

UNINTENDED

A NOVEL

Doug Brendel

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“Sad as a lonely little wrinkled balloon
He said, ‘Well I don’t claim to be happy about this, boys
And I don’t seem to be happy about that’
I don’t want no part of this crazy love
I don’t want no part of your love....”

Paul Simon
“Crazy Love, Vol. II”
Graceland

Prologue

Maddie swings, and the new boy flinches. Ruby's heart skips. It always does.

Maddie is not hefty, which is part of why it's a surprise to the boy. She's long, even for sixteen. You might imagine she's twenty. Her breasts are round but her hips are narrow and her legs are a filly's – stilts. The other girls her age are half a head shorter. Ruby, her younger sister, feels awfully round, awfully short and soft. But her eyes follow Maddie with mostly adoration, hardly any jealousy.

Their mother, Deenah, a huge woman with marvelously delicate fingers, does Maddie's hair in endless narrow braids. They become tight lines of black light when Maddie lets them dangle, and even when she pulls them back, the gleaming streaks make her taller, longer. An educated person might use the word *lithe* – but there are no educated folk here, in the part of Leland they call darktown, where the Negroes live.

Ruby, just fourteen, just pulls her hair back and ties it behind her head. To mimic Maddie would be futile.

The new boy doesn't think Maddie is strong. Her arms are smooth. But when she swings that bat, a fire shoots through her, slicing off of her shoulders and elbows, her wrists and knuckles, so that the new boy has the momentary sensation of a burning saucer flying directly at him. The ragged ball tears past his left ear so fast that it's well past second base before his body can react, and then he ripples – his neck and knees buckling at the same moment, his hips shuddering the opposite way to keep his balance. Ruby's eyes follow Maddie as she flies, her long legs electric. The new boy whirls to peer into the outfield, where boys are flinging themselves toward the escaping ball. Maddie is rounding second base as Ruby turns to look at the new boy. His skin is light enough that he flushes as the infielders giggle.

“Maddie scare ya?” one of them calls.

The new boy bunches up his mouth and exhales through his nose. Maddie leans on a knee at third base, breathing hard, unsmiling. She's played well as long as Ruby can remember. They used sticks for a long time – until finally, a couple years ago, Tobias Farley produced an actual bat. All the neighbor kids crowded around it. It was rough and

splintery, but only on the surface: no deep cracks or splits. Tobias claimed a white boy threw it away after getting a new one for Christmas, and why not pull it out of the trash? Ruby didn't believe him but she didn't care. She watched Maddie close her hands around the coarse neck and let the solid weight of the wood pull against her forearms. The other children yammered but Ruby was silent, as Maddie turned away a step or two and brought the bat up over one shoulder. Maddie and Ruby had watched white boys play with a real bat. They sometimes crawled close enough to the white people's park, in under the line of tangled shrubs beyond left field. Maddie squinted at their hands and, back on the dirt field in her own part of town, she mimicked them, teaching herself to slash and sting the ball, even with a stick. But now, thanks to Tobias, *a bat*. Ruby watched her sister lean into it and rotate it around in front of her body. A kind of warmth seemed to flow directly out of her arms into the wood as she moved.

"Try it!" Ruby had cried, her round face radiant. No one else haggled for first try. Everybody knew: If anyone could test a real bat, it would be Maddie.

She stepped to the plate — a mostly flat rock in a scraped-out hollow in the dirt — and Tobias pitched the pitiful, floppy-skinned baseball. Maddie ripped the bat around to meet it. The wood made a sharp cluck as it struck, and the ball's stuffings exploded. Maddie stood wide-eyed, a stunned angel in a halo of twine dust. Ruby and the other children screamed, delighted, and the carcass of the baseball crumpled to the earth, a mess of leather and string clinging to the rubber-coated heart.

By now, Ruby is unsurprised by the surprise. A new child in town is always astonished by Maddie at bat. Ruby almost might have snickered at this newest new boy, a braggart who insisted on pitching because that's what he did back in West Virginia. But she doesn't bother. After Maddie's first at-bat, Ruby always sees the flicker of fear in a new boy's eyes. The pitches arrive nervous after that.

In the distance, a spoon strikes a frying pan four times.

"No, finish!" Ruby calls. But she knows it's pointless. Maddie, a "good child," is already off, her legs gliding across the dusty field toward home. Mama calls, and the game is over for Maddie. Ruby trudges in her sister's wake. The other children grumble. Some half-

heartedly ask, “Wanna keep on?” But they know supper is nearly on all over darktown.

Ruby sees the new boy fall into step beside Maddie, looking sideways and up at her. He’s shorter, and has to take a fifth step to each of her four, hopping a bit to keep up.

Maddie turns as she moves, smiling the slightest smile. “What’s your name?”

“Henry.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me!” he squeaks.

Maddie keeps her fluid stride but touches his upper arm. “Sorry anyway.”

Henry sighs heavily as he bumps along. To Ruby, Maddie hardly seems to be moving, yet Henry can hardly keep pace. Toward the edge of the vast dirt field, patches of forlorn grass hold their own. The children always call it the dirt field – it’s nothing more than an uncertain square of land where there isn’t anything, a brown buffer between the black and white parts of Leland, Ohio. To Ruby, growing up here, the dirt field is a sprawling sunbaked paradise of baseball and footraces and big kids’ fistfights and imaginary wars and bug-catching. But at the farthest edge of the field lies the reality of a bumpy street, once paved in neat rectangles of brick, now cracked and crumbled, with haggard shoots of the same sad grass. Across the street are the first of the houses of darktown, huddled close and hovering around the south side of the vast dirt field, houses drawn in thin and tilted lines, paint worn away to show the wood or tin or block beneath.

Ruby hurries to catch up, her feet thumping. “Where you live?” she asks.

“Three streets.” Henry gestures, falling behind Maddie to walk alongside Ruby. “We had to move. My uncle got in trouble. My cousin Raymond plays real ball.”

“Real ball? What was we playin’?”

“He’s a grownup. He plays in a league.”

“League? What kind of league?”

“Colored. Up by Pittsburgh. He’s supposed to come visit us because of my uncle.” He looks at Maddie, now far ahead.

“She’s my sister,” Ruby says.

“My cousin Raymond won’t believe her.”

“What?” Maddie calls, looking over her shoulder. She sees her sister lagging. “Ruby!”

“When he sees you hit!” Henry calls to her. “I’ll bring him to watch you!”

Maddie wrinkles her forehead and smiles at the same time. “Why? No grownup’s gonna want to watch a kid play baseball.”

Henry peels away, now trotting backwards, on a diagonal toward his own house. Maddie stops short, her long braids dancing, waiting for some kind of answer.

“Because you’re amazing!” he cries.

Ruby sees Maddie’s face flash warm. For an instant Maddie and the boy are looking at each other. Then Maddie whirls, turning away quickly – but Ruby sees how she has relished the moment. Henry has already turned and dashed away.

“Ruby!” Maddie barks as she turns again to run toward home. “Mama’s gonna tan your hide!”

* * *

Henry’s grownup cousin Raymond thinks the kid is crazy, but the boy is so jumpy and goofy about it that he agrees to walk over to this “dirt field” and see this girl swing a bat. As they approach, the game stops, and everyone turns to watch. Rarely have any of the children seen an adult on the dirt field. Here, striding steadily toward them, is a behemoth carrying a baseball glove – and a little bug of a boy flitting all around him.

“There she is,” Henry announces. “Maddie Tillmore. This is my cousin Raymond.” Henry turns to the rest of the group. “He plays in a league up by Pittsburgh.”

The children stand in a silent semi-circle of awe.

“How do you do,” Maddie offers quietly.

Raymond stands a head taller than she. His arms and neck are stout with muscles. His mouth is crooked with a smirk.

“Henry says you can hit the ball.”

“Oh Lord yes!” Henry wheezes.

“Henry, please,” Maddie says. She looks at Raymond’s eyes and sees

them mocking her. “I didn’t ask Henry to make you do this.”

Raymond puts up his palms. “Right. How about if you hit me a few?”

Tobias Farley, dazed till now, jerks the bat forward for Maddie to take. Ruby is holding the ball. She looks down at it and feels ashamed. Her finger covers the rubber where it’s exposed. Ruby can’t bring herself to toss the ball, not this ball, not to a man who played in a league. She steps carefully to just an arm’s length from him and holds the object out for him to take. He turns the tattered thing over in his fingers and half-grins, shaking his head.

“That is one shitty ball,” he chuckles.

He walks to what serves as the pitcher’s mound, a rough square dug up by children’s toes. The children stand like statues. Raymond looks around.

“Y’all want to field for me?”

Their faces do not change. But they move silently into their places. Maddie stands ready over home plate, and Raymond turns to face her.

“Okay, let’s try this.”

His arm swings back like a pendulum and rocks forward. The ball swoops in a great arc and over the plate. Maddie doesn’t move – Tobias catches the ball – then Maddie straightens up with a puzzled face. The other children begin to titter.

“Uh, we don’t play underhand,” Maddie says, and the children’s giggles sputter alive.

Raymond receives the ball and tips his head a bit.

“Huh. Right.”

He takes a breath, winds up, and pitches. The bat flashes. It sounds like a gunshot. The ball shrieks over Raymond’s head. He has to plant a foot to get his bearings. Ruby watches Maddie fly to second base, then turns to look at Raymond. He’s scowling – a hollow scowl, like the face of a man caught in a lie. He looks back at Maddie, then at Henry, then back at Maddie. His mouth opens on a word, but no word comes out.

Henry wiggles his eyebrows. “See?”

Raymond looks at the dirt and rubs the back of his neck.

“God damn,” he says. He bites at the inside of his mouth.

Henry makes a big-eyed face at Maddie. She scratches something

itchy on her ear.

“I told you,” Henry reminds Raymond.

“Yeah, shut up,” Raymond responds, still frowning. “Uh, Maddie.”

“Yes sir,” she answers.

“Let’s try another one, all right?”

“Sure.” She’s moving smoothly back toward home plate. She picks up the bat and gets ready.

Ruby watches as Raymond looks at the ground and blinks slowly. Finally he blows out a big breath through his mouth and looks at Maddie. He takes a pause, then goes into his windup. The ball rockets out of his hand – Maddie erupts, Ruby’s heart thumps – and in a lightning flash, the ball smashes back into Raymond’s glove, directly in front of his face, knocking him back a step.

“Oh,” Maddie croaks. “That wasn’t too good!”

Raymond lowers the glove from his face and looks at the ball that almost beamed him. For a second, his face is a slate of shock, retroactive terror. Then Ruby sees the veins thicken with embarrassment on his temples, even as he shifts his weight. Ruby has seen this from plenty of new kids, trying to look casual.

“Do you want me to hit another one?” Maddie asks softly. “I can do better.”

Raymond snorts.

“Let her show ya,” Henry calls.

Raymond looks up. His jaw is tight, his eyes a little glassy.

“Sure,” he murmurs.

He rubs the back of his neck again. He stands still for only a second. Then he winds up.

In that final second, Ruby can see that his windup isn’t right. He’s in too much of a hurry. There’s a tension in his body, like a spring drawn tight through the middle of him. But the ball is in Maddie’s face before she can pull out of the way. It takes only an inkling for her to twitch – just a bit to one side – and the ball crashes into her skull just above her left temple. The force of it punches her backward off her feet; the bat seems to float out of her hands. Her body and the bat crash into the dirt together, puffs of dirt jumping out from under them.

Everyone freezes. Silence.

“Maddie!” Ruby screams. But she’s frozen too.

“Jesus, oh Jesus,” Raymond groans from deep in his throat. Then he’s kneeling over her and the children are all around like stricken flies and Henry is jabbering: “You hit her! You hit her!” Ruby, standing near Maddie’s bloody head, her face wrenched, begins to suck air and let out a shrill, almost silent scream, over and over.

“Take her home!” Henry is wailing. “Carry her home!” The children began crying and shouting.

“No! Don’t move her!” Raymond yells. “Jesus! Get her mother! Get a doctor!”

Henry stands paralyzed by panic.

“Henry!” Raymond screams. “Damn it!”

Henry points to Ruby. “That’s her sister!”

Raymond twists to look up at Ruby. She’s lost in her rhythmic panting. He grabs her wrist and yanks hard.

“Go tell your mother. Now!”

Ruby falls silent, looking in horror at him. When she opens her mouth, another sound comes out, hideously – a single-breath scream that slashes everyone else to silence. There’s another split-second of stone-cold stillness. Then, finally, she forces herself to hurl about and flee toward home. Some of the children scramble after her. Among those left behind, the chaotic babbling and bawling begin again.

“Is she dead?”

“Maddie’s dying!”

“She’s dead!”

But Maddie’s chest is moving, and her mouth begins to open. “Gah!” Raymond blurts, startled. Her lips come together, then part. Her throat seems to flex. Raymond grits his teeth. “Talk to me,” he growls. “Talk to me, Maddie.”

“Bee,” she whispers, her eyes still closed.

“Yes, Jesus, yes,” Raymond pleads.

“Bee,” Maddie whispers again. “Bee. Key.”

Raymond is drenched in sweat, and now sobs begin to choke him. “What. What. *Maddie!* Talk to me!”

“Bee, key,” she mouths.

Raymond’s eyes are watery. Maddie’s forehead wrinkles.

“Bee, key,” she says again.

He looks away. His face twists. "Jesus in heaven help her."

"Bee, key."

An echo of anguish reaches the dirt field. Raymond looks toward the street and sees an enormous woman, her legs pounding up desperate clouds of dust, an almost supernatural cry riding ahead of her through the thick air.

"Eee! Eee!"

Maddie's face clenches.

"Bee, key," she urges.

Raymond leans back, away from Maddie, as Deenah approaches, Ruby following close. The woman closes in with astonishing grace on the fallen girl, folding herself silently over her baby. She lays her hands gently on either side of her daughter's face. The woman's eyes crunch closed.

"Sweet Jesus in heaven," she moans.

Maddie moans in response. The woman looks sharply into her face.

"Bee, key," Maddie whispers.

Her mother's face opens with a start.

"Bee key," Maddie repeats.

"Oh lordy," Deenah gulps.

Raymond shivers. "What," he rasps.

"Bee key."

Deenah's eyes draw closed, and she swallows pain.

"What?" Raymond begs.

"Bee key," Maddie breathes. "Bee key, bee key."

The big woman looks down at her daughter again, then she turns her face away and bawls huge tears. It's the kind of crying that opens the mouth and shows the teeth. She gurgles as she cries.

"Mama?" Ruby whimpers, sounding younger than fourteen.

"She's a baby again," Deenah mourns. "She wants the nipple."

Raymond squints harder, as if this will make sense of it. "What?" he insists.

"Bee key," Maddie laments softly.

"Binky," Deenah replies. "She wants her binky."

1.

The sweet stench of rubber hung in the air six days a week. On Sunday, the factory was closed, of course, but otherwise the entire complex clanged and whirred and chattered almost around the clock. Up in Akron, the great rubber companies had risen up like monolithic beasts, sprawling over acres of land and commanding the attention of thousands of workers. They not only fabricated millions of tires but also churned out rivers of rubber – dark rubber, pale rubber, hard, soft – to be heated and shaped and cooled and molded and pressed for a thousand other uses. Along the railroad tracks and major roads that snaked away from Akron in all directions, factories and shops rose up and took form, spawned by the flow of rubber.

By 1940, Chester Arthur Fivecoat was already the wealthiest man in Leland, by virtue of inherited money, but he had an entrepreneurial urge that could not be controlled. Rubber was revenue. Tires didn't interest him, because to buy a tire you needed a car, and to buy a car you needed a major investment, and to make a major investment you needed time. Centered between his old-fashioned mutton-chop sideburns, Fivecoat's eyes danced with a vision of small things: O-rings inside machines, tubes and hoses for equipment, things that get hot and dry and soon crack and need to be replaced; and household items, things you buy often, things that wear out or get lost or become damaged and must be replaced. Things made with rubber. Not the high-grade rubber that Goodyear insisted on. Fivecoat only needed the cheap rubber.

He built Leland Supply Company, a striking red brick cube, and began producing it all: hot water bottles, stoppers, nipples, balls, gaskets, bellows, pads, bands, seals, liners, grips, plugs, guards to keep blades from cutting when they weren't supposed to – whatever he could find another company to purchase in quantity. Workers came from all over Leland. Negroes had to come through a considerable stretch of town to get to the job, which inspired some fussing by white residents in the first year or two. But there were no incidents, and by the mid-1940s it was commonplace to see a Negro walking or riding a wobbly bicycle through Leland.

When Jake Valentine left Leland after high school, he didn't intend to return. He said he was heading to college out east, but it didn't work out that way. He saw the sights, worked a bit, met some people, observed the city ways, learned some of them. When the draft started, Jake's lottery number was lucky. When he finally decided to enroll in classes, he was one of the oldest students in the classroom. College, he found, was easy for someone already in his mid-twenties. The prof wanted a composition – "How have party politics shifted since Truman became President?" – but on the day of the deadline, Jake hadn't begun it. Instead, he spoke with the prof privately; the professor soon admitted that the paper wasn't all that important. Jake had something much more interesting in mind: he would stage the concepts, using other students to represent political groups and their leaders. It would only take an additional week to produce. The prof was eager to see such a thing, and happy to wait.

College was easy.

Jake was still a freshman when he met sophomore Tyler Clendennon, who would under no circumstances lend out the black LaSalle his father had sent with him to school. But Jake spoke with him privately, and soon Tyler was eager to lend out the LaSalle, because a blind date could be arranged for him with Julia Haskell. Julia wouldn't give Tyler a thing, but Tyler nonetheless remained in awe of Jake Valentine.

College was fun.

A classmate in Language Arts as it turned out was eager to give up his Saturdays for those two months for Jake's project. Somehow, he did most of the work and still thought the world of Jake. A girl named Liza Grace as it turned out was eager to let Jake open her blouse. Even after it was over, somehow Liza Grace still adored him – or he assumed so; she fluttered her eyelashes involuntarily whenever she saw him on campus.

College was good.

Jake loved the energy of the east, the motion and the noise of the cities. He loved the hustling, he loved the competition. The women

were sharp and beautiful. But there were also a million other Jake Valentines there – with equally handsome square jaws, equally blond hair gleaming straight back from their foreheads, equally ready smiles. Jake looked ahead and looked back, and Leland had its own allure. The men of Leland were older, or if they weren't older, they seemed older. Or if they didn't seem older, they seemed simpler.

And now, going up in the lag between his first and last years away, there was Leland Supply. Jake could stand two streets away and still see the fancy blue lettering of the company name at the top of the building's face. In quiet, low-slung Leland, this was big. The east was fine; he could do well in the big city. But here, in Leland, he might do even better. A smaller pond.

In the break between semesters, in the middle of his final year away from Leland, Jake made an appointment to see Mr. Fivecoat and ask him for a job in sales. He was 26 years old, but his only jacket was a tweedy number, barely long enough in the sleeves to conceal the frayed edges of his shirt cuffs.

"Sit."

Fivecoat had a deep brown leather chair for visitors.

"What have you learned in college, Mr. Valentine?"

Jake smiled out of one side of his mouth and crossed his legs.

"Nothing, sir."

Fivecoat coughed.

"May I speak frankly, sir?" Jake asked.

"Too late," Fivecoat huffed.

"Nothing in college, at least nothing about selling," Jake continued.

"Everything I've learned about selling I've learned outside of class."

Fivecoat's eyes narrowed. "And that might be along what lines?"

"I've learned I can talk people into things."

"Indeed."

Jake leaned forward in the big chair, elbows on his knees and his hands in motion before him.

"You see a need – for hot water bottles or rubber bands or whatever – and you fill the need. That's great. There's an art to seeing the need and meeting it. I admire you for that."

Fivecoat waved a hand. "Yes, right. Please. Skip that."

"But there's more money to be made, sir."

Fivecoat looked at him sharply – and now he leaned forward too.

“If we create the need,” Jake said. “If we inspire the need.”

Fivecoat cocked his head to one side.

“I invent hunger,” Jake said evenly.

“How?” Fivecoat asked.

Jake sat back. “I don’t know. People like me, and I talk them into things. And after I talk them into it, they still like me.”

Fivecoat stood up. Jake stood up.

“Sit.”

Jake’s eyebrows went up, and he smiled warmly. “Thank you, sir.”

“I’m just straightening my knees,” Fivecoat grouched. “Can’t keep them bent very long anymore.”

Jake sat down smoothly and crossed his legs. Fivecoat paced painfully behind his desk, grunting with each left-footed step.

“I’ve never needed a salesman. I’m my own salesman. Word of mouth is the best salesman I’ve ever had.”

Jake inhaled and waited.

“But everybody’s getting into it now. Crayson over in Bellham. That goddam MacIntyre down in Blue Ridge. I tried to buy him out, the son of a bitch wouldn’t budge.”

Fivecoat put both hands on the back of his chair and leaned hard on it. “I was the first in the county. Now, gotta sell more just to stay even.”

“Yes, sir,” Jake said quietly.

“My damn knees can’t do it.”

“I’m sorry, sir.”

“Hell you are,” Fivecoat rumbled. But then he looked sharply at Jake, and his eyes glinted with a hint of a smile. “Let’s try it. Straight commission.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jake replied with a nod. “I have one more semester. I’ll be available to begin the first Monday in June.”

“I’ll pay you ten cents for every dollar you bring in,” Fivecoat went on. “You’ll get a bank draft on the first working day of every month.”

Jake almost let the arithmetic take his breath – but he recovered in an flash.

“I’ll begin in the morning if you like.”

“Yes. Good.” He reached into his jacket pocket. “Unless you

embarrass me, the risk is all yours,” Fivecoat grumped. “So I’m going to risk something myself.”

He pulled out a narrow leather book, opened it, and withdrew several green bills.

“Here’s sixty dollars, Mr. Valentine,” he said, holding the money out. “Get yourself some clothes.”

Jake stood and took the paper.

“I’m on my way.” And he wheeled for the office door.

* * *

Jake found that DiBanno the tailor was happy to make three new suits for the price of two for someone who would be out and about representing Mr. Fivecoat and Leland Supply. After that, it was easy to sell, for example, rubber bands to Larson Patterson, the owner of the general store in Ulrich Corners, when he had only been buying nipples and hot water bottles before. Jake found that a number of owners of stores and small factories and businesses in nearby towns – Paysville, Yardley, Ulrich Corners, Daunton – were buying some of Leland Supply’s products but had no idea many of the factory’s other products were even available. Leland Supply had begun manufacturing rubber footings for the legs of stools and cabinets only when the owner of McCarey Industrial inquired. Yet McCarey Industrial – by far Leland’s biggest footings customer – had never ordered a single doorstop. Until now.

The woman managing purchases for Gaines Construction over in Sterling decided yes, it would be a nice touch to provide their new construction customers with a doorstop for every door, and she would be happy to buy their doorstops from Jake at Leland Supply. And the manager of Nanceville Household in Nanceville, at first apathetic, let his wife talk him into buying their next supply of bathmats from this earnest young Mr. Valentine. A middle-aged woman, who clearly colored her hair, handled purchasing for Zanesworth’s over in Verbena, and they had no real market for hot water bottles. But Jake liked her – she could sense it, when she looked into his smiling brown eyes – and before he departed, she had placed an order for twenty.

He was able to trade his wretched Buick for a black LaSalle of his

own, newer than Tyler Clendennon's. He was also able to move out of the rented room over the print shop on the square downtown – a room where the smell of ink oozed from the plaster – and into a small white house rented out by the Eldridges, who were going to Europe for a year because of Iona Eldridge's sister's illness.

Here, Jake was at last able to unpack his life. His parents had been elderly – his mother was thought too sickly to have children until, late in her life, Jake came along. In his freshman year at college, his parents had set out by automobile for Monroeville, Pennsylvania, to visit Jake's uncle, but had died on the way in a ferocious train wreck. Debts and taxes took the house and the five acres it sat on just inside the county line. Jake had come home from school, gathered up as many belongings as he could, stored half a dozen trunks in the back of Eric Colworth's father's barn, and returned to college. Now, finally, the trunks came out, the books and photographs, a phonograph, gardening tools, kitchenware. Jake put them in the various rooms and positions where they seemed to belong, then washed up and dressed up and got into the LaSalle and headed north, in the swelter of summer, up the road to Karney's.

* * *

There was always music and usually dancing. A young woman with short black hair sat at the bar, smoking a cigarette and idly watching the dance floor. Jake took the stool next to her.

“Buy you a drink, if you'll let me.”

Her face swiveled to meet his. “If that means let you buy me a drink, okay.”

He grinned and wiggled two fingers at Rory behind the bar.

“You do me a grave injustice, young lady,” Jake said with a mock frown. “I am a man of honor.” He thrust out a hand. “Jake Valentine.”

She took it. “Paula Ricard.” Her voice was low – not throaty, but smooth.

“Shall I get us a table?”

“I'm comfortable here.”

Rory set down a pair of martinis.

“Hm,” she murmured. “What makes you think this is what I want?”

Jake leaned an elbow on the bar. “Paula my dear, if you don’t want a dry martini, I shall sacrifice by drinking them both. What would you like?”

She took one of the glasses and lifted it, unsmiling. “Peace on earth.”

“To peace on earth,” Jake answered, clinking her glass. “And it’s not even Christmas.”

Her dress was sleeveless and silvery, and it glistened as she sipped.

“Care to dance?” Jake asked. “I’m a terrible dancer,” he hastened to add with a broad smile, “but I’ll be happy to step on you.”

Paula looked sideways at him and returned the smile. He had seen that sideways look before. Not from her; he had never met her before. It was the look that came to him when he smiled at a woman, as if his face were assuring her, motioning her in.

“Thanks, no,” she replied. “Sorry, man of honor.” She stubbed out her cigarette and stirred with the olive, still on the end of the toothpick. “What does a man of honor do, anyway?”

Jake raised his chin playfully. “Haven’t you read *Don Quixote*? A man of honor is obligated to gallantly provide for the lady’s needs.” He lifted his glass. “Or something like that.”

Her eyes twinkled. “That’s not what I meant. And besides, what if the lady doesn’t have any needs?”

“No needs? He is dashed!” Jake cried. She rolled her eyes, then had to suppress a giggle. He liked the effect, and raised his voice even more. “The man of honor is ruined! He is shattered!”

“Shh!” She ducked her head reflexively.

“He is unneeded!” And louder yet, over the music. “He is lost!”

She squealed through her gritted teeth and reached out to squeeze his forearm. “Stop it!” she sputtered, but she was wincing with glee.

Jake stopped suddenly and let his shoulders slump forward.

“Uh!” he groaned quietly. “Thank you so much.” He reached over and closed his fingers around her wrist. “Thank you for taking my arm and making me stop.”

Paula could not stop grinning. She took another sip.

He wagged his head and arched an eyebrow at her. “And see that it doesn’t happen again,” he quipped. “Such an embarrassing scene! We have your reputation to uphold.”

“My reputation,” she echoed. “Jesus.” She lit another.

“Imagine what people will think,” Jake shot back, “if the man you’re with is squalling like a lunatic!”

She nodded big. “Yes! Just imagine!”

Jake glowered and turned stern. “You need reputation management, young lady! You need reputation protection!”

Paula half-shrugged. “That’s for sure, isn’t it.”

Jake picked up his glass triumphantly. “I knew you must have a need in there somewhere,” he stated, and drank it down. She chuckled low again. He touched her arm, more softly this time, and did not let go. “Fear not, Paula Ricard. You’re safe with me.”

“But still no peace on earth,” she snickered. But her eyes were dancing.

“Rory?” Jake responded with a formal turn of the head. “We will now celebrate the acquisition of peace on earth. Two more.”

* * *

It was deep in the night when she turned out of a heavy sleep, and the movement jostled him gently awake. He adjusted his shoulders against the mattress, and a long, delicious stretch swelled through his body. Paula laid a hand on his belly, where the moon made stripes through the blinds. She could see his strong cheekbones, reflecting bluish, and the hard angle of his jaw, and the tiny, pleasing turn at the corners of his mouth. He watched her eyes moving over his face.

“You never answered me,” she said tranquilly.

“How’s that.”

“What does a man of honor do?”

His mouth pulled up into a relaxed smile, and he reached over to draw a finger lazily across her.

“I’ve already done it.”

She closed her eyes. “Sure, sure.” Then she opened them again. “For a living, I mean. What do you do, really?”

He stroked her.

“I sell nipples.”

She pulled away and sat up. “Come on. Can’t you answer just one question straight?” She reached for a pack of cigarettes on the side

table.

Jake sat up too. "I do! That's what I do! I sell rubber products! What's the matter with that?"

Paula grimaced. "Nipples? Really?"

"Nipples for baby bottles. Hot water bottles. Rubber gloves. Tubing. Miles of tubing. Little gaskets and seals and rings and things that you never knew were inside things. Do you know how much rubber there is in a refrigerator? Plenty. What do you need? I got doorstops. Bathmats." She stared at him. "Who do you think sells all that stuff? Somebody's got to do it. Otherwise your doors wouldn't stay open and you'd keep falling down in your bathtub."

She lit a match and sat still for a while, smoking silently, and he settled back down into the sheets. His eyes drifted shut, and sleep crept over him.

"Will I see you tomorrow night?"

"Mm," Jake answered without opening his eyes. "I'm selling up in Summit tomorrow."

He could not remember more of the conversation, if there was any. In the morning she was gone. On his Summit County circuit was Bailey Warehouse, where a girl named Victoria liked him and would spend her lunch hour with him at her place. In Daunton on Tuesday, he called at Freesinger's Sundries for the first time ever and fell into conversation with Mrs. Freesinger herself, who was surprisingly young and pretty and articulate and who within twenty minutes assured him they would be alone. A few evenings later he went to the Club Carioca over in Morton, where he saw a girl alone at the bar and took the stool next to her.

"Buy you a drink, if you'll let me."

"Sure," she replied with a smile.

He took one of her hands in both of his.

"Thank you," he said, with an impish grin.

She was rattled. "You're holding my hand."

"You said you'd let me," he shrugged.

She looked in his eyes, and something there made her let him.

2.

Only one doctor would treat Negroes in Leland, and he could only bandage Maddie Tillmore's wound and suggest that Deenah "wait and see." Deenah sat by Maddie's bed, rocking and praying and weeping. To get liquids into her, Deenah filled a baby bottle, and Maddie sucked eagerly, like a contented infant, eyes rarely opening. Ruby came to the door and went away, came to the door and went away. It was her room too, but she was afraid of what her sister had become. At fourteen, she felt herself shrinking, like Maddie had shrunk. Or was shrinking. Or might shrink. *Maddie? When will you come back?*

Henry rapped softly at the front door on the second day. Ruby shooed him away.

"My cousin Raymond has to go back," Henry said plaintively.

"Let him go!" Ruby snarled. "Mama says she don't want to see his face again."

The next day Henry came again. Ruby glared at him through the screen door.

"I got a letter for your mama," Henry offered, holding up an envelope. "My cousin Raymond knows she don't want to see him, but this says how sorry he is and how can he help."

Ruby didn't move.

"How, can, he, help," Henry repeated, his eyes watery.

Ruby opened the door, snatched the envelope out of his hand, and let the door slap shut.

"I'll give it to her. Now go away."

Deenah could not make herself look at it.

"I'll read it to you, Mama," Ruby suggested.

"Don't matter," Deenah gurgled, rocking steadily, her eyes fixed on Maddie's dull face. "Throw it away."

In her darkness, Maddie could not feed herself. She could not clean herself. Week by week, Ruby watched the lines deepen in her mother's face. Deenah's had been a smooth, bulbous body, but now the flesh grew leathery and the fatty tissue hung in limp globs from her bones. She was always exhausted but could never get to sleep. She spooned mashed fruit into Maddie's mouth and wiped her face

afterward. In the dark of night, Ruby could hear the short, sharp hisses of her mother's helpless sniffing.

The ache in Ruby's heart, like a terrible bruise, finally pushed words out, in the nighttime. She speaks softly to Maddie across the gloom between their beds – about her day, about school. Conquering the arithmetic test. Stuart got a new spinning-top. The awful thing Rosalee said about Goldie, except it was true. Terrence claims he saw Miss DuBois holding hands with Mr. Appleton. The words drifted into the murk, longing for an echo, but the echo never came. Yet every night, in hushed tones, Ruby told the tale of her day anyway, spinning out a lifeline to her sister, for herself.

* * *

As long as Ruby could remember, her mother had cleaned people's houses. She scrubbed floors and toilets and tubs, washed dishes, did laundry. She dusted furniture, polished silver, wiped windows. She would get the girls out the door to school, then tie up a bundle of supplies into her apron and lumber down the road. In some years she had been hired to clean colored people's houses, but usually she headed north to the white sections. She never crossed the dirt field; she did not want to be a dusty mess when she arrived. It was enough to be slick with perspiration. Instead, she walked the long way around.

That was over now. Deenah could not leave Maddie, and she would not let Ruby skip school. A few neighbors brought food to the house, just like people bring food after a funeral. But it was impossible to go on. There was no cushion. No recourse. Rent to pay.

"I can clean," Ruby said. "I ain't afraid."

Deenah lowered herself heavily onto the couch, the stale smell of old upholstery billowing up around her.

"You ain't gonna be no *domestic*," she said, leaning sourly on the word. "You belong in school. School's your only way."

Ruby watched her mother's eyes sweep away from her, to the floor.

Deenah sighed, her hands limp in her lap. "But just for a while," she said, more quietly. "Just till Maddie gets better. Miz Harold will let you clean instead of me. And the Cranstons. Just say your sister's sick, and your mama's taking care of her." Her words came sluggish, in

defeat. "Just for the rent."

The next morning, Ruby tied Deenah's apron around her, bundled up the usual supplies, and walked toward the Harold house. Each step was tight with nerves. She knocked softly at the front door, too softly for anyone to hear. She knocked again, with greater force, three raps that almost startled her. Mrs. Harold came to the door, a tall, thin woman with wavy white hair.

"Miz Harold, I'm Ruby Tillmore. My mama's Deenah Tillmore. She can't clean for you but I can."

Mrs. Harold arched. "What happened?"

"My sister's sick. She's taking care of her."

"Well," Mrs. Harold answered slowly, turning her head to one side.

"I'll work hard," Ruby added quickly. "Just as good as my mama."

Mrs. Harold said nothing.

"We'll sure appreciate the work, please," Ruby said feebly, unable to keep looking her in the eye. "I'll do good work for you."

Mrs. Harold released a breath. "All right, we'll see," she said, backing out of the doorway. "Come in and we'll see."

By midday, Ruby was aching, her knees stinging, her back muscles throbbing. But afterward, Mrs. Harold inspected her work, and almost smiled a bit of approval as she handed over the money.

Ruby desperately wanted home. Outside the Harold place, she looked longingly to the right, toward darktown. But she thought of walking through the door, so early in the day, and facing her mother. Maybe Deenah would hug her, maybe even cry a little. Maybe she would stroke her face, touch her hair. Maybe she would sit her down to a bowl of soup. But at the end of the day, the loss would still be hanging in the air. Half a day's pay. Deenah would have made it all. Would have worked the whole day. Ruby turned her face to the left, toward the Cranston place, and made her feet go.

* * *

Jake was still breathing hard as he rolled off of Paula onto his back.

"This is better," she said, snuggling into his neck.

"What's better than what?"

"Better than the bars. Being with you. Alone, I mean."

Jake gave out a heavy, spent breath and pushed his arm under and around her. Her skin was moist, and still warm. She did love to talk, afterward; he had sure noticed that. "What are you talking about?"

Paula wiggled her head against him. "I wandered around a long time. Bar to bar, you know. It's better being with you." Her eyes were only inches from his. Her arm was across his chest, her fingers clasped just below his shoulder.

Their faces were too close for Jake's eyes to focus on her. "Well, I'm glad I was adequate for you this evening."

She slipped her fingers around his arm and almost laughed. "I don't mean just tonight."

Jake knew if he waited, she would finally explain.

"Do you know how many times we've been together?"

Jake lay perfectly still, but he felt something inside tighten. "You count?"

"Ten. Starting three months ago tonight."

"You've counted."

"I didn't intend to. I just happened to."

It was at the base of his throat, where the tightness was.

"It's good, with you," she went on. "With us."

Jake hesitated.

"I'll be back," Paula whispered, and pulled away. She didn't bother to pull anything over her naked body as she circled the bed and headed toward the toilet.

Jake reflexively bent the arm he'd had around her, relaxing the bicep. A scent of sex wafted over the bed and settled around his nostrils. He was limp now, wet and cold. When the toilet flushed, Paula emerged and circled back around the foot of the bed, crawling onto it and dropping her face to kiss his belly with a gross noise. Then she straightened up on her knees.

"This place. God. You're successful, Jake Valentine." She gestured. "Nice radio." She dropped her face back down to his stomach and kissed around his navel. "But you need help."

Jake touched her cheek to make her stop. "Help?"

Paula lifted herself onto her hands and knees and faced him. Her face was open, neutral. "It's not a home, Jake. It could be a home."

Jake frowned a bit. "It's home enough."

Her expression didn't change. "We're good together."

Jake felt a pang in his bladder. Paula turned and let her weight drop her onto her back beside him. "Maybe I'm," she said, then paused. "Ahead of you," she finally said, looking at the ceiling. "I thought you," she began again. "You were ready."

They were silent.

"I'm not pushing you," Paula said evenly, reaching for her cigarettes on the nightstand. "God. Do what you want."

He swung his legs away from her. "I gotta piss."

* * *

Meals shrank, little by little.

"I could go across to the mission," Ruby said as Deenah wrung out a pink blouse. "They give food to folks."

"Oh, Ruby," Deenah answered, shaking her head, not looking up.

"Mama."

"I don't wanna be takin' food from white folk."

"Mama," Ruby repeated. "White folk, it don't matter."

Deenah kept at her task.

"Mama," Ruby said again. "We're hungry."

There was no response.

"Mama, I'm hungry every night."

Deenah's fingers stopped. She looked hard at Ruby.

"You tell them your mama is Deenah Tillmore, the house-cleaning colored woman. Say like that: 'House-cleaning colored woman.'" She looked back down at her work. "Tell them your sister is sick, and can we please have some food."

Ruby turned toward the door

"Don't tell them your sister is crazy," Deenah admonished. "They might not count that for sick. Just say she's sick."

"Yes, Mama."

"Don't tell them she's crazy," Deenah repeated. "White folk take crazy people and lock them up."

Ruby's stomach tightened. She dragged her feet across the dirt field. Her puffy legs felt heavy, like wood – yet it seemed she was across the dirt field and into the white section in only seconds. The center of

town seemed to rise up before her: in the middle of the square, a statue of a bearded white man with a long gun, ornate columns standing like idols in front of the bank, a million stair steps leading up to the courthouse. This wasn't the nice section, where she cleaned houses. This was where everyone criss-crossed. White people were scurrying. Each one seemed to inspect Ruby as they crossed her field of vision. Between her lungs and her stomach, something twisted. She tried to keep her feet moving.

In one corner of the square, the shoulder-to-shoulder buildings gave way, and through the space, a full street off the square, sat the mission.

It was a big house, or had been a house, but now the walls seemed to lean in on themselves, wheezing sadly. The paint was peeling off the sign over the front door, so that instead of "GOOD SHEPHERD MISSION" it looked more like "OD SHEPHERD MISS." There were rickety stairs leading up to a narrow landing at the front door; Ruby stepped up gingerly. A rectangle on the door said "Please Come In." Ruby turned the big brass sphere – she had never felt such a heavy doorknob – and when she pulled on the door, she jumped a bit at the angry screech of the hinges.

Inside was a small room, an office, with the rest of the house walled off except for a single door, which stood open on a dim corridor. In the office sat a simple desk with a chair behind it, and a visitor's chair of torn green leather. Ruby hesitated, uneasy about closing the front door behind her. Then she jumped a bit again to hear the sudden konking of sturdy shoes coming down a wooden staircase. Into the doorway stepped a young white woman, maybe in her twenties, in a long navy blue dress, carrying a magazine. She stopped short at the sight of Ruby, whose dark round face was backlit by the outdoors, her hair pulled back tight.

"Oh my," the white woman said.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Ruby said, her fingers rigid on the doorknob, "if I'm in the wrong place."

"No, no," the woman replied with a quick smile, patting down her hair. It was light brown and wavy, brushed back over her ears. "This is the Good Shepherd Mission. Did you want the mission? Come in."

Ruby carefully pulled the door closed behind her.

“Won’t you sit down?” The woman gestured to the chair. Ruby sat on the split green leather. It seemed cold and slippery to her fingers.

“What’s your name, dear?” asked the woman, sitting behind the desk.

“Ruby.” Her voice was twittery. She cleared her throat. “Ruby Tillmore.”

“Ruby, it’s good to meet you.” She reached her hand across the desk. Ruby took it. She shivered imperceptibly. She had never seen her own hand holding a white hand.

“I’m Alice Bohannon.”

Ruby licked her upper lip.

“How old are you, Ruby?”

“Fourteen, almost fifteen.”

“I see,” Alice said. “We don’t often have the privilege of welcoming fourteen-year-old ladies here at the mission.”

Ruby looked at her. The woman’s face was plain, but she was smiling, and Ruby could not identify it as a false smile.

“How may we help you, Ruby?”

Ruby looked at her hands in her lap. Her throat felt tight. “My mama sent me. She’s Deenah Tillmore. She cleans houses for people. She sent me to ask about food. My sister’s sick.”

“Oh my,” Alice said. “What’s wrong with her?”

Ruby crooked her thumbs together and flexed them. Her forehead felt warm.

“Well,” she mumbled, “she’s sick, ma’am.”

“It would be all right with me if you called me Alice.”

Ruby looked at her uneasily. Alice’s eyebrows went up as she smiled.

“I would like it if you called me Alice.”

Ruby looked down and said nothing.

“I’m sorry your sister is sick. But I’m sure we can help you.”

Ruby looked up at her. “Even if I won’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“What my sister’s sick with.”

“We help people who can’t help themselves. It’s what Jesus did.”

Alice stood and stepped around to lean back on the front of the desk. “Ruby, do you want to tell me what’s wrong with your sister?”

“No ma’am.”

“Then please don’t. If you and your family need help, we’d like to help you.”

Ruby sat silent. Alice reached out a hand. Ruby didn’t take it.

“Would you like to come with me, and we’ll see what we can find?”

Ruby let out a sharp breath, a shot of anxiety, and hopped out of the chair. They went through the door down the corridor, then through another door and into a small warehouse. Ruby halted, stunned. Stale smells of cheap wood and cardboard filled the air. Boxes and crates were stacked to the ceiling, a ramshackle castle of cartons and wooden slats. Two elderly white men and a white woman with her hair in a bun were shuffling about, inventory elves.

“This is where we keep everything we’ve been able to gather,” Alice explained as they strolled. “Food and clothes, things for your bathroom.” She turned to Ruby, her navy dress swishing, and took the girl’s hands. “Ruby, what do you think would help you and your mama and sister the most?”

“Uh,” Ruby said. “Uh?”

Alice chuckled. “Oh, Ruby.” *I know you don’t want to be here.* “Let’s pack a box for your mama.”

Alice whirled and scooped up a big empty cardboard cube and began swooping along the walls of boxes, popping out cans and cartons and depositing them in her treasure chest. Ruby followed her in silent awe. When the box got too heavy, Alice found a rolling cart, and they kept on pillaging. Ruby’s heart pounded at the carelessness. The bounty. Alice was the food angel – no, the food butterfly, floating and fluttering from blossom to blossom, drawing only the best nectar and then dancing away.

“It’s too heavy!” Alice exulted, trying to leverage the box off the cart. She finally dropped to the floor beside the cart, laughing at Ruby’s goofy, mesmerized face.

“Sit down here with me,” Alice said, breathing hard. She tried to push a curl of her hair back into place. Ruby sat down next to her. Alice wiped her brow.

“Do you live here?” Ruby asked.

“No, I have an apartment off the square,” Alice replied.

“Got children?”

“No. I’m not married.”

Ruby’s eyes turned up to the box on the cart.

“Oh!” Alice tried to wiggle the heavy cart with her foot. “You can’t carry this! May I drive you home and give this to your mama?”

Ruby stiffened. “No.”

Alice’s face darkened. “Ruby, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you. I only want to get this—”

“No. You might see my sister.”

Alice took a breath. “You can’t carry it.”

“Take some out.”

“Oh, no!” Alice wailed. “We had such fun collecting it all!” She was still breathing hard. “Would you rather go home and have your mother come back for the food?”

“My mama can’t leave Maddie.”

“Maddie is your sister?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Alice turned her head at an angle. “You know, I would like it if you called me Alice.”

“Yes ma’am, Alice.”

Alice paused. “Ruby, I’ll help you however you’ll let me.”

Ruby’s stomach gurgled.

“Let me.”

Alice touched her arm. Ruby’s eyes narrowed to see her flesh silhouetted by the pale fingers.

“This is starting to feel like the fox, the goose, and the corn,” Alice said. Ruby looked at her blankly. “Do you know that story?” she asked, her hand still at rest on Ruby’s skin.

“No ma’am.”

“No Alice.”

Ruby just looked at her.

Alice arched an eyebrow. “Come on. *No, Alice.*”

Ruby stifled a smile. “No, Alice.”

“Thank you, Ruby. I feel much better.” She straightened her skirt on her lap. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Ruby said. Alice waited. Ruby grinned. “Yes, Alice.”

Alice formally cleared her throat. “A farmer had a fox, a goose, and a bag of corn, and he needed to get them all across the river. His boat

was only big enough to hold two of them at a time. But depending on which ones he left behind on the shore, he might have a problem.”

Ruby’s brow furrowed.

“Right?” Alice prompted.

Ruby looked hard at her.

“So what did he do?” Alice asked gently, her eyes coaxing her subject. “What would *you* do?”

Ruby looked down at her feet stretched out in front of her on the floor. Finally she turned her grim face back to Alice. “Are you tricking me?”

“No!” Alice laughed.

Ruby exhaled, but didn’t look away. “I’d kill that goose and eat it.”

Alice blinked, motionless. Her eyebrows shifted a bit. Then she threw her head back and barked with laughter, the cackles bouncing off the warehouse walls.

“This,” Alice cried, “is a very good idea!”

Ruby frowned uneasily, but as Alice kept laughing, Ruby let go of an uneasy smile.

“Wonderful!” Alice declared, collecting her breath. “But I was thinking the *fox* might eat the goose, if we left them together.”

Ruby stared at her.

“See? Leave the fox and the corn? Carry the goose over the river?”

Ruby’s face was motionless. Alice broke into a huge grin.

“See, I’m the fox, and your mother’s the goose. We can’t be together – or I might gobble her up.”

Ruby covered her mouth. “Oh lordy.”

“So we’ll divide up this food into some smaller boxes. Each one light enough for you to carry. Put them in my car. You and I drive toward where you live, but not all the way. What street do you live on?”

“Polk. I don’t think we should.”

“We can stop a whole street away if you want. That’s like the farmer crossing the river with the goose.”

Ruby was looking hard at her.

“Then I’ll stay in the car, and you can carry one box home, make sure it’s all right with your mother, and come back to my car for the next box.”

Ruby looked at the box, bulging with cans and jars and little boxes.

“I don’t think so.”

Alice slumped a bit.

“I mean, thank you, Alice. But my mama said.”

“What did she say, Ruby?”

Ruby wouldn’t answer.

“Well, I’ll put some of these things in a smaller box for you, so you can take them home. Then come back later, or tomorrow, and get some more.”

Ruby looked at her feet again. “Thank you, Alice.”

Alice packed a small box – there would have been four times as much food by the other plan. “I’ll be praying for your sister,” she said as Ruby left. Ruby lugged the box – big and heavy enough that she had to carry it in her arms like a baby – back across the square and out of the white section, across the dirt field, into darktown, to Polk Street, and home.

Deenah was relieved to see her daughter and the food. Ruby told her all about Alice, and the fox and the goose – and pleaded with her to let her come back in Alice’s car with the rest of the food. Deenah’s eyes darkened.

“Child, no,” Deenah groaned, sitting at the spindly kitchen table.

“Please, Mama,” Ruby implored. “She can stop over to Yancey Street. I’ll walk the rest of the way.”

“Mm,” Deenah answered, not looking at her.

“Mama, Alice is nice. She don’t want to hurt anybody.”

Deenah was silent. Her upper lip glistened.

“She’s praying for Maddie.”

Deenah’s head swung up like a lion’s. “What did you tell her!” she roared.

“Nothing!” Ruby squeaked. “I said sick! That’s all! She’s just a praying lady!”

“Oh, Lord, Lord.” Deenah wiped at her face with a cloth. “Lord, Jesus.”

“Ma, ma,” Maddie sang quietly from the bedroom.

“Mama, let me do it. Please. There’s plenty more food. She wants us to have it.”

“Ma, ma, ma, ma,” Maddie said. “Bee, key.”

Deenah’s breathing was heavy. “They’ll take your sister.”

Ruby reached out to close her fingers around her mother's sleeve. "No. Please, Mama."

The big woman put her fingers to her forehead. "Yes, all right, child. Jesus help us."

Ruby bolted for the screen door.

"No," Deenah shot after her. "Not now. Tomorrow. Lord Jesus, Ruby, it's almost dark."

Ruby deflated.

She could hardly get to sleep. The next day she was distracted as she mopped and dusted and wiped. Afterward she hurried home, then raced across the dirt field toward the square and the mission.

But behind the heavy door, a white-haired man was sitting at the desk. He smiled, but when Ruby asked, he told her that Alice wasn't at the mission that day. Could he help her?

Ruby didn't answer. She turned back out, clomped down the steps, and dragged home.

3.

When Jake discovered that purchases made by the county government were controlled from a single room in the courthouse building, he came to the square and nearly danced up the steps. Inside, on the frosted glass of the office door was the word “Purchasing.” He rapped his knuckles lightly on the door frame and went in. The crowded room, full of file cabinets and shelves, had the feel of a workshop. Facing the desk was a chair for visitors, covered with a fine sheen of dust. The plate on the desk said “Lucille Waldrup.”

“Lucille Waldrup,” he said cheerily. He took Lucille Waldrup to be in her mid-fifties, stocky, with a simple silver wedding band. “I’m grateful to find you here.”

“Yes?” she answered, looking up with a bit of surprise.

“Please forgive me for barging in.” He took her hand. “My name is Valentine, and every time I come through this building I think about stopping in to see you.”

His smile was so true, she almost smiled back. “Uh,” she began. “Please sit down.”

“Oh, I won’t take your time.” He stood, letting go of her hand but leaning into her a bit. “I’m with Leland Supply, so I always notice the kinds of products we make – like the stops for your doors. This is actually my day off; I don’t mean to be selling. I’m just in the courthouse on some personal business. But I always see your name – I always find myself thinking.”

He crunched up his face like a little boy dreaming of ice cream.

“Lucille, Lucille. I wonder how she’s doing.” His face opened up now, toward the imaginary sky, into wide-eyed wonder. “She’s got a huge job; she’s got the public to look out for. Is she faring well? Is the pressure intense—”

He was glittering. Lucille looked half-alarmed. “Sir,” she began.

“—Or does she just have the grace and pluck to handle it all?”

“Sir,” she said, blushing.

“Jake,” he replied. “Jake Valentine.”

“Actually, I have work to do. How can I help you?”

He smiled warmly. "Forgive me, Lucille. I shouldn't be so playful. I'll try to be more professional."

"Well," she said, looking at her desk. "I don't mean," she began again, but then stopped.

He looked at her now with a different face. Self-conscious, boyish. "Two minutes, then I'll be gone. I want to make sure the county is getting the best value for its money; so many things are made with rubber nowadays; you could squander a lot of money if you weren't getting good prices; I know you've got a lot of county property to care for, and you want to do the best you can; so I just thought I'd come by and see if I could help you."

"Hm, well," Lucille mumbled. "Mr. Valentine."

"Jake."

"Jake. Thank you for your concern." She touched her collar absently. "Of course you know in county government we do everything on written bids."

"Oh yes!" he replied, his palms up. "I'm not – I don't mean to be inquiring officially." His eyes crinkled cheerfully. "I mean, I would be happy to help if you thought I could save the county some money, but only if you thought so."

Lucille touched her hair. "Certainly I would be happy to have you bid on any of our purchases."

"To save the public some money."

"I am always interested in saving money for the public's sake, of course."

"Well, if I could take the forms with me, maybe I could stay in touch with you?"

Lucille stood and turned away toward a file cabinet. "Of course; let me get them for you."

"That would be good. Thank you."

The paperwork rattled as she sifted through it. Jake silently ran his handkerchief over the seat of the chair.

"This is completely off the subject," he began again as he sat down, "and it may not even be appropriate, but," and he cleared his throat a bit, "that is certainly a nice dress."

Lucille stalled at her task. "Oh, it's just," she murmured, without turning around. "Uh, thank you."

“I just appreciate a person who brings a little refinement to their workplace,” Jake said. “I didn’t mean to overstep.”

She stopped again and turned a bit to him. “No, thank you; you’re very kind.”

He looked at the floor.

“I’m pleased you came by,” she continued, turning back to the file drawer. “I mostly do this by telephone, and the mail.”

“Oh, Lucille,” he said, a new thought. “I don’t know your policies” – he scratched at a place on his chin – “but could I get a frame of reference, maybe? Some of the prices you’re paying now? Say, just on doorsteps, for example.”

In the drawer, she was no longer flipping through files. “Well,” she began.

“If it’s not confidential,” he cut in. “I don’t want to break any rules!” he laughed.

“Oh my, no,” she smiled. “It seems it all ought to be a matter of public record, but” – now she turned to him, holding back a smile – “I’ve never really understood why it should be any sort of secret.”

She laid a blank bid form on her desk and returned to another file drawer. “Let me just get that for you.”

“Well, thank you, that will help me a great deal,” Jake said.

“I can’t remember anybody ever coming in to ask,” Lucille said lightly, without turning around.

“It’s their loss, I’d say,” Jake replied. “I’ll certainly keep everything just between you and me. I don’t want you to be overrun with obnoxious salesmen!”

“Oh no,” Lucille answered. “I wouldn’t worry about that.”

“Have you been here longer than I realize?” Jake asked.

“Six years. I came over from Judge Zimmerman’s chambers.”

She found the file and drew it from the drawer.

Then the door rattled open, and they both turned to see a tall, lanky woman in a business suit, glasses down on her nose, who froze at her forward angle of entry, her hand still on the doorknob.

“Oh! Lucille, I am sorry!” she said through her nose. “I didn’t realize you had an appointment.”

“No, Betty, it’s fine,” Lucille stammered, guiding the file folder back into its place in the drawer.

Jake was standing. "I beg your pardon; I'm on my way out."

"No no," the new arrival interjected, "I'll come back. I only needed that New London material. I can get it later."

"I'll – let me get it for you," Lucille said.

Betty was bobbing backwards and closing the door behind her.

Lucille exhaled heavily, still standing at the open file cabinet.

"I'm sorry to make things difficult for you," Jake said warmly.

"Oh no." Lucille's fingers returned to the files.

"I've gummed it up."

"No, heavens," Lucille retorted, taking a breath and gathering herself. She yanked the file back out and rolled the drawer shut. "Betty's a good egg. Don't think a thing about it."

She sat down at the desk and opened the folder. Jake sat too. She turned the first sheet of paper, and her eyes ratcheted down the page.

"Here we are," she said. "Stroop Company, in Cleveland." She read the price.

"Oh Lord," Jake warbled. "Lucille, please. Let me help here. The county shouldn't be paying that. The nerve – well – I'm glad I stopped by."

"I am too," she said.

"You should have someone do right by you," he said as he stood, his eyes shining.

"I'll hear from you soon, then, Mr. Valentine?" she asked. "Jake?"

He took her hand, as if to shake it, but he only closed his fingers around it. "Yes." He let go of her hand, picked up the bid form, turned and opened the door. In the doorway he turned back and looked at her, seeming to enjoy her, for a fleeting second. "Thank you so much for this," he said smoothly. Then he was gone.

Betty stepped slowly into the doorway, but she was looking after Jake. Then she turned to look at Lucille, whose face was warm. Betty's eyebrows bent quizzically.

"Who was that?" she asked, nasally.

Lucille sighed. "Some seller."

* * *

Outside, early October had turned warm and sunny. Jake dashed down the courthouse steps, folding the form into his jacket pocket, and broadsided a young woman walking by. She peeped in surprise as she staggered sideways to keep her balance, and her bundle exploded to the ground. Jake snapped to attention, astonished by the collision, then instinctively shot out a hand to her arm, even though she had already recovered. She was not angry; she was smiling a wry smile, one hand touching her wavy brown hair.

“God! Forgive me!”

The woman smiled even more. “A man of prayer,” she noted.

Jake blushed. “Not exactly,” he said, crouching to gather up her goods. The coarse brown wrapper lay mangled on the sidewalk, and maroon rectangles were clumped and scattered in a rough oval. The woman knelt to help.

“I am so sorry.” He looked at what was in his hand. “Are these Bibles?”

“Just New Testaments. We can’t afford whole Bibles.”

“Oh my God,” Jake said, collecting the last of them. “I’ve struck down a religious woman.”

She stood herself straight. “I think religion – and the woman – will survive the blow.”

He was trying to stack the little leather-bound books in his arms and get the paper wrapper back around them.

“Here,” she said, taking the books and leaving him the paper. “Hold that open.”

He did as he was told, with the brown paper open in his hands, as she stacked the New Testaments in neat rows. The original folds in the paper seemed to magically re-appear exactly at the edges of the books.

“Easily done,” she said cheerily. She drew up the edges of the paper and folded them over the contents.

“You’re a saint for not hating me,” Jake said. “I wasn’t watching.”

“Ha,” she replied flatly, taking the bundle out of his hands. “We were both racing.” She could tuck the bundle under one arm again now.

“Jake Valentine,” he said, hand extended.

“Alice Bohannon.” They shook hands. “Jake? Jacob?”

“Yes, actually. Nobody calls me that.”

“Jacob,” she repeated. “The deceiver.”

In her twenties. Hair light brown; a little too mousy, he thought. But she had waved it so nicely.

“Hm?”

“Jacob means deceiver. Schemer. In the Bible, I mean.”

Jake’s mouth opened a bit, but no words came out.

“It’s mysterious,” she went on. “I meant no offense.” She shrugged, like a schoolgirl. “I like it.”

“Pleased to meet you, Alice,” Jake said, sheepishly. “Pardon the circumstances.”

“Full pardon is granted,” she replied pleasantly. “If you’ll excuse me?”

Her eyes were greenish. Maybe call them hazel, Jake thought. “Oh. Uh, yes.”

She was walking away.

“Miss – Bohannon?”

She stopped and turned. Her face was a simple triangle. She could have had more of a chin. His mind was clicking, but no words registered.

“I – Sorry. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Mr. Valentine. But with a full pardon, no apologies are required.”

Her skin seemed a little pale, he thought. She was slender, and her dress was long and narrow on her. Jake watched her go. Her shoes were sensible, but he was surprised by how fluid her motion was. A religious woman would clunk more, he thought.

He had parked his LaSalle a block away; now he wondered exactly where. He looked across the square. Carrasco was fixing the peppermint pole outside his barber shop. Jake rubbed his cheek with the flat of his hand. He could feel the tiniest prickles of his whiskers. He was so blond, he knew they didn’t show yet. He looked across the square in the other direction. Alice was still gliding away.

Jake leaned forward and began to trot on a diagonal across the square. He did not want to run. Or at least, be seen running. As he got close, he slowed to keep his shoes quiet on the brick street.

She turned and saw him coming. Her face tilted a bit and she stood still.

“Are you all right?” she asked, her face a blank.

Jake broke stride and settled into a walk. He tried to roll the word nonchalantly. “Sure.” He wasn’t sure it came out right. It seemed to be taking too long to reach her. “I just — I owe you. I, uh.” He was breathing hard. “I try to be a man of honor.”

The thin arcs of her eyebrows went up gently, to go with her delicate smile. “You don’t understand the idea of full pardon, do you?”

Jake put a hand in his pocket. He took a deep breath. He was off his usual rhythm. “I think even a rotten criminal should feel grateful for it,” he finally replied. He pulled his hand back out of his pocket and motioned toward Partridge’s. “Buy you a cup of coffee, if you’ll let me.”

“Hm,” Alice responded. “Cherry Coke?”

He tossed his head, recovering. “Let the restitution begin!”

Which she found amusing. And they crossed the square and took a booth in the window and talked till their stomachs grumbled, at which point Jake ordered burgers and refills on the drinks and they continued talking.

It was her day off, but she was working. She was employed by the Good Shepherd Mission, started decades ago by a church three counties over because at the time they had a wealthy parishioner who — too complicated to explain.

“Mostly it’s volunteers,” she said. “Officially, I keep the accounts and run the office, but there’s nobody else, really, so, well, I’m the ‘director.’”

“What happens there? At a mission?”

“We give people food, clothing, soap, whatever they need.”

“And Bibles.”

“Well, there’s not much demand for Bibles.”

“You’ve got a few there,” Jake said, gesturing to the parcel.

“Yes, they were donated. Churches love to donate Bibles. If I could trade Bibles for food, nobody in Leland would ever go hungry again.”

Jake watched her fingers, long and slender, stirring her cherry Coke with the straw. Her nails were neat but short. A working girl’s nails.

“This can’t be interesting to you.”

“It is!” Jake chirped, and then blushed a bit to hear how chirpy he

had sounded. "Where do you get the food, and, uh things?"

"From all over – churches, and ladies' groups, and friends of friends – like these New Testaments. A friend of a friend runs a printing plant in Indiana, and they printed too many, so they say, 'Oh! Let's send them to Good Shepherd!'"

"And I clobber you and knock them all over."

"At least it wasn't oatmeal," Alice answered.

"People send you oatmeal?"

"No, it's a joke. Groceries and restaurants give us whatever they can spare – and that's good. We can visit them on a regular schedule."

He found himself looking at the hollow at the base of her neck. Then he caught himself and looked into her eyes again.

"But most donations don't come in on a steady schedule, and volunteers have to be managed, and – well, the real point is to help people, but it takes a lot of time arranging everything so we can be ready for those few minutes when somebody shows up and needs something."

"Anybody can just show up? Anytime?"

"I try to keep the mission open as much as possible. But a lot of people are too embarrassed to visit the mission, so I stay in touch with churches, to find out who might need help. And the police, actually."

"The cops?"

"They tend to know when somebody's in trouble."

Jake didn't realize he was frowning.

"You're frowning."

He started a little, looking up. "Sorry. I just never – thought of it."

She looked at him quizzically.

"People being in trouble, that way," he said.

Alice smiled. "You figure, well, this is 1948, times are good?"

Jake began to speak but then closed his mouth again. Alice laughed. Jake blushed and shifted on the bench.

"I wish more folks from darktown would come in." Alice stirred her cherry Coke again. "I think they think it's a white mission."

"Well, it's white on the outside," Jake said.

"Barely. It needs paint. But of course, paint costs money."

Jake could hardly picture it. Growing up in Leland, he had scarcely registered its presence. It was there but not there. The house had been

donated a generation ago – part of the estate of a wealthy religious man from over in Crawford County – but now, if locals noticed it at all, they were generally nervous about it, and tried to look the other way as they walked by. Back in the day, needy men coming for help were supervised by a chaplain and two male assistants, and discreetly kept in the back part of the old house, where they could shower and shave, change into new used clothes, and if necessary spend the night. It was a big house, but not big enough to maintain separate quarters for women, so women could not shower or spend the night. In the early days, there was a chapel service every morning.

“But then came the war,” Alice said, “and the chaplain was old, with nobody to replace him, and money was tight, and one problem led to another, I guess. So now, it’s just—” She pinched a bit of fallen lettuce from her plate into her mouth. “You do what you can.”

Jake kept expecting a false note, the self-righteous tremolo of religiosity, but Alice talked about her work as if she were an auto mechanic. He would not have been surprised if she had prodded him about his own utter heathenism, but she did not go to the subject.

She had come from Trillip, a town so small that even Jake had never heard of it. To Alice, Leland was the big city. Her father was notorious, a nasty drinker of whisky, but he had been slick in his day. “I probably have brothers and sisters – half-brothers and half-sisters – all over northern Ohio,” Alice smirked. Her mother, too religious to divorce him, suffered mostly in silence, and finally succumbed when influenza ravaged the area. Alice, a teenager, went to be reared by a great-aunt who was faithful to Christ the King Free Church in Stony Township. Yes, Jake did know Stony Township; he had a tubing account there.

Alice read everything; but college was out of the question. When high school ended, she moved up to Leland. Once a year, Christ the King organized a charity drive to send non-perishables over to Good Shepherd Mission. So Alice knew of the work, and when she visited, the director, old Mr. Johanson, had just lost his office manager to her husband’s new job in Toledo. He had been thinking of shutting the place down. A year later, illness prompted old Johanson to retire. Alice was left.

It was not a spectacular face, but her lips – sure, they were

somewhat thin, but they were pretty when she talked. Jake was sure she was wearing not a bit of makeup, but her eyes were naturally alive. He enjoyed the way she wrinkled her nose to signal something small or embarrassing – like when she said “Trillip” – like a little girl, but unpretentiously. Her long, narrow hands and fingers moved with a kind of easy elegance. A tiny gold chain around her neck; no rings.

“So that’s what I do,” Alice said with a bit of a shrug.

Jake did not realize he was resting his face in his hands like a schoolboy until he began to speak and found that his jaw wouldn’t move. He blushed and straightened up and tried again.

“Will you always?” he asked.

“What?”

“The mission. You could – I don’t know – do something else.”

Her eyes were light and bright. “Will you always sell bathmats and doorstops?” she asked without a hint of defensiveness. “You could do something else.”

Jake leaned back and let his eyes wander around the café. “In Leland, it’s good money.”

“Don’t you think it helps people?” she asked.

“The mission? Sure.”

“No, to sell them bathmats and doorstops.”

He looked at her to see if she was teasing him. She was not.

“They’re useful.” She leaned across the table and grabbed her glass. “What if people had no doorstops! Their doors would flap. It could be dangerous!” There was laughter in her voice, but she wasn’t laughing.

Jake ran his hand through his hair. He had almost said “You sound like me” when he realized how lost he was. He did not want her to know he knew how he sounded. His throat felt a little dry, but his glass was empty again. He needed to get his rhythm back. He looked in vain for the waitress.

“I’m not making fun of you,” Alice said sweetly. “You help people in your way. I help people in my way.” She shrugged her little shrug. “I enjoy helping people. That’s all.”

“Yes, I guess. I never thought of it like that.” He cleared his throat. “Your work seems – mine is—”

He could not find the end of a sentence. Alice was tickled.

“It’s a good thing,” she said, bailing him out, “that some people

only need a doorstep. Not everybody has the kind of trouble that brings them to the mission; thank God for that.”

Jake’s mind was grasping. Everything he thought to say seemed unseemly. He finally put one arm up over the back of the booth bench and made an attempt.

“Do you find that men are always telling you how beautiful your eyes are?”

But he bit his lip, and wished he hadn’t said it.

Alice sat back amiably with her arms at her sides. “Do you find that women are always falling into your arms when you ask them that?”

Jake opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

“Jake Valentine,” Alice announced, “this has been a lovely day. I will enjoy it over and over again, every time I remember it.”

He tried to speak again, but she shook her head ever so slightly.

“Time to go.”

In front of Partridge’s, he gestured in the direction of the mission. “I could walk you there.”

“Thanks, there’s no need,” she replied, her face still cheerful. “Man of honor! Oh, boy,” she chuckled. “Thank you again, Jake. I enjoyed it.”

She turned and walked, the brown parcel of New Testaments under one arm.

The words gurgled up out of his throat. “Could I – Could—”

She turned full around, without missing a step, and drawing the parcel up into her crossed arms, she continued sauntering backwards. She was smiling a radiant smile.

“Thank you! It was delightful!”

She spun gracefully around and sailed on.

“Hey!” he shouted – and was horrified by how coarse he sounded. “I should walk you. What does a lady *expect* from a man of honor?”

She spun again and kept walking backwards. He loved how she did it. Her face was as open and fresh as before. She was far now, and had to raise her voice.

“Honorable behavior!” she called to him. To Jake it seemed she was almost gleeful in proclaiming it.

* * *

The next day, he called on Alice Bohannon at the Good Shepherd Mission, having failed to acquire her home address, let alone permission to call on her there. A roundish Negro girl, hair pulled close to her scalp, was carrying a heavy box out as he arrived. He held the door for her.

“Thank you,” Ruby said bashfully, not quite looking him in the eye.

“You gonna be okay with that?” Jake asked as she went by. “It looks awfully heavy.”

“I’ll be all right, thank you,” Ruby replied, clonking carefully down each step.

He watched her as she headed away. Then he turned to go inside.

“Well!” Alice said, bright-eyed. “How can the mission help *you*, young man?”

Jake did better this time; he was on his game, charming and clever – even though to be with her again excited him in a way he could not understand, and when he was alone again afterward, he had to go to the bathroom.

She had a telephone at home; she agreed that he could call her, and he did. But better than that, they went to the Old Bijou to see movies and three times to Chez Chat, the fancy restaurant up in Sagerstown with a neon cat in a top hat on the roof. They had lunches back at Partridge’s sometimes; sometimes he could persuade her to let him drive her to Ramsey’s, which took twenty minutes and cut a chunk out of the middle of her day. He did not suggest going to Karney’s, or to the Club Carioca over in Morton. But Alice was not averse to taking a drink of wine, so they were able to enjoy Tito’s.

His great victory – the achievement that made his spirit crow – was reserving a Saturday morning and taking her to a strand of meadow along the Ossowaga and spreading out a blanket and a picnic meal and then (this was the part he loved best, because she loved it best) reading poems to her. Even as he read the lines, he could not believe he was doing it, but her eyes glistened with such satisfaction that he carried on, never faltering.

He kissed her that day. He was careful not to do it until they were back in town, but before they got out of the car in front of her

apartment he leaned over and touched his lips to hers. He intended to be brief, and he was, and he sat back, but something made him pause before getting out of the car, and then she leaned over with a hand on his face and kissed him warmly and deeply.

* * *

I do want it to be true, she told herself, alone that night.

I do love a happy ending.

I do believe in miracles.

She poured herself a glass of milk and sat at her kitchen table. The kitchen of her childhood, in Trillip, spun around her. She put her head in her hand and closed her eyes. She could smell the whisky as her father rumbled from his favorite chair in the next room.

“Come here, sweetie, gimme a little kiss.”

God, I can't fall in love with a boy like him.

“Come on, wifey. Gimme a kiss or I'll beat your ass.” Then, a raspy cackle of laughter.

God, please, no.

“Come on, don't you want a little kiss from your old man? Patty Connor likes to gimme a little kiss. Want me to go over to Patty's place and get a kiss?” More cackling.

God, please don't let me become my mother.

“Goddammit, Martha, come here! I oughta walk outa here and never come back.”

Tears stung her.

“I've had plenty of women. I don't need this aggravation.”

She was breathing hard.

“I'll find me a good woman, goddammit.”

Jake can't be like that. He's nice. He would be true.

“Alice, where's my pipe?”

She could hear herself wheezing, and her cheeks were hot, and then cold where the tears left tracks.

“Bring me my pipe, dammit, or I'll break your head.”

She clenched her teeth.

“Stop,” she said aloud. “Stop it.”

Her childhood kitchen began to evaporate. She opened her eyes, lifted the glass to her lips, and finished the milk.

Let me be, Daddy.

* * *

It was a lovely, mild winter. She watched Jake skating into her heart and couldn't stop him. So glib, but so devoted. She held back what she could, but it was less and less. Until there was nothing left to hold. She loved how he loved her.

As she pressed the pencil to the paper, she clenched her teeth, then realized it and forced herself to relax her jaw. She let out a deep breath and began writing.

"Dear Daddy," she began. "I am getting married, and I want you to be there."

Aunt Goldie, her father's mother's sister, asked about his plans.

"Goddammit, I ain't going to no wedding," he grunted.

4.

Ruby smiled broadly as she came through the door.

“Ruby! How are you?”

“I’m good,” Ruby answered, beaming.

Alice put down her book and headed for the warehouse door.

“Let’s see what we can find for you today.”

Ruby followed. After six months, she knew the routine. She loved the routine.

“I have good news,” Alice said as she plucked an empty box from the stack and moved toward the shelves. “I’m going to be married.”

Ruby stopped, eyes wide. “Married,” she repeated softly.

“Yes!” Alice reached for a can, put it in the box, then turned to look. Ruby was staring. “Ruby, are you all right?”

Ruby didn’t move. “Will you—” Her mouth closed tight.

“What, Ruby? What is it?”

“Will you go away?”

“No! I’ll be right here.”

Ruby was still.

“He has a house here in town. I’ll move in with him.” Alice reached out to take Ruby’s shoulder in her hand. “I’ll still be here at the mission.” She squeezed a bit. “It will be fine.”

Ruby looked away, at nothing. Alice left her hand there. “Ruby, I’ll be here for you.”

Ruby’s eyes glassed over, reddish.

“I think,” she said, then stopped. Then she started again. “I think I want to tell you about my sister.” She breathed deeply and looked into Alice’s face.

Alice glanced around. “Let’s sit down here,” she said. “On the floor. Just like the first day we met.”

Ruby didn’t answer. She simply slumped to the floor. Alice sat down next to her, and waited.

“We was playing baseball, with a man,” Ruby began quietly. “Man threw a baseball, hit Maddie in the head.”

The air was still. Ruby opened her mouth, but only a sob came out.