

Excerpt: Chapter 2, *One More Foxtrot*, Joyce Hicks

A Man in Leather

In a Chicago café Betty Miles sat with her hands wrapped around a latte, waiting for her friend Eleanor Goldman. She admired the lions at the entrance of the Art Institute across the street gazing benevolently on the pedestrians. Still a newcomer to city life, Betty marveled at this colorful parade and singled out individuals for speculation about their histories and secrets. Could the fortyish matron at last be pregnant? Has the man in a business suit just made a million, or been fired? Could the elderly couple be newly married?

Betty wondered if the café patrons tapping their phones made guesses about her. How little she resembled the woman who last spring had never drunk a latte or sent a text message. She thought of the shiny, loose-fitting navy suit she had chosen for her arrival at Union Station eleven months ago as a fugitive from senior fun. In Elkhart her cardigan with the cardinals had seemed like suitable attire for an octogenarian. That sweater, along with her belongings and furniture, was back in Indiana where she had broken her lease on her apartment at Shady Grove Senior Living. Though the administration had balked, her demand for a refund got their agreement. She figured it was because they bet that she would be back despite her shocking, unauthorized departure. “Begging for their forgiveness, I’m sure!” Betty muttered, recalling the consternation her decision had caused the front office and her daughter, Sharon. Today, she hoped her slim dark pants, fuchsia sweater set, and lemon print scarf fit in with other urban matrons who were out, perhaps shopping or on excursions to the symphony. She glanced toward the counter mirror. Yes, her softly curled bob—a new hairstyle for spring—was in order.

“There comes your friend now,” said the barista who knew the regulars.

No one could miss Eleanor on the sidewalk. Pumpkin-colored leggings made her teal poncho even brighter, a complement to the turquoise cloche hat. Passersby stepped aside for this colorful bird of a woman leaning only slightly on her cane. Betty knew they made an unlikely pair: Eleanor’s gelled hair was a bright red next to her own champagne curls; Betty’s manner suggested diffidence, Eleanor’s confidence.

“The usual,” Eleanor called to the barista as another customer jumped up to keep the door from slamming on her. She joined Betty at her table by the window.

“How was it?” Betty grasped Eleanor’s hand to hear about the doctor visit.

“He said, ‘Sara, you look good to go.’”

“Meaning . . . ,” Betty added her other hand to their handclasp.

“Oh, sorry! You could take that two ways. It was good news. The treatment was very successful.”

“Thank goodness. How wonderful Sara can skip more ordeals. I’m happy for you, too.” The sisterhood of mothering brought the women close and they hugged over the table. Betty was glad her friend was out from under the cloud of doubt about daughter Sara’s health. “I know you have been very troubled by her condition.”

“Not to have felt pain is not to have been human.” Eleanor gestured air quotes as she offered a Hebrew aphorism that she used to cover events ranging from dire to the loss of an earring. “But you’re right, I’m happy all around. It’s wonderful to have a weight off my heart. I feel human enough now for ten women!”

The friends watched as a Harley coasted to the curb. Its driver removed his helmet and then rummaged in a carrier on the back. His trim black pants, jacket, and silver hair caught their attention more than did the shiny bike.

“A stud muffin,” declared Eleanor.

“Not a trifle old for that category?”

“A man in leather is never too old. Now what’s he doing?”

As they watched, he pulled out a teddy bear and balanced it on the handle bar. Then he backed up and took several photos of the bike parked with the busy street as landscape.

The women laughed and Eleanor knocked on the glass and waved.

He gave them a thumbs-up while they speculated on his motives.

Betty offered a travel story. “Someone once stole a concrete frog off my neighbor’s porch and took photos of it all the way to New York City.”

“Really! Life in a condo here doesn’t have so much drama as yours in Indiana.”

“The frog even went to *Cats*,” Betty went on. “The neighbor never figured out who did it. Then when the frog reappeared, she accused everyone on my street of endangering her yard ornament.”

“You’d think she’d have been happy at least her frog got to a Broadway show.”

Eleanor hooted, which made Betty slop her coffee.

Their attention to the motorcyclist had been so zealous that he waved again, packed up his teddy bear, and rode off, the Harley growl penetrating the window.

When the women left to go to the Cultural Center for Scrabble games, they speculated further about the bear and the background for the photos. They stood a few

minutes on Adams looking south. There in the parade of signs along the curb was the answer.

“Look, it says, ‘Route 66 begins here,’” Eleanor exclaimed. “What I wouldn’t give to be on the back of that bike hanging on. Mhmm.”

Betty laughed. Eleanor never let an attractive man over fifty pass by without expressing longing. Apparently, her friend’s three stints at marriage hadn’t been enough.

“Actually, Route 66 didn’t begin here, but on Jackson Street,” Betty said.

“What? Why’s the sign here then?”

“Jackson is one-way now. My Charlie always said we would take Route 66 from start to finish.”

“And?” Eleanor waited to hear what excuse Betty would offer this time for her departed husband’s failings.

“‘Accidents never take a vacation,’ Charlie always said. He was afraid a long trip away from home would be bad for his business. Insurance, you know. Reliable family man.”

“But you found out that he—”

“I know. I know.” Betty shrugged her shoulders. “Let’s just leave it, Eleanor, okay?”

Eleanor looped her hand through Betty’s arm. The friends regarded the historic sign seconds longer while waiting for the walk signal, or, as Betty called it, the sprint signal.

“Get your kicks on Route 66,” Betty sang as they hiked along. How nice it would be to have a rambling route to follow now through old age, one with the kind of

attractions a person would want to see—not just emergency rooms, medical appointments, and funerals.

And maybe a good man as a companion. Now that would make it perfect, she thought.