

Chapter 1

The Beginning of the End

Bet threw the book across the room and screamed. “I don’t want to be a secretary. I never wanted to be a secretary.”

“Well, if you didn’t want to be a secretary, why did you sign up for this class?” Mrs. Lassard asked. “Pull your hair out of your eyes, Elizabeth Ellen Anderson. A secretary must have a professional image.”

Bet fought the urge to do as she was told. “I really don’t want to be a secretary,” she pouted.

“Do you want to talk to the guidance counselor and change your schedule?” Mrs. Lassard stood, feet apart in square-heeled shoes. “Your grades certainly aren’t the best and, young lady, I think you should start improving very soon.” The business teacher tugged on the lapels of her gray suit. “What will you do with your life? You will need these skills to earn money.”

Pitching the book across the room had made Bet feel horrible and embarrassed. She had never done anything like that before. Bet knew everything the teacher was saying was true, but it all seemed so hopeless. She slumped in her chair. She had struggled with learning the keyboard. The location of the letters just would not stick in her mind. Her long nimble fingers could never get the dance steps right. Bet’s mom had said she needed more practice, but practice was boring. Bet felt wedged between her mom and her teacher. It was squeezing the life out of her.

“Lizard,” as the students called Mrs. Lassard, calmly crossed the room to retrieve the book and handed it to Bet as if handing out her destiny. *Advanced Business Skills for Secretaries* read the title, and on the cover was the picture of the perfect prim, blue-eyed blonde secretary with cheerful cherry-red lips. She was every corporate executive’s dream-come-true administrative assistant. Bet just knew that a sloppy girl with no desire to wear make-up, with tangled light-brown hair and brown eyes that never sparkled, a girl like herself, could never measure up to the business world’s expectations.

Accepting the book from the teacher, Bet hung her head. Ring! Saved by the bell. Bet let out a sigh and hurried off to her next class.

“Good morning students,” Mrs. Crawford, the sociology teacher, greeted. “I know that for some of you mid-morning is about your time to wake up—and in my class, believe me, you will stay awake. Bob, get your feet down off that desk, we don’t want all the blood to rush to your head.”

Crawford was a young forty-year-old with a swirl of gray hair falling across her mischievous green eyes.

Ahead in the row of desks, Bet saw her best friend “Cat,” Catherine Coe, winking back as if to say. “Didn’t I tell you Mrs. Crawford would be a lot of fun?”

“Listen, students,” Crawford continued, “I would like to have a very different and unusual guest speaker to come here to the United States to our little Midwestern town and speak to my classes. As you know, our country is in a military conflict with a small country called Vietnam. I’m trying to get a representative from Vietnam to come here and tell you Vietnam’s side of the story.”

The students looked aghast and were silent. It was 1968 and everyone felt something had changed in the country since the start of that war.

“I want you to be the considerate, open-minded wonders you all *think* you are. So let’s get rolling with your last year in school. You see those things on your desks?” the teacher pointed. “Those are called books and we’re going to open them to page fifteen.”

Bet looked around the room at the glum faces of the sons of factory workers who saw the war in Vietnam in their futures. Still fresh in everyone’s memory was the student take-over of Columbia University last spring. Many of the middleclass “college prep” students knew they too would have to form an opinion on the war. The nation was becoming divided. You were one side or the other. No one was allowed to stand in between.

To Bet, it seemed most young people were opposed to this unnecessary war. But the older generation took the opposite stand, feeling they must support any war their government had the wisdom to declare. Bet could see how it was easy for the older generation to support a war against Hitler. Everyone in class had seen the horror of the concentration camps in Germany, but no one felt threatened by the starving children in Vietnam.

As Bet went from English class to typing class, to American history, she began to sense how her school day would go this year. Her final year. The words of Mrs. Lassard still pounded in her brain like a terrible headache. What would she do with her life?

Arriving home, she met her mother at the door.

“How was school?” her mother asked, her short hair as twisted and frayed as the scrub brushes she carried home in a bucket from her job.

“Ok, I guess,” Bet replied, “and how was work, Mom?”

“Oh, I don’t know, I’m tired, but I guess I’ll survive. We had to strip down fifteen rooms today at the hotel.” She dropped the plastic bucket by the kitchen door. “We washed everything: toilets, walls and floors. And, of course, we had to put clean sheets on the beds. The hotel is getting ready for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday season. They want everything spotless.”

As Bet climbed the stairs to her bedroom, she tried to imagine herself a cleaning woman like her mother. The thought repulsed her. There had to be another way. She looked at the small blue portable typewriter on the desk at the foot of her bed then buried it with the schoolbooks she carried in her arms.

Outside the window on a high trellis, the last of the summer roses bobbed in the cool autumn breeze. Bet could see in the distance the quiet little Ohio industrial town where she went to school. The silhouette of the three smokestacks, representing the three most important locations of the town, poked into the bright orange sunset. One tall brick chimney belonged to the school. The other two were the pottery and the plastics factory where many people in the area worked. Bet stared at the smokestacks wondering if the inside of the plastic or pottery would someday be as familiar to her as the school. What was she going to do with her life?

Bet's friend Cat wanted to be a rock and roll singer. Cat bought music in large quantities as though her life depended on it. She even practiced guitar until her fingers got calluses. Bet wished she could feel such a passion for something, especially something that might take her beyond the limitations of the factories.

As Bet changed from her better school clothes to jeans and a shirt she heard the television downstairs in the living room.

"This is Walter Cronkite," said the voice in a stern tone, "and tonight in the news..."

Every evening, the television had been the window on a world in turmoil: police and dogs attacking Black civil rights activists, while around the world, students amassed in protests against the war. Then came the assassinations: first was that of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a civil rights leader who was supporting a garbage workers' strike; then the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy, a presidential candidate. Bet realized she was living during a time of extreme conflict. The copper workers had just finished a strike of over six month's duration. The telephone workers were in a seventeen-day strike fighting to keep jobs and benefits. And always, the bombs fell on Vietnam. Just last month, the Yippies ran a pig for president at the Chicago Democratic Convention.

Bet's mother's voice floated up from the kitchen. "Bet, come down and help me get dinner on the table."

Bet cringed and took a look at her school books. She hated schoolwork, but she hated housework even more. There was no way out. She forced herself downstairs to the kitchen. Soon, they had the table set and the meal was ready.

"Pass the bread," said Bet's father, extending his long arm, clothed in a green cotton work shirt revealing a pair of dirty-cuffed long johns underneath. "So, you kids are back in school?"

"Yes Dad," sang Bet's two younger brothers, Ted and Larry.

On the television a special report broke into the dinner conversation. The family paused to listen.

"Why are we fighting this war?" Bet asked her father. She knew he had lost a brother in the Second World War and wondered if it affected his opinion. She watched his expression.

"Oh Lord, I don't know," he said with a frown on his face. "I have a hunch it's like any other war. The soldiers go fighting for big businessmen who want to build factories over there."

"I can't make sense of it," Bet said. "Our government says it's for democracy, but they're always killing those who disagree with it, like in Vietnam. In the cities the National Guard is shooting Black people. Do you think there'll be a revolution?"

Bet saw a look of incredulity on her father's face.

"Christopher!" he exclaimed, trying to avoid harsher swear words around her.

"I was just wondering," she said apologetically.

"Well daughter, I don't know, I guess it's your future. There ain't too much a working man can do. Pay the bills and hope your kids don't get into too much trouble." He winked at her. "You better just learn that keyboard and get a job when you get out of school. You don't want to end up like a lot of young women in the factories. Secretarial work is better."

Bet leaned over her plate full of potatoes in despair. She appreciated that her father wanted more for her, but she wanted even more for herself. The older generation didn't understand that there had to be more to life than work, work, work. Life had to mean something.

Her little brothers pulled her out of her doldrums.

"Take that," screamed Ted. He slammed a slice of buttered bread into Larry's face.

"What the hell's going on here?" father asked, laying his fork down and turning away from the television screen.

"He always wants my bread so I gave it to him, but good. Now you won't be so piggy. You dummy," Ted jeered into Larry's face.

The younger boy cried, reaching for his glass of milk as if to pitch it in Ted's direction.

Mother intervened, "Boys, if you can't act better than that at the table go to your rooms." They sat back in their chairs and looked at each other as if contemplating the consequences. Bet watched to see what they would do. Soon the family was quietly continuing their meal while various governments launched accusations at each other through the television news reports.

After dinner, the phone rang. Bet left the kitchen and went to the living room where the black dial phone rested on a small table near the big stuffed chair. She slouched into the chair, "Hello, Anderson residence."

"Let's get together Saturday afternoon to celebrate."

Bet pulled the phone away from her ear. It was her friend Cat. Cat screamed out the word "celebrate." She screamed from time to time, maybe hoping people would think she was just like Janis Joplin. The screaming bothered Bet so much that she sometimes wondered why she kept Cat as a friend.

"What are we going to celebrate?" Bet asked.

"The beginning of our last year, of course."

"Yeah, why not," Bet responded.

"We could go into town for a while. I want to see Eric before he leaves for his Saturday night gig. Then after I visit him, maybe we could go to the music shop."

“I’ll have to ask Mom,” Bet said. “But since we’ll be back by late afternoon, I don’t think she’ll mind.”

“I’m sure glad I never have to ask my mom,” Cat responded, then laughed, “My mom always wants me to get out so she can have the house to herself and sleep. Working night shift at the pottery is driving her crazy.”

“Hold on a minute,” Bet said and put down the phone receiver. She went to the kitchen and explained. Her mom nodded “yes.” Bet took the message back to Cat. Another scream burst from the phone, a sure sign of Cat’s delight.

Saturday morning, Bet rummaged through the closet looking for just the right thing to wear. She settled on her paisley jacket, a pair of blue jeans and her white go-go boots. She checked to see how much baby-sitting money she had in her wallet then put it into her favorite purse.

Cat came roaring up the dirt road, a trail of dust behind the olive-green and yellow 1957 Chevy that Elmer, her brother, had rebuilt in shop class. Bet looked back at her mother’s worried face as she climbed into the car.

Cat eyed Bet’s paisley jacket as they raced down the driveway.

“That looks really great, where did you get it?”

“Some “head” shop,” Bet said using the slang of a musician in a rock band.

“Where is it? You’ve got to tell me.”

“I got it at a local department store,” Bet admitted.

“You need some love beads to go with it,” Cat said. She pulled her long blonde hair aside, “Like these.” She tugged at the ten beaded necklaces on her chest that dangled over the bright orange blouse opened low enough to show her pink bra. Like everyone in the 1960s, Cat was wearing faded jeans. Her occasional interest in Country Western music was indicated by her thick Texan boots. As the two young women glided along in the car, their hair blew in the cold wind that came in from the broken passenger-side window.

“I wish I could get that fixed.” Cat said, embarrassed by the defect in her luxury ride. Bet knew that just having a car of your own was a luxury. Where would she be without Cat?

“Bet, when I drive past the theater, look for Eric. He might be standing outside near the door.”

They passed several times and Bet pointed. “There he is.”

Cat began to gasp and sigh in what she believed were orgasmic cries. Bet laughed knowing neither of them had ever had an orgasm and neither knew much about sex.

Eric had his own rock and roll band, complete with guitars, amplifiers and drums, which was an expensive accomplishment for the average student. Everyone suspected that his parents bought the equipment for him. But still, it was really cool to see such a set.

“Let’s go talk to him,” Cat said. She quickly pulled the car over and parked. She jumped out and ran up the street, a spectacle of noise and color. Bet trailed quietly behind her.

“Eric, let me sing in your band. I want to be a singer in a band.”

He looked embarrassed, but grateful. "Cat! Hey, man, it's Cat. Listen, go back to your car and follow us over to my new pad on 8th Street. We were just going over there to hang out. This is Bob." He pointed to the guy next to him. "Say, Hi!"

Cat dutifully said "Hi!" as she shyly wrapped her arms around Eric's waist and looked at his newly forming beard.

Bet also said "Hi," as she looked at this tall thin boy with short brown hair.

"We're going over to Eric's joint," said Cat.

Bet was amused that above ground, Eric's parent's home looked like the all-American white frame house with short green grass and well-trimmed hedges. The narrow white side door led them to the bohemian atmosphere of Greenwich Village or Haight Ashbury. Entering, she strained her eyes to see in the eerie purple glow of the black light bouncing from the posters on the walls. Faces of rock stars and swirls of color seemed to float in mid-air. She slid into a huge soft pillow on the floor near a wisteria scented incense burner. The strange whining sounds of Indian sitar music filled the air.

Cat and Eric sat together hugging and kissing, leaving Bet and Bob to entertain themselves.

"You like the Stones or the Beatles best?" he asked, then smirked as if apologizing for such a trivial question.

"Well, the Beatles, I guess," Bet said, "but I don't have a lot of money to spend on rock band music groups. Cat's the music freak."

"I know about not having money," he said. "I bought one guitar and that's it for me. Gotta keep buying strings and sheet music. You play?"

"No, but I like to listen."

"Great. Come over to the next room here and I'll try out a new tune on you."

She followed him through a doorway strung with beads. "What's the title?"

"I don't know, something like, "No War for Me No More."

Bet sat and listened as he thumped and slammed the guitar. Frantically she searched for something she could remark on favorably. Suddenly the lyrics became sarcastic and funny. She laughed.

He stopped playing. "It's a dilemma, really," he said. "Here I am a prime example: young and hopeful now, soon dead in a war in a year or two. For what? It's serious."

"It's true, I know," she said. "What are you going to do? I'm opposed to the war, but what voice do I have in the matter?"

Bet saw a look of scorn on his face. "Don't be so apathetic. We should do a protest here in our little town. Just to show we aren't backward and cowardly. This war affects all of us."

"A protest? Do you think we could do that in this little town?" Bet said and looked up at him.

“We must try. Let’s go ask the other two if they’ll protest with us.” Bob dashed back into the other room. “Hey, we’re organizing a protest like those students at Columbia. We’re going to shut down the high school.”

“Like any one would care,” Eric said throwing his head back to gulp the last of a beer.

“No one would join us,” Cat said. “It’s a great idea, though.”

“Bob, you know the only thing we can do is head for the Canadian border when the draft calls,” Eric tossed the beer can into a garbage pail.

“We may have to do that, but why not make some trouble in the mean time?” Bob reasoned.

Bet hesitated then added, “We might not call a protest, but we could stop pledging to the flag. I was thinking yesterday as I was pledging allegiance to our country’s flag, what am I saying? What is this about really? Why do we do this?”

“We need to do something. This war freaks me out,” Bob said, then smiled at Bet.

Bet and Bob turned to see Eric and Cat looking at them with a glow of appreciation.

“Let’s call our friends. All they have to do is refuse to pledge,” Bet said.

“Let’s do it,” said Bob.

Eric got up and pulled Cat up by the hand. “Listen girls, you’ll have to come back later to plan this revolution. We got a gig tonight. Right Bob?”

From his shirt pocket Eric pulled out a tightly rolled homemade cigarette. “You girls can enjoy this, can’t you?”

Cat took the cigarette, her blue eyes sparkling at Bet. Bet looked at the white paper stick. What was it? Then she realized what it was. It was marijuana. She grabbed her purse and followed Cat out the door.

Outside the bright sun returned them to suburban America. They climbed into Cat’s car.

“Can you believe this?” said Cat, holding the white stick in her fingers as if it were magic. Bet looked at it with curiosity. She knew Cat had the daring to smoke it, but she wasn’t sure of herself.

“Wait a minute,” Cat screamed. “This stuff is illegal. I can’t have this in my car. What will I do? I don’t want to go to prison.” She looked thoughtful, “I know, I’ll hide it in here.”

She tucked the thin cigarette into a narrow crack in the dash of the car just above the radio. It slipped down and disappeared, out of her reach.

“Oh damn! Now, I’ll have to get Elmer to take the car apart to get it out.”

Bet pretended agony, but gave a sigh of relief.

“You know what really makes me feel bad about this?” Cat paused and looked at Bet. “To get him to do it, we’ll have to share it with Elmer.”