

Chapter 1

of *Beyond All Desiring, a novel*

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JANICE PRACTICALLY FLOORED the accelerator of her blue Honda. “Damn trucks,” she snarled at the two 18-wheelers on her tail since she got on the limited access highway near her house. She tried to be patient as she rode the belt winding endlessly around the navel of the universe, much as the lives of many who lived there revolved from a distance around its famous intrigues. But she couldn’t help wishing the semi monsters would get lost or go jump the guard rail into the Potomac so she could concentrate on getting over to Aunt Sara’s.

Windows up against the traffic noise, air conditioning on against the late July sun, rock ‘n roll oldies radio station turned down to a level that blurred the traffic noise without blasting her brains out, she sped up to 65 in a 55-mph zone, then got in the far left lane where the trucks couldn’t follow. That put her exactly where she needed to be to take the left exit onto Route 66.

Aunt Sara’s next-door neighbor, Marge Sangroff, had called just an hour before. Marge said she hadn’t seen Aunt Sara coming or going for three days now—since Monday. Aunt Sara had never given Marge a key to her house. No, that would have made too much sense. Instead she had entrusted the key to Janice, so she could fly into a panic and race around the Beltway every time her 83-year-old aunt decided to have a crisis.

Janice made quick child care arrangements for Courtney and Jon. When she had stopped working outside the home after Jon’s birth 10 years ago, everybody thought she had so much time on her hands that she’d like nothing better than to keep tabs on Aunt Sara. Why not her sister Barbara? She was single and had no other family responsibilities. But Bar was spared because she worked full time in a management consulting firm and was further away up in Baltimore.

On the phone, Marge said she had knocked on the cottage door yesterday, but no one answered. Which might not mean anything, since it wasn’t unusual for Aunt Sara to ignore knocks on the door.

There was no doorbell. Uncle Harry had taken it out years ago, claiming the loud ringing interfered with their meditation. People who thought computer nerdettes like her lived in an unreal world should meet Aunt Sara! At least Janice had a doorbell and was accessible by phone even when she was online. She and Rick had splurged for a DSL line earlier in the year and kept the second phone line they previously installed for a modem, since the kids were now getting their own phone calls from an ever-increasing number of their little friends and she was getting more business calls. If pressed, she gave out her cell phone number to clients, but she preferred to reserve the wireless for personal use.

As far as Janice could tell, the absence of a doorbell still suited Aunt Sara fine. She lived in some kind of never-never land and please do not disturb. Marge said she had tried to call Sara several times in the last few days and just got the answering machine. She had left messages, but as Janice well knew, you couldn’t tell anything from her aunt’s lack of response since she never picked up and only returned calls she thought were worthy of her time and even that

ust one. In the kitchen.

Aunt Sara hadn't permitted a phone in the house for a long time. Whenever Janice had questioned her about it, her aunt mumbled something about how Uncle Harry—who had died years ago—would disapprove. But finally she got one when phones came on the market that let you turn off the ringer and answering machines became as common as TVs—which Aunt Sara still didn't have. Recently Janice had suggested a cell phone, but Aunt Sara refused to get one.

"Nobody ever calls me on my regular phone," she claimed. "Why should I spend the money for a second phone I'm never going to use?"

Janice exited Route 66, negotiated the shopping mall traffic and, after passing the Virginia Square Metro subway station, entered the residential area of Arlington. In a few more streets and turns she pulled up in front of Aunt Sara's house. Aunt Sara's weeds, might be a better description, as they had gotten so high you could barely see through them to the small white frame cottage.

The family had tried to persuade Aunt Sara to sell the house after Uncle Harry's death. Real estate values had skyrocketed since she and Uncle Harry had moved there in the 1960s. Almost all the other houses on the street had been restored and the whole area now had a yuppified look—porch posts festooned with flags and banners sporting animals, clowns, and abstract patterns. The property had started deteriorating years back when Uncle Harry had fallen ill, that long weird illness that preceded his death. And certainly now Aunt Sara wasn't able to properly care for the property. It was totally ridiculous for her to continue living in this place. But Aunt Sara argued that the house was paid off and if she lived anywhere else it would cost her a lot more.

Janice parked the car carefully, to avoid getting weed gook on it. She glanced in the rear view mirror and ran her hand over her Princess Di haircut, smoothing it down, fingering the too long strands at the nape of her neck. Next week she'd go in for a trim and get her roots done.

She walked up the sidewalk to the house, kicking aside weeds that won out by streaking garish green onto her new white Reeboks. The single window unit air conditioner Aunt Sara had finally put in her bedroom wasn't running, though it had to be at least 90 degrees out.

On the porch, Janice picked up two days' worth of *Washington Posts*. She pulled open the screen door and pounded on the front door with the newspapers, calling "Aunt Sara?"

She put her ear to the door, trying to avoid the edges of its peeling black paint. She heard nothing, but smelled something. Something weird Aunt Sara had been cooking? She knocked again, and waited a moment before fishing the house key out of her purse. Once more she knocked.

Waited.

Then she slid the key into the door.

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