

PART I

*A chair is still a chair, even when there's no one
sittin' there*

But a chair is not a house and a house is not a home

When there's no one there to hold you tight

And no one there you can kiss goodnight

Now and then I call your name

And suddenly your face appears

But it's just a crazy game

When it ends, it ends in tears

A House Is Not a Home

Lyrics by Burt Bacharach & Hal David

Marisa flipped on a light switch, and a thousand watts of overhead track lights flooded the dining room table in her downtown New York loft. She spread out a folder of unpaid bills: ambulance charges, mortuary services, doctor bills, and credit card and bank statements that she'd been shoving in a drawer. Then she sat and waited for the buzzer to ring, which it did exactly on the hour, awaking the cuckoo clock who screeched ten times.

Now on her own, she met Andrew Sachs in the entry and took his coat. He had been their accountant for more years than she cared to count and he had helped her with the closing of Jules's bank accounts and the transfer of funds over to her name. But for all the years he'd come to their home to do their taxes, she'd never had to meet him without Jules who buffered Andrew's caustic remarks about their ad hoc accounting.

Andrew accepted a glass of water before he sat down at the dining room table and pulled out a notepad and pencil from his fat briefcase.

Marisa watched him frown and shake his head as he picked up and put down the unpaid bills. Yes, it was all there, she thought. A tragic novel that Andrew only read as figures that didn't add up. He took off his horn-rimmed glasses and put them in their case before he looked up at her. "You're going to have to sell your loft."

Her back stiffened. "What? How can you say that after looking over those papers for five minutes?"

"Remember, Marisa, I've been doing your taxes for years and I'm well aware of your finances." He took in the cluttered walls of art posters and dusty shelves of memorabilia

from years of world tours. “You know,” he said, “a change would really do you good. Why not move to a cozy, uncluttered modern apartment?”

She was about to interrupt him and say that cozy-modern was an oxymoron but was distracted by Jules, who she imagined settling into his chair across the room, leaving her to deal with Andrew who rambled on. “Or what about an active senior facility where a hundred or so people all live in their own apartments? With meals served in a congenial dining room, there’d be no need to cook. You could eat with the other guests who would all be people your age. Wouldn’t that be nice? No stress over whether you remembered to turn off the stove. I happen to know of a very good one, if you’re interested.” He stopped and smiled across the table at Marisa, who gripped her cell phone.

“Wouldn’t you like that?”

“No, I wouldn’t like that. Why do I have to sell my loft?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” He glanced down at the stack of bills. “You can’t afford to live here on your own. Jules might have been a very respected musician, but he didn’t leave you a pension. You can’t live on his Social Security check. It just isn’t enough.”

“But what about the royalties from his recordings and books? And the income I make from editing manuscripts for publishing houses? I know I’ve fallen behind but I don’t need that much to live on.”

“Marisa, listen to me. Please. The royalties don’t amount to much and not only do you have debts to pay off, but also the maintenance in your building has increased. And the monthly costs of living in a downtown loft . . . just look.” He grabbed a few bills and flung them down. “It’s all right here in black and white.”

“I don’t see in black and white, Andrew. Never did and I’m not going to start now.”

She stood up and gathered the papers back into an accordion folder.

“Look, Marisa, I'm just trying to help. You're living beyond what you can afford. You and Jules always did, but now he's gone and you can't maintain this place on your own. Manhattan's real estate market has peaked, and if you don't sell soon you're going to take a big loss when you finally do.”

She stopped herself from saying, “Or do you mean I've peaked?” Instead, she thanked him for coming over (she was sure she'd receive a bill in the mail shortly) and handed him the folder. He hastily packed his briefcase and said he'd be in touch.

She sank down into the couch across from Jules's chair.

“Well, my dear, what did you think of that?”

He's only trying to help. You shouldn't be so tough on him.

“Me? What about him wanting to move me into an old people's home? Andrew Sachs isn't going to decide how I live. Since you're not here, I can make my own decisions. It's one of the many benefits of widowhood.”

She pulled her phone out of the pocket of his old vest that she wore on chilly evenings and added to her Notes: Put ad in Craigslist for tenants.

“I know,” she said. “I don't like the idea any better than you do. But Andrew's right about some things. Let's face it, I need income.”

She went over to her desk and tapped s-e-r-e-n-d-i-p-i-t-y. *Serendipity* had been her daughter Camille's idea, and she had set the blog up before she returned to California. Marisa had argued against it. “Why on earth would anyone want to read what I write?”

“C'mon, Mom, don't be so hard on yourself. Just write down whatever you feel strongly about and readers will show up. Besides, you need a project. You spend way too

much time talking to Dad's empty chair."

Camille was partially right. Though the blog didn't keep her from still talking to Jules, it did help to fill her lonely days with new, though virtual, friends. She not only wrote detailed reviews of pertinent books on grief and widowhood, but also consoling notes to those who asked for her advice, even meeting in a chat room.

Marisa put on headphones to block out the street noise below and, accompanied by Eric Satie's sympathetic melodies she read a comment from username *indespair* who was asking her to suggest a book that would encourage him to break through his chronic grief.

She recommended *A Widow's Story* by Joyce Carol Oates who wrote her experience of grief after her husband died and her life collapsed. Marisa had found Oates's plaintive wail, "I've made myself sick by widowhood, and I am sick of it; the prospect of another few weeks of this, let alone years, is overwhelming." It was a useful mantra when she needed to shake herself out of self pity.

"You can't grieve forever," she wrote *indespair* though wondered herself if it was possible that someday she, like Oates before her, would "*yield to the recognition that this is my life now.*"

At the dining table, after Marisa poured her son Miles a second glass of his favorite grape, Pinot Noir, she told him about her meeting with the accountant. He listened, leaning back in his chair, rocking back and forth, even after she finished.

It was his way, like his father, to mull things over before saying anything. She always thought they both did it to irritate her because she never could stand waiting a long time for a response. She crossed her arms and stared at Miles, trying hard not to tell

him for the hundredth time, “Stop leaning back in your chair or you’ll break it,” which had never happened in spite of her worries.

Like Andrew earlier, but without disdain, Miles took in the crowded walls of art posters and shelves of memorabilia his parents had collected. His eyes stopped on a photo of himself on a stage, curled up inside his father’s drum, his mother trying to coax him out. He smiled at his three-year-old self and said, “You know, if your accountant thinks you would be comfortable in a cozy, modern apartment then he doesn't really know who you are. And why does he care what you do with your money? I bet he has a heavy investment himself in that 'congenial dining room' he’s trying to sell you on.”

“Mom?” he called out, and when he finally got back her attention said, “You’ve got to stop doing that. Did you hear anything I said?”

Marisa who had bored of waiting for her son to fall back in his chair so she could say I told you so, was imagining Jules in his own chair, something she'd been doing way too much, but was afraid if she stopped conjuring him up then he really would go away forever and that must never happen.

“Andrew thought I was too old to work at Macy's. What do you think?”

“Of course not. But you'll move in with me before you have to do that.”

She laughed. “Where? On your floor?” Miles shared a small Brooklyn apartment with three other young men. He did okay as a graphic designer but living in New York was way beyond his budget, even in Brooklyn.

Martin’s dark bushy brows arched up just like his father’s when he was worried.

“Then what are you going to do?”

She took a deep breath, pulled herself up straight and stated as much to him as to

herself, “I’ve decided to rent out the two back bedrooms and move into your old room in the front.” She hurried on before she changed her mind. “I haven’t slept in our bedroom since”—she sucked in air and let it out. “I can rent out our old bedroom and the other back bedroom. I’ll cash in your dad’s IRA to pay off the debts and I’ll call my publisher clients and get working again. You’ll see. I’m not really desperate at all.”

“Mom, I never said you were desperate.”

“It’s been nine months since your father’s been gone, and I know I haven’t been at my best, but I’m coming around. At sixty-five, I can’t see any reason why I should move into an old people’s home. I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.”

“Hey wait a minute. Who are you talking to? I’m not your accountant. I know you can take care of yourself. But taking in tenants? Is that really a good idea?”

“No, maybe not. But I don’t see any other choice.”

He swirled his glass and put it back down without tasting it. “Look, you’re going to do what you want anyway. But be careful. I’ve read bad things about older women living alone in the City. And if you can’t find the right tenants, maybe you really should consider one of those assisted living places where you’d be safe.”

She leaned toward him. “Do you think your father would have wanted me in an old people’s home after he was gone?”

Miles turned toward his father’s chair and when he turned back to face her, he blinked back a tear that Marisa felt was her own. “No, but he’d want you to be safe. Maybe we can find something like that in Brooklyn. Near me.”

She covered Miles’s hand with her own. “Look,” she said softly, “I know this hasn’t been easy for you either. And I know you want what’s best for me. But you’ve got to trust

me on this one.” They clinked their glasses and smiled, but her heart ached looking into his blue eyes and seeing Jules.

“Now let’s eat and after dinner we’ll look over your Dad’s record collection.”

“Okay, but please don't just take in the first stranger who comes to your door.”

“Certainly not,” she said, rolling her eyes up onto the lofty ceiling.

By Friday, Marisa was anxious. Her publishing house clients had no freelance editing work for her and no one had responded to the Craigslist ad. She’d pretended to be brave in front of Andrew and Miles but poverty scared her.

Ignoring Jules’s ethereal suggestion that she be patient, Marisa sat down at her desk and was about to lower the rental fee from eight hundred to seven hundred when she received an e-mail from cb9p6-388846@rental.craigslist.org: Interested. Could I see? cb

She responded instantly: Dear cb. Yes. Come tomorrow at three. Address: 32 Murray Street. Take subway downtown to Chambers. Walk two blocks south. Look forward to meeting you. Sincerely, Marisa Bridges

It was only after she clicked SEND that she reread CB’s cryptic message and realized what a rash, irresponsible act she’d taken out of desperation. What if she’d just opened her home to a serial killer?

