

# **Going Solo (aka: My Mother Has Agoraphobia)**

By Robert Gately and Drew Keil

(23,347 words)

## PREFACE

After writing my one and only comedy, my wife was watching a talk show with Debbie Reynolds, and my wife told me that Ms. Reynolds said she was unhappy about the slim pickings of screenplays for older women that were being passed around those days. She said people were not writing them anymore, and my wife suggested that I take the time to write one for her. So, I wrote one, but what the heck did I know about women's issues?

The short of it was, I was having a hard time writing the story of an agoraphobic mother trying to reunite with her daughter. Then, along came Drew Keil, an old acquaintance from high school, who was a NYC dramaturge in his own right. The story of how we met is a long one, so I won't get into that now, but he jumped on board and the rest, as they say, is history.

I'm happy to point out that what he brought color and flavor to a project that needed work. He mustered his talent and this is a better stage play, screenplay and novel because of him. And I've been forever thankful for his insight.

In any event, I hope you enjoy, and feel free to email either one of us if you want.

# CHAPTER ONE

Debbie Hammel was at an age where she felt she was getting old. She told everyone on her last birthday that she was celebrating her thirteenth anniversary of her thirty-ninth birthday. She felt better telling everyone that than her real age, which was ‘fifty-two’ (thirteen plus thirty-nine is fifty-two). It was a way for her to avoid the issue of age.

She lived in Brooklyn where a realty sign on her lawn gave away what she did for a living. A *Hammel's Happy Home Realty* sign dominated a manicured front lawn. People raved about the sign mainly because of its subtitle ‘*Buy One Get One Free*’, Debbie’s husband, Harry, had the idea for the subtitle and everyone who saw the sign liked it. Harry died a long time ago, but kept the sign for memory’s sake.

The summer morning bustled with wake-up noises of a typical Brooklyn residential street. Cars honked in the distance. Birds, hidden in trees planted a long time ago, chirped eloquently in a continuous stream of bauds and bits, like they were sending Morse code messages to each other. A police siren echoed from far away. A mother’s voice yelled in the distance. A breeze suddenly marched through street, rustling the leaves and parting the branches of the trees effortlessly; then the wind vanished as suddenly as it appeared.

The sun’s rays ricocheted off parked cars, like laser beams. A car passed by, a little bit fast for a neighborhood with children. A sparrow vaulted from a tree and landed onto a lawn for an early-bird special. A white butterfly breezed by, and briefly gave chase to a small cone-like feather, which floated in the air, downward, like a parachute.

To a person who lived here a long time, these sights and sounds were mostly ignored. The waking mind blocked them out, processing more important data, like what color socks to wear, or debating whether to hit the snooze button. But for someone, like an agoraphobic, for example, who unconsciously took notice of everything at once, the loud as well as the soft sounds, the bright sights as well as the barely visible, the sounds could take on a very surreal, even a menacing tone, and the sights could bring that person to her knees.

\*\*\*

Debbie was having a dream. The moonlit forest revealed a haunting silhouette of leafless branches extending everywhere. In the distance the soft cadence of rapid breathing mixed with a

faint sound of a cello playing a lullaby could be heard. The breathing became more erratic and worrisome. Like in a movie, the camera zoomed back, and searched for the person breathing.

In her dream she stood alone in the forest wearing just a nightgown. Her heavy breathing left a vapor trail in the chilled air. Debbie turned in circles, prompted by a distant sound of a cello.

Debbie slowly realized she was waking from a confusing dream and sat up in bed afraid of something, but not quite sure of what. Her heart raced and, in her mind, she still produced a vapor trail which slowly disappeared. The sights and sounds of the real world brought her the glare of the digital display on the clock/alarm radio, a bothersome reminder that she had to wake up. She hated that feeling. She was tucked away in her own dream state and it felt like a bomb had exploded, and now she had to deal with life's trials and tribulations. But this morning, instead of meeting the day head-on, she stoically listened to the soothing cello music from the alarm-clock radio. A glow enveloped her, like wearing a warm gown right out of the dryer. She shut the alarm off and grunted at the thought of starting a new day.

Debbie got out of bed and slowly walked over to the mirror which hung over her dresser. She stared into it for a long time. "Today is going to be a good day," she finally said.

Not all days were good. In fact, very few days were good. At least, that's how she felt even though she had to put on that face that said 'all was well' even at the home front. She always reported she had one thing or another that was troublesome to her. In fact, she wondered if she ever had 'good' days. Debbie remembered the first time she had an *experience*. That's what she called it in the beginning, long before it became a *condition*, like her daughter might call it. Well before the car incident with her mother, it was the *experience* of losing balance, or getting nauseous because of motion sickness when she noticed she was ... different. She was twelve, she remembered, when her parents took her to the carnival. She would always avoid the rides because she got sick easily. She wasn't like the rest of the children. She couldn't ride because of a feeling that some catastrophic thing would happen if she ever rode on a Ferris wheel, or a roller coaster, or even one of those go-carts which bumped into each other. Maybe she would snap her neck, or fall out, or something worse. Then it happened. The fear materialized. On the Ferris wheel when that handsome boy she had her eye on, Nick, challenged her to a ride.

"*What could I do?*" She whispered to herself as she looked into the mirror. Nick was so handsome and he promised he'd take care of her. He would strap her in and sit next to her and protect her from the evils of the world, or from falling out, actually. So she went on, but Nick couldn't take care of her the way he promised. He couldn't stop the sickness. He couldn't stop her from vomiting on half the people below her, who were her friends, kids from school. It was terrible.

Horrible. Enough to promise herself she would never go to the amusement park ever again. She didn't realize it at the time, but that also meant she would never take her daughter to the the amusement park as well and it led the way for her not to go anywhere. She remembered hating to drive a car, so she stopped driving. Then she stopped going to the movies and to the stores. Eventually, she stopped going out of the house, except to get the mail.

"Today is going to be a good day," she repeated as if it were a mantra. She took a deep breath and repeated it more than once. "Today is going to be a good day," she assured herself.

Meanwhile, a flower delivery van pulled up outside, and stopped at the curb by Debbie's house. Dan Tarentino, who wore an ill-fitting company uniform, stepped out with a bouquet of roses. He hustled up the steps and onto Debbie's porch, and laid the roses on the settee bench.

He took off his cap and combed his hair with his fingers, then produced a floral aerosol can hidden away in his uniform, and sprayed the flowers with two quick hits. He sprayed both his underarms with a quick spurt in case anyone came to the door. He looked in the window before leaving. Nothing to see.

Meanwhile, Debbie was still upstairs grooming herself in the bedroom mirror. From where she stood, she could see the bathroom door, as if the door was at the end of a tunnel where unexpected protuberances lurked within the walls, a leftover visual from the Flash Gordon days of the early 60's.

She shuffled her way from the bedroom into the hallway. Next to the bedroom was another door she had to pass, which she found hard to do since she knew what was inside.

When she got to the room, she cupped her hand on the door knob. "Don't open it. Don't open it," she said aloud to herself. "Not today. Please"

Maybe, if she didn't go in, the feeling of accomplishment would retard the other feelings she had that something terrible was going to happen if she didn't do it. "Don't open it," she said to herself again as she approached the door. Perhaps today she would just journey right to the bathroom and kill that obsessiveness that was driving her behavior.

She turned the knob and opened the door and walked in, anyway. Debbie surveyed the room as she did every day she felt the need. A closed cello case stood on its stand next to an empty bed. Pictures adorned the bureau top. She took a framed photo from the bureau which showed a young girl in a band uniform, smiling and holding a trophy. Debbie remembered how things used to be with Wendy. She delicately replaced the photo and left the room and journeyed into the bathroom.

She did all of her morning business in the bathroom and pranced downstairs into the living

room, which was converted into a realty office. The room had three three desks, each adorned with a PC – one for her and her two employees: Patricia, who lived next door, and Kate, who was a new hire to relieve Pat from some of her phone duties. They both had yet to arrive.

Family photos hung on the wall along with NYC wall-maps. Tall cabinets lined the wall that gave the room a finished office look.

She pranced down the steps fully dressed in business casual outfit. She entered the office and turned on the PCs, then hit the message button on the telephone. A message played. “Debbie, the two-family on Front St. is now in contract. We gotta talk.” She turned the machine off and she said to herself, “You can't afford it, Jeremy. Don't even try.”

She exited to the kitchen where a mini CD player, a pile of CDs, a headset, sun-glasses and a beach hat lay on the kitchen table. Debbie returned to the living room with those items in hand. She flipped through the CDs and selected the one that read WENDY'S 2011 AUDITION TAPE: BOSTON PHILHARMONIC.

She inserted the CD and listened to cello music, similar to the music in her dream, then looked at a magnetized photo on the fridge showing herself and her daughter, Wendy, side by side, laughing. She sighed, and then she washed the dishes that had piled up over the past couple of days.

## CHAPTER TWO

In an apartment somewhere in Boston, Wendy Hammel, Debbie's daughter, lived in an apartment, alone. She washed dishes in the kitchen sink while listening to the radio.

"If the Yankees didn't beat the Red Sox two days ago, Ortiz had a good shot at most RBIs in post season. Now it's who do we root for in the World Series? Yankees or the Angels?"

Wendy shut the radio off then latched her suitcase before heading out the door. As she left she looked at the same photo on her fridge that her mother just looked at, she whispered to herself, "Here I come, Mom, ready or not."

\*\*\*

Finished with the dishes, Debbie hurriedly dried her hands, put on the headset and plugged it into the CD player. She donned her sun glasses and beach hat and cautiously headed out the front door.

Debbie exited the house looking like a scarecrow. When she stepped onto the porch she spotted the flowers on the bench and read the card They were for Kate so she took the flowers inside the house on Kate's desk. It was 8 AM which was too early for Kate to for Pat to arrive.

Debbie sat on the settee bench and turned on the CD player. The soothing sounds of Wendy's cello music set Debbie's thoughts in motion. She hadn't seen her in over two years. Worse, she couldn't remember the last time she talked to her, but playing the CD made her feel closer to her daughter for some reason.

Brooding over her thoughts of her estranged daughter, she waited for the postal van to pull up. Once it did, the mailman, Ralph, hit the horn, got out the mail van, and put Debbie's mail in her mailbox. He walked up to Debbie who stood, as if she were to meet her executioner.

"Good morning, Mrs. Hammel," Ralph said while approaching the porch.

"Good Morning, Ralph. What do you have for me today?"

"Well, let's go see, shall we?"

Ralph offered her a helping hand off the porch, and as they walked down the path to the mailbox, she said, "Don't step on the cracks, Ralph."

"I know," Ralph said. "I don't want to break your mother's back. We got this, Mrs. Hammel. No worries."

Debbie appeared very apprehensive. "Mrs. Aldrich isn't looking, is she?" Debbie said as

she slow-stepped her way down the path.

Ralph pretended not to see Mrs. Aldrich staring out a window from a house nearby.

“No. Not today, Mrs. Hammel.”

“Good,” was all Debbie could manage to say.

Halfway to mailbox, a large gap (crack) in their path caused Debbie to hesitate.

“Three breaths now,” Ralph. “On the count of three: one, two, three...”

They hopped over a crack and continued their slow trek to the mailbox.

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, on a plane at Logan Airport in Boston, Wendy looked out the window and watched airport baggage handlers, who wore Red Socks, hustle baggage into the plane. A sign on the luggage carrier read YANKEES SUCK in bold letters.

A middle-aged woman, sat next to Wendy. They gave warm greetings to each other.

A male attendant approached them. “The flight won’t be long,” he said. “Would you like a pillow?”

The Woman next to Wendy took one, and Wendy shook her head. Seconds later a female attendant approached, and Wendy stopped her and asked her for a pillow.

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, Ralph and Debbie were at the mailbox.

“Okay. Let's see what we got here?” Ralph said as he pulled out the mail. He flipped through it. “Bills, bills, garbage, garbage. Oo! What's this?” he asked. “From your daughter! Overnight mail. Must be important.”

Debbie gave him permission to open it, which he did. As he unfolded a one-page letter, he noticed a photo. He stared at it a bit then then handed it to Debbie. “She looks good,” he said. “Wearing a Yankee hat while play the cello. Interesting combo. Haven't seen her in what ... over a year, right?”

“Two years, but who’s counting?”

Ralph sensed there was tension in the air. “Want me to read the letter,” he asked.

“Yes,” Debbie continued. “Please.”

Ralph opened the letter again and read.

“Hi, Mom: I'll be performing a solo with the Boston Philharmonic concert this Friday night at Carnegie Hall. I'll be home Thursday. I have three complimentary tickets for you, Pat

and a friend. Please don't be upset with me for not calling or writing earlier. I know we have not spoken in a while. But let's put our grievances aside and talk this weekend. See you soon.

Wendy.”

Debbie appeared stoic, undiscerning.

“That’s all she wrote. Are you OK, Mrs. Hammel?”

“Yes. Yes. I'm fine.”

“A solo. I’m assuming that’s good news, right?”

“Yeah. Absolutely.”

“Are you ready to go back?”

“I’ll manage, Ralph. Thank you anyway. Through rain and snow, right.”

“Are you sure?” Ralph questioned. He was not convinced she could handle the trek back herself.

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “See you tomorrow, Ralph.”

Ralph left and journeyed to the next house. Debbie pocketed the photo, then started her trek back to the house. As she marched back to the porch, she saw Mrs. Aldrich peering out her window and quickened her pace. When she got to the door, she leaned against it and took short, rapid breaths, trying to calm her raucous heart and the thumping noises in her ear. It was hard to tell which noises were louder, those her body produced, or those from the outside world. Today’s feelings seem excessive, she thought, compared to other days. It was always hard for her to explain to people what she went through when she was outside the house. That’s for another day, she thought.

Debbie walked into the house and slammed the door behind her. She tossed the letter on her desk, reached in the drawer for her portable tape player, and turned it on.

“The deep breathing exercises you learned in Part-One help counteract irrational thoughts that sometimes provoke feelings of panic and helplessness in our daily lives...”

She felt much calmer after she performed a deep breathing exercise. She turned recorder off and went upstairs.

## CHAPTER THREE

Next door to Debbie's house, loud, muffled voices, introduced unseen characters. The back door of that house displayed the "VA" emblem with an American flag. Patricia O'Neil, like Debbie, was also pushing the limits of middle age. She was casually dressed when she burst through her back door, as if she was in the Calvary marching to war.

"Tenure in 2 years, Trevor," she said as she stopped to briefly check the weather her finger. "Two more freaking' years. You'd throw that away on this half-assed idea that one more man with a gun is going to make a difference in this world. I know I raised you with more smarts than that! And now I'm late, dammit!"

"I told you, I'm only going for an interview. Besides, you only work next door, Mom," Trevor yelled from inside. "So, chill, why don't you."

Pat stormed down the back porch, then turned back, as if she forgot something.

Trevor O'Neil appeared looking every bit of his 40+ years even though he was wearing shorts and a muscle t-shirt, holding a mug. He took a sip and made a face as if to say, 'This tastes awful.' He handed her the mug.

"This, coming from a grown man who still drinks kool-aid at lunch."

"I told you, Mom. I'm not enlisting. It's just an interview. It's for an administrative job at the armory."

"Today it's an administrative job, tomorrow they put you where they need you, shooting children before they learn the multiplication tables."

She grabbed the mug, walked around the front to Debbie's house and saw the bus passing down the street. She looked at her watch and entered the house, and went in the realty office where the first thing that greeted her was a stack of flowers on Kate's desk. She picked them up and hid them inside the wall closet.

A call came in just as she saw Kate Devine through the window. She was also pushing the limits of middle age, and waddled quickly from the bus stop to Debbie's house. Pat set the wall clock ahead to 9:10.

The telephone rang and Pat let the machine pick up the message. "Hello. I'm calling for

Pat O'Neil. We met at the VFW cake sale last week. I'm selling my house. I need to know one thing right off: are you Republican? I only do business with Conservatives. I'll call back later.”

The machine clicked off and Pat whispered to herself: “I remember you. I can't get that raspberry frosting out of my dress.”

Pat looked out the window to find Kate stomping up the porch. Pat feigned working at her desk as Kate exploded into the room.

“Oh, Pat, what a morning. Samantha ... Whew... catch my breath... Samantha was in labor ... I had to ...”

“I don't want to hear it, Kate. It's always something with you and the damn cats. Get rid of them.”

“I will not. If you had cats you'd understand. They're like people. In fact, they are all soul mates from a previous life.”

“Oh, please. If you had a life, you mean. You wouldn't need the cats if you had one. By the way, you're ten minutes late. Now go check the MLS listings.”

Kate looks up at the clock and mumbled, “Dear Dorothy, give me patience”. But before Pat could say anything, Kate said she smelled flowers in the room somewhere.

“It's all in your head,” Pat said.

Kate looked at her notes at her desk to prepare for the new day. “Don't forget that go-see at eleven,” she said to Pat.

“He cancelled. His dog died.”

“When were you going to tell me that? Ten minutes before it was time to go?”

“I tell you things on a ‘need to know’ basis.”

“How sad,” Kate said referring to the fact that the dog died. “When Celine passed on...”

“Enough with your cats already.”

Kate took a puff of air and exhaled through her mouth. “I guess I should ask,” she said, “because I work ‘for’ you not ‘with’ you.”

“Just ask.”

“I'd like to leave a little early today? The new kittens need a warming pad, and I...”

While Pat and Kate talked, Debbie snuck down the stairs and quietly exited the house wearing a hat, shades and a head set.

“Shit, Kate. This is a business, not the ASPCA.”

“Hey, cats are people, too,” was Kate’s only defense.

“Unless they buy a house or pay rent, they are not an item of interest in this office. Go check the damn listings. Now. Chop. Chop.”

Kate read the letter lying on Debbie's desk. “Oh, my God! Look at this. Wendy is playing at Carnegie Hall tomorrow.”

Pat rushed to Kate’s side and read the letter.

“She's coming to Manhattan with the Boston Philharmonic!” Pat said.

“Carnegie Hall! Imagine!” Kate said “I'll need something formal to wear.”

“Oh, good grief. Why don't you do a séance and summon Vera Wang to help you find a dress?”

“Psychics don’t do séances. Why are you being so difficult today?”

“Look! We got a crisis on our hands. Debbie hasn't seen Wendy in 2 years. That letter must have freaked her out. Where the hell is she? DEBBIE ... DEBBIE. WHERE ARE YOU?”

Outside on the porch, Debbie hesitated and forced her breathing exercises. She shivered a bit, then cautiously stepped down the stoop. As she started to count her steps, another car turned onto the street, and the sound of the engine became louder and louder and whizzed by her like a streaking Batmobile. The sight of the passing car caused Debbie’s vision to warp – a surreal image like special effects in a movie. She looked skyward to avoid contact with the outside world.

An ambulance was some distance down the road, but its siren was getting louder causing Debbie anxiety. She remembered that stormy night when she was in labor with Wendy and Harry took her to the hospital in their old Ford '67 Bronco wagon. The ambulance’s siren was blaring in front of them, and rushing down a road somewhere in Brooklyn to the hospital. In her daydream she could see the car in front of them, and the effect the storm was having. It swerved because it was pushed by the raging winds and torrential rain. Lighting bolts stabbed at the darkness like daggers. A tree was uprooted just as they passed by and missed hitting the car by inches. Harry sped up and was gaining on the ambulance, and swerved to miss a windblown garbage can – another close call. In the car Debbie’s groan turned into a growl which then became a scream.

Outside, with the flashback over, Debbie took a few, deep breaths. In. Out. In. Out. “You can do this,” she told herself,

And with that Debbie stepped off the curb, and the siren of the approaching ambulance got louder, which threw her right back into thoughts of that horrific night 35 years ago.

Ambulances were lined up and blocked the Emergency entrance of the hospital. A frazzled Harry, parked the car on the lawn, got out and struggled to get a pregnant Debbie out of the car. He took her into the hospital where medics, doctors and nurses were yelling orders at each other. The power went out and the hospital lights sputtered then failed.

Back to preset day, Debbie ran across the street just as the ambulance came to a screeching halt almost hitting Debbie as she fell into several garbage cans across the street from her house. The ambulance driver bolted out of his vehicle and ran over to Debbie and asked her if she was okay. "Lady, I almost hit you," he said.

Pat and Kate came running out of the house and when they arrived, the driver said he thought Debbie was drunk the way she was walking "I'm so sorry, he said. "I really had no time to react."

"We saw the whole thing," Pat said. "It's not your fault."

"If I didn't have the emergency in the back, I'd stay. But I have to go to the hospital."

"Go. Go," Pat urged. "We got this."

The driver hesitantly left, and Pat hovered over Debbie. An upended garbage can had spewed its contents on Debbie's lap. Coffee grinds and smashed tomatoes stained her clothes.

"Too fast," Debbie said. "Things were move too fast."

"Oh, Dorothy," Kate said. "Help us."

"Shut up. Enough about Dorothy, already. Who is she, anyway?"

Kate didn't respond, but picked up Debbie's hat and glasses, then helped Pat get Debbie to her feet.

"Is Mrs. Aldrich looking?" Debbie said.

"Really. That's what's worrying you?" Pat said. "What were you trying to do?"

"Wendy... She's... You don't understand. She's... She's..."

"Take a breath," Pat said. "Easy. In...out."

"OK. OK. I was just trying to get the paper at the deli... Wendy ... She's ..."

"I know," Kate said. "We read the letter. That's wonderful news about your daughter."

"Not now, Kate," Pat said.

"I was just trying to get the paper. That's all. I hope no one was watching."

"At the deli. You haven't gotten past the mailbox in umpteen years, Debbie. What makes you think..."

“I know, Pat. But I had to see if I could make it. But I can't. It's too hard.”

“You must be so proud of her,” Kate said.

Pat grabbed Kate and pulled her aside. “I'm sure you mean well, but Debbie's embarrassed having you see her this way. I'll handle this. Go inside.”

“But I want to help,” Kate said. “I know I'm only here two weeks, but...”

“If you want to help, get hot tea ready for Debbie.”

Kate said goodbye to Debbie. She ran across the street and stole Mrs. Aldrich's paper that was laying on the lawn before entering Debbie's house.

Debbie reached into her pocket and handed the photo to Pat.

“This is a photo of Wendy. It came with the letter.”

“It'll be great to see her again.” Pat handed the photo back.

“Ha,” Debbie let out like a burp. “You know how many times I've seen her since she left for Boston. Zip. Zero. Goose egg. And we never talk on the phone.”

“How about a little gratitude? Be happy she wants you at her concert. By the way, are you going?”

“I thought if I could get the goddamn paper then, maybe. But look at me now. I can't even make it across the street without an accident.”

“Wendy will understand.”

“No, she won't, damn it. She's never forgiven me for all the MIAs at the school PTAs and her past recitals. I missed too much of her growing up.”

“I'll talk to her. I'll find out why she dumped Trevor while I'm at it. Did I tell you. My son wants to work at...”

Debbie held up her hand like a traffic cop. She didn't want to hear about Pat's son and how Wendy broke up with Trevor. They were suppose to get married and she didn't want to get into it with Pat.

“Pat ... I know she thinks I blame her for my condition.”

“Why would she think that?”

“She thinks her birth caused it.” Debbie shivers at a rumble of distant thunder. She brushed the loose garbage off her blouse. “Help me across the street.”

As they walked across the street, the shadows caused by the early morning gave way to a Sun that was hidden behind the clouds. The cars' lights pierced the misty street like a knife. Car

horns blared at them.

“Oh, God...”

“Hold on. Almost there.”

Debbie slipped from Pat's grasp, fell in the street and cut her knee. A car screeched to a halt and the driver yelled. Pat tried to pull Debbie up. She saw her bloody leg.

“You have to help me, Sweetie,” Pat said. “Push yourself up. Push up, Debbie. Push!”

A blast of lightning frightened Debbie, and provided the impetus for her to push herself up.

Resuming her flashback, her mind went back again to a crowded hospital where flickering emergency lights were part of the mayhem. People were running and screaming while Debbie was giving birth to Wendy right on a gurney. The doctor shouted instructions to Debbie while she was as she was being ushered to the maternity ward

“Push,” the Doctor yelled. “Push.”

She grunted and pushed, but she saw blood traveling down her leg from the fall, which made the hallucination more real.

Pat managed to guide Debbie across the street and struggled up the walkway and towards the porch.

“Help me,” Debbie pleaded. “My baby is bleeding. Are you my doctor?”

“No. I’m Pat. You’re here with me.”

“All these people screaming. Too much noise. Someone help me.”

The sound of someone traveling down the street in a motor scooter unnerved Debbie. To her it sounded like a jet engine. She looked up and saw a plane 100 feet above her head when in reality it was well past the cumulus nimbus clouds 30,000 feet up in the sky.

She shivered as she fell to her knees again.

As Pat picked her up, she said “Look! It's me. You're safe with me.”

“The lights. Flickering. Stabbing my eyes. Where's my baby?”

They collapsed at the bottom step of the porch. Kate ran out with a blanket and Debbie held it tight to her chest.

“You know,” Kate said, “we all have something we're fighting. Pat has cat-a-phobia, I have claustrophobia, and you have agoraphobia. So, what’s the big deal? It’s all good.”

“Good Grief, Kate,” Patricia said. “Stop proselytizing, and go get some tea.” Kate went

back into the house, but once inside, instead of going right into the kitchen to get the tea, she closed her eyes like a clairvoyant detective, moved to the closet close by her desk, retrieved the flowers, and deliberately placed them Pat's desk.

Outside, Debbie was fully back in present day, but still feeling down and out. "They shoot horses, don't they?" she said.

"You're home," Pat said. "You're fine. No hospital. Open your eyes." She did as asked and both of them sighed in relief.

"Good. What just happened, Deb?"

"I was back in the hospital, giving birth to Wendy. It was stormy and dark that night. I was very afraid someone would steal her if I passed out. Then I did. Pass out, I mean."

"Oh, sweetie," was all Patricia could say.

"First time I held Wendy was the day I left the hospital. I had been delusional for three days and the doctors wouldn't let me have her. The whole ride home I wasn't sure she was mine. Now... crowds... flashing lights, speeding cars... it all comes back. I get disoriented, nauseous, lose my balance."

'As they sat on the bench on the porch, Kate brought Debbie tea and the paper.

"Oh, bless you, Katherine. Just what I need."

"A beautiful photo of your daughter," Kate said. "She looks just like you."

"That's all, Kate," Pat said. "See you inside."

Kate started to leave, but came back and faced Pat. "Just to let you that I know, Wendy knows Trevor?"

"She called?" Debbie queried, jumping to conclusions.

"No," Kate said. "She didn't call." Kate opened the newspaper and pointed to Wendy's photo and said, "We just connected."

Pat sneered at Kate. "Oh! It's that psychic thing I told you about, Debbie. She doesn't really know anything."

"I look at this picture and feel Wendy's frustration. She's lost...I know that she wants to reach out, especially to Trevor."

"You can't fool me," Pat said. "You can't tell that from a picture."

"You know that photo of Trevor that sits on your desk? I asked where he got those beautiful blue eyes?"

“Yes. OK. So what?”

“You said, from his father, Joey, who passed away. Why would you say that when you know he didn’t pass away?”

That was followed by silence on Pat’s part. She didn’t want any more discussion on this topic. She looked away and her refusal was more of a testament than an answer.

“What is she saying, Pat?” Debbie asked.

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.” But Kate had hit a nerve and it needed explaining, but Pat just didn’t want to give it.

“Listen, Debbie, we agreed a long time ago not to ask questions that the other person did not want to pursue. And not to go to places where the other wanted to place off limits.”

“Yes. So?”

“So, Joey was off the radar, for Trevor's sake. And you never wanted to talk about your ‘condition’, for Wendy's sake. And now you just did. Things have changed because of her.” She gave Kate a scowling glance. “Look,” Pat said, “What’s done is done. My relationship with Joey, or lack of one, is none of anybody's business.”

As Kate started back into the house, Debbie thanked her for the tea.

“I couldn’t find any sugar.” She looked directly at Pat. “We're little short on anything sweet around here, I guess.”

“How did you like your roses?” Debbie asked.

“Oh, good grief,” Pat said.

After Kate left, Debbie asked Pat why she was so tough on Kate, especially since it was Pat who knew her, and hired her.

“I’m tough on her because she smells like kitty litter all the time,” Pat said, “and because the office smells like flowers all the time. I feel like I'm working in a pet cemetery. That’s why.”

“I'm sitting here stinking of garbage so you can't expect me to criticize Kate for animal odors.”

Pat threw Debbie a ‘so what’ look.

“So, what does she know about Joey that I don't?”

Pat didn’t answer that question, but asked why Wendy dumped Trevor.

Although Debbie led with “I honestly don't know,” she did admit that they stopped talking to each other when Debbie missed Wendy’s graduation. Then she tried to stand and said

after several failed attempts, “It doesn't get any easier as get older.” She gave it a couple more tries getting up, and when she finally made it, she sat right back down and said, “Harry should have stuck around a little longer. Boy, do I need that man now!”

“He'd be proud how well you've done,” Pat said. “Wendy went off to college. She's a big time cello player with the Boston Philharmonic. Your business is doing great. What's not to like?”

“Well, the business is doing well thanks to you, not me,” Debbie said. “I was a wreck when Harry died. You stepped in and kept the business running. It's you who should be proud.”

“But we got closer, didn't we? Both single parents. Both had mortgages.”

Debbie shook her head. “Nice diversion, Pat. You didn't answer me. What does Kate know about Joey?”

“We need to get back inside,” Pat said. Seriously. We'll talk more inside.”

Pat goes to enter the house, but Debbie grabs her and swings her around. They both sit.

“Ok!” Pat said let's talk now. “For all I know, Joey isn't dead. He's out there somewhere, God knows where.”

“What! Joey is alive. Why didn't you tell me?”

“If you saw him that day he appeared at the VA, you'd understand why I didn't tell you. I didn't tell anyone, not even Trevor. I did what I thought was best for him. Now let it go!” Pat grabbed Debbie by the hand and they stood. “It's too quiet in there,” she said. “Let's go inside. Kate's up to something.”

As Pat and Debbie enter the house, Debbie excused herself because she felt filthy and ran upstairs to take a shower.

Patricia entered the office, and noticed Kate was on the phone. Pat wondered who she was talking to just as Kate said into the phone, “A house next to a sump cannot be listed as waterfront property. Would you want your kids to swim in that filth. Goodbye, sir.” Kate hung up and then hit another button because she had put Francine on hold.

“Francine, save the placenta!” Kate said with authority. “It's nutrient-rich and great for my cactus. Keep the kittens together and put them in the empty diaper box that's on the porch. Oh, got another call. Hold on. Hello! Hammel's Happy Homes. Buy one, get one free.”

“Kate!” Pat said in a normal voice.

After a brief pause, Kate bellowed into the phone, “Come in and see what we have. Can

you hold? I have another call. Hello, Hammel's Happy--What did you say--You better watch your tongue, young man. Leaky pipes are your problem, not ours.”

While waiting to interject where feasible, Pat saw the flowers on her desk and groaned. She, picked them up, and plopped them down on Kate's desk.

Meanwhile, Kate said into the phone, “That's disgusting. If I could do that to myself I'd have my own reality show. Good bye!”

Kate noticed that Pat wanted her attention, but held up one finger and hit another line. “Hey, Fran,” she said, “I'm sorry, I have to go. I'm being paged.”

Kate hung up and said, “Wow. You wouldn't believe the phone calls we've been having. Anyway, Marty from the VA called. He wanted to know if you'll be there tonight.”

“Marty?” Patricia said in wonderment. “I don't know a Marty.”

“He said he enjoyed riding you around the rehab ward on his wheelchair last night and wants you back for tonight's basketball game.”

“Oh, that Marty.”

“And there was a sub-leaser who wanted to sublet her sublease. Can she do that?”

“No, she can't.”

“Good. That's what I told her,”

Pat pointed to the flowers and said, “I believe these are yours.” Pat rubbed her temples because she felt a headache brewing.

“Relax, Pat. You know what they say? Take time to smell the roses.”

“Peachy. These flowers, my dear,” Pat said with a tone of sarcasm, “they add such a fragrance in this office, don't you think?”

“Yes, I do,” Kate said, throwing out a little of sarcasm herself. “Since when do you care?”

“Oh, but I do care, and I would care even more if you keep your personal business separate from this realty business, and I would strongly suggest any information regarding Samantha's breeding habits or birthing rituals, or Leroy's urination problems, be kept out of this office.”

“Oh, that reminds me,” Kate said, enjoying the banter a little too much. “I have to be home by four to get Samantha neutered.”

“Goddamn it, Kate,” Pat said. “Go ... go see if there are any “for-sale” signs on Hoover

Street. And get hit by a truck while you're at it."

"My job is to answer phones, remember?"

"Then answer the phones. And find some leads. And get rid of those!" Pat points to the flowers.

"You're just jealous because I'm getting romantic attention from someone and you're not."

"You really think I'm jealous over some nut job with a flower mania?"

Just then the doorbell rang, and Pat looked questioningly at Kate waiting for her to say who was at the door. "I was waiting for you to do your clairvoyant thing." Pat got up and entered the hallway. She opened the front door and found Dan holding a bouquet of flowers.

"We were just talking about you, Danny-boy. What is it, fourth time this week? Twice today?"

"I delivered roses this morning. This time it's mums."

"Yeah, yeah! Cool your jets. She's inside."

Pat led Dan into the office and presented him to Kate.

"Dan. What a surprise!"

"Yes. Isn't this a surprise?" Pat said. "Let me give you my oozing-with-joy look."

"Shush. What do you have now, Dan?"

"Chilean white and Peruvian yellow chrysanthemums in a reusable, lavender-scented, glass-lined holding bowl with matching white and yellow striped ribbon and baby's breath throughout. A big seller, and still signed, 'a secret admirer.'"

"You have no idea, Katherine?" Patricia asked. "Really!"

"No. I'm totally blocked. It's driving nuts that I don't know."

"Ms. Devine," Dan said, "that doesn't surprise me you're getting flowers. Someone out there must like you. You're an attractive woman, if I may say so."

"You may say so," Kate said, "You can say it all day long, in fact."

"You're a very attractive woman," he said again, and would've said it again and again, but he was cutoff by Pat. "Enough, cowboy," she said. "She was just being rhetorical."

"Don't listen to her, Dan," Kate urged. "She's very crotchety this morning. Can you investigate this guy for me? It's kind of important."

"Sure, but maybe the sender just wanted to stay anonymous for some reason."

“Is there something you're not telling us, Danny-boy?” Pat asked.

“No, no. Nothing. Look, I gotta go. Enjoy the flowers. Bye!” Dan quickly exited.

Pat inspected the flowers and said, “If I’m the teeniest bit jealous you have an anonymous admirer, it's not because I don't have my pick of men.”

“If you mean your friends at the VA,” Kate said then stopped. “I've never quite understood that arrangement.”

“You can't find men more loyal.”

“And unavailable! Why did you start volunteering at the VA anyway?”

Pat thought for a second and a somber silence followed. “I'm sorry,” Pat confessed. “I’ve been a bit of a pain this morning.”

“I wouldn’t exactly use those words.”

“Truth is, I'm a frustrated spinster whose libido was crushed years ago by some school jerk who called me thunder thighs. I guess I'm sorry for being so... bitchy. And I had a hard this morning with Trevor. I’m not used to being at odds with him.

“And I guess I keep my cats hoping to find a reincarnated lover in one of them, so who am I to talk?”

Kate fussed with the flowers while talking. “It's rare I'm at a loss like this, but it’s happened before. Like when I'm sexually aroused, I lose my psychic introspection. But it comes back to me after I’m in a relationship for a while. Still, in the beginning, I’m blocked for some reason. Maybe it’s because I’m too emotionally involved. I don’t know.”

“You're sexually challenged then,” Pat said. “I knew it.”

“You know, you're a very hard person to like.”

“So I'm told,” was Pat’s response.

The phone rang just as Debbie entered.

“That’s Mr. Smolich, your go-see guy,” Kate said to Pat as she went over to see Debbie.

After Pat picked up the phone and found out who it was she said into the phone, “Mr. Smolich, what a surprise.”

Debbie fiddled with her bracelet. “Be a dear. Help me with this. I'm a little shaky.”

As Kate helped, Debbie asked Kate where her clairvoyant talent came from.

“It was a gift from my grandmother,” she said. “She had the same intuition. She thought it was a curse, actually.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

A taxi cab pulled up to Debbie's house, and with hesitation, Wendy got out. "I won't be too long," she said to the taxi driver. "I'll pay you for your wait."

In the office, Kate finished fastening the bracelet. "It's a very nice piece," she said. "Where did you get it?"

"From my Harry. A gift on our twentieth." Debbie looked up to the ceiling and said, "Thanks, Harry."

"Oh, your dead husband. That's nice."

"Oh, that's just ducky," Patricia said. "Now you two have something in common. You both talk to dead people."

"I don't talk to the dead," Kate said. "I feel their presence. There's a difference."

Wendy appears at the door and Pat runs to her for an embrace.

"So good to see you, Wendy," Patricia said. "It's been way too long."

"Good to see you too, Pat," Wendy said.

"Come in. Come in. Let me introduce you. This is Kate. A new member of our team. She's a cat-lover, so pardon the smell, and she's a bit on the clairvoyant side, so watch what you think."

"Nice to meet you, Wendy," Kate said. "I heard so much about you. A Yankee fan living in Boston! Isn't that dangerous?"

"People are nice in Beantown, but it's a tough place to be a Yankee fan, especially since they beat the Red Sox for the pennant this year. There's a lot of ... spitefulness around, you know what I mean?"

"Did you know how Boston got it's nickname, Beantown," Kate said. "Back in the colonial days, the Boston people loved baked beans – beans slow-baked in molasses. I looked it up on the internet."

Everyone nodded, as if it appears on the internet it had to be true.

Wendy faced Debbie, and both were reluctant to make the first move.

"Dear, why didn't you tell me earlier you were coming?" Debbie said, trying to break the awkward silence. "I have to read about your concert in the paper?"

"Glad to see you too, Mom!"

“Are you, really?”

“Ok. Let’s try this.” Wendy pulled three tickets from her purse and handed them to her mother. “Here,” Wendy said. “They’re for tomorrow night. We have a rehearsal in an hour and the taxi’s waiting outside, so I don’t have much time.”

“Oh, you can't visit?” Patricia said.

“I’ll be back later on. Early evening, perhaps. I just wanted to drop off the tickets now and later I wanted to explain why I’ve been incognito for so long. I want so much to know what Trevor is doing, but I just don’t have the time right now. Please understand.”

“I do,” Patricia said, but Debbie just pursed her lips and gave a nonchalant shrug.

“Do you have a problem with that, Mom?”

“No. No. You gotta do what you gotta do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Stop it, you two. Listen, Wendy, Trevor will be so happy you’re home. You should call him and...”

“Yes. Yes. I will. We haven't talked in a while. I'm looking forward to seeing him. I ...”

“Do you need his number? I have his number, if you need it.”

“Unless he changed it. I have it, Pat. I’ll call.”

“Imagine! Carnegie Hall!” Kate said. “Isn’t this exciting.”

“Yes,” Patricia said. “It’s very exciting.”

Trevor, in a jogger’s suit, burst through the office door with a box in his hand.

“Mom, I brought over ...,” Trevor started to say but stopped at the sight of Wendy. He obviously didn’t know she was there. “Wendy...” was all he could say. Actually, he had to blink a couple of times because he couldn’t believe he was seeing her in the flesh.

“Wendy,” he repeated.

“Trevor ...” she replied.

“Did you lose your cell phone?”

“I’m sorry. We’ll do this later, if you don’t mind.”

Wendy exited just as Debbie collapsed in a chair.

“What the hell was that? 'Did you lose your cell phone?' Really? That’s the first thing you ask after not hearing from her all this time?”

“It just came out,” Trevor said. “Leave me alone.”

“Did you see the way she looked at me?” Debbie said.

“I felt it too,” Kate said. “Bad vibes all around.”

“Everyone just shut up,” Pat said. “There was no vibe.”

“Her eyes were judging me,” Debbie said. “It was in her voice, too. Didn’t you hear it?”

“Most definitely,” Kate said. “Her voice was so tense and...”

“SHUT UP,” Pat yelled. “There were no vibes and no tension in her voice. So everyone just shut up.”

“I’m going to the porch to sit down,” Debbie said. “I need to think.” Debbie exited outside to the porch and maneuvered her way to the bench.

In the office there was an awkward silence. Finally, Pat spoke up. “I should go buy a lottery ticket. My luck has got to turn.” She noticed Trevor was looking rather somber.

“Are you OK?”

“I’m fine.

“So, what’s in the box?”

“I wanted to drop this off before I went out for a jog.” Trevor handed the box to Pat.

“It’s a peace offering for this morning. Homemade fudge. I made it myself. Some for you too, Kate. And Debbie if she wants it.”

“Men bearing gifts. Cool. But ... why aren't you at work?” Kate asked.

“I have an appointment with the Army recruiter, so I called in sick.”

“Kate,” Pat said, “some tea would go well with this, if you please.”

Pat stares wide-eyed at Kate and head-nods for her to leave. “The water is already hot on the stove,” Pat added.

Kate grabbed a piece of fudge and ate it. “Hmm, this is delicious,” she said and exited but stood close to the door to eavesdrop.

“I know you’re upset, Dear, but is it so hard to understand I don't want you in the military?”

“But I told you it's just an interview. I'm not signing anything. What are you so afraid of, anyway?”

“I'm afraid of you lying dead in a ditch somewhere in Afghanistan or some other God-forsaken place. No one to give you comforting words when you need it. No one to help you when you need help.”

“I know there are risks, but why aren't you proud of me? Is patriotism an out-of-date ideal?”

“My God, Trevor. Will you listen to yourself? If you don't sound just like your father.”

“That's not such a bad thing. I think he'd be proud of me if he were alive.”

“God, this is déjà vu all over again.”

As Kate stepped in, she said, “Did you want milk and sugar with that, Trevor?”

“I'm not staying,” Trevor said. “Maybe next time.” Then he turned his attention back to his mother. “What did Wendy want?”

“She's in town with the philharmonic for a concert tomorrow. She just came by to drop off these tickets.”

“Is there a ticket in there for me?”

Pat didn't answer.

“I see. Just another reason to keep my appointment. Gotta run.”

Pat waited for Trevor's exit. Once he did, Pat said, “Well, that went well, don't you think?” she said with a sarcastic tone, and not expecting an answer. Kate just shrugged her shoulders.

“I have to prepare for that go-see. Help me find the comparative listings.”

“You said his dog died.”

“He just called back. He bought a goldfish and he's feeling much better.”

“Ooo! I don't trust animals without eyelids. Creepy.”

“Yeah,” Pat said. “You're creepy.” There was no response to that, so Pat added, “And I'll need the plot assessment as well. Come on. Let's go. Chop, chop.”

“I'm not moving until you tell me why you never told Trevor about his father.”

“I swear, Kate. Keep your nose out of my business.”

“He needs to know his father's alive.”

“What gives you the right to tell me what to do? Being a surrogate for a houseful of cats may make you an expert on fur balls, but you know nothing about how to raise a son.”

“I agree, and thank God I don't have to raise one, but I feel how much you're aching inside to find Joey. I can help. I'm good at finding people.”

“The only man in your life is an anonymous flower freak, so get away from me with that psychic crap.” Pat sits and buries her face in her hands.

“You might not believe this, and I hesitate even saying this, but I was in love once.”

Pat looks up and all she could say was, “You? In love?”

“Yeah, really, to a part-time dance instructor. We met on a conga-line at an Animal League benefit.”

Pat reminisced a bit. “Joey was a wonderful dancer.”

“Really! Tell me more.”

Pat growled a little.

“Come on,” Kate said. “Loosen up. Talk to me.”

“It was a long time ago. I was twenty-three. We met at a church social. I saw how well he moved, so I went over and introduced myself. So few men can dance well, you know?”

“Tell me about it,” Kate said. “Frank and I spent our first night together on a blanket on a beach in Red Hook. It was spectacular!”

“How long were you two together?”

“For one orgasm.”

“That was it? One orgasm.”

“Don't start. This conversation is going nicely so far.” Kate gave Pat time to think about it, and then added, “It's your turn. Did you see any action your first night with Joey?”

Pat bites her lip. She didn't want to answer.

“Come one. Loosen up, for crying out loud. I'm not taking your blood. I'm just asking you a question.”

“Ah, what the heck. That first night led to one long, hot, passionate summer. Who am I trying to kid. Right out of a Harlequin novel. We screwed like gerbils. By the end of August we had marriage on our agendas. Then Grenada happened.”

“Granada. That sounds like a vacation resort. What the hell happened in Granada?”

“It was no vacation, believe me,” Pat said. “There were 19 US casualties and 116 more troops were wounded. One of them was Joey.”

“Was that how you lost touch?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Why is this so hard for you?”

“Because I wanted to get married before he shipped out and we didn't.”

Kate sat back, and just folded her arms. She waited for more, and got it.

“We argued over it and he left without even saying goodbye. If he loved me, he could've given me a ring. Or some kind of hope. But he didn't.”

“Why not wait until he got back?” Kate asked.

“I just couldn't do that.”

“Why the hell not?”

“You see,” Pat said. “This is why I didn't want to start this conversation. Now I have to tell you everything.” BECAUSE I WAS PREGNANT, damn it.”

Pat took a single rose from the bouquet and snapped it in half.

“The last thing I told him was marry me or leave. God, Kate, if I could only take those words back.” They both were silent for a couple of seconds. “I should've told him I was pregnant when I had the chance. He was gone before I could.”

“That was the last time you saw him?”

Pat unlocked a desk drawer, took out a photo and held it to her breast. She walked slowly over to Kate. “I started volunteering at the VA Hospital in Manhattan after he left. A year later he shows up as a patient. His convoy was caught in a fire fight. His face was mangled by a grenade pretty bad. He couldn't even talk.”

Pat handed the photo to Kate. Tears came easy for Pat when talking about Joey. “The doctor hoped he might be able to speak as he healed. But his mind, the man I remembered, wasn't there anymore. What was I to do?”

“You and Joey look so happy together in this photo.”

Pat took the photo from Kate and put it back in the desk.

“That's enough,” Pat said. “No more. Now let me ask you something. Tell me. Who's Dorothy?”

Kate bended down and picked up the broken rose. She tried unsuccessfully to piece it back together. “Some things can't be fixed,” she said.

Pat thought about pursuing that line of questioning. But she didn't want to get into it at the present. She took the comparative listings and put them into the case and, started to leave. But she stopped and turned back. “By the way,” she said. “I won't complain if you want to look for Joey, but this is just between you and me, okay? I appreciate you listening.”

As Patricia left, she added, “We had a moment there, but this hasn't changed the fact that you're still a pain in my ass.”

“Naturally.”

\*\*\*

Debbie sat on the steps of the porch staring out at nothing particular when Pat appeared and said, “Knock, knock.”

“Go away.”

“Do you feel like talking?”

“Was that two-minute, ‘Hi-mom-I’m-home-gotta go’, visit appropriate for a daughter who hasn’t spoken to her mother in two years?”

Patricia sat next to Debbie and held her hand. “She didn’t want to confront Trevor, is my guess. She would’ve talked to you if ...”

“Oh, come on. Give me a break, Pat. Talking to her is like talking to a robot. We’re both programmed to say the same things over and over.”

“Are you okay out here alone?”

“This is the only safe place I can go outside without freaking out. That swing set we had out back, remember?”

“How could I forget? Trevor almost broke his neck trying to jump onto your roof.”

“I remember her eighth birthday. We counted each swing. One. Two. Three. We must have counted to 500. I get so angry because no one, including me, remembers the good times.”

“Yeah. Those were good times, alright.”

“There’s a wall between Wendy and I now, Pat. She blames me for everything.”

“Wendy can’t accept your limitations right now.”

“She won’t accept shit anytime. The world revolves around her and the only thing that matters is what she thinks.”

“That’s the kind of thinking that gets you ... what’s the right word?”

“Discombobulated.”

“Yeah, well you’re discombobulated then. Talk to her anyway. She might surprise you.”

They both took a contemplative pause, then Patricia asked Debbie to come to the ‘go-see’ with her.

“Cars and me don’t get along very well, Patricia. I’ll get a panic attack. By the way, did I ever tell you the first time that that happened to me? Having a panic attack, I mean?”

“Is this going to be long or ... will I get sick?”

“Oh, that happened on the Ferris Wheel. You want to hear that one instead?”

“No. That’s okay. First time panic attack is much better. I think. Especially if I heard it before.”

“Okay ... here’s what happened. My mother and I drove through a car wash. She loved the feeling she got when those big wipers smashed on the door and windows while sitting in the car. This time, I went with her. But as soon as the machines began sweeping the car, I couldn't breathe. I felt like the car was being crushed. I thought I was dying. At that time I realized something was very wrong with me. So, I developed a fail-safe routine anytime I was in a car.”

“And what was that, pray tell?”

“I’d distract myself by playing with the radio and windows. On, off. Up ... down. I’d do it over and over. Drove my mother crazy, literally, with heavy metal music.” Debbie takes a moment to laugh at the memory. “Why is it that children love to drive their parents crazy.”

“For the same reason they use the word ‘literally’ when they mean ‘figuratively’. I don’t know. It’s in their DNA, I guess.”

“Well ... that’s it. That’s the story – I just went bonkers with the power windows and the radio. I got scolded and never went to the car wash with my mother again.”

“Okay. So, what do you say, now? Come to the ‘go-see’ with me. I’ll be fun.”

“Like the time I vomited in your car?”

“Oo. Yeah. Forgot about that. Come anyway, but don’t throw up in my car this time.”

“Okay. I’ll come if you talk to Trevor about Joey.”

“We’ll ... I don’t know about that. I’ll think about it.”

“Horse of a different color when the shoe is on your foot. Isn’t it?”

“I never said it was easy.” Pat still wanted to know if she would come to the go-see, so she asked her again.

“I’ll go,” she said, “if you promise to talk to Trevor about Joey?”

“Okay. So, you’ll come if I promise?”

After taking her time to respond, Debbie said she would.

“Okay,” Pat said. “Then I promise. But you have to get ready now because I’m going in a couple of minutes.”

Debbie thought for a couple of seconds, then said, “I’ll need a few things first, like a bottle of Pepto.”

“Don’t forget a quart of tequila,” Pat inserted. “I’ll get the listings, too. You get ready.”

Debbie and Pat enter the house together. Debbie heads upstairs, and Pat goes into the office.

“Debbie’s coming to the go-see,” Pat told Kate.

A little surprised, Kate asked Pat how she convinced Debbie to go.

“I can sell sand in The Sahara,” Pat told Kate. “Ok, You’re in charge of yourself and don’t talk on the phone to anyone about your cats.

“And who knows: if we’re successful today, then maybe Debbie might be able to go to the concert.”

As soon as Pat was out the office, Kate grabbed the phone and said “Okay, Francine. You still there? Good. Here's my list of names for Samantha's litter. Lorenzo, Samson, Ferdie, and Sweetness for the kitten with the different color eyes...”

## CHAPTER FIVE

Pat drove up Debbie's driveway just as Debbie exited the house with a gym bag. Pat got out to help her into the car.

“Pat,” Debbie said with a little hesitancy in her voice. “I’m not sure about this. So go easy on me, all right?”

“Have I ever steered you wrong? Trust me? OK. Checklist: bottled water.”

Debbie opens her gym bag. “Got it,” Debbie said.

“Cold compress? Tissues? Towels?”

“Check. Check and check.”

“How about blindfolds?”

Debbie pulled out a few blindfolds from her purse. She put one on her forehead as she and Pat got into the car.

“All right. Now, Smolich has been to two agencies before us. He's very particular. And very rich.”

“Why does Smolich sound so familiar?”

“He’s a plumber. The name's on your toilet bowl. By the way, his dog just died, so be sensitive about talking about pets.”

“Okay. What’s he looking for?”

“A place he can fix up and rent it. Or flip if the price is right.”

“We could snag a hefty commission on both ends then.”

“I like the way you think. Don't mention the dead dog, okay. We're off to see the wizard. Pull your blindfold over your eyes.”

Debbie pulled the blindfold down as Pat starts down the driveway.

“Oh, God! Slow down.”

“Ease up girl. I haven’t gone ten feet yet.”

Debbie peeked over her blindfold, then reset it. “I don’t think I can do this, Pat.”

“You can, and you will. If all goes well, maybe tomorrow...”

“First things first. Now, slow down for crying out loud.”

“Let me make this traffic light first.” Pat gunned it and Debbie yelped.

“This is so unfair! Why am I being punished like this?”

Pat jammed on the brake and pulled Debbie's blindfold up. "Look at me, dammit!" Pat yelled. "Look at me."

Debbie took her time looking at Pat and when she did, Pat slapped her in the face.

"Ouch," Debbie squealed. "What the hell was that for?"

"A slap in the face is punishment for being a pain in my ass. Your phobia is not punishment. God has not given you this affliction. What the hell do you think you've done to deserve this? What?"

"Oh, sweet mother of God," Debbie wailed. Pat slapped her harder than before.

"Ouch. Stop it. Have you lost your mind?"

"Now you have someone to blame for being hurt. Not yourself, not Wendy, not God. Blame me. See if that helps. Now put your blindfold back on. We don't want to be late."

Debbie slipped the blindfold back on as Pat continued driving. After a couple of seconds, Debbie sang Jingle Bells in a high pitch voice.

"Debbie, will you please stop?" Pat asked politely.

Debbie groped for the radio and turned it on. She changed the station repeatedly until Polka music played. Pat reached over and turned the radio off.

After a beat, Debbie turned it back on and found a country western station and turned the sound level to its max. Debbie shrieked out the lyrics and Pat quickly turned the radio off. Before Debbie reached for the radio again, Pat said, "I swear if you touch that button one more time I'll beat you silly. You think my slaps in the face was hard, I'll perforate your stomach on your backbone with one punch."

Debbie decided not to fiddle with the radio anymore. "Wise choice," Pat said.

But Debbie flipped the window up and down with the controls.

"Stop it!" Pat yelled.

Debbie ignored her and Pat reached over to smack her hand away from the controls, and while doing so lost control of the car.

"OH, MY GOD!" Pat said, and then smacked into a tree. Anyone close by could hear the impact sounds of smashing metal and glass being broken.

## CHAPTER SIX

In the realty office Danny has brought in yet another bouquet of flowers. He stood in front of Kate holding them. "Notice the red carnations are shorter-stemmed than the white," he said. I think he's saying his feelings for you are nothing compared to the warmth of your smile."

"How do you interpret that from just the grouping, Dan?"

"I'm getting to know this guy pretty well. We think alike - in the arrangement of the flowers, I mean."

"Well, it's all very flattering, but..."

"I can tell you, this person has deep feelings for you. The careful pruning of the leaves. Five leaves to a stem - no more, no less. He told me to do it in a note he emailed me. I mean, they represent all his senses which take delight in the person for whom this bouquet is intended, which is you!"

"That poetic sentiment was in the note as well?" Responding to Dan's nod, she added, "Could I see it? The note, I mean."

"Well, ah ... I'm afraid I lost it."

"Keep the next one for me. OK?"

"OK. This guy has lousy handwriting, though. Just like me."

"Sometimes I can get a reading from a person's handwriting regardless of how neat it is."

Dan hands her a rose from the bouquet.

"That's a very attractive dress you're wearing."

\*\*\*

Pat held a tissue to Debbie's head as they look at her wound in the broken side view mirror, outside the car. The zoom noises have Debbie unnerved. Finally she said, "It was all your fault. You were driving."

"And I wasn't the least bit distracted by your idiotic behavior."

"Oh, so now I'm an idiot?"

"If you prefer 'whack-o', I would say that instead. Either one applies. Gees, man. Why don't you take meds and fight your phobia?"

"My cousin takes the same meds for her vertigo and all it does is give her skin blotches

and black teeth. She's still afraid of heights."

"Well, the way your head bounced off the dash, black teeth is the least of your worries. Look at my car. Where the hell is my bumper?"

"I put it in the back seat."

"It belongs on the front, damn it."

"Trevor can attach it in five minutes. Don't be so dramatic."

"Look who's calling the kettle black."

"Stop bleeding on my car and get in."

Debbie pulled a bandage from her gym bag and Pat applied it to Debbie's forehead. They got into the car and Pat drove away.

\*\*\*

Wendy walked in from the foyer and heard Kate on the phone. Kate waved her in while talking into the phone.

"You have a sexy voice as well. Listen, I gotta go. Bye." Kate hung up

"Are you blushing?" Wendy asked.

"He said I had a bedroom voice."

"You did sound flirtatious. You do that when you're selling homes?"

"No, no. I would never do that. Besides, I don't have a license yet so I can't sell homes."

"Maybe you should get one. When is my mom due back? I promised the harpsichordist I'd have her car back by six."

"I don't know if she'll be back by then," Kate said. "She'll be disappointed that she missed you."

"Me too. To be honest, I'm a little nervous about seeing her again."

"Yes. I sense that. Confused might be a better word."

"I haven't told you the news yet."

"I sense it's bigger than just apologies."

"That's scary," Wendy admitted.

Just then, Debbie and Pat walk into the office.

"Oh, my God, Debbie," Kate exclaimed, "what happened to you? What's with the bandage, I mean?"

"She's ok," Pat said. "But my car isn't. I sideswiped a huge tree while I was trying to deal

with this crazy lady, here. I broke my rear view mirror, lost my bumper. She was playing with the radio and windows, you nutcase. We naturally didn't make it to the go-see."

"Well then," Kate said. "I see there's no reason for me to stay, then. Let me take my leave. My furry friends need to be fed."

Kate exits to an awkward silence.

Finally, Debbie broke the silence. "I'm glad you stopped back, Wendy."

"Are you, Mother?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Listen. If the accident becomes an excuse to miss my solo, you'll be pleased to know that PBS will be broadcasting the concert live."

Debbie seemed flustered, but started to say "Why do you have to be so damn ..."

After a brief lull Wendy said, "Well, are you going to make it to the city tomorrow?" Wendy got no response. "I didn't think so. So, what do you want from me? I thought you might be pleasantly surprised you can hunker down here and watch it on TV with a bowl of popcorn and a box of juicy fruits. Aren't you happy about that?"

"Why can't you be a little more ..." again Debbie couldn't finish the statement so Wendy finished for her. "Compassionate?" she said.

"No. Optimistic."

"Optimistic!? Hmm. Let's rewind the clock and replay my softball championship when I was very optimistic you'd be there."

"You have no idea what I've done so you could have a good education."

"Oh, no. Here we go again. Don't start Mother or..."

"Or what? Going to leave for another two years? You have no gratitude. This is your senior class recital all over again."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"You never told me about that performance either."

"Oh, boy," Pat interjected. "I think I better go."

"Stay, Pat," Wendy said. "She may need emotional support after I'm finished."

"You don't understand, Wendy. My day just isn't getting any better."

"Well, hang tight, your ride is about to get a little bumpier." Wendy then turns to her mother. "Let me tell you what it was like in high school with everyone talking behind my back."

“You're gonna go there?” Debbie said. “You were a musical savant, for chrissakes. If they were talking behind your back it was because twenty colleges who were tripping over each other to give you a scholarship. Five orchestras were offering you a full time position before you even graduated. 'Oh, poor me, people are talking about me because I'm so wonderful.'”

“Really, Mother? How did you get so enlightened being the recluse you are?” And using finger quotes, Wendy said, “You never came to a single Parent-Teachers meeting because of your ‘condition’. Not one recital in four years because of your ‘condition’. Not one softball game because of your ‘condition’. Not even graduation. You were the talk of the town, let me tell you. That’s who they were talking about ... you, not me.”

“Wendy,” Pat interjected, “all this is a bit unfair, don’t you think?”

“Is it fair my own mother blames me for her ... ‘condition’?”

“I told you your birth was difficult. That’s all. I don't blame you.”

“Not even two years of therapy has convinced me of that.”

Debbie was aghast. “Therapy,” she said. “Therapy!? Why would my daughter need therapy?”

“Oh, my shrink warned me I might not be ready for this.”

“Ready for what? To tell your mother the truth. After all I’ve done for you ... you spoiled brat.”

“The truth, Mother? I'll tell you the truth. Here comes the whole nine yards of truth about one of those many performances you missed.” And Wendy commenced to tell her mother the story that has been haunting her for years.

A much younger Wendy exited the high school after she gave a solo performance at the Centennial Concert in the auditorium of the high school. Of course, it was nighttime when Wendy walked home alone. People were getting into their cars and any one of them would’ve taken her home, but she didn’t ask.

“I was too embarrassed to let people know I didn't have a ride, so I snuck away. I figured the walk home was only a mile because I knew which yard to cut through and which dark alleys to avoid. Maybe you remember that night, Mom? My pants were torn and I had black and blues all over my legs because ... I said I fell off a fence.”

“I remember,” Debbie said softly as she dreaded what was to follow.

“I was in a hurry to get home to finish my book report. So, I cut through Simpson Street,

past the Silver Dollar Lounge. I heard noises and hesitated. A white cat crosses my path when I walked past the Silver Dollar Lounge. A neon sign hummed and sputtered and offered a little light for me. I ignored the rowdy noise and quickly walked past the bar. I sensed someone was following me, a shadow of a figure, so I walked faster, but the shadow stayed with me. A picket fence ahead provided a barrier, but some missing slats provided me hope. Behind it was a busy street, and I knew that would be my escape. So, I ran as fast as I could, and just as I got one leg through the fence, the shadow reached me and pulled me back out of the fence. My pants ripped as I was being yanked to the ground.

“I remember watching a cloud drift in front of the moon. I started to scream, but he stuffed my mouth with a knotted rope. Then he punched me twice in the stomach to silence me. He took the knotted rope out of my mouth and in a gravelly, horrifying voice he said, ‘I’ll kill you if you scream.’

“So, I didn’t scream, and then as he rubbed the hard knots on my cheek with one hand, and he unbuckled his filthy jeans with his other.

“I inhaled quickly as I was screaming the loudest I could, but nothing came out. I inhaled quickly again ... and again ... and again, until I realized these were the convulsions of someone being raped.

“Then he finished with a sickly whimper. I let him lay on top of me for a few seconds, enjoying his conquest, I suppose. He finally got up and buckled up his pants, and walked away, whistling. That’s right mother. He whistled as if he enjoyed the conquest.”

Debbie deep-breathed and waved her arms as if she didn’t want to hear anything more. She covered her ears, but Wendy crossed over to Debbie and removed her hands so she could hear her say, “Wherever I go, I smell the stink of cigarettes and beer.”

Debbie yelped and then a stunned silence filled the room.

“Nothing to say, Mom?”

“I told you to never go on Simpson...”

“That’s what you want to say.”

“What do you want me to say?”

Debbie tried to speak her feelings through her sobs but couldn’t. She wanted to hug Wendy, but couldn’t do that either. She wanted to tell her that she was going to Carnegie Hall tomorrow, but couldn’t. Finally, she just said, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I was scared, Mother. I was scared that if I whispered a word of it to anyone he might come back and do it again. Or something worse.”

No one spoke for a moment, then Pat stood and said, “Is this the news you wanted to share with us, Wendy?”

“Partly. Yes.”

“What else, then?”

“I got pregnant. That’s right. And the Maestro, instead of firing me, took me in his home. I got an abortion. It was a boy, mother. A boy that you’ve always wanted.”

“Oh my God. You killed my grandson? Oh, God. This is all my fault.” Debbie stood and waved her hands as if there's nothing else to say. She faced the wall and sobbed.

“Cat got your tongue, Mother?”

“Who’s the... Who’s... Who's...”

Wendy wanted her mother to say word, but Debbie couldn’t bring herself to say it, so Wendy said it, “The father?”

“Yes,” Debbie yelled. “Who was the father.”

Well, that’s a good question. Could be Trevor’s, I guess, or...:” she got very close to her mother’s face and said, “...the rapist’s.”

Pat cleared her throat and said, “Does Trevor know about this?”

“He’s always known about the rape, but not about the pregnancy. That’s why I stayed away for so long and didn’t write or call. I was ashamed. I felt guilty. I know I should’ve told Trevor. I know I should’ve gotten a DNA test, but I was so distraught and I didn’t know what to do.”

“Wendy,” Pat said, “I’m very sorry about what happened to you...but...”

Wendy shrugged, then crossed to the window and peered out looking at nothing in particular.

“... but I could’ve been a grandmother as well, I guess.”

“I’m not proud at what I did.”

“Yeah, well...I think you did the right thing under the circumstance.”

“I haven't called because I didn’t know what to say,” Wendy said. “I haven’t worked everything out yet, Mom. This was my first step. My doctor assures me one step at a time is the way to go.”

As Wendy started to leave, she said, “One thing hasn’t changed, Mom. I can still leave the house knowing you won’t follow me.” Wendy waited for a response, but got none.

“But I do love you, Wendy. I want us to have a relationship. I want us to be close. I feel so lost without you.”

“Yeah, me too. That will all change if I see you in the audience tomorrow night, then I’ll know we can have a relationship. Until then.” Wendy exits.

\*\*\*

Trevor sat at a small desk next to his bed correcting students' papers. Pat appeared at the door unannounced and entered and sat on the bed. Trevor handed her a folder with the US Army crest on the cover. She skims through it and looks up at Trevor. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say "maybe".

“We have to talk,” she said.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Wendy sat alone in the basement studio playing her cello and wearing her Yankee baseball cap as she practiced. She hesitated several times, having difficulty with a particular piece. Wendy, frustrated, flings the bow across the room. Trevor entered, unnoticed.

“Temper. Temper.”

“Trevor, my God! You scared the hell out of me!”

“Hello, Wendy.”

They meet in an awkward embrace.

“How did you find me?”

“A guy at the desk said you were rehearsing downstairs. I followed the cello music and here I am.”

“The maestro wants a tempo change and I’m trying to improvise a little. I’m having a difficult time.”

“Ah, yes. The maestro. Heard he’s one hell of a great guy.”

“Please don’t make this any more difficult than it is,” she said as she returned to her seat.

“I wouldn’t think of it. Why would I do that? I haven’t heard from you in two years, except for our chance meeting yesterday. All my phone calls? Ignored. No reason for me to be upset, right? Shit, Wendy, you couldn’t let me know you were pregnant?”

“This isn’t the time, Trevor.”

“Or the place, I guess. But you’re right. Two years ago would’ve been better.”

Neither spoke for a few seconds. Finally, Trevor spoke. “I could’ve been the father,”

“I could’ve been a contender,” she said, acting a bit. “And please don’t yell at me.”

“I came home late yesterday and my mother bombards me with a thousand questions as I’m marking papers. She asks me if I got you pregnant. I’m in the twilight zone wondering what universe I’m in. So, excuse me if I seem a little upset.”

“You’d better go!”

“I’m sorry, Wendy. I thought I would handle this better.” Trevor turned to leave, but Wendy asked him to wait and patted the seat next to her indicating she had something she wanted to say. He sat.

“Trevor,” she began “I never stopped loving you but when I found out I was pregnant

with some else's child, I thought you would stop loving me. That's why I didn't call and I became ... incognito, because I thought you would not want to see me. I don't know if you were the father. Is that the only reason you came here? To find out?"

"No. I wanted to return this." He took out a toy figure from his pocket.

"That's Peter Pan! My prom gift to you," Wendy said.

"Yes. That night we had a marathon talk, remember? Six kids and a pumpkin patch in the back yard."

"I don't want that back, Trevor."

"Take it. You're lucky it's still in one piece. I almost ripped it apart many times, but then I thought how childish. Peter Pan never grew up but I had to. I had to let you go."

"So, were you able to let me go?"

"I gave it a try, actually. Heather was a fashion designer. She loved to window shop. This one evening a dress caught her eye as we walked by the storefront. She raved about the cut and the fabric. She was so alive at that moment. I thought she was you for a moment. I grabbed her and kissed her right there with people walking by and everything, and I opened my eyes and I saw she wasn't you. There was nothing in that kiss. No excitement. We sort of just rubbed lips. In fact, she smiled in the middle of it, I think, like I was doing her a favor."

"When things end badly, you move on."

"It didn't end badly for her. She bought the dress." They both smiled at each other. "If we didn't bump into each other yesterday, were you going to see me before you went back to Boston?"

"Maybe. I had to see my mother first."

"Do you feel anything for me at all, Wendy? How did I go from the love of your life to a 'maybe' kind-of-guy?"

"No one in the world would have cared for me the way you did after what happened. I'll never forget that."

"I'm not going to hold my breath. I would've died for you two years ago if that was my only line of defense." Trevor had a Zippo lighter in his hand and flipped the cover open and closed, as he paced the room. "So, I'm just a fond memory, is that it?"

"You shouldn't expect me to be the same person, Trevor. I just wish I had some answers."

“Like what?”

“Like if I had the baby were you willing to be a dad regardless who the father was?”

“I don't know. I was never given that chance to decide. Still, you had no right to make that decision to abort without my input. You had no right.”

“You're right. But what about my rights, Trevor? You can't understand the darkness that hides in my soul, even now. Sometimes, when I'm in the subway or a crowded elevator, I smell his sweat and my stomach turns. I feel his weight pressing into me and I can't breath. That horror won't leave. Until it does ...”

“So, the lesson about moving on applies just to me?”

There was an awkward pause, and then Wendy finally answered. “After the abortion I felt all alone in Boston. And thank God the Maestro took me in. No strings attached. His interest was only in my music. And all I could think about was what if you were the father. How long would have lasted if you decided to stay with me because I got pregnant? So, I dealt with it by having the abortion without knowing who the father was. Later, I felt like I didn't have a life. I had no one. Not even you.”

“You only have yourself to blame for that.” As Trevor paced, he fiddled with the Zippo lighter and finally added, “I would've been there for you. Didn't I prove that before you left for college?”

“Yes. You did. And thank you for that. But would you have married me if I told you I was pregnant? Out of pity, perhaps? I didn't want to spend thirty years only to find out you harbored resentment if the child wasn't yours. Besides, I was broken two years ago, Trevor. I didn't have a direction that I have now.”

“I haven't spent the time that you've had to dwell on this. I don't know if I could've been a father to someone else's child, a rapist, no less. You're right. As usual, you're right.”

“I'm not asking you to decide anything. I thought you got that point.”

The speakers spit out some static then the words: *Five minute call. Musicians on stage in five minutes.*

“Rehearsal's starting,” Wendy said. “I have to go.”

“Please, Wendy. Don't leave me like this. What should I do?”

“I don't have the right to tell you what to do,” Wendy said. “Two years of silence saw to that. I know it's inexcusable what I did. Still, I will apologize properly to you and to our mothers

for my absence. But not right now. No apologies today!”

Wendy began to collect her things: music sheets, back pack, water bottle, jacket, etc. and as she picked up her bow that she threw across the room, she added, “I’m not asking for forgiveness, Trevor. I worked too hard to get here to start feeling sorry now. I concentrate on my music and I move forward. I suggest you do what’s best for yourself, same as I did.”

“This isn’t fair.”

“Fair!?! Ha. My rape isn't fair. My mother's agoraphobia isn't fair. My solo isn't fair to the flutist who wants one as well. And so it goes on.”

“So, that's it? It's over between us? Officially.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, let me tell you. You don’t have to worry about me, Wendy. I’ll get through this. Being alone is something I’ve gotten good at. But before I leave, I need to tell you something.”

“Make it quick. I have to go.”

Last night, after my mom told me about the abortion, and the baby, she told me my father wasn't dead. Can you believe that? Yes, he got injured in the Granada conflict, but he didn't die. He's alive somewhere and obviously never wanted a son in his life. So, you run back to Boston after your solo, and go feel sorry for yourself, because you’re not the only one in this world who rejected a son.”

Wendy covered her face and sobbed. Trevor placed the Peter-Pan figure on a music stand and left without looking back. She was unaware of his exit.

“I’m so sorry, Trevor,” she said still covering her face. “I never meant to push you away. I was just scared I’d lose you forever if the baby wasn’t yours. What if it wasn’t yours and I told you. I love you dearly. I always have.”

She uncovered her face and saw that Trevor had left.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Kate drove herself into work this day, but she stopped off at the grocery store first to pick up some items they needed, or wanted. She took it upon herself to buy some groceries, like Twinkies, for example, while Pat went to Staples to buy some much needed paper clips and paper for the Xerox machine.

It just so happened that Pat turned her car onto Debbie's street from one end while Kate Devine turned her car onto the same street at the other end. The two vehicles traveled towards each other, like jousters ready to do battle.

Pat focused her attention on Kate's car coming at her, like a professor eyeing a cheating student in the back of the room. Her eyebrows were up, and she squirmed in her seat, gripped the steering wheel at the ten and two positions, and concentrated on Kate's car. "Okay, you little pipsqueak," Pat whispered to no one in particular, "get ready to meet your Maker."

Kate appeared to accept her fate in this joust. She was going to die, she felt, so, win or lose, she was going all the way. Still, she was nervous not knowing whether Pat was going to back down.

"You're going a little fast, Pat," she said to herself. Kate squirmed, and nervously fiddled with her hair as she drove towards Debbie's house. She eased her foot off the accelerator and tapped her brakes a few times. Her car veered to the left a little, and she allowed the car to roll on its own momentum, as if she didn't know whether to stop or just hug her side of the road. "She won't hit me," she said, more of a prayer than a proclamation.

Pat peered over the steering wheel while her car gathered more speed. "Okay, you little wimp, let's see if this makes you piss in your pants."

Kate looked like she might pee her pants while she watched Pat's car head right at her. "What are you doing, Pat?" Kate yelled. She closed her eyes and was ready for the worst.

As they approached Debbie's house, Kate slammed on her breaks while screaming incoherently. Her car stalled and came to a stop right in front of Debbie's house. Kate blessed herself quickly and hung onto the steering wheel, bracing herself for the shock of a head-on collision. However, Pat pulled into Debbie's driveway missing Kate's car by inches. Startled, she and pulled in behind Pat.

"You're a crazy lunatic," Kate yelled.

As Pat got out of the car she told Kate that statement was redundant. "A lunatic is always crazy," she said. "You never met a reasonable lunatic, have you?"

"You're crazy nut, driving like that."

“And to add insult to your behavior, you are a wimp. We had a race and you lost.”

Kate looked to the sky and said, “Dear Dorothy, help me,” and then pointed her finger at Pat. “I wasn’t racing. You were racing. And why in-the-Dickens did you park in Debbie’s driveway when you live right next door? Park in your own driveway.”

Pat retrieved a bag of office supplies from her car while Kate retrieved a grocery bag from her car. “Why, indeed,” Pat said. “Why does anyone do anything in this sick, crazy world?”

They both headed into Debbie’s house, each one eyeing the other, avoiding physical contact, like two wrestlers circling each other, each cautious in making the first move. Pat opened the door and extended her arm. “Age before beauty.”

They entered the house and as Kate headed for the kitchen she said, “You scared the Dickens out of me. I started this day in a very good mood.”

“Hey. Some days you’re the bug; some days you’re the windshield,” Pat said as she headed for the Realty Office.

Kate plopped the grocery bag on the counter. “I don’t know why she has to be such a ... bossy witch,” she said to herself as she put several Twinkies away in the cupboard.

She took one back as if it were talking to her. Kate put it back and stared at it. She took back again, this time she smelled it. The Twinkie was goading her. Tempting. Tantalizing. She stuffed it in her pocket and went into the office.

“Want something to eat,” Kate said loudly.

“Shhh. Will you be quiet, for crying out loud,” Pat said. “Debbie’s sleeping.”

“Sorry,” Kate said, her voice turning into a whisper. “I don’t want to wake Debbie, what with all she’s been through.”

“She took a sleeping pill. She’ll be up soon. When she comes down let’s not talk about Wendy or the abortion. Let’s be upbeat. Ok?”

“Let’s talk about that gorgeous hunk who came in a week ago. Remember? The guy who was looking to rent by Yankee Stadium so he could watch the World Series from his window.”

“How could I forget? He was a younger Sean Connery with bushy red hair. You stammered like a school girl. Got all flushed and mumbly. How could I forget?”

“At least I wasn’t drooling all over myself like a puppy-dog,” Kate fired back.

“I was not,” Pat said. “But did you notice his big hands? And you know what they say about men with big hands?”

Kate’s inquisitive look gave her away. She didn’t know.

“You see? This is why we don't have sex talks. Your sex life is like you owning a dachshund.”

“I don't own a dachshund.”

“Exactly.” Pat took a sip from her tea cup. “Ew! This tea is not doing anything for me. Follow me.”

Kate grabbed her purse and followed Pat outside.

\*\*\*

In the backyard, by the swing set, Pat walked to the fence post, took off the top, reached down deep, pulled out a bottle of booze and walked to the picnic table outside.

“How long has that been there?”

“Since the Yankees won the pennant two years ago. Want some?”

Pat filled her cup, took a swig and passed the cup to Kate. Kate took a sip then pulled out a joint from her purse.

“Is that what I think it is?” Pat inquired.

“My next door neighbor grows his own. I don't do this very often.” Kate lit it up, took a 'hit' and handed the roach to Pat. They exchanged roach and cup.

“May I ask you something without you getting upset?”

“Go for it,” Pat said.

“How can you stay attached to a man you've only seen once in 30 years?”

“The memories make me feel good, I guess.” She took another toke and she was feeling no pain. “Oh, who am I kidding,” Pat said. “I never came to closure with him emotionally. I haven't allowed myself to feel for a man ever since Joey. I wanted us to marry, Kate. So much.”

“He probably loved you too much to get married. He didn't want to make you a widow if he never came back.”

They continued to smoke and drink to the point where if either one of them had to give an account of what they talked about, they wouldn't be able to.

“I would've taken that risk. I don't know why he couldn't.”

“I bet if you had told him you were pregnant, he would've married you to provide for Trevor if something did happen to him in Granada.”

“You could be right, Kate. I messed up, didn't I? Screwed it all up. Let's not talk about him.” Pat pours a drink and raises the cup for a toast. “To Dan-the-Man. Your secret admirer.”

Kate refused the cup.

“Come on! You must know it’s him.”

“I suppose.”

“Why don’t you just go for it?” Pat suggested.

“I don’t know how to just ‘go for it’. I’m not like you, Pat.”

“I think Danny-boy’s ready to come out. With a bit of encouragement he might be ready for the fourth move.”

Kate didn’t know what to say, so she kept silent.

“Okay,” Pat started out, “The first move is tongue in the mouth. Second move is take off your bra. Third move is Clinton sex. You know, Cunnilingus...”

“Oh, my cousin works for Aer Lingus.”

They both laugh, and they both take a swig.

“I’m just not good with men, Pat. Every damn time I feel something, you know, the “twang”, it never works out. I can’t seem to survive the courtship. At first I lose my power, but when it eventually returns it just seems to get in the way. Like the time I was being courted by Tim, the lawyer. That could’ve amounted to something.”

“A lawyer.” Pat was impressed. “So, what happened?”

“Well, we dated for a while. Once my estrogen levels were normal, my psychic abilities returned. I did a reading on him and found out he was overcharging a client. When I called him on it he freaked out because he didn’t confess that to me, and he split. I never saw him again.”

“I don’t think you’ll have to worry about that with Danny-boy. If he’s overcharging customers he’s putting it right back into the pot with all the flowers he’s brought you.”

“You’re probably right. But I don’t know what to do. What should I do, Pat?”

“Relax. Be yourself. You’re a good-looking woman, although you should dress better. Accent your assets.”

“When you compliment me, which is not often mind you, you always give me a shit-sandwich.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You compliment me a couple of times,” Kate said, “and stick then shit in the middle.” “Shit?” I don’t think I’ve ever heard you use that word. You’re usually very lady-like.”

“Oh, Kate, ‘you’re so good-looking - you dress like crap - you’re very lady-like.’ Shit

sandwich.”

“I didn't say you were 'sooo' good looking. I said you were good looking. If you were 'sooo' good looking men would be tripping over themselves to ask you out.”

A noise from the house startled Pat.

“I hear Debbie coming,” Pat said. “Get rid of this stuff.”

Pat ran to the fence post and jammed the bottle back in. Kate tossed the roach, fanned the air, and ran to catch up to Pat.

Pat and Kate entered the office just as Debbie did.

Good morning, ladies. Or is it afternoon.”

“I don't know,” Pat said. “It's hard to tell when you're having fun.”

“Okay. I've cried half the night, so I'm not having fun, and I have no more tears left. But I'm better this morning. You don't have to tip-toe around me. Understood? Pat, I assume you told Kate everything.”

Pat nodded

“Good. Now I have something to say. I've decided to go tonight.”

“I want to see Wendy's performance. I'll let the chips fall where they may. If I die, I die.”

Debbie waited for Pat's response. She finally gave one. “You may die if I drive you. The only way I will drive you to Carnegie Hall in my car is if I tie your hands and feet to the armrest, and put duct tape over your mouth.”

“I promise I won't touch anything. I'll just sing and hum. And you can wear earplugs.”

“I hope so, because I can't do another day like yesterday.”

“And neither can I.”

Pat flicked her fingers off her temple indicating a bomb was exploding.

“Good,” Debbie said, “There's nothing left to say right now, so let's try and ...”

Debbie searches for the right word.

“Make merry!” Kate said.

“Make merry?” Pat blurted out. “What are we, in 18th Century England?”

“Let's keep things low on the Richter Scale today, okay?” Debbie said. “Yes, I like that. Let's 'make merry.' What's that smell? Patricia, you look like you've been drinking. Have you been drinking?”

“Make no mistake about it. The answer is a resounding, ‘Yes’. But just a little bit.” Pat pointed to Kate and giggled, then added, “She’s been smoking pot.”

“Hey,” Kate said, feeling betrayed. “So has she.”

Debbie threw both hands to her face in disbelief.

“You should join us,” Pat suggested.

“Just sober up,” Debbie scolded. “Both of you. This is a business, not Woodstock.”

“I’ve decided,” Kate said with confidence never displayed before, “I want to sell houses. I want to get my realty license. Wendy thinks I should.”

The room falls silent to that incredulous statement.

“People are not going to buy homes from someone who smells like kitty-poop all the time?”

“Don’t start, Patricia.”

“Then stick to what you do best. Answer phones, poop-head.”

“Ladies, please stop your bickering,” Debbie said.

The doorbell rang. After a brief pause Debbie chimed in, “Is someone going to get the door?”

The doorbell rings again. Pat and Kate stare at each other. “You’re the office flunkie,” Pat said, “so answer the door. Ooo. You don’t know who it is? That can mean only one thing.”

The doorbell rang again.

“I’m counting to three,” Debbie said with authority, “and if somebody isn’t hauling ass to the front door, you’ll both lose a day’s pay, I swear. One ...”

“One-and-a-half,” Pat inserted.

“Two ...”

“Better get it, Kate, or I swear, I’ll sneak in your basement and sterilize your cats.”

“You do that and I’ll tell your gynecologist that you’re thinking of leaving her because her chin hairs are driving you crazy.”

“Three ...” Debbie moved to get up, but Kate got up first and said, “Excuse me. I have to get the door.”

\*\*\*

Kate opens the front door and is met with Dan carrying yet another magnificent display of flowers.

“These will need water right away,” Dan said.

“They're heavenly, Dan. The colors are dazzling. Is it your arrangement?”

“Yes,” Dan said, “but the choice of flowers is per instructions of your admirer. He has a fine sense of floral compatibility.”

“Tell me who is he, Dan. You must know by now.”

“I can't. He swore me to secrecy.”

“Then you'll just have to return the bouquet,” Kate said. “I can't keep accepting these gifts without knowing who to thank. It's embarrassing. Is there a card enclosed this time?”

Dan nodded and checked his pockets but was slow in the search. As Dan puts the flowers down, Kate pushes a vestibule chair over so he can sit. “Here. You must be tired doing deliveries all day long.”

“No thanks. Actually, it's harder than most people think. Some of these weigh over 20 pounds, like the cacti ... That's plural for cactus ... cacti.”

“You seem quite intelligent, Dan.”

“Well, I do have my degree in botanical science. Ohio U.”

“Very impressive. What else should I know about you, Dan?”

“Well. Let me see. I had a couple of stories published in the Mystery Writers magazine.”

“Really. Who's your favorite author.

“Agatha Christie. No one matches her intrigue and suspense in a story.”

“Yes, I agree.”

Dan finds the card and hands it to Kate.

“Here it is. It came off when I loaded the van.”

Kate recited as she read, “Beauty begets beauty. Flowers will fade, but your beauty never could.” What a splendid compliment. And the hand writing, quite a flourish. Very unique if I may say so.”

“Ms. Devine, tell me something about you.”

“There's not much to tell. Have a stable of cats. A few more since yesterday. Love to read plays. I collect autographs of writers. Have a Thornton Wilder, a John Steinbeck.”

“What's your favorite play?”

“Cyrano de Bergerac! The romance and noble sentiment in that play always give me chills. Now, if I had that playwright's autograph. Hmm. Maybe you'd oblige me with your

signature now that I know you're an author?"

"Me? Oh, I don't know."

"Here, sign your name on this card. I'll add it to my collection."

Dan signed the card. He fiddled with it as he talked.

"I'd very much like to meet the man who fancies me as his Roxanne. I'd say to my secret Cyrano, should I ever meet him, that the poetry he bestows on me with his beautiful flowers are like fragrant words that deserve to be spoken face-to-face."

"The best mysteries are solved only after the suspense is savored," Dan said.

"Exactly. But at my age I have a habit of reading the last pages of a book first, so I don't waste time with an ending I don't like. May I have the card back?"

Dan returns the card with his signature on it.

"Thanks," Kate said. "Now, tell me, Dan. As a mystery writer, has handwriting analysis ever been a technique you've employed in any of your stories to solve a mystery?"

"Of course."

"And if I turn this card over and compare the hand writing, do you think I might finally solve the mystery of who my admirer is?"

"That depends if you could ever imagine me as your Cyrano," Dan confessed. "Could you care for someone who hides himself in roses and daffodils to conceal his own lack of appeal?"

"No mystery there, Dan. Anyone who sends such loveliness could never be less than beautiful himself."

The moment of silence is savored by both of them. Dan comes in and gave Kate a Rhett Butler kind of kiss. Kate noticed Pat by the door while Dan started nibbling on her neck.

"Stop it, you two," Pat said.

"He's so romantic, isn't he?" Kate said to Pat.

"Romantic my ass. He's gnawing at your neck like it's a hot dog. A little advice, Kate. Better practice safe sex with this guy."

"We've already discussed that." Kate elbowed Dan in his ribs. "Dan is going to install handrails around my bed."

Pat did know how to respond to that with Dan standing right there. So, she just said, "Where did you hide the reports?"



## CHAPTER NINE

In Debbie's realty office, later that afternoon, Patricia fussed over the day's paper work. She wore her best dress. Debbie walked in half-dressed and hair in rollers.

"I'm so nervous," she said. "Do I look okay?"

"Take the rollers out. Then ask me."

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"I hope that's not business. We've got to go soon. Pat, I'm scared."

Debbie scampered at the sound of the doorbell ringing again.

"The door's open," Pat yelled.

Still busy with her paperwork, Pat didn't recognize Joey because he hid his disfigured face by looking down. He walked in with a slight limp.

"Come in. I'm about to lock up. Got a few seconds, I guess."

Joey sat and Pat just stared hard at him.

"I feel that I know you," Pat said. "Have we met before?"

"I haven't heard that pick-up line in thirty years."

"Hmm. I guess I'm being cute. What brings you by?"

"I'm selling my family home. Over on Conklin. I'm selling because my mother recently died."

Joey handed Pat the photo. She didn't look at it right away.

"My dad bought it new. I'm selling because my mom recently died. I said that, didn't I?"

"That's okay. So, a single owner?"

"And no mortgages or liens, either."

"Give me a couple of days. I'll put together a comparative listing of homes in the neighborhood. And if you like what you see, we can do business."

"You have to see it. It has an oversized plot ... a backyard pool. It's really nice."

"I'm in a bit of a rush. I'm going to Carnegie Hall. In fact, we were about to close when you rang the door bell. Sorry."

"That's okay. We've had a 'for-sale' sign up for a long time. We thought of selling it by ourselves, but ... you know. Not a good idea when you don't know what you're doing? We need a realtor. Someone like you. Think you could give me a ball-park figure so I could start to plan..."

start to plan... plan... Sorry. My mind drifts every once and a while ... while ... while...It's sort of like Tourette's ... Tourette's."

"That's okay. Sometimes I lose track as well. One day I wanted my purse, so I went downstairs to retrieve it. I forgot what I wanted, so I went back upstairs, and as soon as I did that, I remembered what I wanted, so I went back down stairs and I forgot again. Twice in a row, can you believe it? Anyway...Moving can be very stressful."

"Yes. It is."

"Because of the stress you're under, this move must be difficult for you."

"No, not really. I haven't lived there in years. I live in a rooming house in the city. I'm an outpatient at the VA facility in Manhattan. You know, Post-Traumatic Stress. Kind of hard to explain. Got the Purple Heart for my troubles."

"I volunteer at the VA in Manhattan sometimes. I never saw you there."

"I'm only in there an hour a week. Maybe two. Physical therapy."

Pat studies Joey with increasing alarm. Looks at the photo.

"Do I know you from the neighborhood?" she finally asked.

"I don't know," Joey said, still not recognizing her. "What's your name?"

"Patricia O'Neil."

Shocked, Joey stood and began backing away. "No," he shouted. "This is impossible. I'm not ready for this. Forget I came."

"I know this house, don't I?" Pat said looking at the photo again. "I've been there, haven't I? The address is 145 Conklin, right?"

"I told you, I don't live there now."

"But you grew up there, didn't you?"

"I ... I ... I ... gotta go."

"You just can't drop into my life like this and then leave! Again!"

Joey backs up, as if he's going to run.

"Wait! I need to tell you ... You're a father, Joey. You have a son."

Joey hesitated on his exit. "No. That's impossible. I didn't hear you say that. I can't do this." He bolted from the office just as Debbie entered. He almost knocked her over.

"Whatever did you say to that man?" Debbie asked Pat.

"Debbie! That was Joey."

“As in 'your' Joey. Trevor’s father?”

The sound of the car peeling out has Debbie responding, “Well, what are you waiting for, girl? Jump in your car and go after him.”

“But what about you. I'm supposed to take you to the concert.”

“Don't worry about me. I'll find way. I'll call Kate on her cell or take a cab. Or something. Now, go before you lose him again. Just go! You'll spend the rest of your life regretting it if you don't.”

“Don't forget to bring Wendy's pocketbook. She left it here yesterday.”

“Okay. Okay. Go.”

Pat kissed her, gave her thanks, and left. Debbie ran to her desk, picked up the phone and dialed.

“I need a taxi. Quick,” she said then listened a bit. “World Series, my ass,” she said. “I can't wait that long. Never mind.”

Debbie hung up, and reached over to the recorder, and turned it on.”

“Disease and illness are preventable afflictions when your primary response to a stressful situation is stress and anxiety. You need to relax physically and mentally...”

Debbie dialed another number and turned off the recorder.

“Damn you, Kate. Pick up. Pick up.”

After a couple of seconds, she hung up.

“Dear God, not the bus.” She stood and started to pace back and forth trying to figure what to do. She looked to the ceiling and said, “Dear God, help me.”

Just as she said this, Wendy entered. Debbie didn't see her enter.

“What am I going to tell Wendy? No ... No. I gotta go to Carnegie. I'll take the bus. That's what I'll do. I'll take the bus.”

Debbie turned quickly and saw Wendy with her hand over her mouth ready to cry.

“I wanted it to be a surprise.”

“I don't know what to say, Mom. After thirty years ...”

“Yes. Yes. Now don't make a big deal of it.”

Wendy spotted her pocketbook on Pat's desk and grabbed it.

“I left my pocketbook,” Wendy said. “That's why I'm here. Come. Come on. My taxi is outside. We'll take it together.”

“No. Taxi's too close to the ground. Things speed by too fast. The bus is better. Less claustrophobic.”

“I don't have time to argue, Mom. I'm going to miss first call. The taxi's right outside. Let's go.”

Debbie ran into the vestibule area, retrieved her shawl and an umbrella from the alcove area and opened the front door just as a car whizzed by. A kaleidoscope of images caused her to falter. She slammed the door shut, then opened it again, and everything appeared normal. She walked to the porch casually, as if nothing had happened. Wendy escorted Debbie who was moaning and groaning all the way to the taxi.

Debbie slid in the back seat and Wendy slid in next to her, then slammed the door. To Debbie, it was if she was a prisoner and she heard the clanging of the cell doors slamming.

“Please hurry,” Wendy said to the taxi driver.

The airplane flying overhead, the motor scooter buzzing by, the voice of the taxi driver, all intensified and showed Debbie's full range of agoraphobia as she reacted to the onslaught of the outside world. After a brief period of traveling in the taxi, she repeated several times, “Bus is better. Bus is better...”

As the taxi stopped at a red light, she grabbed her shawl and umbrella and bolted out of the taxi. She didn't know where she was going, but finally she saw a church, so she ran up the steps to the front door. She swung the door open and ran in, and headed right for the confessional booth, as if she knew where she was going.

Back at the taxi, Wendy handed the driver money and said “Go if you must.”

\*\*\*

The front doors opened and Wendy walked into the church with trepidation.

“I haven't got time for this, Mother. Okay, you win. We'll take the bus.”

Wendy heard sobbing coming from the confessional booth and saw the umbrella leaning against the booth. Wendy walked over to it and turned the knob. It was locked, so she ducked into the center confessional. Once inside, she heard her mother sobbing.

“Mom ... stop.”

“I'm sorry, Sweetheart. I can't help this,” Debbie said through her sobs. “I know you don't believe me, but I really can't help it.”

“At this point, it doesn't matter what I believe. Can we just get focused so we can go to

the bus stop? Please.”

“See. You don't care, do you?”

“Don't have time for this circular crap, Mother.” She let out with a deep sigh and then said, “Okay. You want absolution. I absolve you from your sins. Say three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys.”

“What are you doing?”

“I'm giving you absolution of your sins.

“But you're not even Catholic.”

“Forgiveness is a human trait, not a religious one. I forgive you, Mom.”

“Then tell me to drink arsenic. But don't tell me to say the rosary.”

There was silence, then a groan from Wendy.

“You don't sound too forgiving.”

“What do you want me to say, Mom?”

“Tell me you love me.” Debbie starts sobbing again, and the echo of Wendy's scream was followed by total silence, which accentuated the echo that followed her scream.

“Why did you do that?” Debbie asked.

“Why is the sky blue, Mommy? Why is there evil in the world, Mommy? Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? I suppose you wish I were more grateful, don't you?”

“That would help,” Debbie said, not helping her situation.

“Well, I've tried to get close to you, Mother. And when I try, your issues seem to get in the way, and I can't stifle this thing that happens inside me...like someone's stoking coals in my soul. A chemical pumps through my body and I feel hot all over. And I can't look at you without wanting to scream. You should understand that feeling, right?”

“Yeah, well ... I'm sorry you feel that way.”

“I bare my soul to you, and that's all you want to say, some psycho-crap your doctor tells you to say.”

“You act as if I'm responsible for what someone else did to you. Well, I'm sorry, Wendy. You're not the only one who has hardships.”

Debbie puffed out a lungful of air and said, “Okay. I'm ready, now,” and with that Debbie's confessional door flew open and she bolted out of the confessional and out of the church.

Wendy followed. "I bet Norman Bates' mother was never like this." Wendy grabbed the umbrella that Debbie left behind and began singing and tapping the umbrella's tip on the floor as she walked out. xx

Meanwhile, Debbie ran down the church's steps and stopped. She tightened the shawl around her shoulders, then turned and saw Wendy heading towards her, so she ran towards the bus stop. All the movements, all the sounds and lights, hit her at once, so she stopped and froze. Wendy approached. "Close your eyes," she said.

Debbie closed her eyes. A car passed and the Doppler Effect of the engine sound started out loud but ended in a normal tone. Debbie's panic subsided.

"Okay, the car is gone," Wendy assured her mother. "Now look both ways. Anything coming?"

"No."

"Then let's cross the street."

Before they started to cross the street, Debbie said, "Dear God, you get me through this and I'll never use another four-letter word. I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep, Mother."

"It's getting dark."

"It's okay. They're just shadows, Mom. The bus stop is only a couple of blocks down the street."

"What am I going to do when the bus moves and things go flying by the window? I'll get dizzy. I'll faint."

"You'll close your eyes and take deep breaths is what you'll do. Like you're giving birth. Oh, that's right. You don't want to do that."

Debbie approached a corner and heard people talking. Debbie stopped. She heard the voices no one else could hear except her. The scenery was as if it were right out of a Hitchcock movie. To Debbie, the voices got stronger, more menacing. To her, the sounds, incoherent, seemed to be coming from everywhere. Maybe they were voices of muggers or thieves in the night.

Debbie grabbed the umbrella from Wendy and readied herself, as if it were a weapon. Whispering, she called out her daughter's name and said "I hear voices."

"What are they saying to you?"

“They're not in my head. They're real. Don't you hear them?”

Maybe Wendy shouldn't have said that she heard them, but she was going to be late for the show if she didn't do something that would move them forward. Still, for Debbie, the voices got louder, and more menacing as they get closer to the corner. The voices sounded wicked. At the edge of the corner the voices sounded their worst and Debbie jumped ahead and looked, as if she was going to see the Phantom of the Opera, or someone like that. Instead, there was nothing to show for her anxiety.

“See,” Wendy said. “No one is there.”

Still, Debbie screamed at the top of her lungs, dropped her umbrella, threw her shawl over her face and ran across the side street. Wendy picked up the umbrella then walked briskly after her mother who slowed down but continued walking with the shawl on her head. Wendy caught up to her and took the shawl off her head so she could see again.

“This is so hard,” Debbie said.

“Let's just focus. It's getting late. I don't want to miss my solo.”

Wendy handed the umbrella to Debbie and they continued walking to the bus stop. The engine sound of someone traveling down the street in a motor scooter unnerved Debbie. To her, it sounded like a jet engine.

She looked up and saw a plane high above her at 30,000 feet up in the sky. She closed her eyes and saw the plane again, this time it was flying overhead 100 feet and it roared by her. She went into a full fledged anxiety attack and fell.

Debbie got up screaming. She collided into a Bag Lady and fell. Debbie quickly got up and pointed the umbrella at the Bag Lady, as if it were a sword.

“Hey, I was walkin' here,” the Bag Lady said in her best Dustin Hoffman impersonation.

“One false move and you're dead,” Debbie said.

Debbie reacted to the sounds of the cars that were zooming by as if they were cannons being shot on a battle field. In response to the noise, Debbie threw the shawl over her head and hugged the Bag Lady who tried to free herself from Debbie's grip.

“Wendy. Wendy,” Debbie called out. “Where are you?”

Wendy peeled Debbie off the Bag Lady and stood between them to prevent an altercation. “I'm right here, Mom. I know this is difficult, but it's only a block to the bus stop. You're almost there.”

“Hey,” the Bag Lady said loud and clear. “This is my territory. Go find your own street.”

Wendy held her mother's arm and they gingerly continued forward with the shawl over Debbie's head. She peeked out a few times to see where she was. The Bag Lady followed them.

“I can't see. I can't see,” Debbie bellowed when the shawl was covering her head.

“Mom. That's probably because you have the shawl over your head. Take it off.

People will think you're a nut cake.”

“Too fast. Things move too fast, if I take it off.”

“Then walk slower.” Debbie removed the shawl from her head and walked slower.

Surprisingly, her vision returned to normal.

“We're at the bus stop,” Wendy said.

The Bag Lady stopped a few feet away.

“We made it,” Debbie shrieked.

Wendy pulled at Debbie and they both sat down on the bench at the bus stop.

“You did real good, Mom. I'm proud of you. So, now we just wait for the bus. It'll take us to the bus terminal in New York City and from there we'll take a taxi and go to the hall.”

Debbie dropped her umbrella and the Bag Lady picked it up.

“Give it to me,” Debbie said.

“Finders, keepers.”

Wendy rose from the bench and faced the Bag Lady who pointed the umbrella at her.

Debbie rose as well.

“What's the matter with you?” the Bag Lady said to Debbie.

“I could ask the same thing of you.”

The Bag Lady pointed the umbrella at Debbie just as a car zoomed by.

“Too fast. Things move too fast. Everything gets ... discombobulated.”

“Whoa. Dis-cooom-boob-ulated. Oo! Aren't we the grown-up person using big words that twist the tongue.”

“Give me my umbrella back.”

“You want it back? Come and get it.

“Mom, it's not going to rain tonight. I'll get you another umbrella. Leave her be.”

Debbie sat back down and threw the shawl over her head.

“What's her problem?” the Bag Lady asked Wendy.

“She doesn't get out very often? What's your problem, lady?”

The Bag Lady poked Debbie in the arm with the umbrella. “Hey, dis-cooom-boob-ulated lady?” she said. She poked Debbie again. “You sick in the head, or something?”

She poked Debbie again, and again, and with each stab she said, “Hey you,” and ended with, “What's the matter with you?”

Debbie pounded her fists into her lap in a fit of hysteria. As the Bag Lady went to poke Debbie again, Wendy intercepted the umbrella and a tug-of-war began. Wendy yanked the umbrella out of the Bag Lady's hand and whacked her with it.

Meanwhile, while Debbie tried to get up, the Bag Lady pushed her back down with her foot. Wendy grabbed the Bag Lady by her collar and the Bag Lady growled.

“Pipe down, lady,” Wendy said. “Now, you sit here and be a good little girl, or I'll take your eyeballs out with a corkscrew and stuff them up your butt.”

The Bag Lady backed off and sat down and was quiet the whole time before the bus arrived.

## CHAPTER TEN

At the bus terminal, Wendy was waiting in the woman's room in front of a stall. She talked to her mother from behind the closed door while Debbie was going to the bathroom. Wendy looked at her watch.

"Mom, are you going to come out any time soon?"

"No. I can't go if you're standing there."

"Well, I want you to know that I called Kate on her cell. She's coming here and will take you to the hall while I go to Carnegie. I should at least make intermission. My solo is in the second half, so I think I'm okay."

Just then, Kate entered the Woman's Room.

"Oh, thank God you're here," Wendy said.

Kate pointed to the stall and said, "Is she in there?"

"Yes. She locked herself in and I have to go, I'm sorry."

"Go, go. Intermission is in a couple of minutes."

"I don't know you well, but ... Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, go. Go! We'll have plenty of time to connect. You'll make the second half if you hurry."

Wendy left while Kate sat in the chair next to the stall. She fumbled with her jacket and pulled out a flask. "You in there?"

"Yes." Debbie could be heard but not seen.

"You want a swig. It's whiskey."

After a short pause Debbie slowly comes out and without hesitation grabbed the flask and took a healthy drink. She handed the flask back to Kate who also took a healthy swig.

"Thanks. I can't go. I'm too scared."

"Come on, Debbie. You gotten this far, another mile or two won't matter. We can take a cab home. I don't want to miss the second half. I'm leaving. Bye."

As Kate started to leave, Debbie pulled her back, grabbed the flask and took another swig. She handed it back to Kate who also took a swig. Debbie slammed the stall door shut.

"Open doors scare the shit out of me," Debbie said.

“Me too. Let’s face our fears together. Join me in a toast to our daughters.” Kate took another swig.

“What? You have a daughter?”

‘Yup,’ Kate gave out a hearty reply. “And today’s her birthday. To Wendy and Dorothy”

Kate took another swig and handed the flask to Debbie who also took another swig.

“I’d like to meet her,” Debbie said.

“One reunion at a time. Let’s go.”

“Wait. What? You and Dorothy aren’t close?”

“That’s not true. In fact, she’s with me all the time.”

They slow-step their way to the center of the bus depot where, while Kate explained her fate, they work their way through the crowd of people to the escalator and to the main floor.

“You look confused,” Kate began. “Let me explain. My little girl, Dorothy, she had a sparkle in her eyes that told you she was going to be someone special when she grew up: a writer, perhaps, or a doctor, a philosopher, someone worth knowing. She was so inquisitive, a thousand questions about the simplest things. I saw her once gently pick up an ant between her fingers. She put it real close to her face and said (using a gravelly voice) Wow! (back to her normal voice) and she stared at it for minutes on end. When she finally put it down, it scurried away, better off for its encounter. She was that intense, sometimes.

“She’d look into my eyes and see straight into my heart and I’d be forced to say (in a gravelly voice) Wow. (back to her normal voice) I would feel worthy by the simple stare that caught me off-guard. I wondered who or what this child was who could see so far into my soul. A smile from her gave me the confidence that God lived. When she started talking, there was no end to her questions. Her adventure became my adventure. She’d look in wonderment at the birds in the tree branches and demand to know their names. “Wutsdat” ... “Wutsdat”, she would ask. Sticks, leaves, birds, cement, cars, the wind against her face. Everything. She’d wander off after anything that caught her eye. She didn’t stay in one place for long. Those precious eyes saw such a fascinating world we all take for granted like a butterfly, or a floating feather.”+

“Then, one day I was sitting on the couch, exhausted from trying to keep pace with her as she darted from room to room. She was wearing a pair of pink sneakers with pale blue laces. Those sneakers were so worn from all the miles she ran in them. Anyway, unless the laces were firmly tied, Dorothy would put up a fuss and would sit on the floor saying, “Pleeese, Pleeese”

until they were fastened. That day I found myself falling asleep just as she tugged on my sleeve to tie up the lace on her left sneaker that had become undone. The room was barricaded and I was so sleepy. I tied the lace, watched her turn on the TV, and I fell asleep. But the child-gate was loose. And the kitchen door was unlocked. And the street was ... busy. And my child with her inquisitive mind and voice calling out 'Wutsdat ... Wutsdat' to a slumbering mother, found her way into the unknown. That's the day God died for me."

Debbie didn't even realized she had hustled her way through a crowd of busy people bumping her way to the bottom floor of the terminal.

"For years," Kate continued, "I thought about the shoelace I tied and the gate I left loose. Drove myself insane with grief and blame."

"Sweet Jesus! I thought I had it bad."

"You do," Kate said. "But we all do. Life's a bitch and then you die."

"But Wendy won't forgive me."

"Agh, forgiveness? Hardest thing to do in life. Spent years seeking it. You can't forgive, especially yourself, unless you change something inside yourself." Kate pounded on her chest.

"After Dorothy was gone I couldn't move, went nowhere, saw no one. Dorothy's father died in a car accident before she was born, so ... no help there. Anyway, one morning after she died an emaciated alley cat crept into my kitchen and wouldn't leave. Poor thing was starving and I had to do something. So I left the house to buy some milk and when I got back the cat had curled up asleep between Dorothy's pink sneakers. Dorothy was trying to tell me something. Sje wanted me to move on."

"You think Dorothy forgave you?"

"It's not about forgiveness, Debbie. It's about acceptance. Accept your daughter for who she is and you for who you are. Do that and then you'll have the heart to forgive yourself, and once you do that, you'll be able to forgive her.

They reached the Eighth Avenue exit and the line of cabs outside.

"Wait," Debbie commanded. "You're the psychic. Tell me if I make it in one piece."

"Yes. You make it in one piece. But it's a bit of a walk. One more test. You have to take a cab to finish this.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

A few minutes later, outside of Carnegie hall, Trevor came out just as Joey meandered slowly towards him.

“You coming out because of intermission?” Joey asked.

Trevor nodded, and started to say something but Wendy came buzzing through the crowd like a chain saw.

“Good,” she said to Trevor. “I made it in time. We’ll talk later.”

She hustled inside just as Joey excused himself and asked Trevor how much he had missed.

“Intermission just started. You missed about half of it. Best part is coming up, though.”

Joey twirled an unlit cigarette between his fingers. “Good. Then I have time for this. Got a light?”

Trevor lights the cigarette with his Zippo.

“Much obliged. I know ... I see it in your eyes. I'm trying to quit. I haven't seen an old Zippo like that in a long time.”

“It's a keepsake. It belonged to my father.”

“I had one ... I had one. I know I had ... I'm sorry I get lost. Sometimes I can't even remember my name. My mind gets jumbled. How's the concert going?”

“Amazing. The woman you just saw has a solo performance in the second half that should be outstanding.”

“Good. I'll keep that in mind. It's nice to have a stake in something you're watching.”

“Yes, indeed,” Trevor said. “Where are you sitting, by the way.”

“I don't actually have a ticket,” Joey admitted. “I know it's a sold out house, but standing room is fine.”

“Well, this must be your lucky day. The guy sitting next to me is a doctor and he got called out on an emergency.”

“Oh, wow! Thank you.” He took a puff on his cigarette then added, “I have a friend inside as well. We met today after a very long time apart. I didn't handle it very well I'm afraid. She followed me in her car. Caught up with me at a stop light. Motioned for me to pull over, but I didn't. At a stop light she yelled at me to come here tonight then I sped away. I was afraid, I

guess. I'm here to apologize and ... and ... change all that if I can ... if I can. She's in the audience somewhere. Somewhere. I thought I'd surprise her."

"It's that kind of a night, I guess. You from around here?"

"Born and raised in Brooklyn. I'm looking to sell the family home, though. My mother recently passed and all I need is an apartment. I don't need this big house."

"This must be your lucky day. My mom works in a realty office." He frisked himself. "I'm sure I have her card somewhere."

"The soloist. She's a close friend?"

"We were engaged once. I've been trying to get our relationship back on track. I'm sorry. I shouldn't be so personal."

"Oh, no, no. That's okay. It's okay. I came here to settle a piece of the past as well. I let a relationship die a long time ago because I felt ... Unworthy, I guess."

"Oh, here's the card," Trevor said as he handed to Trevor.

Joey didn't look at it and said, "So, what ... what do you do?"

"I'm a teacher. High school drama."

"Bet you're good at it. You seem very personable. A friendly guy. Your folks raised you right ... right."

"My mom is a single parent. I never knew my dad."

"Yet you carry his lighter? Interesting! Let me see it."

"What makes you feel 'unworthy', if you don't mind me asking?"

Joey takes a cursory look at the Zippo. "No, that's okay. Did you ever go somewhere and suddenly realize you don't know where the hell you are or how you got there? Happens a lot to me. Doctor...Doctor...Doctor says I get lost physically cause I feel lost emotionally. Hard to explain, but it makes me keep to myself ... myself."

Trevor thumbed Carnegie and said, "So, the person you know inside understands all this?"

"I guess. I don't know. It's my fault if she doesn't. I don't stick around long enough to talk things out. My MO, I guess."

"You see. Just the opposite with me. She's the one who leaves and gets lost. If I told you what I found out..." Trevor stopped and thought twice about divulging personal information about someone else, especially Wendy.

“Tell me. You got nothing to lose. You’ll never see me again.”

“Well, she might’ve been pregnant with my child two years ago and got an abortion and never told me. Or, she might’ve gotten pregnant by someone else.”

“This is way too weird,” Joey said. “I just found out I have a kid. Wow. So, you might’ve been the father, huh?”

“I guess. The operative word there is ‘might’. I don’t know.”

“I know it’s none of my business, but something tells me you’d be a good father if you ever got the chance.

Trevor looked at Joey as if he was beginning to realize that he was speaking to his own father.

Joey inspects the Zippo lighter more carefully and began to realize that he was speaking to his son.

“Stay with her,” Joey said. “You’ve suddenly got a second chance at being part of something that truly matters - a family. Don’t walk away from her now when she needs you the most. I wish I took that advice. I’d be much happier than I am now. Hey, this lighter. The initials on the backside are same as mine. And this card you gave me, it says Pat O’Neil ...”

Pat enters just as the cab pulled up.

“Trevor, it’s time to get inside before ... Joey? You came.”

\*\*\*

Trevor and Joey enter the Hall just as Kate and Debbie step out of the cab.

“I can tell you more stories,” Kate said as if she had been talking non-stop since Debbie was in the woman’s room. “I got a slew of them, like why Samantha needs to be neutered and how she only nurses on the yoga mat. And, you’ll love this, how my precious Dandelion cornered a squirrel in the laundry room last year and actually backed it into a bucket of bleach. And then there was Missy. She caught a mouse with her back paws. And then there were the cutest calico kittens under the driver’s seat on the M44 to Astoria. Do you know what I did?”

“Oh God, I can’t go in. You go. I’ll follow soon.”

Kate hesitated, but nodded and went in.

Debbie listens to the music by the doorway as the orchestra played *The William Tell’s Overture*. The music stopped abruptly and tapping sounds followed as if the Maestro was banging his baton against the music stand bringing the orchestra and the audience to attention.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the unseen Maestro said. “Please put your hands together for a wonderful Cellist doing her very first solo. Please welcome Wendy Hammel who will play her rendition of *Amazing Grace* in G minor.

Debbie leaned against the wall and listened. She got very emotional, then took a deep breath and vanishes into the hall.

THE END