

ELAN BARNEHAMA

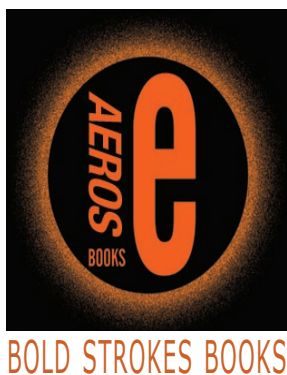
finding



bluefield

a novel





eBooks are not transferable. They cannot be sold, shared or given away as it is an infringement on the copyright of this work.

Please respect the rights of the author and do not file share.

FINDING BLUEFIELD

Visit us at www.boldstrokesbooks.com

FINDING BLUEFIELD

by

Elan Barnehama



2012

FINDING BLUEFIELD

© 2012 BY ELAN BARNEHAMA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

ISBN 13: 978-1-60282-795-0

THIS ELECTRONIC BOOK IS PUBLISHED BY
BOLD STROKES BOOKS, INC.
P.O. Box 249
VALLEY FALLS, NY 12185

FIRST EDITION: SEPTEMBER 2012

THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION. NAMES, CHARACTERS, PLACES, AND INCIDENTS ARE THE PRODUCT OF THE AUTHOR'S IMAGINATION OR ARE USED FICTITIOUSLY. ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, BUSINESS ESTABLISHMENTS, EVENTS, OR LOCALES IS ENTIRELY COINCIDENTAL.

THIS BOOK, OR PARTS THEREOF, MAY NOT BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM WITHOUT PERMISSION.

CREDITS

EDITOR: CINDY CRESAP

PRODUCTION DESIGN: SUSAN RAMUNDO

COVER DESIGN BY SHERI (GRAPHICARTIST2020@HOTMAIL.COM)

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Denise Shaw for always wanting to read more, and Henry Shaw for being there. Thanks to George Cuomo for his patience. Thanks to Lesléa Newman for her generosity, and to Kiki Smith for caring.

Dedication

For Nisa who taught me about love

And for Ezra and Arye, without whom my story
would be less interesting

CHAPTER ONE

1960

The screen door handle was hot to the touch as Barbara grabbed hold and pulled. Inside the Bluefield Diner, two large fans faced each other from across the room and tried to stir things up.

The waitress looked up from behind the register. “Sit anywhere you want, darling,” she said, taking a sip of iced tea. Barbara found a seat at the counter, ordered a slice of blackberry pie and coffee, and tried not to think about procedures or protocol or anything. Around her, the air was thick with the fragrance of fried onions, pork, biscuits, ham, hominy. A chalkboard listed side orders of collards and mustard greens and turnips. She yawned and lifted her coffee as two police officers entered the diner and removed their hats.

“Hot enough for you boys?” the waitress asked.

“It’s so hot,” one officer said, “I saw a dog chasing a cat, and they were walking.” The waitress went back to adding receipts.

Barbara’s first bite of pie took her by surprise, baffling her taste buds with a combination of flavors and aromas that she couldn’t identify but wanted to keep experiencing. With pie like this, she decided, she would certainly be passing on the hospital cafeteria as often as possible. She scooped up another forkful of pie and listened to the dropped consonants, the elongated vowels, the unhurried speech that surrounded her. She sipped her coffee and became lost in the soothing symphony of the unfamiliar accent and didn’t notice

that someone was talking to her. Slowly, she turned her head toward the voice, still not hearing the words.

"I was saying that I made the pie," a woman repeated. She was holding a plate of fries and gravy. Her brown hair, pulled back and braided, reached most of the way down her back.

"The pie?" Barbara stared into a pair of sea green eyes.

"Yes. I made it." The woman sat a few seats from Barbara.

Barbara withdrew her gaze and put her coffee down. "Do you know how good this is? It's incredible. And the crust. It's perfect."

"Thanks." The woman shook a cigarette from its pack and slipped it between her lips. She offered one to Barbara who declined. She reached into her jeans for matches. "So where're you from?" She struck a match and touched its flame to the cigarette.

Barbara turned away and lifted her cup. That didn't take long, she thought as she took a deep breath and inhaled some coffee.

"I'm asking because you never had my pie." When Barbara still didn't respond, the woman continued. "I'm kidding. We get a lot of folks visiting relatives at the hospital, and they come here to get away. And your accent." The woman slid her plate along the counter and took the stool next to Barbara. "I can't place it." She rested her cigarette in the ashtray and extended her hand toward Barbara. "Nicky Stewart."

"Ohio." Barbara shook Nicky's hand.

"So, Ohio, what brings you to the Bluefield Diner?" Nicky said.

"The pie."

"I get that a lot."

Barbara removed her hand from Nicky's grip. "I came here to get away too. I work at Bluefield Hospital." This conversation was already more extensive than anything Barbara had in mind when she decided to venture out of the hospital. After two weeks of cafeteria food, she was simply looking for a change of scenery. What she found was the best pie of her life, but now she began contemplating two years of pie-less hospital cafeteria meals.

"Really? You moved here from Ohio to work at the hospital?"

"Manhattan. The accent is Ohio."

"Must be a good job."

“Yes.” Barbara was thinking that this would be a good time to leave. She could do that. She could simply say that she had to get back to work and just stand up and leave and never come back. But those green eyes were fixed on her, and her legs stayed put. Those green eyes made her say, “I’m doing my residency.”

“Medical residency?”

“Yes.”

“No kidding?”

“No.”

Nicky stood and slipped behind the counter. “A woman doctor. That’s great.” She topped off both her and Barbara’s coffee. “Is it unusual? I mean, it is around here, but is it unusual other places?”

“It’s not uncommon.”

“Good for you,” Nicky said, nodding her head. “I would go to a woman doctor.”

“That’s good to know.” This is not going to go well, Barbara thought.

“Your husband get a job here too?”

And there it is. Barbara took a sip of coffee. “There’s no husband.”

“Really?” Nicky returned to her plate of fries, sitting back down next to Barbara. “How do you like Bluefield so far?”

“If by Bluefield you mean the airport and the hospital and now this diner, then it’s fine.”

“It’s a lot nicer than fine. You need to see more, Dr. Ohio Manhattan.”

“Barbara.”

“Well, Dr. Barbara, you must see more.” Nicky stuffed her hands in her jeans. “I can show you. I know everything there is to know about Bluefield, and the rest I just make up.”

“Thanks. But I don’t have much free time. Maybe when I’ve settled in.” Her head swirled with confusion. Did Nicky know what she was doing or was this simply that mythical Southern hospitality? What they were doing might make sense in New York, but she was in Virginia, for God’s sake. Barbara stood. It was past time to leave. She reached in her pocket for some money.

“Sure. I know they work residents hard,” Nicky said, “but if you don’t take breaks, you’ll never last. I’ve seen it happen. What time you get off?”

“I finish a double shift at four thirty,” Barbara said. “It’ll have to wait for some other time.”

“Four thirty is perfect. You can rest in the car. I love to drive.” Nicky stood and turned toward the kitchen. “I’ll meet you out front,” she called out as she pushed through the swinging doors that led into the kitchen.

Out in the parking lot, Barbara inhaled deeply and kicked the dirt into a dust cloud. Traffic on 147 was heavy as she waited for the light to change. Chevys and Fords mostly. The high August sun sent beads of sweat down her brow, and she shielded her eyes with her left hand. When the light turned green, she ran across the road, back to the hospital.



Fighting fatigue, Barbara sat on the bench in the nurses’ dressing room and hurried to tie her sneakers. Several nurses had already made it clear that they didn’t like sharing their space with a woman doctor. But the hospital only had a male doctors’ changing room, and the Chief of Medicine wouldn’t allow her to change there, so she was forced to use the nurses’ space. And since new residents relied upon the nurses for help, Barbara avoided being in their room during shift changes. She grabbed her bag and took the stairs to the ground floor where she stopped suddenly. Nicky was waiting outside the hospital entrance. She had forgotten the plan, or at least did not think Nicky was serious. Barbara was about to turn back into the stairwell when Nicky waved.

“I like the convertible,” Barbara said as she approached Nicky. “But really, I don’t think this is a good time.”

Nicky leaned over and pushed the passenger door open. She had the Chevy Bel Air’s top down and the windows up. “When’s your next shift?”

“I have twelve hours off,” Barbara said.

“No problem. I’ll have you back in plenty of time.”

“But I need to sleep.”

“You’ll unwind in the car, and then I’ll take you home and you’ll get some sleep. You’ll sleep better after you get some fresh air. Trust me.”

Barbara noticed the pile of *Kennedy for President* leaflets on the floor mat.

“Don’t worry about those,” Nicky said.

“Is it always this muggy around here?” Barbara asked. She pushed the pamphlets to one side as she sat down.

“Only in the summer.” Nicky slipped into first gear. “Sometimes in the fall. But only a little in the spring and rarely in the winter.”

“So you’re supporting Kennedy?” Barbara lifted a flyer from the floor.

Nicky removed a pack of cigarettes from her shirt pocket and shook one between her lips. “How can you tell?” She didn’t offer one to Barbara. “Who do you like?”

“They’re all the same. I don’t vote.”

“Nixon and Kennedy? I don’t think so.” Nicky turned onto Main Street. “Pay close attention here. This part of town goes by fast,” she said, pointing out the Montgomery Ward, the Five & Dime, the Squire Theater that was showing Jack Lemon in *The Apartment*, Laura Lee’s Beauty Salon, Bluefield Hardware that was having a paint sale, and the Smokehouse Restaurant. “They couldn’t be more different.” Nicky continued as she made a left turn and headed away from town.

“Who?” Barbara yawned. “Sorry.”

“Roll down your window and let the wind blow through your hair. It’ll feel good. And while you’re doing that, I’ll explain to you how Nixon and Kennedy are different.”

“They might have their differences,” Barbara said, “but I’m saying that politicians are all alike.” Barbara took off her glasses and exchanged them for some sunglasses.

Nicky shifted into high gear. “Did you want to be a nurse when you were a kid?”

“I never wanted to be a nurse.”

“Because not many girls grow up wanting to be doctors.”

“In the Soviet Union, where doctors aren’t as rich, half the doctors are women,” Barbara said. “Anyway, no. I never wanted to be a nurse.”

“Okay, so you always wanted to be a doctor. You must have been an interesting little girl.”

“I didn’t always want to be a doctor.”

“What did you want to be then?” Nicky asked.

“I wanted to be a cartoonist.”

“Comics or funnies?”

“Funnies,” Barbara said. “I drew a strip in high school. I was the editor of the school paper. I drew one in college too. But I wanted to be able to support myself.”

“So you picked doctor?”

“Pays better than cartoonist, and I was good at sciences. I like knowing how things work. I like figuring out ways to fix things.”

“My friend Andy is the same way.”

“Is he a doctor?”

“Andy? No, mechanic.”

“Not that different. But he can get replacement parts easier.”

“Andy’s the best there is around here. If you ever need car work, Andy’s your guy.”

“I don’t have a car.”

“Even better. He sells used cars.”

“I don’t drive.”

Nicky turned and stared at Barbara. “Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Doesn’t seem possible.”

“I never had the time. Never had a reason.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t you want to learn?”

“I don’t think about it much.”

Nicky continued driving away from Main Street. “When you’re ready to learn, I’ll teach you. We don’t have subways out here.”

At Four Corners, where Bluefield Road crossed Route 212, Nicky turned into a service station and pulled up to the pump. "This is Andy's place," she said, tapping the horn.

Andy came over to the car, wiping his hands on a rag. "Hey, Nicky."

"Andy, this is Barbara Phillips. I mean Dr. Phillips. She's new in town. From New York."

"Welcome to Bluefield, Dr. Phillips." Andy reached across Nicky and extended his hand toward Barbara.

"Thank you," she said, shaking his hand. "And it's Barbara."

"Can't say that I've ever met a woman doctor."

"I'm giving Barbara the grand tour."

"I'm glad to be one of the attractions," Andy said.

Nicky laughed and turned the car on.

"I think he likes you," Nicky said as she pulled back onto the road. "If you want, I can set something up."

"He's not your boyfriend?"

"Andy? That would be weird. I've known him since second grade. He's more like my brother."

"He seems nice."

"So how about it?"

"I don't have any time for dating," Barbara said.

Nicky lit another cigarette. "When will you have time for dating?"

Barbara was used to this line of questioning, but she was surprised it was coming from someone like Nicky. "After I finish my residency." Barbara sat up in her seat and looked around. "This is nice out here," she said.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you." Nicky kept driving until cornfields and silage silos lined the road. "Sit tight." She turned the car onto a narrow dirt road that led through tall oaks and hickories. The woods were thick and wild with summer, and Barbara quickly lost sight of the main road. Nicky stopped the car and turned off the engine. "I got just the thing to revive you. There's a swimming hole near here," Nicky said, looking at Barbara. "You do swim?"

"I do swim."

Nicky got out of the car, opened the trunk, and grabbed a blanket, a couple of towels, and a picnic basket. She started down the path. "Come on."

Barbara hurried to catch up. Before coming to Bluefield, she'd decided to put all her energy into the hospital and avoid any social life. There would be enough challenges, enough drama at work. So why, Barbara wondered, why was she on a dirt footpath in the rural outskirts of a small town in Virginia following some woman she had just met? The trail continued under cover of trees for several more minutes and then suddenly gave way to a clearing and a small pond.

"I don't have a suit," Barbara said.

"I don't either."

Nicky sat under a large walnut tree and began taking off her shoes and socks. Barbara watched. Nicky stood and removed her shirt and pants and then her bra and panties. She walked into the pond and slipped silently under the water. She came up by the side of the raft where she grabbed hold of the ladder.

"Aren't you coming in?" Nicky called to Barbara who stood on shore, still dressed. "The water's great."

"In a minute."

"I won't look." Nicky sat on the raft, her back to shore.

Barbara took off her clothes and rested her glasses in a sneaker. She took a deep breath and slipped into the water. The energy it took for each stroke and the deep, rhythmic breathing felt good as she approached the raft. She grabbed the ladder with both hands and held on.

"Come on up. The sun feels good," Nicky said.

"I've got to catch my breath. But that felt good. It's hard to get exercise in med school."

"You're shy, aren't you? Don't you see bodies all day long?"

"People don't just walk around the hospital naked. Especially not me."

"You've got nothing to be ashamed of," Nicky said.

"Where are we?"

"My farm."

"People live here?"

"It's just me and my dad, and he's out in the fields or in the barn. He never comes here."

"What about your mom?"

"She died when I was young. I don't really remember her."

"What happened?" Barbara said.

"Consumption."

"Siblings?"

"My sister, Carol-Ann."

"Where does she live?" Barbara asked.

"She lives near L.A. with her husband Richard and their two girls. When she visits, we still like to come here and race to the raft." Nicky stood. "We were on the swim team together in high school."

Nicky dove off the raft and swam toward shore. Barbara followed her.

"Ever been out there?" Barbara asked as they walked onto shore.

"California?"

"Yeah."

Nicky handed Barbara a towel and then squeezed water out of her hair. "A few winters ago, after she had Claire, her first child. She asked me to come out and give her a hand. But she really just wanted to get me married to someone in Richard's company. I mean they hired a nurse and already had a live-in housekeeper. I was just extra work."

"But you were family." Barbara grabbed her glasses.

"They fixed me up with a million guys."

"California boys. That must have been fun."

"If blind dates are your idea of fun." Nicky passed Barbara a hairbrush.

"Didn't you like any of them?" Barbara started dressing.

"That's what Carol-Ann kept asking. I didn't even like California, let alone California guys. She just wanted me to pick a guy, any guy, and get married so my father wouldn't have to worry about me, and then she and I could live on the same block, and borrow eggs and have barbecues and birthdays and Christmas and Thanksgiving together."

“Sounds nice,” Barbara said.

Nicky spread the blanket on the grass and opened the picnic basket. “You want a beer?”

“Sure.”

Nicky reached into the picnic basket and handed Barbara a bottle and the opener. She rested her cigarette on a rock and began to dress. “What about you? Do you want to marry a doctor?”

Barbara coughed on her beer. “Getting to be a doctor is enough right now.”

“Men doctors marry.” Nicky took a long drink of beer.

“They get wives.”

“That’s what you need.”

“A wife?” Barbara asked.

“Tell me about your family?” Nicky said. “Your parents still in Ohio?”

“They’re both dead.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. My senior year at college, right before Christmas, my father was driving home from a party and got onto the highway in the wrong direction. He hit a car head on. He and my mother were killed and so was the couple in the other car. The girl was pregnant. My parents were both drunk.”

“Shit,” Nicky said, “that sucks.”

“Mostly for the other couple.” Barbara finished tying her sneakers. “I grew up watching my father drink. My mother got so tired of all the arguing with him, she decided to join him. Then they got along fine.”

“Any brothers or sisters?”

“Younger brother. That’s it,” Barbara said. “He still lives in Akron where we grew up.”

“Do you go home much?” Nicky folded the blanket and closed the picnic basket.

“It’s not home to me anymore.” Barbara stood and followed Nicky back to the car. “Once I went away to college, I rarely went back.”

“Didn’t your parents care?”

The trail was starting to darken under the setting sun.

"They were too drunk to notice. Besides, all I ever wanted to do growing up was get the hell out of my house. Getting pregnant didn't seem like a good option because all the girls who got pregnant stayed in Akron, and I wanted out of Akron too. I figured going to college was my best bet so I worked hard in school. I got A's in every class, even gym. I joined the school newspaper, became a cheerleader. I slept over at other girls' houses just not to be home. When I got a scholarship to college, I never looked back. There was nothing at home that I wanted."

They stopped by the car and Nicky reached into her pockets for the car keys and opened the trunk. "See, I can't imagine that. I love this place. I love the farm. You'll think I'm some backwoods hick, but I love this dirt. It's like it runs in my veins."

"Do you want to take over the farm?"

"I love this land, but I'm not up to being a farmer."

"You could marry someone who wants to farm," Barbara said, wondering why she was moving the conversation back in this direction.

"I'm not a package deal. I don't need a dowry to marry. Just because I didn't go to college doesn't mean I have to be taken care of. I could run the farm if I wanted to. It's just not something that I want to do right now. Maybe I will someday."

"I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Forget it. Tell me about your brother. What's his story?" Nicky continued loading the trunk.

Barbara laughed. "Ted? He's a couple of years younger than me. He played football in high school. That's a big deal in Ohio, and he had lots of friends. I guess he was pretty good because he got a scholarship to play in college. But the glory days ended and he went back to Akron, and last I knew, he was working in the tire factory where our dad worked. I haven't seen him since my parents' funeral. I don't keep in touch." Barbara opened the passenger door and got in.

"My sister can be a real pain," Nicky said, "but we're still close. She'll be here for Thanksgiving." Nicky closed the trunk and got in the car. She started the engine and turned on the lights.

"Maybe you'll meet her then." Back on the road, on the way toward Barbara's apartment, Nicky asked about dinner.

"Another time. I really need to get some sleep," Barbara said.

"You still have to eat."

"No. I need to sleep."

"I understand." Nicky stopped the car in front of Barbara's apartment.

"The swim was really nice. Next time I'll bring a suit."

"How about Saturday?"

"I have to check my schedule. I'll come by the diner."

"Hey," Nicky called, "don't forget to register to vote. And as long as you think they're all the same, vote for Kennedy. Virginia's going to be close."



On election night, Barbara didn't leave the hospital till shortly after four a.m. There'd been a complication with one of her patients at the end of her shift, and she had stuck around to listen to the diagnosis and observe the procedures. The hospital staff had been following the voting results all night, posting returns at the nurses' station. A couple of the doctors started a pool. When Kennedy was finally declared the winner, Barbara thought of Nicky and how she must be happy.

As Barbara neared her apartment, she spotted Nicky's car. She'd been spending a lot of her time off with Nicky. Movies, meals, swimming. A couple of times Nicky took her for some night swimming, and they slipped through the water together, under the moonlit sky. Barbara approached the car and saw Nicky asleep in the driver's seat. Barbara tapped the window. Nicky opened her eyes and looked up.

"Hi." Nicky smiled.

"What are you doing?" Barbara asked.

Nicky sat up and rolled down the window. "Kennedy won."

"I know. Why are you sleeping in your car?"

"Isn't it great? There's hope, possibilities. You never know what might happen."

Barbara opened the door. "How long have you been here?"

"You weren't home."

"I was working," Barbara said. "You've been drinking."

"A lot. We were celebrating."

"You can't drive home like this."

"I'm fine," Nicky said.

"No, you're not. You better come up for some coffee." Barbara helped Nicky out of the car.

"I wanted to see you."

"I'm tired and you're drunk." Barbara helped Nicky up the stairs, into her apartment, and onto her couch. "Stay there while I put up some coffee."

As Barbara measured the grinds, she took a deep breath. All she wanted was to get Nicky home. Maybe she should let Nicky teach her to drive.

"I didn't think he'd win," Nicky said when Barbara came back from the kitchen. Nicky had slipped her shoes off and was watching a report from Kennedy's national headquarters. She exhaled some smoke. "Look, there's Jacqueline. She's pretty."

Barbara sat on the chair across from Nicky. "Where was the party?"

"At the Kennedy office. We were so anxious waiting for results. And then they called it for Kennedy and everyone started drinking. I was tired and hadn't eaten, and it went right to my head."

"But you drove here?"

"I wanted to see you. I was so happy." Nicky crossed her legs up on the couch. "How about some music?"

"Drink your coffee."

"What's that album you were telling me about?"

"Sam Cooke?"

"Yeah, play that." Nicky sipped her coffee.

Barbara shut the sound on the TV. "I made plenty, so drink up." She removed the record from its jacket, blew dust off the vinyl, and set it on the player. She lifted the arm and lowered the needle onto the record. That's when she felt a hand on her back. She didn't move.

"Let's dance," Nicky said.

Barbara straightened herself up and turned around while Nicky's hand slid around her hip. Barbara's eyes met Nicky's.

"What are you doing?" Barbara said softly. This was a moment she had imagined often and avoided resolutely.

"What would you like me to be doing?" Nicky put her other hand on Barbara's waist and began moving her to the music.

"Are you trying to seduce me?"

"I'm hoping you want me to," Nicky said.

Barbara placed her hands on Nicky's shoulders and followed her lead.

"I've been waiting," Nicky said.

"For what?"

"For too long." Nicky leaned over and kissed Barbara.

"Why'd you wait?" Barbara said, catching her breath.

"I wasn't sure."

"Sure you wanted to?"

"Sure you wanted me to," Nicky said.

"And now?"

"Now I'm drunk."

"Have you ever done this before?" Barbara asked, her head on Nicky's shoulder.

"You want references?"

"You got references?" Barbara looked up at Nicky.

"I have great references. But I'm not sure—"

"That's enough talk." Barbara pulled Nicky closer and lowered her lips to meet Nicky's. They continued to dance as Barbara brushed her fingers through Nicky's light brown hair, traced the freckles on Nicky's cheeks, circled her solid shoulders, slid down the hard curve of her spine, massaged the small of her back, and searched the insides of her back pockets. Nicky unbuttoned Barbara's shirt, kissing each section of newly exposed skin as Barbara danced them toward the couch. Along the way, they lost pieces of clothes.

When the sun came through the window, they were still on the couch, still naked, and still awake.

"Shit." Nicky jumped up. "I'm late for work." She squashed her cigarette, drank some cold coffee, and ran to the bathroom.

Barbara put her glasses on, went into her bedroom, and got under the covers. She was trying to stop thinking. Where do we go? That was nice. What's next? Who will find out? Who would have thought this would happen in Virginia? Do we end this now? Before trouble starts? As good as it was?

Nicky came in, hair dripping, and began to dress. "Damn, you look comfortable." Nicky leaned onto the bed and gave Barbara a kiss. "Come in for lunch."

"I'll try." Barbara pulled Nicky toward her.

"I'm really late," Nicky said. "I can't do this. I want to do this. I really want to, but I'm already late."



Barbara had met Nicky's father, Paul, on several occasions, but she had no interest in coming over for Thanksgiving to meet Carol-Ann and Richard and their kids. Nothing good could come of it, she told Nicky. "You come over to my place after you're done with the family."

"But I want you there. I want to show you off."

"And there lies the problem," Barbara said. "You want me there as your lover, but I can't be there as your lover."

"Then come as my friend," Nicky said. "I really want you to meet Carol-Ann."

"I can't see that going well."

"You went home with your college roommates."

"They closed the dorms."

Nicky inhaled deeply on her cigarette. "I bet you slept with some of them."

"Not as many as I wanted to sleep with."

"If you're trying to make me jealous," Nicky said, placing her arms around Barbara's neck, "it's working." She gave Barbara a long kiss. "I'll pick you up for breakfast."



Nicky and Barbara hung their jackets in the mudroom. Barbara took a deep breath and followed Nicky into the kitchen where she was introduced to the family gathered about the table for breakfast. Carol-Ann was working the griddle, piling pancakes on a platter. Claire, the oldest, sat on her Grandpa Paul's lap, and Richard, Carol-Ann's husband, sat rocking the baby in her carriage. Bacon and eggs and potatoes and toast and juice and coffee filled the table.

"Want some help?" Nicky asked.

"I'm done," Carol-Ann said. She flipped the final cake onto the platter. "Let's eat."

"Smells good," Barbara said.

Nicky gave her niece Claire a kiss and sat next to Claire and her father. Claire slipped off her grandfather's lap and onto Nicky's. Barbara sat between Nicky and Richard. She held her coffee cup near her face with both hands as if she were trying to hide behind it.

"Nicky," Richard said, "I was just telling your father that we're moving next month."

"Didn't you just move into that house?" Nicky said.

"We've been there almost three years," Richard said.

"We've been here for almost two hundred," Nicky said.

"Richard just got another promotion," Carol-Ann said. "They made him a vice-president." She was making plates for Richard and Claire. "Eat up, everyone."

"There's more," Richard said. "It's not just my promotion. The new house has its own pool."

"Maybe we'll go for a swim at the pond later," Nicky said to Carol-Ann.

"If it warms up," Carol-Ann said.

"Can I finish about the house?" Richard interrupted.

Nicky and Carol-Ann looked at each other and answered together. "Sure," they laughed.

"Besides the pool, it also has five bedrooms and a maid's quarter, so there's plenty of room for visitors. And, of course, there's room for the baby."

"I thought Julia already had her own room?" Nicky said to Carol-Ann.

Barbara's eyes shifted back and forth between the sisters.

"Yes, Julia does have her own room," Richard responded. "But I'm talking about the *baby*," Richard added with emphasis.

"You're pregnant?" Nicky said to Carol-Ann.

Carol-Ann smiled. "Yes."

"How many months?" Nicky got up to hug her.

"Two," Carol-Ann said, retuning the hug.

"That's wonderful," Paul said, giving Carol-Ann a kiss.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Nicky asked.

"Richard wanted to wait and tell you in person," Carol-Ann said.

Paul shook Richard's hand.

"And that," Richard said, putting an ending to his telling, "is why we need a bigger house."

Nicky took Carol-Ann's hands and kissed her cheek.

"Congratulations," Barbara chimed in. She was ready to go home, but the day was just starting.

"Nicky, you better get to work if you're going to catch up," Paul said, sitting back down.

"She has too big of a head start," Nicky answered.

"Are you seeing anyone?" Carol-Ann asked.

"She didn't have time," Paul said, cutting pancakes for Claire. "She was too busy getting Kennedy elected."

"Well," Nicky said, "he did win. So if you want to give me the credit, I'll take it."

"Or blame," Richard said.

"So now you have time," Carol-Ann said.

Claire slipped off of Nicky's lap and announced that she was done eating.

"Come on, Claire," Paul said. "Let's go feed the animals."

"Don't get that child all dirty, Daddy," Carol-Ann said, "I just bathed her."

"We're going to the barn, Carol-Ann," Paul answered. "We're on a farm. We most certainly will get dirty. Right, Claire?"

"Right, Grandpa."

After everyone was finished, Nicky began to clear the breakfast table. Richard pushed the carriage out of the kitchen and into the

living room where he turned on the TV. The sisters began work on Thanksgiving dinner.

"Daddy is going to ruin her shoes," Carol-Ann yelled to Richard.

"Don't worry about it," Richard said. "It makes him happy."

Nicky gathered ingredients from the cupboards and refrigerator and lined them up on the kitchen table. "He just wants to show Claire where you came from."

"I'll wash the breakfast dishes," Barbara volunteered. "I'm not much of a cook anyway." She was happy to have something to do that didn't put her in the way.

"Nicky," Carol-Ann said, "you look great."

"I've been swimming a lot."

"Well, it's done you good," Carol-Ann said, starting in on the mushrooms. "You even have that glow."

"What glow is that?"

"The one you get when you're seeing someone," Carol-Ann said.

Nicky picked up a frying pan and used it as a mirror. "I don't see it."

"It's there," Carol-Ann said. "So are you seeing someone?"

"I do not at this time have a man in my life," Nicky said. "New topic."

"But they must be after you, the way you look. I don't get it. You must be turning them away, like you did in California." Carol-Ann turned to Barbara. "Did she tell you about all the great guys I set her up with?"

"You set me up with jerks," Nicky said.

"That was just round one. There were others. I was working on it and you just left." Carol-Ann turned to Barbara. "Do you have sisters or brothers?"

"Younger brother," Barbara said.

"The younger ones are always hard, but brothers are easier. Does he listen to you?"

"If you don't keep chopping, we'll never be able to have supper," Nicky said.

“Remember Peter Sumner?” Carol-Ann asked Nicky.

“Yeah, he was obsessed with his car.”

“He was just named top salesman. He’s very successful.”

“What was I thinking? If I had known that, I would have slept with him and made him marry me and then I would be the wife of the top salesman. What more could a girl wish for?”

“You have to be more open-minded, Nicky.”

“I am very open-minded,” Nicky said.

Carol-Ann placed her cut vegetables in the stuffing pot and stirred. “Can you please give people a chance? You can’t wait forever to settle down and have kids or it might not happen. I mean, you’re gorgeous, but you’re not getting any younger.”

“No one is,” Nicky said.

“What?” Carol-Ann asked.

“No one is getting younger. Anyway, just because I might want to settle down doesn’t mean I want to settle.”

“You’re too clever,” Carol-Ann said. “But I know how much you love babies. You really might have to settle, Nicky.”

“Carol-Ann,” Nicky said. She stopped slicing apples for the pies and put down her knife. It was hard for her to keep from looking over at Barbara. It was even harder to not tell her sister that she had indeed found someone. “Don’t worry about me. If you want to worry, worry about getting supper ready. But don’t worry about me. I’ll be just fine.” Nicky went back to cutting apples.

Carol-Ann continued to stare at Nicky. “You’re not telling me something. I’m sure of it. I always know when you’re keeping a secret from me.” She walked over to Nicky and put her arm around her. “You’re keeping something from me and it’s killing you. C’mon, Nicky, tell me everything.”

“Where do these go?” Barbara interrupted, holding up the cast-iron pan.

Carol-Ann turned to Barbara. “You must know who Nicky is dating.”

Nicky laughed.

“What is so funny, Nicky?” Carol-Ann asked.

“You are. Listen to yourself. It’s like you have nothing else to talk about. Like you’re trying to solve a crime.”

Carol-Ann returned to her prep work. “Well, it would be a crime if you didn’t get married and have children. Besides, I worry about you and I worry about what would happen to you if Daddy, you know, when Daddy gets older.”

Nicky rolled out the dough to cover the apple pies. “Really, Carol-Ann, that’s your big worry? I can take care of myself. I’m the one who has a job, remember? Not you.”

“Nicky, you’re all I have.”

“You have your family.”

“But only one sister.” Carol-Ann poured brown sugar on the yams.

“Can we change the subject? Tell me about your new house. How are you going to decorate it?”

“Barbara,” she said, “we’ve been ignoring you. Do you have a man in your life?”

“I am too busy at the hospital. Residents don’t have a lot of free time.”

“No one should be that busy.”

“Can we cook now?” Nicky said.



After the turkey was removed from the oven, the pies left to cool, the table set, the pots and pans washed, and the football game turned off, everyone found their place at the table. Paul cleared his throat and rose from his seat. He raised his glass of beer, looked at his family gathered around him, and began to speak. “I’m inspired by this fine gathering, by the news of another grandchild, to make a toast,” he said.

“The children are awfully hungry, Daddy,” Carol-Ann said.

“Go on, Daddy,” Nicky said. “We don’t gather very often anymore.”

“I not hungry, Grandpa,” Claire added.

“Play nice, girls,” Paul said to his daughters. He then turned his attention back to the table. “I am a fortunate man, a lucky man. I’ll say that to anybody. I have spent my life laboring over twelve inches of topsoil, and it’s been good to me. Every year I hope, I pray, and I bargain as I wait for my crop to come in. I am dependent on the weather and I need to be lucky. Lucky to have the right mix of rain and sun. Lucky to avoid insects, drought, and flood. And banks. Very lucky to avoid banks. Nothing else matters. Nothing else can happen if mankind doesn’t have those twelve inches of dirt and the right amount of rain and wind and sun. So I raise a toast to my grandchild on the way, and hope that this one’s a boy. If he is, I’ll teach him to farm.”

After all the glasses were lowered, Carol-Ann handed Richard a carving knife and fork. “Why don’t you carve the turkey, honey?”

The Stewarts’ hospitality permitted them to make small talk but not to ask Barbara too many personal, prying questions over dinner. Besides, they were too busy talking among themselves. After dinner, the women cleared the table. Barbara went straight for the sink and began to wash the dinner plates.

“I think that Daddy should sell the farm and come live with us,” Carol-Ann said, cleaning off the turkey. “It’s one of the reasons we bought such a large house.”

“Did you miss his toast?” Nicky said, covering leftovers.

“It’s a good time to sell. Richard looked into it and the market is high. Daddy’d make a lot of money. He’d be a free man.”

“He’d shrivel up and die if you take him from his land. What do you think he’d do in California?” Nicky said. “Not like he plays golf. Or surfs. He needs his land; he needs his people.”

“Daddy’s getting older and I worry about losing him. I remember losing Mom. You don’t,” Carol-Ann said.

“You love to remind me of that. It’s like you think you’re pulling rank on me,” Nicky said. “At least you got to know her. That’s why you can remember losing her.”

“I want my children to know their grandfather.”

“Then move back to Virginia,” Nicky said.

“Richard’s job is there or I would.”

“Really?” Nicky asked. “You would?”

“What if Nicky wanted to take over the farm?” Barbara asked, regretting at once that she had entered the conversation.

“Is this something new?” Carol-Ann said to Nicky. “You never wanted the farm before. Did you tell Daddy? Because that would be great and then he could travel and know that the farm was being taken care of.”

“I mentioned to him that I was thinking about it,” she said to Carol-Ann.

“I’m glad you might want this place,” Carol-Ann said, “but you can’t live here alone.” She passed Nicky a dish.

“Sure I can,” Nicky said. “But I won’t have to be alone.”

“I knew it. I could see it in your eyes.”

“I mean I can always rent out a room.”

“Don’t be such a tease. Who is he and how long and how serious? Tell me everything. Is he a farmer?”

“No.”

“He’s not married?” Carol-Ann said.

“You’ve been a suburban California housewife too long.” Nicky laughed. “You’re missing the point.”

“What is the point?”

“This is Bluefield. We’re from here. This is my community; I’m never alone.”

“You know, Nicky,” Barbara broke in, “it’s getting late and I need to get back.” Barbara was calculating the walk back to town and wishing she had worn sneakers. Twelve miles would be a long walk, but leaving right now would be worth it. “Really, Nicky, I can’t be late for my shift. We should go.”

Carol-Ann looked at Barbara and then Nicky and then back at Barbara. “It’s you?” she said. “Isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?” Barbara turned to Nicky.

Carol-Ann turned back to Nicky. “I thought you gave that stuff up after Mary Beth moved.”

“I thought so too, but it just happened that way,” Nicky said.

“Things like that don’t just happen.”

“They do if you’re lucky,” Nicky said. “And it was my idea, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“What are your plans?” Carol-Ann asked Nicky.

“Plans?” Nicky laughed. “Who are you?”

“Don’t you realize that when Barbara finishes her residency, she’ll leave? She’ll move some place where people don’t know her and get a good job and even a husband if she wants. Where does that leave you? Once this gets around, you’ll never get a husband around here.”

“You both realize that I’m right here?” Barbara said. She was trying to remain calm, but it wasn’t working. During medical school, Barbara had given up on love. Not for lack of desire, but lack of options. She wanted to be with a woman and she wanted to be a doctor. She spent time at some of the women’s bars on New York’s West Side. She let women take her home, but never gave them a phone number or address, fearing that if they showed up at her work, she could lose her scholarship. She made a choice to go it alone till she had her medical license. But then Nicky and her sparkling green eyes and all her charm and zeal showed up and made her take chances she had not planned to take. And she liked having a plan.

“I’m not looking for a husband,” Nicky said. “So there’s no problem.”

“It’s your life,” Carol-Ann said.

“You finally got something right.”

“I guess that explains why you didn’t like any of those guys we set you up with.” Carol-Ann rinsed the silverware.

“No. I didn’t like them because they were assholes.”

“Did you tell Daddy?”

“Why would I tell him?” Nicky said.

“It would kill him,” Carol-Ann said. She looked directly at Barbara. “I’m happy for you if this is really what you want. I just think you need to know what you’re getting into. Bluefield is a small town, and once word gets around it spreads like fleas on a dog.”

“How would it get around?” Nicky said.

“C’mon, Nicky. Everything gets around.”



Barbara shut the car door and let out a deep sigh. “Why’d you do that?”

Nicky started the engine. “I didn’t plan on it. It just came out. I really wanted her to know about us. And you defended my honor in there. You stood up for me. That was sweet. I can’t wait to get you home.”

“This is not good. If this gets around, it will sabotage my residency and I’ll have to leave.”

Nicky pulled the Chevy onto the road and headed back to town. “Carol-Ann’s not going to tell anyone. It would reflect poorly on her and Richard, and she wouldn’t want that.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Besides, you said everyone at the hospital already thinks you’re a dyke.”

“But that’s just rumor,” Barbara said.

“So what’s the difference? The worst that could happen is that they’ll think you’re a dyke.”

“It’s different when they’re sure,” Barbara said. “How the hell did your sister guess?”

“Weird, isn’t it? It’s like she has some special sense that can tell when people have had sex. She was like that in high school. If Richard ever cheated on her, she would know right away.”

“So you knew she would know?”

“No. I honestly didn’t think her powers worked on lesbians.”

“One more thing,” Barbara said as Nicky shifted the car into high gear. “Who’s Mary Beth?”

CHAPTER TWO

1963

The lunch rush left and Nicky grabbed her newspaper and a cup of coffee and took them both over to the sinks. She hopped up on one of the counters and offered Leroy a cigarette. He stopped washing the pots and took one. She lit her cigarette and passed Leroy the matches.

“Have you seen *To Kill a Mockingbird* over at the Squire?” she asked Leroy.

“Haven’t.”

“You should. It’s probably the best movie I’ve ever seen. I might see it again. It makes the South look bad. But it also makes us look good. That’s what I liked.”

“I haven’t seen it,” Leroy said.

Nicky put down her coffee and picked up her newspaper. She started flipping through the papers.

“You see this?” Nicky said, showing the paper to Leroy. “A million people are expected for Dr. King’s march in DC?”

Leroy took the paper from Nicky. “That’s a lot of people.”

Nicky retied her hair. “You know Stella’s boyfriend Tommy? The one who’s a cop?” She took the paper back from Leroy.

“Sure.” He started back in on the pots.

“Well, he told Lucinda that one of the black churches is organizing buses. Mixed buses. Who would have thought people from Bluefield would want to go? Are you going?”

“No.”

“You should.” Nicky inhaled her cigarette and slowly released the smoke.

“Are you?” Leroy asked.

“I wasn’t planning on it, but I’m thinking it’s a chance to see Dr. King in person. That guy might be president some day.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Why not? We elected a Catholic.”

“That’s not the same.”

“I know. I’m just saying no one thought that was possible.” Nicky slid off the counter. “Anyway, you know which church is organizing the buses?”

“No,” Leroy said softly, looking around the kitchen. “Maybe Stella knows.”

“That’s funny. Real funny.” Nicky retied her apron. “Let me know if you hear anything.” Nicky returned to her area and got back to filling orders.

That afternoon on her way out the door, when she put her hand in the pocket of her jean jacket, she found a flyer along with her car keys. She read it quickly and shoved it back into her jacket. She opened the kitchen doors and stepped into the restaurant where the waitresses were filling ketchup bottles, sugar dispensers, and salt and pepper shakers while the radio blared. Nicky flipped through the phone book near the restrooms.

“What you looking up, Nicky?” Lucinda called from the register where she was adding up receipts, just as she had done after every lunch for eight years since her husband died, leaving her in charge.

Nicky didn’t look up. “The Squire. I wanted to see what’s playing.”

“I got the paper right here,” Lucinda said, swinging at a fly.

Nicky put down the phone book and went over to look through Lucinda’s newspaper.

"You going tonight?" Lucinda asked as Nicky checked the listings.

"Nothing good." Nicky put down the paper and turned to leave.

"*Mr. Ed's* on tonight," Stella called. "I love that horse."

"See y'all tomorrow," Nicky said and stepped outside. The air was so still it made things quiet. She sat in her car making up her mind. At a gas station, Nicky checked the phone book and wrote down the address of the First Baptist Church. Twenty-six years in Bluefield and Nicky didn't know her way around the North End. She'd been by it and through it, but not in it. Never had a reason to stop. The North End was a neighborhood of small, single-story houses, originally built for GIs, white GIs, on their return from WW II. Gradually, post-war prosperity and progeny sent most of those families in search of newer and larger homes on the south side of town and the North End became home to the many black families who had come to town to work in the new factories and services of Bluefield's expanding economy. Nicky found Jefferson Street and spotted the church. She turned into the parking lot and turned off the Bel Air. The sanctuary doors were wide-open, and the sounds of the choir practicing spilled out of the building. When Nicky's father died a year earlier, Nicky and Carol-Ann had sung together at the funeral. Nicky hadn't been to church since. She took a deep breath, climbed out of her car, and up the steps into the chapel. When they saw her enter, the choir stopped singing. The reverend looked over his shoulder and then turned back to his choir. He started them on a hymn and walked toward Nicky. He ushered her outside and shut the doors behind him.

"They sound beautiful, Reverend," Nicky said. "I used to sing in the choir."

"Is there something I can help you with, ma'am?" the reverend said.

"I hope so." Nicky pulled the flyer out of her pocket and showed it to the reverend as if it were proof of some sort. "I'm looking for bus tickets for the march on Washington. But if this is a bad time..."

"This is fine," he said, "I have tickets."

“Are these the only buses leaving from Bluefield?” Nicky asked.

“These buses are integrated, if that’s what you’re asking. You won’t be the only white folk on the bus.”

Nicky bought four tickets, took two, and asked the reverend to give the other two away.



Back home, over dinner, Nicky showed Barbara the tickets while she told her about driving through the North End and about the details of packing food and clothes for the trip. Barbara listened quietly and said nice things about Dr. King and the other organizers, but she wasn’t going to join Nicky for this one.

“It’s about civil rights,” Nicky said. “How do you not support civil rights?”

“Who said I didn’t?”

“I know you do. So why won’t you come with me?”

“Look, I’m glad Dr. King is shaking things up and taking his message to Washington, but he’s a reverend, and at the end of the day, preachers just don’t march for dykes or with dykes. black, white, Christian, Jewish, rich, or poor.”

“But this is not a queer thing,” Nicky said, lighting a cigarette.

“No. Not now. But the moment someone finds out you’re queer, then it quickly becomes a queer thing.”

“No one has to know. I don’t have to tell everyone I meet who I sleep with.”

“Because you can’t,” Barbara said.

“Because I don’t have to. Blacks can’t hide that they’re black. Does the hospital have a black doctor?”

“They wouldn’t have hired me as a queer doctor.”

“But you know how many black doctors you work with. You don’t know how many queer doctors.”

Barbara put down her fork and started to clear the table. “Anyway, I’m not saying don’t go. I’m not even saying I’m right. I’m just saying I can’t go with you.”

“And I’m just saying that I would like us to go together.” Nicky stood and put her arms around Barbara’s neck. “I think it will be fun.”



A few days later, early on a Wednesday morning, Nicky slipped out of bed without waking Barbara. She grabbed her clothes and made her way downstairs to shower. Dried and dressed, she pushed open the screen door and stepped outside under cover of a moonlit sky. Three in the morning and the heat had barely let up. Nicky tossed her bag onto the backseat of her Bel Air, slipped behind the wheel, and headed to meet her bus to DC.

The parking lot at the First Baptist Church was filling up like Easter as Nicky guided her yellow Chevy into a parking spot and shut the engine. The Bel Air’s top was down, and Nicky lifted herself up and sat on the driver’s seat headrest. Her cigarette glowed in the darkness like one of the many stars lighting the sky that night. Someone who didn’t know better, Nicky thought, someone who didn’t know that the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was going to be speaking in Washington, DC, later that day, would have been surprised by all the activity in the parking lot of the First Baptist Church of Bluefield, Virginia’s, first free Negro congregation. If they didn’t know about the march, then they might have supposed that people were gathering for some moonlight revival. Except, they would have had to wonder what so many white folks were doing peacefully in the North End. At night. But, Nicky thought, you’d have to be real young, real old, or real sorry, not to know about the march. All of which might explain why Bluefield’s three police cars were parked directly across the street from the unlit lot. No one, it seemed to Nicky, paid them any mind. At least not now, not at this moment.

Nicky got out of her car. People were dressed, she thought. Sunday best dressed. Going to make history, how you want people remembering you, dressed. Her own choice of clothes was certainly not church-attending attire. But it would do. Nicky lit a cigarette

and leaned on the hood, her left heel resting on the front fender as the swelling sound of large engines quieted the crowd. Three buses, each marked with the words *Charter: Washington DC*, turned onto Jefferson Street. They maneuvered into the lot, coming to a rest alongside each other, relaxed and ready, their diesel engines purring in the moonlight, their golden parking lights glowing in the still of the night. The drivers quickly began the process of boarding passengers. As families of several generations made their way into the bus, cordialities were traded, inquiries into one's health and relatives, comments on the weather, a hat, were all exchanged on the way down the aisle. With each passenger, the process took just that much longer.

And my family, Nicky thought. Daddy's gone. I don't remember my mother. My only sister lives way across the country, and I haven't seen her since Daddy died. Even with all the birthday and Christmas presents I send, Carol-Ann's kids don't really know who I am. Barbara and I are family, but we're the only ones who think so.

Nicky stepped on her cigarette, lifted her bag, and joined the line. She handed the driver her ticket and climbed the steps into the bus. The smells instantly covered her, and she was reminded of all those revivals Carol-Ann forced her to attend. She made her way down the aisle to the rear of the bus and took one of the remaining seats next to a young boy who was trying to rub sleep from his eyes. It didn't work, and as soon as the buses started rolling across Virginia, he fell asleep using the window as a pillow. Nicky ate a peach.

As the sun came out, Nicky followed a hawk circling outside her window. Up and down the aisles, passengers began to stir. The bus pulled onto Highway 11 and joined an unplanned caravan of buses from all over the Southland, from Virginia and Georgia and Alabama and Tennessee and Mississippi and Louisiana.

Softly at first, a woman sitting in the front of the bus, began to hum a familiar melody that spread gently over the riders. It didn't take long before several other women took up the song.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound

Two women took to the aisles. Nicky sang along softly and thought about her father's funeral service when she and Caron-Ann sang together. Nicky and Carol-Ann had been part of their church choir from when they were little girls. They were both sopranos, but only Nicky got the solos. Their father drove them to and from church for practice, for services, but never came in. He was always there, waiting across the street in his truck, but he never came in. Their mother would have wanted them to keep singing, he told them. Weeknights, after dinner, while they washed dishes, her father would light a cigarette and sit at the kitchen table reading the newspaper while he listened to them sing.

That saved a wretch like me

After he fell and broke some ribs, they found the cancer. By then, it was too late and he faded fast. She and Carol-Ann buried him in the family plot at the edge of the farm.

I once was lost, but now am found

When Carol-Ann went away to college, Nicky stopped going to church. After Carol-Ann got married and moved to California, they hardly ever had a chance to sing together. Until the funeral.

Was blind, but now I see

When Carol-Ann's third child came, it got harder for Carol-Ann to make the trip east, and they hadn't seen each other since their father's funeral. Nicky was going to have to go west if she wanted to see Carol-Ann.

"Orphans," Carol-Ann had whispered to Nicky during the funeral service.

"What?" Nicky giggled.

"We're orphans now."

"We're too old to be orphans," Nicky had said.

"You're never too old for some things."



In DC, Nicky left her fellow travelers and made her own way toward the Capitol where a large crowd had already gathered. She

drifted toward a row of tables full of pamphlets, buttons, T-shirts. One table made her stop.

“My father had a table like this,” she said, rubbing the surface.

“What happened?” a man with a thick Brooklyn accent responded.

Nicky looked up. “He died last year.”

“I’m sorry. But what happened to the table?”

“Nothing. My father and his friends used it to play cards. Mostly, they’d eat and drink too much and talk too loud.”

“Sure. That’s the point of playing cards with friends.”

“They always played at our house. Probably because my father didn’t have a wife. When Jay Johnson died, they got Sonny to take his place, but when my father died, the game stopped.”

“Why didn’t it move?”

“I don’t know. It’s been over a year since my dad died, and those men still check up on me. I should ask the guys if they want the table.”

“Maybe they want you to take his place,” he said.

“Play cards with a woman? No. You don’t know those guys.”

Nicky laughed. “Maybe they want to keep the game going at my house.”

“My Shirley played cards on this table. She died eight years ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Since then, this table has been leaned on by thousands of people. Seen all of New York. Well, not Staten Island. Been in all fourteen cars I’ve had in the last eight years. The thing is...” he spoke more softly at this point, making Nicky lean toward him, “this table has had enough pamphlets, flyers, petitions, buttons, letters, bumper stickers, and collection cans on it to have solved just about every problem this world faces. But who’s going to listen to a table? Right? Still, you do what you can.”

“Yes,” Nicky repeated. “You do what you can.”

A thickly bearded man stepped up and began to inquire about the merits of a certain petition, and Nicky took the opportunity to slip away. She found a place to sit and rest and wait. Things were

happening. The country was changing. No way to deny it. Be part of the change or be in its way. Kennedy in the White House. King in Washington. People in the streets.

During the short march from the Capitol to the reflecting pool, no one seemed to be in any hurry. By the time Nicky arrived, the speakers had started, and all the grass on both sides of the reflecting pool, and every shaded spot along the street, was covered with people. Nicky was tired, hungry, and thirsty, and she needed a bathroom. She looked at the lines for the portable latrines and started walking away from the Lincoln Memorial. She took out a biscuit and kept walking as she passed the Washington Monument. At the Smithsonian, she found an empty ladies' room without a line. Refreshed, she strolled through the floor looking for the Wright brothers' plane. As a girl, Nicky would beg and beg to go up in the crop duster, but her father never allowed it. Someday, she thought, looking at the Wright Flyer's wings, I'm going to learn to fly.

"You like planes?" a man said, startling Nicky.

"I like that plane," Nicky said.

"I'm here for the march," he said. "Came all the way from California. Are you here for the march?"

"For the bathroom," she said.

Nicky started to walk away.

"You from DC?" he asked.

"No," she said and moved away. It sure has been a long time since someone tried to pick me up, Nicky thought.

"I drove out after school let out. Made a summer out of it. I teach history in high school," he said, catching up. "I figured I wanted to be part of history, to experience it firsthand, and then go back and tell the kids."

Nicky stopped by an exhibit of World War II fighters. "I don't like these planes."

"Okay," he said. "But I don't follow."

"Every good thing gets ruined. Over there you have the Wright brothers. They gave us wings. They taught us to fly. And here you have fighter planes and they gave us death."

“My name is David,” he said, extending his hand toward Nicky.
“David Levin.”

Nicky shook his hand. David adjusted his large rucksack.

“What do you have in there?” Nicky asked.

“Some food, some drink. A hat, a blanket. With all these people, I wasn’t sure what to expect. This is my first demonstration.”

“Are you camping out on the lawn?”

“No, I’m staying in a hotel. This is just for today,” David said.

“Can I walk you back to the march?”

“Assuming that’s where I’m going.” Nicky walked slowly.

“You picked today of all days to visit the Smithsonian?” David held the door open.

“Thanks,” Nicky said, stepping outside. She stopped at the top of the stairs to light a cigarette.

“Isn’t it great,” David said, “how everything’s free in the nation’s capital? Free and open to the public. Anyone can go anywhere anytime. They even give us permission to protest. But away from the Mall, people are less free.”

“Are you practicing your speech for later today?” Nicky said.

“Just working up the nerve to make a speech to you.” David shifted his rucksack.

“And that speech would be?”

“Would you be free to have lunch with me? That is, if you’re here for the march.”

“I am,” Nicky said. She thought he looked cute with his huge rucksack of provisions.

“Free for lunch or here for the march?” David asked.

“Here for the march. Lunch depends on what you brought.”

“What I brought, I made. Except for the California wine. That comes from a friend of mine who has a vineyard.”

“Stop trying to impress me. I’ll take a look inside that rucksack when we get there.”

“And before we get there,” David asked, “do I get to know your name?”

“Barbara,” Nicky said, wondering why she lied and why she couldn’t come up with a better choice than Barbara. She offered David a cigarette.

“I don’t smoke,” he said. “You shouldn’t either.”

Nicky and David set up a picnic on a shadeless patch of grass, far from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

“You made all this?” Nicky said.

“Again, I didn’t know what to expect.”

“I meant did you actually cook the food?”

“Sure. I love to cook. I live alone, so I also have to cook if I want to eat. And I’m quite fond of eating.”

Sitting in the sun, among the largest group of people she had ever been part of, Nicky listened to speaker after speaker while she drank David’s wine, ate his food, and listened to his commentary. Suddenly, she realized that David had his hand on her knee. She didn’t know how long it had been there.

“Barbara...Barbara,” David repeated as he gently rocked her leg.

Nicky turned to face him.

“Are you all right? You look a little pale. Maybe you’ve had enough wine, especially in this sun.”

“I’m fine,” Nicky said, though she was feeling a bit light-headed.

“Do you want to get out of the sun?”

“That might be a good idea.”

“My hotel is close by. If you wanted to, you could go there and rest a little, take a shower if you want, get refreshed, and then we can come back.”

“Your hotel?” Nicky looked David over closely. “Shower?”

“I’ll wait in the lobby while you shower,” David said. “My hotel’s only a few blocks.”

Nicky’s mind started working and was quickly shifting into high gear. Two weeks since my period. This guy is good looking. He’s a teacher, so he’s smart. No one will ever know, and Barbara will understand because there’ll be a baby. She and I will be a family. This is too good to pass up. I mean, who knows if I’ll get this kind of

chance again? Nicky finished her cup of wine. "Let's go," she said, standing too quickly. She steadied herself on David's arm as he led her away from the crowd. His hands were soft, but they were strong. He's probably younger than me, Nicky thought.

Inside the room, David tuned the radio to the march and sent down for soda and snacks. Nicky went into the bathroom to shower while David waited for room service to arrive.

"Your soda's here," David called through the bathroom door.

Nicky took a deep breath. "Bring it in." She looked out from behind the curtain. David had his back toward her as he tried to pass her the glass of soda. Nicky put her hand over his. "Want to wash my back?"

David turned around. "I'd love to." He stepped into the shower, clothes and all.

"You're nuts." Nicky laughed, pushing him out of the shower. "Take those clothes off and I'll wash your back too."

When they were both covered with lather, Nicky told David that he could stay where he was, he didn't need a rubber, she had an IUD. Later, when they moved to the bed, with the radio broadcasting Martin Luther King's dream about his children, David and Nicky drank more wine and made love more times. When David fell asleep, Nicky got dressed. She didn't want David to know much about her, and she hated lying. Keeping in touch with him wasn't a choice. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to David, or the kid, she told herself as she wrote him a note thanking him for a wonderful afternoon and apologizing for the fact that she had to run out to catch her bus home. She added that if she were ever in San Francisco, she'd look him up. She wanted to sound casual, so he wouldn't follow her. She grabbed her bag and closed the door quietly behind her.

Back at the reflecting pool, in the middle of a huge crowd, Nicky lay on her back and soaked in the rest of the splendid, special afternoon. Just too good to be true, she repeated to herself. She couldn't stop smiling and she couldn't wait to tell Barbara.

In the evening, on the bus heading back to Bluefield, during the singing, the eating, the celebrating, the recounting, the retelling of the good day just passed, Nicky thought about being pregnant.

This will put an end to all those rumors about Barbara and me, she laughed to herself. And after I have the baby, no one will ever bother us again. Everything will be fine because people will know there was once a man in the picture and they will feel pity. Pity because some guy took advantage of me and left. No one would want to marry me after I had a kid. And then they'll just write us off as a couple of spinsters. But they'll leave us alone.

Of course, everyone in town knew that Nicky had gone out with Tommy Baines back in high school. He was captain of the football and basketball teams and had a smile that opened doors. That was around the same time that Nicky had a confusing crush on her gym teacher. So when Tommy Baines, star running back, asked Nicky to go with him to the pep rally, she thought that he was just what she needed. Tommy turned out to be a nice guy, and nice to her, and Nicky had a great time with him. But he did little to cure, or even explain, her crush. That didn't happen till Nicky slept over at Mary Beth's house. Mary Beth's parents were away, and she had asked Nicky to keep her company. They watched *American Bandstand* and ate vanilla ice cream with corn chips and Mary Beth asked about Tommy.

"Seems like something is missing," Nicky said. "Maybe I'm doing something wrong."

"Maybe he is. What do you do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Details."

"We just do it," Nicky stuffed some chips in her mouth.

"If I'm going to help you, I need information," Mary Beth said.

"It's usually in his father's Buick. He has this new Skylark. I love that car. It's a red convertible with a white top. But we leave the top up when we have sex. The backseat is very roomy."

"What do you do?"

"I'm not following," Nicky said.

"Do you take your clothes off?"

"In a car?"

"So what do you do?"

"We kiss for a while, and you know."

“Tell me.”

“He opens my bra and I pull up my skirt. He pushes his pants down and puts on a rubber. Tommy thinks it’s great. Afterward, we drive over to the diner for burgers and fries. He eats a lot and can’t stop grinning and I get to choose the radio station.”

“Did he ever touch you like this?” Mary Beth asked, placing her hand on Nicky’s nightgown.

“What are you doing?”

“Make believe I’m Tommy. I can teach you. I know what’s missing.” Mary Beth kissed Nicky on the lips. “Does he ever do this?” Nicky was still recovering from the effects of the kiss when Mary Beth slipped her hand inside Nicky’s nightgown. By the time Mary Beth was done asking and demonstrating, Nicky was no longer imagining that Mary Beth was Tommy, and she stopped wondering what was missing. Nicky kept going out with Tommy because she didn’t want anyone to wonder why she and Mary Beth slept over at each other’s house so often—even after dates with Tommy. Besides, like she told Mary Beth, she really did like him.

After graduation, Tommy went to college on a basketball scholarship and he and Nicky decided to see other people. Mary Beth went to college in California, went away and never, ever came back. Nicky was left wondering how to meet other women. She had no idea what she was supposed to look for or how she would recognize them, or how they would spot her. Until she saw Barbara sitting at her counter eating a slice of her blackberry pie and she knew.



The weary travelers returned to the church parking lot that evening cheerful but quiet. Nicky couldn’t help thinking that returning to Bluefield held some disappointment for many of her fellow travelers. Anxious to see Barbara, she threw her bag into the Chevy and drove off.

Barbara was sleeping when Nicky slipped into bed. Gently, slowly, she caressed Barbara until she rolled over and began to

return Nicky's kisses. After they made love, Nicky turned on the radio and lit a cigarette. The college station was playing Phil Ochs.

"That was wonderful," Barbara said, catching her breath. "You'll have to go away more often."

"It's coming home to you that I like."

"How was the march?" Barbara asked. "I saw some of it on the news."

"Great. Wonderful," Nicky said. She lay coverless in the heat and placed her hands on her abdomen. "And the best part is that we're going to have a baby."

"You're so funny."

"I mean it," Nicky said. She sat up. "I think you'll be proud of me. I met this guy and let him have sex with me, and—"

"You what!" Barbara grabbed her glasses from the nightstand and sat up.

"I told him I had an IUD."

Barbara got out of bed. She pulled on one of Nicky's T-shirts. "Who?" Barbara said. "I don't understand."

"Some guy."

"What guy?"

"That's not important." Nicky rested her cigarette in the ashtray.

"Of course it's important."

"Barbara, we're always talking about having children, so I went ahead and got us one. It's fabulous."

"You're serious."

Nicky grinned and nodded.

"You went off to Washington and fucked some guy at the march so you could get pregnant," Barbara said.

"I didn't do it for the sex. You're all I need for that." Nicky put her hand out to Barbara who didn't take it. She dropped her hand.

"Apparently not."

"Look, Barbara, if we lied a lot," Nicky said, "someone might let us adopt an orphan from Asia or South America. But then this opportunity came up, and I just had to take it."

"Had to?"

“Like it was meant to be. Like that’s why I went to the march, like that’s why you were too stubborn to go with me.”

“I’m not letting you go anywhere by yourself again.”

“You’re not thrilled?”

“Thrilled is not the first word that comes to mind.” Barbara rubbed her face. She sat on the edge of the mattress. “You can’t smoke those if you’re having a baby. What am I saying? This is impossible. Ridiculous.”

“You’re right. I quit.” Nicky pressed out the cigarette. “I can quit this time. You’ll take good care of me and the baby. How many mothers live with doctors?”

“A lot,” Barbara said.

“True. But how many lesbian mothers live with doctors?”

“This is not a joke.”

“And I’m not joking—not even a little. But I am happy. Very happy.”

“Do you have a plan?”

“No.”

“What is your plan?”

“I was planning on celebrating with you. On enjoying the moment with you,” Nicky said. “It’s not like you didn’t want to have a baby.” She moved around the bed and sat next to Barbara. “It’s not often you get a chance like I got, so I took it and now our problems are solved.”

“Seems to me that they’re about to start. I need a drink.” Barbara headed downstairs. Nicky followed close behind.

“A drink is good. We’ll drink to our baby.”

“You know there’s no drinking when you’re pregnant.” Barbara opened herself a beer and drank.

“This is going to be rough, but I can do it.”

“Does this mean you’ve been unfaithful to me?” Barbara said.

“I closed my eyes and thought about you the whole time.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“Anyway, it doesn’t count with a man,” Nicky said.

“So I can have an affair with a man and you won’t mind?”

"I didn't have an affair. I didn't even tell him my real name," Nicky said.

"What name did you use?"

"Yours."

Barbara stepped back. "Did you tell him where I worked? Where we lived? Is he going to show up here looking for you and find me?"

"Relax. I said I lived in Philadelphia and he lives in California, and I only told him my first name. I mean yours. Your name was all I could think of. That's kind of cool isn't it?"

"What's his name?"

"Doesn't matter," Nicky said.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"All that counts is that we're going to have a baby."

"Did you?" Barbara repeated.

"Sort of. I mean I knew why I was doing it. Funny, this time, he was real slow, real patient, and I was in a hurry."

"The baby has his genes. It's half his, you know."

"I know, but the baby's still half mine, and the part that counts is that we're the ones who are going to raise this baby. Just like if we adopted, only better. Starting right now, this minute, we're the parents. That guy, who was a nice guy, will have nothing to do with it and no one needs to know anything about him," Nicky said. "I don't even know anything about him."

"You're probably not even pregnant. I'll do the lab work in a couple of weeks, and then we'll see."

"You doctors are all alike. You always need a test." Nicky pressed her hands against her belly. "I can feel it."

"If you're pregnant, it's too early for you to feel anything. There's nothing going on yet."

"Nothing?" Nicky said. "A baby is growing inside me. It started. Cells are splitting. A life is beginning. It's incredible. My life, our lives, will never be the same, and you call that nothing?"

"What if she wants to know about her father?" Barbara said.

"It's a little early to worry about that."

"I could lose my job," Barbara said. "People could try and take the baby. We'll have to think about moving."

"That's the beauty of this. Everyone will stop thinking that we're dykes, and instead, they'll just think some guy got me pregnant and left me. We'll be a couple of spinsters. Dykes are a threat, but spinsters are just sad. People know me here. They know my family. They like me and they'll like my baby."

"That'll all change."

"You can get pregnant next. Guys would be falling over each other to help you out with that."

"I can't have a baby," Barbara said.

"I don't mean now. After you're done with your residency and have a practice going. You take a little time off and then go back to work because I know how you love your work. I'll stay home with the kids. I'm going to be a great mom."

"Let's first see if you're really pregnant," Barbara said.

"I am." Nicky yawned. "Let's go back to bed. I need my sleep. It's tiring being pregnant."



The next morning, Nicky overslept and had to rush to work. Barbara was already gone.

"Damn," Lucinda said when Nicky came into the kitchen.

"I'm not that late," Nicky said, tying her apron.

"Stella says you went to DC."

"Oh, that."

"Went to listen to a bunch of niggers and kikes," Stella added. She was filling napkin holders. "Tommy saw you." Stella's boyfriend stopped by the diner regularly when Stella was working.

Lucinda followed Nicky into the kitchen. "Is that why you needed the days off?"

"What'd he do, write down everyone's name?" Nicky said.

"What'd you go for?" Lucinda asked.

"I went to see," Nicky said, tying back her hair.

“What’re you going to see when King and that Malcolm get niggers all crazy and worked up so they forget their place?” Stella said.

Lucinda turned to Nicky. “Just be careful, Nicky. People like you here. Hell, I like you here.”

“If you’re done now,” Nicky said, steadying herself, “I’ve got work to do.”

Nicky was surprised by her surprise. Of course people would care. Of course people would talk. She placed a cigarette between her lips, turned the burner on, and leaned over the flame. Quickly, she pulled the cigarette out of her mouth, threw it down on the floor, and squashed it under her cowboy boot. She went into the bathroom and locked the door. With both her hands on her stomach, she took some deep breaths. I can do this, she told herself several times. I can.

CHAPTER THREE

1964

The walk across the parking lot was enough to tire Nicky. She grabbed hold of the screen door handle and took a deep breath before entering the Bluefield Diner. The breakfast crowd had thinned, and preparation for lunch was underway. Nicky had made a habit of passing by once a week since she stopped working. Cooking had become both difficult and dangerous, and Lucinda was worried something might happen to the baby or Nicky. Her job, Lucinda promised, would be there for her after the baby.

Lucinda stepped out from behind the counter. "Let me see you, girl," she said, taking Nicky's hand. "You look like you're about to have that baby any second. How are you feeling?"

"I'm ready. This is not fun anymore."

Nicky moved to a booth where she lowered herself onto the bench.

"Selma," Lucinda called, "bring us some coffee and some of that crumb cake." She turned back to Nicky.

"Just some coffee," Nicky said. She pressed out her cigarette. "I don't have any room left for food."

"How much longer?"

"Couple of weeks."

Selma placed the coffee and cake on the table.

"Have you decided on names?" Lucinda said.

“Still thinking.” Nicky tried some cake and wondered how much longer she could keep going over the same routine with Lucinda. Did she miss the place that much?

“Then Lucinda isn’t out yet?”

“I don’t want you to be disappointed, but I wouldn’t count on it,” Nicky said. “Anyway, I keep telling you, I think it’s a boy.” Nicky was going to go with either Paul or Paula. Folks would recognize the tribute to her father, and they would feel like they knew her baby. Paul Stewart. Paula Stewart. We know that name. We know you and your mama. We knew your grandma and grandpa. You’re from these parts. You belong here. You’re one of us.

“When you going to tell me who the father is?”

“When I want to tell the whole world,” Nicky said.

“You never told him?”

Nicky stuffed a large piece of cake into her mouth.

“Of course all that man would have to do is look at you,” Lucinda said. She shifted in her seat. “I see that George Wallace is challenging Johnson. I might have to vote Democratic for the first time in my life.”

Nicky stabbed at the cake. “The cake is good,” Nicky said.

“People have been asking for your pies.”

“I told you to let me train Leroy.”

“You haven’t heard?” Lucinda said.

“Heard what?” Nicky said.

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard. Leroy was drunk and tried to rape Norma James.”

“Nobody rapes Norma. They just buy her a few drinks.”

“You’re talking about white boys,” Lucinda said.

“She’s always too drunk to remember what happens to her. Someone told her to say that. Leroy wouldn’t do that.” Nicky held on to her coffee cup with both hands.

“How do you know?” Lucinda asked. “He was so quiet here, but you can never tell.”

“I worked with him,” Nicky said. “You did too. You know he wouldn’t do any such thing.”

"He behaved here, but I paid him. I don't know what he's like outside of here. All I know is we can't let coloreds go around raping white girls."

"Where's he now?"

"Don't know. Tommy said they beat him real bad. No matter what happened, he doesn't have a job here anymore. I don't want any trouble here."

Nicky pushed herself off the bench. "That was delicious," she said. "Tired me out. I'm going to head home and rest."

"Don't be a stranger after you have that baby."

Nicky began driving home and thinking about a long soak in the tub. A few blocks from the diner, she changed her mind and circled back toward the North End. Leroy wasn't in the phone book and Nicky didn't know his address, so she headed for the First Baptist Church. An elderly man was sweeping the steps as Nicky got out of her car.

"I'm looking for Reverend Peters," Nicky called.

"You found him," he said, looking up.

"I'm sorry. I didn't recognize you."

"Should I know you?"

"No. Maybe. I bought tickets to the King march from you. Doesn't matter. I'm looking for someone I used to work with. Leroy Ellison. He works at the Bluefield Diner. Over by the hospital."

"Did you try there?"

"He's not there," Nicky said. "They said he got badly hurt yesterday."

"At work?"

"No. Something about getting beat up."

Reverend Peters resumed sweeping. "How far along are you?" he asked.

"Excuse me?"

"The baby. When are you due?" he said.

"Couple of weeks. Do you know Leroy?"

"Do you have others?" the reverend asked.

"Other children? No, this is my first." Nicky shifted her feet; the baby was cutting off circulation to her legs. "Do you know where Leroy lives, sir? I just want to see if he needs help."

The reverend stopped sweeping. "The thing is, Mrs....?"

"Nicky. Nicky Stewart."

"Mrs. Stewart, you're pregnant. It's not such a good idea for you to be driving around not knowing where you're going, getting involved in things you don't even know about. You go home to your husband and get ready for that baby." He shifted his attention back to pushing the broom across the steps.

"Sorry to trouble you." Nicky opened her purse and wrote her phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to Reverend Peters. "If you see him, tell him I was asking after him. If there's anything he needs, he should call me." When she got back in her car, she started to weave her way around the unfamiliar territory of Bluefield's North End. Even the smallest house, she noticed, had a garden, and it seemed like marigolds were in bloom everywhere. Nicky was not sure what she was looking for, only hoping something would turn up. She spotted a pool hall and pulled over. Several young boys sat outside on the porch, huddled in the shade. They followed Nicky to the door as she stepped inside. Fats Domino sang out from the radio. Nicky let her eyes adjust. The man behind the counter put down his cigar and turned off the radio. He hurried toward her. The crowd of only black men stopped their games and their chatter. All eyes turned toward her. Nicky considered turning to leave.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" He blocked the stairs leading down to the pool tables.

Nicky swallowed hard. "I'm looking for Leroy Ellison. He works over at the Bluefield Diner."

"Did you try there?"

"Yes. He didn't show up at work."

"Sorry, I don't know him." He turned toward the first table where two men rested on their cues and watched. "Johnny, you know anyone named Leroy? He works over at..." He turned back to Nicky. "What's that place?"

"Bluefield Diner. He's a dishwasher."

"I don't know no dishwashers," Johnny said.

"You don't know no one who works," someone called from the back, and several men laughed hard.

“Sorry we can’t help you,” the man in front of Nicky said, and opened the door for Nicky who didn’t move. “Watch out for those steps,” he said, still holding the door open, still trying to usher Nicky out. “They can be tricky. Can I give you a hand?”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. But you be careful.”

Back in her car, Nicky caught her breath. What the hell am I doing, she thought. Driving calmed her, made her feel safe again as she continued to explore the North End. She spotted a small store and pulled in.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” the white man behind the counter asked, getting up quickly and putting down his newspaper.

“Sure.” Nicky picked out some gum, some pretzels and some licorice, and a bottle of pop.

“I’m not used to white folks shopping here,” he said.

“Could I have a pack of Winstons?” she said at the counter. After Nicky took the cigarettes and lit one, she said, “You know a man named Leroy Ellison?”

“What did he do?” The man packed her purchase.

“Nothing. I used to work with him and I need to return something to him.”

“This is no place for a fine woman like yourself to be hanging about. If I were you, Mrs....” he paused for Nicky to answer. When she didn’t, he continued. “If I were you, I’d let that boy pick up his stuff at work.”

“Thank you, sir. That’s a good idea.”

“You go on home now. I doubt your husband wants you driving around here.”

Nicky picked up her bag and headed for the door. “Thanks again,” she said. Once outside, Nicky grabbed hold of the banister and made her way down the stairs.

“Can I help you carry your bag, ma’am?”

Nicky turned to find the child’s voice. She hadn’t noticed the girl sitting on the porch bench. “Sure,” Nicky said. She handed the girl her snacks.

The girl followed her down the steps to her car where she opened the door for Nicky. “Why you want Leroy?” she whispered.

"You know Leroy?"

"Maybe."

"I heard he got hurt." Nicky closed the door.

"You that woman who got him in trouble?"

"No."

"Is that his baby?"

"No."

"You a doctor?"

"No."

"Then how you going to help him?"

"Do you know where he lives?" Nicky said.

"No."

Nicky took a slow, deep breath. Getting in and out of the car so often was tiring her.

"Would you like those snacks?"

"Why?" the girl said.

"Give me a second." Nicky looked through her bag and found a twenty-dollar bill. She found a used envelope on the floor mat and stuck the twenty in it. She wrote Leroy Ellison on the outside and handed it to the girl. "This envelope is for Leroy," Nicky said. "You make sure he gets it. You keep those snacks and pop for your trouble." The baby kicked and Nicky winced.

"You all right? You're not having that baby now are you? I've seen that look on my sister."

"I'm fine. Please make sure Leroy gets this."

"I will," she said. Then she ran off through the adjacent lot, turned behind the shed, and disappeared.

Nicky started her car. It took her a few minutes to find familiar roads and make her way out of town toward home. As the road narrowed to two lanes and fewer and fewer houses interrupted the landscape and the dirt became visible, she began to relax. Along this part of the road, the old houses had been kept up; few new ones had been built.

As Nicky downshifted into second and turned onto her driveway, it began to drizzle. The smell of the fresh rain made her smile and she walked slowly from the car to the house. She opened

the screen door, and let herself into the mudroom where she hung her jacket on a hook, sat on the bench, and kicked off her muddied shoes. In the kitchen, she noticed the time. Barbara was sure to be worried. She grabbed the phone and called Barbara at the hospital.

"Where were you?" Barbara said. "Why didn't you call? I checked downstairs to see if you went into labor."

"I'm fine," Nicky said. "I was in town and I didn't realize how late it was or I would have come by the hospital. I stopped by the diner and Lucinda told me that Leroy got beaten, so I tried to find him."

"You know where he lives?"

"I asked around the North End, but no one would tell me where he lived. I wanted to see if he was okay."

"And if he wasn't, what would you have done?"

"Can you check to see if he was brought in last night? Get his address for me?"

"People were talking about how this group of blacks and whites were out registering voters and that they got beat real bad."

"The ER will have his address."

"No one was brought here. You know that," Barbara said.

"I'll have to go back and look for him."

"Don't go anywhere; don't do anything till I get home," Barbara said. "Don't worry me like this. Did you forget that you're pregnant?"

"Not even for one second." Nicky hung up the phone and put a kettle of water on the stove. She leaned her back against the counter and watched the water boil. Outside, the much needed rain had stopped. A false hope. Through the window over the sink, she saw her unplanted garden. She hadn't gotten to it yet. When the baby was out, she would plant a garden and she would bring him out on the dirt with her. Nicky's father taught her to tend the eating garden. You come from a people who work the earth, he told her often. Dust to dust. There is no more noble an undertaking, no more crucial a task, no more satisfying an occupation. Soon, Nicky thought, soon my baby will be a part of this land, and he will work this earth, and then he too will be part of this place, this history, this patch of earth.

When the water boiled, Nicky carried her tea upstairs and ran the bath. While waiting on her tub to fill, the phone rang.

"Nicky Stewart?" a man's voice said.

"Who's this?"

"I got the envelope."

"Leroy?" Nicky said.

"Thank you."

"Are you okay?"

"I need a favor."

"What is it?"

"I need a ride."

"Sure," Nicky said, sitting down on the bed. "Where?"

"Richmond."

"That's two hours from here," she said.

"Yes."

"I'm pregnant," Nicky said.

"I know."

"I mean, I'm almost due and I'm not supposed to go that far from the hospital."

"It's a bad idea. I'm sorry to have bothered you," Leroy said.

"Wait." Couldn't they ask someone else, Nicky thought? But I did offer help. I'll get Barbara to come along with me.

"Are you there?"

"I'm thinking," Nicky said. "When would you need to go?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Nicky said. "Where would I meet you?"

"At the First Baptist."

"I'll be there by eleven."

"If you decide you can't drive me, I'll understand."

"I'll be there." Nicky hung up the phone and got into the tub. She slid her head under water and wet her hair and thought about swimming. It's just a ride, she thought, he's just asking for a ride. Okay, it would be bad if people found out. So, she figured, they better not find out.

"Leroy called," Nicky said over dinner. "He needs a ride to Richmond."

“He called you?” Barbara drank some wine.

“I told him to.”

“When?”

“When I was at the church, I gave the minister my number in case he needed anything. I didn’t think he’d need a ride. I thought he might need some money.”

“You told him you couldn’t, right?”

“Not quite.”

“You said yes?”

“I didn’t say one way or another,” Nicky said.

“But you think you’re going?” Barbara began to pace the room. “Do you understand you can’t go? It’s too risky to you and the baby.”

“I understand, but nothing’s going to happen to me.”

“Let’s just start with going into labor.”

“Come with me,” Nicky said. “You still never had ribs from Bub’s. That alone is worth the trip.”

“I have to work tomorrow. Can’t he find someone else?”

“He asked me.”

“People don’t joke about this stuff around here. Remember how everyone knew you went to the march? This is worse.” Barbara walked over and put her hands on Nicky’s shoulders and started to rub. “I like that you want to take him, but you have to promise me you won’t.”

“You’re so attached to this baby,” Nicky said.

“Promise me.”



Nicky rolled onto her side, sat up, and rested her feet on the rugless pine floor. After such a lousy night’s sleep, she was relieved to be getting up.

“That baby’s just preparing you, training you so you’ll be ready when he comes out,” Carol-Ann told her in that older sister tone the last time she called.

“Where are you going?” Barbara asked, sitting up and putting her left wrist in front of her nose to see the time.

"My checkup." Nicky's toes hunted for slippers.

"Aren't you early?"

"I move slow. I'll be late." She stood up.

"I'll come for the ride." Barbara rubbed her eyes with her palms.

"Don't you have to work?"

"I do. But if you need me."

"I'll be fine. Right now I just have to pee. Instead of drinking anything, I should just pour my glass right into the toilet. Save all that effort of moving liquid through my body."

"Can I make you breakfast?"

"I can't eat."

"You sure you don't want me to come?" Barbara asked as Nicky returned. Barbara, still in bed, reached over to her night table to get her glasses.

"I'm fine." Nicky headed downstairs. "I'm just pregnant."

Barbara got out of bed, grabbed her housecoat, and followed. She kissed Nicky and opened the screen door for her. "Call me," she yelled through the screen door. "Maybe we'll have dinner in town."

"Dinner in town sounds nice." Nicky turned back to Barbara. "What were you going to make me?"

"What?"

"Breakfast."

"Cereal. Whatever you want."

Halfway through the twenty-minute drive, Nicky turned into the Four Corners gas station and shut the engine.

"Hey, Nicky," Andy said as he approached the car.

Nicky pushed herself up. "Give me a hand will you?"

"How much longer?" he asked, wiping his hands on a clean rag.

"Couple of weeks." Nicky opened the door, swung her feet around. "But I'm ready now." Andy took her hand and helped her out of the car. "Could you fill it up? I'm going to get some coffee."

"I'll bring the car over," Andy said.

"Good plan." She walked across the road to the Four Corners Restaurant, exhaled some smoke, and stepped inside.

“Hey, Nicky,” the waitress called, “you’re looking good.”

“Don’t give her any food,” the cook yelled out as he peeked through the order pickup window. “She’ll get stuck in here like Pooh Bear.”

“That’s enough, Bobby,” the waitress said, laughing.

Nicky covered her belly with her hands. She felt an elbow just above her belly button that used to be an innie that had long since been turned into an outie by the baby. The restaurant was full with farmers. Nicky had known these people her whole life. They knew her father, her mother, and her sister. Like Nicky, they were descendants of the way things have been, white inheritors of a once prosperous and dignified occupation. Nicky’s father had always had their sympathy, losing his wife early, running that farm by himself, having only girls, and then dying young. Maybe that was why they didn’t ask Nicky about the child’s father. Not directly. Or maybe it was because they were farmers and this was the season of planting seeds in the earth and making things grow and the weather had not been kind.

They were talking about the newest government farm plan, the presidential primaries, the young baseball season, and their hopes that their Washington Senators would not lose a hundred games. Again. They were talking about anything but the weather. But Nicky knew their thoughts were on rain. They needed the rain to remain idle. They’d had too much time to prepare things. It was up to the plants now. They simply had to start growing. If the rain came, they would eat more pie, drink more coffee, and worry about flooding. Nicky saw her father in these men, remembered his worry, his patience, his pride at getting food from the earth. Every year it was different, and every year it was the same.

Nicky wanted to sit and listen and lose herself in their small talk, but she was not a farmer and not a man. Maybe someday her son would sit here. Barbara had recently agreed to apply for a job at the hospital at the end of her residency and not force the issue of moving. Nicky was certain that staying in Bluefield would be best for the baby, and she was almost as sure that Barbara would learn to love Virginia the way she did. She lifted her coffee, wedged a copy of the morning paper under her arm, and stepped back outside.

Andy was waiting outside the diner with Nicky's car. He was holding the door open for her. "Got names picked out?"

Nicky tossed the newspaper onto the passenger seat and slid behind the wheel. "I've narrowed it down to a few." The engine purred.

"What are they?"

"I like to keep them to myself, you know, till he's born."

"You like secrets."

"Don't start with me, Andy."

"How's the pedals?" he asked. He was leaning against the door, checking the space between Nicky's belly and the steering wheel. Andy had rigged the Chevy's gas, brake, and clutch with blocks when Nicky's expanded belly forced her seat back and left her feet out of reach.

"Good. But if the baby doesn't come soon, you'll have to move me back some more." She depressed the clutch and pushed the lever into reverse.

"There is no more."

"That's how my belly feels. No more room."

Andy wiped his hand across the hood. "You call me if you need something, Nicky. Anything."

"I will." Nicky maneuvered back onto the road. On the radio, the announcer read the results of the primaries. Barry Goldwater was going to make things easy for Lyndon Johnson. Nicky had never liked Johnson. She figured that somehow he was involved with those Texans killing JFK.

It started to rain and soon the rain began coming down hard. The wipers looked like they were trying to make the car take off. The college radio station was playing songs with rain in the title. It was "Singin' in the Rain" by the time the rain slowed to a drizzle. Nicky turned her wipers on and off as she drove. They wiped away the drops, they hesitated, they wiped again.



"I'm ready now, Doc," Nicky said when Dr. Roberts entered her exam room.

“Your baby’s not quite as ready as you are,” Dr. Roberts said. “But soon. Couple of weeks at most.” Dr. Roberts paused to look at her chart. “The good news is that everything looks fine.”

“How big is the baby?”

“I always guess between four and twelve pounds and that way I’m seldom wrong.”

“Promise me he’s healthy?” Nicky sat up.

“I’m sure he’ll be. But you know there aren’t any guarantees. Is Dr. Phillips still renting from you out at the farm?”

“She is,” Nicky said.

“Good. It never hurts to have a doctor in the house.” Dr. Roberts stood. “Keep doing what you’re doing. This close to your due date means you should avoid trips more than an hour away from the hospital.” He sat next to Nicky. “Have you made any decisions,” he asked, “about what to do after the baby is born?”

“What do you mean?” Nicky said.

“I want to make sure you are aware of your options,” he said.

“Options?”

“It’s my professional obligation, as well as my personal responsibility to the memory of your mother and your father. With all his troubles, man still found a way to help out my father during a tough time—”

“You’re losing me, Doc.”

“Should you be considering giving the baby up, it’s much easier to do that without seeing the infant.”

“I’m not giving the baby up.” Nicky took a deep breath and tried to steady her hands. “Where did you get that idea?”

“I’m not saying you are. I just want you to know what to expect in case that’s what you decide.”

“What circumstances?”

“Less than optimal,” he said, facing Nicky. “Look, Nicky, I’m just concerned. And so is your sister.”

“You spoke to Carol-Ann?”

“She called me. She gave me the impression you wanted to know your options.”

Nicky dressed quickly and quietly. “When did she call you?”

“Carol-Ann was just looking out for you. It’s difficult to marry when you have a child. She said that you were also considering having her adopt the child so that he would remain in the family. That would be very nice of her.”

“I appreciate your concern, Doc, but I am not giving up my baby. I am staying right here and raising my baby,” she said, moving toward the door. “His name will be Paul Stewart and I will teach him to farm.”

“Like your dad. That’s nice.”

“And that’s the only option I’m considering.”

“I must have misunderstood Carol-Ann. You know my family feels indebted to your father.”

“I’m sorry my sister put you in the middle of this.”

“I must have misunderstood her. That’s the last I will ever speak of it. I don’t want you to get worked up. The important thing to focus on is that baby is doing great. You’re doing great, and the two of you will be meeting soon enough.”

Once outside, Nicky checked the time. If she left right away, she could make Richmond and be back in time to meet Barbara for dinner. The ride would do her good, take her mind off the conversation she just had. And she could pick up a bucket of Bub’s ribs. She’d mentioned those ribs often enough that it was time Barbara had some.

Finding the First Baptist was no longer difficult, and Nicky shut her engine in the parking lot. She waited behind the wheel, lacking the energy to get out of the car and look around. After a few minutes, Reverend Peters emerged from the chapel and walked toward her. Nicky rolled down her window.

“Thank you for coming,” the reverend said. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m sure.” Nicky pressed her cigarette into the ashtray and lit another. She was trying not to let on that she was shaking and wondering what she was doing.

“Leroy’s going to the bus station,” the reverend said.

“I know where that is.”

“You’re not in a rush, so don’t speed. Needless to say, you don’t want to be stopped.”

“I’ve never gotten a ticket.”

“If you’re stopped, just tell them that he works for you.”

The reverend turned and waved toward the chapel door. Two men emerged with Leroy, who they helped down the steps. A third man carried several suitcases. When they reached the car, one of the men asked for Nicky’s keys and he put Leroy’s stuff in the trunk. The other men lay some blankets on the rear floor.

“It’ll be better if Leroy stays down on the back floor till you get into Richmond.”

“Sure,” Nicky said. “Whatever you think is best.”

The men helped Leroy lay down across the rear floor.

“Has he seen a doctor?” Nicky asked the reverend. “He looks bad.”

“He’ll be okay once he gets on the bus. Someone will meet you at the station.”

“How will I recognize them?” Nicky asked.

“He’ll find you,” he said. “Thank you again for your help.”

“Should I call you?”

“Better if you don’t. I’ll get a call from Richmond.”

Nicky took a deep breath and turned the key. I love this car, she thought as she shifted into gear, let the clutch pedal up, and took off. She turned right on Summer Boulevard, took a left onto Jefferson Avenue, and headed east.

“You okay back there, Leroy?”

“I’m okay.”

“Want a cigarette?” Nicky asked.

“It might look odd to see smoke rising from the rear seat that has no passenger.”

“That would look funny.”

Nicky pulled the lighter out of the dash. “What happened, anyway?”

“I guess I upset some people.”

“What were you doing?”

“Nothing,” Leroy said.

“Nothing?”

“The less you know, the less trouble you could get into.”

“Too late for that, so go ahead and tell me,” Nicky said.

“Okay. You’re right,” Leroy said. “I was helping to register voters.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s enough,” Leroy said.

“Not what I heard.”

“What did you hear?”

“That you tried to rape Norma James, that you pulled a knife on a couple of white boys when they tried to stop you.”

“That’s a good story, but it’s a story. I’m guessing that you didn’t believe it since you’re driving me.”

“Where are you going?”

“New York City,” Leroy said.

“Till this blows over?”

“This won’t blow over. At least not for me.”

Nicky drove along farmland and through small towns as she made her way east. She had never driven with this kind of pressure. She never worried about being stopped, never cared. She’d always talked her way out of it. She knew talking wouldn’t do much good this time.

“You have people in New York?” Nicky asked.

“Cousins,” Leroy said.

“They grew up around here?”

“I’ve never met them.”

“You know, Leroy, I’ve been working with you for two years and I don’t even know if you’re married.”

“I am.”

“Any kids?”

“My girl is eight and my son is five. They’ll come up to New York after I get settled.”

“New York is sure going to be different than Bluefield,” Nicky said. “The longest I ever lasted in a city was two weeks when I stayed with my sister out in L.A. Course I wasn’t crazy about living with my sister, so who knows? You have any brothers and sisters?”

“Two brothers and a sister,” Leroy said. “And a nephew.”

“Nice. A big family is nice.”

They reached the city limits and Leroy sat up. Nicky asked him if he wanted to get some ribs with her. He preferred to go directly to the bus station.

“Is Leroy Ellison your full name?”

“Leroy Turner Ellison.”

“It’s a nice name.”

Nicky pulled to a stop and opened her door.

Leroy pushed the front seat forward and climbed out the passenger side door. Nicky unlocked the trunk and Leroy put his bags on the curb.

“I’d better go in myself,” Leroy said.

“You’re going to manage with all these bags?”

“I’ll be okay. Besides, you’re way too pregnant to carry anything.”

An elderly man came over to the car. He looked at Leroy. “Can I give you a hand with those packages, son?”

“No, thanks, sir.”

“I’m not a porter, son,” the man said. “You’re Leroy Ellison?”

“Yes, sir,” Leroy said.

“Reverend Peters called,” the man said. “I’m here to help you get on your bus.”

“Thank you, sir,” Leroy said. He turned to Nicky and extended his hand toward her. “Thank you, Nicky Stewart. All the best to you and your baby.”

“You take care of yourself, Leroy Turner Ellison. And thank you.” Nicky took his hand between both of hers and held it.

“For what?” Leroy said.

“Just thank you,” Nicky said.

“I think we’d best be on our way,” the man said, lifting some pieces of luggage. He turned to Nicky. “Thank you, ma’am,” he said as he herded Leroy toward the station.

Nicky got back into her car. At Bub’s she picked up a full bucket of ribs, a quart of slaw, and extra sauce. Once she was out of Richmond, she shifted into high gear, pushed down hard on the gas

pedal, and let the Bel Air loose. She began to relax as she cruised along the road toward home. Without Leroy in the car, she would tell the troopers that she was in labor and trying to make it back to Bluefield Hospital. The radio played Elvis and Nicky sang along. She was feeling good as she reached over and took a rib from the bucket and worked at it slow.

Three ribs and an hour later, Nicky had to pull over. She couldn't tell if she was having contractions or gas. When the pain eased, she drove as fast as she could to Four Corners where she pulled into the station and leaned hard on the horn. Andy came running.

"The baby's coming." Nicky pushed opened her door.

"What should I do? Should I call the doctor?"

"Drive me to the hospital." Nicky got out and went around the car to the passenger's side.

Andy wiped his hands on his pants. "You sure?"

"Let's go," Nicky yelled.

Andy jumped in. "You going to make it there?" Andy said as he backed out.

"I hope so." Nicky breathed rapidly, unable to talk. "That was rough," she finally said. "If we don't make it, you'll be the first person this baby sees."

"Hang on." Andy shifted rapidly through the gears.

"Shit."

"What?" Andy said.

"These ribs, they're for Barbara. I don't want them to spoil."

"Forget the ribs. Keep breathing."

A few minutes later, Andy parked at the emergency room and led Nicky in. "Nurse, we need some help here. She's having a baby!"

"Are you the husband?"

"No, ma'am," Andy said.

"Are you the father?"

"There's no father," Nicky said, "no husband. He's my friend."

"There's always a father," the nurse said, looking cross at Andy and sounding more irritated than concerned.

By the time Andy found Barbara, it was clear that Nicky was not in labor. She had gas. Happens a lot to first timers, the nurses told her.

“Where were you all day?” Barbara said. “I called you.”

“The ribs!” Nicky said, slipping on her shoes. “I’ve got to get the ribs from my car before they spoil.”

“What ribs?”

“From Bub’s,” Nicky said, shifting her weight. “Let’s go home.”

“I’ll walk you out, but my shift isn’t over.”

Inside the elevator Nicky said, “I was craving ribs and I went to Richmond and I had one on the ride home. Okay, I had a few, and all of a sudden, I had these incredible pains. I was sure this baby was ready. Turned out to be some wicked gas. If childbirth is worse than what I just had, I’m not going to be able to do it.”

“You took Leroy?” Barbara asked.

“Let’s not talk about that in here,” Nicky said as the elevator doors opened. “You just have to try Bub’s ribs.”

“You said you wouldn’t go. We had an agreement, Nicky.”

“You had an agreement. You said I shouldn’t go. Anyway, I got ribs and slaw in the car. I’ll get you some beer on the way home and we’ll have dinner and talk then.”

“You put the baby at risk. Someone could have run you off the road. People are getting killed doing what you did.”

“It’s not such a big deal.”

“It is a big deal.”

“Okay, it was a big deal. But nothing happened.” Nicky opened her car door. “Do you smell that?” Nicky sat behind the wheel, lifted the bucket of ribs, and offered it to Barbara.

“Not now.” Barbara rolled down Nicky’s window and closed her door. She leaned over. “Are we going to raise the baby together or not? Do I have any say about what to do, or is it all up to you?”

“Of course we’re going to do this together. But it’s different now,” Nicky said. “He’s inside me, and I don’t have a choice but to take him with me. After he’s born, things will be different. And let me tell you, I am so ready for him to be born.”

“I found out today that I can stay if I want to.”

“What do you mean?”

“They offered me the fellowship.”

"You got it. Now we really have something to celebrate. Good thing I got those ribs," Nicky said. "Did you accept?"

"Not yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

"I don't know. It's confusing. There's the mediocre pay," Barbara said.

"But we have mediocre expenses."

"That'll change after the baby is born. But mostly, it wasn't my first choice."

"Are you used to getting your first choice?"

"I'm used to trying for it."



"How long have you been here?" Nicky asked Barbara as she opened her eyes.

"Since they brought you back, Mom." Barbara approached the bed. She was holding a cup of coffee that she slowly drank. Out in the hallway, the hospital was waking up. Trays rattled, phones rang. "Your chart said that the birth was uneventful."

"You doctors talk funny. It certainly was not uneventful. I gave birth," Nicky said.

"I just meant everything went well."

"Have you seen Paul?" Nicky asked.

Barbara sat at the edge of the bed. "I couldn't take my eyes off him. He has your eyes." Barbara put down her coffee.

"Can the nurses bring him?" Nicky said. "I only saw him for a little while and then I fell asleep"

"I'll go tell them you're awake."

A nurse came with Paul, and Nicky pushed herself up. She took Paul and asked Barbara, "How was this uneventful?"

"He's falling asleep," Barbara said.

"He had a rough day," Nicky said. "You're allowed to kiss him. Everyone kisses babies. You're not going to ruin your career if someone sees you kissing a baby."

"Depends on whose baby."

An orderly came in with a tray of food, and the nurse returned to take Paul back to the nursery. That's when Barbara left for rounds. That's when Nicky lit a cigarette and dialed her sister. "Hey, Carol-Ann," she said, "I had a boy."

"When?"

"A few hours ago."

"I knew you were having a boy," Carol-Ann responded. "Didn't I tell you you were having a boy? That's why you were late."

"I was on time. On my due date."

"Yeah, but my three girls were all early. What's he look like? What's his name?"

"He doesn't have much hair, but what he has is dark," Nicky said. "I think he'll have dark eyes. They have Daddy's shape. You know the way his were deep and all."

"Like yours."

"He's gorgeous, perfect. I just love him."

"What's his name?" Carol-Ann said.

"Paul."

"Daddy would like that," Carol-Ann said. "How are you feeling?"

"It's nice not to be pregnant anymore."

"What was the birth like?"

"I hated it," Nicky said. "You did this three times?"

"I might do it again."

"You pregnant?"

"Not now. Take pictures," Carol-Ann said. "Lots of pictures. And send me one right away."

"I'm getting tired."

"Give baby Paul a big kiss from his Aunt Carol-Ann."



Nicky sat on the porch holding Paul while Barbara unloaded the car. The afternoon sky was bright and cloudless. Barbara brought over the carriage and Nicky placed Paul inside and covered him.

"I can't wait to stop wearing these maternity clothes."

"You look great," Barbara said, leaning over to give Nicky a long kiss. "You both look great."

"Let's take Paul to the pond." Nicky stood.

"You don't want to go inside?"

"First I want to show him the farm."

Barbara pushed the carriage while Nicky walked alongside. They slipped behind the barn and followed the tractor path through the corn seedlings. In the years since her father died, Nicky had been renting her land to their neighbor, Mr. Jamison. The farm was paid for, had been for a long time, and the rent money paid the taxes and gave Nicky a decent income. Rumor had it that Mr. Jamison landed a contract to supply pork to the army. With the Stewart land, Mr. Jamison had the largest farm in the county. He'd offered to buy the farm from Nicky after her father died. Had offered a more than fair price. Mr. Jamison and Nicky's father had been friends since they were kids. They played football together in high school, went to the state finals their junior year, and he was not about to take advantage of Paul's daughter, a Southern woman, not like that scoundrel who got Nicky pregnant. You tell me who the father is, Mr. Jamison had offered Nicky on several occasions, and I'll haul his ass out here to take responsibility for that child.

Nicky stopped in the cornfields and looked over the four-inch-high seedlings.

"What?" Barbara said, turning around to look at Nicky.

"Nothing." She caught up and gave Paul a kiss. "Everything is perfect." She put her arms around Barbara. "I love you," she said. "I love Paul. I love this farm."

At the edge of the woods, they maneuvered the carriage onto the narrow path that led to the pond. When they arrived, Barbara took the blanket and spread it on the shore. She sat with Paul on her lap. "Your mother and I fell in love here," Barbara said to Paul.

"Tell him more."

"You brought me here without asking and then you just stripped in front of me. I thought you were so feisty."

"I thought you said it was when you looked into my eyes that first time at the diner," Nicky said.

"Yeah, that too. But here is where I was sure."

"Because you saw me naked?"

"That never hurts."

"But you weren't going to act on it?"

"No."

"You needed me to do that."

"I didn't know that you would."

"But I was the one who made the move."

"Take all the credit if you need to," Barbara said. "Do you think if Kennedy had lost we would be together?"

"Sure, cause I still would have gotten drunk and come over to see you." Nicky leaned over and kissed Barbara. Nicky kicked her shoes off. Her body, sore from the effort of childbirth, felt fresh and energetic, freed from the great task of sustaining another life inside her. She rolled up her pants, stood, and waded in the shallow water. "We might have to put a fence up."

"Why?"

"Paul could wander out here alone."

"We have some time before he can make it out here on his own. By then you'll teach him to swim." Paul began to cry.

"Let me feed him," she said, making her way back to the blanket. Paul started feeding and stopped crying.

"What's Paul going to call me?" Barbara asked.

"What do you want to be called?"

"I don't know," Barbara said. "I don't know who I'm supposed to be. I want him to know who I am. How will he know who I am?"

"You're his mother," Nicky said.

"You're his mother, Nicky."

"He's a lucky guy. He has two mothers."

"He can't call me Mom. At school, they'll say, give this to your mother. What will he say? Which one?"

"That would be funny." Nicky shifted Paul to her other breast. "I wish he could say that. I wish he could. How about Aunt Barbara?"

"That would mean that we were sisters. Or I was his father's sister. Lots of questions without answers. It's too confusing."

"They'll just figure we're a couple of spinsters. Old maids get called aunt."

"Great. I get to be an old maid. Still, that's everyone else. What about Paul? How will he know who I am unless he knows what to call me?"

"Barbara, I can't believe you're all worked up about this. He'll know who you are."

"That's easy for you to say. You're Mommy."

"Then you could be Daddy. He'll call me Mommy and call you Daddy."

"Nicky, I want him to know who I am."

"He'll know. You'll feed him, clean him, bathe him. You'll hold him and rock him. Kiss him and hug him. You think he won't know you love him?" Nicky said. "He'll see us together and he'll know that we love each other and that we love him."

"But what will he call me?"

"What about Barbara? He'll call me Nicky and you Barbara and we'll call him Paul and we'll all be on a first-name basis and we'll be happy forever after."

"He needs a mommy. You'll be Mommy."

"You're jealous?"

"I just want to fit into this picture. I don't want what he calls me to be awkward or create a distance. I don't want it to put anything between us."

"Barbara, we're just going to have to make things up as we go along."



Nicky pulled a cigarette out of the pack lying on the kitchen table and lit it. "What time do you get in?" she said.

"Four, Virginia time," Carol-Ann answered.

"Barbara will still be at the hospital so I'll pick you up with Paul."

"That's okay," Carol-Ann said.

"It's no problem." Nicky twirled the phone cord like a jump rope.

“Even if you didn’t just give birth, we’d rent a car. There’s five of us now, you know, and with you and Paul, that’s a big crowd. I can’t wait to see him.”

Paul began to cry.

“Is that him?” Carol-Ann asked.

“I need to nurse him.” Nicky put out her cigarette. She shifted the phone and lifted Paul from his carriage. “He’s so cute when he nurses.”

“Is he on a schedule?” Carol-Ann said.

“You know I hate wearing a watch.”

“How often do you nurse him?”

“Whenever he’s hungry”

“Even at night?” Carol-Ann said.

“The night is Barbara’s. I hate getting up. She’s used to it. She changes him and tries to rock him back to sleep with a pacifier. If she can’t, she brings him to me to nurse and then puts him back in his crib. He’s in our room so you won’t even hear him wake up when you’re here.”

“Really? He sleeps in your room?”

“Sure,” Nicky said.

“Speaking of sleeping,” Carol-Ann coughed. “Richard wanted me to ask if you and Barbara could sleep in different rooms while we’re visiting.”

“What?”

“Claire’s almost nine and she’s been asking questions.”

“What kind of questions?” Nicky said.

“About her Aunt Nicky and Aunt Barbara having a baby,” Carol-Ann said. “We don’t know what to answer her.”

“Tell her the truth.”

“She’ll get confused,” Carol-Ann said.

“Life is confusing.”

“Just think about it, little sister.”



Carol-Ann, Richard, and their three girls arrived at the farmhouse without any luggage.

"We checked into the Bluefield Motor Inn on the way over," Richard said to Barbara who came out to help.

"They have a neat pool, Aunt Barbara," Claire said.

"Why didn't you tell us?" Barbara asked. "We got all the rooms ready for you."

"Richard surprised me and the girls," Carol-Ann said. "He told us on the plane."

"I know how hard it is after you have a baby if you don't have help," Richard said. "You don't need to take care of us too."

"Enough about us. I want to see Paul," Carol-Ann said, heading inside.

After they doted over Paul, after they took turns holding, kissing, hugging Paul, and after dinner and desert were eaten and the dishes cleared from the table, Carol-Ann told Nicky, "We should get going. It's been a long day for the kids and I promised them they could get in the pool before bed."

"We'll be back early tomorrow," Richard added.

"Why don't you stay?" Nicky asked Carol-Ann. "Richard, how about if you take the girls and I'll drive Carol-Ann back later?"

"He never puts the kids to sleep," Carol-Ann said.

"I can handle my girls," Richard said. "Come on, princess," he said, lifting Roberta. "Who wants to go swimming?"

Richard left and Carol-Ann helped Barbara wash the dishes. Nicky sat at the kitchen table nursing Paul.

"That was a great dinner," Carol-Ann said, drying the dishes.

"I couldn't eat garlic the whole time I was pregnant," Nicky said.

"I never got nauseous," Carol-Ann said. "It's because I had girls."

"You love being pregnant," Nicky said.

"Holding Paul makes me want to do it again," Carol-Ann said.

"Are you serious?" Nicky asked.

"Sure." Carol-Ann finished the dishes and was rinsing out the sink. "One more. I think I could do it one more time. Richard really wants a son. I'm happy with all girls, but I'll try again if he wants to."

"I'm going to read in the living room," Barbara said, putting the last dish away. "Do you want me to take Paul?"

"I'll keep him a little longer," Nicky said.

Carol-Ann sat next to Nicky. "Let me hold my nephew."

"You want coffee?" Nicky said, walking over to the stove. She pulled a cigarette out of the breast pocket of her denim shirt, put it in her mouth, and searched her pockets for matches. Coming up empty, she leaned over and lit the cigarette on the stovetop burner.

"Sure. Let's drink it outside," Carol-Ann said. She brought Paul out to Barbara while Nicky poured the coffee.

They stepped out into the night air. Carol-Ann sat on the picnic table by the big oak. Nicky leaned against the tree.

"I remember when Daddy built this table," Carol-Ann said. "I wanted to invite some friends for a barbecue, but we didn't have a picnic table so Daddy built this."

"You whined for a week until Daddy couldn't take it anymore. Then he built it."

"I always thought you'd be the one to leave this place and I'd be stuck here my whole life." Carol-Ann picked her teeth with a blade of grass.

"I've never felt stuck here. Never wanted to leave. If I left, I'd just be looking for a place like this." Nicky moved her back from side to side, letting the bark massage her muscles. The moon, just clearing the top of the barn, was the color of custard.

Carol-Ann crossed the driveway to the old Impala wagon parked in the unmowed grass. She placed her coffee on the roof and her hands on the hood. "Daddy loved this car. First car he bought that wasn't a pickup. You ever going to sell it?"

"You want it?"

"Are you kidding?" Carol-Ann laughed. "They'd laugh at me if I drove this in my neighborhood."

Nicky opened the car door, slid into the driver's seat, turned the ignition, and rolled down her window. She leaned over and pushed the passenger door open.

"You leave the keys in the car?" Carol-Ann asked.

"You've gotten too used to L.A."

"I'm thinking of the kids getting in here. You're going to have to start thinking that way."

"Hop in," Nicky said.

Carol-Ann grabbed her coffee and slid into the passenger seat. Nicky guided the car around the barn and turned onto the dirt road that divided the cornfield. Corn stalks rose high above the car on either side, leaving only sky visible. Noise from the crickets overwhelmed the Impala's deep rumble. Nicky drove without headlights, letting the full moon light the way. "How come you didn't tell me you were staying in a hotel?"

"Richard thought of it on the plane. He thought it would be easier for you and it would be more of a vacation for us."

Nicky downshifted into second where the road narrowed and the car brushed against corn stalks on both sides. Carol-Ann pulled her elbow into the car. Nicky shifted back up to third.

"What is Paul's last name?"

"He has ours. I mean mine."

"What about his father's name?" Carol-Ann said.

"I told you there's no father."

"I don't understand."

"I'm not claiming immaculate conception. It's just that he doesn't know about Paul. So there is no father." They came out of the cornfields and Nicky brought the car to a stop. She lit a cigarette, got out of the car, climbed onto the hood, and sat on the roof of the car. She could see her house, all lit up. "What a beautiful night."

"You didn't tell him?" Carol-Ann opened her door and leaned against it.

"It's none of his business."

"Do you think that's fair?"

"He wasn't trying to make a baby." Nicky flicked ashes onto the ground.

"And you?"

"I was trying."

"How did you meet him?" Carol-Ann said.

"What's your point here?"

"Did you like him?"

"That's not why I slept with him," Nicky said.

"What are you going to tell Paul about his father?"

"I don't know," Nicky said.

"You're going to have to think of something."

"Paul is six weeks old. Maybe Johnson will get us all blown up before he asks. I don't know. If I make it to where he asks, and he's ready to understand, then I'll tell him."

"How are you going to explain Barbara?"

"To who?"

"To Paul."

"Why are you doing this?"

"You have to think about these things," Carol-Ann said. "They're going to come up and they're going to make things tough on Paul. What do you think it's going to be like for him to grow up like this?"

"Like what?" Nicky said.

"You know."

"I don't."

"By lesbians. You still live in Virginia, not California."

"This is the happiest time in my life." Nicky slid off the roof and got back behind the wheel. She turned the ignition. Carol-Ann hurried in and shut her door. "If you're not happy that I have a baby then you don't need to be here." Nicky's cigarette dangled from her lips and she shifted gears rapidly. "You think Barbara and I didn't think about any of this? Paul will have to put up with crap. All kids do. Fat, skinny, tall, short, glasses, names, freckles, hair color, anything. Paul'll get picked on. But not by his family. I want you to be happy for me, but if you can't then there's really no point to this visit. I'm not going to apologize for Paul, and I certainly won't let you hurt him."

"You're the one who's going to hurt him. I'm trying to protect him. And you," Carol-Ann said. "Have you considered giving Paul up for adoption?"

"Dr. Roberts told me you called him."

"I just wanted you to know all your options."

"I wanted to have a kid," Nicky said. "I was trying to get pregnant. That was my option. It worked out."

“Richard offered to adopt Paul. He considers Paul family. You could be his aunt and see him whenever you want and, Paul would have a regular family.”

“Shut up,” Nicky said. “Regular?” She laughed.

“Just think about it. The sooner it’s done, the better for Paul and the easier for you.”

Nicky turned the headlights on and pulled the car onto the street. “I’m taking you back to the hotel.”

“Slow down, Nicky. You’re scaring me.”

Nicky pressed down harder on the gas pedal. She wanted Carol-Ann out of her car as fast as she could. “Don’t come over anymore. I don’t want you near Paul.”

“You’re overreacting.” Carol-Ann said. “Richard was just trying to be nice. This way Paul would stay in the family.”

“I heard what Richard said when you told him I was pregnant. I heard him say that I’ve gone too far this time. That I’m crazy and shouldn’t be allowed to raise a baby.”

“That’s not what he meant. He just wants what’s best for you and for Paul.”

“I am what’s best for Paul, and he is what’s best for me.”



The next morning, Carol-Ann called early to say that Richard was needed back at work. An emergency at the plant. They were taking the next flight back home to California. “I’ll call you when I get in,” she said.

Nicky sat up in bed. “Do what you have to do to protect your children from me.”

“That’s not fair, little sister. Listen,” Carol-Ann said. “Think about what we talked about last night. The offer stands. Richard is serious about it.”

“I’m sure you both are,” Nicky said. “Have a safe flight.” She hung up the phone and pushed the blanket away from her.

“What was that all about?” Barbara was still in bed.

“Carol-Ann’s going home.”

Barbara leaned over on her elbow. "What happened?"

"We had a fight last night."

Barbara sat up. "What about?"

"She doesn't know how to explain us having Paul to her kids."

"And she didn't want us to do the explaining? That Claire is a sharp one."

Nicky laughed. "I offered. It didn't go over too well."



During Paul's two-month checkup, Nicky's pediatrician told her that he had spoken with Carol-Ann. He said he was glad to hear that Nicky was considering letting Carol-Ann adopt Paul and he offered to help in any way he could. He said that Carol-Ann and Richard had already filed custody papers.

"But you already knew all that," the doctor added. "Paul will have a stable home this way, a normal home, and you'll still be related to him. A special aunt," the doctor had said while Nicky redressed Paul. "He'll be lucky. Think of it this way. He'll have two mothers instead of one. You and Carol-Ann. That's a lucky boy. And it will be a lot easier for you to marry."

Nicky sat still and fought to remain calm. Be a good girl and they'll let you and Paul leave. Just nod and smile and say thank-you, she kept telling herself. Don't panic or they'll declare me unfit and take Paul.

"You're making the right decision," the doctor had continued. "I'm glad you realized how hard it would be, especially for the baby. He wouldn't be accepted by a lot of people around here."

Barbara was unreachable at the hospital so Nicky drove to Four Corners where she pulled in front of a bay and shut the engine.

"Hey, Nicky," Andy said, coming out from under the hood of the Impala he was working on.

Nicky lifted Paul out of the car. She walked over to Andy. "Want to hold Paul?"

"Sure." Andy wiped his hands on his thighs. "He's huge." Andy bounced Paul in his arms. "Looks like you. And a lot like your dad. How old is he now?"

“He’ll be two months on the fourth. Independence Day. We’re having a party for him. You have to come.”

“My folks are having everyone over for a barbecue, but I’ll stop by.”

“You ever think of having kids?” Nicky said.

“Can’t do that by myself.”

“Anybody’d jump at the chance to be your wife.”

“So far no one has jumped. Not even a hop.”

Nicky shoved her hands in her pockets. She knew Andy liked her. If she were married, Nicky thought, Paul would be safe. She’d be normal. They’d have a normal family. “You’re not looking in the right places,” she said.

“What places are those?” Andy said.

“Not in those bars you hang out in.”

“Not fair. You used to hang out in those same bars.”

Nicky waved out her match and exhaled. She and Andy had been friends for so long, she felt like his sister. Andy started walking over to the picnic table by the side of the building. Nicky followed. He sat with Paul in his arms.

“Nicky, what’s this about?” Andy asked.

“How come you’re the only one who never asked me about Paul’s father?” Nicky said.

“It’s some guy, right? And either he doesn’t know or you don’t want him to know,” Andy said. “You okay, Nicky?”

“No. No, I am not.” She sat across the table from Andy. “I’m worried about what people will think of Paul.”

“You’re not the only woman in Bluefield to have a kid with no father.”

“Any of them yours?”

“Did something happen with you and Barbara?” Andy asked.

“What about me and Barbara?” Nicky said.

“You know.”

“Know what?”

Andy adjusted Paul’s pacifier. “We’ve known each other for a long time, Nicky, but we don’t talk about these things. I always figured it was understood that you and Barbara were, you know...”

"What?" Nicky said. "Just because two single women chose to share a house people jump to conclusions?"

"It's me, Nicky. I'm not jumping."

Nicky squashed her cigarette into the blacktop with her boot and took out another one.

"Isn't it true?" Andy asked.

"Isn't what true?"

Andy leaned over and borrowed Nicky's cigarette to light his.

"Come on, Nicky. That you're a lesbian."

"Does everyone in this town think I'm a dyke?"

"People talk," Andy said.

"I've got to go," Nicky said.



Nicky pulled up to her house. Mr. Jamison was out in the fields on his tractor. She got back into the Bel Air and drove into the fields to see him. Mr. Jamison waved. He shut the engine and stepped down from the huge tractor.

"Hey, Nicky, what a nice surprise."

"Hello, Mr. Jamison," Nicky said, getting out of her car. "How're things?"

"Been a good year. Didn't start good, but the weather turned kind to us." Mr. Jamison stuck his head in the car. "That Paul, Jr.? Let me take a peek at you. He looks a lot like your daddy."

"He sure does."

"Soon he'll be out here fooling with my grandchildren. Learning how to plow these acres."

Nicky leaned against the car's hood. "That's what I want to talk to you about, Mr. Jamison," she said. "I want to sell the farm."

"Isn't renting it working out? If you need help, all you have to do is ask."

"You're always after me to sell," Nicky said.

"But now I figure you'd want to hold on to it for Paul, Jr. here?"

"That's just it, Mr. Jamison, I'm doing this for Paul," she said. "I worked things out with Paul's father and we're going to go live with him."

"You did? That's great," he said. "Where's that?"

"What?" What the hell am I getting myself into, Nicky thought.

"Where his father lives?"

"Oregon," Nicky said. "Portland. Outside Portland. A small town in Oregon."

"That is far." Mr. Jamison rubbed his cheek. "But what if you two decide to come back here?"

"He's not a farmer," Nicky said.

"Well, it's really up to you, Nicky, about selling the farm. I'd be glad to keep leasing the land in case you want to come back here. But if you're going to sell, well, I just as soon it be to me. You think about it and let me know. Don't make a rash decision that you'll regret."

"Thank you, Mr. Jamison. I'll let you know."

Back home, Nicky gave Paul a bath and put him to bed. Barbara had to work late that night and Nicky was asleep on the couch when she finally got home.

"There's some chicken if you're hungry," Nicky said, pushing herself up.

Barbara went over and kissed Nicky. "Come sit with me while I eat."

Nicky shut off the television and followed Barbara into the kitchen.

"Ever think about moving?" Nicky said, putting up some coffee.

"I'd never make you leave. The way you love this place, you'd blame me for ripping you away from here. It wouldn't be pretty. We'd be separated in a week."

"Where would you move if I was willing?"

"What's this about?" Barbara said, washing down her chicken with some beer.

"I was thinking we could use a vacation, and I thought we'd go somewhere interesting."

"We could use a vacation," Barbara said. "This chicken is good. I'd love to go to Maine or Cape Cod. I've always wanted to see New Mexico."

"The whole town knows we're dykes." Nicky was hugging herself tightly. "I'm losing it. I thought about proposing to Andy today."

"You are losing it."

"I need to protect Paul."

"From what?"

"From someone taking him." Nicky sat at the table. "Carol-Ann wants to adopt Paul. That's the other part of the fight we had, and that's why I told her to leave. Said she'd give him a real home and that Richard was behind it."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Barbara said, going over to hug Nicky. "Don't try and protect me by hiding bad things from me."

Nicky lit a cigarette and blew out some smoke. "And now, Carol-Ann called my doctor and told him I was thinking about letting her adopt Paul. He was talking like it was all settled, like I had agreed. I thought everyone would just leave us alone."

"They can't do anything."

"We're dykes; they can do everything." Nicky rose to pour the coffee. "I saw Mr. Jamison today and I told him I wanted to sell. We'll have plenty of money to buy a house. The main question is where to move. People get sick everywhere so you'll be able to find work wherever we go. The south is about to explode and I don't want Paul to get caught up in the mess."

"It's going to be the same no matter where we are."

"I want to start over where no one knows us."

"Slow down, Nicky." Barbara sat back down at the table. "Let's not panic. Sit down. Let's talk."

"I'm not panicking." Nicky put a blackberry pie on the table. "I'm gearing up. I'm taking action."

"You made pie?" Barbara said. "I guess you're not panicking."

"I am not about to let my son be part of some tug-of-war, some legal battle. I'm not willing to turn him into a cause."

"You need to call Carol-Ann and see what she says."

"I'm not talking to her. Ever."

Nicky finally agreed that she wasn't going to do anything until she spoke to Carol-Ann. When Carol-Ann answered, Nicky asked her why she had spoken to her doctor.

"Come on, little sister, he's a friend of the family. He was our doctor. Richard and I are just trying to help. My lawyer says that the younger the child, the easier it is on them."

"Your lawyer?"

"You'll need a lawyer too. Richard and I will pay all the expenses, of course."

"You don't get it, Carol-Ann. You just don't get it."

"It's you who doesn't get it, Nicky," Carol-Ann said. "You've gone too far. Having a baby without being married and flaunting it. Expecting everyone to say it's okay for lesbians to raise a boy. Well, it's not and no one is going to accept Paul. I still have friends in Bluefield. They tell me things. They won't let their kids come to your house and they won't let Paul in their homes. They don't even want him in their schools. If you care about your baby, you'll give him up. I'm just trying to keep him in the family."

"Thanks for explaining everything to me."

"I'm glad you finally get it," Carol-Ann said.

"It's all very clear now." Nicky placed the receiver down.

Barbara came over and held her. "It's going to be all right." Barbara wiped Nicky's tears with the back of her hands. "We're together. We'll get through it."

Two days later, on July fourth, Barbara and Nicky celebrated Paul's two-month birthday. Andy stopped by with a rattle for Paul and they had cake and ice cream. Paul smiled, cried, and then fell asleep. After Andy left and when Barbara was inside, Nicky pushed the carriage into the shadow of the oak tree.

"I never wanted to take you away from here," Nicky said. "This was supposed to be our place, our home. Now you'll never remember this place. It's Independence Day and it's time to say good-bye."

During the weeks that followed, Nicky made arrangements to sell the farm. Carol-Ann called and several letters from her arrived. Nicky stopped answering the phone and threw away the letters unopened. By August, the letters and the calls both stopped.



Paul was napping and Barbara was setting the table while Nicky finished preparing dinner. "Funny that you should be the one to decide to move," Barbara said.

"Funny?"

"Odd."

"I didn't actually decide," Nicky said. "It's not like I want to move. We have to. That's not the same thing."

"I finally got used to the idea of staying around here."

"I really thought things were changing and Paul would be coming into a new world. I saw King on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial when Paul was conceived, but then they shot Kennedy before Paul was even born. And now they just found the bodies of those three civil rights workers. Who's next? We're not changing a thing."

"Yeah, but this time two of those killed were northern whites," Barbara said.

"Meaning?"

"This won't go away easily or quickly or quietly."

"Maybe. But they were Jewish," Nicky said, "so who knows."

"You were happy when Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act just a month ago."

"Sure, but he obviously didn't include me in the bill." Nicky stopped and broke into a smile. She put her arms around Barbara.

"What?" Barbara said.

"Look at you getting all political."

"I think that we have to be optimistic about the world we brought Paul into."

"You mean lie to ourselves?" Nicky asked.

"Exactly."

"So my wanting to move, you could look at it as a gift," Nicky said.

She lit a cigarette on the stove and removed the chicken from the pan.

"I could. Do you?"

"Not yet. But I might," Nicky said. "You really wanted that job in New York. Is it still an option?"

"They have real winters in Medford. Snow, ice, the whole thing." She took a sip of wine.

"Sounds delightful."

"I didn't realize you were that freaked out," Barbara said.

Nicky put some cheese and crackers on the table. "You were willing to stay here because of me and because of this place. I want you to pick a place this time and I'll move there."

"Medford is a beautiful town. Right in the heart of the Finger Lakes. You will like it."

"Okay," Nicky said. "Medford it is."



Nicky wanted to vanish without a trace. Or at least without being traced. She didn't want to find out what Carol-Ann was capable of. People had heard that she was selling the farm. Mr. Jamison said he was glad that Nicky was moving to Oregon to join Paul's father. Barbara went along with the story. Nicky was sure, she told anyone who pursued it, that she and Paul's father could patch things up. Lucinda wanted an address, a phone number, and Nicky promised to send one just as soon as she was settled. Nicky then drove all the way to Roanoke to hire movers. Harder to trace, she told Barbara.

After the truck was packed and gone, after she and Barbara said their good-byes, Nicky put Paul in the Chevy for the drive north where she would set up house and wait for Barbara to finish her fellowship at Bluefield Medical.



The nurse poked her head behind the curtain and woke Barbara to tell her she had a phone call. Barbara was fast asleep on her cot in the old storage closet that had become the hospital's first female residents changing quarters. As the hospital's only female resident, the old closet was all hers, and she was glad for the privacy despite its extra isolation. Besides, Dr. Weldman had made such a big deal

about designating a place for Barbara that she had no choice but to accept gracefully.

Barbara got to her feet, letting her adrenaline kick in as she picked up the phone at the nurses' station. She was ready to sound in control, exactly like she had been trained to do. "Dr. Phillips," she said.

"This is Carol-Ann."

Barbara was still. She was not trained for this.

"Nicky's sister," Carol-Ann added.

"Yes," Barbara said.

"I'd like to talk to you."

"Can I call you tonight after my shift?"

"I'm here," Carol-Ann said.

"Bluefield?"

"The hospital."

"You're here?"

"I'm in the cafeteria."

Barbara didn't want to deal with Carol-Ann without Nicky. "I'm working," she said. "I have to check on some patients. Can I call you later?"

"I can come up and wait till you have a break."

"Give me a couple of minutes and I'll come down," Barbara said. She hung up the phone, checked in on a patient, and walked down the three flights of stairs, hoping to prepare herself. Carol-Ann was going to want to know where Nicky was, and she wasn't sure she could pull off the lie. Barbara had stopped eating at the Bluefield Diner after Nicky left because she knew that Lucinda and Tammy and everyone at the diner would hound her for information about Nicky, and she was worried she wouldn't be as convincing as she needed to be. If everyone really knew where Nicky was, then what was the point of moving anyhow? Going back to eating her meals at the hospital dining room had given her a sanctuary. And now that was gone, she thought, as she spotted Carol-Ann across the cafeteria.

"When did you arrive?" Barbara said, sitting down.

"This morning," Carol-Ann said. "Where's Nicky?"

“Oregon.”

“That’s what everyone’s telling me,” Carol-Ann said, “right after they ask me if I I’ve heard from her.”

“Have you?”

“No. That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m not following,” Barbara said. She sat quietly, letting Carol-Ann do all the work. The less said, the better, she thought. After all, she was the one left behind, left for a man at that. Hopefully, Carol-Ann would think they had a falling out and that Nicky really didn’t tell her anything.

“Funny that you’re the one left behind in Bluefield,” Carol-Ann said.

“Funny?” Barbara said. She found nothing funny about that.

“Odd,” Carol-Ann said. “Irony. Can you give me her address, her phone number?”

“She didn’t give me an address when she left,” Barbara said. “That’s not how we left things. I’m guessing she hasn’t called you. I would have thought she’d have called you by now. Or sent you a letter.”

“Everyone says that she went to patch things up with Paul’s father. That he’s from Oregon.”

“Then you know as much as I do.”

“Did you two have a fight?”

Barbara did not respond.

“I knew you two wouldn’t last,” Carol-Ann said. “I just knew it.”

“You did mention that several times,” Barbara said. “Look, Carol-Ann, I don’t want to fight with you. I don’t know what happened between you and Nicky, but I’m sure you’ll work it out, and I’m certain she’ll contact you when she gets settled. Just give her some time. But she has never told me anything about Paul’s father so there is nothing I can tell you.”

“It’s nothing personal, but doctors and cooks don’t make good matches.”

“I’ll try to remember that the next time I meet a cook,” Barbara said, standing up. “I have rounds.”

“Look,” Carol-Ann said, “I just want to find Nicky. I want my sister back.”

“I can’t help you with that. She didn’t want me to know where she was going.”

“I could tell everyone here that you’re a lesbian.”

Barbara leaned on the table. “And how would that help you find Nicky? I still couldn’t tell you where she is,” Barbara said.

“But at least you’d be as miserable as I am.”

“The fact that I am not with Nicky means I am already more miserable than you.” Barbara sat back down. “You can spread whatever rumor you want about me, but I’ll be gone soon and forgotten. But think about what will happen when Nicky comes back with Paul and his father and she finds that none of them are welcome here because you had to punish me. How do you think Nicky will feel about you then? My guess is that she won’t be all that forgiving.” Barbara stood up again. “So do what you think you need to do and tell whoever you want whatever you want. But right now, I have patients that need my attention. Nice to see you again. Say hello to the girls.”



Right after New Year’s, Barbara finished her fellowship, finished covering holiday shifts, finished her very last shift at Bluefield Hospital, said her good-byes to her colleagues, and headed north. She flew into New York and headed for Manhattan to catch a train to Medford. She had to wait overnight for a train but didn’t mind. An evening in Manhattan would be like a decompression chamber, a way to transition between Virginia and Medford. Barbara checked into her hotel and took a cab to the Upper West Side where she visited her old medical school hangouts. After two very quiet bars, she found the bar on 72nd Street lively, especially for a Monday evening. She found a small table and ordered some wine. She was on her second glass when a tall, athletic-looking woman came over and sat at her table.

“My name is Rochelle,” she said, extending her hand.

Barbara had noticed Rochelle earlier. It was hard not to. She was wearing a black miniskirt that showed off her legs. Her black hair was braided and reached all the way down her black motorcycle jacket. Barbara shook Rochelle's hand. "I'm Barbara," she said.

"How about a dance?"

"Sure," Barbara said, putting down her wine.

After a few rowdy tunes, the DJ put on a slow song. Barbara turned to sit, but Rochelle held her hand. "I asked her to play this for us."

Barbara stayed. She liked being pursued. Rochelle pulled Barbara closer.

"Come home with me," Rochelle said as the evening wore on.

What am I doing, Barbara thought. I'm not sure. Nicky slept with a guy; why can't I sleep with this woman?

"You don't have to stay the night. Just come spend some time with me," Rochelle said, her arm around Barbara's waist.

No one would ever know, Barbara thought.

"You're very beautiful," Rochelle said, and she kissed Barbara's hand. "Your girlfriend is very lucky."

"How could you tell?"

"The hesitation," Rochelle said. "It's only the ones with girlfriends who hesitate."

Barbara laughed. "You are very beautiful."

"Thank you," Rochelle said. "Is she pretty?"

"Who?" Barbara said.

"Your lover."

"Very."

"She's very lucky." Rochelle led Barbara back to the table. "Are you afraid she'll find out?"

Barbara had some more of her wine. "I'm afraid I'll tell her."

"Do you live around here?"

Barbara shook her head.

"It would just be sex. Great sex, I promise you."

"I better go."

"Why?" Rochelle said.

"Because I don't know how much longer I can hold out."

“I have a girlfriend too.”

“I don’t understand,” Barbara said.

“My lover is out of town. She’s free to do what she wants when she’s away and so am I.”

Sex with Rochelle was great. On the way back to the hotel, Barbara picked up Chinese food. She got in bed, opened up the containers, turned on the TV, and called Nicky.

“Are you okay?” Nicky asked.

“I missed you.”

“I miss you too, but it’s three in the morning. Can you miss me tomorrow? Paul’s been getting up at six thirty.”

“I lost track of time.” Barbara was ravenous. “I love you,” she said through a mouthful of food.

“What are you eating?”

“Lobster in black bean sauce.”

“You really missed New York, didn’t you?” Nicky said.

“Not as much as I miss you,” Barbara said. She heard Nicky yawn. “You better get to sleep.”

“It’s okay to miss New York,” Nicky said. “We’re close enough to visit now.”

“I know,” Barbara said. “Listen, I really need to tell you something.”

“Can it wait till tomorrow? I’m so tired.”

“It can’t wait,” Barbara said. “I can’t wait.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

Barbara took a deep breath. “I love you. I really love you and I can’t wait to start our new life together.”

CHAPTER FOUR

1968

It was the first day of spring, and though the weather was hardly behaving like it, Nicky had the Bel Air's top down. She pulled into a parking spot in front of the Hilltown Day Care Center, stepped out of the car, and onto her cigarette. Pushing her car keys into her jeans, she reached over the door to place her sunglasses on the dash. She removed the rubber band that held her hair together against the wind and shook out her long strands. She unbuttoned her jacket and headed in to pick up Paul. With a deep breath, she pulled open the heavy door and joined the half dozen mothers milling around the hallway waiting to have their children returned to them. As Nicky leaned against a wall, a woman came over to her.

"Are you Paul's mom?"

"Yes. I'm Nicky."

"I'm Eddie's mom, Judy. Eddie is so glad that Paul started coming here. He talks about him all the time."

"Paul seems to be enjoying coming here."

"You have a lovely accent," Judy said. "Where is it from?"

"Virginia," Nicky said, wishing Paul would be let out soon.

"You have the top down," Judy said. "Isn't it cold?"

"I freeze," Nicky said. "But it's the first day of spring and I have to."

"Of course, the first day of spring in Medford is a lot colder than Virginia."

"That it is."

"But I guess I know what you mean," she said. "I put my peas in the first day of March, no matter what. Even if I have to clear the snow."

"Exactly."

"Eddie said you're a doctor."

"He means his Aunt Barbara. She lives with us."

"And your husband?" Judy said. "What does he do?"

"There is no husband."

"I'm sorry. What happened?"

Nicky looked at her watch. She took a cigarette out and let it dangle unlit from her lips while she searched for her lighter. "Nothing interesting."

"It helps to talk about it. I'm divorced myself. Almost two years. After my husband left me for one for his students, I didn't want to talk about what happened either. But I will tell you that she left him after he helped her get into graduate school. Served him right. Anyway, I almost lost my mind until I joined a support group. They saved my life. I wouldn't have met my second husband if it wasn't for that."

"He was in the group?" Nicky said.

"You're funny." Judy laughed. "The group was for girls only. You know, Nicky, we live over by Clifton Pond. Eddie'd love to have Paul come over after school some day. I could pick him up with Eddie."

"That sounds nice," Nicky said. "I'm sure Paul would like that."

Nicky poked her head inside the classroom. Kids were getting their coats on.

"You'll come over and have coffee while the kids play," Judy said, "and I'll tell you more about the group."

The children began to file out. "I'll call you," Nicky said.

"Let's try for next week," Judy said.

Nicky looked at the cluster of little boys and girls swarming out of the room. Paul's school was as white as the one Nicky had gone to, but hers had been white by design. After she'd been out of high school for a couple of years, the Bluefield School District removed its segregation laws. Since there weren't any private schools to retreat to, everyone stayed put and the schools integrated with much less fuss than many had expected. With the money the department saved from closing the Negro schools, they built new bleachers for the football field. With the larger student pool to draw on, the football team filled its new stands and even went to the state semi-finals for the first time in school history. One of the surprises for Nicky moving north was that so few blacks lived in Medford. She'd assumed there were blacks everywhere.

Paul ran into Nicky's legs and hugged them.

"How was school today?" Nicky said, taking his snack bag from him and leading him out of the school.

"You put the top down," Paul screamed. "Are we going for a ride?"

"We're going to town to get you new sneakers." Nicky lifted Paul over the door and into the passenger seat. "T-ball starts Saturday." She snapped his seatbelt shut.

"I make believe I'm mad at the ball." Paul swung his hands. "That's why I hit so hard."

The radio played Crosby, Stills & Nash as they headed east on Oak Street toward town. Nicky tapped her right hand on the shifter, causing ashes to fly about like snowflakes. "Hungry?"

"I want to get ice cream."

"I meant food."

"You said it's the first day of spring and you put the top down and you said it's a special day."

"Ice cream it is." Nicky found a spot in front of the drugstore. She helped Paul put pennies in the meter. They turned and walked east along Main Street toward Jimi's. After a few steps, Paul stopped suddenly and pointed to a man sitting across the street by the bus stop. He was wearing a Mets hat, had dark black hair, and a jean jacket. "Is that my daddy?" Paul said.

Nicky didn't wait to see if the man had heard. She lifted Paul and walked away quickly. "No, honey," she said softly. "He's not your father. I told you your father does not live around here. You weren't born here." Nicky tried to compose herself. "Come on. Let's go get ice cream. You can get a banana split if you want."

When he settled in at a table with his cone, Paul continued his train of thought. "What part does he live?" Paul said.

"I don't know?"

"So he might live here?"

"I'm sure he doesn't," Nicky said.

"How do you know?"

"I know," Nicky said, licking her ice cream.

"What does he look like?"

Nicky hesitated. "I don't remember."

"Then how will we know when we see him?"

"We won't see him." Nicky glanced nervously around the shop. "Eat your ice cream."

"Does he want to see me?"

"He doesn't know you were born, so it's not like he doesn't want to see you. If he knew, I'm sure he would want to see you."

"Why didn't he know?" Paul said.

"It's hard to explain, but I really didn't know him. He never knew I was pregnant or that you were born. I don't know what happened to him; he just went away."

"Can we tell him?"

"No."

"Is he dead?"

"I don't think so." Nicky took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was having the talk with Paul in an ice cream parlor. Not what she envisioned. Barbara should be here, she thought. Wished. She rolled her lighter around in her hand a few times and then slipped it back into the breast pocket of her jean jacket.

"Eddie said girls can't make babies alone. Did Barbara help make me?"

"Okay," Nicky said. "Let's take our ice cream out with us." She got up and led Paul out of the store. Out on the street, she tried to change the subject. "Let's finish eating and get you sneakers."

“Is Eddie right?”

“Yes,” Nicky said. “I grew you inside of me for nine months, and Barbara took care of me until you were ready to come out.”

“I got three parents?”

“Barbara and I are your only parents,” Nicky said a little stronger and a lot louder than she had intended to. She threw the rest of her ice cream into a trash bin and lit a cigarette. She blew out smoke and crushed her cigarette into the sidewalk. She wiped Paul’s mouth again and lit another cigarette. “You’ll understand when you’re older.”

“Eddie has three parents. He lives with his mom and stair-dad—”

“Step-dad.”

“His mother’s divorce and she’s married. Are you divorce?” Paul asked.

“No.” Nicky wiped Paul’s face.

“Are you married?”

“No.” She tried to give answers that if repeated in school would not ostracize Paul.

“What is divorce?” Paul said.

“When two people who love each other decide that they can’t live together anymore.”

“Will you and Barbara ever divorce?” Paul said.

“No,” Nicky said. “Do you worry about that?”

“When Eddie stays with his dad on some weekends, he gets lots of toys.”

Nicky laughed. She put out her cigarette and stopped in front of the shoe store. She herded Paul in.



Two weeks later, Nicky sat in Judy’s kitchen looking through the *New York Times* as Paul and Eddie played in the backyard.

“I’m glad you didn’t cancel,” Judy said. “I’m really sad and I’m kind of nervous about what response this might trigger.”

“There’s a piece here on Robert Kennedy. He was in Indianapolis last night and he had to break the news to the crowd.”

“I hope he gets the Democratic nomination,” Judy said. “Can you imagine how he felt?”

“He must have been thinking about his brother,” Nicky said.

“He must be wondering about his own safety,” Judy said, looking out the window to see what the boys were up to.

CHAPTER FIVE

1969

Though only June, the day was promising to be another scorcher—not just hot, but humid too—by the time Barbara headed to work. Nicky left Paul at the table to finish his cereal while she loaded the Bel Air for a trip to the lake. Nicky heard a large truck and turned to watch as a moving van came to a stop at the Stanleys' old house across the street from hers. She went inside to get Paul and they stood in the driveway watching. A few minutes later, a Ford wagon and a Buick sedan pulled up and parked behind the truck. The Stanleys had left when Mr. Stanley accepted a job at Stanford. They didn't have any children, and she and Barbara hardly knew them.

"New neighbors," Nicky said to Paul. She took a deep breath and lifted him onto the trunk and leaned against the car.

An elderly man in a white button-down short sleeve shirt stepped out of the Buick, looked at the house, then turned and surveyed the surrounding houses as if they were the competition. When he saw Nicky and Paul in the driveway, he waved. An unlit cigar rested in his mouth, and he pulled at his chin as if there were a beard there. He was soon joined by a man Nicky's age who was wearing a weathered Brooklyn Dodgers baseball cap, and a woman with a long black braid that reached all the way down her back. They too waved to Nicky and Paul. The moving men gathered around the

woman and waited for instructions. Though she stood in one spot, her hands were in constant motion. The younger man entered the house and then came back out and said something to the woman who then turned and started walking toward Nicky and Paul. The two men followed the movers inside.

"Hi," the woman said as she approached. She held her hand out toward Nicky. "I'm Susan. Susan Schulman."

"Nicky Stewart," she said, pushing herself off the car and extending her hand. "And this guy is Paul. Welcome to the neighborhood."

The woman took Nicky's hand. She gestured toward the moving van and her house. "That was my husband, Abe, and my father-in-law, Isaac." She turned to Paul. "How old are you?"

"Four and a quarter," Paul said proudly.

"My Joshua is your age. He's five. He's sleeping in the car. Will you be starting kindergarten in the fall?"

"Yes?" Paul asked.

"And so will Josh. Maybe you'll be in the same class."

"There's only one class," Nicky said.

"Oh. In Brooklyn there were going to be three classes."

"You moved here from Brooklyn?"

"You mean you can't tell? Have I lost my accent already?" Susan said. "It's all that fresh air. It smoothes everything." When Nicky didn't laugh, she continued. "Abe was offered the chair of the astronomy department at the university, so here we are. He's involved in the Apollo moon landing stuff with NASA. The one that just came back and the one that's going soon. Abe is very big in space."

Nicky tried to hold back a laugh.

"Go ahead, laugh," Susan said. "It's a joke. It needs the laugh."

Nicky let out a quiet laugh.

"Do you have any others?" Susan asked.

"Paul's it," Nicky said. "And you?"

"I have a girl, Lila. She's two. She's also sleeping in the car. But we'll have plenty of time to talk. You and your husband will come over for cocktails after. In the meantime, I was wondering if

I could use your phone to call the phone company. They still didn't hook up our phone."

"Sure," Nicky said and led Susan into her house and showed her to the kitchen phone.

As Susan picked up the phone, she looked around the kitchen. "You must really like cooking."

"I love cooking," Nicky said.

"I love what you did with this kitchen. It's so country. That table is fabulous. The wood is so thick." Susan rubbed her hand on the hard hickory surface. "This must be an antique."

"My great-grandfather made it from trees on his farm. He cut and dried the wood himself."

"See? That's different around here," Susan said, pushing the receiver down again. "I don't have anything from my family. No heirlooms. They came here with so little stuff. Only brought what they could carry. Nothing much of value except their lives and some jewels. Anyway, enough history. Want to show me around the rest of the house? I'd love to see what else you've done."

Nicky wasn't used to Susan's pace. She and Barbara had visitors, but they never took anyone upstairs. And she just met Susan. As they climbed the stairs, Nicky was glad that Barbara's study was set up to look like a bedroom.

"I love it," Susan kept saying as Nicky showed her each room on the second floor. "I love what you've done here. You'll have to tell me where you shop."

Nicky figured she must have passed the bedroom check. She was glad to have neighbors who were new in Medford, who came without a local family tree. Susan intrigued her, and she hoped the two families would like each other. It would be a real gift to get good neighbors. It was so hard to break in with the locals. Barbara didn't socialize much with her colleagues and maybe even had less need to. Having adult company all day, she was glad to come home and spend time with Nicky and Paul.

"I should make that call and get back."

Back in the kitchen, Nicky listened as Susan demanded that her line be the next to be hooked up. She told them that she was living

with her aged father-in-law and that he was ill and that the phone was not a convenience, but a medical necessity.

“Is your father-in-law sick?” Nicky asked when Susan hung up.

“Isaac? No. He’ll outlive us all. I just wanted my phone hooked up.”

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” Nicky said. “I’ve got a fresh pie.”

“Thanks. We picked up some coffee and doughnuts on the way over,” Susan said. “Tell me, your accent, it’s not from around here.”

“Virginia,” Nicky said.

“So you’re not from here either? Did your husband also get a job here?”

“There’s no husband.”

“I’m sorry,” Susan said. “What happened to Mr. Stewart?”

“I’d rather not go into it.”

“I understand. So it’s just you and Paul?” Susan asked.

“And my friend Barbara. She’s a doctor.” Nicky braced for the response.

“Really?” Susan said.

Nicky tried to gauge Susan’s reaction.

“That’s great,” Susan said. “I feel safer already. Does she make house calls?” Susan laughed and Nicky realized it was another joke. “I’m not used to being this isolated. I lived in Brooklyn my whole life except to go to Brandeis. That’s where Abe and I met. In Brooklyn, there are always lots of people on the block. You know, I never lived in a place without sidewalks or where you couldn’t walk to a store. But Abe got this good job and we figured with the kids and all, it was a good time to get out of the city. But I told Abe that I’m not coming unless they have a synagogue. It’s not that I’m religious or anything, but I figured if the place doesn’t have enough Jews to support a temple, we better stay away. But listen to me going on,” Susan said. “I really should get back. Abe doesn’t know where anything goes. You know how men are about these things. We’ll have coffee together soon. I’d like to meet Barbara the doctor.”

Susan left and Nicky finished packing the car. She made snacks for her and Paul to eat at the lake. On the radio, the DJ was talking

about John and Yoko's Montreal bed-in for peace. Nicky was thinking about what Susan said about her temple and how she could pull into a town and join and be a part of something, be with her people, or not join, but know that they were around. Nicky wished she had a group to join. What do Jewish dykes do, she wondered?



Both moon and sun were visible against the July sky as Nicky, Barbara, and Paul stepped outside onto the pavement and headed across the street to watch the Apollo moon landing with the Shulmans. Nicky was delighted at the way Paul and Josh seemed to get along and how friendly Susan and her family turned out to be. Abe the scientist was glad to have Barbara the doctor understand some of what he said.

"I really wanted to put a frosting on this," Nicky said to Barbara before reaching the other curb, "but Susan said you don't frost a marble cake."

"You don't mess with a marble cake," Barbara said. "I learned that in med school."

"But you know how I like to adapt recipes."

"I always say that about you, you're very adaptable."

Nicky stopped and looked up at the moon. "You see the moon, Paul? They're up there. They're up there now."

"You said they were on TV," Paul said.

"That's right, sweetie. The TV is showing us pictures from the moon."

"How does it do that?" Paul said

"I don't know," Nicky said. She looked at Barbara.

"Waves," Barbara said.

"Like at the beach?" Paul said.

"Something like those waves, but you can't see these waves. The camera turns the picture into waves," Barbara said, "and a satellite picks up the waves and turns it back into a picture for us to see."

"Maybe it's only pretend," Paul said.

"I guess he inherited your conspiracy gene," Barbara whispered to Nicky.

"Do you really understand that stuff?" Nicky asked Barbara. "The stuff about the waves?"

"A little. But not so much. Abe can tell us more," Barbara said.

"I understand even less when he explains things." Nicky knocked on the Schulmans' door. "Let's not ask."

Susan opened the door. "Come in, come in." She was holding the baby, Lila. "Look at that cake," Susan said. "You sure you're not even a little Jewish? How about you take Lila and I'll go cut the cake?" she said to Nicky.

"Deal." Nicky took Lila from Susan and followed Barbara into the den. She settled on the couch. Barbara sat in an armchair next to the couch.

"I feel like a kid," Abe was telling Josh. "Only better. This totally beats nineteen fifty-five when the Dodgers beat the Yankees."

"I remember," Nicky said when they had all settled in, "the first time Paul knew that he was seeing stars. He was almost two and he'd never been outside and awake in the dark."

Susan came in carrying the cake.

"He wanted to know what those lights in the sky were," Nicky continued.

"Nicky felt so guilty," Barbara said, "she went out and bought a telescope."

"Guilt," Susan said, "is the universal religion."

"Kids have a hard time looking through a telescope," Abe said.

"I learned that."

"Can we use a telescope tonight?" Barbara asked Abe.

"They're not on this side of the moon," Abe said. "Anyway, you wouldn't see anything, even with the most powerful scope."

"How are they sending those pictures if they are still inside?" Barbara asked Abe.

"There's a camera on the top of the Eagle. It's taking much better pictures than we are seeing because it's sending those pictures back to stations here on earth and those stations have to convert the

images for TV. But they'll bring back—" Abe realized that Susan was staring at him. "What?" he said. "Too much?"

"I did ask," Barbara said.

"I would love to be up there," Nicky said.

"Not me," Barbara said. "I hardly like flying."

"I did always want to be a pilot," Nicky said. "When I was a kid, I begged my dad to let me go up with the crop dusters."

"Did he let you?" Paul said.

"No."

"How about giving me a hand with the coffee?" Susan said to Nicky.

Nicky followed Susan into the kitchen. The coffee had finished perking and Nicky poured herself a cup.

"I tried a piece of your cake," Susan said, putting coffee cups on a tray. "I hate that you can make my own cake better than me. I'm Jewish. This is supposed to be my cake."

"Yours is good." Nicky realized that Susan was smiling at her. "What? You're paying me a compliment, right?"

"Yes," Susan said.

"I'll catch on soon," Nicky said. "Thank you."

"Some of my people see the marble cake as a symbol of harmony," Susan said. "Everything is intertwined and each flavor relies on the other for existence."

"It's just cake," Nicky said.

"You say that, but I've had your pie. And even if it wouldn't cost me your friendship, I would never say your blackberry pie is just pie. That would just be wrong, plus I don't think you believe that."

"I wanted to put frosting on it."

"That would be wrong. Just wrong."

Nicky had often wondered if Paul's father was Jewish. She remembered his name sounded Jewish and he was a teacher. She secretly hoped all the desirable Jewish stereotypes would show up in Paul. What do you do when the stereotypes are true? Look at her and Barbara. Don't most stereotypes start somewhere? Maybe they're not stereotypes then. Maybe they're some sort of cultural identity. Like farmers and the weather. Nicky was glad the Schulman's were

Jewish—not that she had ever had Jewish friends before—but, just in case Paul was part Jewish, genetically speaking, then the Schulmans were exposing him to his own culture, his own heritage, without him even knowing it.

Susan put the sugar on the tray and poured milk into a server. “I have a cousin who lives on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and works in publishing,” she said. “She’s a lot like you; you’d like her.”

“How is she like me?” Nicky was counting coffee cups.

“Her name is Alice.” Susan handed Nicky plates and forks. “We grew up in the same building on Ocean Parkway and I never knew. She told me she didn’t know either, at least she wasn’t sure, until she went away to college, Sarah Lawrence. Not that it was Sarah Lawrence that made a difference.”

“You lost me, Susan.”

“It’s a messy situation,” Susan said. “She lives with her girlfriend and has to tell her parents that they’re roommates. Her parents are always trying to fix her up with men. Mostly widowers, because she’s older now. They surprise her with these fellows when she comes home for Shabbat dinner. When she brings Deborah over, that’s her girlfriend, they sometimes have two men as dinner guests. I asked Alice why she won’t just tell her parents that she’s a lesbian and be done with it? She says it’s because there’s a lot of money involved. Her father made a killing in wash and dry shirts. I think she’s scared it might kill him and cost her any inheritance.”

Nicky sat down. She felt a mixture of panic and relief. She liked Susan and wanted to confide in her, but didn’t want to jeopardize Paul’s chance to stay friends with Josh. “Exactly how are we alike?” Nicky braced herself.

“You know,” Susan stopped cutting and looked directly at Nicky, “you and Barbara.”

“I don’t follow,” Nicky said, trying to stay calm.

“The lesbian thing.”

“Did you ever consider you could be wrong?”

“Me?” said Susan. “Am I?” Susan sat next to Nicky.

Nicky was not really sure what to make of all this. Was this the reason Susan invited them over?

"Maybe I'll invite Alice and her friend Deborah up for a visit," Susan said.

"And maybe I'll invite my Jewish friends over to meet you."

"Okay, I deserve that," Susan said, grabbing the tray. "I think that's everything. Let's join the others." Susan stopped in the hallway and turned to Nicky. "So do you have another Jewish friend?"

"No." Nicky laughed. "Do you have any other lesbian friends?"

"Yes." Susan took Nicky's hand. "I'm not trying to hurt you."

"I know." Nicky took a deep breath. "Are we that obvious?"

"Probably not. But remember, I'm from New York and I've learned the signs. And even without all those signs, with your looks, you could get any man you want, so you probably don't want one. Most people wouldn't think anything. I'd never say anything to anyone, so don't worry."

"I'm not worried," Nicky said. "I never worry. Hardly ever. So when did you first suspect?"

"Suspect? I knew when you showed me around your house the day we met."

"Feel free to invite them. But only if they're coming to visit you."

"Good. Now let's have cake."

Nicky looked at Barbara sitting in the chair near Abe. They were talking about the space program and waves and transmitters. Barbara could not only appreciate what Abe had to say, she could also follow him, something Nicky found difficult.

"Did you ever want to be an astronaut?" Nicky asked Abe.

"Never. I like the analyzing data. I'm not too crazy about life-and-death adventures. But I've met some of the astronauts."

"Did you meet these?" Josh asked.

"Yes. They go through lots of training."

"You went through lots of training," Nicky said.

"Astronauts are a different kind of people. Remind me of cowboys."

"You've met a lot of cowboys?" Susan asked.

"No," Abe said. "My point is that I resemble them in no way. But we get along because they understand what I do. And I appreciate what they do."

On TV, the anchors were reviewing those moments when the computers were aiming the astronauts at a crater and had to be shut off. Those were some quiet moments at the control center while Armstrong maneuvered the Eagle craft manually toward a landing. They were also replaying old footage of John Kennedy promising to put a US astronaut on the moon within the decade.

“Too bad we can’t make the same promise to provide health care for all,” Barbara said. “Probably cost less than the space program.”

“You don’t like the space program?” Susan said.

“I like it,” Barbara said. “Exploration is what humans do. Scientific research is always valuable. But a lot of our motivation is to beat these Russians. I just want to know why we don’t want to beat them at health care and housing. They have us beat there. And let’s compete with them in art and music.”

Paul was asleep on the couch by the time Neil Armstrong opened the landing craft and, followed by Buzz Aldrin, took those few steps down the ladder onto the surface of the moon where he kicked up some moon dust. A human had set foot on the moon and did not sink waist deep as had been feared. And for the first time, one of us had left the shelter of our planet and touched another surface in the universe.

“What must that feel like to be out there on another orb, in another realm,” Abe said. “I wouldn’t want to make the whole trip, but I’d love to have that experience. Imagine what it would be like without TV or radio,” Abe said. “You’d see the astronauts leave and then hear about their return. Like Columbus. No one knew what Columbus was up to, whether he was alive or not, or what he found until he came back. And even then, they weren’t completely sure where he’d been.”

“Hey, Abe,” Nicky said, “do you think we’ll ever leave the solar system or find life on another planet?”

“Astronomers have a joke,” Abe said.

“They only have one,” Susan said, “and it’s not even funny.”

“Let me tell it,” Abe said. “Other forms of life have and do exist throughout the universe, but each time a life form evolves enough to be able to seek out other life forms, they destroy themselves.”



Nicky stood on her back porch looking over the yard, looking for something that needed doing. The garden was all set. Nothing to do but water and wait for harvest time. The plants were big enough to take care of themselves. The lawn was cut. The new swing set was assembled and stained. When the teapot whistled, she returned to the kitchen where Paul was eating pancakes. Barbara came in as Nicky was pouring hot water through coffee grinds.

"Those look good," Barbara said to Paul as she kissed him.

"Want some?" Nicky asked.

"I'm late. I'll eat at the office."

"How unusual," Nicky said. She poured Barbara a cup of coffee. "Good thing I don't fix you a plate anymore. I'm starting to miss those predictable hospital shifts."

"Not me." Barbara took the cup, gave Nicky a kiss, and finished buttoning her skirt.

"Paul starts school soon," Nicky said.

"I know that."

"Everything will change."

"Everything always does. Give me a clue here. I'm in a hurry."

"We're going to be tied to Paul's school schedule," Nicky said. "I'm worried that spontaneity will be gone. We'll be bound to weekends and school vacations from now on. We won't be able to get up and go whenever we feel like it. We won't be able to jump in the car and take trips."

"We don't do that now."

"Still, this is our last chance for a while."

"There's still other summers, but do we need to talk about this now?"

"Of course not."

Barbara was trying to sip as much hot coffee as she could. "Are you okay, Nicky?"

"I'm bored."

"And I'm late," Barbara said. "We'll talk tonight?"

"Do you want to go to the outdoor music festival everyone is talking about?" Nicky said. "It's not far. White Lake. Maybe two hours."

"This weekend?"

"I think it starts today and goes for the weekend."

"I really can't get off," Barbara said. "Why don't you go without me and I'll meet you there? Maybe ask Susan and Josh."

"That might work. We could meet on the weekend. It's not far."

"I wouldn't mind getting away," Barbara said.

"You could volunteer for the medical tent."

"Spend the weekend treating drug overdoses?" Barbara said. "No, thanks."

"I'm going to call Susan and ask her if she wants to come along. Maybe we'll leave today."

"Just call the office and let me know what you decide," Barbara said. "I've really got to get going."

"Susan doesn't like to camp. We'll have to get a hotel."

"Call me," Barbara said. She kissed Paul and Nicky and left.

Nicky gave Paul another pancake and picked up the phone to dial Susan to ask her about going to Woodstock. "Joan Baez will be there. Maybe Dylan will show up. He's supposed to live around there. The weather is supposed to be great. We should take the boys and go. It will be fun."

"I'd love to see Dylan again. Abe and I saw him in the city before he got famous. Not that we knew. Who knew?" Susan said. "We didn't even know he was Jewish."

"So you'll go?" Nicky said.

"I can't. We're having some friends come up from the city this weekend and it wouldn't work. But Diane is over here listening and she's jumping up and down and wants to talk to you." Susan lowered her voice to a whisper, "I think she wants to go."

"Put her on," Nicky said.



When Diane and Mary came up the block, Nicky was putting camping gear in the trunk—a precaution in case they couldn't find

a hotel room. Diane lived three houses up the street on Susan's side and had begun hanging around with Susan and Nicky. Her daughter Mary was the same age as Josh's little sister, Lila, and she and her husband had been raised in Medford. Her husband worked at the post office and they owned several apartments in town that they rented to students.

"I can't believe you brought so much food," Diane said, looking at the backseat. "I think Susan is rubbing off on you." Diane took Mary out of the carriage and put her in the backseat with Paul. She added her baggage to the trunk.

Nicky closed the trunk and left Diane with the kids and went inside to call Barbara. This time she reached her. "Susan couldn't go, but Diane wanted to," she told Barbara.

"You asked Diane?"

"She was at Susan's when I called and she asked me. I couldn't say no."

"I think she likes you," Barbara said.

"I like you being jealous."

"Call me tonight," Barbara said. "Let me know where you are."

"Love you," Nicky said and hung up.

Nicky was relaxed behind the wheel as they headed east on Route 206. The top was down, the sun was out, the air was warm. "It's good to be on the road without an errand," she said. "I really needed to get away, to get a break from the routine. Especially with kindergarten coming up."

Diane adjusted her sunglasses and turned the rearview mirror so she could fix her lipstick. "You do this kind of stuff a lot, think up adventures?"

"Not nearly enough. This suburban life is still new for me."

"I know. Mike has been working a lot this summer, and then he has his softball team," Diane said. "Mind if I find some music?"

"Go ahead," Nicky said.

"How do we get tickets?" Diane turned on the radio and adjusted the station.

"They're selling them at the gate. There should be plenty."

"I heard Dylan might show up."

“He’s supposed to live around there.”

“This is great,” Diane said. “People around Medford don’t usually drive convertibles.”

Nicky liked to listen to Diane talk about Medford and its history and customs. It reminded her of the way people back in Bluefield talked about local ways.

“Mike’s father had one of these, but it wasn’t a convertible.”

Diane was brushing her hair. “He drove it when we started dating.”

“Was it a Bel Air?”

“I think it was a Buick, but it was big and round like this with that great backseat. We had a lot of fun in that backseat. Mike wasn’t my first, but he was my best, though I think the car had something to do with it. Sometimes I think that’s why I married him.”

“Tommy Baines,” Nicky said. She thought this was a good time to spread some gossip about herself. And it was even true. “He was the captain of the basketball team and he used to pick me up in his dad’s Buick. I remember that backseat. Maybe that’s why I bought this car.”

“Mike was captain of the baseball team. I was a cheerleader. We were kind of a classic story. If the team had voted for another captain, who knows who I would have married.”

Nicky laughed. “Like Susan’s joke about the mayor?”

“Tell me.”

“I won’t tell it right.”

“Tell it anyway.”

“The mayor and his wife are walking through town and they pass a construction site. One of the workers says hello to the wife. They keep walking, and after a while the mayor asks his wife who the man was. Before I met you, she tells her husband, I went out with him and he asked me to marry him. The mayor said, see, if you hadn’t married me, you’d be the wife of a construction worker. Not so, said the wife. If I had married him, he’d be the mayor.”

Diane laughed loudly. “That’s very funny. Jews are funny. I never met a Jew in person before Susan.”

“You’ve been dating Mike since high school?” Nicky asked.

“When Mike went to college, we split up. He had a baseball scholarship. Then he had an accident with his hand and couldn’t

pitch any more so he lost his scholarship and couldn't pay for school so he returned home."

"That's too bad. Was he good?"

"Yeah. At least it kept him out of the army. Anyway, I dated a few guys after Mike. Some steady, but none serious. A few years later, we ran into each other again. I didn't even know he was back in town. The rest is history."

Three bathroom stops and two snacks later, the kids fell asleep.

"Are you noticing how many more cars there are here?" Nicky said to Diane in the Catskill Mountains. "I don't like it."

"I'll see if I can get a local station." Diane spun the dial.

Finally, Nicky had to bring the Chevy to a standstill. She stood on her seat to get a better look. "Let's get out of here. I don't want to get stuck." She slid down back into her seat, turned the car around, and drove the wrong direction on the shoulder until she found a break in the cornfield and turned again. The car disappeared into the stalks.

"This is wild. I've never been inside a corn field," Diane said.

"I grew up in this. There's always a way to another road."

Nicky followed the path till it came out by a barn. Across from the barn, some children were playing on a tire swing. Nicky waved and drove down the driveway to the road. When she came to town, she pulled into a gas station.

"I hope you're not heading east," the attendant said.

"Why's that?" Nicky said.

"It's all over the radio. Too many hippies trying to go up to that farm. You can't even get near the damn place. They shut the thruway. People are staying wherever they can, camping out in fields, pitching tents on people's lawns. They better not be heading this way. No siree, Bob," he said, wiping his hands on a rag. "I was in-country and proud of it. Protecting their asses and then they come here and spit in my face." He removed the hose and secured Nicky's gas cap. "Not like I ain't ever shot no one either." The man looked at Paul, who was awake and listening, and stopped talking. "I'm sorry to be going on like this in front of the kids. How old are you, son?"

"Five," Paul said, holding up his right hand.

The attendant was surprised and pleased to see Paul offer his hand. He took it and shook it. "I bet your father's proud of you."

"He died in the war. He's a hero," Paul said.

"I'm sorry to hear that." The attendant looked at Nicky. "Who was he with?"

"I'd rather not talk about it," Nicky said, nodding toward Paul. She held out her money.

"He was a marine," Paul said.

"That's enough," Nicky said to Paul. She held out her money to pay.

"Keep your money," he said.

Nicky looked confused.

"You have enough to deal with, raising a boy without his father. I know the benefits aren't what they should be."

Nicky tried again to pay him. The attendant stepped back. "Put it away. Use it for your boy. You can pay me by making sure your boy never forgets his father," he said.

Nicky wanted to pay the man, but she really didn't want to continue the conversation. "We should get going," she said and started the engine.

"Where're you heading?"

"Medford," Diane said.

He gave Nicky some back road directions to avoid the traffic and she shifted into first and eased the car out of the station.

"He liked you." Diane laughed.

"I don't think so."

"Is that true about Paul's dad?" Diane said.

"No," Nicky said. She hoped that Diane would not pursue it. "Who's hungry?" she asked the kids.

"I am," came the call from the backseat.

"They haven't stopped eating the whole trip," Diane said.

"I know a great place for lunch. Lake Minospa. We're not too far and it's on the way home."

"Sounds good," Diane said. "I'm getting hungry and I'm in no hurry to get home."

Twenty minutes later, Nicky parked the car and shut the engine.

Diane stood and stretched. She was several inches taller than Nicky, and her short jean cutoffs made her look even taller. "That's a gorgeous lake. Maybe we can go for a swim after we eat."

"I could use a swim."

"How did you find this place?" Diane said. She lifted Mary out of the backseat.

"Barbara and I came here in the spring."

"Just the two of you?"

"And Paul."

"You and Barbara do a lot together. It's nice you have someone to help with Paul. I don't know what I'd do if Mike and I didn't have all our family around."

Nicky opened the trunk. "Do you want your stroller?"

"Let me get it," Diane said.

The restaurant was crowded, but Nicky and Diane decided to wait for a table on the outside deck. While they waited, Diane suggested staying for the weekend.

"I was beginning to get depressed about going back home," Nicky said.

"We're both free for the weekend. You said you wanted to get away. We're away."

"I doubt they have any rooms," Nicky said.

"Wait here with the kids and I'll go see."

Nicky lit a cigarette and took the rubber band out of her hair. She could see a canoe making circles in the middle of the lake and some families playing on the shore. She shook out her hair. Diane came back with two keys.

"They had one room left for two nights, so I took it. The weekend is booked, but at least we don't have to go home right away." She was holding drinks. "I stopped at the bar and got us margaritas to toast our good fortune." She handed one glass to Nicky and raised her own. "To vacations," she said, and touched Nicky's glass. She drank greedily. "This is good. I'm going to like it here."

After lunch, where Diane had more margaritas, they went to the lake and spent a lazy afternoon. The kids were happy to be out of the car, and Nicky was happy to be away from home. During

dinner, Diane continued drinking margaritas. Later, Paul and Mary fell asleep watching TV while Nicky and Diane got involved in a game of gin rummy. Diane got a bottle of wine from her suitcase.

The next morning after breakfast, Nicky and Diane took the kids back down to the lake. Diane removed her beach cover and asked Nicky to oil her back. Nicky was surprised at how revealing Diane's bikini was.

"I'm ready for some serious tanning," Diane said. She pushed the straps off her shoulder.

"I'm ready for a swim across the lake," Nicky said. She felt like a prude in her one-piece racing suit.

"You go. I'll watch the kids. As long as they don't block my sun, I'm happy."

Nicky walked into the lake. It was warmer than she expected and she quickly submerged herself. As she came up, her body began the familiar rhythm of kicking, stroking, and breathing. She was enjoying the lack of sound, the singularity of purpose. It was good to get away, even if she didn't know what she was getting away from or getting to. Paul would be off to school in a few weeks. Barbara had wanted to send Paul to the lab school at the university. In the end, they settled for the neighborhood school where Josh was going.

But what about me, Nicky wondered as she stroked her body through the water. Barbara's been in career heaven since she left the hospital and joined a practice. What am I going to do for the next thirteen years while Paul is in school? I've turned into a housewife without even knowing it. Maybe I should go to college. Susan has three kids; that's a full-time job. Barbara thinks I should get a job, get out into the world. She's probably right, but I don't want to miss out on Paul. Besides, what would I do? Get a job cooking in a diner? Start my own restaurant? Open a pie shop?

Nicky reached the far side and turned back toward shore. To stop her thoughts, she increased her speed and raced back. She was breathing hard as she stood in the water. She rubbed her face and squeezed her hair. Two guys were sitting on a towel next to Diane.

"You're a fine swimmer," one of them said.

“Nicky,” Diane said, “this is Todd and Bart. They were also trying to get to the concert and ended up staying here.”

Both Todd and Bart were wearing cutoff jean shorts and had their hair tied back. Todd taught political science at NYU; Bart taught English Lit at CCNY. Nicky was wondering what Diane was up to when Todd reached into his bag and pulled out a joint, lit it, and passed it to Diane. Nicky lit a cigarette and passed on the joint when Diane offered it to her.

“Try some,” Bart said. “Don’t be a downer.”

“Really?” Nicky said. “That’s the best an English professor can come up with? A downer.”

“You’ve never tried any?” Todd asked.

“I’m allergic.” This is funny, Nicky thought, I’m the most conservative one here, and I’m the lesbian. But it wasn’t the pot; it was Paul. Nicky never did anything that would give someone reason to consider her an unfit mother.

When Todd and Bart went for a swim, Diane came over to Nicky. “Aren’t they cute?” she said.

“Very.”

“If you want to fool around with one of them, I’ll watch Paul. Guys that age lack experience, but they sure got stamina.”

“Are you serious?” Nicky said.

“Why not?” Diane looked confused. “You won’t see them again, and you’ll have some fun. You do that at home and everyone will know. I’d think about it myself if Mary wasn’t here. That Bart has a great body.”

Nicky relaxed and smiled. This makes sense. Diane thinks I’m single and she thinks I’m straight, she reminded herself. “They’re not my type,” Nicky said. At least I’m not lying, she thought.

“I think it’s cute. They’re such boys. Oh well, what a waste. Maybe I’ll let them go up to the inn and bring back some of those delicious margaritas. May as well get something out of all their attention.”

Todd and Bart spent the afternoon with them, drinking, singing, and smoking. Nicky played along with their flirting games, following Diane’s lead, though she didn’t let them oil her back. By

dinnertime, the guys were ready for more serious action and drove off to town in search of a bar. Nicky and Diane put the kids to sleep and sat on the porch outside their rooms. Diane uncorked a bottle of wine and poured them each a glass.

"It's none of my business," Diane said, "but you ought to date a little. You're still young and you certainly still have your looks."

"Being a mother is enough for me right now."

"What happened to Paul's father?" Diane said.

"It's something I don't talk about."

"Okay, I'm curious, but I won't be nosy. But I still think you should date some. It'll do you a world of good."

Nicky was glad when Diane tired early and went to sleep. She called Barbara and told her they would be back by dinner. The next morning they packed up after breakfast and drove home along the back roads, stopping at antique stores. Diane was as enthusiastic about shopping as she was about Bart and Todd, which made the ride home very pleasant.



When Barbara arrived home that evening, Nicky was in the den watching news footage from Woodstock. She was sorry she hadn't made it all the way there, but it didn't look like a place for Paul. Barbara sat next to her and gave her a long kiss.

"How was the lake?" Barbara said.

"It was great to get away," Nicky said. "I feel revived. There's something to be said for exploring. For seeing new places, new people, new experiences."

"What was it like traveling with Diane?"

"That was interesting. She's wild. She tried to fix me up with these young college teachers. They hung around us all day smoking pot and drinking."

"You smoked pot?"

"No. But the bar makes great margaritas, and those guys kept buying them for us."

"Diane must think you're straight," Barbara said.

"I guess."

"I wonder what that makes me."

"Sad," Nicky said.

"Thanks a lot."

"Were you hoping she thought we were lesbians?"

"Sort of," Barbara said. "That would mean that no one cared."

"Let me see if I understand this," Nicky said. "You want to be ignored for the right reasons?"

"Now you've got it."



When September rolled around, Paul took to kindergarten without any adjustment. Chester Road Elementary, just two years old, still smelled new inside. Construction had begun with the promise of Lyndon Johnson's New Society and ended with the shootings of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. Nicky used to bring Paul to the site to watch the building being raised. They sat on the grass across the road and ate a picnic lunch while work crews and large machines went about their business.

Still, even though the building was new, its roots were old Medford. Paul's teacher, Mrs. Kelly, grew up in Medford and went to school with Diane. Mrs. Kelly was related by blood or by marriage to three teachers, one firefighter, a police officer, two DPW workers, and a former mayor. Back in Virginia, it took several generations of buried relatives to be considered more than a visitor. With the transient college population in Medford, Nicky had hoped that the waiting period would be shorter. If not for her, at least for Paul.

The long school day was less easy on Nicky than Paul, and though he took the bus to school each morning, Nicky found a way to plan her day to coincide with picking him up after school. Standing around waiting for the bus to arrive each afternoon made her edgy, and even though Susan offered to take turns at the bus stop, most days Nicky's impatience won out and she hopped in her car and made the drive over. Which is what she had done that afternoon as she parked the Bel Air across from the school and got

out. She shut the engine but not the radio, where Janis Joplin was belting the blues. Nicky adjusted her sunglasses, lit a cigarette, and leaned back. Paul's first parent-teacher conference was coming up, and Nicky was hoping to be a familiar face around school by then. As Paul and Josh emerged together, bouncing off each other and laughing, Nicky felt the moment. Moving turned out good. When Paul's teacher waved to her, Nicky waved back and thought that they were all going to be all right. The boys hopped on the backseat of the convertible with a lot to say.



Barbara uncorked a bottle of wine and poured two glasses while Nicky put Paul to sleep. She was sitting on the rug, her back against the couch when Nicky came down. She handed Nicky a glass and watched her start a fire.

"At school," Nicky said, "Mrs. Kelly asked the kids to tell the class what their parents do."

"This should be interesting."

"Josh told the class his father works in space."

"Okay," Barbara said. "But that's not your point."

"No," Nicky said, pausing for a sip of wine. "Paul said that I take care of him."

"Go on."

"And that you're a doctor."

"Good for him. But I'm still waiting."

"Mrs. Kelly said you didn't count because they were only talking about mothers and fathers."

"And there it is."

"There what is?"

"Why you've been scowling all night."

"I was waiting to tell you."

"Did Paul say I was his mother?" Barbara asked.

"No, he said you worked as a doctor so we could have nice things. Mrs. Kelly said that was nice of you and went on to the next kid."

“That’s my boy,” Barbara said.

“This doesn’t upset you?” Nicky searched her pockets for a lighter. “She basically told him that a normal family is not us.”

“You really believe there’s such a thing as a normal family?” Barbara sat behind Nicky and started to rub her shoulders.

“Paul never sees families like us. He can’t see us on TV, or in the movies, or anywhere,” Nicky said. “They certainly aren’t going to talk about us in school. It’s going to turn him against us.”

“Maybe there aren’t many places Paul’s going to see dykes, let alone dykes with babies. So what? The whole perfect American family stuff is a fiction. Most of what you call the ‘normal’ family was made up by Jewish immigrants working in TV and movies. They made up the kind of families that they thought Americans wanted to see. Turned out they knew exactly what everyone wanted to see. But they couldn’t even put themselves in the movies because they were still outsiders. Same as Barbie.”

“Barbie? You’re losing me now.”

“She was designed by a German Jewish woman who survived the holocaust. And what doll does this Ruth Handler correctly guess that girls in the US want? Someone who looks like her? No. A blonde-haired, blue-eyed Aryan model. It’s like that for lots of people. Just wait till Paul’s class starts counting Santas, making Christmas decorations, and learning Christmas carols. Go ask Susan and Abe about fitting in then.”

“See, I would stick up for them.” Nicky touched her lighter to her cigarette. “Shouldn’t I defend myself?”

“Nobody fits in. That’s the big secret. Nobody.” Barbara rubbed the curve of Nicky’s neck. “Most people are scared shitless of being left out and will do anything to try to fit in. Especially leaving others out.”

“Then why not just flaunt it if we’re never going to fit in?” Nicky said, closing her lighter. She blew out a perfect ring. “If they’re going to think that we’re all strange no matter what we do, why do anything to keep up pretenses?”

“If we run in and fight every time someone looks at Paul wrong, they’re going to label him,” Barbara said. “If we make this about us

instead of him, then we'll turn him against us. This is going to be a long haul through school, and we are going to have to choose what to fight and what to ignore."

"I want them to know right from the start that we are not going to take shit. I think we should have a talk with Mrs. Kelly," Nicky said.

"We can't fight them and win," Barbara said. "But they're scared of us. All we can do is get them to like us, or not hate us, and then maybe they'll focus on us as parents instead of as lesbians. And as long as Paul does well in school, teachers will like him and not care about us. And you are going to promise me that you are not going to talk to his teacher."

"Is that what you have to do as a doctor? Make them forget you're a woman?"

"I make them remember that I'm a doctor. A very good one. That's the only part of me that is important to them. You're the only one I need to think it's important that I'm a dyke." Barbara gave Nicky a long kiss.

"Okay, the kiss wins this round," Nicky said, "but one of these days, Paul is going to figure out that we're different."

"I like to think he already has. All we can do is hope that he loves us and himself and maybe not care too much what others think. The fact that he has two women for parents isn't his fight, it's ours. And I'm not in the mood to fight right now," Barbara said, kissing Nicky again and again. "But I am in the mood."

"The way I see it," Nicky said, "nothing ever changes because we keep going along with things for our kids or our parents."

"Neither of us have parents, so I guess it's all about Paul," Barbara said, standing up and taking off pieces of clothes as she made her way toward their bedroom. "Hurry up."

"Okay, okay. I'm coming." Nicky jumped up and ran after Barbara. "But I'm still mad at Paul's teacher."

"Promise me."



Whether it was the wine or the chocolate cake, Nicky hardly slept that night. She kept going over and over the same argument in her head. She rose early, ready for a fight, and drove to Paul's school to see if Mrs. Kelly was in. On the drive, she rehearsed several speeches. She felt the anger, the outrage, the hate building until she realized it was out of proportion. She was arguing with Carol-Ann again, and Carol-Ann wasn't even listening. Or maybe she was frustrated by her own inaction, her own lack of direction, her own sense of helplessness. The Chicago Eight trial, My Lai, the Weatherman. They were all happening without her. All around her people were choosing sides, and she was at home baking cookies. If the revolution was coming, where did that leave her and Barbara and Paul? Maybe I'm not that different.

Nicky downshifted. Barbara was right. She wanted Paul to have friends, to be invited places. She didn't want him left out of things because of her. But this was only kindergarten, and the troubles were just beginning. Twelve more years to go. At least in college Paul will be grown; no one will care. It takes so damn long to raise a child, she thought. So much to learn and then unlearn. As a child, Nicky had helped her father deliver animals. Calves, piglets, foals. She'd watched chicks peck their way into the world. In no time, these animals were up and running, taking care of themselves. But it wasn't that way for people. If growing up was easy, Nicky's father liked to say, it wouldn't take so long.

Nicky hit the brakes and turned the car around. On the way home, she stopped at the bakery for fresh bread and muffins. "I was dreaming about French toast all night," Nicky said, entering the kitchen. Barbara looked at her. Paul looked up from a bowl of cereal. "I'll have a real breakfast ready in a moment."

CHAPTER SIX

1975

Barbara woke Paul early so they could make breakfast and bring it to Nicky in bed before she awoke. They sang “Happy Birthday” as they entered the bedroom with a tray with French toast, coffee, juice, and a roll of architectural drawings tied with ribbons. Barbara had rummaged through the still unpacked boxes from Bluefield to find a good picture of the Stewart family farm pond. The black-and-white photo showed wildflowers in bloom and the grass under Nicky’s bare feet. The landscaper that Barbara hired could not feel the coolness of the water or smell the moisture in the soil, but it all came back to her. Nicky had been comparing every swimming hole since Bluefield to that pond, and Barbara was going to re-create it behind their home for Nicky’s birthday. The landscaper looked at the picture as Barbara led him around the property in search of the right spot. Barbara pointed out the cedar raft afloat in the pond’s deepest water and asked him to build one of those.

Paul helped Nicky finish eating and they got ready for the convoy of earth-moving machines. She rolled up her drawings and followed Barbara and Paul to meet the crew. In the few hours after Barbara left for work and Paul for school, a path to the site had been cleared and the digging begun. Nicky took a cup of coffee and climbed out onto her roof to get a better view of the earth being moved.

That night, Nicky put *Bridge Over Troubled Water* on the tape player in their bedroom, lit some candles, and uncorked a bottle of champagne. She shut off the light, poured two glasses of champagne, and turned to find Barbara naked on top of the covers.

"I'm just going to stand here and enjoy the sight," Nicky said. "I might even have to drink both glasses."

As they made love, Barbara felt something in Nicky's breast. She didn't say anything right away but arranged for Nicky to go for a test, which led to more tests. A week later, they sat and listened to Dr. Hirsh explain that the biopsy results from the radiologist and the lab supported his suspicion that the small tumor in Nicky's left breast was, regretfully, cancer. When he said the word cancer, Barbara grabbed hold of Nicky's hand. She let go quickly. And then took it again.

"While they were doing the biopsy," Nicky told the doctor, "I did the math and figured out that I must have smoked about a quarter million cigarettes."

"I should have made you quit," Barbara said. "I should have been more insistent."

"That's a lot of cigarettes," Dr. Hirsch said.

"I got an early start and then I really put my mind to it," Nicky told Dr. Hirsch. "Got addicted before anyone decided to mention that it wasn't good for you."

"When you were young," Dr. Hirsch said, "you wouldn't have cared what anyone told you anyway." Dr. Hirsch had been Nicky and Barbara's physician since they arrived in Medford.

Nicky walked around the small office. "People grow tobacco and raise pigs for a living where I grew up," Nicky said. "So everyone smokes and eats pork." She took her lighter out of her pocket and turned it over in her hands. "One or the other kept most of the town going." She replaced the lighter in her pocket.

"We can't be sure it's from cigarettes," Dr. Hirsch said.

Nicky laughed. Dr. Hirsch went on to suggest that Nicky be operated on immediately. And that she quit smoking immediately as well. There was a surgeon, a Dr. Thompson in Ellwell, he wanted to refer Nicky too. Dr. Hirsch also liked the oncologist that worked

with Dr. Thompson. Barbara knew the surgeon and though she had referred patients to him, she sometimes wondered if he performed too many mastectomies. At that moment, Barbara was only glad that he had so much practice.

Dr. Hirsch picked up the phone and called the surgeon. "Can you head over now?" he asked, covering the receiver.

Barbara nodded.

"He's going to have his staff schedule surgery for early next week," Dr. Hirsch continued after hanging up the phone. "Just to get things moving. If you decide against surgery and start with the oncologist, he'll cancel. My recommendation is surgery and I think he'll agree."

"I want to be on the chart, Jon," Barbara said. "They don't know me in Ellwell, and I don't want to have a problem seeing Nicky."

"I'll arrange that," he said.

"If anything happens to me," Nicky said, "Barbara has power of attorney."

Dr. Hirsch leaned forward on his desk. "Nicky, you're going to be just fine. This is routine," he said. "I want you to have a good attitude, a positive attitude going into surgery. And please call me if you have any questions, anything. But you're going to be fine. Dr. Thompson is a fine surgeon."

Out in the parking lot, Nicky unlocked the Mustang for Barbara and then went around to the driver's side. "Routine," Nicky said, sliding into the car. "What part of this is routine?" Nicky asked, as she pulled out of the parking lot. "Slicing off my tit. Knocking me out with anesthesia? Sticking me with tubes and drugs. Whose fucking routine is that?"

The Bel Air, Nicky's last daily reminder of Bluefield, had finally been retired two years earlier. Not traded in or junked, but, and Barbara still didn't get why, placed in storage. Parts had been increasingly harder to come by for some time, and no one could really keep it running the way Andy had. Nicky's old Virginia plates were still in the trunk under the spare, and she swore she could still smell the hogs, the manure, the corn whenever she opened the trunk. Try as they did, Barbara and Paul could not smell anything.

At the Chevy dealer, with Nicky comfortably behind the wheel of a new Camaro, Paul told the salesman that his dad died in the war and that his dad was a hero and that his death was not a waste. The salesman expressed his sorrow and quietly told Nicky that his brother had also died in Vietnam. He promised Nicky a great deal on whatever car she wanted, promising not to take any commission on the sale. Nicky was sorry she had to give up getting a Chevy but not sorry about leaving Paul home while she looked at Fords. It didn't take long for her to decide on the Mustang, though the convertible had to be special ordered—against the advice of the salesman. When the Mustang arrived, it was snowing, but Nicky still had them put the top down before she drove it home.

"He just meant that the surgeon does this a lot," Barbara said.

"Do you tell your patients that procedures are routine?" Nicky said.

"Yes. Patients want to know that a procedure is not out of the ordinary. Dr. Hirsch was just trying to set you at ease and help you feel confident in Dr. Thompson. Obviously, it's not working."

"Are you confident in Thompson?"

"The guy has a lot of experience performing mastectomies."

"I guess all that smoking finally caught up with me."

"We don't know that."

"Really? After all these years of hounding me to quit, now you're saying that there might not be a link between my smoking and this cancer?"

"I want you to have a positive attitude going into surgery."

"You're not usually so spiritual about medicine."

"I just don't want you thinking that getting sick was your fault," Barbara said, "that you did something wrong."

"But I did. And now I'm going to do something right and get well." Nicky shifted in her seat. "By the way, I really liked it when you grabbed my hand in Dr. Hirsch's office. On Paul's eighteenth birthday, you need to kiss me right in the middle of Main Street. And I don't mean one of those little pecks on the cheek, I'm talking one of those seven-day kisses."

“Count on it,” Barbara said, “But maybe we’ll wait till the day after his birthday.”



Dr. Thompson finished looking through Nicky’s records and lab reports. He put her x-rays up on the screen, asked her a few questions, and then examined her breasts. Barbara joined them in his office where he was prepared to discuss the surgery.

“You’re suggesting a prophylactic mastectomy of the right breast as well?” Barbara asked, completely surprised.

“With Miss Stewart’s medical and family history, I would certainly recommend it. A radical mastectomy on both breasts is the safest, surest way to avoid a recurrence. Without it, she remains in the high-risk group. If she decides to go with the prophylactic mastectomy, she becomes a good bet to avoid any recurrence.” Dr. Thompson turned to Nicky. “You’re lucky to have detected the cancer early. You’re young and strong and we know your history, so I am confident that we can do a lot for you. Afterward, there are some cosmetic options that we can discuss.”

“I’m not interested in cosmetics,” Nicky said.

“It’s too early to think about that, but they’ll remain an option later, if you change your mind,” he said. “For now, I’m sure your main concern is your health, and that’s my main concern. We’ll move ahead with radical mastectomies on left and right breasts. I’ll have my secretary arrange for you to be admitted on Monday and schedule surgery for Tuesday first thing.”

“So soon?” Nicky said.

“The sooner we operate, the sooner you can begin your recovery,” he said.



“You’re quiet,” Nicky said on the drive home.

“Just thinking about arrangements.”

“Flowers? My funeral?”

“Neither,” Barbara said, “but if you have any preferences, this would be a good time to let me know.”

“Funny.”

“No, it’s not. Anyway, I was thinking about logistics. How to get Paul to school, cover work. That kind of stuff.”

“You don’t have to be here all the time,” Nicky said, “I can take care of myself.” Nicky pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her breast pocket. “How am I going to quit? It’s not like I’ve never tried.”

“If you don’t, you’ll die.”

“I’m dying now.”

Barbara took a deep breath. “Hand them over. I don’t like being left.”

“So this is now about you?” Nicky said, handing the cigarettes to Barbara.

“Isn’t it always about me?”

Nicky was enjoying the Mustang on the curves on this stretch of road. “Seriously, don’t worry about me. I’m not going anywhere. Paul has too much growing up left and I’m not planning on missing any of it.”

“What are we going to tell Paul?” Barbara asked when they neared their house. Nicky stopped the car to let Barbara jump out and get the mail and newspaper.

Nicky pulled into the driveway and parked. She got out of the car and looked around at her house, her neighborhood. Everything appeared less familiar. She didn’t know what to do next.

“You’re going to be in the hospital for a while,” Barbara said, walking up the driveway. “Don’t you think he’ll notice?”

“Why do we have to tell him anything? Why worry him? Tell him I’m going to visit some friends.”

“What friends?”

“Dr. Thompson.”

“We should lie to him?”

“For his own good.”

Barbara followed her inside their house. Nicky went straight for the living room where she took out her lighter and lit a carton of cigarettes, which she threw it into the fireplace. She left her lighter on the mantel.

“Enough secrets.” Barbara came up behind Nicky and put her arms around her.

“We have a lot of secrets?”

“Like who is Paul’s father,” Barbara said. “That kind of secret.”

“Okay. I didn’t see that coming,” Nicky said. “Is there something you’re not telling me? Are you worried I’m going to die and take some secret to my grave?”

“Tell me something about the guy,” Barbara said.

“He had good sperm. Really good sperm.”

“I’m serious.”

“So am I. Look at Paul. There’s nothing to tell. It was so long ago, I don’t even remember anything about him.”

“You had sex with the man,” Barbara was shouting. “You were both naked. He’s Paul’s father and you don’t remember anything?”

“Soon I’ll look like the father.”

“Keep joking. I can wait.”

“I drank a lot of wine that day,” Nicky said. “And I kept my eyes closed and thought of you, and when it was over I left without looking at him.” Nicky turned around and put her arms on Barbara’s shoulders.

“Fine. You’re not ready. But we’re telling Paul about the operation and he’s visiting you in the hospital.”

“Okay.”

“Tonight.”

“I know. Now give me a break. I need some gum or something.”

“Here’s something to do with your mouth,” Barbara said and then kissed Nicky for a very long time.

“That works.” Nicky caught her breath. “But you’ll have to keep it up all day long.”

Barbara kissed Nicky again.



On Monday morning, Nicky said good-bye to Paul as he boarded the bus for school. She and Barbara drove to Ellwell Hospital. The top of the Mustang was down that morning, but Barbara didn’t say a

word. The spring air made Barbara cold, but it also invigorated her and that surprised her. She dropped her shoulders, stopped bracing against the wind, and let the elements hug her. All she wanted was for Nicky to keep driving and never stop. But then Nicky started to drive faster and Barbara's knuckles turned white as she squeezed the door handle and then she did wish she had worn a warmer coat.

"You trying to get us killed before the operation?" Barbara said.

Nicky slowed down. "I thought we were late. We're not late? I can slow down if you want me to."

"I don't want you to ever slow down."

Nicky checked in with admitting and settled in her room. When they came to get her for a series of pre-op tests, Barbara headed back to Medford. She left the top down, afraid to change anything. After a stop at her office to see several patients, she returned home to pick up some things for Nicky and wait for Paul's bus to bring him home. She put the Mustang in the garage and drove her Jeep to the bus stop. She had a bag of cookies and a container of milk in the car for the ride to the hospital. As she waited, she started in on the cookies, twisting the black wafers apart, scraping the white filling with her teeth.

"How was school?" Barbara asked as Paul opened the car door.

"We're doing a play Friday for morning assembly," Paul said. He threw his bag on the floor and hopped into the jeep. "Will Mom be back?"

"Not by Friday." Barbara opened Paul's milk carton. "I'll try to come."

"Mom usually comes." Paul took a cookie.

"I know."

"Won't you be at work?"

"Yes. But I can come."

"You don't have to."

There was a silence as he scraped the filling off the cookies. It was a silence Barbara felt came from emptiness, not fullness. She was not around for Paul as much as Nicky was. She was always at the office. It worked for her and Nicky, but at that moment, as she stared at the open road ahead, she felt the loss of all those missed

moments. She was not fond of regret and reached to turn on the radio.

“Is Mom going to die?” Paul asked between cookies.

Barbara did not turn on the radio. “No, honey. She’s going to be just fine. She’ll be weak for a while, but she’ll get strong again.”

“You’re a doctor, so you really know.”

“Yes, I do know.”

“She’s really strong.” Paul grabbed another cookie.

“That’s right. So she’ll be fine.” Barbara rubbed Paul’s shoulder. “Easy on those cookies. Save some for later.”

“Why do they have to take part of her body off?”

“Right now, it’s the only part of her that has the illness.”

“Can’t they give her medicine?”

“This is the best approach,” Barbara said. “They remove the sick layers and several surrounding layers as well. If they get all the bad layers out, the disease can’t spread to other parts of her.”

“What if they don’t get all the bad parts?”

“They will,” Barbara said. “It’s a common operation. Lots of women have it.”

“Will you?”

“I hope not.”

“Then why does Mom have to?”

“Cancer is a hard disease to predict.”

“You said if.”

“What?”

“You said, if they get it all.”

“I was talking clinically,” Barbara said, trying to cover up her slip. “They train us to talk that way. It’s just a habit. Maybe a bad habit.” She had always given Nicky a hard time about not being honest. Nicky said she told Paul as much as he could handle. Nothing is easy, Barbara thought.

“I don’t ever want to be a doctor,” Paul said.

“It’s a good job.”

“Can you do the operation?” Paul asked.

“I’m not a surgeon. I don’t have the training. But it’s like anything else, like baseball. You need a coach, you need to practice,

you need to train a lot, and you need to play real games. You have to play real games. Being a doctor is not so different from being a mechanic. Probably easier, because unlike a car, people can tell you where it hurts. Only people have more parts and more things that could go wrong.” Barbara realized she was talking to herself. She looked to see if Paul was getting any of this.

“Mom loves cars.”

“That she does.”

“I hope she teaches me to drive.”

“I do too,” Barbara said. “She taught me. But, hey, don’t forget, I taught you how to ride a two-wheeler.”

Paul laughed. “I kept falling.”

“You should have seen what you looked like when I carried you in. Bloody shirt, hands all scraped, hair covered with dust. Nicky was going to kill me.”

“But Mom still made me go to the pet snake show in town,” Paul said.

“I remember that,” Barbara said. “I never knew so many people kept snakes for pets.”

“Do you think we should tell my father that Mom is sick?”



Paul and Barbara rode the elevator to Nicky’s floor. The nurse behind the desk stopped Barbara and Paul as they came out of the elevator.

“We’re going to see my Mom,” Paul said.

“Three eleven B, Nicky Stewart,” Barbara added.

The nurse looked down on the chart. “Are you a relative? Only immediate family.”

“This is her son.”

“And you?”

“Dr. Phillips.” Barbara didn’t wait for acknowledgment. She turned and led Paul to the room. She was certain she heard the nurse mutter the word “dykes” under her breath as they walked away. It was hard to control herself, but these nurses were taking care of

Nicky and she wanted them to treat her well. For now, that would have to wait.

Nicky was sitting up when they entered her room. “Hey, kid,” she said to Paul, “how was school?” She swung out of bed and hugged Paul.

“We have a play on Friday.”

“Barbara will come to that one,” Nicky said.

“I already told him I want to come,” Barbara said.

“I want you to come,” Paul said to Nicky.

“I won’t be out of this place yet, honey.” Nicky reached for her bag. “Hey, I got you some baseball cards. Want to open them with me?”

Paul jumped up on Nicky’s bed.

Barbara excused herself and stepped out of the room. She walked back to the nurses’ station and leaned on the counter.

The nurse looked up at Barbara. “Can I help you?” she said.

“You can help yourself by keeping your comments to yourself.”

“Now listen here, Miss—”

“Doctor. My name is Dr. Phillips, and you listen to me.”

Barbara looked around to see if anyone was listening. “I don’t know what your problem is, and frankly, I’m not interested. But if I hear one complaint from Miss Stewart about her care then I will be your problem, and I’ll have you off the floor and floating by the end of the day. Do you understand me?” Barbara turned and went back to visit with Nicky.

“Who’s hungry?” Barbara said. “Suddenly, I have an appetite.” Nicky and Paul had the baseball cards spread out on the bed.

“We ate—” Paul started to say.

“Don’t say it,” Barbara interrupted.

“What?” Nicky said to Paul.

“Don’t do it,” Barbara said. “Don’t tell her.”

“We had Oreos in the car,” Paul said.

“You didn’t,” Barbara said.

“In my car?” Nicky asked as she tickled Paul.

“Barbara’s.”

“Okay,” Nicky said. “Did you save me any?”

"I was hungry," Paul said.

"Look," Nicky said, "you got a Hank Aaron. And a Tom Seaver."

"I was thinking of getting some food in the cafeteria," Barbara said. "Anyone want me to bring back anything?"

"Is it the one where you get to slide your tray along?" Paul said to Barbara.

"It is," Barbara said. "But it's still hospital food."

"I want to go with you," Paul said.

Barbara looked at Nicky.

"Go ahead," Nicky said. "I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere."

Barbara and Paul returned with their trays. Nicky made a place for Paul to sit.

"Macaroni and cheese," Nicky said to Paul, "fries with gravy, pudding. You got all the best stuff."

"You can have some," Paul said.

"I'm not supposed to eat anything," Nicky said.

Paul took a big bite of macaroni and cheese.

"Good?" Nicky asked.

"Yeah," Paul said, "but not as good as yours."

Nicky rubbed Paul's hair. "You're getting so big, so beautiful."

"He's almost as tall as me," Barbara said. "By his next birthday I bet he's taller."

After dinner, Barbara called in to her answering service. Nicky and Paul flipped baseball cards. A nurse came around with medication. Susan and Abe called to say hello. At eight o'clock the guard started to knock on doors and send people home.

"I love this boy," Nicky said as she hugged Paul.

"I want you to come home," Paul said.

"I'll be home real soon," Nicky said.

Barbara kissed Nicky. "I'll be back in the morning. Susan's going to come over and get Paul ready for the bus."

"Good evening, Dr. Phillips," the nurse said as they passed the station.

"I like when people call you Dr. Phillips," Paul said in the elevator.

“You’d make a fine doctor.” With the sun down, the air felt cool and Barbara shivered as she unlocked the car for her and Paul to get in.

“If Mom died would I be able to stay with you?” he asked.

“What?” Barbara said as she pulled out of the parking lot.

“Because we’re not really legally related so they might try and take me from you.”

“Who are they? And who told you?”

“The courts. I read about it in the bath.”

“The bath?”

“It was in one of Mom’s magazines.”

“We should never have taught you how to read,” Barbara said. “So exactly what did you read?”

“It was about custody,” Paul said. “Did you adopt me?”

“I can’t adopt you. You have a mother. But I have legal custody now and, well, it’s also in Mom’s will. But nothing is going to happen to Mom or me, and no one is taking you away from me. You can be sure of that.”

“What if both of you died? Who would I live with then?” Paul asked.

“No one is dying.” Barbara realized she was crying and hoped it was too dark in the car for Paul to see.

“What would I do?”

“You’ll be old enough by then and living on your own,” Barbara said.

“I don’t want to be alone.”

“You will never be alone.”

“Would I live with my father?” Paul asked.

“No, honey, you wouldn’t. Because he doesn’t know you, so he couldn’t take you in.”

“Remember when you went to Europe with Mom?” Paul asked.

“Yeah.”

“You said you and Mom weren’t on the same plane because they didn’t have room. But Josh said it was because you didn’t want to be on the same plane in case one of them crashed. He said his parents do the same thing, so that he and his brother and sister wouldn’t be alone.”

“You’re killing me here, Paul,” Barbara said. “You’re right, but we have to change the subject cause you’re killing me here.”



With Paul tucked in and asleep, Barbara took a glass of wine into the living room. She picked up the lighter from the mantel and squeezed it tightly in her left palm. The last four days had been such a blur of decisions, tasks, errands that she hadn’t had time to feel. She held the lighter up to her nose and tried to smell Nicky, but all she smelled was lighter fluid.

Barbara arranged some newspapers and kindling in the fireplace. She crouched, knees resting on the hearth, and tried to spark the lighter by hitting it against her jeans the way Nicky liked to do. She’d never been able to get the rhythm of it so she used her thumb instead. It was Nicky’s favorite lighter, the one she had with her at the doctor’s office that day he mentioned cancer. It was Nicky’s favorite lighter, not because it was beautiful or even valuable, but simply because Nicky had managed to hold on to it for so many years. Nicky had placed the lighter on the mantel with the pottery they had picked up in South Dakota several years earlier.

I hate this fucking lighter, Barbara thought, as she held its flame to the newspapers. She wanted to throw it in the fire, but it had Nicky’s sweat, her palm oils, and the groove her forefinger had worn out. Damn you, Nicky, for doing this to yourself, for not listening. Barbara sat on the hearth and took off her glasses. She rubbed her face, her brow, her eyes, the marks on her nose where her glasses rested, and fruitlessly pushed back her hair. She let out a long breath. The day had been full of waiting. The next day promised to be worse.

When the kindling caught and the blaze reached up for the chimney, Barbara placed three logs in the fireplace, grunted, and pushed herself up. She sat on the couch and moved the photo album that she had brought up from the basement, the one with pictures of the pond. Nicky didn’t like having them around. Barbara lifted her wine with her ringless fingers and sipped cautiously. She was

scared. Scared for Nicky and for Paul. Scared of being alone. When she was younger, no one could have ever convinced her that she would spend her life with the same woman and that they would raise a child together. Then, in just a blink, here they were, together for almost fifteen years. Barbara had gotten so that she relied on Nicky to make things happen, to throw things off-kilter, and not let them all get too comfortable. Like that summer when Nicky found out about the medical volunteer program in a clinic in South Dakota and practically signed Barbara up for it on her own. Practicing without most of the conveniences of her office and the easy access to a hospital and with a constant lack of supplies changed the way Barbara approached medicine. She knew that even if she could parent Paul on her own, he needed Nicky. She needed Nicky. And she knew everything could be taken away quickly.



Barbara didn't sleep at all that night. Didn't even try. When Susan came over before sunrise, Barbara was eager to get to the hospital and see Nicky while she was still awake. After the nurses took Nicky to prepare her for surgery, Barbara planted herself in Ellwell Women's cafeteria. She was nursing her third cup of coffee when she saw a chaplain sit down across the room. If I knew how, she thought, I would pray. Many of her patients prayed. She knew it was not for lack of confidence in her ability, but an acknowledgment of medical limitations. If I knew to what or to whom, I would pray right now. I would pray. I would beg. I would make a deal. What am I supposed to bargain with? I have nothing. Am I supposed to ask for special attention, for favors from God? I never asked anyone for anything. I got what I wanted through hard work coupled with some luck, and some good genes. But as a doctor, she knew there was more to treating patients than just diagnosing illness and administering therapies and drugs. She had seen disease leave and arrive on its own terms, as if her intervention was an afterthought. Why and how an illness affected someone was so hard to predict, impossible to justify. A good attitude helped, but it wasn't a prescription, and

it certainly wasn't a guarantee. Luck, grace, karma, history, the planets, they were all part of the deal, but couldn't be counted on. But she had even less faith in who or what dealt out life and then took it away. That was not something Barbara had much hope in coming to Nicky's aid.

What the hell, Barbara said to herself, almost out loud, Nicky would do it. She crossed the room to where the chaplain was carefully dunking a Danish into his coffee. The chaplain looked up at her.

"May I sit?" Barbara asked.

"Please."

"What do you pray for?" Barbara said.

"Do you have a loved one who is ill?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll pray for him to be well."

"What do I pray for?" Barbara said.

"The same thing."

"I've never prayed. I don't know how," Barbara said. "Am I just supposed to ask for what I want?"

"What we want is not always what's in God's plan. You should also pray for the strength to face adversity."

"If there's already a plan, why pray?"

"We might not be able to change the plan, but we can change ourselves, and how we react to what unfolds around us."

Barbara heard herself being paged. "Pray for me," she said, "I'm being paged."

Barbara ran to the phone where a member of the surgical team told her that the surgery had gone well. Both breasts had been removed and they were closing up. Nicky was doing fine and would be out of the OR in another forty-five minutes. Barbara was told she would get another call when Nicky was in recovery and Barbara would be allowed to see her then.

She hung up the phone and bought a fresh cup of coffee and a slice of pumpkin pie—she really didn't expect them to have blackberry.

As she sat down, the chaplain approached her table.

"Is everything okay?" he said.

"Good news," Barbara said.

"Praying may not change things, but it will change you," he said. "Good luck."

After he left, Barbara returned to waiting. She knew how to wait. Didn't matter that just being there all morning didn't help anything, didn't change anything. She just knew there was nowhere else she would want to be and nothing else she wanted to be doing. She needed the boredom of waiting, the singularity of focus. She needed to not be doing what she usually did while someone was removing parts of Nicky. And, well, then there was the *in case*, the just in case. She decided not to finish that thought.



Barbara watched Nicky sleep. Her long brown hair was braided and pulled back from her face, and Barbara couldn't remember the last time she thought Nicky looked as beautiful. As she stared she followed the twist of her lip, the slope of her brow, the angle of her chin, the way her ears hugged her face, the way her nose was off center. She started to breathe in unison with the rise and fall of the blanket as it measured out the steady rhythm of Nicky's breath.

Barbara took a pen from her pocketbook, found a piece of paper in the nightstand, and began to draw. The pen felt good in her hand.

A nurse came in to change Nicky's IV bag. Barbara covered her sketch.

An hour later when Nicky stirred, she saw Barbara sitting by her bed. "I never thought I'd see you again." Nicky was still groggy from the anesthesia.

"Everything went well, Miss Stewart," the nurse said. "The doctor will be in soon to talk with you. If you need anything, just press the buzzer."

"Good thing I had small boobs," Nicky said. "I won't miss much. Now if it were you," she said to Barbara, "there'd be plenty to miss."

"You've had a lot of painkillers," Barbara said.

"I look like a man now," Nicky said. "Maybe I'll get a haircut and run for president."

"Trust me," the nurse said, "no one would ever mistake you for a man. You're beautiful." She adjusted the drip flow of the IV.

"Here's the thing," the nurse continued, "every day that you are able to look in the mirror and see yourself alive and kicking is a good day."

After the nurse left, Barbara put the paper down and held Nicky's hand.

"The nurses have been so nice to me," Nicky said.

"I think this one was flirting with you."

"You're cute," Nicky said. "What were you drawing?"

"Just doodling a little."

"Let me see."

Barbara held up the paper with Nicky's face on it.

"What's the rest of me look like?" Nicky said.

"You're all bandaged."

"Damaged?"



By June, when the humidity was joined by heat and the water in their new pond was just warm enough to bear, Nicky, Barbara, and Paul suited up for a dip. Barbara brought a camera and Paul carried a basket of food.

"Don't race her," Barbara whispered to Paul, when they reached the beach. "Let her enjoy the swim."

Nicky was first to step in the water. "Race you to the raft," she yelled to Paul as she dove in.

"Cheater!" Paul yelled as he ran into the pond and began swimming.

Barbara folded her arms across her chest and watched them both glide through the water. When Nicky reached the raft, Barbara put down the camera and walked into the pond and swam out to join them. She pulled herself up the ladder and onto the raft. She stretched out on her back and caught her breath. Paul was sitting,

knees against his chest. Nicky was standing, her back to Barbara, her wet braid hanging down her back.

Nicky turned to face Barbara. "Thank you." She bent over and gave Paul and then Barbara a kiss.

"I fell in love with your mom at a place like this, on a day like this," Barbara told Paul. "Except it was much hotter."

"And we weren't wearing suits," Nicky said.

"Kids do that at Butterbrook Falls," Paul said.

"How do you know?" Nicky asked.

"Everyone knows."

"I know," Barbara said.

"I didn't know," Nicky said. "Have you been there?"

"No," Paul said. "But kids talk."

"Tell me more about falling in love," Nicky said.

Barbara hung her feet over the side of the raft. "It gets real hot in Virginia. Too hot to do much of anything, so she took me swimming at the Stewart farm pond. By the time your mom and I left the pond, I was in love."

"I thought your anniversary is election night," Paul said.

"That's when we decided to tell each other," Barbara said. "Till then we each kept it a secret."

"I fell in love," Nicky said, "the moment I saw Barbara sitting at the counter drinking coffee and eating a slice of my blackberry pie."

"She loves that pie," Paul said.

"Good thing I didn't order pumpkin," Barbara said. "You know, Paul, we took you out to see the Stewart pond first thing when you came home from the hospital. Before we even took you inside the house."

"I'm hungry," Paul said.

"Let's go back and eat." Again, Nicky left first. She took two steps, vaulted off the raft and disappeared into the dark pool. Barbara and Paul followed.

Nicky spread the blanket on the sand and opened the picnic basket.

Paul scooped up a butterfly that landed on Barbara's shoulder.

“Some butterflies,” Barbara said, “only live for twenty-four hours.”

“What do they do?” Paul asked, biting his cheese sandwich.

“They spend most of their time getting food.” Barbara twisted her beer bottle into the sand and sat up.

“Do they have fun?” Paul asked.

“What would be fun for a bug?” Barbara said, reaching for a deviled egg.

“Bugging people?” Nicky said.

“What’s a good time for you?” Barbara asked Paul.

“Playing baseball.”

“How about you?” Nicky asked Barbara.

“I like doing this,” Barbara said. “I like my job.”

“I like knowing how to make a great blackberry pie,” Nicky said. “I like knowing the names of animals and plants that live around me. I like knowing about Georgia O’Keefe, Rosa Luxemburg, and penny sales.”

“What’s a penny sale?” Paul asked, biting down on one of Nicky’s homegrown, crispy, full sour pickles.

“My father, your grandfather Paul Stewart, witnessed a few of those.” Nicky squatted down. “He said that during the nineteen thirties, a lot of farmers couldn’t pay their bills so the banks took the farms. They held auctions and sold everything off, keeping what was owed them. In some places, neighbors got together and bought all the stuff, only one person bid at one time and they only bid a penny. Afterward, they gave all the stuff back to the family. People looked out for each other.”

“What if a stranger showed up?” Barbara asked.

“Outsiders were asked to stay away. If they didn’t understand, they either got scared away or locked up in someone’s barn until the auction was over.” Nicky poured some lemonade.

“That’s so cool,” Paul said.

“Yeah, but it didn’t happen often enough. Most people lost their farms.”

“Is that how we lost our farm?” Paul said.

"We didn't lose our farm, sweetie," Nicky said, "We sold it so we could buy this house."

"Did we get a lot of money?"

"Enough," Nicky said.

"Was it a big farm?" Paul said.

"It had two hundred acres of rich Virginia soil," Nicky said. "Three barns and the house I grew up in."

"Do you think we'll ever visit?"

"It wouldn't be the same anymore," Nicky said. "There'd be no point."

"Maybe one day," Barbara said.



After dinner, Barbara put a record on in the den, opened the windows wide, and went out onto the rear deck. She took Nicky's hand and began to dance while Paul ate desert. When Paul was finished, Barbara took his hand and let him cut in. Recently, she'd begun to teach him steps, Jitterbug, Swing, Texas two-step, show him how to lead. She didn't say, now we are going to learn how to dance or anything, she just always danced with him, taking him for a spin or two around the living room.

"It's not healthy to eat and then sit," Barbara said as she glided Paul across the deck.

"But it's not safe to go swimming either," Paul said.

"Who said anything about swimming?"

"You did," Paul said. "At the pond when I wanted to go swimming after lunch."

"That's because you could get a cramp and drown," Barbara said.

"Can't you get a cramp from dancing?"

"But you won't drown," Barbara said, moving to the sound of the big band.

"But you could get stepped on," Nicky added from the table where she sat with her coffee.

"Dancing," Barbara said, stopping to bow, "is a dangerous sport."

CHAPTER SEVEN

1982

“Nicky,” Barbara yelled from the house. “Nicky, come quick!”

Nicky dropped the buttercup squash she’d just picked from her garden and ran to the house. Barbara was holding the day’s mail.

“Look at this,” Barbara said, handing Nicky an envelope. “It’s from Claire Harper. That’s your sister’s kid?”

Nicky stared at the return address. Claire Harper, Santa Barbara, California. She sat at the kitchen table. The letter was addressed to Nicky Stewart and Barbara Phillips. The handwriting reminded Nicky of Carol-Ann’s.

“Open it,” Barbara said.

Nicky carefully tore open the envelope and unfolded the letter. “Dear Aunt Nicky and Aunt Barbara,” Nicky said, looking up at Barbara. She read on in silence. “Carol-Ann died. September twenty-eighth,” Nicky said. “It was sudden. Richard found her in the kitchen. They had just returned from a party, and she was making some tea.”

“Are you okay?” Barbara said.

“I’m okay.”

“You shouldn’t be.”

“It’s not like I’ve seen Carol-Ann recently.”

“I’m not sure what reaction I think you should be having,” Barbara said, “but this isn’t it.”

“There is one thing,” Nicky said.

“What?” Barbara took the letter and began reading it.

Nicky stood. “I wonder how Claire got our address?” she said.

“That is strange.”

Nicky took out pots and pans from the cabinets.

“What are you doing?” Barbara asked.

“I need to start cooking. It’s getting late, and Susan and Abe will be here at seven. I’ve got a big menu planned.” She removed vegetables from the refrigerator, grains from the cupboard.

“Fine.” Barbara turned. “I’m going to make a fire.”

After Barbara left, Nicky sliced, chopped, minced, sautéed, simmered, and stirred. She had pots cooking, casseroles baking. For dessert, she had planned to make squash pie, she preferred buttercup to pumpkin, but as she prepared the crust, she had an urge for pecan pie. “I need a few things for dinner,” she called into the living room. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I’ll come with you.” Barbara ran in from the living room.

“I need you to watch things. Take the casserole out in fifteen minutes, but leave the oven on and leave the potatoes in until they’re soft. The soup can keep simmering.”

“What do you need?” Barbara said.

“Set the table while I’m gone.”

Nicky started the Bel Air. Two years earlier, Barbara had surprised her by having the Chevy restored for their twentieth anniversary. It took seven months for the mechanic to find or fabricate all the parts, to make all the repairs, and to re-cover the convertible’s top, but when he was done, it looked just like it did in 1957 when Nicky’s father drove it out of Bluefield’s Chevy dealership—with a few upgrades. Barbara had the engine modified to use unleaded gas and had three point seat belts installed and added an FM radio.

As Nicky drove the familiar hills of the Finger Lakes, she looked around at the landscape and thought, this isn’t my land, and it never will be. I’ve spent almost half my life here in Medford and I still feel like I’m from Virginia. I still feel like a visitor. And now I’m alone. No parents, no sister. Just me. I’m the only adult left, the elder of the family. When Carol-Ann was alive, even through

all those years of not speaking, I always felt like the younger sister. Carol-Ann has returned to the earth, and too soon, it'll be me.

With pecans in tow, Nicky headed home. It was beginning to drizzle as she turned on to University Drive. A young woman, hatless and umbrella-less, was hitchhiking. Nicky pulled over.

"You shouldn't hitch by yourself," Nicky told her.

"Did you stop to tell me that or are you offering me a ride?"

"Get in."

"The bus stops on the next block, but I was hoping for a ride in this car," she said, getting in the car. "It is so cool. I never hitch rides."

Nicky listened to the women's accent. "It's a Chevy—"

"Bel Air," she interrupted excitedly. "Small-block V-Eight, three speed."

"You know cars?" Nicky said.

"I know this car. My father has a fifty-five," she said. "But it doesn't look like this."

"This is a fifty-seven," Nicky said. "Your accent sounds familiar. Where's home?"

"Virginia."

"Is that right?"

"Outside Richmond."

"I used to go to Bub's Barbecue in Richmond. Is it still there?" Nicky asked.

"How do you know Bub's? I love Bub's."

"Born and raised in Bluefield," Nicky said.

"I know where that is, but I've never been. Do you get back often?"

"How do you know cars?" Nicky asked.

"My father has a garage and he only had girls. Four of us. None of my sisters took an interest, but I liked the tools, liked fixing things."

"Tell me. How'd you end up in Medford?"

"School," she said. "I'm studying mechanical engineering. No surprise there I guess. When I'm done studying, I'm going back to Richmond. So when was the last time you were in Virginia?"

"August twelfth, nineteen sixty-four," Nicky said.

"Okay. That's specific. And a long time. How come?"

"That is a long and dull story." Nicky pulled over at the top of the hill. "Listen," Nicky said, writing her address onto a slip of paper. "If you ever want some Virginia cooking, or another ride in this car, give me a call. I'd love to hear more about Richmond."

"Thanks," she said, taking the address.

"Will you be here for Thanksgiving?" Nicky asked.

"I'm going home." She stepped out of the car. She put Nicky's address in her pocket and held the door open for another moment. "You ought to go home. They'll be glad to see you." She closed the door and turned the corner.



Nicky pulled open the screen door and set the groceries down in the mudroom. She hung her jacket on a hook and entered the kitchen where Barbara was sitting at the table changing the batteries in her beeper.

"Where have you been?" Barbara said. "I was starting to get worried."

"I picked up a hitchhiker."

"Why?"

"I don't know. She said she saw my car and wanted a ride. She's from Richmond. How strange is that?"

"Maybe we should cancel with Abe and Susan. It's been a rough day."

"And let this fine cooking go to waste? No way." Nicky took out the roller and started smashing pecans. "Really, Barbara, I'm up to it."

"Can I do anything?" Barbara said.

"All I have left is the pie. Put up some water and I'll bring tea to the living room when I'm done. Now get out and let me cook."

"She was really from Richmond?" Barbara said.

"Weird, isn't it?"

"You know what else is weird? You not wanting to talk about Carol-Ann."

“Nice segue,” Nicky said. “Seriously, what is there to talk about?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that your sister died?”

“You know what I keep wondering?” Nicky said, putting down her rolling pin. “How did Claire get our address? All this time I thought we were in hiding.”

Barbara left and Nicky leaned against the counter. She looked out the window at her garden. There were no seedlings to check up on, only the last of the pumpkins and some winter squash waiting to be picked. In a few weeks it would be Thanksgiving and Paul would be coming home from school. Nicky and Barbara and Paul would have turkey, go for walks, and bed down the garden for the winter. The previous spring, on Paul’s eighteenth birthday, Nicky had let out that deep breath she’d been holding for all those years. She knew it was not original, or even slightly profound, but she wondered where the time had gone. Susan told Nicky that in Hebrew, eighteen was the numerical equivalent of the word life. For Nicky, it meant that Paul had become his own legal guardian and that no one could take him away from her anymore.



With dinner set, Nicky filled two mugs with tea and took them into the living room. She was surprised to see an open book of photographs waiting for her. The pictures, almost all black-and-white, were held in place by tiny black triangles that grabbed the photos by their corners. They were pictures of Nicky and Carol-Ann as children. Her father had taken the pictures the summer their mother died.

“Where did this come from?” Nicky said.

“I brought them up from the basement.” Barbara was working on the fire. She stirred the coals, placed two logs on the pile, and stood.

“I meant, why?” Nicky said, lowering the mugs onto the coffee table.

“I thought you might want to see them.”

"I don't." Nicky's legs felt weak and she sat down. "All I want is to forget."

"Forget what?"

"Everything." Nicky lifted the tea and warmed her hands. "Promise me you won't mention Carol-Ann to Susan and Abe. I don't want to waste and ruin the whole evening talking about Carol-Ann and looking at old pictures." Nicky sipped her tea cautiously, inhaling more vapor than liquid.

"That's two things."

"What is?"

"That's two things you don't want." Barbara took off her glasses and rubbed her face. "What are you going to tell Paul?"

"There's nothing to tell Paul. He never knew Carol-Ann and now she died. So there's even less to tell."

"Nicky," Barbara sighed. "I'm tired of keeping secrets."

"What do you want me to tell him? That the reason I stopped talking to my only sister, his only aunt, and the only reason we left Virginia was because he was born?"

"That's a start."

"It wasn't his fault," Nicky said.

"It wasn't your fault either."

"Who cares whose fault it was?"

"Well, it wasn't yours. But you don't believe that."

Nicky straightened up in the chair and drank some tea. "I've spent my whole life thinking I did the right thing by leaving without saying a word. Even if I was right and Carol-Ann was wrong, what difference does it make now? I can't even have that argument with her anymore."

Barbara sat on the couch and flipped through the photo albums. "What would you have done differently?" She leaned back on the couch.

"Not let it go on. Called her. Talked to her. Argued with her and yelled at her. Cried with her. Now I'm stuck with what if. And there's nothing I can do because she had to go and die first."

"You should definitely be mad at her for that."

Nicky lifted the book of photographs and slammed it shut. Abruptly, she stood, walked over to the fireplace, and dropped the book in.

“Are you crazy?” Barbara jumped up, spilling her tea onto the rug as she rushed to pull the photos from the fire.

Nicky went over to the window and looked out over her yard. Her breath fogged the pane and she traced a face on the glass.

Barbara put the album back on the coffee table. She went over to Nicky and stood behind her, slipping her arms around Nicky’s waist. “You could call Richard,” she said softly.

“Did he call me? Did he write me about Carol-Ann?”

“Maybe he asked Claire to,” Barbara said. “I still can’t believe they had our address.”

“I can’t believe they stayed together.”

“Maybe he’s changed. It’s been a long time. People change.”

“Maybe she changed. When Richard heard I was pregnant, he told Carol-Ann that I should be committed, that I’d gone too far. He said he was willing to find a doctor and sign the papers and then he and Carol-Ann could adopt Paul.”

Barbara began to rock Nicky back and forth. “Still, it’s been eighteen years.”

“I’m not reaching out to Richard. Even if it was eighty years.”

“Then you could call Claire. Ask her about Carol-Ann. Get to know her family. We could take a trip out there with Paul. Give him a chance to know the rest of his family.”

“That’s not going to make up for Carol-Ann.”

“No, it won’t. Nothing will.”

“I just want to forget her again,” Nicky said, turning to look at Barbara.

“Have you ever forgotten her?” Barbara said, putting her arms around Nicky.

“No.”

“Then call Claire before even that’s too late,” Barbara said. “She wrote you. She called me Aunt Barbara. How cool was that? You have to try if you want to know things about Carol-Ann.”

“I don’t know if I want to.”

"I think you do. And Paul is certainly going to want you to," Barbara said.

"That's just it." Nicky wiped the pane clean.

"What?"

"Carol-Ann wanted to separate Paul and me, and I'm scared that she's finally going to do it.



Susan and Abe arrived for dinner carrying a case of wine they bought at a small winery on their recent trip to California.

"You know it's just the four of us?" Barbara said.

"We went on a wine tasting tour," Abe said.

"We tasted a lot of wine," Susan said. "This was our favorite so we brought a case for you too. Hope you like it."

"Because we really don't know much about wine," Abe said. "I mean, compared to that sweet wine we use for holidays, everything is good."

"I love that wine," Nicky said.

"This winery doesn't make enough wine to sell outside of California," Susan said as Abe uncorked one of the bottles. "Probably because they give away so much of it to visitors. It's not that hard to get drunk on all the tastes they offer you. And then you get back in the bus and drive to the next winery and keep drinking."

"I can't believe you two are seriously thinking about moving there," Barbara said.

"Well, the university made Abe a nice offer," Susan said, "and then there's the weather. It's always sunny there. I mean, I love upstate New York, but these winters here are getting to me. And Lila is just starting high school, so she can start there."

"And the free wine," Barbara added.

"It's tempting," Abe added. "Their research facility is the real draw." He filled four glasses. "You should think about California. Doctors can set up practice anywhere."

"But we haven't decided anything, so let's not dwell on it," Susan interrupted. "Nicky, tell me about the new sanctuary family. I haven't met them yet."

“They’re just staying a few weeks before heading to a church in Vermont that offered them permanent sanctuary.”

“Where’s this family from?” Abe asked. He handed everyone a glass.

“El Salvador.” Nicky said. Turning to Barbara, Nicky added, “Did I tell you that Sonia, the mom, is pregnant?”

“Shit. They’re on the road, for God’s sake,” Barbara said. “Do they have other kids?”

“Three.”

“Does she want to keep it?”

“They’re Catholic,” Nicky said.

“So no birth control. Think of all the extra resources your Sanctuary group will have to provide.”

“I may have told the committee that I’d ask you about giving Sonia a checkup.”

“May have? I hate when you do that to me.”

“You can say no,” Nicky said.

“It’s easier to do that if you ask before you volunteer me,” Barbara said.

“All I offered was to ask you.”

“The family probably hasn’t had a checkup in a long time,” Barbara said.

“Maybe never,” Abe said. He raised his glass. “How about a toast?”

“And the kids will need immunization records for school. I should probably examine the whole family together. I’ll learn more that way. Will you translate for me?”

“So I’ll tell them yes?” Nicky said, giving Barbara a kiss.

“Good times,” Abe said, raising his wine glass.

They touched glasses and drank.

“This is good,” Nicky said. “It will be great with dinner.”

“I thought you’d like it,” Susan said.

“We also have some California news,” Barbara said.

“What news?” Susan said to Barbara. “Are you looking for work there? It’s pretty easy for doctors to move. Maybe we could still be neighbors.”

"It's not about me. It's about Nicky."

"I thought we weren't going to do this," Nicky said to Barbara.

"Okay," Susan said, "now you have my attention."

"I never agreed." Barbara pushed back her chair and stood.

"Is everything okay?" Susan asked.

"You two are making me nervous," Abe said. He drank more wine.

"Nicky's sister died." Barbara finished the rest of her wine and put the glass on the fireplace mantel.

"Sister?" Susan said. "I don't understand."

"Carol-Ann," Barbara said.

"Did we know about a sister?" Abe asked Susan.

"No." Susan moved closer to Nicky on the couch and put her arm around her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Nicky."

"It's okay," Nicky said.

"No," Susan said, "it's not. Something like this is never okay. Let's put aside, for the moment, that we've been neighbors and friends for more than twelve years and you never told me you had a sister. But talk to me now. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine. It's not such a big deal."

"Are you going to the funeral?" Abe asked. "Jews bury the next day. I know other religions allow you to wait, but we don't wait. I'm not sure why we're in such a hurry. I think it has to do with—"

"She died a few weeks ago," Barbara said. "They already had the funeral."

"Why didn't you tell us?" Susan said.

"She didn't tell us about the sister," Abe said, "why would she tell us about the funeral?"

"We only found out today," Nicky said.

"You weren't close?" Abe said.

"We were very close. A long time ago, we were very close." Nicky filled her wine glass and started circling the living room. "Carol-Ann moved to California before I moved here and we haven't been in touch since."

"Is she older or younger?" Susan asked

"Three years older."

"Was she one of those sixties flower power, summer of love, going to California hippies?" Abe asked.

"Not even close," Nicky said. "In fact, the exact opposite."

"Is there anyone else we don't know about?" Susan said. "Another sister? A brother?" Susan asked, looking at Barbara.

"That's everyone," Barbara said. "Just Nicky and Carol-Ann."

"Does this have anything to do with Paul's father?" Susan asked.

"What do you know about Paul's father?" Abe said.

"Nothing," Susan said. "That's why I'm asking."

"I thought we weren't allowed to talk about that," he said.

Nicky drank some wine. "This has nothing to do with Paul."

Susan followed Nicky around the room. "I don't understand. You were afraid to tell your best friend that you have a sister you weren't speaking to? Someone in my family is always not speaking to someone else. Most of the time they don't even remember why so they just start talking again."

"It wasn't important," Nicky said.

"It rarely is. But then why did you hide it?" Susan asked.

"I didn't hide it," Nicky said. "It just never came up."

"How would it come up if you didn't bring it up?" Susan stopped pacing. "You know, I always pictured you growing up all alone, just you and your dad surrounded by hundreds of acres of nothing but corn. So sad. But you weren't alone. You had a sister."

"And cows," Nicky said, standing and turning toward the kitchen. "And a few pigs, a couple of dogs."

"I'm not laughing," Susan said.

"Okay, but for now can we just sit down and eat? I spent a lot of time cooking and I'm expecting everyone to spend a lot of time eating."

"Don't worry. All this talk is making me hungry," Abe said.

"You knew?" Susan said to Barbara.

"It wasn't my place," Barbara said.

"At least she told you."

"I met her," Barbara said. "Several times."

"Is that why they stopped talking?" Susan said. "Because you and Nicky were together?"

"You need to ask Nicky."

"If you all don't come to the table this minute," Nicky called, "I'm going to get angry."

"Let's not upset her," Abe said. "She's had a rough day and I'm hungry."

Over dinner, Nicky drank more wine than usual. Drank enough so that she was willing to answer Susan and Abe's questions and enough so that she was willing to leave the dishes in the sink and go right to bed. She dreamt continuously but could not remember anything. She woke up thinking about pie, blackberry pie. The one the bake sale ladies requested, the potluck planners hinted at, and dinner guests hoped for. She still used her mother's recipe, except that she had to—reluctantly—substitute local berries for those Virginia berries. Nicky insisted that the pies made with substitute berries were never the same. When she couldn't get back to sleep, she dragged herself out of bed and showered and dressed. She tried not to wake Barbara.

"Where are you going?"

"I have my annual checkup."

"Want me to make you breakfast before you go?" Barbara sat up in bed and put her glasses on.

"You want to make breakfast?"

"Sure."

Nicky came over to the bed, leaned over, and gave Barbara a kiss. "That's sweet, but I'm not hungry."

"Call me after your appointment."

"I will."

"I love you," Barbara said.

"I love you too." Nicky stopped by the bedroom door and turned back to Barbara. "You were going to make breakfast?"

"Sure. I still can."

"What were you going to make?"

"Make? Oh, cereal. Toast maybe," Barbara said. "Coffee and leftover pie. Definitely pie."



Nicky sat on the exam table and ran her hands over her chest where her breasts once were. Breasts she had willingly given up to keep on hanging on, to improve her chances of sticking around and see who Paul would become—simple as that. She was buttoning her shirt when the doctor returned.

“Everything looks fine,” Dr. Hirsch said, holding her EKG. “I’ll have the results from the other tests in a few days and go over them. If you don’t hear from me in a week, then you know the results were all normal.”

“I want you to call me either way,” Nicky said.

“Sure.” Dr. Hirsch stopped writing and looked up at Nicky. “Is something bothering you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Because there’s really nothing to be concerned about. Your tests have been coming back clear for several years. You’re in great shape.”

“Maybe just lucky,” Nicky said.

“Nothing wrong with lucky. I have a feeling you’ve made a lot of luck for yourself.”

“Like getting cancer?”

“How’s Barbara?” Dr. Hirsch asked.

“Fine.”

“And Paul?”

“Paul’s in his first year of college, having a good time,” Nicky said.

“That’s what he should be doing. Will he be home for Thanksgiving?”

“Sure. I know that’s not what you’re asking. Don’t worry, I’m fine,” Nicky said. “We’re all fine. I’m just nervous about the tests. But thanks.” Nicky hopped off the table. “I’m good.” She grabbed her jacket and slipped it on.

“Okay. But if you need anything, call me. Anytime.” Dr. Hirsch put his hand on Nicky’s shoulder and opened the office door. “Say hi to Barbara.”



Sitting there in the parking lot not listening to the rain as it tapped on the roof of her car, Nicky didn't want to go home. The hood was turning the drops of rain into steam. The radio was tuned to the local college station and the DJ was playing requests. The next song was going out to Lucy, but Nicky wasn't listening. Instead, while she waited for the windshield to defog, she was composing a letter to Carol-Ann. A letter she had once started but never finished, a letter she had so deeply tucked away, so thoroughly forgot, that she might have believed it never existed.

Nicky leaned over and placed her right elbow on the passenger seat. With her left hand she opened the glove compartment and took out the envelope from California. From inside the envelope she removed the photograph of her sister that Claire had sent with the news. Nicky held the photograph against her cheek for several moments before sliding it onto her lips. When she pulled it away, she traced Carol-Ann's face with her forefinger. She looked great. Claire, now a mother of three, took the picture shortly before Carol-Ann died. Claire didn't question Nicky about the past, didn't ask her to explain all those years of not seeing, not speaking to, not hearing from. She just thought that Nicky, her Aunt Nicky, would want to know.

Nicky sat back up. She crushed the photograph and threw it onto the passenger side floor. I'm alone now. No parents, no sister. Just me. Even through all those years of not speaking to Carol-Ann, I always felt like the younger sister, the baby of the family. But now there's only me. Carol-Ann and I buried our mother together, and later we buried our father. But I wasn't there when Carol-Ann was buried, and she won't be there when it's my turn.

The windshield cleared and Nicky turned on the wipers, pressed down the clutch, eased her car out of its parking spot, and headed for the Quaker Meeting House to cover her shift with the latest family being given asylum. Nicky wasn't a Quaker, but she had taught herself Spanish and after Paul's eighteenth birthday had felt the freedom and the need to take risks.

Nicky spent all her time with Sonia, who already missed her home. Sure, she was grateful to get out safely with all her children,

but she prayed she would get back home some day before she changed so much that she would feel like a stranger in her own land, before her children turned into Norte Americanos. The one inside, Sonia said, she would not even be born on Salvadoran soil. Losing your country, your land, Sonia said, was like losing a limb.



On her way home, Nicky pulled into a gas station and convenience store. While her tank was being filled, she went inside and bought a large cup of black coffee, a *Medford Gazette*, a *New York Times*, and a large bag of peanuts. She tucked the papers underneath her arm and returned to her car. As she took that first hot sip of coffee, the sun poked through the drizzle and Nicky could see a piece of a rainbow. She maneuvered onto the highway and listened to a report on the public radio station describing the dedication of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. The ceremony was a homecoming for some veterans and families, while others had decided to boycott the event because they were unhappy with the design. More than one veteran said that he hoped the memorial would help the nation move on while not allowing it to forget. Remember but not relive, Nicky thought. Her family had been to many Passover Seders at Susan and Abe's house, and she was always struck that the text instructed Jews to remember being enslaved, but not relive the experience. Could the Vietnam Vets do the same? Can I do that with Carol-Ann?

Nicky was driving on automatic. Muscle memory was directing the car while her mind replayed scenes of her and Carol-Ann together. Their father loved to ask: What is life without regret? He waited, but they never answered. Better, he said with both certainty and finality. They were never sure if he was talking about himself or trying to save them from having any.

By the time Nicky paid any attention to the highway signs, she found herself heading south instead of north. She realized where she was going and without any thought, without any hesitation, she continued driving south, crossing into Pennsylvania. It was clear to

her that if she didn't go at that moment, she might never go home again.

Nicky had tried to find a way to avoid selling her farm. But that money allowed her to start a new life, to have some security in case Barbara backed out of the relationship. But she and Barbara lasted. Better than lasted. And while they had not set out to live a life of example, nor did they think they had, many younger women in the area had taken to tracking them down to hear their story, wanting to interview them for radio shows and articles and dissertations. Those young women—the flannel women, Barbara called them—wanted to know what it was like way back when.

“They think we’re dinosaurs,” Nicky once told Barbara.

“They think I’m a dinosaur,” Barbara said. “You? They want to sleep with you.”

After crossing the Mason-Dixon line, Nicky pulled into a Maryland rest area for something to eat. As she paid, she remembered that movie where the hero, who is on the run, gets tracked down by his credit card use. She wondered if Barbara could trace her movement south.

Nicky stopped at the cigarette machine. It took dollar bills. She fed the machine but found that the humming noise it made as it swallowed her bills and the electronic push button were far less satisfying than the sound of coins dropping and the pull of the mechanical handle she remembered from her days as a smoker. She thought about the pinball machine in the church basement that she and Carol-Ann had competed on before choir practice. She wondered if Carol-Ann’s high score still stood, or if the machine was still there, or even if the old church was still there.

Nicky looked around at her fellow travelers. Why were they there? What was their journey? How many others were on spontaneous road trips? She stuffed the cigarettes into her jacket, picked up her snacks, and headed back out on the road.

Just before eleven that night, Nicky pulled off the interstate and onto Route 212. Five minutes later, she stopped in front of an *Entering Bluefield* sign. She got out of the car and took a deep breath. She bent down and grabbed a handful of dirt, letting it sift

through her fingers as she stood back up. "I'm home," she said out loud. "And I'm hungry. And I'm talking to myself." She got back in her car and drove south on Jefferson toward Route 147 and the Bluefield Diner.



Bluefield's Main Street was brighter and a whole lot busier than Nicky remembered it. She slowed down as she passed The Squire, which was showing *E.T.*, and the ice cream shop that had a frozen yogurt sign in its window. The hardware store was gone, and in its place was a clothing store. At the intersection of Route 147, Nicky turned left and was greeted by a cluster of too many familiar fast food chains. Their full parking lots gave her pause. It's not as if Nicky expected that nothing would change. She'd have been disappointed if Main Street was exactly the same, but it occurred to her that the Bluefield Diner might no longer be in business, and that was a change she was not ready for. So as she approached the hospital with its new wing, she paid it little mind. Instead, her attention and smile were focused across the road where the familiar blue neon letters spelling out Bluefield Diner still rested on the building's roof like a beacon in the night. The diner had aged well and looked exactly the way Nicky remembered. Nicky turned the Bel Air into the parking lot that had been paved and lined and was struck by the number of imports mixed with all those pickup trucks. She found a spot and took a deep breath. I'm ready for this, she thought, getting out of the car. And if I'm not, it doesn't matter because I'm already here and I'm really hungry.

The screen door was cool to the touch as Nicky pulled it open and stepped through the portal. The original art deco had become popular again and gave the place a hip look that was unexpected. Air-conditioners had replaced the two big fans, but little else had changed since the day Nicky said a silent good-bye to her kitchen and her past. Except the people. The people were different. Black and white hospital workers in their scrubs shared several booths. High school kids were sprinkled about the diner, and some were also

in mixed groups. In fact, there might be more blacks in the diner at that moment than in all of Medford.

"Sit anywhere you like, ma'am," the woman behind the cash register said.

Nicky wondered how long she'd been standing by the door and staring. She took a seat at the counter and a cup of hot coffee was placed in front of her. Yes, she was back in Southland. She read the specials on the chalkboard and went with the dinner special: chicken with biscuits, potatoes and gravy. The menu listed blackberry pie, but they had run out.

"You got someone at the hospital?" the waitress asked as she placed the food in front of Nicky.

"No," Nicky said, trying to revive her accent that had been smoothed over by all those northern winters. She took a bite and smiled. That forkful of mashed potatoes and gravy alone made the whole trip worth it. They must be using the same recipes. Her recipes. With every bite, she felt more revived.

"How's everything?" the waitress said, returning to fill Nicky's coffee.

"Perfect."

"You see the football game? I heard it was a good game."

Nicky knew the game the waitress was playing. "Is this still Lucinda's place?"

"You're looking for Lucinda?" she asked.

"Just wondering."

"You know Lucinda?"

"Once upon. Another lifetime."

"Really? What's the connection? Family?"

"I cooked for Lucinda a long time ago," Nicky said.

"Really? Here?"

"Is she still around?"

"Well, Lucinda sold the diner about ten years ago. A couple of years ago she moved to Florida year-round."

"Florida?" Nicky said.

"With her sister. She comes up every now and then during the summer."

"The place looks great. Looks almost the same as when I worked here."

"When was that?"

"Before you were born probably," Nicky said.

"You don't look that old, and I'm not that young."

"Eighteen years."

"You worked here eighteen years ago?"

"Yeah," Nicky said.

"Nineteen sixty-four?"

"Seems like yesterday."

"You want to see the kitchen?"

"I'd love to." Nicky followed the waitress through the swinging doors and was covered by a flood of memories. "Do you know who bought the diner?"

"Yes, I do," she said. "My family."

"Really?"

"Yes. My father bought the diner from Lucinda."

"I'm glad he kept it the same," Nicky said. "Whoever does the cooking, well, the chicken is awesome."

"My sister. I'll tell her."

Nicky looked around at the pots and pans and utensils. She wandered over to the dishwashing area where a teenage boy was spraying down plates. She went over to a shelf that had books of recipes lined on it. She spotted hers and took it off the shelf.

"You're Nicky? I knew it."

Nicky looked up. "Yes, but—"

"That's your recipe book. Charlene Hunter," the waitress said, extending her hand toward Nicky as they strolled around like they were at a museum.

"Nicky," she said, taking Charlene's hand in hers. "Nicky Stewart."

Charlene tightened her grip on Nicky's hand. "And you say you worked here eighteen years ago and you left when you had a baby?"

"How do you know that?"

Charlene was still holding Nicky's hand but finally let go of it. "Hunter is my married name. My family name is Ellison."

“Ellison?”

“Yes.”

“I worked with a man named Leroy Ellison.”

“That would be my father.”

“Your father?” Nicky leaned against the side of the walk-in cooler.

“Yes. He always talked about you.”

“Is Leroy here?” Nicky said, standing up straight.

“I wish,” Charlene said. “He passed away last year.”

Nicky leaned back again and shut her eyes. “I’m sorry to hear that. I wish I hadn’t missed him.”

“Let’s go sit down,” Charlene said, leading Nicky back out of the kitchen to an empty booth. She asked one of the waitresses to bring over some coffee and a couple of slices of peach pie.

“Daddy always wondered what made you do it,” Charlene said after Nicky sat down.

“Do what?”

“Drive him.”

“I liked to drive. Still do.” Nicky knew that wasn’t enough.

“Weren’t you pregnant?”

“Thought I was about to give birth on the ride back. Turned out to be gas from the ribs I got at Bub’s over in Richmond.”

“Daddy had no idea why you took such a risk to help him,” Charlene said. “He said you offered, weren’t even asked.”

“Seemed like the right thing to do. Anyway, I owed him,” Nicky said. She was trying to absorb the fact that Leroy had come back to Bluefield and she didn’t. “I can’t believe Leroy bought the diner.”

“Why’d you owe Daddy? He never said anything. What’d he do for you?”

“He never knew it, but I owed him. I never told him that. I wish I had. I should have. He probably thought he owed me, but we were even. It’s going to sound silly,” Nicky said. “Won’t make any sense at all.”

“Doesn’t matter. Please tell me.”

“I went to the King march in nineteen sixty-three because of your father. I didn’t go with him, but something happened there that

changed my life. I'm not trying to make a hero out of him, but I drove him to say thanks. That's all. Of course, he never knew that."

"What happened?"

Here goes. "I met a guy and got pregnant."

"That's it?" Charlene asked.

"I said it seems silly now, but it was a big deal to me back then," Nicky said. "The thing is, I might never have had a child if I didn't go to the march." Nicky wanted to change the subject. "Now you tell me something. How did your father end up moving back? Wasn't it dangerous?"

"About six months after Daddy moved to New York and got settled, Mom brought us north to stay with him," Charlene said. "Anyway, he hated living up north. He used to think the north was the answer because so many black folk went up there and never came back. The thing is, he lived a Southern life in the middle of Harlem and finally, he decided that he should live that life back in the South. By nineteen seventy, it seemed like enough time had passed, enough had changed, and Daddy said he would rather take his chances back in Bluefield than in New York City."

"How'd he end up buying the diner?" Nicky said.

"Daddy worked as a cook in New York," Charlene said, "Amsterdam Avenue, close to where we lived. People up there loved his Southern cooking. Anyway, he saved up a lot of money, and when we came back, he convinced Lucinda that if she gave him a job, more black folks would start eating here and she would be able to retire sooner and sell him the diner. After he started working here, he just kept reminding her that he was going to buy her place. When all the chains started opening up along 147, Lucinda took Daddy up on his offer. Probably thought she'd lose the business eventually anyway, so may as well take his money."

"I still can't believe he came back," Nicky said. "I'd have never guessed."

"So how come you left?"

"That is either a very short or very long story. I'll just say that it wasn't easy for me to leave, but it was even harder to stay."

“There are some pictures of Daddy by the cash register,” Charlene said. “See if you recognize him.”

Charlene would not let Nicky pay for anything and insisted that she come back the next day to meet her mother and sister. Then she called ahead to the Bluefield Motel to be sure that Nicky had a room waiting for her.

Back in her car, Nicky remembered driving Carol-Ann back to the Bluefield Motel the last time they saw each other. It’s likely, Nicky realized, that Carol-Ann had returned to Bluefield with her family more than once over the years. Probably ate right there in the diner.

Nicky checked in, got the key, and opened the room. She had no luggage to carry in and nothing to change into. After collapsing on the bed, she took off her clothes and aired them out for the next day. She ran the bath and pulled the phone close to the tub. Time to phone home.

CHAPTER EIGHT

1982

Barbara finished up with her patient and checked in with her receptionist. She hadn't heard from Nicky all day and was hoping to meet her in town for dinner.

"Still no messages," the receptionist told Barbara.

"Could you try my house again?" Barbara said, heading back to an exam room. I'm getting Nicky a beeper. I don't care how much she objects. I'll tell her it's so Paul can get in touch with her anytime. She'll go for that.

There was still no word from Nicky when Barbara left the office, and when she pulled into her driveway, Nicky's car wasn't there. At that moment, she was less concerned than annoyed. Since Paul had left for college, Nicky didn't stick around the house waiting on Barbara's return. But it was Friday night, and plan or no plan, it was unusual for them not to spend it together. By nine, Barbara had eaten enough leftovers, read enough newspaper, drank enough wine, and watched enough TV. By nine, it was time to worry. She dialed Susan.

"Have you heard from Nicky this evening?" Barbara asked.

"Not me," Abe said. "Let me get Susan."

"I haven't spoken to her all day," Susan said. "Is everything okay?"

"I don't know where she is. She left this morning for a doctor's appointment," Barbara said. "Maybe she had a meeting, but it's not on the calendar."

"Could she be with the sanctuary family?" Susan asked.

"When she's with the Salvadorans, she doesn't put them on the calendar, but she writes something down. There's nothing. I think this has to do with Carol-Ann."

"You sound awful," Susan said. "I'll be right over."

"I'm fine."

"I'm coming over."

By eleven o'clock, Susan had put up a fresh pot of coffee, and had called the state and local police, and the emergency room. Barbara was glad not to have gotten any leads but was still frustrated, nervous, and angry at Nicky's disappearance. She sat at the kitchen table picking at the marble cake Susan brought over. She was showing Susan pictures of Carol-Ann.

"Did you speak to Paul tonight?" Susan said. "Maybe Nicky called him."

"I'll try him," Barbara said, heading for the phone. "It's Friday night and he's in college," she said, as his phone rang several times. "There's no answer."

Susan yawned.

"Go home, Susan," Barbara said. "Get some sleep. I'll call if anything comes up. Nicky's probably out driving around trying to figure out how to deal with Carol-Ann's death. She can drive endlessly without looking at the time."

"I'm sure Nicky's fine," Susan said. "It's you I'm worried about." Susan gave Barbara a hug.

"Me?"

"You have to promise to call me as soon as you hear something." Susan turned to leave. "You have to promise to wake me or I won't be able to sleep."

Barbara lay down on the couch and drifted off to sleep during Johnny Carson's monologue. A few minutes later, she was jolted awake by the phone's ring. Her brain raced to orient itself like she had trained it to do. Her adrenaline kicked right in, her pulse

quicken, and she remembered Nicky. Her hands shook as she lifted the receiver.

"It's me," Nicky said softly.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Where are you? I've been worried sick. I tried all the hospitals and the state police. I called the Meeting House. I didn't know if you were arrested or lying unconscious in a ditch somewhere?"

"Why is it always a ditch?" Nicky said.

"I added arrested."

"I'm in Bluefield."

"Where?"

"Virginia?" Nicky said.

"Now that hadn't occurred to me."

"Me neither. I was driving home from my doctor's appointment. I wasn't paying much attention, just driving. I must have got on Eighty-one heading south instead of north. I drove for an hour before I even noticed. That's when I realized where I was going and I knew I had to just keep driving."

"Why didn't you call?" Barbara said.

"You would have made me stop. Or I would have stopped myself. I don't know. But I knew if I called I wouldn't go, and I didn't want to turn back."

"You've been gone for twelve hours."

"Yeah, I made good time. The Chevy was great," Nicky said.

"I meant you could have called sooner."

"I know and I'm sorry."

"What are you going to do in Bluefield?" Barbara said.

"I have no idea," Nicky said. "See things. See what's happened around here. Maybe you'll come down here too?"

"I most certainly am coming down to get you," Barbara said.

"To be with me. Not get me."

"I can't believe you're in Virginia."

"I had a wonderful ride," Nicky said. "I had so much time to think about things. I bought a pack of cigarettes in Maryland."

"You what?"

“Not to smoke. I just bought them. I think it was because I always had them with me here. The cigarettes reminded me of how much has happened since I moved away. I left the pack on the counter at a road stop before I pulled into town. They’re very expensive now, you know?” Nicky stood and stretched the phone as far as it would reach. She let the water drip off as she spoke.

“Don’t do anything till I get there.”

“What would I do?” Nicky stepped out of the tub and dried herself.

“I don’t know what you would do, but you just drove to Bluefield on an impulse so I’m just saying don’t do anything else till I get there.”

“I love it when you worry about me. Have I ever told you that?”

“All the time. What about Paul?”

“He’s not here.”

“Funny.”

“He’s in school. Don’t bother him. He’s busy with classes.”

“Yeah. Okay,” Barbara said. “As soon as I hang up with you I’m calling him. He will want to come with me.”

“I’m not in the mood to argue.”

“Nor are you in the position to.”

“Did I tell you how beautiful it is here? I have the windows open. It’s November.” Nicky carried the phone back to the bed where she got under the covers.

“Are you really okay, Nicky?” Barbara said.

“I’m better than okay. A little tired though,” she said, pulling the cover over her shoulders. “On the way down I kept thinking that the sun is always shining. It’s always shining. We still talk about sunsets and sunrises even when we know better. Sometimes I forget. I guess I stop paying attention and then I forget that the sun is always shining. But I love you. I never forget that.”

“I love you too, Nicky,” Barbara said. “I’ll call you in the morning.”

Nicky fell right to sleep. An old dream came back to her like some late night rerun. In it, Leroy was being chased by an angry crowd, and no matter how hard she tried, she could not reach him.

She'd had that dream for weeks after she gave Leroy a ride out of Bluefield. It didn't matter that she knew Leroy was safe, that she'd brought him to Richmond herself. The dream had frightened her so that she remained always on her guard, and the fear stayed with her during waking hours, and daytime too became full of bad dreams. Barbara had said it was triggered by hormones, and she might have been right because as soon as Nicky gave birth, the dream stopped and never came back. Until now.



By the time Barbara got off the phone with Nicky, she was calm. She had wanted Nicky to have a stronger reaction to Carol-Ann's death, and this was something. Maybe a bit more dramatic than she had hoped for, but Nicky had to make her peace with Carol-Ann, with Bluefield, with herself, and maybe a return to Virginia would speed up the healing. In fact, Barbara now wished she'd been the one to suggest going to Bluefield. But if it had been my idea, she thought, Nicky probably would not have gone. Nicky was more comfortable just driving off than planning. Feeling wide awake, Barbara called Susan. It was late, but she promised.

"She's in Bluefield, Susan."

"Where?"

"Bluefield, Virginia. Where she grew up."

"And she's okay?" Susan asked.

"Yes. I'm going to go down there tomorrow."

"It sounds like Nicky needs a sort of homecoming, and she should have her whole family there with her. You should bring Paul."

"I'm going to call him when I hang up with you. He'll want to come."

"She went back because of her sister?"

"We moved here because her sister wanted to take Paul away from her, wanted to adopt him. That's why Nicky stopped talking to Carol-Ann, and that's why we never returned to Virginia. Not even for a visit."

"Does Paul know about this?"

“None of it. It’s time for Nicky to tell him. If she won’t, I will. This has gone on long enough.”

“I wish I could come with you.”

Barbara replaced the phone in its cradle. It was late and she decided to wait and call Paul in the morning. She went into her study and checked her commitments for the rest of the week. She called the airlines. Flying wasn’t going to be convenient so she would drive. Paul might miss some classes, but she didn’t care if he missed the whole semester. Barbara didn’t like anyone to cover for her and had never left the office with such little notice. It made her nervous to skip out on her commitments, as if everything she had worked for would unravel. Being responsible for the family’s economic well-being drove her. She never wanted Paul to feel like he was going it alone the way she had.

Wide-awake now, the road trip was quickly growing on Barbara. Yes, she would let Paul sleep and then he would do most of the driving. He took to driving the way Nicky had. The return to Bluefield, she realized, meant that she too would finally come to terms with having been run out of town. And Paul would at last make his journey home. If it was his home simply by having been born there. But wasn’t it more than just his birth? It was his lineage, his heritage, his legacy. He left Bluefield when he was just three months old, but the Stewarts had been farming there for over two hundred years. Nicky had put Paul to bed with stories about the family farm, the pond, the barns, the fields of silage corn, the hogs. She told him about Andy’s garage, and Lucinda’s diner where you could always, always find a piece of blackberry pie. But why, why do I think Bluefield is his home? Isn’t Medford his home?

Later, after a few hours of sleep, and with the sunrise shining through her study window, she dialed Paul. On the twelfth ring Barbara heard the receiver being lifted. “Paul,” Barbara said.

“Barbara?”

Barbara heard a woman’s voice complain about the time.

“It’s Saturday,” Paul said.

“I know. I need to talk to you.”

“Okay,” Paul whispered into the phone. “Talk.”

“Did Mom call you last night?”

“She didn’t. What’s going on, Barbara?”

“Your mom drove to Virginia.”

“Virginia?” Paul said loudly.

“Yes.”

“Where she grew up?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“That’s the part I was hoping she told you.”

“Well, she didn’t, so you need to. Did you have a fight?”

“Is everything all right?” Barbara heard a woman’s voice ask.

“Who’s that with you?” Barbara asked. “If she’s in your room this early then you might want to introduce us.”

“What’s going on?” he asked Barbara.

“This is going to sound confusing.”

“Going to?”

Barbara paused for a moment. “Her sister died.”

“Died? What sister?”

“Mom’s sister. Her name is Carol-Ann,” Barbara said. “She was three years older than your mom and she lived in California.”

“Mom has a sister and you’re just telling me now. And you’re only telling me because she died?”

“I can’t believe she left this for me,” Barbara said.

“That’s not the issue, Barbara.”

“You’re right. Okay. Your mom and Carol-Ann haven’t spoken in many years, and then on Saturday we got a letter from one of her kids, Claire. She’s your cousin. She’s maybe ten years older than you. Anyway, she wrote to tell us that her mom died and that she thought Nicky and I would want to know.”

“You knew her?” Paul asked.

“I met her a couple of times, many years ago.”

“I have an aunt that no one told me about, and she died. And I have a cousin? And Mom took off for Virginia,” Paul said. “Anything else? Anyone else I should know about? This seems like a good time to tell all.”

"There are more cousins. Carol-Ann had three girls the last time we saw them."

"When was that?"

"Before we moved to Medford. Carol-Ann and Richard and their family came to Bluefield to see you after you were born."

"They met me?"

"You were about a week old."

"So why is Mom in Virginia?" Paul said. "You said Carol-Ann lived in California. Are they burying her in Bluefield?"

"No. We missed the funeral," Barbara said. "Truthfully, I'm not sure why she's in Virginia, but I'm going down there to get her."

"I'm coming with you."

"You don't have to."

"Have to? Funny," Paul said. "And miss seeing Bluefield, the land of the Stewart legends. No way."

"Good. I was hoping you'd want to come."

"Then why didn't you ask?" Paul said. "Is there anyone else I should know about before I shower?"

"That's it."

"What about my father? What does this have to do with him?"

"I don't know," Barbara said.

"Was Mom going to tell me about Carol-Ann?"

"I don't know," Barbara said.

"Why didn't they talk?"

"Your mom should answer that."

"She will, but you get to tell me your version," Paul said. "Because the timing of all this points to having something to do with me."

"Give her a chance," Barbara said. "She took the news about Carol-Ann hard. I'm worried about her."

"I'm sure she's fine. Mom's tough."

"Anyway, you have to catch a bus soon so we can start driving."

"Okay."

"Bring your friend," Barbara said. "Road trip."

"Good-bye, Barbara."

"Bring her."

Barbara remained at her desk for several minutes. When she finally stood up, she put down the phone and went to the bedroom where she changed into a cotton turtleneck and running shorts. She double knotted her sneakers, slipped out of the house and into the cool, crisp autumn air, and began to run under the cloudless sky. At the end of her street she turned left toward Center Road. Crossing the bridge, she glanced briefly at the dam below. Most trees along these familiar miles had shed their leaves—except for those stubborn oaks. Always the last to let go. Houses, set back from the road and hidden by the foliage since spring, were once again exposed.

Barbara's muscles were now warmed and loose and she picked up her pace. Her legs felt strong, almost springy, as they carried her along the route. As she settled into a familiar rhythm, her breathing became steady, her arms swung purposefully, each trained to stay on their own side of her belly button as she ran, and her mind began to clear.

Barbara got Paul into running. She started out going for walks to relieve the stress of work but quickly found it too slow and turned to running. At first, Paul rode his bike alongside her as she ran, but after a while, he abandoned the bike and ran with her. She liked the time they spent together and their routes steadily grew longer. She discovered the ability to maintain her pace over long distances and entered a marathon. A successful first try led to more training and more marathons. Last year when she turned fifty, she won her age group. Paul ran the whole race alongside her.

At the steep hill on South Street, Barbara's legs automatically shortened their stride, her arms exaggerated their motion, appearing as if they were pulling her. Up ahead, a woman raking leaves onto a tarp looked up, nodded, and continued raking. Barbara lengthened her stride as she started to come down the other side of that hill.

Barbara turned left by the cemetery. Carol-Ann was buried somewhere in California. Where will Nicky and I be buried? Near our house in Medford? Nicky's family, the Stewarts, have been burying their dead in Bluefield for over two hundred years. My family is all over Ohio. All these unconnected gravestones are a

little like littering, she thought. It's why cremation intrigued her. But she was scared of fire.

"Good run?" Susan called from her driveway as Barbara approached her house.

"Yeah. It's going to be a good day."

"Call me from Virginia."

Once back inside, Barbara peeled off her wet clothing and stepped in the shower.

CHAPTER NINE

1982

Nicky wiped sweat from her brow and reached for the phone that kept ringing and ringing. Shaken from her sleep, she sat up and looked around the room, needing to orient herself.

“How’d you sleep?” Barbara said.

“What time is it?”

“Eight. Sorry. I wanted to catch you.”

“I was having a nightmare,” Nicky said. She swung her legs out of bed. “Remember the one I used to have before Paul was born? The one about Leroy, the one where he gets lynched and I can’t stop them?”

“I remember,” Barbara said. “It went away after Paul was born.”

“I was too tired to tell you last night or this morning or whenever it was that we talked.” Nicky lay back down and pulled the white sheet up to her neck. “I met his daughter.”

“Whose daughter?”

“Leroy. He came back to Bluefield and ended up buying the diner from Lucinda.”

“And you saw him last night?”

“No. He died last year, but his daughter runs the diner and she was there last night.”

“That’s wild,” Barbara said.

"She knew my name, Barbara. Knew who I was. His whole family knows that I drove him to Richmond."

"That's wonderful."

"Leroy came back." Nicky pushed her hands through her hair. Why had this dream, this nightmare come back? Why now and why here, knowing that Leroy had come back, had died happily?

"Are you planning to let this eat at you?" Barbara said. "Leroy got to return, but you didn't? Or maybe you could, but you wouldn't?"

"I'm thinking about letting it."

"I'm driving down today with Paul. He's catching a bus home and then we're going to drive down together."

"Let Paul drive."

"We won't be that late. Maybe around nine? That will give you all day to poke around on your own," Barbara said. "I'm bringing you clothes."

"That will be nice."

"Get Paul his own room."

"His own room?"

"Yes."

"Okay," Nicky said. "Did you have something special in mind?"

"You know how I love hotels."

"You hate hotels."

"Please be there when we get there," Barbara said. "We're coming straight to the motel."

"Where else would I be?"

"Do you need anything else?" Barbara said.

"I need everything."



Nicky managed to fall back to sleep, and this time when she awoke, she felt rested. Outside, the day was clear and warm. Nicky was anxious to show Paul where she came from. She planned to spend the day scoping out what had changed and what remained the

same. Paul's roots went down to the earth here, and it was time for him to see the places and people he sprang from. It might help him in ways neither of them knew.

Nicky showered and dressed and stopped at the mall in search of clean clothes. She couldn't start calling on people while wearing dirty clothes. She had no intention of strolling down Main Street looking like she thought it was fine to disappear for twenty years and then return without dressing for the occasion. A young woman helped her find some jeans and a sweater and Nicky picked out some underwear and socks. She felt awkward showing the cashier her New York driver's license when paying with her credit card, and even more awkward when she asked to have all the tags taken off so she could return to the dressing room and change into everything she just bought. The sweater was looser than usual, but she didn't want everyone she met to stare at her missing breasts. Not first thing anyway. At the drugstore, she had picked up a toothbrush, some hair ties, assorted makeup, and a hairbrush. Back in the mall parking lot, Nicky put her soiled clothes in the trunk and cleaned out her car and used the rearview mirror to freshen up her face. She put the Bel Air's top down, tied back her hair, and slipped her sunglasses onto her nose. Before pulling out, she tuned her radio to the college radio station, which was playing John Cougar's "Jack and Diane." Who was I when I lived here? What was I going to be?

Nicky parked along Main Street, got a cup of coffee, and strolled along the sidewalk. The five-and-dime, the hardware store, the beauty salon, and the candy store were all gone. The Jeffers family seemed to have entered the real estate business. Nicky read the listings on their large storefront window. They were pushing condominiums, both commercial and residential. She recognized one of the new condo developments as a former farm. She was hoping that was not the fate of the Stewart farm. Back in her car, she drove to the hospital where she sat in the parking lot and finished her coffee. The place was not much to look at, but it had brought Barbara to Bluefield and Paul into the world. Not a bad résumé.



Route 147 was more disturbing by daylight. The successful invasion of fast food chains and superstores had stripped the road of its Southern character. Except for the Virginia license plates, this could be anywhere in the US, and, unlike Main Street, traffic on 147 was heavy. Nicky was glad when she reached Route 212 where she turned to head out of town toward Four Corners and Andy's shop.

She pulled over almost immediately when she saw a condo development sign that read: Jeffers Place. Nicky remembered every farm that lined this road, remembered each clapboard house and shack and tobacco barn and smokehouse. She knew the Jeffers farm, yet couldn't find any connection to it as she drove through the townhouses on their newly paved streets and manicured yards.

The Jeffers had the biggest farm in the county, and they had allowed the circus to set up on their land every Labor Day weekend. Seemed like the whole town came to see it. Nicky's father would drop her and Carol-Ann at the farm where they watched the circus unpack and set up while he ran errands. On the day of the circus, they woke early and waited for their father to get up. During the ride, they rethought their strategy, reconsidered the merits of each ride, each show, and recounted their money, money earned from summer chores, money tied tightly in their handkerchiefs. Before getting out, their father pressed a few extra coins into each of their palms.

Once inside the gates, Carol-Ann and Nicky were allowed to wander by themselves; after all, they were among their own. With the long growing season and all those solitary months of tending to the crops drawing to an end, no one minded standing in line for hours with their neighbors. The wait was part of the attraction, a yearly social event for normally reticent folk. Now the condo's fitness center stood where the main tent used to set up.

She continued on her way till the traffic light that had been installed at Four Corners stopped her. Nicky smiled as she waited for the light to change. The garage was still there, though it didn't have gas pumps anymore and its sign now said: Andy's Auto Infirmary, quality maintenance and repairs for your vehicle. Across from the garage, the Four Corner's Restaurant was still there. But a general

store and a used car lot stood on what had been the empty third and fourth corners. The general store sold self-serve gas, groceries, and it also rented videos. The used car lot was called Andy's Autos. When the light turned green, Nicky pulled up to a bay and shut her engine.

A young man approached her car. "Don't see many of those around anymore," he said. He walked around the car. "You drove it all the way from New York?"

"I heard this place had the best Bel Air mechanic on the East Coast."

"We used to," he said. "But he retired."

Nicky leaned against the fender. No one was still around. Was she too late? Was this trip a mistake? "Really? You're saying I drove all the way here for nothing? We'll just have to un-retire him."

"Good luck with that. I'll want to watch this," he said.

"He's here?"

"Out back. Wait here and I'll go get him."

"You do that," Nicky said.

"Sure, ma'am," he said, and went inside the building.

Nicky saw Andy. His hair had grayed, but he still had most of it and he looked fit. He was wiping his hands on a clean rag and smiling. He looked good.

"What seems to be the problem?" Andy said, looking first at the car.

"You don't recognize one of your own cars?"

Andy looked up at Nicky. She stared back.

"Nicky?" he finally said. "Wow. Nicky Stewart?"

"How are you, Andy?" she said, extending her hand.

"I never thought I'd ever see you again." Andy pushed her hand away and gave her a big hug. Her stepped back and looked at her. "How long has it been?"

"Too long," Nicky said. "Eighteen years."

"Too long is right," Andy said. "What brings you back?"

"A visit. Figured it was time."

"It's about time is what it is," Andy said. "Are you here for a while? Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"I'd like that."

Nicky followed Andy across the road to the Four Corners Restaurant where he led her to a booth.

"Did you come alone?" Andy said.

"I'm still with Barbara if that is what you're asking."

"Sort of."

"She's coming down tonight with Paul. Paul started college this year."

"You must promise to bring them by."

"I would love for Paul to meet you." Nicky took a bite of pecan pie.

"You don't smoke anymore."

"Not by choice." Nicky crossed her arms on the table in front of her. "How about you, Andy? How did things turn out for you?"

"I married Elizabeth Sector and we have a boy and a girl. Aaron's fifteen and Emily is twelve. They're great."

"I don't remember Elizabeth."

"She was a couple of years behind us in school. She went away to college and I met her after she came back."

"The Sector name sounds familiar."

"Her father used to have a feed store in town," Andy said.

"That's right."

"She's great. You'll like her. Full of spunk. She teaches math at the junior high."

"You look good, Andy. I missed you."

"I was mad at you when you just left. Gone with the wind and never looked back. I was mad at you for not writing, not letting me know where you were, or even if you were all right. After a while, I stopped wondering, but I never understood why there was so much mystery."

"I'm not sure I understand anymore," Nicky said.

"Your sister came by a few times to see if I had heard from you." Andy speared a piece of apple pie with his fork and moved it around his plate. "I told her to let me know if she found you."

"Carol-Ann died last month."

“That’s a shame.” Andy looked up at Nicky. “Is that what brought you back?”

“No. Not exactly. The thing is though, Carol-Ann was trying to take Paul away from me,” Nicky said. “That’s why I left. I was too frightened to let anyone know where I was. After a while, covering my tracks became a habit.”

“Where’d you end up?” Andy asked.

“Medford, New York. The Finger Lakes. Nice place, nice life for me and Barbara, but it’s not here. It’s not Bluefield. Carol-Ann took that away.”

“The truth is, it was more than Carol-Ann who would have made things hard for you and Barbara around here back then. Things have changed now, but it would have been rough. People were talking. I’m not saying you didn’t have friends who would have stood by you. I’m just saying it might have turned out easier up north. Especially for Paul.”

“Anyway, that’s all over. I missed this place. Didn’t know how much till I got back, but I did. And I missed you. I never had another friend like you. I made friends, good friends, but they never knew who I was and where I came from.”

“Seems like things worked out for you. Don’t feel bad. We all do what we need to do, and you needed to move. Regrets are a waste of time.”

“Show me your shop,” Nicky said.

Andy paid for the food and they crossed the road back to the station. “Did you see the new name? The Auto Infirmary. Your idea.”

“That’s right!” Nicky said. “I completely forgot.”

“Well, I thank you for that one. I own the general store across the street. Opened it before some chain decided to put me out of business. Liz’s brother runs it with me. That’s why I moved the pumps. And I sell used cars out of the fourth lot. It’s a family corner here. I’ve become a manager.”

“Town has certainly changed a lot,” Nicky said.

“Been out to your old house yet?”

“That’s next.”

“Mr. Jamison died in seventy-four. He made a lot of money selling pork to the army during Vietnam. His grandson, Emmett, took over the farm and is making a go of it. Emmett’s living in your old house. He’s a good kid. It’s tougher on farmers these days with all the real estate crap going on, but he’s sticking with it. The Jeffers are into real estate big time. Old Man Jeffers talked me into buying up the other corners back in seventy-two before the boom. It protected me from the developers. He looked out for me. But his kids don’t give a damn about the town. They don’t care what goes up or where. It’s all money to them.”

“You getting political in your old age, Andy?”

“It’s just that I got kids and I’d like it if they got to stay around here when they get older. I’d hope they could afford to buy a house in the town they grew up in.”

“It’s really good to see you again.”

“You want company out to your old house?”

“I better do this one myself.”

“Where are you staying?” he asked.

“Bluefield Motel.”

“You’ve got to come for dinner while you’re here. Meet Liz and the kids. Tomorrow night, when Paul and Barbara are here. Don’t even think about it, because I won’t take no,” Andy said. He wrote down his home phone number. “I’ll call you over at the motel.”



The road narrowed to two lanes and then the yellow lines disappeared. Fewer and fewer houses interrupted the landscape, and the dirt became visible again. Along this part of the road, the old houses had been kept up and few new ones had been built. Nicky eased up on the gas and drifted onto the shoulder where she sat and looked across the road at her old house. A woman was on the front porch holding a baby in her arms. At the same time, she was watching a small child ride his three-wheeler. Around the house, swings, bikes, an assortment of brightly colored plastic toys stood side-by-side with farming equipment. There was still a garden in the

same spot that Nicky had worked. Someone, probably Emmett, was out in the fields turning the corn under. He would be just a few years older than Paul.

What am I looking for, Nicky thought. This is not my home anymore. If I go inside, I'll only see these people's life and then that is how I'll remember the farm. Was I expecting to find Carol-Ann here? Some sparked memory? Some revelation? Is this my way of getting her back? Or back at her?

As a young girl, Nicky always had one of her mother's things with her. She held them to her nose, squeezed and rubbed them with her hands, put them under her pillow, carried them in her pockets. Later, as she grew older, she'd stand by a window in her house and think, this is what my Mom saw. Nicky first took to cooking to try to feel like her mother. She used her mother's pots, pans, utensils and tried to feel her mother in them. Her mother had cured the cast-iron pans, had rubbed oil in them and heated them. The pans lasted longer than her mother who was consumed by unrestrained cancer cells before Nicky turned two.

Carol-Ann looked a lot like their mother, while Nicky had more of their father's features. Maybe that was why Carol-Ann took the role of big sister so seriously. It took Nicky a lot of years to realize that losing their mother probably was harder on Carol-Ann because Carol-Ann knew her, remembered her, had witnessed the decline. Her loss was real because she had something to lose.

"There's nothing here," Nicky said out loud. She turned on the engine, turned the car around, and headed back to town.

Bluefield was different and the same. She was different and the same. What had she expected? That everyone would be waiting for her? She lost her mother, father, sister, home, land, and community. Leroy came back, and found what? In the end, she thought, it's not what you do or where you live, it's who you choose to do life with. What Nicky did, she did with Barbara and Paul, and for that, she had no regrets. For that, she had only gratitude.

Nicky had dinner at the diner and met the rest of Leroy's family. They exchanged Leroy stories. Seeing that she was exhausted, Charlene packed a cooler with food and paper goods for Nicky to

take back to the hotel for Paul and Barbara. Ribs, slaw and sauce, fried chicken, green onions, corn fritters, corn bread, bread pudding, candied yams, sweet potato pie, baked beans in molasses, scones, and blackberry pie. The essentials.

Her motel phone flashed and she listened to her message: Hello from Delaware. Nicky set the small table in her room, undressed, showered, and got dressed again. She lay on the bed, flipped through the channels on the television, turned the pages of some magazines, and fell asleep while her family made its way south.

CHAPTER TEN

1982

Hatless and with both hands shoved deep into the pockets of her black leather jacket, Barbara leaned against the brick building that housed the combination bus station and doughnut shop. Her sunglasses rested on her head, pushing back her hair and showing off those turquoise earrings Nicky had bought for her on their trip to Four Corners last summer. Barbara became increasingly drawn to southwest landscape and its expanse, which gave her a feeling of letting go. It was as if she had been cured of a claustrophobia she didn't know she had. A claustrophobia caused by the denseness of all those houses, trees, valleys, and mountains that seemed to reflect everything back, to hold everything in.

On the way to the Albuquerque airport to catch their flight home, Barbara thought about what was keeping her in Medford. What and who she would miss.

"I want to retire here," she told Nicky. "Or at least visit again."

"It's magical," Nicky said.

"Paul's going off to college. Maybe it's time for us to go off somewhere too."

"I love Medford," Nicky said.

"I'm ready for something new, something different," Barbara said. "I don't want to do the same thing till I die."

"We have a great community, we have great neighbors, great friends. And we just moved there."

"It's been eighteen years."

"I'm just getting over leaving Virginia. I can't go through that again, not yet."

"Really? Eighteen years."

"Is this some sort of mid-life crisis?"

"I'm way past the middle."

"But you know everyone in town and everyone knows you. Do you really want to have to start all over?"

"The only reason people know me is because I've treated them or their kids," Barbara said. "They're not my friends. Our real friends are your friends and I just tag along."

"Paul still needs a home. What if he wants to come back to Medford after he graduates?"

"This isn't about Paul. It's about us. And there's no way he stays in Medford. It was a great place for him to grow up, but there's nothing for him there."

Barbara looked at her watch and adjusted her sunglasses. The bus was due to arrive at any moment. She and Nicky made plans to return to the west that winter for a longer stay. She wondered how this trip to Virginia would affect that plan.

"Hey, Dr. Phillips," a man called.

Barbara straightened up. "Hello, Jim. How are you?"

"Fine. Fine. Just getting some doughnuts for the guys at work," he said, showing Barbara the bag.

"How are the kids?"

"Katie'll be getting married after Christmas and James, Jr. is expecting his second. Seems like I was just bringing them in to have you check their ears. Sure goes by fast."

"You say hi from me," Barbara said. Few people asked Barbara about Paul.

"Nice to see you, Doc," Jim said.

Barbara heard the bus before she saw it. She watched it make the wide turn in front of the station, its air brakes hissing as it came to a stop. The driver opened the door and came out while Barbara watched Paul walk down the aisle. She couldn't help thinking what a good-looking young man he had become.

“What did Mom say?” Paul asked as he gave Barbara a kiss.

“How was the ride?” she asked, noticing that the young woman following Paul out of the bus was now standing behind him. “You brought your friend?”

“Yes,” Paul said.

“Where are your manners? Introduce us.”

“Barbara, this is Rebecca. Rebecca, this is Barbara.”

“Hello, Rebecca,” Barbara said. “You were with Paul this morning when I called?”

“Yes, Dr. Phillips, I was there. Thanks for inviting me.”

“Call me Barbara,” she said, extending her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Barbara,” Paul interrupted, “what did Mom say?”

“She’s spending the day in Bluefield.” Barbara stopped in front of her black Jeep and handed Paul the keys. “You drive.”

“You got a new Jeep?” Paul said. “Cool. You didn’t tell me.”

Barbara turned to Rebecca. “Paul told you what’s going on?”

“Sort of.”

“That sounds right. He’s just like his mom that way,” Barbara said. “I’m guessing, at least hoping, he did tell you that we’re on our way to Virginia to meet his mom and that we might be gone for several days.”

“That much I know,” Rebecca said.

“Okay,” Barbara said. “And you are welcome to join us. You’d be my guest of course. In fact, I hope that you came along because you intend to come along.”

“I’d love to join you.”

“Wonderful,” Barbara said. “Let’s go.”

Barbara went over the route with Paul and then settled in for the ride. As Paul made his way through town toward the interstate, Barbara pointed out some of the local landmarks of Paul’s youth. As they left the landmarks and approached the on-ramp, Barbara turned to face Rebecca in the backseat. “If you don’t mind me asking, how did you and Paul meet?”

“We met at a planning meeting for next summer’s twentieth anniversary of the King march on Washington.”

“Really?”

“We spent a lot of time together working and then I missed a meeting and Paul called me to find out if I was okay. It was very sweet. I told him I had a wicked cold, and he brought me over some soup.”

“Soup?” Barbara said.

“I got it at the cafeteria,” Paul said.

“It was very romantic,” Rebecca said.

“Very nice,” Barbara said to Paul.

“It was so sweet,” Rebecca said, leaning forward and putting her arm around Paul.

“Thank you,” he said.

“He’s actually a good cook,” Barbara said. “His mother made sure of it. She’s pretty good herself.”

“I do know that he’s a good cook,” Rebecca said. “I can’t cook at all.”

“It’s true,” Paul said.

As they passed through Pennsylvania, Barbara was thinking how they were following the same route that Nicky had taken. It was like they were on her trail. When Paul pulled the car into a rest area, Barbara followed Rebecca into the women’s room.

“You know, Rebecca, when I met Nicky, she was cooking at the Bluefield Diner,” Barbara said. “She had quite a following. Kind of a local celebrity. We’ll take you there.”

Rebecca looked as if she were about to speak. But she just looked at Barbara.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m a bit puzzled. You said you met Nicky?” Rebecca said. “I thought you two were related.”

Barbara didn’t answer right away. “Let’s finish this in the car.”

They used the rest rooms, picked up snacks and coffee, and returned to the car. Barbara decided to drive for a while. She told Rebecca to sit in front with her.

“What did you two talk about?” Paul said when he was delegated to the backseat.

“Exactly what has Paul told you about Nicky and me?”

“Do I get to be part of this conversation?” Paul said.

“You want to answer?” Barbara said.

“That’s okay. I’ll just listen.”

“Well, he said you’re a doctor and his mom gets involved in a lot of causes,” Rebecca said. “And he calls you Aunt Barbara. That’s it. He’s either very private or very secretive. We don’t have secrets in my family. Not real ones. I mean, we try, but we’re lousy at it. No one can keep a secret. If you don’t want to tell someone in the family something directly, you just tell someone else and tell them it’s a secret and you can be sure that they will find out. I think it’s healthy.”

“So Paul told you I’m his aunt?”

“I never told her that,” Paul said, “I just call you that. What she thinks is her business.”

“See what I have to put up with?” Rebecca said. “But he’s so cute.”

“Don’t forget that,” Paul said, leaning back in his seat.

“Well,” Barbara said, “I’m Paul’s mom,”

“Then who is Nicky?” Rebecca said.

“She’s also his mom.”

“Then you’re not really his aunt?” Rebecca said.

“No.”

“So you and Nicky are lesbians?”

“Yes.”

Rebecca laughed. “And that’s why Paul didn’t want me to meet you and Nicky,” she said.

“Is that true, Paul?” Barbara said.

“No. We just met,” Paul said. “So it wasn’t that I thought it’s too early to meet the lesbians, but I did think that it was too early to meet the family.”

“All the time I thought Paul was ashamed of me,” Rebecca said. “Or that maybe he was protecting me because his mom didn’t like Jews or who knows what, and all along it’s not me it’s him.”

“Here we go,” Paul said to no one in particular.

“This is great. It’s not me.” Rebecca turned to face Paul in the backseat.

“Remember, you said I was cute.”

“Did you know I almost got a nose job when I was fourteen,” she said.

“No, I did not,” Paul said. “See, there are a lot of things we haven’t told each other yet. That’s what I was saying.”

“Yeah, okay. Anyway, I was fourteen.”

“Why were you going to do it?” Paul said.

“I wanted the nose that drove the boys wild, made teachers notice you, got good service at restaurants, was offered the good job. I wanted the nose that America was after.”

“What stopped you?” Paul said. “Not that there’s anything wrong with your nose. I love your nose.”

“What did your parents say?” Barbara asked.

“They were okay either way. Everyone in the neighborhood was having it done.”

“But you decided not to?” Barbara said.

“I almost did it. I don’t know what happened. I was looking at pictures of noses. Perfect noses. And I realized that they didn’t go with my face. It took me a while, but I like my nose now,” Rebecca said. “I’m okay with the way I look. I no longer think my ears are too small, my lips too big. I don’t mind that my hair measures humidity,” Rebecca said. “Well, the hair thing, that’s not true. I hate that.”

“I know that this is one of your riddles and I’m not getting it,” Paul said. “I need a clue.”

“Things are never as bad as you imagine they will be. They never are.”

“Never?” Paul said.

“Almost never.”

“Which one of us were you afraid of?” Barbara asked Paul.

“Look, I never told her anything that wasn’t true,” Paul said. “I just didn’t get to some stories. I mean we just met. We weren’t really up to exchanging family genealogy.”

“When did I become genealogy?” Barbara said.

“Come on, Barbara. Didn’t I bring Rebecca with me?”

“I’ll give you some credit for that. She’s made the ride more interesting.”

Paul leaned forward and put his arms around Rebecca.

"You're not done explaining," Rebecca said.

"I just wanted to get to know you and for you to get to know me before we got families involved. Is that too much to ask? I was going to tell you."

"See how cute he is? I told you, that's why I fell for him. So did my parents."

"Paul met your parents?" Barbara asked.

"They were up at school for a visit," Paul said. "It wasn't a plan."

"My father wasn't crazy about Paul not being Jewish. But he was so charming that my dad couldn't help liking him."

"Can we talk about something else?" Paul said.

"I'm glad you came a long," Barbara said to Rebecca. "Maybe you'll be able to help him understand."

"Understand what?" Rebecca said. "This is the most mysterious family ever. By a long shot."

"Tell me about my Aunt Carol-Ann," Paul said.

"Is this a real aunt?" Rebecca said.

"She's Nicky's sister."

"Why did they stop talking?" Paul said.

"We'll give Mom a chance to fill in those details."

"Their fight and our moving all came at the same time, around the time I was born."

"That does seem like more than a coincidence. But you waited this long, you can wait till we see Mom. If she doesn't tell you, I will. But she knows more than I do. Anyway, we'll be there in a few hours. Just remember, everything she did was to protect you. Everything."

"Protect me from what?"

Paul drove after dinner and Rebecca took the backseat where she stretched out and rested in case Paul wanted her to drive. By the time they crossed the Maryland border into Virginia, Rebecca was asleep.

"Did you really think Nicky and I would scare Rebecca away?" Barbara asked Paul. "She doesn't look like she scares that easy."

"It's fun to be in college and have no past. You meet everyone with a clean slate."

"I can understand that. I really do," Barbara said. "But you shouldn't wipe out your past. This is all Nicky's fault, all the secrets. We're going to have to put an end to that."

"I want to know about my father, why we moved and why Mom stopped talking to her sister right after I was born," Paul said. "Someday, there won't be anyone to tell me."

"I have a few questions of my own for your mother."



The moon was directly overhead when Paul pulled the Jeep off the highway and onto Route 457 West.

"Pull over here," Barbara said. She put her hand on Paul's arm when she saw the Entering Bluefield sign ahead. Paul slowed and stopped on the dirt shoulder. Rebecca stirred in the back. "Do you want me to drive?"

Barbara got out of the car and stretched. She never thought she'd see this place again. She knelt and grabbed a handful of dirt and let it sift between her fingers. Paul knelt beside her and did the same.

"She always said it was in her veins," Paul said.

"Are we there?" Rebecca opened her door and got out.

"Almost." Barbara drove from that point, hoping to remember her way around. Twenty years later and she was still alive, and not only alive but returning to Bluefield with Paul, a full-grown man. She and Nicky had stayed together and were still in love. Who could have figured? It felt good to have made it that long.

Barbara gazed around as they neared town. Route 143 looked like thousands of other roads around the country, but it didn't look anything like she remembered. "Damn, this place has changed," Barbara said to Paul.

"You didn't think it would?"

"I didn't think it could."

"I wonder what Mom thinks," Paul said.

“We didn’t get you a room, Rebecca. Nicky got Paul his own room. We could get you your own room, but that might be silly since you were in Paul’s bed this morning when I called.”

“I’d rather stay with Paul,” she said.

“And your parents?” Barbara asked.

“They should definitely get their own room.”

“I like this one,” Barbara said. “But I don’t want to get in trouble with your parents, who I never met. Do they know you’re sleeping with Paul?”

“You won’t get into trouble,” Rebecca said.

“I hope you two have discussed birth control,” Barbara said.

“Please, Barbara?” Paul said.

“I know it’s awkward, and I understand that at school you can do what you want, and do, but I’m about to give you both a key to a motel room, so I have a responsibility. After all, I’m a doctor and your mom and a woman.”

Barbara parked next to Nicky’s Bel Air.

“That’s Mom’s car,” Paul said to Rebecca.

“Cool car.” Rebecca yawned.

“I just realized that Nicky has no idea Rebecca’s with us. This is going to be quite the surprise.”

“Yeah! I get to be a surprise,” Rebecca said as she got out of the Jeep.

“Well, you’re not the biggest surprise of the weekend,” Paul said.

“What is?” Rebecca said.

“I’m still waiting for that,” Paul said. “Let’s go see Mom.”

Barbara stepped in front of Paul and Rebecca. “Here we go.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1982

Nicky stirred each time she heard a car stop, a door open, voices in the parking lot. When she finally heard Paul's and Barbara's voices, she stood, shook herself awake, ran her hands through her hair, smoothed out her clothes, and went to open the door for her family. As she opened the door, she was enveloped in Barbara's arms and lips. Barbara let go and stepped back, and Paul leaned in to give her a kiss. That's when Nicky saw the young woman with them.

"More people?" Nicky said.

"This is Rebecca," Barbara said. Everyone looked at Paul. "Paul's friend. She came along for the ride."

"Hello, Ms. Stewart," Rebecca said, extending her hand.

"Call me Nicky." She gave Rebecca a hug. "That's a long trip to come along for."

"I love road trips."

She turned to Barbara. "You knew about this?"

"Yes and no. I'll fill you in later."

"Come in," Nicky said, pushing the door open. "I hope everyone's hungry, because I picked up some food. A lot of food. Southern food. The real thing."

"I thought you cooked the real thing," Paul said.

"I do." Nicky took Rebecca's arm and led her in. "Have you had real Southern food?"

"Can't say I've had much. I'm a Jewish girl from Boston. But I'm looking forward to trying some."

"Good."

"Did you drive all the way here for the food, Mom?" Paul said.

"I'm not sure I know why I drove down here. But we still have to eat. And my friends at the Bluefield Diner made all this for you."

"I'm starved," Rebecca said.

"I like her," Nicky said.

"I got ribs from Bub's Barbecue. I don't usually eat red meat anymore, but it's been twenty years since I had a rib from Bub's, and they are the best ribs you will ever eat."

Barbara shut the door behind them. "They're vegetarian."

"Really?" Nicky said to Paul. "How long?"

"Not long."

"And you?" she asked Rebecca.

"A few years."

"I got lots of other choices. But you have to try the Bub's sauce and his cole slaw. Even by itself."

"I'm having a rib," Paul said. "I mean I grew up hearing about these legendary ribs and I'm not passing them up."

"You drove all the way to Richmond?" Barbara said.

"There's a Bub's in Bluefield now. Right on Main Street."

"The only other time I had Bub's was right before you were born," Barbara said to Paul. "Nicky drove two hours to Richmond to get them. They gave her gas and she thought she was going into labor."

Nicky made a plate and handed it to Rebecca. "You only have to eat what you like."

"Everything smells so good," Rebecca said.

Paul raised his beer. "To Bluefield," he said, touching Nicky's bottle with his.

"To happiness," Barbara said.

"To ribs," Nicky said. She took a drink. "To coming home."

“How come you never told me about your sister, Mom?” Paul asked.

“Interesting time you picked to introduce me to your girlfriend,” Nicky said.

“Rebecca knows. In fact, she already knows as much as I do, which is sort of odd on its own.”

“You know the joke about the guy who’s running for mayor and his opponent accuses him of having a sister who’s a prostitute,” Nicky said, slicing the blackberry pie. “Only he doesn’t have a sister. His problem? How does one go about proving they don’t have a sister?”

“You’re losing me, Mom.”

“I’m stalling,” Nicky said.

“I’m ready,” Paul said.

“You told Rebecca about us?” Nicky asked Paul.

“By us you mean you and Barbara?”

“She knows,” Barbara said.

“Come on, Mom,” Paul said. “I’ve waited long enough. And it’s only gotten stranger.”

Barbara sat next to Nicky. She put her arm around Nicky’s shoulder and pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. “Nicky,” Barbara said, “Paul and Rebecca met at a planning meeting for next summer’s twentieth anniversary celebration of King’s march on Washington.”

“Really?” Nicky said to Paul.

“Really.”

“That’s cool.” Nicky sat up. “Did Paul tell you that I went to the march?” Nicky asked Rebecca.

“No.” She turned to Paul. “You know I’m trying to interview people who went to the original march.”

“I thought you had enough people.”

“Lame.” Rebecca turned to Nicky. “Will you let me interview you? I mean not now, but later.”

“Sure. And, Paul, you’re going to want to interview someone too.”

“No, I’m not doing that project.”

“But you are going to want to interview someone.”

“Great, more mysteries. Who else do I know that went besides you?”

“Well, you’ll have to find him first.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t believe you never did the math,” Barbara said. “Nicky talks about the march all the time.”

“Does this family ever just say something without making it a riddle?” Rebecca said.

Paul was quiet for a moment. “Okay, I’ve done the math. Now give me the details.”

“I got pregnant at the march.”

“With me?”

“Your father, David Levin, came up to me at the Smithsonian where I went to get out of the sun.” Nicky looked around the room. Rebecca had her arm around Paul. Barbara was holding his hand. They were all staring at her. She continued. “He taught high school history in San Francisco. He was twenty-six, about five feet ten inches tall, had curly black hair, great skin, beautiful olive, California tan, very cute. He was Jewish. You have his hands and his legs. Definitely his legs. He came out to the march by himself to see history and so he could go back and tell his students what it was like to be history and not just read about it. I told him I was using birth control. Which, by the way, I hope you are both using.”

“I covered that, Nicky. Go on.”

“Not much more. Though I doubt he included me in the stories he told his students.”

“I don’t know,” Rebecca said. “Sounds like you were the best part of his march.”

“So I have a father.”

“I hate to be the one to break it to you, Paul,” Rebecca said, “but you always had a father.”

“I always had a sperm donor. An anonymous sperm donor. He didn’t exist, didn’t have a name. He wasn’t real except in that he deserted me. Wasn’t interested in me. Didn’t care what happened to me.”

"I always told you he didn't know about you."

"I never believed you. I figured you were protecting me."

"I was, but I always told you the truth."

"Like about who my father was."

"I never lied. I just left things out. But I never lied."

Paul began to pace around the room. "So that's it? That's the big secret about my biological father that you've been keeping from me all these years?"

"You sound disappointed," Barbara said.

"I made up better stories than that," Paul said.

"That you did," Barbara said with a laugh.

"What do you mean?" Rebecca said.

"My only option was to make up stories about what happened to my father."

"How was that your only option?" Rebecca said.

"I needed to have a father since they wouldn't tell me anything about him. I had to make stuff up."

"That's so sad." Rebecca stroked Paul's hair.

"Yeah, he always made up sad stories," Barbara said. "It seemed to get him a lot of sympathy."

"So you used sad stories to get girls?" Rebecca asked.

"High school was rough," Paul said. "But I never told you a story. I didn't want you to feel sorry for me."

"I always said it wasn't that interesting," Nicky said.

"Then why wouldn't you ever tell me?"

"I didn't think you'd understand."

"Understand what? That you had a one-night stand and used the guy who turns out to be a boring high school teacher."

"I never said he was boring. We spent the whole afternoon together. He was anything but boring."

Nicky went over to Paul and tried to hug him. He walked away.

"Is that why you went to the march alone?" Paul said.

"I didn't plan to go to DC and get pregnant."

"It's true," Barbara said. "Nicky wanted me to come, but I didn't want to."

"You were okay with Nicky sleeping with a guy?"

"I wasn't at first, but once I realized I was getting you, I got over it. You know, we really didn't have a lot of options for having a baby back then. We couldn't adopt and there weren't any sperm banks."

"It wasn't like I cheated on her. I went to DC for Dr. King and found myself with this good-looking stranger who was trying to pick me up. He was so cute. He packed this huge lunch and lots of California wine. Kind of a mix between bohemian and nerd. He had no idea I wanted to get pregnant. I don't think he was even trying to sleep with me. I left him sleeping in his hotel room at the Willard."

"Didn't we stay there?"

"Yes."

"I had no idea," Barbara said.

"You getting all this?" Nicky asked Rebecca.

"Will there be a quiz?"

"How does your sister fit into this?" Paul asked.

"That's where the real story begins."

Barbara took Nicky's hand.

"After you were born, my sister wanted to take you away from me. I was so scared, more scared than I have ever been before or since. More frightened than when they told me I had cancer." Nicky went over to Paul. "Remember, it was nineteen sixty-four. They shot Kennedy. They were blowing up churches with young black children, beating up freedom riders, shooting civil rights workers. The House Committee on Un-American activities was still ruining lives. They took children away from a divorced white woman who married a black man. If my sister really wanted to take my baby, and it seemed like she really wanted to, then she could have."

"You still can," Rebecca said.

"That's right," Barbara said.

"I wasn't willing to find out what she and Richard were capable of. You were all that mattered to me. So that's it. That's why I stopped talking to Carol-Ann. I didn't want her to know where I was. Everything was about protecting you."

"I understand that," Paul said. "But why didn't you ever tell me?"

“I didn’t want you to have any reason to think there was anything wrong with me and Barbara being your parents.” Nicky started to clear up.

“I would never think that,” Paul said.

“Doesn’t anyone want dessert?”

“Did you think I would run off in search of my father?”

“That was one of my thoughts. I also thought you might think you were abandoned.”

“I did,” Paul said. “Now I realize I wasn’t.”

“Oh, honey,” Nicky said. “It’s not like he walked out on you. He was a decent man or I wouldn’t have thought of sleeping with him. If I hadn’t come up with the idea of getting pregnant, I would have stayed at the march and hung out with him all day. I mean, he didn’t pressure me to sleep with him. It was mutual. I don’t think I took advantage of him. But I certainly wasn’t interested in keeping in touch.”

“Did he ask you to?” Paul said.

“He was sleeping when I left,” Nicky said. “But I’m sure he would have.”

“Would you want to meet him?” Rebecca asked Paul.

“I’m not sure. I mean I’ve always thought about what it would be like to meet my father. I’m certainly curious to find out who he is and what he does.”

“If you want to find him,” Nicky said, “I’ll help. But you have to be careful. He could have a family and it might be awkward. But I’m willing to look with you.”

“So why did you drive down here?” Paul asked.

“I needed to go home.”

“Home?” Paul said.

“I needed to see Bluefield again, and I couldn’t put it off. First I thought I was trying to get Carol-Ann back by coming here. Or get back at her. But what I really wanted was, I wanted Bluefield back. She took it from me and I was pissed. She took it away from me, and she took it away from you, Paul. It was Bluefield I needed to make peace with, not Carol-Ann. I figured that out when I got here.”

“Hey,” Paul said loudly, “How did you find out that she died if we were in hiding?”

“Well, that’s the irony I guess. Your cousin wrote us. So either they knew all along or she just found out, which means it wasn’t that hard. But if they knew where we lived all along and they never tried to contact us, well, that’s sad too. I mean that says something about Carol-Ann.”

“For what it’s worth, and I know we’re not taking a vote here,” Paul said, “I liked growing up in Medford.”

“What’s your family like?” Nicky asked Rebecca.

“I have an older brother, Aaron. My mother is from Brookline and has a large family. My father lost most of his family to the Nazis.” Rebecca yawned. “That’s the basics.”

“How would your family handle this?”

“Well, this is different, but if this was my family, there’d be screaming and fainting. And water. Someone always needs a glass of water.”

“Are you changing the subject?” Barbara said.

“I’m thinking that maybe that’s enough for one night,” Nicky said. “You’ve had a long trip. Let’s all get some sleep. In the morning, we’ll drive around. See things. Tell more stories. It’ll be fun.” Nicky started wrapping the desserts. Rebecca helped her. “I got another room. Paul can stay here with us and Rebecca can have that room.”

“They’re going to stay together,” Barbara said. “We talked about it on the way down.”

“And her parents—”

“I’ll explain later.”

Paul gave Nicky and Barbara a kiss and then he and Rebecca left to get their bags and find their room.

Nicky closed the door and started to put away the food. “You got used to this quick.”

“We were in a car for nine hours.”

“They’re going to have sex and we’re letting them? We’re okay with that?”

“Only if we can also have sex.”

"I tried to get the room next door. Good thing they only had one on the other side."

"I think she's good for him," Barbara said. "I'm glad she came along."

"She's cute."

"She was in his bed when I called this morning." Barbara wrapped her arms around Nicky. "I didn't like being without you," she said.

Nicky turned and kissed her. "You're all sticky. Let's shower. I'll wash you."

They moved from the shower to the bed and back to the shower. Afterward, they shared some blackberry pie.

"That was worth the wait."

"The sex or the pie?" Nicky said. She started getting dressed. "I'm wide awake now. Let's go out for a ride. Maybe get a coffee."

Outside, they noticed the Jeep was gone.

"They left?" Nicky said. "Where did they go?"

"Let's go check their room."

"The car's not here. Why would we check the room?"

"Maybe Rebecca's here."

"There's a note on my car." Sure enough, there was note from Paul. *Didn't want to wake you, but we went for a ride. See you in the morning.*

"Maybe we'll see them."

Nicky drove through town and they pointed at stores, houses, landmarks. She and Barbara called out the names of streets and buildings as if saying them out loud would reconnect them with their memories. Nicky pulled into the parking lot of an elementary school. As they sat there, she found the local college radio station. The overnight DJ was playing Bruce Springsteen's *Nebraska* in its entirety. Nicky wondered what it would have been like if Paul had gone to school there.

"That's really not worth pursuing," Barbara said.

That's when a Bluefield police car pulled up alongside them. The officer got out of his car and aimed his flashlight at Nicky's eyes and asked what they were doing.

"We're just looking around."

"Why?"

"I used to live here and it's been a while."

"You drove all the way from New York to see an elementary school at two in the morning. That doesn't sound odd to you?"

"It does sound odd. But I can explain," she said.

"I'd like to see your license and registration."

Nicky handed the officer her papers and waited while he ran her license in his car.

"What happened to the days when you could talk your way out of anything?"

The officer came back and leaned on Nicky's door. "I'm glad you're anxious to show your friend Bluefield, but schools are not a good place to hang out. Ever." He handed Nicky her papers.

"Thank you," Nicky said. "I used to cook at the Bluefield Diner."

"I'm not following."

"I'm just saying that I used to cook at the Bluefield Diner."

"Okay."

"My family really is from here is what I mean."

"That's good to know. My family isn't," he said. "You ladies have a good night. Save your sightseeing for daylight, okay?"

Nicky pulled out of the driveway and Barbara started laughing.

"What?"

"I used to cook here?"

"All the cops used to eat there."

"Imagine if Paul had to bail us out," Barbara said. "Let's drive to the hospital,"

"Another parking lot?" Nicky started laughing, which made Barbara laugh even harder.

A few turns and circles later, Nicky pulled into the Bluefield Medical Center parking lot and shut the engine.

Barbara took Nicky's hand in hers. "That was a wild time for us. Have I ever told you how brave you were by getting pregnant the way you did?"

"Never."

"I tell you all the time."

"You do."

"A little stupid, but brave. It's a lot easier these days. All kinds of women, for any number of reasons, can just walk in and request to be inseminated. You don't even have to be a lesbian. You can walk right in and get anonymous sperm right off the shelf at any of the following convenient locations. Maybe Paul's father was not any different from one of those sperm donors. So maybe you've been right after all. There really is nothing to tell about Paul's father."

"That's what I've been saying."

"Except Paul will be seeking him out."

"We'll go with him."

"We'll worry about that later. For now, let's go for a swim."

"We didn't bring suits."

"Exactly."

Nicky drove past Four Corners and Andy's shop. It took her and Barbara two passes to find the old logging road. The brush had grown in and was impassable by car so they made their way on foot, passing several No Trespassing and No Swimming signs. "I actually remember where I'm going," Nicky said.

"I sure wish I had a flashlight."

"Hold on to me."

"I'm trying. But sometimes I can't tell which way you're going."

"I'll slow down."

The moon reflected off the pond as they came to the clearing. The raft had been pulled out of the water and sat on the beach. It was missing pieces. A small fire pit and some empty beer cans were signs of a teen hangout. Nicky had grown so used to her own pond that its image had replaced this one and the pond in Medford now looked more like the original.

"This place has sure changed," Barbara said.

"Everything has changed," Nicky said. "Everything." She untied her sneakers.

Barbara slipped off her shoes and placed her arms around Nicky. They kissed and hugged and waded in deeper and deeper till they stepped in muck.

Nicky started swimming. "Come on," she called to Barbara.

"What should we do next?" Barbara said, catching up to Nicky.

"I want love, adventure, passion, beauty, surprise, and sex. What do you want?"

"Whatever it is, I want to do it together."

They swam back to shore and sat on the raft. Barbara stroked Nicky's hair. "Let's fly to California and see Claire and the other kids," Barbara said. "We'll ask them about Carol-Ann. We'll talk to Richard. Maybe we'll try to find David Levin."

"What if Richard won't talk to us?"

"That's just it," Barbara said. "We don't have to know. We just have to try. We'll just go out there and whatever happens, we'll be together."

Nicky took Barbara's hand as they followed the trail back to the car. Away from the cover of trees, the world started to lighten up. They got back in the Bel Air and started back toward the motel.

"Let's go to the Bluefield Diner," Nicky said. "Suddenly, I'm very hungry. Suddenly, I'm starving."

About the Author

Elan Barnehama grew up in New York City where he developed a taste for pizza and learned to recognize a joke. He earned an MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a BA from Binghamton University. Elan has taught writing and literature at several colleges, led community based writing, been a high school teacher and baseball coach, a radio news announcer, the writer for a university president, and a cook. His commentaries and essays have appeared on public radio, online, and in newspapers. Elan lives in Northampton, MA. This is Elan's first novel.

Books Available From Bold Strokes Books

Month of Sundays by Yolanda Wallace. Love doesn't always happen overnight; sometimes it takes a month of Sundays. (978-1-60282-739-4)

Jacob's War by C.P. Rowlands. ATF Special Agent Allison Jacob's task force is in the middle of an all-out war, from the streets to the boardrooms of America. Small business owner Katie Blackburn is the latest victim who accidentally breaks it wide open but may break AJ's heart at the same time. (978-1-60282-740-0)

The Pyramid Waltz by Barbara Ann Wright. Princess Katya Nar Umbriel wants a perfect romance, but her Fiendish nature and duties to the crown mean she can never tell the truth-until she meets Starbride, a woman who gets to the heart of every secret, even if it will be the death of her. (978-1-60282-741-7)

The Secret of Othello by Sam Cameron. Florida teen detectives Steven and Denny risk their lives to search for a sunken NASA satellite-but under the waves, no one can hear you scream . . . (978-1-60282-742-4)

Dreaming of Her by Maggie Morton. Isa has begun to dream of the most amazing woman—a woman named Lilith with a gorgeous face, an amazing body, and the ability to turn Isa on like no other. But Lilith is just a dream...isn't she? (978-1-60282-847-6)

Andy Squared by Jennifer Lavoie. Andrew never thought anyone could come between him and his twin sister, Andrea...until Ryder rode into town. (978-1-60282-743-1)

Finding Bluefield by Elan Barnehama. Set in the backdrop of Virginia and New York and spanning the years 1960–1982, Finding

Bluefield chronicles the lives of Nicky Stewart, Barbara Philips, and their son, Paul, as they struggle to define themselves as a family. (978-1-60282-744-8)

The Jetsetters by David-Matthew Barnes. As rock band The Jetsetters skyrocket from obscurity to super stardom, Justin Holt, a lonely barista, and Diego Delgado, the band's guitarist, fight with everything they have to stay together, despite the chaos and fame. (978-1-60282-745-5)

Strange Bedfellows by Rob Byrnes. Partners in life and crime, Grant Lambert and Chase LaMarca, are hired to make a politician's compromising photo disappear, but what should be an easy job quickly spins out of control. (978-1-60282-746-2)

Speed Demons by Gun Brooke. When NASCAR star Evangeline Marshall returns to the race track after a close brush with death, will famous photographer Blythe Pierce document her triumph and reciprocate her love—or will they succumb to their respective demons and fail? (978-1-60282-678-6)

Summoning Shadows: A Rosso Lussuria Vampire Novel by Winter Pennington. The Rosso Lussuria vampires face enemies both old and new, and to prevail they must call on even more strange alliances, unite as a clan, and draw on every weapon within their reach—but with a clan of vampires, that's easier said than done. (978-1-60282-679-3)

Sometime Yesterday by Yvonne Heidt. When Natalie Chambers learns her Victorian house is haunted by a pair of lovers and a Dark Man, can she and her lover Van Easton solve the mystery that will set the ghosts free and banish the evil presence in the house? Or will they have to run to survive as well? (978-1-60282-680-9)

Into the Flames by Mel Bossa. In order to save one of his patients, psychiatrist Jamie Scarborough will have to confront his own monsters—including those he unknowingly helped create. (978-1-60282-681-6)

Coming Attractions: Author's Edition by Bobbi Marolt. For Helen Townsend, chasing turns to caring, and caring turns to loving, but will love take five steps back and turn to leaving? (978-1-60282-732-5)

OMGqueer, edited by Radclyffe and Katherine E. Lynch. Through stories imagined and told by youth across America, this anthology provides a snapshot of queerness at the dawn of the new millennium. (978-1-60282-682-3)

Oath of Honor by Radclyffe. A First Responders novel. First do no harm...First Physician of the United States Wes Masters discovers that being the president's doctor demands more than brains and personal sacrifice—especially when politics is the order of the day. (978-1-60282-671-7)

A Question of Ghosts by Cate Culpepper. Becca Healy hopes Dr. Joanne Call can help her learn if her mother really committed suicide—but she's not sure she can handle her mother's ghost, a decades-old mystery, and lusting after the difficult Dr. Call without some serious chocolate consumption. (978-1-60282-672-4)

The Night Off by Meghan O'Brien. When Emily Parker pays for a taboo role-playing fantasy encounter from the Xtreme Encounters escort agency, she expects to surrender control—but never imagines losing her heart to dangerous butch Nat Swayne. (978-1-60282-673-1)

Sara by Greg Herren. A mysterious and beautiful new student at Southern Heights High School stirs things up when students start dying. (978-1-60282-674-8)

Fontana by Joshua Martino. Fame, obsession, and vengeance collide in a novel that asks: What if America's greatest hero was gay? (978-1-60282-675-5)

Lemon Reef by Robin Silverman. What would you risk for the memory of your first love? When Jenna Ross learns her high

school love Del Soto died on Lemon Reef, she refuses to accept the medical examiner's report of a death from natural causes and risks everything to find the truth. (978-1-60282-676-2)

The Dirty Diner: Gay Erotica on the Menu, edited by Jerry L. Wheeler. Gay erotica set in restaurants, featuring food, sex, and men—could you really ask for anything more? (978-1-60282-677-9)

Sweat: Gay Jock Erotica by Todd Gregory. Sizzling tales of smoking hot sex with the athletic studs everyone fantasizes about. (978-1-60282-669-4)

<http://www.boldstrokesbooks.com>

Bold Strokes

B O O K S

victory
EDITIONS



Drama



Mystery



Sci-fi



e-Books



Erotica



Young

Adult



Romance



WEBSTORE

PRINT AND EBOOKS

