

*Hot Box
in the
Pizza District*

*by
Thomas W. Keech*



Baltimore, 2015

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ALSO BY THOMAS KEECH

The Crawlspace Conspiracy

Prey for Love

~ Chapter 1 ~

She was – what, about 25? Black hair glowing with a rainbow iridescence like gasoline spilt on a wet asphalt road. No furniture or curtains on the first floor. The light was hitting her figure from a big window in the empty room to the left as she paced down the stairs right in front of me, white T-shirt cut high above short black shorts, damp sheen on her stomach, sparkle from her navel. Otherwise it was dim inside the entrance hall. The place was hot, echoing and empty; each step creaked as she stepped on it. The overall effect was jarring. She pointed to the floor.

“You can just leave it there. I’ll deliver it for you.”

“Um, my friend Buddy said he’d get it delivered.”

“I know, but he called and said he couldn’t do it himself today. So I’ll do it. I don’t mind.”

I set the box down and turned to go, but her image was already burned into my brain. I had to turn around and take one last look. She had large, dark eyes, black lashes, fair skin. Her eyes caught mine and immediately that sweet, hot current began to run down all through me. But she was looking at me expectantly, as if I had turned around to say something important. I couldn’t think of anything to say at all.

“I don’t mind,” she repeated.

“Yeah,” I managed to say. “Thanks.” I stood there still, probably

a little too long, boxed in below her in that hot little room.

“It’s none of my business, but are you, like, a bodybuilder or something?” She made it seem like she was just curious, like she had no strong opinions on the subject of bodybuilding.

“A student.”

A boy, she probably thought. And really, she was too old for me. Did they lose it even by then, by 25? You didn’t see women out much at that age. Mostly married, or at least doing jobs and decorating apartments. Disappearing into the frou-frou. This house was empty though, not cluttered with cutesy junk, and solid, with old, beaten-up hardwood floors. So you could walk in and really stand there, be steady – not just balanced on the spongy padded carpet in some girlie apartment like a wary animal that everybody is afraid will throw up all over himself.

I tried to look only into her eyes, but my own eyes wouldn’t follow my instructions, and they wandered downwards. “What?” I blurted out. “No tattoos?”

“You don’t know that.” She smiled like it was totally normal for me to check her out. “You can’t see everywhere.” She left that thought hanging. Sweat had plastered my own shirt to my body, and my diligently crafted muscles suddenly felt too big, overdeveloped. But she didn’t seem to be grossed out or intimidated. She smiled again, a wide, pretty smile showing her perfect white teeth – but with a hint of wrinkles already at the corners of her eyes. It must really suck to get old.

Her eyes flashed down toward the box. She walked across the hall and crouched down next to it.

“I don’t get it. This has a UPS label. It’s already been delivered.”

“Yeah. Delivered to me. I want it taken back to the person who sent it to me.”

“What? Hey, this address is really close. Why do you need me to ...?” She saw me stiffen at her question and stopped. She quickly let go of the box like it was burning her hands.

I thought I needed to explain, at least a little. “I know it’s close,

but I really can't do it myself." I still didn't want to have to explain the whole story to her.

"Oh. Okay. No problem. I'll do it, like I said. What's in it?"

"I don't know."

"So why are you sending it back?"

"This was supposed to be like, just drop off the box two doors down the street at the house Buddy's parents own and he'll take it back for you, or there's this girl there and she'll take it back herself or some such crap."

She rose from her squatting position without taking her hands from her hips, quadriceps smoothly flexing as I watched.

"You don't have to yell at me."

"I just want to send it back and not have to think about it again."

"You're yelling again." She was right. I was acting like an idiot. I wished I could convince her that I was not normally this weird. But that would be hard to pull off now.

She crossed over and stopped right in front of me, leaning a hand on the bannister. "Sorry for prying. It's none of my business. I just had the idea you wouldn't mind telling me."

This house and this girl were solid. Why did I have the jitters? What instinct was telling me to run? The part of my brain that was sane was telling me exactly the opposite – that I'd be a fool not to stay there and talk to her. "I'd like to talk to you. I can't talk about that."

She looked like she might want to talk, but then her expression changed. "Right now, I have to get ready to go to a meeting. But I'm here for three more weeks."

I didn't know why she said that, so I went back to the subject of the box. "So, when will you actually take the box back?"

"I'll take it back this afternoon. Will you give me the two-minute version of the story of this box right now?"

"Do you need, like, money from me?"

"No, I owe a favor."

"Not to me."

"No, to Buddy. To his parents, really. They own this place."

“What’s your relationship with Buddy?”

“What?” She stepped back.

“I’m sorry. It’s none of my business. You’re really nice to do this. I’m saying all the wrong things, I know. It’s so hot in here.”

Her eyes softened. “It’s no big deal, really. I’ve never even met Buddy. His parents own this house. They know my aunt somehow. They’re letting me stay here free until they rent it out.”

I glanced at the rooms on either side of the hall.

“You don’t have any furniture?”

“Bedroom furniture.”

“So you just, what, arrived in this neighborhood from another planet or something?”

“I’m just housesitting for a month. I’m going to graduate school in September.”

Oh shit. Smart, too. This was too much. This was just too right, like a beautiful package that’s got to explode in your hands.

“Generally, for graduate school, it helps if you have a subject of study in mind.”

“Why do you talk like that? You could just ask me what I’m studying.”

Because you might explode in my hands.

“I’m sorry. Sorry.”

She screwed up her mouth, the silliness of that expression exaggerated by her full lips. “I guess I should be glad you asked at all. Not many people do.”

“What are you studying?” I said. “What’s your name?”

“Eileen. I’m starting on my masters in psychology in upstate New York next month. Who are you?”

“I’m Tim. Did you just graduate this spring?”

“Yeah. I made it out in four years, even with a real slow start. My brother might have given me a bad example on that. He always told me the first two years of college were just for fun. Are you in college?”

“Yeah. Sort of. Badger Community College right up the street,

actually. Not exactly graduate school. You starting graduate school – that’s really cool.” That was a lame comment, I knew. This girl made me wish I could find the middle ground between sarcasm and idiocy. I expected she’d just run up the stairs.

Instead, she sat down on the steps facing me. Those were definitely the most beautiful eyes that had ever looked into mine. I searched for imperfections and found only a very faint spray of freckles across her cheeks. “I barely got into the graduate program,” she said. “I didn’t exactly ace undergraduate school.”

“So you didn’t do that well in college? And that gave you the idea of going to graduate school?” I couldn’t help taunting her. It helped keep the focus on her rather than me. I’d met her two minutes ago, she was gorgeous, and I already suspected she was out of my league and was just playing with me. Push her away before she pushes me. That’s what I was doing. I had done it before. Okay, the results weren’t that great. Some people thought I was a little strange. Mostly I hung around with my really old friends, but that was no way to get a girl either.

She gave me this look like she figured out that I couldn’t talk straight to a girl, but she went on talking to me anyway.

“I know what I want now,” she said. She paused like she would like me to ask her more. I guess I didn’t pick up on that quickly enough. “What about you?” she added.

“I take eighteen credits at a time. I get all As. I pick one course every semester and make myself learn more about it than the teacher knows. Right now it’s *Coriolanus*, one of Shakespeare’s plays. I’m a bike messenger for a living. And I lift weights.”

“I can hardly remember some of the courses I took in my first two years of college. I used to party a lot, especially the first couple of years,” she laughed. “I guess I don’t regret it. Don’t you have any time for fun?”

“I ... have some fun.” Okay, it came out defensive. I do think you have to take some things seriously, but I knew she didn’t want to be lectured. We were very different. I turned to go. But she got

up and stood between me and the door.

“Come on. Tell me. Why are you sending this box back?”

“I’m sending it back to my father. I don’t want to see him. I just want to send his package back.”

“Oh! It’s not like you were sent this box by mistake.”

She was almost as tall as me, and she stood close, still flushed from her exercise upstairs. She pulled her hair up off her neck and I caught a faint smell of lilac. I felt pinned down by her eyes. I knew if she asked another question, she would extract another confession. Meanwhile she was sending that sweet current racing through my blood from my heart on down. I was stimulated to the point of distraction. In 30 seconds’ conversation she had made me feel first like a boring nerd and now like a horny animal. I had to get out of there.

“Right. Not a mistake. Gotta go.” I put my hand on the doorknob.

“So you’re making like an ultra-cool insult to your father, sending his package back to him not even opened.”

Shocks spread through the middle of my back, burned out like tiny intramuscular meteorites. If she touched me right then I would have fallen down. But she didn’t. I was left kind of paralyzed, with my hand still on the doorknob. Don’t get inside my head, I thought-begged her.

“What do you want?” I croaked.

“Isn’t that kind of a rough way of making a point to your father?”

“It’s a rough life.” I turned around.

She backed up a step. “When I was fourteen,” she said, “my father took me out to lunch one day and introduced me to his mistress. Before that moment, I had no idea she even existed. I didn’t speak to him for a whole year.”

I stared at her.

“I’m not saying it’s the worst thing that ever happened to anybody, but it really hurt at the time.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I got over it. I’m just saying, I know strange shit happens with

fathers sometimes.”

“The box is probably a birthday present.”

“What birthday?”

“Twentieth.”

“Oh, man,” she said, “that’s supposed to be a happy one.”

“Who says it’s not?”

She looked down at the box.

“I didn’t want to take it back there myself, and run into him ... or anybody. I mean his new wife. And I wanted to get rid of it, you know, right away.”

“I’ll take the box back today. But I’d really like to know why you’re so intense about it.”

“I don’t like to talk about that.”

“Just to me, or to anybody?”

“Especially not to you. You’re too ... mature, I guess, to understand. Sorry. Gotta go.”

“Now I’m really interested. I’m going to personally deliver this box to your father. Any special message I should give to him?”

“Please don’t. You know, never mind the whole thing. Just forget it.” I reached for the box.

She put her hand on my arm. “All this drama. I was starting to think you liked me.”

“Like” didn’t seem like a strong enough word, since I had just experienced a mini-ejaculation the instant she touched my arm.

“I’m 23,” she continued after a minute. I was still bent over, hiding my condition from her while reaching for the box, not able to respond. She went on, “No one ever told me I was too old for them before.”

I gave up on grabbing for the box and stood up. Started to talk, but my voice came out strangled. Took a deep breath. She had a concerned look in her eyes like she was afraid I was having a seizure or something. “I’m fine,” I said. My voice was back. “I didn’t say you were old. I said mature, like you have your shit together.”

“Oh.”

“You seem really nice. It’s just me. I can’t get women right. Just give me the box and I’ll go away.”

“Oh no,” she said, wrapping her arms around it. “I’m taking it back to your father just like I said I would. And I’m going to find out the story of this box.”

~ Chapter 2 ~

There was a phone message from my father's wife about the box. She wanted to make sure, she said, she had sent it to the right address. This was the game Anita played, always pretending there was some little scheduling problem or miscommunication foiling our arrangements to get together, instead of the fact that I always avoided the two of them for as long as I could. I was supposed to call her back to see what the problem with the package was. She knew I wouldn't call her back. I never called her back. No, that's not correct. Once in a great while I'd brainwash myself that it couldn't be that bad, and I'd call. Unfortunately, it had the same effect as intermittent reinforcement on laboratory pigeons.

I wondered how much Eileen would find out about my family situation when she delivered the box. Usually I skipped over that part of my life when I met new people. That was the part I couldn't do anything about. What matters is what you do with the part of your life that you can control. I aced all my courses. I made enough money not to be dependent on anyone. I sculpted my body with workouts. I spoke the truth to my friends. I didn't get too involved with women because once they get tangled in your life you can't always say what you mean even if you can figure it out.

I decided to call my father's office directly.

I usually hang up if his office puts me on hold, but I didn't this time. Some muffled sound, like his secretary was holding her hand over the receiver, held me up.

"Timmy?" His secretary was back on the line.

"Tim."

"Tim. I suggest you call your father at his house right now. Do you have the number right there?"

"Is this about the box?"

"I don't know anything about a box."

First there had been Anita's whiny, diminutive voice calling two weeks ago, asking me to call for no reason, then the call about the box, now this. I slammed the phone down and ran down to the basement and started pumping without counting, set after set until biceps and triceps were burning. Repeat while burning. The racing blood helped too, and the sucking in of air, and the concentration on the pain and the strength you can grow from that pain. If you keep going into that pain you can achieve maximum bodily perfection on a given frame. I think I read that phrase in some pamphlet that came with some of the weights.

"What'r ya'doin'?" Jeremy mumbled. He had just clumped down the creaky stairs to the Weights and Laundry Room next to where I sleep. Lazy, curly reddish-brown hair topped a chiseled face that would have been handsome but for the pudgy layer of randomly freckled skin. He had a devilish smile that made me think his mother had called him cute once too often. I'd known him all his life, and he was a little taller than average, but his body was pale and doughy. He squinted at the bare, gritty concrete floor illuminated by bleak fluorescent light, turned his head toward the shiny-white but little-used washer and dryer. He glanced over to the door to my bedroom in the corner.

"Man, it's harsh down here. Sparse and harsh."

"You've never come down here before? That means you never

wash your clothes.”

There was a good little silence then. I believed in the power of silence. Jeremy had taken it hard when I told him I didn't have time to shoot the shit any more. But it was only because I found out he didn't know a thing. All he knew was the stuff that automatically sank into your head if you had your TV or YouTube on all your life and you eventually saw every part of every Discovery Channel show.

“Well, dear, Jeremy is a sophomore in college,” my mother often reminded me in her sweet, insidious, coaxing voice. “He's getting it over with, jumping through all the hoops you have to jump through to get a degree.”

She wouldn't say what she meant, which was that there was something wrong with me. Sometimes I challenged her: what exactly was wrong with six courses at a time, eighteen credits a semester, all As? I knew more than you needed to know to ace Modern European History and Calculus I, and I've read practically everything that's ever been written about Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*.

“But a lot of people,” my mother would say in her sweet, passive-aggressive way, “look upon college as a means to an end.”

Jeremy walked over and picked up a fifteen-pound dumbbell and started some poor-posture, lazy-ass bicep curls. He takes pride in thinking he's too individualistic to be considered a normal college guy, but Jeremy is about as normal as they come. He has mastered the art of getting by while doing as little schoolwork as possible. He's really the definition of normal, even to the point of getting drunk in the pizza joint the other night and yelling “Fuck all this shit! All I want to do is get laid!” until they told him to leave. I had to step in front of the manager to keep him from physically throwing Jeremy out. I tried to explain to Jeremy later that it wasn't a good thing that we couldn't go in there again, and that his angst was so banal.

“Hey, Tim, this girl came by for you,” he said now.

“What? Who?”

“She didn't say who she was.”

“What'd she look like?”

“Dark hair. Long legs. Real low-cut shorts. Man, I could have taken that coming or going!”

“Confident – but with a sweet smile?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“Did she have like, these beautiful dark eyes with long black lashes?”

“Definitely.”

“High breasts that look like they might bust their way out of her T-shirt?”

Jeremy just nodded.

“Did she have those cut abs you can barely see, but you know you could feel them if you ran your fingertips across her skin down there?”

“Okay. Cut the shit. Who is she?”

“I have no idea.”

He punched me on the shoulder. “She said she wanted to see where you lived. If I knew you were going to give me such a hard time about it, I’d have invited her in, tried my luck myself.”

“She didn’t say anything else?”

“She sure did. She asked me so many questions about you I thought you had applied for a job or something. And she said you should call your father.”

I just nodded.

“I wish I could have seen the rest of that tattoo.”

I didn’t tell Jeremy she lived just two doors up the street. And I could count on the fact that he wouldn’t follow me outside in the sweltering heat. I knocked on her door. She opened it wearing a two-piece exercise outfit, her face red and her skin damp. She had been working out on a machine in the bare room to the left with a fan blowing directly on her. She was trying to catch her breath. She walked back to the steps and pulled on a giant-sized, loose T-shirt. Less good stuff to see. Maybe that was better. She held up the hem of the shirt so the air from the fan could fill it up.

“It looks like you’re wearing a giant pink balloon.”

“It’s gross, I know, but I’m so hot.” She played with the hem in the wind. Now she looked like a triangular pink sail with the wind licking in just at the tops of those legs. “I wish you’d called first.”

“You didn’t give me your number.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. You’re right.” She guided the sail into the wind. “You didn’t ask for it.”

“I was afraid to ask for it.”

“Afraid of me? Right.” She laughed. She let the hem go, and the shirt molded itself to her body. She kept pulling it away and letting it cling back against her as we talked.

“Why did you come to my house yesterday?” I said. But what I was really thinking was: I can call? That was the first sign of what she was doing to me. I was thinking one thing and saying another. The minute you start messing with women your mind gets hypocritical like that.

“I took the box back to your father. I talked to him.”

“About me?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. You come into my house looking strong enough to tear it down with your bare hands, but you freak out when you get a little present from your father. I was curious to see what he was like. Aren’t you curious about what’s in the box?”

“No.” That wasn’t exactly true. The truth was I just didn’t want to talk about my father or the box. The truth was that Eileen was drawing me in toward her with a cosmic gravitational pull like the sun uses to suck on the planets. To keep talking to her in this conversational tone would be to deny the real physical truth that was rising up between us. Adrenaline jolted my heart. The itch flooded my body. My hands were shaking. But she stepped back.

“I really can call you?” It seemed like we had left off this part of the conversation an hour before.

She held her head a little to the side, her dark eyes focused on mine but with little detours back and forth to my hands.

“Sure. You know, your father seemed nice. That makes it even more of a mystery why you don’t like him.”

“Most women like him.”

“I can see why. But I mean he talked about you.”

She brushed past me and walked through the empty living room and through a doorway towards the back, her running shoes squeaking on the bare wood floor. My hands were left dangling in the air.

She didn’t invite me, but I followed her back. I try not to be intimidated by women. It was a kitchen furnished with an old, chipped, steel-legged formica table and one torn chair. She was filling a glass of water at the sink. She wasn’t surprised to see me follow her. She picked up another glass from the strainer near the sink and held it up with a question mark on her face. I shook my head no. She drank her whole glass in two or three little spasms. All of her skin was damp.

“There’s only one chair.” She offered it to me with a nod of her head.

I pulled it out and sat down, resting my arm on the tabletop, which was warm to the touch, like every other surface in that room.

“You talked to Jeremy when you came to my house?”

“Reddish brown hair, so high?” She held her hand up like she was indicating how tall a little kid had grown. I gathered she wasn’t impressed with his height. I was glad I was two inches taller than he was.

“Yeah. That’s Jeremy. He liked you.”

“He was nice to me.”

I couldn’t help but compare in my head this comment to Jeremy’s gross descriptions of what he’d like to do to her. “He tries to act all cool and above it all, but he’s really very needy.”

“You don’t like him?”

“He’s my best friend. Sometimes he gets on my nerves a little. It’s not a big deal.”

Even though we had just met a few days before, it seemed like we

were continuing a conversation we had been having for years. We talked about college. She talked as if my school, Badger Community College, was the full equivalent of the real college she had just graduated from. She might have been 23, but her eyes still lit up when she described her uninhibited first year in college – drinking, cutting classes, tattoos, other activities that she left to my imagination.

“Wow, that sure is not me. I just live in my friend’s basement and study. And work.”

“I’m not like that any more,” she insisted, her eyes drawing mine in. “I paid the price. Because I screwed around for the first couple of years, I barely made it into graduate school.”

“They let you in, right? I’m sure you’ll do okay.” It crossed my mind that I actually had no reason to know how she’d do. But I still thought I knew.

“Jeremy said you’re an A-plus student. He said you were super intense about everything.”

“Why were you asking Jeremy about me?”

“I don’t know. You seem like a nice guy, and I didn’t get any information out of you the other day except those one-syllable answers.”

“I was a little intimidated, walking in the door of this dumpy old house and suddenly there’s this hot woman coming down the steps right in front of me.”

I stood up and walked to a little window over the sink. It looked out over a narrow strip between her house and the next, a strip that consisted of a skinny, crumbling sidewalk barely visible between big clumps of burgundy and orange zinnias full of juice but withering at the edges under the blazing August sun. I could feel her own heat behind me, picture her dark eyes brighter, sharper than any half-dead flowers.

I was drawn back to that heat until my hands were flat on the table near the chair. She had taken the chair when I stood up. She met my gaze, then looked away at just the right instant. I kept staring. She was holding her hair off her neck in a way that emphasized

her sculpted cheekbones. There was a noise, and I saw that I was vibrating the table against the wall.

“You should probably stop that.”

“I should probably stop, period.”

She broke eye contact, shifted in the chair, sat up straighter, still holding her hair up off her neck. She looked great. I didn’t know what to do. I had always dreamed I would meet some sweet girl crazed by astrophysics or political science or Verlaine, and a tiny, invisible plasma flow would start between us and then gradually grow strong enough to alter the universe. But Eileen was nothing like those dreams. She was gorgeous, and not like me at all. She took off her giant shirt and started mopping her skin. Her white top was soaked at the bottom of each breast. She got up suddenly and walked away toward the window, and we stared together at those crazy lopsided zinnias in the alleyway, deepening in color as they died.

“Jeremy told me,” she said, “that you turned down Princeton to go to community college.”

“I would have had to take my father’s money.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Really? That would have been a problem? I would have taken my father’s money in a minute.”

“No, it works out better this way,” I insisted. “I have a job that pays for everything. I can study any subject until I know everything there is to know about it. I have time to work out. I can keep my edge. I couldn’t do that if I had to do all the other college crap.”

“Some of that ‘college crap’ can be fun.”

“I’m not sure it would have been fun for me.”

I had last seen my father in the spring. He drove up and parked in front of my house without warning and called me from his cell phone and waited outside in his car until I showed.

“Nice.” Riding in his car was like sitting on a leather sofa with an oriental rug on the floor while inhaling the faint odor from the

waxed surface of a mahogany side table.

“I always wanted one of these Jags,” he said. “Mechanically, they’re pieces of crap. Won’t last, but then either will I. When you get to be my age, you realize that you aren’t getting too many more chances, and you have to go and take what you want.”

“I thought you always did that.”

He took his tie off and threw his suit coat in the back seat. Except for a pen in his pocket, there was no sign that he was supposedly a big local lawyer. At least I used to think he was someone important, until my own job as a legal messenger took me into his office once in a while. After I saw a lot of legal offices, I figured out that he was just a mid-level lawyer in this middle-sized suburban Pennsylvania town, but a mid-level lawyer with a faithful client base and a decent income, mostly due to a big smile, a good secretary and a deep bass voice. He drove me to a combination restaurant and bar in what you might call the higher-class end of the pizza district, one of those happy-hour places where office people start their weekends on Thursday afternoons. It had a large, U-shaped bar, a lot of small metal tables, and one wall of private booths covered in dark, fake leather. We sat down in one of the booths.

“You still like burgers?” he said. “I was wondering if you had become a vegetarian yet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It would be another thing where you’d be different from me. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“I know I don’t want to be led around by the nose by my Stepford Wife.”

He ignored my reference to Anita. “And you want to be poor. And you want to be a bike messenger.”

“And learn a lot about everything. And not pretend.”

“And how would that would make you different from me?”

“You tell me.”

“C’mon, Timmy.” He called me Timmy because he liked to pretend I had been frozen at the age of ten. That’s how old I was

when he forgot I existed. I let it go this time. “I’m not perfect. I’m sorry I had to leave.”

“It wasn’t the leaving. It was the before. And the after.”

He sat back. “How is your mother doing?”

Why was he now suddenly curious about the damage he had left behind?

He took a swig of his beer, swallowed it slowly, looked around like he was wishing there were other people in the bar who would come over and let him buy them beers too. His hands were restless, playing with his coaster. “I was drinking an awful lot back then.”

“She didn’t mind you drinking. She thought everything you did was great until you started chasing after Anita right in front of her face.”

He didn’t want to argue about my mother’s qualities. “But tell me honestly what you think, about *me*.”

“Okay. I remember you used to cry in front of me. You used to sit with me on the sofa on Saturdays when Mom was out of the room and tell me you loved me and cry for no reason. You would always whine in front of me. What was I supposed to do? And you’re still whining every time I visit your house. ‘Why has it been so long?’ ‘Why can’t you stay longer?’ Really, Dad: *boo-hoo*.”

“I was crying because I was headed for the gutter. What you don’t know is, Anita’s the one who saved me. She’s such a knockout, I never dreamed she was falling for me. It was months before she convinced me that she believed in me.” I stared at him as he went on in a quavering voice. “I always knew there was something missing from my life, but until then I didn’t even know what it was.”

“What was it?”

He stared at me like I might be mocking him. “She believes in me. I can’t live without that. I don’t know how to say it any other way. I was half dead – turning black inside – until I met her.”

“You still drink.”

He held up his fingers. “Four beers a day. Two at lunch, two after dinner. Maybe six on weekends. Remember when I used to

drink until I fell down?”

“No.”

“You don’t remember the time I got my face smashed up so bad I went to the emergency room and had to miss a week of work?”

“No.”

“How could you not remember that? Oh. Your mother, of course. She must have covered up for me. Like always. Your mother is a saint.” He shook his head in amazement, but the movement ended in a shiver, as if the memory of my mother sent a cold chill up his spine. “Anyway, I’ve been doing well at my job again for years. Got most of my clients back. Made up with my old friends at work. I’m at least halfway functional now. I owe all that to Anita.”

“You made me lie for you.”

He put his hands in the air out over the table, palms facing outward, then pushed them apart, like he was clearing away extraneous thoughts. “For just one minute can we focus on me?” he said. “I know you’re seeing the bigger picture. But for me, the feeling is – Anita gave me my soul back. I couldn’t function without her.”

“Just you and her? Nobody else mattered?”

“Of course you mattered. I could see the big picture too. But the big picture was a smash-up either way. If I stayed, I would drink myself to death. If I left, I would destroy my family. There was no right way. My life was hit by a freight train. Destroyed no matter what I did. I pray to God that never happens to you.”

“The only reason I ever come to see you is Mom makes me do it sometimes.”

He took a couple of deep breaths.

“I hoped when you were grown up, we could at least go out together and have a conversation together like men. I guess we’re having one now. Thank you for putting your cards on the table.”

We drank another round in utter silence. Then he let out a loud sob that brought a few quick looks from the patrons at the bar. Luckily, they had turned back toward their beers before they could notice the tears that were streaming down his face. “Sorry. God, I

hope none of my clients are in here and see me like this.” He wiped his face on a napkin and blew his nose. It made a funny sound when he did that. We both looked anxiously around the bar, then saw each other looking around and laughed.

“That’s not the only reason I come to your house,” I corrected myself. “I would probably come even if Mom didn’t make me. I just meant that it’s hard for me to go there.”

“Thank you.” But then he started crying again, whispering to himself about something being late.

“What’s late?”

He just cried more. I stood up to go, but his hand shot out and grabbed my arm. He motioned for me to sit down. “It’s not you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Something bad has happened. I can’t tell you. I understand now that you don’t want to see me crying. So let’s just leave it at that.” He searched in his wallet for bills to throw on the table. Then he stood up and walked out the door without meeting my eyes.

Our two-story, wooden house in the pizza district had once been somebody’s cedar-shingled dream starter home. Now the shingles were curled and the front porch was rotting around the edges. On one side of the yard there was an eight-foot stockade fence separating us from the parking lots of the pizza district. On the other side of the street, there was a guy who sat on his wooden porch all day, talking to his mother who had died twenty years ago. A huge drooping tree screened us from the road most of the year, but the shade didn’t keep the weeds from growing waist high, something that caused us to get cited by the county that summer. This was probably caused by the woman who lived next door, who was a cop. There was nothing she could arrest us for, but she didn’t seem to like us.

My other housemate, Ben, was in a way of speaking our landlord. I had known him since he was nine. He owned the house we lived in – or maybe his father did. Anyway, he acted like it was his house,

including taking on some of the responsibilities of an owner. In the past few months he had bugged the county until they got rid of two abandoned cars that had sat in front of our house for maybe two years. They wouldn't do it unless he cut the lawn first, and so he made us do that. Ben always wanted the rent paid in cash. My father told me years ago that people who deal only in cash are usually cheating on their taxes. I don't know why Ben did it. I would never cheat on my own taxes, but if Ben wanted cash, I was giving him cash.

The main street of the district was 50 steps away and on the other side of the stockade fence. It was a wide street, formerly the suburban community main street, and it used to have a movie theater, an appliance store, a hardware store, and a jewelry store. Now there were two gas stations, a motorcycle shop, a pool hall above a copy place, a vinyl record store, a used clothing store, a dollar store, a craft store, and a flower shop. There was plenty to eat and drink. There was a chain fast food restaurant, four or five little old-time restaurants with tiny tables and low ceilings and the same menus and the same people sitting there as ten years before. There were three or four bars, and five pizza places. No one else on this street had ever even heard of *Coriolanus*.

Eileen and I were still at the window when she turned to me, still holding her hair off her neck. The heat coming off of her skin was moist, unlike the stifling kitchen heat.

"I don't know anything about you," I said. "Where are you from?"

"Washington. The D.C. area anyway."

"Are your parents government people?" I asked.

"You could say that. My father's a lobbyist. My mother has had a couple of jobs in agencies. My brother's in the army now."

"I don't know anybody in the government, or in the army," I said. "And I don't even have any brothers or sisters."

"I have a step-sister too. She's sixteen. She's smart, and funny too. My father lived with her mother for seven years but just got

married a few months ago.”

One reason it was so stifling in there, I realized, was that she hadn't opened any of the windows. I tried to push the kitchen window open, but it wouldn't budge. She asked me to stop before I broke the frame. I saw the windows were painted shut, like most of the windows in our own house.

“Your parents are divorced too?” I said.

“Oh yeah. Now I have two families. I guess that's kind of normal these days.” Her eyes were seeking my agreement, but I never feel qualified to say what's normal. She changed the subject. “Who do you hang around with?”

“My friends. Jeremy. You met him. And Ben, my other roommate. That's about it. We've known each other our whole lives, went to high school together three miles away from here. Do you get along with both your mother and your father?”

“I don't send my father's presents back unopened, if that's what you mean.” I could tell she thought she might have said the wrong thing. So she touched my arm as if to make up for that. “I don't mean to make fun of you. Families can put people in weird situations.”

I nodded. She took her hand off. There was no polite way to ask her to put it back. My hand went out to touch her waist, but it seemed to be moving so slowly it would never get there.

“Ouch!” She had backed into the hot metal edge of the table. “Can we go for a run?” Immediately she started fastening her hair back into a long ponytail with one of those elastic bands that all girls seem to have on them at all times.

I followed her outside. We settled into a jog too fast to talk, too fast for the heat of the day. The more we ran up the hill away from the pizza district, the less funky the neighborhood got. This was where the people who were still functioning in the economic system lived. The sidewalks were not all broken up by tree roots like they were in front of our houses. Small cottages were scattered like tugboats tending to the big foursquare houses. We ran by the elementary school with three overcrowded basketball courts where Jeremy and

I sometimes played after midnight by flashlight. Then there was one of the first suburban developments of brick row houses. Every one of them was meticulously kept up, every postage-stamp front yard perfect, everybody busy and no one in sight.

The sky was a blinding white. I let her set the pace. I stayed ten steps behind her. Her long runner's ponytail poked out from the back of her baseball cap and twitched from side to side with each stride. I heard the rhythm of her running shoes grinding into the thin gravel strip next to the road. Then the gravel strip disappeared and the asphalt was too sticky to run on, so we ran on tiptoes on the edges of people's private yards. Finally there were some high trees and shade, then a tiny, white, nineteenth-century clapboard church, with its old cemetery on a green rise behind a wrought iron fence. The graveyard was a deep green, with colorful dots of impressionist flowers glowing at the bases of the tiny headstones. This was the quietest place I knew, but you couldn't tell how much longer the tranquility of the departed would last. The woods past the graveyard were fenced off now, and there were bulldozers parked there as if the land were being prepared for transformation into something much more profitable and profane.

We came to the top of a long hill past the cemetery and turned onto Ribbon Road, a winding two-lane country road now turned commuter artery that ran along next to a golf course. We ran for another mile, past the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth holes. Then into the entrance of the community college. This was where I went to school but, like most students, I had never gone there on foot. We climbed the long, hilly entrance road, circled the loop road around the administration building, crossed a couple of mostly empty parking lots and went through an opening in a chain link fence and down the long concrete steps to the campus track.

Four laps and she was done. Beads of sweat tracked down into her shirt. She walked over and grabbed the chain link fence, stretching both arms high and suspending herself against it. A nice, girly body. Hips, nice shoulders and, when she turned around, breasts just bold

enough to never let you forget they were there. I pulled myself off the fence and staggered around the track for another hot lap. Then I hung with her against the fence, baking in the sun, sucking in the humid air.

“That was ... pretty rough.” Exhaustion was keeping my sentences short.

“Maybe we went too fast in this heat,” she admitted. “Sorry.”

“I didn’t know you were such an athlete.”

She laughed. “I’m not an athlete. I was never on any teams or anything. I took up running a couple of years ago. Just to, you know, get something off my mind.”

We let go of the fence, reached the stairs and climbed the long set of concrete steps back toward the entrance to the track.

“I’m a bike courier for a downtown law firm,” I said. “Absolutely everything is a super rush. You have to ride between the lanes of traffic. There’s no brakes on my bike. That job can really get stuff off your mind.” We came out of the track enclosure and began walking down the winding campus drive.

“Would you go out with me sometime?” I asked, finally getting to the main point I had been thinking about since the instant I met her.

“Sure.” She smiled to herself. “I thought I was being pretty obvious about that.”

“But then you ran away from me in the house.”

“I just can’t start a relationship with you by making out while being backed up against a hot kitchen table.”

“I get that a lot.”

There were some tall trees giving us shade along the campus entrance road, and even more on Ribbon Road. She made a point of walking alongside of me. She seemed interested in my courier job. She said she had never run across anybody with a job like that. I told her the legal business ran in our family. Then she said she couldn’t understand why I wanted to be an expert on *Coriolanus*. I said I couldn’t explain that one, except maybe I was trying to be a smarty-pants. She laughed at the word. Neither of us was a chatterer,

though, and we went for a long while without saying anything.

We were almost home and were approaching the old white clapboard church before she spoke again. "It's really none of my business."

"What?"

"What's wrong with your father?"

"How much time do you have?"

"No. I mean physically. He's sick, right?"

"I have no idea."

"You don't?"

"Let's just run."