

Sycophants

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Linda Gould

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CHAPTER 1



WHEN IMOGENE TAYLOR Wittier, a country girl by birth, was forced to abandon New York City—her adopted home and the place of her dreams—she considered herself an abject failure.

Her six years in the big city, from 1982 to 1988, had been exhilarating at times but also brutal, both personally and professionally. The first time she separated from her husband, Steve, the breakup proved tougher than the marriage. She'd picked a screaming fight, accusing him of plotting to leave her for his brassy legal partner . . . or maybe his sexy paralegal. It was a mere suspicion, with no real evidence to support it, until he took her up on her suggestion to pack up and leave their condo.

While Steve was gone, Imogene signed up for a dating service, but five months of entertaining what she called “a parade of jerks” made her husband look good by comparison. She and Steve had been soul mates since college, after all, with their joint dream of “making it in the big city.”

Steve moved back in, and they continued together for another year or so, but it always felt tenuous. Steve's flirtations, to Imogene's mind, were symptomatic of the fundamental problem. To this point, they had faltered in their avowed mission to conquer New York together—or, more accurately, *she* had.

Her job struggles were partly at fault. In 1987, she risked her financial security by leaving a safe but boring job for an exciting opportunity that soon threatened to overwhelm her. She'd have been fired outright, she suspected, if her boss hadn't also been a close friend. That was, in itself, an awkward situation.

It was galling to have reached her late twenties with so little to show for it . . . especially when ambition had always driven her. She had savored that

feeling when she graduated from Glendary College, a small-town campus in the Appalachian foothills of Western Maryland. That was where she had met Steve and roomed with her eventual boss, Sara Murphy. Imogene, a farmer's daughter, couldn't wait to begin her married life in New York with the son of a Baltimore bus driver.

They had continued their working-class romance . . . their rags-to-riches trajectory, she believed . . . as she supported Steve for three years while he attended New York University Law School. She found an entry-level position in the publishing industry, a perfect stimulus for her own writing career, she hoped. For five years after graduation, she produced the annual class notes for the *Glendary Alumni Magazine*, an efficient way to track the lives of her classmates.

She thought at first that her life compared favorably to most of theirs—not that there'd ever be any possibility of competing with her former high-powered roommates, including Emily Palmer as well as Sara. Those two had always been hell-bent for fame and fortune. They were the only members of the class of 1982 who could actually claim to be in show business . . . Sara as an independent music producer and filmmaker and Emily as a West Coast-based actress, who'd actually gotten her foot in a few Hollywood doors.

Imogene's five-year class reunion at Glendary, which she attended without Steve, had given her a chance to take stock. Having concluded that single life in the city was the worst, she glossed over her marital troubles with old friends. She was in a mood to gloat over the job offer she had recently received from Sara, who had returned to her native New York after several years in the Midwest. Everyone agreed that Sara and Emily would have livened up the reunion, but both had sent their regrets.

Since she was leaving it behind, Imogene could joke about her experiences at the lowest rungs of the publishing industry. She amused her former hall-mates Betty and Shelley, both teachers at Glendary High School, by describing what passed for advancement in that job. After being "promoted," she still typed letters and fetched coffee, but gradually she'd been allowed to get close enough to actual manuscripts to spill coffee on them. There was no danger that her clumsiness would impede the cause of literature, since her company published mostly dry textbooks.

"What about that Great American Novel you were planning to write yourself?" Betty asked.

"That just might turn into the Great American Screenplay instead," Imogene replied, "now that I'm going to work for Sara's outfit."

"Ah, yes, the resurrected Peace Enterprises," purred Shelley, her ironic friend. "I can't wait to see what Sara's version of the company will accomplish. I'm sure she has a plan for world domination."

"Just so it's not a plan for world destruction," rejoined Betty, the more sarcastic one, "like when her brother, Jake, the ravaging rock star, was in charge." Betty had recently agreed to take over the *Alumni Notes*, and Imogene wondered if she planned to skewer their former classmates.

"I'd say we're all still living up to our college nicknames," remarked Shelley, who had been especially adept at coming up with them. She had dubbed Imogene "Groupie with a Pen" once Imogene had embarked on a senior honors thesis that analyzed the Sunburst, the rock band fronted by Jake Murphy. That thesis had become a particularly hot item when the band returned to campus for the 1981 Homecoming celebration. Betty, who'd always been a stickler for dormitory rules, had been known back then as "Schoolmarm Betty."

Everyone agreed that Emily and Sara, having declined to show up for this event, had continued to live up to their respective nicknames, Supercilia and Superwoman. "Too busy and too important, I guess," Shelley declared.

Shelley then brought up the collective nickname she had bestowed on her own type: "the nondescripts." These were the plain-looking and unadventurous girls who stayed in the dorm on Saturday nights, drowning their frustrations with pizza, popcorn, and Cokes in front of their portable black-and-white TVs. The nondescripts tended to be overlooked on campus . . . as they searched for underhanded ways to exert their influence.

Imogene had been startled when Shelley mentioned the self-deprecating nickname, as if she still thought of herself that way. Struck by a sudden inspiration, Imogene declared, "I swear, if I ever actually write the screenplay I have in mind, I'm gonna call it *The Nondescripts*. Just to give you guys a touch of the glory you feel you missed." Everyone laughed.

The topic of marriage and children came up, since the women were approaching their late twenties and most had not started families. Shelley was a step ahead of her friends, having two step-kids with her much older teacher husband. Betty and the rest of the nondescripts professed themselves too busy planning aggressive career moves or pursuing advanced degrees, or both, to contemplate marriage or domesticity.

That didn't stop them from cross-examining Imogene about why her five-year marriage had as yet produced no offspring. Imogene, who had lately been trumping up some nebulous symptoms in her own mind, remained coy about it. She stuck to the standard line that neither she nor Steve were well enough established in their respective professions to take that step.

"That's another way Emily and Sara seem to be having it all," she added. "They each have a child. I don't know how they do it. It must be quite a balancing act."

"Or else they have their men well trained," Betty said. "We already know that at least one of the husbands has made waves as a nanny."

Everyone remembered the story that Imogene had reported in the class notes about Sara's attempts to continue breastfeeding her five-month-old daughter, Laraine, after launching her first self-produced film, a strenuous music-and-dance extravaganza called *The New Swing Time*. She'd been forced to switch to a breast pump, and her husband, professional football player Jim Guthrie, had agreed to come on the set every day and take the brunt of the baby. He hunkered down in a trailer with bottles and diapers, while Sara spent her days cavorting across a soundstage in the arms of her charming dance partner and costar. This had everyone exclaiming about what a great guy Jim must be. If he resented his "nanny" status, he didn't show it.

As for Emily, who had quit college in her senior year and run off to Hollywood with drama instructor Mark Piluras, motherhood seemed to have tempered her acting career, at least temporarily. She had made her professional breakthrough almost immediately by snaring a recurring role on *Cops and Lawyers*, a network TV drama produced by two of Mark's cousins. However, she hadn't appeared on the show since giving birth to her son Marcus two years ago. Still, she had managed to finish her degree in dramatic arts at

UCLA, where Mark had been promoted to assistant professor. She had told Imogene that she planned to go on for her teaching credentials, without in the least giving up her true dream.

"If our two favorite powerhouses still plan on conquering the world," Betty continued in her most sourpuss voice, "I hope they're at least smart enough not to have any more children." Everyone in the group agreed.

When Imogene returned to New York after the reunion, the pace of her life picked up while the core of it remained uneasy. She had become accustomed to Steve's late work hours, which meant they rarely had dinner together. She vowed that once she quit her current job and started working for Sara, she'd put in some late office hours herself. Then maybe she'd take more in stride his constant excuses about meetings that ran long or clients who couldn't be put off.

One morning, as they prepared to leave for their respective offices, Imogene startled her husband, and herself too, by asking in a deceptively casual way, "Who's the legal or paralegal babe who'll be keeping you out late tonight?"

"It isn't anything like that," Steve stammered. He left the condo without elaborating, but he came home for dinner that night. He even helped her by preparing the salads and setting the table. All through the meal, she sensed he was trying to tell or ask her something, but he never did. Within a week, he slipped back into his usual pattern.

On the sunny, crisp Monday morning in early February when Imogene walked into Sara's office at Peace Enterprises for her opening conference, she knew this vibrant place would infuse her life with purpose. A stocky young woman passed her through the reception area; she looked vaguely familiar . . . an underclassman at Glendary, perhaps, when Imogene and Sara had been seniors.

Sara's carpeted corner office was the largest on the third floor . . . noticeably larger than those of her senior staff members, Fiscal Officer Leroy Pierce and Director of Public Relations Gus Lewis. She seemed to need the extra space to exert herself as an artist as well as a businesswoman.

Sara reclined in an executive chair behind a huge mahogany desk, piles of manuscripts in front of her . . . screenplays, Imogene surmised. A small upright sign on her desk read, "Thank you for not smoking." She tossed her dark hair with its modified Farrah Fawcett flip, adjusted tinted reading glasses, and surveyed her new employee with the acute gaze Imogene remembered so well. The hint of subservience Imogene felt didn't trouble her; it reestablished their college friendship, in which their respective positions of leader and follower had come naturally.

Imogene seated herself on a couch opposite Sara's desk. Behind Sara, near the back wall, was a quadraphonic sound system, the most modern Imogene had ever seen. It was linked to speakers placed strategically around the room. To Imogene's right was an electric piano attached to a small amplifier, with several scribbled-over pieces of music paper on its stand. Here was evidence that Sara was composing scores for future films, something she had once declared to be her life's ambition. A coffee pot simmered on a hot plate set up on a small table close to the piano, and Sara directed Imogene to help herself. Riding a wave of excitement that made her hands shake, Imogene poured herself a large cup and then returned to her seat.

"When I first got into town and contacted you, I sensed immediately that the New York publishing world hadn't been as congenial as you hoped." Sara smiled as she watched Imogene take a gulp.

"It's been a dead end," Imogene admitted, after swallowing hard. "Right out of college, I got a secretarial position in a firm that published the kind of books I like—novels, memoirs, biographies. After two years, I left that to take an editorial assistant job at a textbook firm. Big mistake, I now believe. The job title turned out to be pretty hollow in terms of responsibility or respect. And the books themselves were as dry as dust."

Imogene didn't mention a transgression she had often committed in the office. Most days, she couldn't resist interspersing her mind-numbing chores with projects of her own. She had been observed, she feared, by a hefty woman with an amazingly quiet footstep and no apparent job description other than "spy." Whenever Imogene stole a few moments to jot down ideas for a novel, pay bills, or read the newspaper, this office busybody was sure to appear over

her shoulder. Imogene never received an official reprimand, but she could feel her stock in the company falling.

The vibes of Sara's establishment could not be more different. Imogene immediately sensed an atmosphere primed to encourage individual initiative and creativity. If she could just grind out a screenplay, maybe it would land on top of Sara's pile.

"I hired you on impulse, Imogene, because I feel I know you pretty well, and I need people around me I can trust." Sara rose partway from her chair to tuck her white frilly blouse into the skirt of her dark-blue business suit. As she sat back down and crossed her legs under the desk, Imogene noticed her black fishnet stockings and high heels. She self-consciously straightened her own workaday skirt and sweater and smoothed down her straight brown hair.

"Who can possibly know each other better than former college roommates?" Sara continued. "Although I'll admit there are exceptions to that rule. Neither of us was particularly chummy with Emily in our year of living together. I still hear from her, but these days she only shows me her sunny side, or tries to. She's no longer a starlet, obviously. She now aspires to be a more serious actress."

"Emily's affair with a certain charming drama instructor set her apart from everything and everyone senior year," Imogene said. "In a way, she was already gone . . . willing to risk expulsion for the sake of utilizing Mark Piluras's Hollywood connections."

"It's kind of a shame Emily and I fell out," Sara remarked, "because she and I had been friends since freshman year. We collaborated on a lot of stage productions. But once we started living together, our egos clashed—my fault as well as hers, I'll admit. I'm glad you and I got along well enough to ease the tension some."

Sara and Imogene laughed together as they recalled their odd threesome with Emily in the relatively spacious corner room at Mary Ellen Clemens Dormitory. Then Sara got down to current business.

"My immediate goal in hiring you, as you know, was to improve on your most recent salary and provide a decent health benefits package, while leaving the exact job description for later. This opening conference will be our

first attempt to formalize the position. My impression is that you could make yourself useful and learn the business by providing administrative support to the Fiscal Officer and the Public Relations Director. You've already met Leroy, as I'm sure you remember."

"Oh my, yes!" Imogene exclaimed. "I'll never forget the road trip we took that Homecoming weekend to pick up what was left of the Sunburst and take them back to campus for the concert. When we met with Mr. Pierce, he struck me as the only person here in the office interested in saving Peace Enterprises as a business . . . and even he didn't have high hopes."

"Who thought the place would still be standing five years later?" Sara gloated. "Things have stabilized, as much as they can. The company has produced two successful films since I got involved, and Leroy has cut out a lot of the deadwood that was sinking the ship. But, believe me, now that I'm sitting behind this desk, I'm aware I can't take anything for granted. As much as I'd like to spend all my time acting in films and scoring them, I have to steer the ship."

"You sort of nudged out your brother and his then wife, didn't you?" Imogene ventured. "I imagine that wasn't easy."

"Jake wanted out. I'm not so sure about Marianne. I'm still hoping that one of these days they'll sell out to me completely. They proved to my satisfaction long ago that rock stars and their wives have no business running production companies. Even when you and I were still in college, I knew they were screwing the place into the ground with their offbeat decisions. Like picking the grungiest bands to keep under contract, and even prodding their own band, the Sunburst, into weird musical 'experiments.' If that wasn't conscious sabotage, it was close. So as far as I'm concerned, they can stay away."

"I know Jake has lived upstate for several years now," Imogene said, "but does he ever . . . come back here?"

She had tried to keep the question casual, but Sara gave her a long look. "Once in a while, on a whim," she replied. "He still owns one of the condos upstairs. But I can never predict when he might honor us with a visit. I wouldn't count on it, Imogene. Remember, he's got two ex-wives now, and a kid with each. Double the responsibility he used to have."

"Oh, I know that!" Imogene exclaimed. "I was just curious."

Neither woman cared to reminisce about the “accidental” tryst Imogene had enjoyed with Jake during that long-past Homecoming weekend. Instead, Sara picked up an intercom phone and called in Leroy Pierce and Gus Lewis to meet and greet Imogene. Both men were products of the big city, who spoke with the local accent and seemed to smile at the country-girl naïveté they detected in Imogene. Other than that, they were a study in contrasts. Leroy was short, corpulent, and sported a ragged crew cut and a slightly rumpled suit. Gus was tall and slim, with clipped, dark hair, and wore a three-piece suit that gave him a buttoned-down look.

“Imogene will be something of a paid intern for us at first, doing a little bit of everything,” Sara explained to her senior staff members. “It may take a couple of months to figure out whether she can help us more on the fiscal side or the public relations side.”

“I have dibs on you first.” Leroy reacquainted himself with Imogene by caressing her shoulder and pecking her cheek. “Last time I saw you . . . Jesus, was it five or six years ago already? This whole enterprise of ours was shaking at the foundation. Those were the days, weren’t they, girls? Jake and Marianne had taken over the reins from our original founder, the recluse folkie Byron Robarts, who had vamoosed to his upstate New York getaway, having finally remembered that’s where he’d stashed his family.”

“Imogene doesn’t need a full recap of the company’s history, Leroy,” interjected Sara. “She wrote her senior honors thesis about it.”

“Yeah, and that was some topic for a little college girl to tackle.” Leroy’s grin resembled a leer. “What title did you come up with—‘Sex and Drugs and Rock ’n’ Roll?’”

“I called it ‘The Spirit of Byron,’” Imogene explained. “I wrote about the songwriting partnership that sprang up between Jake and Byron almost as soon as they met. That chance encounter on the street, when Jake begged for Byron’s help in launching the Sunburst, ended up rekindling Byron’s career as well. Two musicians who were as different as possible merged their respective rock and folk styles in a unique way.”

“That honors thesis shoulda had a sequel,” Leroy proclaimed. “All about how Sara, when she was a mere college senior, rode into town one autumn

weekend and began laying the groundwork to take over Peace Enterprises herself one day.”

“That was some weekend,” Imogene reminisced. “I remember how Sara and I sat down in your office, and you gave us your opinion about the dire state of the company.” She glanced at Gus and added, “I don’t think you had a public relations department then.”

“I was hired in spring of 1982,” Gus supplied with a half smile. “My mission at first was to combine nostalgia about the company’s past with the story line that Sara would infuse the place with new energy as soon as she graduated from college and started focusing on the business. Of course, it didn’t happen quite that way. She traveled a long and winding path to arrive here.”

“That was because I married a football player,” Sara pointed out, grinning. “Jim’s career took us away from the big city, so I had to launch my first film from a distance. Most of *The New Swing Time* was shot in the streets and alleys of a Kansas town, with a minimal crew. I had no idea how it would be financed or publicized. I left that up to you guys here at headquarters.

“But the dream I hatched as a college senior remained the same. I always hoped Jim would catch on with one of the New York teams so that we could move here and I could remake Peace Enterprises from the ground up, with both Jake and Byron out of the way. That finally happened last year, when Jim became a free agent and signed with the Giants.”

Still musing about the company’s past, Imogene said, “You’d think with Byron and Jake and their families living together commune-style in Upstate New York, the old songwriting partnership might have regenerated by now. But I guess it hasn’t.”

“As far as we know, they’re never given a thought to making new music since they’ve been up there,” Gus said. “I tend to believe their partnership was a lightning-in-a-bottle phenomenon, based on mutual desperation at a vulnerable time. It ran its course quickly.”

“Yeah, it’s a love fest they got going up there, not a band,” Leroy chortled. “Wives, ex-wives, various temporary lovers, kids from those unions, what have you, all jumbled together. Dunno what they do all day long besides sing Kumbaya together and cash their checks from past glories.”

“Thanks to your investment skills, Leroy, they still have checks to cash.” Then, not to neglect the more soft-spoken Gus, Sara turned to him and added, “And it’s owing to our crackerjack publicity machine that the public still admires the idealism of our original owners and doesn’t write them off as complete loons.”

“Byron and Jake are only as relevant these days as you care to make them,” Gus remarked. “The Guthries are the face of the company now.”

Once the two directors returned to their respective offices, Sara asked Imogene, “Now that you’ve talked to the management team, what do you think? Could you get comfortable working for Gus or Leroy, or maybe both?”

“I’m sure I could.” Imogene paused to choose her words carefully. “Considering my current skills and experience, I’d probably be of more use in public relations than accounting.”

“I’ll let Gus know your preference. It’s only fair to warn you, though, there’s far more competition for assistant publicist than accountant slots. I have a ton of job applications from former Glendary classmates and fellow New Yorkers I’ve known since elementary school, as well as anonymous hordes from all over. Most would rather talk up the wonders of Peace Enterprises than watch its bottom line. Finance might be less exciting than public relations, but it’s the basis of everything. And I must say,” Sara continued, sending a penetrating glance over the top of her reading glasses, “doing PR for me requires a fairly aggressive personality.”

Imogene’s back stiffened. “I can be aggressive when I need to be. And I do have an advantage over many other applicants. I’ve written in depth about Peace Enterprises before. My senior thesis probed the very essence of its name.”

“The thesis was great,” Sara said, “but ‘The Spirit of Byron’ was an idea better suited to that time. Byron never returned to the city, as you predicted he would, to put the ‘peace’ back in Peace Enterprises. Instead, he left it to Jake and Marianne to implement their own raunch-and-roll vision, until they got fed up with it themselves.”

“I still believe in my thesis,” Imogene pleaded. “I like to think Byron’s original inspiration in launching the company survives. He sincerely wanted

to promote peace in an age of war and violence. And he knew folk music wasn't the only way. All kinds of music can do that. And other art forms, like moviemaking."

Sara appeared to stifle a laugh. "I'm not your thesis advisor, Imogene," she said, "and we're no longer in our old college dorm, kicking around all sorts of idealistic plans. Welcome to the real world."

"I might be naïve," Imogene admitted, "but I notice it's still Peace Enterprises. You haven't changed the name of the company."

"Not yet," Sara conceded, "but once Jim and I are the sole owners, we'll be ready to give the place a complete makeover. It's bound to be different, because I believe in profits as well as creativity."

It was bad form, Imogene perceived, to disagree openly with Sara about the company's mission. Sara eyed her with amusement. "Dearest Imogene," she said, "it's your first day, and you look a tad disillusioned already. You're just beginning to realize this isn't the same madcap place we encountered on our college road trip. I also have fond memories of the days when these suites and corridors were filled with nonstop music and free love and partying. It was an illusion of productivity . . . the sound of bleeding money."

As Sara continued, Imogene realized that Gus Lewis had stated the new company line: it was about the Guthries' brand. She'd better figure out what that meant.

"It hasn't been any cakewalk for Jim and me," her new boss explained. "As you'll remember, we were champion athletes at a small college. Those credentials were enough to launch Jim's pro football career, mostly at a journeyman level, and my broadcasting gig, which was limited at first to college gymnastics. Those careers were nothing to sneeze at, but conquering the midwestern markets left us both unsatisfied."

"Even so, you and Jim were the greatest success stories I ever wrote about in the *Alumni Notes*," Imogene said.

"Frankly, that's not saying a whole lot. I learned the hard way that nobody was gonna knock down doors to offer me movie roles. I was regarded by the powers that be as 'handsome,' even 'striking,' but not as conventionally pretty as an ingénue should be. I had to put together the first deal myself, pulling

every string I could find. That meant selling myself as the sister of a famous rock star, something I swore I'd never do."

"But it's the truth," Imogene pointed out.

"I did a lot of things I swore I'd never do. I exploited Emily's connections . . . which means, as she keeps reminding me, that I owe her big-time. And I really debased myself by contacting one of the producers my mother cozied up to when she was trying to climb the ladder herself . . . having abandoned Jake and me to pursue her so-called career. That felt like prostitution, but it did help a little. I'm not enough of a hot babe, like Emily is and my mother used to be, to charm my way in. I have to rely on guts and determination."

"You must have felt vindicated when *The New Swing Time* proved to be such a success," Imogene remarked.

"A moderate success," Sara amended. "I had fun showing off my singing and dancing skills, even if I had to do it mostly in a small-town alley. That movie was made on a shoestring, relatively speaking, so it ended up profitable."

"It was our second film, *Bloody Skies*, that turned into an extravaganza. I was confident it would be a popular hit, with the renowned Hank Frisk directing a hunky ensemble cast featuring my husband and several other pro football players. A space-war thriller, with spectacular special effects, can't help but bust the budget. But it recouped our investment soon after release, and it gave us financial security apart from our day jobs. That's why I can now afford to sit back in this executive chair, take a bit of a breather, and deliberate on my next project."

"Any idea what that will be about?" Imogene asked.

"I'm ready to do something controversial." Sara paused to gulp some coffee and wipe her mouth. "So far, I've danced in the streets, and Jim has flexed his abs for the world to see. We've celebrated our physicality without really leaving the realm of fantasy. I always thought that once I was well established, I'd be in a position to make a political statement."

"What kind of political statement?"

Sara smiled and leaned forward. "Something that might irritate a war-mongering government like the one in Washington right now."

“A strong antiwar movie,” Imogene declared, riding another wave of excitement, “would be worthy of the Peace Enterprises name.”

“I see your point.” Sara kept smiling. “As long as I’m an incurable peacenik just like the previous owners, there’s no reason for me to change the company’s name. Whatever or whoever else I might do away with, it’ll most likely remain Peace Enterprises forever.”

CHAPTER 2



MIDWAY THROUGH THE conference, the stocky receptionist came in with a fresh supply of coffee bags and restarted the coffee maker, evidently a standing order for mid-morning. Again, Imogene felt a glimmer of recognition. “Should I keep on holding your calls, Sara?” the woman asked in a lilting voice, with a quizzical glance at Imogene.

“Just for another hour or so,” Sara replied. “Thank you, Janie.”

Once Janie left, Imogene and Sara replenished their coffee cups and fell to talking about old times. “I’m sorry I missed the reunion,” Sara said. “Did the girls from the hall talk about me a lot?”

“Constantly,” Imogene said, smiling at Sara’s easygoing egotism. “They agree with me that the Guthries turned out to be the undisputed stars of our class.”

“Maybe so, but I wasn’t ‘the girl most likely to succeed’ back in 1982. If it’d been put to a vote, Emily would’ve taken that prize hands down.”

“Yeah,” Imogene said, “because she made such a big deal about her plans to go Hollywood. She married the right person to help her do that. Five years later, it looks like the tables have turned. Now you’re in a better position to help her than vice versa.”

“That’s what I like about this job. Sometimes I can help family and friends who have stars in their eyes.” Sara’s smile took on an inner glow. “Of course, family is paramount. It felt good to give my has-been mother, the former burlesque bombshell, a few moments of relative dignity with a dramatic role in *Swing Time*. Then in *Skies*, I proved my husband’s not just a handsome face but also something of an actor. Maybe for my next trick, if I can get my

brother to cooperate, I'll reignite his career by collaborating with him on a rock musical.

"Not that I'm running an employment agency here, but if you look around, you might recognize a few familiar faces from college. Janie, for example, graduated a couple of years after us and used to write for the school newspaper. For now, our fellow alumni are mostly support staff, but you can be sure they're nursing big dreams."

Imogene reflected, "That's been a big part of your story ever since you escaped the Midwest doldrums . . . not that you were doing so badly there. But now that you've established more of a national presence, it seems the world is flocking to your door."

"It's not as easy as all that." Sara stroked her chin as she regarded Imogene thoughtfully. "Our struggle to be taken seriously isn't over by a long shot."

For the rest of the interview, Imogene felt she was being put to the test to demonstrate her grasp of the Guthries' "struggle." She offered, "Jim's pro football career has been an example of slow but steady progress. He made the Kansas City roster as a walk-on, right?"

"Yeah, and he toiled mostly on kickoff and punt return teams the first few years, until he finally established himself as a running back. That led to the Giants offering him a three-year deal, which isn't quite as secure as it sounds. Only the first year was guaranteed."

"Jim's been able to stay fairly healthy so far, hasn't he?" Imogene asked.

"He's had his share of sprains and hip pointers and bruises, but nothing major." Sara sighed and added, "That's always a worry, but apart from that, I find the whole football culture scary. There's so much drinking and carousing after games . . . in fact, it's not unheard of before games. I'm not naïve; I know there're temptations everywhere for these guys, including the married ones. Thank God, Jim is smarter than most, and we've always communicated well, from our very first chance meeting in the Glendary dining hall. That keeps our marriage solid."

"Everybody at the reunion kept bringing up that item I wrote about Jim for the *Alumni Notes*, about his taking charge of your five-month-old baby in a trailer while you were busy on the set of *Swing Time*. The consensus was, he

must be an amazingly good sport to play nanny while you were . . . kicking up your heels with a handsome costar!”

“Yeah, Joe Costello is a stud in his own way, but he’s no Jim Guthrie.” Sara smiled at the memory and then added, “Actually, I can’t say Jim loved every minute of that experience, but the bond he formed with Laraine was worth it. He’s been into the fatherhood thing ever since.”

“Does Jim involve himself much in the business?” Imogene asked.

“He’s done a lot of publicity for *Bloody Skies*,” Sara replied. “He gives me sound business advice, but he doesn’t have the patience to sit at a desk all day like I do. Right now he’s on a week-long hunting trip to Montana with some of his offensive linemen.”

“Sounds nice.” Imogene felt slightly deflated that she wouldn’t catch a glimpse of Jim today. Like every other girl who used to watch him stride into the dining hall at college, she’d nursed a crush on the hulk with the dark, curly hair and the twinkling blue eyes. He’d been so far out of her league that she’d barely talked to him.

To change the subject, Imogene asked, “Do you ever visit the commune upstate? It’s hard to picture Jake and Byron and their families living that life-style together on a six-acre estate. Not much like running Peace Enterprises in Manhattan. How do they manage the farming part of it?”

“Are you serious?” Sara laughed. “They’re pseudo-farmers at best. They keep dozens of hired hands around to do the grunt work. Nowadays, they’re fake musicians too. They sit around all day fiddling with their guitars, just in case some of that lost creativity sparks up, but they don’t push it. Once in a while they get off their asses and make a show of cleaning out a barn or milking a cow. That’s what they call ‘getting close to nature.’”

Imogene, the typical farm girl, had a good laugh. Sara continued, “I ventured up there a few months ago with some documents for Jake and Byron to sign, but I didn’t stay long. The whole setup seems unproductive . . . dangerously so. Too much living in the past, vegetating in the present, and depending on layers of helpers to insulate them from real life.”

“You think they could go broke if they don’t get back to lucrative work?” Imogene asked.

"Oh, money's no object, at least for now. Leroy has that under control," Sara replied. "When he first took charge, he stopped the immediate bleeding by cutting loose most of the artistic riffraff that had been milking Peace Enterprises dry for years. Neither Byron nor Jake is in any financial trouble, as long as Leroy is protecting and investing their past earnings. Still, they resent being dependent on a crass businessman. They signed the papers I took up there, allowing Leroy to keep on doing his thing, but they looked at me like I was an agent of some enemy nation."

"I doubt Jake really feels like that," Imogene said. "I reported in the *Alumni Notes* that he invested generously in your first film. No question, he helped you get started."

"To be honest, that's a bit of a myth," Sara replied. "It's not like Jake propped up *Swing Time* out of his passionate belief in me. It was one of Leroy's investment ploys, and Gus ran with the story. Jake never asks for details about what the accountants do with his money."

Again Imogene felt the raw facts hitting her like a splash of cold water. She ventured, "I know Jake's got too restless a mind to just vegetate. He must be doing something creative, besides communing with nature and raising two families."

"He's not much into raising the kids," Sara chuckled. "That's women's work. Actually, like everybody else I know, he claims to be working on a screenplay . . . something based on our family history. Imagine what a horror story that could turn out to be."

"Not necessarily. It could become that rock musical you were contemplating," Imogene felt a surge, as if she had hit on this idea.

Sara laughed and said, "I guess anything's possible. Whether it's a budding comedy, tragedy, or fantasy, it's bound to rock out. I think maybe Jake has a notion of romanticizing our parents as misunderstood artists. Now that he's a father himself, he seems to have forgiven our dad for essentially drinking himself to death after our mom left us."

"A project like that," Imogene said, "could be a healing exercise for all of you."

"Yeah, maybe." Sara eyed her new employee again. Imogene wondered if she had gotten too personal.

She tried not to squirm in her seat as Sara observed, “In some ways, Imogene, you’re still that dewy-eyed coed who wrote in her senior thesis that Jake’s music formed the soundtrack of her college years. You insisted your tryst with him that Homecoming weekend was ‘accidental.’ But I must say, I was a little shocked to hear about it weeks later from his pregnant wife, who’d just found out about it herself when Jake let it slip. She ranted and raved and even threatened you.”

“That was a wild weekend,” Imogene protested, “and Marianne didn’t exactly behave like a dutiful wife herself.”

“I guess none of us were on our best behavior,” Sara conceded.

Imogene took a deep breath and elaborated, “I should point out, Sara, this is no longer an issue. That brief roll in the grass—which is literally what it was, since we were in my father’s pasture—pretty much quenched whatever naïve feelings I had about Jake. I realized, at that moment, it could never lead to a serious relationship.”

Imogene’s honesty seemed to put Sara at ease. She opined that her brother had yet to figure out what he wanted in a relationship. He had married his second wife, Jasmine, and had a son, Jade, without really moving on. His first family, Marianne and daughter Crystal, lived next door on the estate, “as if they really believe they can be one big, happy family.” This arrangement, while minimizing the pain of divorce, made for many awkward moments. Sometimes, to escape the turmoil, Jake returned to the city he professed to hate and crashed for a week or two in his condo, next door to the Guthries.

“So he does come around once in a while,” Imogene remarked, wondering why Sara had implied earlier that he almost never did.

“Just don’t expect to see him in the office,” Sara said. “He’s allergic to business. And if you should by chance run into him, be careful. He still has that reputation as a lady-killer, and unless I’m mistaken, you’re trying to have a marriage.”

“Trying to,” Imogene said, smothering a sigh.

She focused on a picture of Sara’s three-year-old daughter in a stand-up frame on the desk. The child possessed both her father’s vivid blue eyes and her

mother's long brunette locks, an enchanting combination. "How is Laraine?" Imogene asked. "You've sent me pictures of her, but I haven't met her yet."

"I'd say she's both precocious and adorable." Sara glowed with pride. "We'll take a break and go upstairs in a few minutes, and you can judge for yourself. I have a wonderful nanny, a college-age girl named Yvette, who'll be more than happy to show off her charge. Without her, and a competent housekeeper too, I don't know how I'd manage."

"You've found a way," Imogene observed. "That's what the girls at the reunion decided . . . that both you and Emily have achieved real-life Superwoman status. None of us could imagine anything more ideal than being involved in show business while also raising a family."

Sara smirked, as if she found Imogene endearing but naïve. "That's the right attitude if you plan on writing press releases for me," she said. "Gus would certainly approve. But just between you and me, I won't sugarcoat how hard it is. Working motherhood is a constant juggling act. Being successful in business doesn't necessarily make it easier. As the company grows, so do expectations. I'm juggling so many plates in the air right now—the two bands that we still have under contract, the search for a new film, the publicity for the last one, figuring out how to pay for it all. I really do enjoy running the show, but a few broken plates now and then can't be helped."

Sara sighed and continued, "For example, while we were shooting *Bloody Skies*, Jim and I had to leave the set for ten days when Laraine was hospitalized with pneumonia. That shutdown cost us roughly half a million dollars in lost productivity."

What's a half million dollar loss, Imogene thought, *when you ended up raking in twenty million?* Instead of pointing this out, Imogene nodded sympathetically, and took up a topic that she knew would engage Sara. "Do you think Emily's happy with her life?"

Sara grinned. "Hard to say. She doesn't have a publicist spinning it for her like I do. The last time we talked, she sounded . . . not discouraged exactly but exhausted. Mark may have blown down social barriers as an instructor back at Glendary by dating a student, but he turned out to be old-fashioned when it comes to child-rearing. He expects Emily to be at home with their son most of the time."

Sara's expression turned somewhat grave as she added, "Just a word of warning, Imogene, in case you're contemplating taking on this kind of juggling act yourself. We 'Superwomen' don't always feel as invincible as we may seem."

"I'm sure it's tough," Imogene said, although it still sounded enviable to her. A little exhaustion, she figured, was a fair price for having it all. "Steve and I have agreed," she offered, "no kids for us until we're both well established in our careers. I guess we'll know when the time is right . . . if it ever is. Still, I'm curious to see how you do it."

Sara explained that her balancing act required her to have reliable household and workplace help, as well as barriers separating the two. It was sometimes challenging to keep her business and domestic lives separate when they existed in such proximity. The nanny and housekeeper generally didn't disturb her during office hours for anything short of an emergency. She compensated by going upstairs for a break at noon, if she had no lunch meeting. She also tried to leave the office at a reasonable hour each evening in order to cook dinner for the family . . . if she had no late meetings.

This system allowed for some flexibility. When Jim was at home, he took Laraine on frequent outings. Occasionally, he brought her into the office to explore Mommy's domain. Here on the third floor, the little girl negotiated the rows of cubicles, as if they were a fun maze, and chattered away to the employees she discovered. When that got boring, she might beg to be allowed to visit Studios One and Two on the second floor, where Sara was nurturing the only two bands from the previous era that she hadn't cut loose. Sara intended to extract profitable CDs from these as yet unknown outfits, while mostly closing her eyes to their excesses and limiting her child's exposure to the process.

"It's hardly a normal life for a kid, living at company headquarters," Sara conceded, "although she seems to thrive on it. I grew up in a much poorer part of town than this, and Jim was raised on a farm in Ohio. Living over the shop isn't what we expected when we got married. I'll never be a farmer's wife, and he'll never really be a big-city type. So I expect someday we'll compromise and buy a house in a nice neighborly suburb."

As they left the office to head upstairs for their break, the receptionist jumped to her feet and handed Sara a fistful of messages. "I guess I really

hogged your time this morning,” Imogene said, watching Sara furrow her brow over one or two of them.

“Perfectly okay,” Sara assured her, thrusting the messages into an inside pocket of her jacket. “I’m enjoying our visit. I rarely get a chance to relax with an old friend.”

“How long will you be upstairs?” Janie asked, her voice giving way to petulance.

“Just the usual hour or so,” Sara replied. “Why?”

“It’s just that Russell Mellini has called twice. I don’t feel comfortable putting him off.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll get back to him.” Sara smiled indulgently at the receptionist. “Try to take it easy, Janie. You can’t freak out every time you talk to someone whose name you recognize. Actors, especially, are a dime a dozen.”

“Russell Mellini, the TV star?” Imogene inquired, steadying her own voice. “Wasn’t he the lead in *Cops and Lawyers*, the series that Emily appeared in?”

Sara nodded. “Now that the series is over, he has some ideas for a *Cops and Lawyers* movie. Emily has called me about that too. She’s obviously maintained her ties with him, or is trying to.”

“What should I tell him if he calls again?” Janie persisted.

“Just tell him the facts of life. It’s all about the screenplay. If he can come up with one, I’ll add it to my pile.”

Here, Imogene thought, was the essence of Sara Murphy in 1987—a more-or-less independent film producer, with Hollywood connections that she could utilize at her convenience without kowtowing to them. Imogene was awash with admiration, while Janie said, balking, “I don’t think it’s good form to be rude to a famous actor.”

“Then commiserate with him. Tell him everybody who works in my office is trying to launch a movie career. I suspect most of my employees have half-finished screenplays secreted away in their desk drawers.”

Janie seemed to blush as Imogene felt her own face growing warm. She’d been foolish to assume her scribbling would receive special attention just because she’d known Sara since college. There was no getting around it: to gain Sara’s favor, she must first make her mark in the office.

The two women rode an elevator to the fourth floor. When Sara opened the door to her condo, Laraine dropped the book she was reading with the nanny, jumped off the couch, and raced across the wide expanse of the living room. She jumped into Sara's arms, saying, "I'm so glad you came home, Mommy. Mrs. Jones is making hamburgers for lunch!"

"No way I'd want to miss that." Sara hoisted Laraine up and kissed her. She explained aside to Imogene, "Low-fat burgers, with veggies on the side. I hope it's to your liking. I'm trying to keep the family eating as healthy as possible." She set the child down and told her, "Laraine, say hello to your aunt Imogene. She's a dear friend of mine from long ago."

Laraine wrinkled her nose at the visitor and said, "She's not my aunt."

"How about just Imogene, then?" Imogene bent down to shake the little girl's hand.

"Okay," Laraine agreed. "That's a pretty name." Instead of shaking hands, she reached up for a hug.

Laraine left the room with her nanny to wash up for lunch. "You were right about her being both precocious and adorable," Imogene said sincerely. She thought if every hyper-busy working mom could raise such a charming child, that lifestyle might be the way to go.

The dining-room table, with its lacy white tablecloth, looked as if it could accommodate a banquet. Mrs. Jones, a rather stern middle-aged black woman, served the burgers with a lettuce-and-tomato garnish. Yvette brought in a serving plate of raw carrots, cauliflower, and broccoli with dip, and passed it around. "This is certainly a nutritious lunch," Imogene observed.

"Fortunately," Sara said, "Jim and Laraine thrive on healthy food." She smiled at the child, who was bouncing up and down in her seat as she grabbed several carrot sticks, covered them in dip, and took one bite of each.

"But as for me, I weigh ten pounds more than I did in college." Sara smoothed down her blouse and readjusted the waistband of her skirt. Imogene had thought she noticed a slight bulge that hadn't been there when Sara was a sleek college gymnast. "It's the lunch meetings that do me in," she explained. "If I eat and drink while I'm talking business, I lose track of calories."

The grown-ups drank water (spring water, not tap, Sara said), while Laraine sipped milk from a cup. Yvette, sitting beside the child, prompted her to eat more vegetables and to talk about the book they'd been reading. As Mrs. Jones began clearing the table, she said to Yvette, "I could use some help with dessert—if you don't mind."

"Of course." Yvette's bright smile tightened as she followed the housekeeper into the kitchen.

Sara sighed and said discreetly to Imogene, "Boundary issues. They're supposed to divide the daytime kitchen work as fairly as possible, since I only hire cooks for special occasions. I try to stay out of their squabbles, unless they get ugly."

The two women brought in fruit cocktails and coffee. Laraine asked, "Can I go downstairs after lunch? Please?"

"How about a nap?" Sara suggested.

"I'm not tired," Laraine said, squirming in her seat. "When can I go to where the bands play?"

"I think you and Yvette should take a walk outside, instead. You need some fresh air. It's sunny today and not too cold."

"I want to hear the music," Laraine insisted. "You promised!"

"Not today. I'd rather you got some exercise."

Laraine pouted for a moment and then asked, "When is Daddy coming home?"

"On Saturday. He'll take you to hear the music when he has time."

Yvette and Laraine left the table to prepare for their outing. Sara and Imogene lingered over their coffee, slipping past the hour Sara had allotted for their break. She checked her watch and said, "We better get back so I can settle you in a strategic location on the third floor. As I said, most of your initial assignments will come from Leroy, but I'll put you in a position to observe Gus's operation. He recently hired an assistant—a young, attractive one—and I'm not always sure what in hell those two are up to. So I'll ask you to stay alert and keep me informed if you notice any unusual activities."

Imogene smiled at the idea of being an office spy, like the hefty lady with the light step who'd spooked her at her publishing job. Maybe every workplace needed one.

“So what do you think?” Sara asked as they got up from the table. “Any questions or concerns before you plunge in?”

“Just out of curiosity . . .” Imogene hesitated. “What are the chances of any of those screenplays in your pile being produced?”

“Anything is possible.” Sara smiled teasingly at Imogene. “Why? You got something you want to toss in?”

“Not yet,” Imogene said, feeling herself blush again, “but I have an idea I’m working on.”

“Certainly, you’re welcome to try. I haven’t found any gems in my slush pile so far, but that doesn’t mean I never will. In fact, one of my goals for Peace Enterprises is to promote talented amateurs. That didn’t happen in my first two movies. The scripts were shepherded by a fabulous group of Hollywood-based women I call the Triumvirate. Whatever I do, I’ll always rely on those ladies for advice.

“My ultimate dream, though, is to build a moviemaking outfit that isn’t dependent on Hollywood and isn’t adverse to risk. The same goes for the music. I’m nurturing two garage-style bands that I hope will eventually shake the world with their originality.”

Sara’s smile grew more indulgent as she added, “Look, I don’t object if you hack away at your screenplay whenever you have a spare moment in the office. As I said before, I suspect many of my worker bees are doing the same thing. I just ask that you be realistic: it’s called working on speculation. Only if I find it exceptional, and seriously consider using it, will I make you an offer for the rights.”

“I understand how competitive the business is,” Imogene said, “and that I’m here to work for you . . . not for myself.”

“That’s the right attitude.” Sara gestured toward the door. “Let’s get down to it, shall we?”

That afternoon, while Sara holed up in her office to deal with her accumulated calls, Janie introduced Imogene to several of the employees toiling away in accounting, payroll, and administration. They visited the personnel director, who gave Imogene several forms to fill out. Janie then settled Imogene

in a cubicle that was larger and more modern than any she had occupied in her previous jobs. The desk had ample drawers, and there was a small closet for her coat and scarf. She tried out a fancy electric typewriter that had a “memory” and could erase mistakes with a whiteout tape.

After completing the paperwork necessary to formalize her employment, Imogene began “working on speculation” as Sara had suggested. She typed an outline for her screenplay idea, tentatively entitled *The Nondescripts*. She labored on this until Leroy came by, welcomed her again, and handed her a stack of forms with scribbled notes on them, and another stack of empty forms. He asked her to decipher the notes and type clean copies “whenever nothing else is too pressing, my dear,” but ideally no later than close of business Wednesday.

Imogene looked through the documents, her interest picking up gradually. These were to be management agreements for the eight musicians who currently comprised the two house bands, Amorphous and Stuyvesant. What better way to learn the essentials about the talent on the second floor? She got the work done by close of business Tuesday.

Leroy went out of his way to say good morning to her every day. By contrast, the public relations director and his “assistant” seemed to be stonewalling her. Gus held frequent closed-door meetings with Sherri, a model-beautiful, light-skinned black woman, while mostly ignoring Imogene. On her first Friday morning in the office, Imogene made a point of crossing Gus’s path. Only then did he give her a reluctant “good morning” and refer vaguely to an assignment soon to come her way.

A few hours later, Sherri dropped a large document on her desk and said, “We need three copies of this report right away, please.” As Imogene examined the front page, Sherri said, “I need you to copy it, not read it.”

Imogene looked at her, startled. Sherri added, “I’m sorry to be so abrupt, but we’re on a long-distance conference call. If you could help me out, I’d be grateful.”

“Of course.” Imogene’s cheeks burned as she made her way to the photocopy room. She was no mere clerk; she would never type or copy anything

without trying to understand its significance. But she sensed Sherri was keeping tabs on her as she struggled to figure out the massive copying machine. It was all she could do to glance at a few pages. Was it a screenplay, or the outline for one? If so, why did Sherri call it a “report”? And why were they discussing it with someone other than Sara?

CHAPTER 3



IMOGENE SETTLED IN at Peace Enterprises, yet continued to ride a roller coaster, both personally and professionally. She put up with Steve's mostly uncommunicative behavior because she dreaded being single again. In the office, saddled with mundane tasks at first, she nevertheless managed to soak in enough of the vibrant atmosphere to spark her own creativity. Minimized by the two coworkers who should have been helping her, she compensated by maintaining her friendship with Sara and cherishing occasional compliments from Leroy.

All in all, she held her own in the big city . . . until an upheaval in the Guthries' lives, a long-awaited breakthrough, changed everything.

The spring and summer of 1987 were mostly upbeat. Imogene felt her stock rising, especially when the Guthries and Wittiers hung out together. They had each other over for dinner and went out on the town a few times. Discovering that Steve shared his interest in outdoor sports, Jim took him on a fishing trip with a group of his football buddies.

Jim proved to be the same charmer whom Imogene had admired at college. It had always been from afar, until a memorable lunchtime in the dining hall shortly before Homecoming weekend of their senior year. Seemingly on a whim, he'd deserted his cheerleader girlfriend and seated himself at Sara and Imogene's table. The star running back had talked entertainingly about his Ohio farm childhood and made fun of the prevailing sports culture on campus. That was the day Sara, in her own words, fell in love with him "at first sight or, more accurately, at first conversation."

Now, almost six years later, Jim still amused Imogene with tales of his life as a pro football player who had overcome his initial marginal status to become a valuable cog on two teams. "I tend to be more popular in the clubhouse than

in the coaches' offices," he said, grinning at the understatement. "I'm plain-spoken and fairly impervious to authority. I play harder than I practice, and I yawn and snooze my way through meetings when coaches drone on and on."

"Especially when they start praying," Sara put in.

"Yeah, they can sense my resistance when they turn into lay preachers and start equating football with Christianity. A lot of the players buy into that, but I personally can't see anything mystical or moral about x's and o's. Football's not that complicated, in my opinion. It's basically about knocking the opponent's block off."

During their last get-together at the Guthries' condo before Jim left for training camp in late July, the two couples, contrary to habit, talked about business. Jim made light of his "so-called acting career," which consisted of one action-hero role in a film that had taken off big-time. "I know my wife is out to prove I have real chops as an actor," he said, grinning at her while Laraine climbed onto his lap. "So while I'm off tending to my real job, I assume she'll be searching for some Shakespearean drama to cast me in."

Laraine said, "I want to be in a movie too!"

"I thought you wanted to be in a band," her mother reminded her.

The Guthries asked Steve about his law firm's recent foray into the entertainment field. During that discussion, Laraine piped up that she just might decide to be a lawyer too.

As the autumn of 1987 set in, Imogene immersed herself in the pro football experience. The Wittiers attended two games at Giants Stadium in September and October as guests of the Guthries, sharing access to a private suite reserved for friends and families of players.

In November, Sara invited Imogene to join her at home for an informal Sunday lunch. They had the condo to themselves, since Laraine was away visiting a playmate, and the staff was off duty. Sara served Sloppy Joes, French fries, beer, and sundaes for dessert. Her rules about healthy eating, she explained, went out the window on game days. The women watched the Giants play on the road, enhanced by a big-screen TV, while they discussed Imogene's progress in the office.

Imogene was determined not to complain, even when Sara prodded her about the continuing Gus-and-Sherri stonewall. “Gus says your contributions to his operation are more clerical than professional,” she remarked.

“That’s his choice,” Imogene sputtered. “He intentionally excludes me from the important stuff. Whenever I take a call from the news media, I’m supposed to pass it on to Sherri.”

“He also says you seem to be doing your own thing a lot.” Sara’s amused look eased Imogene’s momentary panic. “I told him not to sweat it, that I gave you permission to exercise your own creativity when nothing else is pressing.”

“I appreciate that,” Imogene said. “And rest assured, office business always comes first.”

“Understood. How’s that screenplay coming, by the way? What did you say it was called?”

“*The Nondescripts*.” Imogene felt an inner glow. “It’s mostly a jumble of ideas right now. But I’ve written to our old hallmates, Betty and Shelley, asking for their reminiscences about certain incidents that took place senior year—like the night they crashed the Homecoming dance without dates.”

“Oh yeah. That must have been a major breakthrough for them.”

“And I’d also like to contact our former roommate,” Imogene continued. “Maybe after all this time, Emily would be willing to describe exactly what she was thinking and feeling the day she left college so abruptly.”

“After locking herself in our room and faking a suicide,” Sara supplied with a widening grin. “Yeah, that was a stunt for the ages.”

Imogene hoped this was more than polite interest. “My story might not be a political blockbuster or anything that dramatic,” she asserted, “but it makes its points through social satire.”

“I get that, but you gotta realize you’re competing with screenwriters who’re into nuclear war, assassinations, race riots, kidnappings . . . every possible form of political violence. They don’t just want to satirize the system. They’re ready to burn it down.”

“I personally prefer movies with a more subtle message.” Imogene found herself battling a deflated feeling. How would she keep up, excitement-wise, with her unseen screenwriting competitors and their apocalyptic visions?

"Besides," she continued, "I'm thinking *Nondescripts* could lend itself to that rock musical you're looking for—the one you were hoping would revive Jake's career. What better way to do that than to dramatize the Homecoming weekend when the Sunburst returned to their home campus?"

"Intriguing," Sara said, "but there's one tiny problem. A musical needs songs, and you're not a songwriter."

"Songwriters can be hired, can't they?" Imogene said, hesitating, and then added, "Haven't you been doing some composing yourself, on the electric piano in your office?"

Sara looked startled, but not displeased, that Imogene had noticed. "I have tunes going through my head all the time. Whenever I get a spare moment, I try to pin down some of those ideas for future film scores. That doesn't make me a songwriter, unfortunately. To write songs with exact meter and meaningful lyrics . . . that takes a poet, actually. I've always envied my brother that gift, even though he's chosen to let it go dormant."

She regarded Imogene thoughtfully. "So what're you suggesting? I should set up a meeting between you and Jake to discuss your potential college musical? Wouldn't that be playing with fire?"

"Our one little fling is in the past," Imogene hastened to assure her. "Any meeting between us now would be strictly professional."

"You sure about that?" Sara smirked at Imogene and then added, "What would Steve say?"

"I'm pretty sure he could handle it."

Sara evidently picked up a sour note in Imogene's voice. "I wouldn't be too sure," she said. "Even men who have a roving eye—not that I'm implying Steve does—can be sensitive about their wives' outside interests. Besides, Jake's still in the process of extricating himself from a marriage to an insecure, unstable woman. Jasmine's not tough as nails like wife number one. There's no telling how she'd handle it."

"It wouldn't be like that," Imogene objected. She couldn't resist adding, "Although thinking back, I believe my college fling with Jake kind of energized my relationship with Steve. Like it excited him to have shared me with a rock star."

“College flings are one thing,” Sara said, “and marriages are another. Here in the real world, our actions have lasting consequences.”

Imogene was forced to agree. “I’m not totally naïve,” she said. “Jake’s rich and famous, and I’m a fledgling screenwriter. To even imagine he would care about my project . . .”

“You can go on imagining it,” Sara said, “but you could also find songwriters who’re a lot more accessible. For example, I have two house bands who’re kind of spinning their wheels right now. Maybe if you met with them, they could be prodded to come up with some usable product.”

“That would be great.” Imogene tried to sound more enthusiastic than she felt about Amorphous and Stuyvesant.

As the women helped themselves to second beers, Sara prompted, “Tell me more about the office dynamic. Are you and Sherri getting along?”

“On the surface it’s fine,” Imogene said. “Sometimes she even apologizes for piling all the grunt work on me. But she’s so possessive of Gus that I barely see him. That seems counterproductive to me.”

“You should take it as a compliment,” Sara said. “She might regard you as a bit of a threat.”

“A threat? Me?” Imogene exclaimed.

“You’re potentially a rival for Gus’s attention and smart enough to compete with her. So why don’t you give her a run for her money? Once in a while, if a caller from the media seems friendly, strike up a conversation.”

“I’ll do that.” Feeling emboldened, Imogene ventured, “Are Gus and Sherri, to your knowledge, involved?”

“I assume they are on some level. I don’t know the extent of it. That’s really their business, not mine.”

“Is it possible Sherri thinks I have designs on Gus? *I am* married, after all.”

“You could make your married status more obvious,” Sara advised. “Your cubicle looked pretty bare, last time I checked. There aren’t any pictures of you and Steve, or anything personal.”

“I guess I could put some up.” Imogene flinched at the realization that her sterile walls must make her look like a recluse . . . or, worse, a temp.

“So what’s with these documents they have you photocopying?” Sara asked. “If they’re reports, shouldn’t I be receiving them?”

"I think Gus and Sherri are working on something secret," Imogene said. "They give me pages full of statistics and charts about various films currently on the market. That stuff is interspersed with other stuff that looks more personal—original film treatments or outlines or something. And at least once a week, they close Gus's door and presumably have a conference call with someone."

Sara shrugged. "If they're working on speculation, I don't own their product, unless I decide to pay for it. But if they're doing it on office time, there shouldn't be any secrecy about it. See what else you can find out."

"I sure will," Imogene promised.

After halftime, the women began to pay attention to the game. Jim gained some notice for the first time by returning a kickoff almost to midfield. Shortly thereafter, a less-than-exciting three-to-three tie between the Giants and the Washington Redskins was finally broken with a touchdown drive by the Giants. Jim got the ball on a couple of short-yardage plays, once making a first down.

"Jim's having a good game," Imogene observed.

"A good second half at least," Sara agreed. "If they just used him more, maybe they'd figure out how good he can be for an entire game."

The Redskins answered that score quickly, tying the game at ten each. When they kicked off afterward, Jim again received the ball. He darted and dashed through the field of defenders, eluding them all as the Washington crowd groaned. Imogene and Sara jumped to their feet.

"He's gonna break this one!" Sara shouted. "Finally! We've been waiting for this all season."

An excited television announcer yelled "Touchdown, Giants!" and praised Jim's deceptive moves, only to deflate a moment later. "Wait, hold everything. There's a penalty flag on the play."

"Oh shit!" Imogene and Sara exclaimed simultaneously.

The play was called back. Later in the third quarter, the Giants used their passing game to take the lead. Jim's impact on that strategy was limited, and Sara's cheers for the home team seemed muted. By the fourth quarter, she looked bored.

Late in the game, with the Giants leading twenty-four to seventeen, they were forced to punt from deep in their own territory. Their coverage team,

including Jim, made a hard hit on the Redskins punt returner, forcing him to fumble. The women cheered this play, which effectively iced the victory for the Giants. But Jim got up slowly and limped to the sideline.

"Damn, he's hurt," Sara fumed.

"Not too badly, I hope," Imogene offered.

"Honestly, Imogene, sometimes I hate this game. It's tough for me to watch, knowing Jim's always in a position to take the hardest hits."

"His teammates appreciate it, I'm sure," Imogene said.

"His teammates love him, but what good does that do? I'd like to see him traded to a team that'll use him the right way, instead of relegating him mostly to kicking teams. They don't call those the 'suicide squads' for nothing."

"You wanted to come to New York," Imogene pointed out.

"I did, but we're paying a higher price than I expected. All the nagging injuries Jim suffers are bad enough, without always having to worry about the Big One. I'm afraid that someday he'll be carted off on a stretcher."

The women listened to the television commentators, who blamed the Redskins' ineptitude on the so-called suicide squads for their loss of a crucial divisional game. "Sounds like they could use some help," Imogene remarked. "Any chance Jim could be traded to a place like DC?"

Sara contemplated this with a smile. "Now, there's a plan. Imagine moving Peace Enterprises to the center of national political life. What a shot of energy that'd give us. We could get that house in the suburbs, and Laraine would have all the fresh air and sunshine she needs."

The football broadcast finished with glimpses of iconic symbols in and around autumn-dappled Washington—Capitol Hill, the White House, the Reflecting Pool, and the Lincoln and Iwo Jima memorials. These sparkling pictures seemed designed to make the nation's capital inviting . . . and to set Sara's wheels turning. Imogene had assumed that football decisions always dictated business decisions in the Guthries' world, but who could say which really took precedence?

If Imogene's life in the Big Apple felt shaky at times, that was to be expected. You're not really experiencing it unless you're sweating it, Sara assured

Imogene during a chance meeting in the ladies' room. It was the day after Thanksgiving, and the office was nearly empty. Imogene had hoped they'd get a chance to talk, but Sara excused herself, saying she had to rush back to her office to return an "official" call from Washington.

"Really? What's that about?" Imogene asked.

"Nothing definite as yet," Sara replied, "but I'm exploring some long-range possibilities for filming on the National Mall. Just checking with the National Park Service about what it would take to get permits."

Imogene spent the day typing a variety of vouchers for Leroy, who was short of accounting staff. Most were routine requests for office supplies, but a couple of travel authorizations caught her eye. It seemed that Gus and Sherri had hit on a way to relieve the stress of city life . . . to get away, at company expense, as often as they could.

First up for them was a visit to Upstate New York for three days in December. Imogene figured they would be visiting the Robarts-Murphy commune. That didn't excite her envy, as it was sure to be terribly cold up there. But California for five days in January struck her as a full-fledged junket.

When she took her finished work in to Leroy, she remarked as casually as she could, "Looks like I'm gonna be left alone with the public relations chores while my colleagues are on their trips."

"Yeah, you'll be in charge for a few days here and there," Leroy said and chuckled. "Try not to let it go to your head."

"Do Gus and Sherri take these trips often?" Imogene asked.

Leroy shrugged. "Sara seems okay with it. Might mean she's either too busy to travel herself or wants to avoid a face-to-face meeting with somebody. Or are you referring to the propriety of Gus and his pretty assistant traveling together? I try not to comment on that angle, if I can help it."

"I'm not commenting on that, either," Imogene said quickly. "I'm just saying . . . it must be nice for them."

Leroy kept chuckling as he signed the vouchers. "Yeah, but whatever you might think about that pair, they're good at calming the waters and spinning things as needed. It's safe to say they head to the upstate commune at times when Sara can't deal with the emotional currents up there.

As for the West Coast junket next month, I guess that's to shore up Sara's Hollywood ties."

He smiled at Imogene as he added, "Maybe you'll get a chance to kick some PR ass while your colleagues are gone. Or if nothing in particular comes up, just keep that part of the office operating smoothly without running to Sara with every little problem. She'll appreciate that; trust me."

Imogene doubted she'd get much of a chance to "kick PR ass" during her week of running the shop in December. She found herself unprepared when a reporter from a monthly music tabloid called one morning and asked, "Do you have any comment on the bar fight that broke out last night between members of the bands Amorphous and Stuyvesant?" Imogene was not only unaware of the fight but also had never met the combatants.

"According to police reports, Sylvan Moore and Paulie West were both arrested, released on bail, and have court dates next month," the reporter informed her. "Will the company be assisting them with their legal troubles?"

"I'll get back to you on that," Imogene said. After concluding the call, she headed down to the second floor and poked her head into Studios One and Two. Both sound stages were a tangle of musical instruments, wires, amplifiers, and microphones, with no musicians in sight. Probably too early for them, she figured.

A man who looked about thirty-five, with straight blond hair reaching beneath his shoulders, emerged from the sound booth in Studio Two. "Can I help you?" he barked.

"I hope so," Imogene said, trying to sound confident. "I need a statement from both Sylvan Moore and Paulie West, if possible, about the bar fight they were in last night. Are they available?"

"Do they look available?"

Imogene jumped at his belligerent tone. "When will they be coming in?" she stammered.

"I only speak for Paulie. I'm the producer for Stuyvesant. Name's Andrew Decker. I don't know you, and I don't know why my lead singer would give a shit about talking to you."

"I'm in charge of the public relations office this week," Imogene said, intimidated but also growing angry. "There's been a press inquiry about the incident."

"Yeah? Well, you can just tell the press to fuck off."

An older-looking man, mid-forties and balding, stepped into the studio and scowled at the long-haired blonde. "There's no need to be rude to the office brass," he scolded. To Imogene, he said, "I'm the producer for Amorphous. What do you need?"

Imogene explained her mission. The older man responded, "I can tell you right now what the fight was about. Our two bands, Amorphous and Stuyvesant, both want to be featured in a video the company is planning to shoot in Washington, DC, as part of the first city-wide Martin Luther King Day bash next month. Sylvan and Paulie must've taken their difference of opinion out on the town and tried to drink their way to a solution."

"And I'm guessing my guy knocked your guy around, since he's a bigger, stronger dude," Andrew said.

"Yeah, we all know your guy gets physical when he can't get his way."

"Oh yeah? Like this?" The younger man reached out and shoved the older man, who shoved back.

They kept at it until Imogene screeched, "Stop it! Please!"

The two men paused, and Imogene continued, "I really should talk to the musicians directly. Would you be willing to give me their phone numbers?"

"Like I said," the younger producer sneered, "my guy's unavailable."

"I'll give you Sylvan's." The older producer grinned. "He's more likely to speak to you in complete sentences, if he isn't too hung over."

He wrote down the number on a slip of paper. Imogene thanked him and left the second floor as the two producers resumed arguing.

She returned to her desk, determined not to hesitate. She punched in the number she'd been given, rehearsing the questions she needed to ask. The ringing on the other end went on so long that she almost hung up. She'd have to call the reporter back and tell him that the fight had taken place, but the combatants weren't talking.

As she took the phone away from her ear, someone picked up and grunted, "Yeah?"

"Is this Sylvan Moore?" Imogene asked.

"Who wants to know?"

"This is Imogene Wittier, from the public relations office at Peace Enterprises. I hear you've been . . . there's been a report that you got into a fight at a bar with one of your colleagues."

"What you mean 'colleagues'? I ain't got no colleagues."

"Another musician, I mean," Imogene amended.

"And you wanna know who won?" Sylvan burst into a staccato laugh. "Well, if you gotta know, I was sucker-punched. I got a shiner that would show up perfect in any close-ups you might wanna shoot of me right now."

"When are you coming back to the studio?" Imogene asked.

"I'm waiting on a formal apology." That weird laugh sounded again. "You can tell everybody I'm injured—just like that great football star Jim Guthrie whenever he decides he's too beat up to play but still wants to get paid." Imogene wrote this down, thinking it would make a colorful quote.

"Who is this again?" Sylvan asked. "That black chick who's always pretending to be our publicist but really just wants to sing with us? You're pretty obvious about that, honey babe."

"That's not me," Imogene said. "I think you're referring to Sherri Johnson."

"Oh yeah, Sherri. You're not her?"

"She's out of town right now," Imogene said. "I didn't know she was an aspiring singer. I'm a different publicist . . . Imogene Wittier. Do you have anything else to say about the fight?"

"Me and Paulie don't really hate each other that much, y'know. It's mostly that we're frustrated with fucking Peace Enterprises. We've heard every empty promise in the book from Princess Sara—we call her the princess 'cause her brother's really the kingpin behind it all. She keeps us making demos and tapes just so she can pretend she's running a record company. You think she's ever gonna let either of us make a real album?"

"I can't say," Imogene said.

"Me neither, honey babe, but I bet her plan is to keep us fighting for scraps, like this fucking video in DC."

Imogene felt obligated to point out, "Peace Enterprises is primarily a movie production company now. Making a video would be a positive step for you musicians. And there are bound to be films that need musical scores."

"Yeah? You know of any?"

"I'm working on a project myself—a story that revolves around a college band. It would need a score of youthful, catchy tunes. It's in an early stage of development, but I'm hoping it goes somewhere."

"That sounds right up our alley. If I could just believe, hon, there's some hope for us getting into the movies—I wouldn't cut and run."

Imogene continued to pump up his prospects and her own, until she was sure she'd convinced him to return to the studio. She hung up with the uneasy feeling that she'd gone overboard. Sara hadn't agreed even to consider making *Nondescripts* or, for that matter, putting her house bands to work in any movie.

When she contacted the reporter, she described the fight as a minor disagreement among friends, which would soon blow over, and added that there would be no further comment. She tried to end the conversation at this point but feared it would be bad policy to hang up on a member of the local news media. He kept pressing her to admit that professional frustrations within the company had precipitated the fight.

Trying to sidestep any implied criticism of Sara, Imogene finally blurted, "I've said all I can. If you need more, I suggest you contact Sylvan Moore directly." As soon as she had given the reporter Sylvan's number and hung up, she feared she'd blundered again.

Imogene spent the rest of the week assisting Leroy with minor tasks and gave Sherri a brief report on the incident when she and Gus returned late on Friday. She thought nothing more about it until after the holidays. When she returned to the office after a week off, she expected the prevailing mood to be upbeat, reflecting the Giants' surprising surge into the NFL playoffs.

She was on her way to Sara's office to say hello and congratulate her on the team's success, when Gus blew past her without a word, almost pushing

her against the wall. Waving a tabloid newspaper, he disappeared into Sara's office and closed the door.

Oh God, Imogene thought, *I must've screwed up big-time when I talked to that reporter. The damned story's somehow blown up. Giving him Sylvan's number was beyond stupid.* She inched toward the door, hearing just enough to confirm her fears. The phrase "should be fired" reverberated inside the office.

With knees shaking, she made her way back to her desk. Should she start cleaning it out now, she wondered, or would Sara defend her on the grounds of inexperience, naïveté, or friendship?

Checking periodically, Imogene determined that Sara's door remained closed for a half hour. When Sherri dropped by with a typically mundane assignment, Imogene smiled ruefully and said, "Looks like this might be the last photocopying I'll ever do for Peace Enterprises."

"Yeah, Gus is pissed," Sherri acknowledged. "Too much inside information got out when you talked to that reporter. You violated several PR commandments in one blow."

"I didn't know any better," Imogene protested. "How could I? I've never been told what the PR commandments are."

Sherri shrugged. "You'll probably survive this, since you're buddy-buddy with Sara. She'll probably keep you around, even if it's in some other capacity."

"Like what? Housekeeper?" Imogene took a deep breath and got to the heart of her grievance. "I don't see why Gus can't talk to me directly if he has a problem with me."

That made Sherri laugh. "Haven't you noticed Gus will do almost anything to avoid real human contact? Granted, he likes having young ladies around, but he prefers them as decoration. He'll never admit he went in there to try to get you fired—from now on, he'll just pretend you don't exist. He'd do the same to me if I got on his wrong side, and I'm his best friend around here."

Sherri glanced around the corner and then drew closer to Imogene and lowered her voice. "Just between you and me, it's not the worst thing in the world for us so-called assistants to shake things up when we get a chance. We're supposed to promote the idea that one of this company's missions is to

Sycophants

help struggling artists. So what's wrong with getting out the word about your unfinished screenplay and my singing? We don't want to be mere handmaidens forever. We're creative too."

Sherri smiled and picked up a section of the huge pile of papers she'd just dropped on Imogene's desk. "I'll help you with this," she said as she headed out. For the first time, left alone with a mysterious document, Imogene squelched her impulse to snoop.

CHAPTER 4



IMOGENE SAT IN her cubicle for the next several days, waiting for the ax to fall. Activity swirled around her as she wallowed in self-pity. She figured the only reason she hadn't been fired was because her colleagues were too busy to give her a thought. Gus and Sherri were occupied with preparations for their trip to California. The day before they left, they spent an hour with Sara behind her closed door, which was hardly reassuring.

Imogene wondered if Sherri's burst of friendliness had been an aberration, not to be repeated. She'd probably been disingenuous when she proclaimed solidarity with Imogene as a struggling artist. The silence from the top concerned Imogene more. She learned, via one of the travel vouchers she typed, that Sara would be spending a few days in Washington, overseeing the Martin Luther King Day video shoot and attending the Giants playoff game against the Redskins.

She resolved to have at least a brief word with Sara before the trip to DC. Grabbing a rare moment when her employer had no visitor and had just gotten off the phone, Imogene stepped resolutely into the corner office. "I know you're frantically busy," she stammered, "but I just wanted to reassure you that I'll try my best not to do anything flaky while everyone's away. I learned my lesson the last time about giving up too much to a reporter. Next time, it'll be mostly 'no comment.'"

Sara looked at her with a perplexed brow, which perturbed her more than outright anger would have done. Finally, Sara said, "Oh yeah, that. Why don't you close the door and sit down, Imogene. I meant to address this with you when it first happened, but things got crazy around here."

Sitting in a hot seat, feeling her blood freeze, Imogene waited for the verdict. Should she seize the offensive? She blurted, "I just think I'd be doing

better with public relations if the office atmosphere wasn't so secretive. Even hostile at times."

"That's the problem in a nutshell, Imogene. You let things like that get to you." Sara took a gulp of coffee from her tall cup and eyed Imogene.

"What I mean," Sara continued, putting the cup down and wiping her mouth, "is that you're too sensitive about Gus and Sherri. Why should you care what they think? True, you made a potentially serious mistake—a firing offense, if Gus had his way—but you need to own it and move on. Develop more of a backbone."

Imogene straightened up in her seat as if to take the advice literally.

"You need a thick skin to succeed in this super-competitive business, Imogene. And a willingness to take chances. If that means you overstep once in a while, the only person you owe an apology to is me."

"I do apologize," Imogene said. "I understand it's bad form to expose the company's internal quarrels to the public. And pumping up my unfinished screenplay was probably out of line."

"There you go again." Sara laughed. "Be careful what you apologize for. Most of your screenwriting competitors are tougher than that. They're not afraid to use their association with me to talk up their projects wherever they can. If that pisses me off, they just shrug."

Imogene's head whirled. It sounded as if Sara was encouraging her to stand up to everybody, including Sara herself.

The look of confusion must have been plain on her face. Sara rose abruptly and came around her desk, saying, "I'm sorry to cut this short, but I have to get upstairs for lunch. I'm hosting Laraine's play group today. I just want to mention that I've been contemplating a change, and now seems the right time. So starting next week, I'd like you to switch places with Janie. She's been asking for a shot at public relations, and I think a turn at the front desk might be just the thing to get you out of your shell. We'll see how that goes for a couple of months, and then we'll reevaluate. Thanks in advance for your cooperation."

Imogene sat frozen in Sara's wake. "You're demoting me?" she asked, incredulous but unheard.

Propelled by a surge of anger, Imogene got to her feet and left Sara's office. She swept past Janie's desk without a glance. Returning to her cubicle, she sat down heavily. Just as she'd feared, she would be packing up her things, but how far was she going? Should she accept this demotion meekly? Or should she take Sara's own advice and stand up to her? Maybe Sara was goading her to quit, yet she shrank from it. As she tossed around the two choices, a third one occurred to her.

Imogene jumped up and made her way back through the maze of cubicles to Janie's desk. She stood there for a moment, steeling herself, as the receptionist stared at her. "It looks like I'll be taking over here for a while," she finally got out. "Can you start showing me the ropes now? That switchboard phone looks complicated."

Janie gave a cautious smile and replied, "Oh, it's not too hard, except when all eight lines start ringing at once."

Imogene returned the smile, trying for a conspiratorial look. "I guess the receptionist is the one who really knows what's cooking around here. In a way, this is where all company business originates, right?"

"Yeah, I guess." Still looking uncertain, Janie proceeded to explain the phone system. Imogene listened, trying to conceal her disdain. This would be a pure crap job, she thought, unless she figured out how to do it creatively.

Since she had no choice, Imogene took possession of the switchboard phone. She soon mastered the basic juggling act of putting several calls on hold, remembering who they were and judging their order of importance. It required a thick skin, something Sara had advised her to develop. She endured daily abuse from callers who didn't get through. Most of these didn't matter, being part of what Sara called "the anonymous hordes," whom she didn't care to know or talk to.

Sara was away on her trip to Washington while Imogene endured her initial struggles. She had been at it over a week and was having a particularly busy morning, when her boss returned. Imogene could hear every staff member in Sara's path greet her as she made her way toward the private corner office. Sara accepted condolences about the Giants' playoff loss and reassured

everyone who asked that the sprained knee Jim had suffered in that game wasn't serious. This gave Imogene time to compose herself and prepare to demonstrate her mastery of the front-desk job.

Sara stopped before her and smiled. "Good morning, Imogene. How are you making out with that phone contraption? Is it driving you crazy?"

"I'm handling it," Imogene breathed. "How was your trip?" Her eyes drifted back to the switchboard, just in time to see one of the blinking lights go blank.

"Oh shit. I just lost a call I put on hold."

"Don't sweat it." Sara kept on smiling. "Just remember, your main job is to protect me from people who're out to waste my time."

"Yeah, but every now and then I drop someone who might be important. If I'm not mistaken, that was the actor Russell Mellini I just lost."

"Emily's special pal? Don't mind him. He's a pest." Sara checked her watch. "I gotta get to work, but we'll sit down together for a good talk soon. Hang in there."

Imogene did "hang in there" in hopes of having that conversation, but Sara seemed busy and distracted for weeks afterward. Still, thanks to the perpetually blinking switchboard lights that she managed with increasing skill, Imogene gradually pieced together what was going on. She put through all calls from Washington, DC, as a top priority.

This apparent focus on the nation's capital was intriguing. Imogene intended to remind Sara, as soon as the opportunity arose, that Washington was her birthplace. Her parents had been mid-level Federal employees, with country roots, when they met. They'd eventually given up city life to buy a farm and move eighty miles west. Still, Imogene had always been attracted to the ultimate hub of politics. When she took calls from members of the DC mayor's staff, she knew who they were, even if she was unsure why they were calling.

Imogene also spoke to music critics in DC who had reviewed Amorphous's performance at the Martin Luther King Day celebration. This time she didn't overstep but, with Sara's approval, put the journalists in touch with the band's

producer. She wondered how the members of Stuyvesant were reacting to the growing fame of their rival band.

Imogene exchanged frequent banter with Russell Mellini, who still hadn't reached Sara after several tries. "If I ever get through to your boss, I'll demand she fire you for giving me such obvious b. s. about her whereabouts," Russell joked in his smoothly modulated actor's voice.

"I already know of one person who's demanded my firing," Imogene said, "and yet I'm still here. Sara must like having me around."

"I can see why. Please give her my regards—again—and tell her I'm sure *Cops and Lawyers: The Movie* is just the project she's looking for."

"I'll do that—again," Imogene responded, "as soon as I've pumped up my own movie, *The Nondescripts*."

"I thank *you*, at least, for listening to my movie idea. I'm sure yours is intriguing too, although I'm not so sure about the title."

"I'll work on that," Imogene said. "You might be interested to learn that my project involves a mutual acquaintance of ours. Your former costar, Emily Palmer Piluras, was one of my college roommates senior year."

"Ah yes, I'm a big fan of Emily. She made quite a splash in our TV series, although it was a minor role. I was hoping to give her a shot at something more substantial in the movie."

"I can confirm she's a born actress," Imogene said. "Her dramatic exit from college, just a few months before graduation, was one of the events that inspired my story."

"Are the two of you still close?"

Imogene hesitated and then admitted, "It was never a real friendship. More a marriage of convenience. The thing was, Sara and Emily needed a third person to get the biggest room in the hall."

"You're obviously still close to Sara," Russell observed.

"Sara and Emily were campus powerhouses," Imogene explained. "I couldn't keep up with either of them, but Sara and I gradually connected, while Emily was mostly unavailable. Once she took up with Mark Piluras, her drama department advisor, her life revolved around him."

"How about Sara and Emily? Are they still friends, as far as you know?"

"They're both headstrong personalities," Imogene said. "They collaborated on theater productions back at college, but they clashed sometimes—and it seems they still do, whenever they talk."

"That's a shame," Russell said, "now that they're grown women. I'd think they could both benefit from a mature friendship."

"Maybe." Imogene's wheels started to turn. She remembered that when she had pitched her screenplay idea to Sara, her boss had seemed bored with the idea of portraying "the nondescripts" as heroines. Her interest had picked up when Imogene introduced a melodramatic character bearing a resemblance to their former roommate.

"You might suggest to Emily that she give me a call," Imogene advised Russell. "I'd like to talk to her. And if we get lucky, I'll put her through to Sara."

One morning in late January, Imogene picked up a ringing line, trilled her usual greeting, and heard a voice from her past. "How are you, Imogene? Sounds like you've got the receptionist gig down pat."

"Oh, hi, Emily. Long time, no hear." Imogene emitted a laugh. "I haven't completely mastered it, to be honest, but it's a good way of learning the ropes. So how's Hollywood treating you?"

"Not bad," Emily said, "but with an energetic three-year-old son, sometimes my career has to take a back seat. I guess that's something you haven't discovered yet."

"No, not yet," Imogene conceded.

"Is there any point in asking if Sara's available? I've tried to storm this barricade before, but I couldn't get past the previous girl with the saccharine voice. Or is it possible Sara's been avoiding me on purpose?"

"It's just her frantic schedule," Imogene said. "She's on a conference call at the moment, and she has a lunch meeting right after that. I'll certainly tell her you called."

"If you would, please. I'm sure everyone she knows is trying to sell her a screenplay, but my project is based on a long-running television show, with a respected actor at the helm. Who else can say that?"

"You're lucky to have Russell Mellini in your corner," Imogene said. "He's told me about his plans for *Cops and Lawyers: The Movie*, and he's been nice enough to listen to my story idea in return. I'm attempting a screenplay called *The Nondescripts*, using some of our college experiences as inspiration."

"So now that you're Sara's confidante, you probably figure you have the inside track for pushing your script—even without any show business credentials." Emily spoke teasingly but with an edge. "Oh, wait, you do have one advantage, don't you? You get to control who talks to her."

Imogene took a deep breath and reminded herself of Russell's wise advice about the benefits of mature friendships among former rivals. "Listen, it's nothing personal," she said. "It's just that Sara's super busy. I must tell you, though, I doubt she's in the market for a police procedural."

"But you think she *is* in the market for a nostalgic college story—a 'Revenge of the Nerds' for girls? I can't see it."

"My story's potentially a musical," Imogene asserted. "If Sara's brother, Jake, got involved, it could lead to a career revival for him. And you never know . . . there might be a juicy part for you."

Emily seemed to catch her breath. "Tell me more," she said.

Imogene described the story she had outlined. It would give the nondescripts their day as unlikely heroines, the purveyors of many sneaky deeds on campus. The climactic scene, however, would be the fake suicide staged by the school's leading drama student to protest the administration's heavy-handedness about her illicit affair.

"Can't you see yourself playing that role?" Imogene pursued. "It'd be a chance to recreate your younger self while you're still young enough to do it."

"Yeah, I could see myself doing that."

Emily paused, as if reluctant to admit how intrigued she was. Finally, she said, "It was pretty clever of you, Imogene, to set yourself up by writing the *Alumni Notes* all these years. You not only cornered the market for nostalgia but also made a point of flattering Sara in your updates."

"I flattered you plenty, too," Imogene pointed out, "but I gave up the *Alumni Notes* when I took this job. Our old hallmate, Betty Altington, has taken over."

“Oh yeah, that two-hundred pounder we used to call Schoolmarm Betty. She was always a stickler for the dorm rules, since she never had any reason to violate curfew herself. I expect her *Alumni Notes* to be vicious.”

“Betty’s the type I’m trying to glorify in *The Nondescripts*,” Imogene said, “and she knows about my project. Maybe it’ll give her an incentive to be nice to us.”

An outside line began ringing as Imogene heard stirrings in Sara’s office. “Listen, Emily,” she said, “I have to take another call, but I think Sara might be in between appointments. I’ll try putting you through now.”

“I appreciate it, Imogene. Nice talking to you.”

She put Emily on hold, buzzed Sara’s intercom, and said, “Emily’s on the line. She says she’s been trying to reach you for a while. She and I just had quite a conversation.”

“No kidding? I only have a second, but put her through.”

After connecting her two former roommates, Imogene picked up the ringing line and trilled, “Peace Enterprises. May I help you?”

“God only knows. I’m thinking maybe it’s Peace Enterprises that needs help. Seems I gotta make the phone ring off the hook before anyone answers.”

“Oh my . . . Jake.” Stunned by the sound of that famously scratchy voice, Imogene breathed harder.

“The same. It’s not exactly the well-oiled business my sister promised when she took over.”

“My fault,” Imogene managed. “I’m new at the receptionist’s desk.”

“Obviously. Which poorly trained wage slave do I have the honor of addressing?”

“It’s Imogene Taylor . . . Wittier. From Glendary College.” She paused and then prompted, “I roomed with Sara senior year, and you and I met during Homecoming weekend. We . . . spent some time together.”

“Oh yeah, Imogene. I remember now.” Jake’s voice grew warmer. “You were a fresh-faced novelty for me, fairly innocent but definitely willing. You took me to meet your folks, out on the farm, like I was a legitimate boyfriend. That was a rare moment of normalcy in my life.”

“It was a blast for me,” Imogene said, laughing.

"Not so much for your parents, I guess. But no harm done, since it seems you went on to marry your respectable boyfriend. Now you're supporting his career with an office gig? Or is answering phones for my sister your ideal job?"

"Not exactly," Imogene said. "I'm still trying to learn this switchboard system. I screw up regularly."

"Yeah, you do. I called earlier and no one answered. I could have you canned for incompetence." Jake's voice was teasing.

"It's just that some of the calls are distracting," Imogene said. "That was our old roommate Emily I was talking to just now. I passed her on to Sara. You remember her, don't you?"

"Yeah, of course, Emily. Who could forget the auburn-haired bombshell, the perverter of professors!" His quick, vivid recall gave Imogene a pang of jealousy.

"What's she doing these days?" Jake asked. "I used to get off on watching her strut her stuff as an undercover prostitute on that cop show, but then she kind of disappeared. Did she take up serious acting or something?"

"She took up motherhood," Imogene replied. "That's what she says has been occupying her time." Imogene paused and then added, "I guess women like her age pretty quickly in Hollywood."

"So now she's pestering Sara on the phone, while you hang around the office doing menial chores. I'd say both of you are desperate to get into pictures. Am I right?"

Imogene's heart began to palpitate as she replied, "Emily's trying to pitch a movie based on her old TV show. And I'm working on a screenplay set at a small-town college much like Glendary. Right now I'm envisioning it as a musical . . . which means I'll need somebody to write the songs."

"Ah, I see your game. You're trying to lure this has-been songwriter out of mothballs for a nostalgic tale about his glory days."

"You're no has-been," Imogene hastened to assure him. "You just need the right project to get you going again. There's no doubt in my mind you can still write great music."

"I like being flattered," Jake said, "but it's only fair to warn you, you've got competition in that department. Your PR director and that hot black chick

he's got posing as his assistant came up here last month to check me out. They've got some kinda project up their sleeve too."

"Gus and Sherri?" Imogene steadied herself. "I knew they visited you at the commune, but I thought they were on company business. What's their project about?"

"Christ only knows. They're counting on me and Byron to actually get off our asses long enough to make that comeback album they say the whole world's been waiting for. I guess they have designs on using it as a soundtrack. The story is some kinda fantasy based on our bucolic life up here, my sister's corporate life back in the Big Apple, and how they're destined to clash someday."

"So it's about a class war?" Imogene asked.

"Something like that. Our new music would supposedly spark an uprising here in the boondocks. The corporation resists putting out our groundbreaking album, causing the movement to grow legs and sprout into a youth army. The army keeps growing, acquires real weapons, and swarms south to storm corporate headquarters. Pretty heavy stuff."

"That story line is . . . is rank disloyalty," Imogene blurted. "It makes Sara look like a villain." She reflected that Gus and Sherri were in California right now, gaining access to Sara's Triumvirate—her closest Hollywood contacts. Were those two looking after Sara's interests, as they were supposed to be doing, or plugging their own questionable ideas?

"Take it easy." Jake laughed. "This proposal is probably DOA, like all the others. I hope you realize Sara's just humoring you wage slaves by pretending to listen to your fabulous ideas. She's toying with me, too, by swearing she's gonna restart my career. Look, I think she's sincere about wanting to help as many of her friends and family as possible. But you gotta realize, her main objective is to make herself and hubby superstars."

As always, Jake's gravelly voice, once it lifted out of boredom, mesmerized Imogene. Even if he denied it, she felt sure he was eager to revive his career. Why else would he call Sara's office to air his opinions?

"What are the chances that comeback album with Byron will actually happen?" she ventured.

“We talk about it regularly, but that’s the problem. It’s all talk. Sometimes we actually pick up our guitars and try to get a new song going, but then inertia strikes again. Seems we’d rather sit around strumming our old tunes like we’re at a campfire sing-along or something. Resting on our laurels is so much easier than getting back in the game.”

Imogene exclaimed, “That makes me wish my movie idea could be considered, if for no other reason than to get you off—I mean, to reenergize you. I envision starting with some of your music from that Homecoming celebration back in ’81 and then adding in new songs.” She ignored two ringing lines on the switchboard as she talked up her project. If the mayor of DC or the president himself were calling, they’d have to wait.

Jake finally interjected, “Clever of you to flatter me this way when I’ve been inactive so long. But I gotta tell you, toots, your story is trapped in the past. At least the Gus-and-Sherri idea is kinda topical. Shit, now I think about it, theirs could even inspire a real-life anti-corporate movement. If I’m gonna come out of my cocoon, it’s gotta be for something revolutionary.”

“Revolutionary?” Imogene gasped. “That’s what you want?”

“Maybe,” Jake replied, “but what do I know about current movie trends? I might be able to get into your story if you pitched it to me personally. Any chance of your coming upstate sometime soon?”

“I’d have to ask Sara to authorize a trip for me,” Imogene said. “So far she hasn’t.”

“Sounds like you’re the designated office drone. Well, maybe I’ll come into the city when you least expect me. It always unsettles Sara and her hubby when I show up unannounced. Jim’s a good guy, but he and I are like a different species. We can drink together for hours, but we talk past each other. He doesn’t get my humor all the time, and vice versa.”

“When do you think—” Imogene began.

“I can’t say. I’m responsible for two families up here. Just keep working on that screenplay. Make it worth my while to look at it.”

“I’ll do that,” Imogene vowed.

“Here comes one of my ex-wives now. Gotta go.” The receiver slammed down, leaving Imogene off-kilter but hopeful.

When Imogene informed Sara that Jake had called, Sara responded, "I'll bet you and he talked up a storm. I'd like to hear all about it as soon as I have a moment." She wasn't able to find that moment before she embarked on another week-long trip to Washington.

On returning to the office, Sara stopped at the front desk and said with a strained smile, "Good morning, Imogene. We need to discuss a few matters, after I take care of some immediate business. Come into my office around ten o'clock. And would you mind making a fresh pot of coffee around that time?"

I guess I really am the permanent receptionist, Imogene thought, if I'm in charge of the coffee machine. On the bright side, maybe it's the quickest way to get a sit-down with Sara.

Imogene slipped into Sara's office at the appointed time to find her boss on the phone, talking heatedly to someone whom she addressed as "Reverend." Seeing that the coffee pot was empty, Imogene grabbed it, hurried to the ladies' room, and filled it with water. She returned to the office, read the vague instructions on one of the coffee packets, and pulled it apart, spilling some of its contents. She placed what was left of the grounds in a holder, poured the water into the top of the machine, and then turned on the contraption, fearing it might explode. Miraculously, fresh coffee began to drip into the clean pot. She relaxed and listened to Sara defend her decision to bring the band Amorphous to the Martin Luther King Day celebration in Washington.

Soon Imogene was able to hand Sara a fresh cup of coffee and receive a nod and smile in acknowledgment. Sara took a long sip and barked, "What's your point, Reverend? That it was disrespectful to bring an all-white band to the event? I don't get that at all. I thought we were celebrating racial inclusiveness . . . So what if the musicians looked disheveled? I don't involve myself in their personal hygiene. They were there as performers, not models . . . All I can tell you is that no disrespect was intended; quite the opposite. I think it was perfectly appropriate that Amorphous shared the stage with hip-hop and R and B artists."

Sara frowned as the reverend evidently steered her into another hot topic. "I understand that you're the Redskins' team chaplain," she said, "but that doesn't mean you have any need to know what the owner said to my husband

in private. All I can tell you is that we went to a reception Mr. Bailey threw in a hotel suite downtown, and there were numerous NFL players and personnel in attendance from various teams. A lot of cross-conversations were going on all night. As of right now, Jim is still a member of the New York Giants.”

As the reverend’s wide-ranging diatribe continued, Sara laughed silently and rolled her eyes in Imogene’s direction. Then Imogene suffered a panicked moment when Sara responded, “I’m sorry you didn’t get through when you called me here in New York. That should never happen, and I’ll look into it.”

When Sara concluded the call, she gave Imogene a weary look and then rubbed her forehead. Imogene wondered, *Am I in trouble, or is Sara?*

“Well,” her boss began, “I’ve barely dipped my toes into the currents of our nation’s capital, and I’m already being accused of showing disrespect to the black community there. On top of that, I’m being criticized for running an unprofessional outfit here.”

“That’s totally my fault,” Imogene admitted. “I missed a few calls while I was talking to Jake. I got wrapped up in our conversation, and he’s not a person you can easily put on hold.”

“True enough,” Sara said, “but it appears Reverend Christopher Strickland has an ego to match my brother’s.”

Sara’s momentary sternness gave way to laughter. “God, Imogene, don’t look so frightened. What did I tell you about developing a backbone? You probably deserve a good scolding, but right now my own screw-ups take precedence. And I suppose it’s just as well you didn’t talk to the reverend on the phone. He’d have intimidated you, whereas I’m sure Jake sweet-talked you.”

Imogene sighed with relief and asked, “What’s this about screwing up in DC? Did Amorphous do something to embarrass you?”

“They put on a solid show at Constitution Hall and got a decent reception, but the black artists on the bill got the real raves. That was to be expected, given the composition of the crowd. Still, when a reporter asked me how I liked the concert, my response might’ve been a tad insensitive. I said I appreciate hip-hop as an art form, but it’s not my idea of real music.”

“Oh my!” Imogene exclaimed, thinking Sara had bombed at PR as badly as she had. “Is that what upset the reverend?”

“Among other things. During his MC duties at the concert, he gave an impassioned speech about his long, intimate friendship with Dr. King. Some of his critics say he exaggerates that relationship, but he seems to think it gives him the moral authority to question everyone else’s motives.

“Anyway, it turns out he’s an authority on football too. At the reception after the show, he stalked up to me and said he was aware that Jim had met privately with the Redskins owner, Maximilian Bailey, during a party Mr. Bailey threw recently for select NFL players.”

“How could that possibly be any of Strickland’s business?” Imogene herself was awash with curiosity.

“That’s what I wondered. He just revealed what’s really up his craw. It seems the Redskins have a star-wide receiver who happens to be a member of Strickland’s congregation. According to the reverend, this guy doesn’t get invited to parties given by the team brass and isn’t one of the privileged few who get to negotiate their contracts directly with the owner.”

“I think I know who he’s talking about—Geoffrey Starrett.” Imogene seemed to startle Sara with her football knowledge. “From what I heard, Starrett had a great regular season for the Redskins, but he fumbled a couple of times in the championship game, which finished the Redskins’ Super Bowl chances. Maybe he’s fallen out of favor in DC.”

“You’ve really been paying attention, haven’t you? My guess is that the reverend plans to champion his guy’s cause if there’s any chance of his being eclipsed as the number-one star.”

“Do you think Bailey has his eye on Jim?” Imogene asked. “And wouldn’t that be considered poaching, as long as Jim’s under contract to the Giants?”

“Don’t ask me. I don’t get involved in football decisions. That’s Jim’s world. I was at that get-together, but I confined myself to the wives’ circle.”

Imogene chortled in disbelief. Sara continued, “Strickland is dead wrong if he’s implying Mr. Bailey practices segregation. I saw several black players there with their wives. For all I know, or the reverend knows, Geoffrey what’s-his-name and his wife could’ve been there.”

Sara reclined in her high-backed chair and sighed. After a moment’s reflection, she added, “I gotta concede the reverend’s musical point, at least a

little. Amorphous and Stuyvesant both dabble in rhythm and blues, and they change their rosters all the time, but they've never taken in any black members. That seems wrong, but I don't know what to do about it."

A lightning bolt of an idea struck Imogene. "What about Sherri?" she exclaimed.

"What about her?"

"She's a singer, or at least she's trying to be. When I spoke to Sylvan Moore on the phone, he mentioned that she'd auditioned for Amorphous."

"I'll be damned." Sara furrowed her brow. "I had no idea." She picked up the phone, punched in an intercom number, and said, "Good morning, Sherri. I'd like a word with you. Would you mind stepping into my office?"

Sherri came in a minute later with a questioning look, bordering on alarm. Sara laughed at her expression. "Why's everyone around here so scared of me? Grab some coffee, Sherri, and pull up a chair. We're just having a little gabfest, revealing some of our innermost secrets. Such as, what's this I hear about your wanting to sing with Amorphous?"

"Well, I . . ." Sherri glanced suspiciously at Imogene, who tried to send back an encouraging look. "I've just been fooling around with the guys a little—in the studio, I mean. They're trying to write enough songs for an album. I've sung on a couple of demos."

"They're not quite ready to put out an album," Sara said, "but they're making progress. Singing with them could definitely give you a career boost. Does Gus know?"

"Yes. In fact, it was his idea." Sherri's light-brown cheeks showed signs of a blush.

"I guess he knows that could conceivably take you farther in this company than your PR skills. I'd like to attend one of your sessions. Why don't you arrange it?"

"I'll do that. Thanks." The blush came on stronger as Sherri added, "I've always loved singing, ever since I was little, but lately I've gotten interested in acting too. While Gus and I were in California, the Triumvirate ladies—Mrs. Frisk, especially—suggested I had the kind of presence that might suit the big screen."

Sycophants

“Whoa. First things first.” Sara put up a hand. “Let’s see if you have what it takes to front Amorphous first. They went over pretty well at the Martin Luther King fest despite being criticized for lack of diversity. At least they got a foothold in DC. Jim and I will be returning there in a few weeks to tie up some loose ends from our last visit. If I have time, I’ll scout around for other suitable venues to showcase the band. I think the town might take to them . . . and you.”

CHAPTER 5



WHAT LOOSE ENDS in DC was Sara referring to? Imogene pondered this whenever she had a moment to breathe. The switchboard phone kept her busy and stressed out. She had been instructed to get tougher with callers, to insist that they state their business up front. The occasional verbal abuse from disappointed callers continued. She tried to shrug this off as she continued to detect signs of an approaching cataclysm in the Guthries' world.

One morning she picked up a ringing line, trilled her usual greeting, and heard a genial-sounding southern voice say, "Hi, ma'am, this is Jack McLahan, head coach of the Washington Redskins. I was wonderin' if you could help me get in touch with Jim Guthrie."

She was authorized to put through all DC-related calls. "Mr. Guthrie isn't here," she said, "but I can connect you with Mrs. Guthrie."

"I'd be grateful if you'd do that for me. Have a blessed day."

This call left Imogene in a fever of curiosity but in no position to ask questions. The next day, she picked up a line and was cut off in mid-greeting by a gruff voice. "Is there any chance I can reach Jim Guthrie at this number? I'm Billy Schlatt, head coach of the New York Giants—if that matters."

"I'm sorry," Imogene stammered, "but Mr. Guthrie is unavailable. Mrs. Guthrie has stepped out, but I could have her return your call."

"That won't cut it." The voice got sarcastic. "Tell me, just how 'unavailable' is Guthrie? Is he shooting a movie in Hollywood? Big-game hunting in Africa? Or is he off somewhere checking out a new team?"

"I don't know, sir. All I can do is try to get a message to him that you called."

"Don't bother. I'll call his agent. And maybe his lawyer." The phone slammed down.

When Sara reappeared, Imogene informed her that Coach Schlatt had called, sounding angry. Sara shook her head as if perplexed. "What's got his goat? The Giants' off-season workouts haven't started yet, and Jim hasn't missed any required team events. Wherever he chooses to hang out during his time off is his own business."

"Coach Schlatt threatened to contact Jim's agent. And maybe his lawyer."

"Holy crap." Sara laughed. "When did Jim become such a vital cog in the Giants' operation? They've mostly treated him like cannon fodder on the field."

Imogene continued, "I'm guessing Coach Schlatt knows Coach McLahan has been in touch."

"So what? If Schlatt calls back, tell him Jim and I are both unavailable. And if he questions our trips out of town again, tell him it's the movie business. We're scouting locations."

Imogene pumped herself up for this possible call. It would require acting chops, now that she suspected the Guthries were indeed planning a move south. Even as she prepared to deny it, she must figure out how it would affect her own life. Would they consider taking her along? If so, what about her marriage?

Imogene left the office that evening with her head spinning. If nothing else, she must clarify things on the home front. Steve worked late, as usual, but arrived in time for dinner at eight. He sat across the table from her, downing a beer and shooting her the same tentative look she'd been noticing for weeks now. She waved her fork and said, "I can see you're working up to something. So out with it."

Steve put down his beer and wiped his mouth elaborately. "The thing is . . . I've been thinking . . . I might want to get a vasectomy."

Imogene sat back, the breath knocked out of her. When she was able to speak, she sputtered, "I'm still on the pill, you know. I'd tell you if I went off it."

"You're always complaining about its side effects. I just thought this might be an easier way."

You're such a bad liar, Imogene thought. "You mean," she said, "this would be an easier way for you to have an affair."

"That's not what I'm talking about." Sweat came out on Steve's brow. "It's about us not wanting children. We agreed to that."

"Not exactly." Imogene strove to keep her voice steady. "We agreed to no children until we were both established in our careers."

"Right. That's what I'm saying."

"What, exactly, are you saying?"

Staring at his plate, he muttered, "You need to face facts. You're not making it, career-wise."

Imogene responded, "I know I've struggled since I've been in New York, but I've learned a lot. And I *am* making progress, even if it's not always obvious. Are you saying you think I'll *never* make it?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't see it happening." Their eyes met for a painful moment and then both looked away. "You've always said this was the city of your dreams. You've been here six years, and what're you now? A receptionist."

"But I'm . . ." She wanted to say she was a high-end receptionist, but that would sound ridiculous.

"I know you . . . I mean, I know you're ambitious. A kid would take all your time and energy. If you hadn't fulfilled yourself at work, you'd resent it. And me."

He did know her, she acknowledged. He had pegged her so accurately that it agitated her more. "I *will* have a satisfying career," she insisted, "one way or another, even if it means leaving New York. That'd be nice for you, wouldn't it, if I left? You could have uninhibited sex all night long with your paralegal girlfriend, right here. On the dining-room table, if you wanted."

He remained silent. They finished the meal that way.

They were about to go their separate ways, but Imogene had no clear plan in mind. That evening she stuffed an overnight bag with about three days' worth of clothes and a toothbrush. She and Steve watched TV and went to bed around eleven, as usual.

In the morning, as they got dressed for work, he eyed the small suitcase and asked, "What are you gonna do? Visit your folks in Maryland?"

"For starters," she said, packing up her makeup case.

"So you're quitting your job at Peace Enterprises?"

"Not at all," she shot back. "I'll talk to Sara today about taking a leave of absence." *If I can get in to see her*, she added silently. She left the condo carrying the overnight bag as well as her usual briefcase.

Imogene resolved to hold herself together in the office, but she jumped in her seat when the phone rang. She snatched it up, only to hear a voice that wasn't Steve's; she felt her heart sink. She put the call through to Sara without the usual screening and then began to sob, her face in her hands.

Sara disposed of the caller quickly and came rushing out of her office. "My God, Imogene, what's happened?"

Imogene couldn't speak. Sara picked up the phone receiver, punched in an intercom number, and said, "Janie, I need you to cover the front desk this morning. Imogene is indisposed. Make sure you inform Gus."

When she arrived, Janie glared at Imogene as if she suspected the "indisposition" was a ruse. Imogene was too upset to care. She followed Sara into her office, and Sara closed the door. Seated on the couch opposite the large desk, Imogene poured out everything, trying to steady herself with frequent sips of rewarmed coffee.

"I'm so sorry, Imogene," Sara said, shaking her head as if perplexed. "I had no idea you and Steve were on the rocks. You seemed to get along, and I always thought he was a decent guy. Jim thought so too. They had fun on their fishing trip."

"He's not a bad guy," Imogene said, "but he gets bored easily, and he's obviously bored with me. That must be why he sprang the vasectomy idea on me . . . to shake things up."

"You still have plenty of time to have kids," Sara observed, "but if he's serious about getting snipped, and you disagree, that issue has to be settled right away."

"I'm not ready to decide," Imogene said. "That's a big problem. But so is the sexy paralegal in his office."

“You sure it’s an affair? Not just a flirtation?”

Imogene reflected. How sure was she, really? “All I know is that he works late almost every night. When I accuse him of fooling around, he doesn’t deny it . . . he just clams up. And I observed them both at the firm’s Christmas party. He didn’t even want me to come, but I insisted. He was exchanging smiles and mysterious signals with her all night.”

“That’s annoying, for sure,” Sara said, “but it might not be that serious.” She sipped her own coffee thoughtfully. “Flirtation is something I’ve learned to live with. There’s no choice if you’re married to a sports star. Women come at them from all directions, at every opportunity, even if they’re out with their wives. The temptations . . .” She paused and sighed.

“But Jim has never actually succumbed, has he?” Imogene said. She felt a spark of interest, although she wished no misfortune on the Guthrie marriage.

“I can’t say he’s never looked at another woman. He’s only human. But there’s a difference between looking and crossing the line. A wife, especially a celebrity wife, has to pick her battles.”

“You and Jim have a closer bond than Steve and me,” Imogene pointed out, “since you already have a child.”

“True. Although that makes everything at least twice as challenging.” Sara smiled with satisfaction before refocusing on Imogene’s problem.

“So what will you do now?”

“I thought I’d take a leave of absence,” Imogene said, “maybe for a couple of weeks. I’ll spend some time with my folks in Western Maryland. Try to clear my head and figure things out.”

“You’re heading home today?”

“Right after I leave here this evening,” Imogene said. “I can take Amtrak from Penn Station to Union Station and stay overnight in DC. Tomorrow I’ll hire a cab to take me to Glendary.”

“That’s seventy or eighty miles,” Sara said. “It’ll cost a fortune.”

“My dad will help pay for it if I run short.” Imogene’s heart sank as she spoke. The prospect of returning to the farm after failing in the big city brought back the old claustrophobic feeling. She loved her parents, but escape had always been an essential part of her plan.

"I hate to see you looking so unhappy." Sara gazed at Imogene, stroking her chin. "Besides, I'll miss you. If you go home, you might never come back. You don't mind leaving the condo to Steve?"

"He's adjusted to city life better than I have," Imogene admitted, calmer but still teary-eyed. "It's time to be brutally honest with myself. I took on more than I could handle when I moved here. Even this job . . ." She barely stopped herself from self-immolation.

"You've been generous about giving me a shot," she resumed. "I'm not saying I'll never come back. I just feel a need to get away and . . . and regroup."

"Somehow," Sara said, "I don't think you'll last long on the farm."

"If I miss city life, there's always DC." Imogene laughed ruefully. "I could probably catch on as a secretary in the Federal government. That's where my parents met."

"I have a feeling that's not what you want, either."

Sara checked her watch, stood up, and came around the desk. "I'm sorry to leave you like this, but I've got one of my stress-filled financial meetings across town." She paused, as if seized by an idea.

"Listen, Imogene. Instead of leaving tonight, why don't you come to dinner and stay over? We'll hash things out and see if we can come up with a better plan."

Imogene restrained her sniffles and answered, "I don't want to barge in on your family."

"Nonsense. Jim and Laraine love having company for dinner. It always livens things up."

"I really appreciate the invitation." Imogene's voice broke, and her eyes filled again. She had been saved, at least temporarily, from an impulsive step backward that she might have regretted.

"You don't look like you're in any shape to work. I suggest you go upstairs to the condo and try to relax. I'll call Mrs. Jones from my car phone and ask her to straighten up the guest room. And let her or Yvette know if you feel like eating something. Janie can stay at the front desk all day."

"She won't be happy about that," Imogene couldn't resist pointing out.

"Maybe not, but judging by some of Gus's comments, he'll welcome a break from her in the PR shop. He finds her a little aggressive."

Unlucky in love, Imogene at least found herself blessed with friends. In her time of need, the Guthrie family took her in, consoled her, and gave her a safe haven. She felt well cared for as soon as she went upstairs that morning. As she relaxed in the guest room, Mrs. Jones brought her chicken soup and crackers on a tray.

During the afternoon, she joined Laraine and her nanny in the living room while they read a fairy tale aloud. Jim burst through the front door and greeted her with his characteristic grin, muted by sympathy. "Nice to see you, Imogene. Sara phoned me at my agent's office and told me what went down between you and Steve. All I can say is, stuff happens. Marriage is a tough proposition, especially when two people are way different. It takes compromise."

"That may work for some issues," Imogene remarked, "but not for others."

Laraine regarded her thoughtfully and then pronounced, "You look so sad."

"Do I?" Imogene gave the child a hug. "Actually, I feel better already."

Jim excused himself and headed for his study, saying he was expecting an avalanche of calls from the local sports media.

Sara got home at 5:30 p.m. and dismissed Yvette and Mrs. Jones for the evening. She and Imogene joined forces in the kitchen, reminiscing about their college days as they prepared a hearty dinner of pot roast, potatoes, and mixed vegetables.

Laraine sat with the adults at the table. She turned up her nose at the vegetables but gamely ate most of them when her mother warned her that was the price of having a special treat for dessert. "I thought we'd splurge tonight with chocolate sundaes in honor of Imogene's visit. That is, *if* we eat enough dinner."

"I've eaten enough, Mommy," Laraine said. She had grown restless, so she was excused until dessert time.

Jim proposed cracking open a few beers “to further welcome our honored guest.” The conversation took a serious turn as Imogene tried to explain what had gone wrong in her marriage. She could now look back and see red flags that should have been evident as long ago as college.

“I must say, my opinion of Steve just plummeted,” Sara said, “and we’re giving his firm a lot of business. In fact, they’re handling all the management contracts for our musicians. Maybe we should rethink that arrangement.”

“God, no, honey, we should stay out of it,” Jim objected. “Imogene’s our friend, but it’s not our place to act vindictively. You agree, don’t you, Imogene?” She nodded reluctantly.

Sara informed Jim of Imogene’s plan to return to Western Maryland for a temporary retreat. Imogene interjected, “It sounds like I’m abandoning my goals, but I’m really not. Hopefully, it’s just a pause. I dreamed my whole life about leaving the farm for the big city. I still find this the most exciting place on earth, but it’s gotten to me.”

Having conceded failure, Imogene felt her shoulders slump. She took heart when Jim said, “Join the club. There isn’t a person in New York City, all the way up to and including the mayor, who doesn’t feel that way sometimes. I’ve been trashed by the sports media here for the tiniest screw-ups on the field. Every player gets a load of that, but if they start pegging you as disloyal, that’s when you’re really in their sights.”

Jim sat back with a grin and hoisted his beer. “Come to think of it, Imogene, your idea of a retreat doesn’t sound half bad. I have a hankering to revisit the old college, where all the student reporters idolized me.”

“Same here,” Sara said. “I miss that rural sunshine and fresh air. Jim, how about we make Glendary one of our stops on our next trip to DC? I know it’s hours out of the way, but a drive in the country might be just what we’ll need to help us unwind from business.”

Imogene felt a jolt of inspiration. Maybe she could make her proposed trip home pay off. “Why don’t you guys plan on visiting me at the farm while I’m there? We could also hang out at the college, for old times’ sake.”

The Guthries embraced the idea of a nostalgic side trip, while Imogene reflected that her parents had never exactly cottoned to unexpected guests.

Sara persuaded Imogene to stay on as a houseguest past the first night. "It'll be fun. We can pretend we're roommates again, with both of us at a crossroads, just like senior year."

Before Imogene knew it, her visit with the Guthries had stretched to two weeks, and it was mid-February. Night after night she sat at the dinner table, absorbing the couple's increasingly ambitious plans to reconstruct their lives in a different city. Sara claimed to be traumatized at the idea of leaving her hometown for good, but the chance to make politically charged movies in the nation's capital was irresistible. Besides that, she longed for a "real home" with space for the family to put down permanent roots.

During Imogene's stay, she and Sara went downstairs to the office no later than eight on weekday mornings. Imogene resumed her position at the front desk, treating the switchboard phone as the hub for numerous transformations and transactions.

An assistant coach for the Giants called to demand why Jim hadn't shown up for the first "voluntary" meetings of the football off-season. "I'm sorry, sir, I don't know," Imogene purred, although she believed she did know. "I'll try to get your message to Mr. Guthrie."

Helene Frisk, a member of Sara's Hollywood-based "Triumvirate" of advisors, and the estranged wife of famed director Hank Frisk, called to announce that she had arrived in town for a "whirlwind tour." She wished to drop by to discuss a script under development, which she called *Deterrence*. *So it's decided*, Imogene reflected. *We now have a Hollywood-sanctioned project with a title, so it must be real. Deterrence has a warlike ring to it. Doesn't sound much like a musical.*

Imogene passed messages back and forth until it was arranged that Helene would come to an informal dinner, which would also serve as an initial story conference, at the Guthries' condo.

One morning, Imogene picked up a ringing line and heard Steve's voice. "So you're still there," he remarked. "I thought you were going home to Glendary."

"I was planning to," Imogene replied, "but things heated up here all of a sudden. I'm staying with the Guthries temporarily. They're headed to DC soon, so I thought I'd wait and tag along."

“That’s one reason why I’m calling,” Steve said. “If a company relocation is in the works, I need to know how it would affect the house bands.”

“Is that really your business?” Imogene asked. “I thought you were involved in negotiating their management contracts. That doesn’t make you a music producer.”

“No, but I have an interest in getting them produced. Amorphous is the closest to being ready. They’ve got almost an album’s worth of songs recorded. I’m looking for reassurance that the bands won’t be left high and dry without studio space if the Guthries move out of New York. Just making sure they get a fair shake from Peace Enterprises.”

“If you want my advice,” Imogene said, “I’d keep in mind that since Sara took over, the company has evolved from primarily a record company into a film company. Maybe your musicians should be thinking less about studio space and more about film sets.”

Imogene and Steve went on bantering about what might become of their own pet projects as the company continued to “evolve.” They ended the call without having touched on personal topics.

Imogene helped Sara to prepare what was reportedly Helene’s favorite meal—cheeseburgers with large sides of French fries, small helpings of salad, and at least two six-packs of beer. As Sara explained, all three of the ladies who formed her Hollywood Triumvirate could be described as forces of nature, but Helene Frisk was the closest to being unstoppable. The other two had developed their own niches. Jacqueline Jones was an actress and former model who had transitioned from cinematic beauty into respected casting director. Jodie Iscowitz, known as “Izzy,” was an entertainment lawyer who wrote legal novels on the side. Helene had earned her first major Hollywood credit by converting one of Izzy’s novels into a script that became the basis for a critically acclaimed courtroom drama.

Newly released from her marriage, Helene seemed determined to compete with her ex as a triple-threat screenwriter, director, and hustler. She was average looking, Imogene thought, with her frizzy brown hair, stocky figure, and rather thick lips, but her dynamism burst all boundaries. She blew into the condo when Jim answered the door, planting a kiss perilously close to his

mouth. She handed her heavy briefcase to Imogene, whom she immediately sized up as a trusted assistant. "Guard this with your life, darling. There's a real tome in there. It has a little bit of everything Sara asked for."

Helene embraced Laraine, who was pouting over being sent to a neighbor's place for dinner. "Sweetie, you'd be bored with us gross adults eating and drinking and droning on and on about business," she told the little girl. When Laraine still objected, Helene exclaimed, "My, aren't you adorable, and smart too. I wish my own daughter was half the charmer you are."

She told the adults aside, but none too discreetly, "I love my child, but she's a whiner. Otherwise, I mighta had more children. And if I'd pushed out a son, who knows? Maybe my husband woulda stuck around."

Laraine started to ask a question, but her dad told her it was time to go. After the two of them had exited, Helene proceeded to the kitchen, where she heartily approved the dinner preparations. She helped Imogene and Sara dish up and carry the meal to the dining room.

Once Jim returned, the combination dinner-story conference began and soon became a delicious blur. The constant flow of ideas, fueled by junk food and beer, produced a colorful tumult in Imogene's mind. As she tried to decipher the proposed *Deterrence* plot, she realized it bore some resemblance to the story line Jake had described during his call to the front desk a few weeks before. Supposedly, Gus and Sherri had pitched the idea of a singing peace army that originated in a rural commune, gathered strength, and marched south to avenge a has-been musician (or maybe more than one) who'd been wronged by a New York City record company. Imogene remembered that she had denounced the idea as unfair and disloyal to Sara.

In *Deterrence*, Helene had inflated the business conflict into a military insurgency that threatened to take down far more than a single predatory company. The "peace army" would declare war against the national government, spouting violent rhetoric against all lackeys of the establishment. It would acquire lethal weapons, rumored to include a nuclear device. Opposing the citizens' army would be the first female secretary of defense, also the youngest in history, a combat veteran with presidential ambitions. She would lead the anti-insurgency forces while the nation's capital turned into a battlefield.

Helene's script took a personal turn as the steely heroine discovered the identity of a shadowy leader behind the revolt—her own brother, a long-dormant rock musician. The story would reach back into their childhoods to examine the roots of a conflict that might end in the demise of one or both siblings.

"This script, Sara darling," Helene declared, pounding it with her fist, "has all the plot elements we've been tossing around in preliminary drafts for months. It will stir up a hornet's nest of political issues. And where, I ask you, will you find a heroine role any more tailor-made for you—a type-A personality with sibling issues? The story begs for musical input from your real-life brother."

"I *am* looking for ways to revive Jake's career," Sara conceded, "but this could be risky. He's constantly criticizing my efforts to make Peace Enterprises a more profitable and less idealistic outfit, yet he's mostly willing to sit back and let me do whatever it takes to keep the money rolling in. I don't know what would happen to that equilibrium if I started encouraging him to write revolutionary songs."

"My guess is that any new songs Jake Murphy wrote would be only mildly revolutionary," Helene said. "More sad than angry. I presume your brother's still under Byron Robarts's influence at that godforsaken commune. It must be all peace-and-love and Kumbaya up there. But here's the thing: somehow you gotta coax those former bandmates out of their shell so they can give us a soundtrack. Their nostalgic appeal would be just the thing to attract mega-investors to our movie."

Helene tossed back a beer in a few gulps, wiped her mouth, and continued, "And speaking of the soundtrack, we could think about letting loose those raunchy bands you've been nurturing in your second-floor studios. See if they could supply some heavy metal or other weird sounds, as a contrast to Jake and Byron's familiarity."

"Now you're talking." Sara's eyes glowed. "I gotta find some productive uses for Amorphous and Stuyvesant, before they self-destruct out of sheer boredom. Helene, I have a feeling this project is gonna accomplish wonders for us on many levels. No disrespect to your ex, but I've been wanting to move

beyond the fluff and fantasy of *Bloody Skies*. This story feels much more real. That's what makes it a little scary."

"Darling, I sincerely doubt you've ever been really scared of anything in your life."

"I rarely back down from a challenge," Sara proclaimed, swigging her beer, "and scared or not, I'm ready to embrace what could be a breakout role for me."

"That's great for you, honey," Jim said, "but I'm not just a little scared of this project. I'm scared shitless."

This admission stopped the discussion cold. Jim put down his beer and uncharacteristically pushed it away, as if to imply that in matters this important, they couldn't drink their way to a decision.

"I'm concerned it could get out of hand," he continued. "How real do we want this showdown on the National Mall to become? Will it mean using flesh-and-blood bodies and actual weapons instead of special effects like in *Bloody Skies*? I ain't hankering to see real blood on a movie set."

"Jim darling," Helene said, smiling flirtatiously, "that's the point. Fake wars are my ex's thing. Special effects are his tour de force. We'll leave Mr. Fluff-And-Fantasy in the dust by making our story as real as possible. I want you to picture that impressive backdrop of government buildings and monuments known as the establishment. Then imagine a youth army swarming in and threatening to overthrow everything. All in real time, with hundreds of extras who look fierce and determined enough to do it."

Helene paused to give everyone a moment to picture reality versus fantasy. Then she added, "There are practical concerns, of course. Like convincing the relevant politicians to give us the access we'll need for as long as it takes."

"Yeah, I'll say there're practical concerns," Jim said. "We're gonna have to start spending like high rollers and learn how to deal with political VIPs, when we've never really played in either league before. How're we gonna manage that?"

"I'll tell you how. Win a lot of football games with your new team, the Washington Redskins. I'm assuming that'll soon be official?"

"Christ, the new contract's not even drawn up yet, and you're already demanding a championship run?" Jim grinned, as if this strategy made sense to him.

"The power's all in your legs, baby," Sara crooned. "They'll kick down doors."

"Yeah, but no pressure, right?" Jim replied.

"The pressure will all be on me," Helene declared. "As director, I'll exert field marshal-style balls over the production. We'll work smart and fast. I'll control the budget with an iron fist." Pounding the script again, she explained ways they could economize by using remote locations for some scenes, targeted casting calls, and modern shooting techniques.

"However, kiddies, there's one scene I envision that can't be faked even the least bit. We *must* conjure up a Murphy-Robarts comeback performance on the National Mall. How could the politicians say no to such a potentially historic event? If we can make that happen, I'm guessing we'll also be able to buy enough time to set up a decent battle sequence. As the script currently has it, the fighting will be sparked by the concert."

"What'll we do if we wear out our welcome on the Mall?" Sara asked.

"Assuming we'll be allowed to use it at all," Jim added.

"Not to worry, darlings. That's what I mean by remote locations. I hear the countryside surrounding DC is quite pretty."

"It's spectacular," Imogene piped up. "My parents' farm, in particular, would make a great alternate battlefield." She hardly knew what she was proposing, but it made her feel like a full participant in the story conference. "It's lovely up there at Glendary, with its wide-open spaces and the Appalachians visible in the distance."

"It's beautiful, for sure," Sara agreed, "but I can't imagine what Imogene's mom and dad would say if we asked permission to invade their property."

"They'd be thrilled, believe me." *They'd be horrified*, Imogene thought, *but I could get around that somehow. I'd just have to convince them my future depends on it.*

"I'll discuss it with my parents when I go home. I'm due for a visit." As she gulped more beer and fought hiccups, Imogene felt herself releasing a torrent of words. She urged the director to expand her vision for *Deterrence* by scouting both the farm and the college as possible venues for backstory. Glendary College, in fact, might be viewed as the place where the seeds of the youth revolution were planted. Jake's band, the Sunburst, had taken root there.

Jim interjected, “Thanks for bringing up another of my worries—my unpredictable brother-in-law. There are times when he scares the bejesus out of me.”

“You, scared of Jake Murphy?” Helene laughed uproariously. “I don’t believe it. Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?”

They all looked—Imogene tentatively, Helene hungrily, Sara proudly. Jim was wearing a loose sweater with the sleeves rolled halfway up his muscular arms. The collar of his shirt was open, revealing his massive neck. He grinned at the compliment and then grimaced again.

“In case you didn’t realize it, you’re a hulk,” Helene continued. “Compared to you, Jake is a rail. Don’t try to tell me you’re scared of him.”

“I know I could take him in a wrestling match,” Jim said, “but when it comes to the mind games he plays, I’m not so sure. All I know is, he threatened us once.”

“Oh no, not this again,” Sara groaned. “Are you gonna bring up that barroom conversation you two had, when you were both drunk and playing around with bullets? Baby, that was years ago. And it’s not like Jake was actually carrying a gun, or ever would. Christ, he wouldn’t know which was the business end.”

“Seriously, he threatened you?” Helene asked, her eyes widening.

“Not in so many words.” Jim paused to reflect on the scene. “Old Jake is no warrior, except in his own mind. Like Sara says, he wouldn’t know what to do with a gun. But what he *was* carrying—and it was beyond weird—was a pocketful of bullets. About a dozen of them, all thirty-eight caliber. He took them out and set them up on the bar like little tin soldiers or something. When I asked him where in hell those came from, he hinted at some underground connections of his, who intended them for corporate or political targets.”

Jim had to stop and wipe his brow. Sara protested, “But you should know by now, Jim, not to take Jake literally. He was just using those bullets to illustrate a story idea.”

“Yeah, he started talking up some kinda movie scenario. You could even say it was an early version of this peace army or youth revolution idea we’re kicking around now. To tell you the truth, I barely followed it. I was too

busy trying to figure out how to keep a bizarre brother-in-law away from my family.”

“So you offered him a bribe,” Sara prompted, “to return to the commune and stay there unless we invited him back.”

“I pulled out all the money I had on me, maybe a couple hundred bucks, and offered it to him. Not necessarily a bribe, but at least enough to hire a limo back to Upstate New York. He took it from me, stared at it as if it was blood money, and then hurled it in my face. He gathered up his bullets and stormed out. I haven’t had a real face-to-face with him since.”

“That’s a fascinating story, but I can see it’s made you paranoid.” Helene turned to Sara. “How about you? You think of your brother as some sort of bogeyman?”

“No, I don’t think that,” Sara declared. “He’s just got a vivid imagination. He gave us the wisp of a movie idea, which has picked up steam since then. But Jim is right about his unpredictability. When he chooses to communicate with us, sometimes he’s curious about what we’re doing. Other times, it’s a hostility festival. He accuses us of building our empire on his back.”

“Not that there ain’t some truth to that,” Jim said.

“Poor lost kid,” Helene mused. “He’s handed you the reins of the company, and now he regrets it, even though he doesn’t really want them back. Just give me an hour alone with him, and I’ll settle his hackles. You folks may know I was a social worker in LA before I married into the Hollywood aristocracy. I have a gift for placating temperamental artists. I used to settle down whole casts so my ex-husband, the genius director, could work with them.”

Helene turned to Jim. “Remember how I coddled you and your football buddies all through *Bloody Skies*, with my timely snacks and pep talks?”

“You were a regular den mother,” Jim acknowledged. Imogene couldn’t help thinking it would be quite a jump from “den mother” to director of a major motion picture.

“If only I could figure out how to exert those same maternal skills on my own daughter.” Helene sighed. “She’s all of eleven, and she’s convinced she’s gonna marry a rock star someday if she can’t be one herself. It’s the Hollywood lifestyle screwing with her head. At this rate, she’ll have a Mohawk and

multiple tattoos within the year. I'm tempted to send her to boarding school to keep her sane."

"That sounds harsh." Sara recoiled a little. "Although I agree, you gotta protect her from the groupie mentality at all costs. My sisters-in-law, Marianne and Jasmine, actually married their rock idol and became disillusioned pretty quick. They couldn't live with Jake, but they can't seem to let him go, either."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised to hear Jake's a notoriously lousy husband," Helene said with a guffaw, "but isn't there anything positive you can say about your brother?"

Sara filled Helene in about the childhood traumas that had scarred Jake and made him a relentless cynic, inclined toward self-destructiveness.

"I saw a calmer side of Jake," Imogene offered, "when I invited him to visit the farm during our senior Homecoming weekend. He said he needed a break from the tension surrounding the band and the craziness of the concert the night before. He loved the peacefulness of the farm . . . said it made him feel like a new person. He even liked my folks."

"Yeah, all that fresh air and those wide-open spaces were a real turn-on for him. Not to mention the innocent little coed he had his way with—without her parents' knowledge." As Sara fixed Imogene with a mock glare, her face grew hot.

Looking Imogene up and down, Helene said, "You're not kidding when you call Jake unpredictable." Imogene didn't know whether to take this as an insult. She decided not to, once she realized that Helene was regarding her with more interest than before.

As the evening wore on, the conversation blurred. Helene described some misadventures that she and the "genius director" had enjoyed, both together and apart, during their twelve-year marriage. Sara joked, "We'll have to start calling you Frisky to distinguish you from hubby."

"Ex-hubby," Helene corrected. "The divorce is all but final."

"What're you suing him for?" Jim asked.

"General misogyny, asshole behavior, whatever I can think of. Would you believe the bastard got a vasectomy without telling me? He claims he had my approval, but I must've been drunk if I ever gave it. He's got this theory that all men at least contemplate it."

“He’s right!” Imogene exclaimed, but no one noticed her. Helene talked about the operation in graphic terms, hoping it had been painful. Imogene didn’t wish that on Steve, who at least had had the decency to discuss it with her.

When Laraine came home a few minutes later, she climbed onto her father’s lap and tried to join the conversation. She heard the word “vasectomy,” although it was whispered. “What’s that?” she demanded.

“It’s an adult thing of no concern to little girls who’re past their bedtimes,” Jim replied.

“Are you afraid to answer the question, or what?” Helene taunted drunkenly. “I thought you two were the kind of modern parents who believe in being utterly truthful with your kid. I wasn’t, and look what I got.”

Sara told her three-year-old, “It’s a kind of operation that lets a man and a woman be close to each other without having a baby, if they decide not to have one.”

“But why would they decide that?” Laraine asked, wrinkling her nose. The adults went silent, and she was hustled off to bed.

CHAPTER 6



IMOGENE ACCOMPANIED THE Guthries to Washington, stayed at the same hotel overnight, and then proceeded to the farm. Determined to make the most of her visit home, she tried to settle into the leisurely pace of Western Maryland in early spring. She was merely on hiatus, she told herself, from “the city of her dreams.” After the stressful time she’d endured in the most hectic place on earth, she deserved a prolonged rest. Besides, her parents needed her as much as she needed them. She foresaw that as they got older, they would require more help managing the property. This wasn’t an issue as yet, admittedly, since her father hired all the temporary help he needed to work the fields.

Still, she could make herself useful by helping her mother clean the house and plant the garden. She held on to this outlook until a blowup at the dinner table one evening blasted her defenses. Her parents teamed up to announce that it was time she “did something with her life.”

Stunned, Imogene protested, “I still have the same goals I always had. I’m just taking a breather to . . . reset myself.”

Mom and Dad countered that she was in her late twenties, high time to start making grownup decisions.

“In that case,” Imogene said, barely controlling her temper, “tell me what kinds of adult things I should be doing.”

“First of all, file for divorce,” her mom said. “Get your things out of Steve’s condo, and forget about him. That’ll free you to meet the right man.”

“It’s my condo too,” Imogene pointed out, sorrow washing over her. While not averse to meeting “the right man,” she couldn’t bear the thought of severing her most vital connection to New York.

“If you’re going to be here for a while,” her dad said, “you need to think about getting a job. Building up your bank account.”

"A job?" Imogene repeated. "You're suggesting I could have a career in this hick town?"

Grim choices flashed through her mind. She could be a waitress, a department store clerk, or, at best, a typist in the local real-estate or insurance office. Alternatively, she could go back to Glendary College and pursue an advanced degree. She was sure her parents would insist that she study some practical subject this time, like accounting or business.

Imogene got up from the table and began to clear her place. "I love you both," she declared, "but I gotta tell you, this isn't the life for me."

"What does that mean?" her father demanded as she carried her plate and silverware into the kitchen.

She returned to the dining room and announced, "I'm not divorcing Steve until I've had time to clarify our situation. And I'm not getting some piddling job in town as long as my paychecks from Peace Enterprises are still going into my bank account."

"Honey, you've got to face facts," her mother said. "How long do you think your friend Sara—if she really is your friend—will keep you on when you're of no use to her?"

"She told me to take all the time I needed to get my head together. That *is* a real friend, in my opinion."

"Get your head together?" Her father repeated the words as if they were a foreign language. "What kind of employer puts up with nonsense like that?"

"All I know is, that's what she said." Imogene gathered up more dishes and silverware.

By the time she had cleared the table, Imogene was ready with a plan. "First thing tomorrow," she told her parents, "I'm putting in a call to Sara. I'll make sure I'm still on the payroll, and I'll find out exactly what I have to do to stay there. Then I'll get in touch with Steve to discuss what we should do about the condo. Once I know where things stand in New York, I'll be ready to settle down to a more productive routine here . . . for as long as I'm here."

"For as long as you're here?" her dad retorted. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I haven't decided. If I don't return to New York, I could head to DC. Maybe the Federal government is hiring. But I can't stay here . . . at least, not longer than a few months."

Mom and Dad stared at her as if confused. Softening her tone, she continued, "I won't rush into anything. While I'm here, I'll help out as much as I can around the house and garden, and I'll start paying room and board too. In return, I must have some time to myself. I need at least two or three hours every morning, alone in my bedroom with my typewriter, uninterrupted."

Now they looked bewildered. Imogene explained, "I've been writing a screenplay, off and on, ever since I started working for Peace Enterprises. It's time to get serious about finishing it. Sara has shown some interest in my ideas. Also, while I was staying at her place in New York, I sat in on a story conference about a different screenplay, and I picked up a lot of insights into what she's looking for—what Hollywood is looking for."

"Hollywood?" Her parents laughed and then burst forth with objections and near-ridicule. Imogene calmly proceeded to the kitchen, to load and turn on the dishwasher. Then she slipped into her bedroom and closed the door. She hauled her baggy monster of a screenplay out of its accordion folder and began chopping away at it.

The next morning, after assuring her parents that she would pay for every long-distance call she made, Imogene settled into her father's study and phoned the receptionist's desk at Peace Enterprises.

"Oh, it's you." Janie's voice was edgy. "I'm just filling in here. Are you still 'indisposed'?"

"No, I'm in Western Maryland, visiting my folks. Is Sara back from DC?"

"Not yet," Janie said. "I don't know if she's coming back. I guess you don't read the sports pages."

"I do sometimes," Imogene said. "I know things are happening on the football front."

"You better believe it. Word has it that the Guthries are meeting with Redskins management to finalize Jim's new contract. The Giants and the New York media are ranting and raving about Jim's desertion."

"I've heard they can be hostile," Imogene said.

"Personally, I couldn't care less about football, but I'd like to know what's gonna become of this office if the Guthries move down there permanently."

Imogene realized she had never considered the full consequences herself. Maybe returning to New York wouldn't be an option for her.

"Could you put me through to Leroy Pierce?" she asked. Janie predicted that the fiscal officer would be too busy to talk but did as Imogene asked.

It took several rings, but Leroy finally greeted her in his usual hearty voice. "How's country life treating you? Bet you're glad you got out of Dodge when you did."

"I don't have access to much sports news here," Imogene said. "I hear all of New York is in an uproar over Jim leaving the Giants. Does that mean Sara will be closing down the office there?"

"Not right this minute," Leroy said, "but I gotta think that's the eventual plan. That billionaire owner of the Redskins will help the Guthries get settled in DC. I can envision them becoming a celebrity couple in the nation's capital and wowing everybody with their prospective movies. No doubt they'll start reducing their presence here pretty soon. They'll still need to keep some core staff around, like me and Gus and a few others, but I suspect all the extraneous hangers-on who're clinging to their desks will be out the door."

Including me? Imogene wondered.

"Unless, by some miracle," Leroy added, "our original owners, Jake Murphy or Byron Robarts or both, come galloping back into town to save the day. Right now I don't see that happening."

"I guess not," Imogene said. "This upsets my plans too. I love my parents, but I can't stay down on the farm forever. A few more months of this could drive us all berserk."

"I believe you," Leroy said, chuckling, "but you do have some assets. You've managed to stay close to Sara all these years. She likes and trusts you more than all those power types and financiers she has to cozy up to for business reasons. Once she establishes herself in her new place, she might want you at her side."

"You think so?" Imogene was heartened, even as she admitted, "It's not like I was the most impressive employee at headquarters."

"Maybe being an office drone just ain't your thing. Sara can always hire a slew of those. You're in a unique position to be her confidante, her companion. Boost her ego when she needs it. And she's gonna need it, trust me. She doesn't half realize what she's getting herself into."

"I've always thought of Sara as such a strong woman," Imogene said, "not someone in need of much ego-boosting."

"Listen, she may come off like Superwoman, but she can never really escape the orphan child she'll always be inside. Your best bet is to reach out to her at the first opportunity while she's in transition."

"Any idea how I can do that?" Imogene asked.

"All I can say is, good luck catching her on the run. Me, I'm just on tenterhooks waiting for her to call here with instructions on who to fire first."

Imogene thanked Leroy for his advice and promised to stay in touch. Then she punched in Steve's office number. She was surprised to be put through immediately. "How are you?" he asked.

"Well rested, here on the farm," she replied, "but a little bored. I'm working on my screenplay, but that's about it. What have you been up to?"

He seemed to regard that question as a land mine. She kept probing until she was satisfied that he had made no changes to his living arrangement.

The vasectomy question seemed to hover between them, but Steve volunteered no information. Instead, he asked, "Do you still work for Peace Enterprises?"

"I honestly don't know," Imogene replied. "As of last month, I was still getting paid, but I haven't talked to Sara about my status. She's in DC and apparently unavailable. I just got off the phone with the New York office, and no one could tell me how to contact her."

"I might be able to help you with that."

"Really?" That was the last thing Imogene had expected to hear. "How?"

"I think someone here has her car phone number. She called the other day for some quick advice about the standard musician's contract. Hold on a minute."

Imogene was on hold for several minutes. She pictured Steve conferring with the sexy paralegal. When he came back on the line, he gave her the number.

"I appreciate this, Steve." Imogene kept her voice businesslike.

"Don't mention it. I hope it helps."

After hanging up, Imogene lost no time calling the car phone number. Sara answered with a breathless "Hello!"

"Sara, this is Imogene. I hope I'm not interrupting anything. I'm calling from my parents' farm. It's been about six weeks, so I thought I'd touch base with you and see how things are going."

"How things are going?" Sara laughed. "I hardly know how to answer that. Right now I feel like I'm on a roller coaster speeding into an abyss. Scary but exciting. We're on a country road headed in the direction of Middleburg, Virginia, we hope. Maximilian Bailey's mansion should be somewhere up ahead. Jim's trying to follow a map as he's driving. We figure if we keep heading roughly northwest, we should be entering Mr. Bailey's vast domain before too long."

"Rumor has it that Jim has already jumped ship with the Giants and signed with the Redskins."

"He has every right to. The Giants contract was never guaranteed past the first year. If we don't screw it up, today's meeting will seal the Redskins deal. A direct owner-to-player negotiation like this is fairly unusual, so it must mean Mr. Bailey really wants us. Jim's agent is back in New York, trying to placate the team and the media there. That's all I can say right now. I'm sure we'll be talking to the DC press sometime this afternoon, after our meeting. Wish us luck."

Imogene ventured, "People at headquarters are wondering what will happen to their jobs if . . . when you move."

"I haven't had a chance to think through all the ramifications yet. Jim and I are gonna have to put down roots in the DC area pretty fast. We'll need a house with a few acres of land, a suitable office with a sensible commute, and a high-quality preschool. To be honest, the idea of leaving New York elates me. It's my native city, and dear to me, but the baggage I carry there—my

brother's as well as my own—is choking me. I'm already breathing easier in these wide-open spaces. Feeling more like my own woman."

"I'm breathing easier where I am, too," Imogene said, "but I also know that life down on the farm will drive me bonkers if I stay too long."

Sara laughed at her dramatics. "I believe you, Imogene, but trust me, you're lucky to be missing the disruption at headquarters. We'll be reducing the New York staff, and only a chosen few will be asked to join us here. In fact, the only employee we brought with us on this trip is Yvette, the nanny. She's looking after Laraine at our hotel."

Imogene realized she must get to work selling herself. What did she have to offer? "I'm familiar with the DC area, since my parents are from there originally. I might be in a unique position to help out with your transition, while I continue working on my screenplay. I'd really appreciate—I mean, I need to find a way to continue in paying status. Maybe I could answer the phones for your new operation and gradually work up to PR."

"I'm sure you could, Imogene, but there isn't any new operation as yet. We'll discuss your status at some point, I promise, but not on a car phone."

"Is there anything I can do for you in the meantime, to keep my paychecks coming in?"

Imogene waited several anxious moments as Sara broke off to discuss with Jim which way to turn next. Finally, her boss responded, "Right now, you realize, there's no phones for you to answer and no PR to do. I can't keep you on salary just to write a screenplay on spec from a remote location. Unless . . ."

Sara paused again, and Imogene sweated.

"I could make use of your editorial skills. Helene has submitted a revised draft for *Deterrence*, and I'll be asking the office staff to copy it and send it to a few trusted critics. That could include you, if you're willing. Izzy of Triumvirate fame is my chief developmental editor, but I'd still like to get as many opinions as possible. So read it carefully, and write up an evaluation. You should have a leg up, since you sat in on that first story conference with Helene. Give us an honest opinion, and that will justify at least a few more paychecks."

"I'll do my best." Imogene kept her voice professional, but she could barely contain her relief. She gave Sara the number of the rural post-office box her

father used, and added, "I really appreciate this opportunity, Sara. I'll give you a thorough critique."

As Sara had promised, the 110-page document arrived in the mail. It looked ponderous enough, Imogene hoped, to impress her parents with the seriousness of the assignment. Even as her outdoor activities intensified with the warming temperatures, she insisted on her "office hours."

Rediscovering some of her old college diligence, she tackled *Deterrence* as if she were writing a term paper about it. After reading the script twice and taking copious notes, she churned out the evaluation rapidly, only to stew over it for days afterward. She praised the story for its strong political characters, especially the lead role intended for Sara, which would surely make a feminist statement and burnish her acting credentials. Imogene also talked up the musical possibilities in depicting a rebellion seemingly triggered by rock 'n' roll. Besides showcasing new bands, there was the tantalizing prospect of reviving the dormant partnership of Jake Murphy and Byron Robarts.

Imogene revisited some of the concerns that had been raised at the dinner meeting. The ambitious scope of the movie, with mobs swarming government buildings and battling it out on the National Mall, could lead to a runaway budget if not carefully managed. Imogene gingerly suggested that both Mrs. Frisk and the Guthries were inexperienced with projects of this magnitude and must look for expert advice on ways to economize.

"In summary," Imogene wrote, "the story of an ambitious woman intent on acquiring political power and faced with a rebellion against her authority, as well as family turmoil, has great potential. However, the producers must guard against overreach. Staging a full-scale war against a Washington backdrop would be an enormous undertaking, but this could be minimized by such tactics as moving some scenes to a rural setting and using relatively inexpensive, nonprofessional actors as combatants."

Imogene continued in this vein until she realized she was subtly promoting her own script. Under the guise of controlling expenses, she had proposed an "inexpensive" scene in which the heroine was a Glendary College alumnus, returning to campus for a five-year reunion. There she would confront

a group of hostile fellow alumni, old-time peaceniks who disapproved of her military career. Would Sara consider an angle like this, if Imogene took care to present it unobtrusively?

She resolved to turn in the evaluation as soon as possible and deal with any consequences later. The question was how to accomplish this, as Sara was no longer answering her car phone. She called headquarters again.

The phone rang unanswered at the front desk all morning. Imogene kept calling, until finally in midafternoon, a woman answered. It took her a moment to recognize the voice.

"Oh, hi, Sherri," she said. "Are you filling in as receptionist?"

"Somebody has to," Sherri replied. "Janie's supposedly 'indisposed,' although I suspect she's really on a sick-out. We kicked her out of the PR office. She was just too obnoxious."

"I see," Imogene said. "Other than that, how're things going?"

"Eerily quiet. Nobody really knows what's going down. It's kind of nerve-racking waiting around for Sara to make a decisive move."

"Speaking of Sara," Imogene said, "I'm doing an assignment for her, and I need to get in touch. Has she called in?"

"A couple of times, but she only spoke to Leroy and Gus, and they're not really talking. So it's no use asking me to connect you with either of them."

"I didn't ask," Imogene protested, although she'd been about to. "How are you all handling the uncertainty?"

"Personally, I'm not worried. I'm still singing with Amorphous in the studio, and there's a rumor we could get cast in the DC movie."

"That'd be great," Imogene offered. "I hope it works out for you."

"It should. Gus has heard the current screenplay incorporates some of our original ideas. We're okay with that, as long as Sara puts me in the movie."

"I see your point," Imogene said, "but I know for a fact that the Guthries and Helene Frisk are batting around ideas like crazy. I just finished an evaluation of the latest draft, but it's probably changing as we speak."

"All I'm saying is that the 'peace army' idea is ours, so they have to credit us. And Janie's been trying to stick her nose in by writing song lyrics or something. Like I said, it's getting tense. I just hope Gus and I don't have

to resort to suing Sara or leaking our grievance to the press, to protect our ideas.”

“You can’t be serious.” Imogene tried to treat this threat as a joke. “You’re her PR team. Your job is to make her look good.”

“There’s another line ringing. I gotta go.” Sherri hung up unceremoniously, which left Imogene shaking her head. *Gus and Sherri might be bluffing*, she thought, *but who knows? These people are barracudas.*

Another two weeks of relative isolation went by. Sara hadn’t gotten in touch and still wasn’t answering her car phone. An item in *The Washington Post*, which Imogene glanced at whenever she went into town, reported that Jim’s three-year deal with the Washington Redskins was now official, including the required physical exams. No doubt the Guthries were fully occupied with searching for a home and office in the DC area.

Meanwhile, the completed evaluation for *Deterrence* sat on Imogene’s desk as she returned to her own screenplay. With few distractions, she made rapid progress on *The Nondescripts*. She pondered ways to make it feel like a real movie and not just a pile of paper.

On an impulse, she phoned Betty and Shelley, the local schoolteachers who had been leaders of the original “nondescripts crowd” back at college. Both of her old friends laughed skeptically at the idea of seeing their campus exploits portrayed on film, but as Imogene talked up her connection to Sara, they grew intrigued.

The three women met for dinner at a popular pizzeria. As they sipped wine, they reminisced about those days when they’d lived in a supposedly dry dorm and couldn’t legally fuel their bull sessions with anything stronger than Coca Cola to wash down mountains of popcorn.

Betty, always the sharper of the two cynics, said, “Tell us truthfully, Imogene. Are you really in a position to make *The Nondescripts* happen? Or is it possible Sara’s just stringing you along so you’ll go on being her willing slave?”

“There are worse things than being a ‘willing slave’ to someone like Sara.” Imogene’s imbibing took the edge off any possible irritation and boosted her

confidence. "I'm living the life of Riley at the moment, girls. All I have to do is sit in my bedroom every morning and plug away at my screenplay. I'm getting paid to do that."

"Sounds like a sweet deal," Betty said, "but what can possibly come of it? You really think you can sell your boss on a story that elevates us 'nondescripts' to heroine status? If you get anywhere with that, I swear I'll proclaim you saleswoman of the year in the *Alumni Notes*."

"I do think *The Nondescripts* has one strong argument in its favor," Imogene replied. "It would be a simpler, less-expensive alternative to the potential boondoggle Sara's focused on now."

"Say no more. I'm completely sold." Shelley raised her glass in a toast. "I hereby declare *The Nondescripts* a go. We need more movies that celebrate the courage and perseverance of the underdog. This one will be the blockbuster of the year in the nerd category. As far as I'm concerned, only one burning question remains. And that is, who's gonna play me? We must search far and wide for just the right semiattractive, slightly overweight young actress who can convey my troubled air to perfection."

"To hell with that. Why can't we just play ourselves?" Betty smirked but then grew serious. "Why go to the expense of hiring real actresses when we could do it just as well, or better?"

"This is a professional production we're talking about," Imogene argued. "The characters aren't you; they're just inspired by you. Did I mention there's also a character based on Emily Palmer? It's a little different for her, being a credentialed actress. She'd probably get a shot at playing it herself."

"Naturally." Shelley sounded deflated. "Even if by some miracle we got to be in the movie, Emily would completely steal our thunder. The mistress of the fake suicide would own the spotlight."

"Yeah, so much for amateur hour." Betty's sarcasm returned full force. "No doubt Emily Palmer Piluras will insist on being treated like the star she already thinks she is."

"I know Emily still sticks in your craw, with those superior airs she had in college," Imogene said. "I talked to her recently, and she hasn't changed much. But she *would* add legitimacy to my project. I need that to impress Sara."

"I won't argue with you," Betty huffed. "It's your movie."

"You should consider hiring us as extras, if nothing else." Shelley grinned and then added in a mock-warning voice, "We'd find devious ways to make our presence felt, just like we did when we were nothing but campus back-drop. Wouldn't that suit the premise of your movie?"

"Actually, it would," Imogene said, returning the grin.

Inspired to finish her screenplay, Imogene pushed herself during the sweltering weeks of early summer until she had produced something resembling a complete product. She called headquarters again, determined to get past the front desk this time. She thought Leroy Pierce, at least, might have some encouraging words for her. As the line rang, she plotted ways of bypassing Sherri or any other determined gatekeeper.

She was startled when a different but familiar voice barked, "Peace Enterprises."

"Emily?" Imogene paused. "Is that you?"

"Yes, this is Emily Palmer. Who's calling, please?"

Imogene identified herself, tamping down her irritation at not being recognized. "Remember, we spoke a few months ago. You called from LA when I was covering the front desk. I certainly didn't expect to find you doing the same thing. How did that happen?"

"Long story." Emily gave a short laugh. "I came east with Russell Mellini, my old television costar, last week. He has a part in an off-Broadway play. We're staying in his walk-up in Manhattan, which he's had since his early theater days. I've got a few auditions lined up myself. I dropped by here on Monday to see Sara, but, of course, she was traveling and unavailable. Mr. Pierce told me they were desperate for receptionist help and asked if I'd fill in for a couple of weeks. I said I'd do it for the paycheck, which will keep me afloat until I can get a real job."

Imogene's head was spinning. "But what about . . . does that mean you've left Mark . . . Mr. Piluras? What about your little boy?"

"Mark's busy with his teaching, but I need to work too. Nothing's happening for me right now in LA." Emily's voice wavered and then steadied.

"It'll be tough on the family for a while, especially Marcus Junior, but I'm really doing it for them."

"Of course." Imogene had to choke off her disgust. She reflected that Sara's mother had abandoned her and Jake to their alcoholic father when she moved across country to pursue a series of Hollywood casting couches. She too had claimed to be doing it for her children.

Sara would be revolted, Imogene thought, to learn that Emily was contemplating the same path. Would this torpedo any possible rapprochement between the two former roommates?

"So how's life treating *you*?" The edginess in Emily's voice made it plain that she would not tolerate being judged.

"Actually," Imogene offered, "Steve and I are taking a break too."

"Oh, that's a shame. Temporary or permanent?"

"I don't know yet," Imogene said. "For now, I've moved back to my parents' farm, but I'm still doing assignments for Sara."

"What kind of assignments?" Emily sounded skeptical.

"I wrote an evaluation of the company's current film project. And I've made substantial progress on my own screenplay. Remember the small-town college story? We discussed it the last time we spoke."

"Oh yeah, I remember your mentioning it." Emily was trying to play it cool, Imogene thought, but she saw through this act. She could tell the idea of *Nondescripts* actually quickened Emily's pulse.

"You think there's any chance Sara will even look at it?"

"That's the trick," Imogene conceded. "She's unreachable at the moment, except by a select few. It seems neither you nor I are on her A-list right now."

"How high-and-mighty can she get?" Emily mocked. "She thinks she's gonna become the cream of DC society the instant she moves there?"

Emily and Imogene laughed together at Sara's apparently raging ego, while Imogene reflected on this turnabout. Back at college, Emily had been the roommate most often accused in absentia of being an insufferable prima donna.

After this first-ever bonding moment between Imogene and Emily, the temporary receptionist snapped back to business. "I'll leave a message that you called. Whom I should leave it with, I'm not quite sure."

“Try Leroy Pierce.” Struck by a bolt of an idea, Imogene continued, “Actually, if you could put me through to him right now, I’m pretty sure he’ll take my call. I have something important to tell him.”

“I’ll see if he picks up,” Emily said. “Best of luck with that screenplay.” Her doubtful tone gave way to a hint of bravado. “If Sara condescends to talk to you anytime soon, go ahead and use my name to plug it. I do have professional credentials. Even she can’t deny that.”

“And I’m sure Sara respects those credentials.”

After saying good-bye to Emily, Imogene sweated as the intercom phone rang five or six times. She was relieved when Leroy picked up.

“Our long-lost farm girl! How’s rural life treating you? Getting any inspiration from the boondocks?”

“Actually, yes. I’ve made progress on a couple of projects.” Imogene explained what she had been doing and then added, “I was surprised to find my old roommate Emily manning the front desk. What happened to Sherri and Janie?”

“They promoted themselves from the receptionist gig,” Leroy said with a chuckle. “Sherri’s remaking herself into a singer, with Gus’s apparent blessing. She spends all her time in the studio with Amorphous. And Janie’s decided she’s either a full-time PR chick or nothing. She’s barreled into Gus’s business like gangbusters—none of *my* business, of course. As always, I’m just here to add up the numbers.”

“Sherri hinted to me, the last time she answered the phone,” Imogene said, “that Sara stole the original idea for *Deterrence* from her and Gus. She threatened to sue, or maybe leak that accusation to the press. I thought you should know that.”

“Thanks for telling me, my dear, but I don’t think Sherri’s the issue right now. Her head’s been totally turned by dreams of rock ‘n’ roll stardom. If anybody picks up the ball on that accusation, it’ll be Janie.”

As Leroy spoke, the memory of an old scandal clicked in Imogene’s mind. “That would be kind of ironic, considering that Janie herself was accused of plagiarism when she was a star reporter on the Glendary College newspaper. I knew there was something about her I’d forgotten.”

“Yeah, yeah. Call it irony if you want. Personally, I call it bullshit. Seems like anyone and her sister can claim a movie idea these days.” Leroy paused and then added, “I appreciate the information, Imogene, and I applaud your loyalty even more. I gotta run now, but feel free to get back in touch if I can ease any of your worries. I’m still the fiscal officer here, until I’m told otherwise.”

CHAPTER 7



IMOGENE SPENT SEVERAL days reviewing her nearly completed screenplay, wondering if it portrayed her former schoolmates fairly. She figured Betty and Shelley wouldn't be shocked to be treated as comic figures, but Emily would expect to be a heroine. *Instead, I've made her a drama queen*, Imogene thought. *I always suspected her fake suicide at college was an act of desperation. And now she's abandoned her family all these years later, which seems to prove me right. Still, the melodramatics of the role might appeal to her.*

Her mother interrupted, as she often did during Imogene's self-designated office hours, to demand her help with a household chore. Imogene vacuumed her father's study as instructed, but with a tight jaw. It seemed that whenever she zeroed in on a breakthrough idea or two, they got chased away. *Mom's doing it on purpose*, she reflected. *My creativity makes her uncomfortable. All the more reason why I need to find my own space, and soon.*

Imogene had just finished dusting the phone when it rang. She picked it up and said, "Peace Enterprises."

"Peace Enterprises? Really? You miss being at headquarters that much?"

"Sara! It's you!" Imogene exclaimed. "I forgot where I was for a moment. I'm so glad you called. I've been wanting to get in touch with you."

"Jim and I are on the move, yet again. Here's hoping this car-phone signal lasts at least a few minutes. We've been checking out rental properties in northern Virginia. We've seen two really nice places that would work for us, both within a fifteen-minute drive of the Redskins practice facility and both with an option to buy. It's just a matter of choosing between them. Jim and I have different preferences, but we'll work it out."

Both of the houses, Sara explained, were being vacated by celebrities of different stripes. The one Jim favored belonged to a former Redskins player who'd recently signed with another team. Sara, however, felt drawn to the house of a musician who had been popular in local night clubs before deciding to move to Los Angeles. The main selling point for her was a small recording studio situated on the property. "It's nestled in a little patch of woods about a quarter mile from the house. Just perfect for nurturing musical creativity."

Jim, who was driving, said something that Imogene struggled to make out. He seemed worried about the recording studio's proximity to the house, especially if grungy outfits like Amorphous and Stuyvesant petitioned to make it their stomping grounds. Sara laughed this off, insisting that she and Jim would keep their personal and business lives separate as they always had.

"But enough about us. How're you doing down on the farm?"

Imogene informed her boss that she'd finished the evaluation she'd been asked to do and had also made rapid progress on her own screenplay. As she offered details, something told her that Sara had not called for an update on her work.

"It all sounds good, Imogene," Sara interjected, "but I'm about to propose an entirely different task for you, and even a radical change of lifestyle. This project would work best if you left the farm and moved in with us for a few months. Once we're settled in our new home, we'll have plenty of room for visitors."

Imogene gasped. Hadn't she just been longing for a space of her own—especially one close to the action?

"Let me explain why I think this is urgent. It's recently come to my attention that there may be a plot afoot in my own PR office to spill some dirt on me to the press, or even to concoct an exposé. Leroy is trying to find out if Gus and Janie are pursuing a deal with some publication that specializes in hatchet jobs. Maybe, with your experience in the publishing industry, you could give us an idea who they might be talking to."

"I'd only be guessing," Imogene confessed.

"It's not that I care so much if details of my life are exposed. I have nothing to hide. But I do worry about certain incidents being twisted and exaggerated in a narrative I don't control. It's happened before."

"I get it." Imogene pounced on the idea. "You need someone to counteract their dirt, if that's what it is, by presenting your point of view on a daily basis. Something like a live memoir, right? And who would be better qualified for that job than me?"

"Exactly. As my old college roommate, you're already familiar with every quirk and fault I have. Listen, I think I'm drifting out of signal range, but we'll talk again soon. I'll invite you to come see us as soon as possible, and then we can . . ." Sara's voice faded out, but the conversation left Imogene feeling as elated as a prisoner about to be released from custody.

Imogene saved her dramatic announcement for dinner that night. She told her parents she'd be moving out soon, but when she admitted that the exact date was uncertain, they scoffed. Then her dad put the knife in. "Honey, it's time for you to put this fantasy aside. You need a real job, with regular hours and responsibilities."

Although incensed, she controlled herself until the meal was over. After she had loaded the dishwasher as usual, she stalked toward her bedroom, saying, "I'm gonna start packing now. And when I leave this time, I'll only come back to visit—briefly. Never to stay."

It began to look like an empty threat as the summer days kept slipping by and no further word came from Sara. Had the "live memoir" idea been just a passing whim of hers? Maybe she'd decided any "scandals" that threatened her were too trivial to worry about.

Imogene kept trying the car phone, without success. She called headquarters and spoke to an irritable Emily, who presumably was still unemployed herself except for her ongoing "guest receptionist" gig. Emily forwarded the call to Leroy Pierce, who could only surmise that Sara was busy setting up her new home and office, while Jim attended his first Redskins training camp in preparation for the early September start to the football season. Leroy didn't know much else, except that Sara had persuaded her nanny to relocate with the family. "I'm guessing her new house must be substantial if it can accommodate live-in help."

"Speaking of live-in help," Imogene said, "Sara proposed a special project for me when we last talked. The idea was for me to move into her house for

a few months and sort of chronicle her daily life—to counteract any negative press she might get elsewhere. But I haven’t heard from her since, so I’m still stuck on the farm.”

Leroy snorted at the “live memoir” idea. “What is she, paranoid? She thinks she’s gotta justify her every move, every day? Not that I blame her much, judging by the unfriendly vibes I get around here sometimes.”

After pondering a moment, Leroy proposed, “Seeing as Sara ain’t quite ready to take you in, how about paying us a visit at headquarters instead? We could put you up in the Guthries’ vacant condo, and you could schedule a meeting on some pretext or other with Gus and Janie, assuming she’s still his girl of the moment. They’ll try to stonewall you, but who knows? You might gain some info that’d be of use to Sara.”

Leroy paused again. “Also, you might want to catch up with your husband, or vice versa. He either calls us or comes by every few days to make sure our house bands are still thriving in the studios downstairs. Who knows, he might make a career out of managing them.”

“A trip to New York sounds fabulous, whatever the reason.” The emotion in Imogene’s voice surprised her as she continued, “I’ve missed everything about it, much more than I thought I would. I’ll see you in two days . . . or less.”

As soon as she hung up, Imogene headed to her bedroom to pack for real. She told her mother that something had come up regarding her “fantasy job” that required her immediate presence in New York.

When Imogene arrived at headquarters on a sweltering late-July afternoon, she barely had time to say hello to Emily before the “guest receptionist” jumped to her feet and came around the desk. “Thank God you’re here. I need you to take over right now.”

“Wait a minute. I didn’t come back to be the receptionist.”

Her former roommate was already halfway out the door when Imogene shouted after her, “Where are you going?”

Emily turned back and gave Imogene an odd smirk. “I’m due at rehearsal in Studio Two. Gus has suggested I try out as lead singer for Stuyvesant. He ran the idea by your husband, who’s helping the bands stay afloat—in case you didn’t know.”

“Since when are you a singer?” Imogene demanded, but Emily disappeared without answering. *Is she a good enough actress*, Imogene wondered, *to convince audiences she can front a band?*

Imogene settled herself behind the desk, shaking her head in disbelief. Was she really back in the same dead-end position where she was destined to do just as lousy a job as before? Her first order of business must be to contact her estranged husband and, among other things, find out how he intended to prop up the house bands.

She called Steve’s office and identified herself to the secretary, or paralegal, or whoever she was. “Mr. Wittier is out of the office at the moment,” the woman purred. “May I take a message?”

“I’m calling from Peace Enterprises headquarters,” Imogene said. “If he wants to return my call, he can reach me at the front desk.”

“Oh.” The woman hesitated. “Actually, I believe he’s headed that way now.”

Sure enough, within minutes, Steve strode into the reception area and stopped short at the sight of Imogene. They both demanded, “What’re you doing here?” and then laughed.

“I’m on a spying mission for Sara,” Imogene told him in a theatrical whisper, “looking for evidence that her own PR people are turncoats.”

“I dunno about that, but I do know what Sherri’s up to. She’s competing in the Battle of the Bands with your old roommate Emily in the studios downstairs. Leroy Pierce has decreed that the company can only afford to put out one record, so it’s a fight to the death between Amorphous and Stuyvesant to see which band can make a releasable demo. The girls are weighing in as lead singers, their regular jobs be damned.”

“A Battle of the Bands? That I’ve gotta see!” Imogene exclaimed.

“Why don’t you come downstairs with me now and check it out? Or are you stuck behind that desk?”

“I haven’t been here long enough to get stuck.” Imogene jumped up from her seat. “Let me out of here, before that damned phone starts ringing.”

Imogene spent an enjoyable late afternoon and evening immersing herself in raw blasts of rock ’n’ roll. It was a rare opportunity to experience music in its preproduction state. She and Steve, sipping from tall coffee cups, drifted

between the two recording studios, assessing what they were hearing and sharing their impressions.

In Studio One, the rather courtly middle-aged producer for Amorphous sent the band out for a break and then invited Imogene and Steve to sit down and listen to several recent demos. To Imogene's ear, the loudest and most raucous songs were the catchiest. When the band returned, the musicians recreated part of their Martin Luther King Day performance in DC, emphasizing the slower, bluesy numbers they had played then, and adding Sherri's whispery voice to the mix. She shimmied and shook her hips at intervals, which made Steve smile.

By contrast, the Stuyvesant musicians in Studio Two reflected the belligerent personality of their long-haired, grungy producer. He ordered Imogene and Steve to sit quietly and listen to a live performance, which turned into an improvisation as it wandered along as if in search of an ending. Emily's voice, stronger but less nuanced than Sherri's, added to the chaotic feeling. She hit a few high notes imperfectly and glared at Imogene, as if daring her former roommate to notice.

After several hours of alternating between the two studios, Steve and Imogene retreated upstairs and sat down in the reception area. It was past eight, and the office was silent.

"My ears will be ringing all night," Imogene joked.

"So, which band do you prefer?" Steve put the question as if her opinion really mattered.

"Amorphous is definitely more professional," Imogene said. "Some of its songs . . . well, they're actual songs. Also in its favor, the band has appeared at a major public event without exactly disgracing itself. Whereas Stuyvesant seems like . . . an ongoing experiment."

She paused and then added, "Although that's not necessarily a bad thing."

"Are you sure you're being musically impartial," Steve teased, "or are you really just trying to decide if Emily or Sherri is a better friend of yours?"

"Neither of them is exactly a bosom buddy. It's not about my feelings. It's about . . ." She paused to reflect.

"Shouldn't it be about selling records?" Steve prompted.

“Should it? If Peace Enterprises were still primarily a record company, Amorphous would win this contest hands down. But now Sara’s making movies, and she’s looking for soundtracks. *Deterrence*, the new project, is shaping up to be experimental and explosive. Who knows, that might give Stuyvesant the advantage.”

The switchboard phone rang, piercing the silence and making them jump. “Damn, it’s too late to play receptionist. I’m not gonna answer it.” Imogene looked at the blinking light and amended, “Or maybe I better. It’s coming from downstairs.”

When she picked up the phone, a voice growled, “This is Andrew Decker, Stuyvesant’s producer. Just thought I’d let you know, both Sylvan and Paulie are on their way upstairs to get your decision in person.”

“Why are they coming up here?” Imogene protested. “We can’t . . . we’re not authorized . . .”

“If you ain’t prepared to choose between them, they might have to work it out with their fists. Same for us producers down here. So you better face the music, lady.” Andrew hung up.

Within moments, Sylvan appeared in the entrance and paused, his face and his long brown tresses damp with sweat. Paulie, muscular and tattooed, appeared close behind and tried to push his rival out of the way.

They made their way into the reception area, still shoving each other. “Well?” they both demanded, glaring at Imogene and Steve.

“I was just trying to explain to one of the producers,” Imogene said, “that we’re not in charge of musical decisions.”

“Don’t bullshit me,” Paulie growled. “You’re sitting up here in corporate. Who else we supposed to talk to?”

“You call this corporate?” Imogene laughed mirthlessly. “This is the receptionist’s desk.”

“Yeah,” Sylvan said, “but you’re buddy-buddy with the boss lady, right?”

“Both our chick singers used to sit here,” Paulie pointed out. “Looks like it’s some kinda launching pad.”

As if conjured up, both of the “chick singers” appeared at that moment. They greeted Imogene and Steve, their gazes lingering on Imogene. *They’re wondering if cozying up to me will do them any good*, she thought.

"As my wife was just explaining," Steve said, "we don't have decision-making authority here. We can only pass our impressions on to management."

"So, spill it," Sherri purred. "What're those impressions?"

"And how're you gonna pass them on?" Emily demanded. "Are you even in contact with Sara?"

"Sure I am," Imogene declared. *I'm not really lying, although it's been a while.* She continued, "As my husband said, we're just advisors here."

"Yeah, yeah. So who gets your seal of approval?" As Paulie clenched his fists, Imogene reflected that this apparent power she and Steve shared was making them both shake with fear.

Steve gulped and said, "Personally, I like both bands. A lot."

Way to make a decision, Imogene thought, frowning at her stammering husband. *What're you really trying to decide here? Which chick singer is sexier?*

"I'm serious!" Steve exclaimed, responding to the host of glares in his direction. "Why do we necessarily have to choose between two good bands? There must be ways of utilizing them both. In fact, I'd love to hear how all of you sound jamming together."

As this idea picked up steam, the potential rumble transformed itself into a love fest. Sylvan and Paulie, instead of slugging out their differences, vowed to start pooling their talents. Sherri and Emily, giggling together like coeds, agreed they could work out some kind of duet.

The bands reassembled downstairs and played into the early-morning hours in Studio One. Imogene and Steve fueled the session by bringing in tequila and tacos from the neighborhood all-night cantina. Several recordings were made, mostly exuberant noise to Imogene's ear. The immediate goal, Sylvan and Paulie and their producers proclaimed, was not to churn out music per se but to include everyone in the creative process and have a blast doing it. *I gotta hand it to Steve,* Imogene thought. *His cowardice turned out to be inspired.*

At first Steve beamed at the success of his idea but later nursed some reservations. He murmured to Imogene, "Leroy will pop a cork when he gets the bill for this after-hours studio time. Especially if nothing usable comes of it."

"I say we plug it as possible soundtrack material," Imogene offered, knowing this wouldn't fool anyone but the musicians themselves.

When the session ended around 2:00 a.m., Imogene told Steve that she had nowhere to go. She'd arranged with Leroy to stay in the Guthries' vacant condo but never had a chance to see him and obtain the key. "If you want to crash with me tonight," Steve replied, "it's cool."

Steve and Imogene went home together, collapsed in bed, and slept chastely until midmorning. They got up and went their separate ways: Steve to his law office and Imogene back to the Peace Enterprises receptionist's desk.

When Imogene dropped by Leroy's office, he gave her the condo key and remarked with his characteristic chuckle, "You didn't waste much time hitting town after our phone conversation. So what's your plan now?"

"I'd hoped to gather some intel about what Gus and his girls are doing. From what I saw of Sherri in the studio last night, I'd say she's out of the PR business for now and into her singing career. So that leaves Janie. Does Gus have a similar plan for her?"

"Who knows? I guess she ain't pretty enough to front a band." Leroy picked up the intercom phone, punched in a number, and winked at Imogene. "Why don't we check her out? See how well she protects her boss."

When the call went through, Leroy said, "Janie? Is Gus around, by any chance?" He listened, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, I get how incredibly busy he is . . . okay, never mind. Maybe I'll get lucky and run into him in the john." Leroy hung up with a shrug.

"What do you think they're hiding?" Imogene asked.

"My dear, whatever it is, it ain't something they're willing to divulge to a mere fiscal officer. I'll probably never know, unless they set up their own outside operation and make a lot of noise with that. I always thought Janie was more naturally talkative than Sherri, but she sure clammed up just now."

Imogene spent a long afternoon at the front desk, taking calls and writing down messages that Sara wouldn't receive any time soon and would likely never return. At five o'clock, she was thinking about heading upstairs to the living quarters, when Emily came in.

Imogene greeted her and remarked, "That was quite a session last night. Are you going back into the studio soon?"

"Yeah, I'm sure I will. It *was* amazing, wasn't it? Although you gotta realize, that was lightning in a bottle last night. Usually the bands don't get along well enough to carry on a civilized conversation, much less create together."

She sighed and then added, "Don't get me wrong, I have a ball singing with Stuyvesant. But I also have acting classes several nights a week. That's my priority . . . my true calling."

"Of course," Imogene said. "How's that going?"

"It's a prestigious school. The contacts I'm making could help me a lot."

"I thought you already had the best contact possible," Imogene said. "Isn't Russell Mellini . . ."

"Yes? What about him?"

Emily's sharp tone made Imogene jump. "I mean, he's an established actor who's mentoring you, right? I thought you were understudying his play, as well as . . . living with him."

"I can't rely on Russell Mellini, or anyone else, to make my career. I have to do that on my own."

Emily continued to give Imogene a hard look. Then she demanded, "Listen, Imogene, were you bullshitting when you said you and Sara were back in touch?"

"Not exactly," Imogene said, "although it's been a while. She's super busy getting settled in DC right now. Why? What's so urgent?"

"I gotta know whether she's willing to help me or not. I can't spend months spinning my wheels on the east coast when I've got a child back in California who misses his mother. Sara owes me, big-time. She can't deny I helped her get a foothold in the theater department at college. And later on, when she was trying to launch her first film, I put her in touch with Mark's cousins as possible advisors. So the least she can do now is talk to me. Can you possibly arrange that?"

"I'd help you if I could," Imogene said, "but she's barely talking even to the brass here. And it remains to be seen what her move to DC will mean for the company. She may close the New York office, or she may not. That's why the tension around here is rising."

"But we know there's a DC movie in the works," Emily said, "and everybody wants a piece of that. Sherri says she and Amorphous have already auditioned for it, at least informally. Where does that leave me and Stuyvesant?"

"There's bound to be other movies," Imogene offered. "I still think my screenplay, *The Nondescripts*, has possibilities as a musical."

"I wouldn't get my hopes up about that, Imogene. It's not like Sara assigned you to write a college musical. And it's not exactly blockbuster material."

"I know it's not a blockbuster," Imogene huffed. "It's just a modest story that dramatizes a pivotal year in our lives."

"You might think about a different title," Emily said. "'The Nondescripts' doesn't exactly speak to me. I was the anti-nondescript at college."

"Exactly," Imogene explained. "You were the one who made the ordinary girls jealous and inspired their feats of sabotage."

Emily's stern face gave way to a slight smile. "Well, I wish you luck with that, Imogene. I guess anything is possible. Maybe your project would work for Stuyvesant."

"And nothing's been decided yet about *Deterrence*, either," Imogene said. "Sherri shouldn't assume she and her outfit have it made."

Imogene had barely finished speaking when Gus walked into the reception area with some paperwork. A lift of his brow told Imogene he had heard her slight jibe about one of his favorites. Her face grew hot.

Gus said smoothly, "I'd like you to type these travel vouchers, if you would. They're for a week-long trip starting next Monday." He handed her the draft forms with the information written in pen.

"Of course," Imogene said, suppressing her annoyance at being tagged as a clerical employee yet again. She pulled two blank voucher forms out of a side drawer as she read through the drafts. "You're going to the upstate commune again? And Janie's going this time?"

"In her new capacity as assistant publicist," Gus replied. "I'd appreciate it if you'd get those done for Leroy's signature no later than noon tomorrow."

As he turned on his heel, Imogene asked, "What shall I put down as the purpose of the trip?"

Gus looked back at her and said, "Just the usual business consultation." He left hastily.

"Something's up," Imogene told Emily. "Gus and I have never been buddies, but he usually has no problem telling me the purpose of a trip. And why does he need a whole week at the commune to discuss business if it's just the usual stuff?"

"Maybe he needs the time to break in Janie," Emily remarked with a smirk. "She's dowdy, but I'm guessing she's fairly well endowed with brains. Why didn't you ever join Gus's little harem of assistant publicists, Imogene? You're as qualified as the others."

Imogene laughed. "I guess I'm just not harem material." Then she added in a discreet voice, "Gus has never seemed comfortable around me. I don't know why. Maybe he thinks I'm on to him."

"On to him for what?" Emily asked.

"The timing of this trip upstate, for example. Now that Sara is leaving headquarters, someone has to fill the vacuum if this office is gonna remain open. Maybe Gus figures on luring back the original owners, Jake and Byron, for another try at running the place."

"I thought the last time those two ran it," Emily said, "they pretty much ran it into the ground."

"True enough. They're totally not businessmen. Hopefully, they've learned something about getting along during their years of communal living. But their naïveté could leave them open to manipulation by someone like Gus."

"I'll bet it could." Emily's eyes opened wide.

"Then again, it might work out okay," Imogene speculated, "if Leroy keeps a steady hand on their spending. Not that he doesn't have enough problems already."

"Damned straight he does," Emily said. "I heard him railing to one of the assistant accountants that *Deterrence* was a boondoggle waiting to happen. When he saw the initial budget, he literally felt his blood pressure shooting up."

"Leroy's always threatening to have a heart attack." Imogene tried to laugh. "That's nothing new."

Imogene reflected that this was the most frank conversation she'd ever had with Emily. On an impulse, she invited her former roommate to accompany her upstairs to Sara's condo so that they could continue talking.

Imogene and Emily sat at the dining-room table, sipping from bottles of water they found in the refrigerator. Emily remarked that it felt odd to be hanging out in Sara's condo when she was out of town and presumably unreachable. The phone rang, and Imogene went to the living room to answer it.

"Greetings, Imogene! I just talked to Leroy, and he said you might be using my New York digs. How's it going? You keeping busy?"

"Sara!" Imogene exclaimed. "We were just talking about you."

"Really? Who's 'we'?"

"Emily's here," Imogene said. "She was in the recording studio last night, singing with Stuyvesant."

"Amazing!" Sara exclaimed. "The three of us together again, more or less, after all these years. Are you on the living-room phone, Imogene? If so, just flip the switch, and we'll have ourselves a conference call."

Imogene, Sara, and Emily proceeded to conduct a no-holds-barred bull session worthy of their former status as college roommates. At first Imogene felt the old sensation of being crushed between two dynamos, but she resolved to speak her mind as never before.

Sara plunged headfirst into turbulent waters by asking Emily what she was doing on the east coast without her husband, Mark, and their son. Emily explained, somewhat defensively, that she was trying to gain a show business foothold for her family's benefit and that Russell Mellini, her former television costar, was helping her.

"Is that what he's doing?" Sara asked. "Sounds like he's mostly helping you escape your responsibilities. What's really going on? You can tell us."

Emily admitted to "communication issues" between herself and Mark, the drama instructor who had taught all three of them at college and had run off with Emily before the end of her senior year.

"Sorry to be blunt, Em," Sara said, "but if he's prowling among his drama students at UCLA, he's just being true to form. He left his first wife for you,

and we all had her for freshman composition. You knew who he was when you married him.”

“Of course I knew, but I’m no Sharon Piluras,” Emily retorted, naming the jilted instructor. “I’m a professional actress, dammit, not a dowdy English teacher.”

Imogene put in, “Marriage can be a real bitch. I supported Steve through law school and beyond, and how did he repay me? Took up with a sexy paralegal at his firm.” She still wasn’t sure how guilty Steve was, but it made a compelling story.

“I’m not surprised,” Emily said. “Your Steve was always kind of a jerk. So how does it feel, Sara, to have a perfect marriage? Imogene and I wouldn’t know.”

“Hold on a second. I never said it was perfect.” Sara’s voice sounded triumphant.

“But what could be better?” Emily persisted. “Your handsome stud of a husband just signed a pricey football contract with a winning team. You’re sure to be wined and dined by politicians . . . maybe even invited to the White House. Meanwhile, the city will transform itself into your own personal movie set.”

“All that might be theoretically true,” Sara said, “but it puts big-time pressure on Jim to have a great season. Football is huge in DC, and winning would open a lot of doors for us. It would grease the moviemaking wheels for sure.”

“I’d bet on Jim being able to handle the pressure,” Imogene said. “He always has.”

“He thrives on it,” Sara agreed, “but he has to stay healthy. That part of it is a crapshoot.”

“So how’s *Deterrence* going?” Emily asked. “Have you started shooting?”

“We’ve done a few exteriors here in DC. Also, the crew is building a sound stage in my basement to serve as an imitation Pentagon office. Jacqueline Jones, our well-known and gorgeous casting director, is sending out audition calls for extras and minor actors to staff up our make-believe military bureaucracy. She’s targeting drama departments at the local universities. It takes an army to make a film, girls, and it’s the first time I’ve had to run things. The

preliminary work alone—editing the script, hunting down financing, casting—is a full-time job.”

“A job that must make you feel like God,” Emily remarked. “It’s gotta be awesome, having the power to reward your most deserving friends and associates with juicy roles.”

“I can’t cast everyone I know,” Sara protested. “That could turn into a . . .”

“A boondoggle,” Emily said. “I heard your fiscal officer use that word just the other day.”

“Leroy called *Deterrence* a boondoggle?” Sara sounded startled.

“He meant potentially.” Imogene rushed to Leroy’s defense. “He was expressing concern about worst-case scenarios. Just doing his job.”

“Yeah, it *is* his job to stress out.” Sara laughed. “From his first day at Peace Enterprises, he’s never stopped predicting our expensive schemes would be the death of him.”

“It could happen,” Emily warned. “He’s overweight, and I’ve seen him sneak into the corridor to smoke cigarettes. What would you do, Sara, if you lost your one voice of reason in the office?”

“I have no intention of losing him,” Sara said, “but he’s not the only advisor warning me against overreach on this project. Just about everyone has.”

“I did, myself,” Imogene said, “in my script analysis.”

“Helene’s soon-to-be ex-husband wrote me a ten-page memo,” Sara said, “and the gist of it is that Helene is in over her head. We don’t know how much of that is sheer sexism. It’s up to us to prove him wrong.”

Imogene exclaimed, “Sounds like you’re putting yourself in the middle of a divorce!”

“I’m not trying to be their relationship counselor, but I *have* urged Helene not to write off Hank’s advice completely just because he’s been a lousy husband.”

“Has he advised paring down the script . . . as I did?” Imogene asked.

“Hank’s not just talking about a few edits. He’s advocating a whole new concept.”

“What does that tell you?” Emily burst out. “The biggest Hollywood hot-shot you know is advising you not to make this boondoggle.”

"On the contrary, he thinks we can make it work without breaking the bank if we shoot it documentary style. The idea would be to combine some of my real-life activities in DC with a fictional narrative, to create a unique hybrid—part reality, part fantasy."

"That sounds . . . fascinating," Imogene said, although she shook her head in confusion.

"Helene, on the other hand, wants *Deterrence* to be gritty and realistic, as the current script calls for," Sara continued. "She insists the violent showdown on the National Mall, between the youth army and the U.S. military, should be shot in real time with a minimum of special effects—fake blood, of course, but everything else as genuine as possible. Hank says that'd be prohibitively expensive and impractical. Not to mention the lawsuits we could be facing if anybody got seriously hurt."

"Sounds like Hank is pushing another sci-fi war," Emily pointed out, "not much different from *Bloody Skies*."

"That was Helene's point at our first story conference," Imogene said. "She seemed determined to move beyond Hank's 'fluff and fantasy' battles."

"What'll you do if it looks like Helene's vision is gonna bankrupt you?" Emily asked. "Fire her and rehire Hank as director?"

"No way," Sara insisted. "I consider this a feminist project. It's up to Helene and me to manage it. Her vision is my vision."

"I gotta say, I admire you for having the guts to take risks," Imogene said, "when it'd be much safer to stick to the *Bloody Skies* model."

"It's a proven model, Sara," Emily said. "You could always throw your husband and a few of his stud teammates up on the big screen like before. Nobody makes a more impressive hero-warrior than Big Jim, with the rippling muscles."

"You got that right," Sara said, "but Jim and I didn't make this move south just to spin our wheels. We want to be innovators in the industry. For now, though, Jim's true calling is football star, not matinee idol."

"I hear you," Emily said. "This has been a fascinating discussion, but it's getting late, and I have an acting class to prepare for. So why don't we get down to brass tacks? Sara, your under-employed ex-roomies are sitting around in your abandoned condo, wondering what you can do for us."

Sara laughed and retorted, “I think you have it reversed. Shouldn’t I be asking what my ex-roomies can do for me?”

“We’re already working for you without any promise of security. I’m singing in one of your house bands, and Imogene . . .” Emily looked at her inquisitively.

“I’ve done PR for you in the past,” Imogene said, “and I’m ready and able to do it again.”

Sara seemed to consider this. “I’m just getting started in a new town, and I plan to staff up gradually,” she said. “I know you both very well, of course, but I still need to think about how I can best utilize your skills. So how’s this? I’ll arrange for both of you to visit me on separate days. We won’t call it an ‘interview,’ just a friendly chat. We’ll discuss my hiring needs, and it’ll give me a chance to show you my new house.”

Imogene and Emily agreed. Sara added, “Keep in mind, I don’t have a real office yet, just a rented suite in Alexandria, Virginia. I need enough space to accommodate my various Hollywood connections whenever they choose to drop by. That means any permanent jobs with Peace Enterprises South will revolve around their needs and supporting my DC-based movie.”

Sara ended the discussion by scheduling appointments with each of her ex-roommates for the following week. After Sara hung up, Imogene and Emily smiled at each other tentatively.

“You’re going first, so maybe you can warn me about any pitfalls,” Imogene ventured. She thought Emily recoiled a little, as if the two of them were now competitors.

CHAPTER 8



IMOGENE COULD ONLY tread water in New York for a week as she awaited her interview with Sara. She sat at the front desk during the day, reading newspapers to pass the time, since the phone rang less often than it used to. Gus and Janie were away on their upstate trip. Leroy came by occasionally to say hi but didn't linger.

One early evening, reflecting on the lonely prospect of the condo upstairs, Imogene gave way to an impulse and called Steve at his office. He seemed startled but ultimately glad to hear from her. She accepted his invitation to dinner out, acknowledging that she was on a tight budget. They had a relaxed evening, chatting about their respective careers. Steve wished her luck with the upcoming interview.

"You know just how to flatter Sara," he said. "I'd advise you to pour it on good."

"Shouldn't Sara be hiring people who will tell her the unvarnished truth?" Imogene asked.

"She'll have enough of those. She needs you to be her friend and sounding board."

On a Tuesday, the day before her trip south, Imogene went to Penn Station at noon to make her travel arrangements. She decided at the window to purchase a one-way ticket to Washington, reflecting that her goal was not to return. She also arranged to rent a car at Union Station, wondering if she could trust herself to find Sara's house in the northern Virginia suburbs. Her sense of direction had always been suspect.

The phone was ringing as Imogene rushed back into the office. She snatched it up and panted, "Peace Enterprises. May I help—"

"Cut the crap!" barked a familiar raunchy voice. "You've been letting the phone ring for hours, so obviously you're no help. Guess it's up to me to charge back into town, dragging my songwriting partner behind me, to save the company."

"Jake!" Imogene's heart began thumping. "This is Imogene. I'm sorry about the phone. So it's really true that you and Byron are coming back to the city . . . to recreate the old Peace Enterprises?"

"If it can be recreated. Not that I blame my sister for trying to make it profitable, but the company's original mission was to spread peace and love, and that's been lost. I'm convinced the time has come to stand up to greed. If we conduct our business by and for the people, they'll support it. By the way, I got no problem with you being the permanent receptionist. Incompetence at the front desk fits my business model just fine. I never wanna be accused of doing things by the book."

"I'm not planning on staying," Imogene said. "I'm leaving for DC tomorrow. If all goes well, I'll be working for Sara there."

She felt a surprising reluctance as she spoke. Would she consider sticking around headquarters just for the chance to be close to Jake again? Her aroused senses told her yes, while her logical mind shouted that this would be professional suicide.

"Your choice, of course," Jake said. "I'm not out to trash Sara, even if she does attract too many sycophants who tell her how great she is. You need to guard against that."

"I know," Imogene admitted.

"You have to ask yourself: would you sell your soul to be included in her epic movie?"

"That's not what I'm doing," Imogene protested. "I've got a movie of my own to sell. Not that *Nondescripts* is in the same league as *Deterrence*."

"If you believe in it, don't undersell it. Try making it into a musical, and I might find it intriguing myself. Sorry, I gotta cut this short . . . some woman

is pestering me as usual. I'm living in a damned harem." Jake hung up, leaving Imogene both excited and confused. She could never tell how much he remembered or cared about their past fling.

Imogene, equipped with an accordion folder containing her latest draft of *The Nondescripts* and her evaluation of *Deterrence*, caught an early-morning train from Penn Station to Union Station in Washington, arriving shortly before noon. At the car-rental desk, she received the keys to a shiny, almost new Ford Pinto and requested a map of the area. She sat down at a café table with a cup of coffee and studied it as she gulped nervously.

Feeling too confused even to see her way to the Virginia state line, Imogene located a pay phone and called Sara's home number. The cheery nanny, Yvette, greeted her. "Mr. and Mrs. Guthrie should both be home by six. They're looking forward to seeing you, and they're expecting you for dinner."

"That'll be great," Imogene said, "if I can just find the place. I've rented a car, but I get lost so easily when I drive. Can you direct me to McLean?"

Yvette gave her directions, which she tried to memorize. Once she got into the car, she sweated and gripped the wheel as she navigated the DC streets in their seemingly illogical sequence . . . First Street, then Louisiana Avenue, then D Street. Once she had found the exit to George Washington Memorial Parkway and had crossed the bridge into Virginia, she breathed easier. Merging onto Virginia 123 wasn't difficult in this pre-rush hour.

As Imogene hit the gas pedal harder, the engine sputtered and then failed. She barely had enough momentum to pull over to the emergency lane. She put on the hazard lights and burst into tears. Drivers whizzed by without stopping to help, and there was not a police cruiser in sight.

"Why do I even try to do anything adventurous?" she wailed, pounding the steering wheel. "I always screw it up. I'll probably die out here, and Mom and Dad will say they told me so. They'll say I should've never left the farm or at least should've stayed with Steve. Being unhappily married wasn't so bad . . . at least it was safe. Why'd I ever leave my first job? Typing and fetching coffee were just my speed."

Listening to herself, she straightened up in the driver's seat. *Don't be such a childish wimp. Self-pity won't get you anywhere. This is just a small setback, the first of many challenges. You can handle it.*

Imogene pulled the car manual out of the glove compartment and flipped through it until she hit on a possible diagnosis. She must have flooded the engine by driving too fast in the wrong gear. If she were patient and restrained herself from touching the ignition key for at least fifteen minutes, she might be able to restart the car.

She filled the time by reading the manual, as her nerves jangled and her heart pounded. Then she tried the ignition, and the engine roared back to life. She eased onto the road and proceeded on her way, so cautiously that a driver honked behind her. She couldn't resist giving him the finger but otherwise ignored all distractions as she kept her eyes peeled for the McLean exit.

"I'm in business now," she exulted as she slipped down the exit and approached the high-end community. Her heart rate settled down when she spotted one of the landmarks that Yvette had mentioned—Turkey Run Farm.

She drove through the town center of McLean, searching for Brook Road as instructed. As she left the town proper without finding it, confusion began to descend again. She had expected to come upon a somewhat rural road sporting a cluster of mansions. She knew she was not supposed to turn down Chain Bridge Road, as that would take her away from McLean, yet she saw no alternative.

"This can't be happening," she moaned, almost succumbing to tears again. "How stupid can you get?" She was either headed back to DC, she figured, or going around in circles. At least she hadn't wrecked the car. *That'll be next*, she thought, *if I don't calm down.*

Spotting a shopping center, Imogene pulled into it. She located the security office and found a young police officer sitting behind a desk. "I'm new to this area, and I'm kind of lost," she explained. "Can you direct me to Brook Road?"

She wondered why he looked at her so oddly. *Am I the first citizen he's ever seen wandering around in a state of confusion?*

"You need to get to West McLean," he said. "What address are you looking for?"

When Imogene told him, he furrowed his brow and said, "I know that place. It's the Guthries' new residence. What business do you have there?"

"They're friends of mine," Imogene said. "I was invited."

"Oh yeah? We've heard that before."

"Sara Murphy—Mrs. Jim Guthrie—was my college roommate," Imogene said, her voice rising. "She's now my employer. I've got a meeting scheduled with her."

An older officer emerged from the inner office. "What seems to be the trouble, miss?"

Imogene explained and then gestured toward the phone on the desk. "If you don't believe me, just let me call the house. I already spoke to the nanny today. She'll tell you I'm expected."

"Look, miss," the older man said, "you need to be aware that the Guthries have complained about harassment."

"Who's been harassing them?" Imogene asked.

The younger man glanced at his superior, who said, "Might as well go ahead and tell her. It's been in the news."

"The day of Jim Guthrie's contract-signing ceremony at Redskins Park," the officer explained, "a crowd of media types and fans camped out on their lawn and were waiting when they returned home. Guthrie grabbed a shotgun out of his van and started waving it. He yelled for everybody to get off his lawn and never come back without an express invitation. The crowd scattered, but a news camera was rolling, and the incident got a lot of press. The next day, Guthrie apologized and said he was just kidding around."

"I knew Jim owned firearms," Imogene said. "He and my husband have hunted together." She paused and then asked, "Is he in any legal trouble over it?"

"Probably not," the older officer said, "as long as it's an isolated incident. Look, we'll direct you to the Guthries' place. But if you're not as welcome as you claim to be, don't say we didn't warn you."

Imogene found her way to West McLean, but her misadventures continued. She felt self-conscious to be driving in a halting manner through this

neighborhood. She couldn't make out house numbers across the expansive lawns and saw no opportunity to pull over and ask directions. How would she recognize the Guthries' house?

Having explored most of West McLean, she was beginning to wonder if there was a Far West McLean, when a car honked behind her. She barely restrained herself from thrusting up her middle finger. The driver persisted, and Imogene looked back to see a woman in a new-looking convertible, sporting sunglasses like a movie star, her dark hair streaming out.

"Oh my God," Imogene said, relief flooding over her, "it's Sara!"

Imogene bore right, and Sara pulled up on her left, shouting, "You lost or something?"

"I've been wandering around for hours!" Imogene shouted back.

"Poor dear." Sara laughed. "You were lost, but now you're found. Follow me."

Imogene trailed the shiny red car down a road that led farther west. They arrived at an enclave of four houses, situated at the edge of a lush patch of woods. The Guthries' place was not as ornate as some of the mansions Imogene had glimpsed in McLean proper, but Sara had explained that its relative privacy was a selling point. The garage where Imogene parked the rental car alongside the convertible was spacious enough for three vehicles.

"We have a cozy football community here," Sara told her, "with two of Jim's teammates and their families as our closest neighbors. Wendell Cushing, the place kicker, lives next door and Brian Ambrose, the quarterback, one door farther down. I'm already quite chummy with their wives, Beverly and Pamela, and they conveniently have kids Laraine's age."

"It sounds perfect," Imogene said. *A trio of football wives*, she reflected, *in place of the old roommate trio. I wonder if they get along better than we did.*

"Laraine's on a play date," Sara continued as she unlocked the front door and escorted Imogene inside, "and Jim's working out at Redskins Park. They'll both be home soon. Yvette here has been heroically holding down the fort, wearing both the nanny and housekeeper hats until I can bring in more staff. I've asked Mrs. Jones if she'd be willing to relocate, and she's considering it."

Yvette grimaced at the mention of her old nemesis but smiled at Imogene and asked if she'd enjoyed her trip. "'Enjoy' isn't quite the word for it," Imogene

replied and then burst out in giggles from the strain of the past several hours. "Your instructions were perfectly fine, but with my sense of direction, it's a wonder I'm not halfway to Florida by now."

Once Sara and Imogene had settled down in Sara's study for their meeting, each with a steaming cup of coffee, Imogene found herself relaxing. One advantage of having come through a perilous journey, she thought, was that it made the subsequent interview seem easy by comparison. She was well prepared when Sara asked what she had been doing. She reached into her accordion folder and pulled out her evaluation of *Deterrence* and her own screenplay.

"You haven't been idle, that's for sure," Sara said, glancing at the impressive mound of paper. "I appreciate that, but as I told Emily the other day, I don't have a real office yet, much less conventional jobs for either of you. My new operation is, as they say, fluid."

"I like it that way," Imogene said, her pulse quickening. "It makes everything an adventure."

"All I could offer Emily was a chance to catch on as a singer with Stuyvesant, or in some acting role. Your situation is different, of course, since you're not a performer. You need a desk and a phone to do your thing."

Did this mean Emily's prospects were better than hers? She protested, "I could find a way to do publicity for you, with or without a desk and phone."

"I'm sure you could." Sara's smile reassured Imogene. "Emily couldn't do publicity for me; she's way too envious. You always understood me better than she did, even back when we were roomies. That's why I'd like to revisit the idea I proposed a while back, that you move in here for a couple of months. We could sort of relive our senior year, especially the time when you were working on your honors thesis about the Sunburst. And then, conveniently for you, we took that road trip to New York to collect the band and bring it back to campus for Homecoming weekend. You'd be hanging out with me again, chronicling my life and counteracting the inevitable bad press that comes to anyone who dares to shake things up."

"It sounds like just the life change I'm looking for." Imogene felt no need to restrain her excitement.

"I like your enthusiasm, but be forewarned. I'm a person who attracts controversy, without even trying."

"I'm qualified to handle it," Imogene said, "since I've known and admired you longer than just about anybody." She hoped that didn't sound too sycophantic.

"First and foremost," Sara said, "we need to figure out what's going on with Jake. He's been a loose cannon lately. You've always had a knack for talking to him."

"We spoke just recently," Imogene said, "while I was covering the front desk at headquarters."

"Did he say anything nasty about me?"

Imogene repeated as many of Jake's rapid-fire ideas and accusations as she could remember. He had vaguely supported the contention that Sara had stolen her movie idea from either him or her own PR office. He had revived his long-standing grievance about the transformations Sara had brought to Peace Enterprises during the five years his back had been turned. Now that she had decamped to DC, he had a notion of returning to headquarters with Byron in tow and restoring the peace-and-love carnival atmosphere it once had.

"I know he's made that threat before," Imogene added, "but maybe the communal life upstate really is wearing thin. He complained about living in a harem."

"He used to love that." Sara laughed. "I guess the poor boy is exhausted. Still, I know the office would bore him to death, just as it did before. I'd give him a week behind a desk at headquarters before he started screaming bloody murder. He's the antithesis of a competent businessman—hates losing money but thinks the process of making it is immoral."

After musing for a few moments, she shrugged and added, "He can blow up the office, for all I care, as long as he and Byron fulfill the bigger plan. Just picture a reunion concert with the two of them on the National Mall, at the climax of *Deterrence*. Mind-blowing, right? Of course, we have to convince not only the two musicians but also the politicians in DC who control access to public places."

Sara talked on, proposing much the same solution to every problem. She seemed to think she could neutralize many of the troublesome people in her

path by offering them movie roles. Since the *Deterrence* script was continuing to evolve, anything seemed plausible. The prospective cast was ballooning before Imogene's eyes.

Sara explained the hybrid method she and Helene had concocted, which had already been set in motion. Film crews had recorded sequences from Sara's daily life, striving for spontaneity, while scripted scenes had been shot in the imitation Pentagon office downstairs. More shooting was planned around upcoming special events in town. Imogene was beginning to think she might wander into the movie herself, if only by "accident." She couldn't be the only person who entertained such an idea. Maybe that was one of Yvette's motives for working double shifts at the house.

"We've got tentative plans for the newly constituted Amorphous, fronted by Sherri, our lovely publicist-turned-singer," Sara continued. "If the band keeps improving, we might give them the warm-up slot before Jake and Byron's performance on the Mall. I'm looking for ways to compensate for my screw-up at the Martin Luther King celebration last winter, when I accidentally offended the all-powerful Reverend Christopher Strickland and many of his constituents. I realize now it was bad form to present Amorphous as an all-white band at a soul concert. Maybe I could appease the reverend further by casting him as the MC for the Mall concert."

Just as Imogene was beginning to sense the interview was winding down, Sara knocked her off-balance by observing, "You seem to be cozying up to Emily lately. Did she fill you in about our meeting the other day?"

"No, I haven't seen her at all this week," Imogene replied.

"I only bring it up," Sara said, "to remind you of her deviousness. I got the distinct impression she was trying to drive a wedge between you and me by bringing up your screenplay, which supposedly has a starring role for her. I'm fine with that, as long as it's understood that *Deterrence* is the current project under production at Peace Enterprises. I trust your loyalty, Imogene, and I want to go on encouraging your creativity, but our priorities must be established from the start."

"Of course," Imogene responded in a hearty voice, while her heart sank a little. She added, "I don't think Emily meant to be devious in this case. She understands the priorities of the company as well as I do."

Imogene couldn't help thinking, *Sara's guilty of a little deviousness herself. She's trying to prevent Emily and me from bonding over an alternate project.* She cut off this train of thought, realizing it was in her best interest to plant herself firmly in Sara's corner.

By mid-October 1988, the football season was in full swing, and Washington was aglow with Redskins fever. The team was mowing down its opponents, looking like a juggernaut behind the dazzling performances of quarterback Brian Ambrose, wide receiver Geoffrey Starrett, and newly acquired running back Jim Guthrie. All the local sports pundits declared that Guthrie had turned out to be a "steal" from the Giants.

Imogene had settled into her job and her temporary home with the Guthries, who treated her like family. She and Sara commuted daily to a rented office suite in a glassy Alexandria building, a forty-minute drive from the house if traffic was favorable. It was just the two of them during these early weeks, so Imogene answered all phone calls, declaring herself whenever possible to be the publicist in residence, not the receptionist.

Six weeks into the job, she felt she had earned the more exalted title. She sat comfortably behind a desk, giving general answers to inquiries from the press about the Guthries' daily activities, the move to DC, and the movie in production. Sara had counseled her to stick to a few upbeat stock phrases, and it was easy to get away with this as long as Jim and Sara were the uncontested toast of the town.

One morning, Imogene took a call from a woman who identified herself as Pauline Perros, a features reporter for the *Washington Post*. "May I please speak to Sherri Johnson?" she demanded.

"Ms. Johnson doesn't work in this office," Imogene said. "She's on another assignment. I'm the publicist here."

"Sherri's not there? Then may I please speak to Janie Wilson? I believe she was my last contact at Peace Enterprises."

"Ms. Wilson doesn't work here, either." Imogene suppressed a surge of irritation and repeated, "I'm the publicist in the Washington office. Imogene Wittier is the name."

"Sounds like quite a revolving door. Who's holding down the fort in New York?"

"I'm not sure anybody is." Imogene saw no need to prevaricate. "I'm the person you want, Ms. Perros."

"Then maybe you can comment on reports that Sara plans to acquire additional space in her Alexandria office building to erect a movie sound stage. I also hear that the nonprofit organization currently occupying that space will be evicted to make room for the expansion."

Imogene was dumbstruck for a moment. Then she managed, "I've heard of no such plan."

"Then you're denying it?"

"I'm saying it's not an accurate report," Imogene replied, more firmly. If it turned out to be true, she'd think of a way to spin it.

To Imogene's relief, Ms. Perros moved on to a topic that was controversial but familiar to her. "The day Jim Guthrie signed his contract with the Redskins, he brandished a shotgun to scatter the reporters and fans who had camped on his lawn. Is this sort of behavior typical of him?"

"Of course not," Imogene replied. "Most people realize by now that Jim was just having some fun. The Guthries' relationship with the press is perfectly cordial, and the fans love Jim."

"Does he have a stash of guns?" Ms. Perros inquired.

"I don't know if it's a stash," Imogene said. "I know he has an interest in recreational hunting, as many football players do."

"Does his wife share his interest in guns?"

Imogene hesitated. She remembered Sara describing the shooting lessons Jim had insisted on giving her, for her own protection. "I haven't discussed that with Sara," she replied.

Ms. Perros moved on swiftly. "I hear the Guthries' relationship with Sara's brother, Jake Murphy, has been particularly tense lately. Is that due more to business or artistic conflicts?"

"I'm not aware of any conflicts," Imogene said, keeping her voice bland.

"Aren't there major differences of opinion about the movie currently being shot in DC, as well as the general direction of Peace Enterprises?"

Imogene intoned, "There are many issues yet to be decided about both the film and the direction of the company."

"My previous sources told me that Sara has been accused of incorporating other people's ideas into her new movie without crediting them. Can you confirm that as well?"

"Certainly not." Imogene determined to squelch her predecessors here and now. "Ms. Perros, I'd advise you to move past any rumors and accusations that were previously generated in New York. Come to me for the facts. I'm here in Washington, DC."

During the autumn months, Sara included Imogene in a social life that revolved around football. They both participated in an informal club established by the Redskins wives to support their men. Riding the crest of what was shaping up to be a victorious season, the women sat together in their own section at home games. Each weekend when the team was on the road, the group met at a different member's house to watch the game on television and share a potluck meal. While the club was theoretically open to all Redskins wives, it consisted of a dozen or so core members. Sara confided to Imogene her belief that the group was too insular and needed shaking up.

As the two women drove home from the office one evening in early November, Sara outlined her plans for the following Sunday, when she would host the watch party for a game that started at 4:00 p.m. With the help of the team's PR office, she had extended special invitations to wives who ordinarily didn't attend. "It doesn't seem right that the Redskins are a majority black team, and our group is lily white," she explained. "If I can manage it, the ladies in my crowd will begin to embrace diversity."

They would also embrace a fleeting chance at a wider spotlight. The *Deterrence* cameras would be rolling, transforming the Guthries' living room into a movie set. As legally required, the potential participants had been warned in advance that they might be captured on film. Not one had objected.

To add star power, Sara had invited Reverend Christopher Strickland to drop by to say grace and offer his blessings on the team's probable Super Bowl run. Since the Reverend's public prayers generally turned into political events, Sara and Helene Frisk hoped he would deliver an oration worthy of inclusion in the movie.

“We want to keep this scene as spontaneous as possible, so Helene says she’ll resist any impulse to direct it. The plan is to capture the reverend in his unscripted, natural glory. The reactions to his speech will also be as natural as possible—mine included, since I have no clue what he plans to say.”

“How, exactly, does the reverend fit into the movie narrative?” Imogene asked.

“He speaks truth to power without mincing words, which could make him both an inspiration and a torment for my character, Secretary of Defense Eleanor McIntyre. By the way, all of her friends, and some of her enemies, call her Elsie. We’re not planning a direct confrontation between the two of them on Sunday, but you never know. His mere presence should be enough to shake up my social circle—that is, Elsie’s social circle.”

The magnitude of the event grew as the press got wind of it. Imogene kept repeating, during the many calls she took in the office, that it was an invitation-only brunch like all the other Redskins wives’ weekly meet-ups. One reporter joked, “Since Jim Guthrie’s on the road that day, will Mrs. Guthrie be the one warning off intruders like us with a shotgun?”

Imogene laughed and replied, “Not unless she has to.”

Despite Imogene’s efforts to downplay it, Sara’s brunch was breaking new ground in DC society. A contingent of black wives would be present for the first time. Sara’s former housekeeper, Mrs. Jones, finally accepted Sara’s standing job offer, showing up at midweek to help with the preparations. “You’ve saved my life,” Sara told her in a show of effusiveness that seemed to ruffle Yvette, who had been running the show since the move to Virginia.

“I hope to God those two will get along better in a larger space,” Sara told Imogene privately. “I soothed Yvette’s feelings by explaining that her main duty on Sunday won’t involve waiting on the adults but overseeing Laraine and the other kids in attendance. They’ll be having a separate party in the playroom downstairs.”

Sara was also planning an in-house halftime show. The band Amorphous, with Sherri as lead singer, would play an acoustic set. Assuming this performance might get into the movie, Imogene figured it was bound to raise Amorphous’s stock well over Stuyvesant’s.

As Sara enumerated cleaning and cooking chores to be done in advance of the event, Imogene offered to pitch in. She felt obligated to do so, although volunteering to be part of the housekeeping team made her uncomfortable.

"I've conferred with Mrs. Strickland," Sara continued, "and she says the best way to keep the reverend in good form for an afternoon event is to ply him with chocolate chip cookies and coffee. Those have been the fuel for many dynamic sermons, she says. Only trouble is, when am I gonna have time to bake cookies? Heaven forbid we serve the reverend anything store bought."

"I can help with that," Imogene piped up. "Chocolate chip cookies are my baking specialty. Steve used to love them."

"Thanks, dear; that'd be terrific!" Sara exclaimed. "By the way, my neighbors and best buddies on the team, Pam Ambrose and Beverly Cushing, have promised to come over Saturday to help set things up. So rest assured, you won't be left alone in the kitchen to drown in cookie batter."

With this news, Imogene decided there was no danger of being treated like a servant. Pam and Bev would add glamour to the preparations.

"They're both fabulous women," Sara explained, "although they couldn't be more different. Pamela, being the wife of the starting quarterback, is our natural leader. She knows more football than the rest of us put together, and she critiques the team and everybody around it constantly. Beverly is the opposite, a peacemaking type. She's also quite religious. Bev and her husband organize the team's Bible studies, which is something Jim and I have politely avoided so far. Despite all that, the three of us are pretty tight."

Sara paused and then added, "I hope we can keep it that way."

CHAPTER 9



IN PREPARATION FOR the watch party on Sunday, Sara and Imogene began serious grocery shopping on Thursday evening, stopping at the market on their way home. Imogene loaded up on enough flour, white and brown sugar, eggs, and chocolate chips to bake dozens of cookies. Sara bought chicken wings and several bags of precooked vegetables to be served on platters. Their haul included plenty of ice for the coolers that would contain soft drinks and beer.

All day Friday in the office, Imogene continued to answer press inquiries, by now a routine chore. Toward the end of the day, she picked up the phone and heard a voice drawl, “Afternoon, ma’am. This is Reverend James Randall of Southwest Virginia Ministries. Perhaps you’ve heard of my movement? Without intending to brag, I can tell you that its influence reaches far beyond its home base.”

“I can’t quite place it,” Imogene admitted, although the name sounded familiar. “I’m new to this area.”

“Do I understand correctly that the event Mrs. Guthrie is hosting on Sunday will have a minister in attendance?”

“Yes, Reverend Christopher Strickland will be there,” Imogene replied.

“I know Reverend Strickland well and respect him immensely,” Randall said. “He’s a dynamic speaker and a sincere man of the cloth, but I must say, he approaches his ministry from an extreme left-wing perspective. My concern is that the upcoming gathering, with its political implications, lacks representation from another Christian perspective—and what I mean is, a truly Bible-based one.”

“That’s not really an issue,” Imogene said. “Some of the Redskins and their wives do hold regular Bible studies, but Sunday’s event is simply the usual game-day brunch. Reverend Strickland will give a blessing, not a speech.”

“Beg pardon, but I hardly see how you can pass it off as just another brunch when it’s set up to be part of a movie—a movie with a liberal antiwar message, I’m told. It seems to me that another important message is in danger of being overlooked. And that is, true Christians have no reason to fear war, even nuclear war. If the whole world and everybody in it is incinerated, they’ll be saved.”

Imogene fumbled for a response. Randall added, “I’ve taken up enough of your time, ma’am, but if you’ll be so kind, please pass my thoughts on to Mrs. Guthrie.”

“I’ll do that,” Imogene promised.

On Saturday morning, Jim left for the road trip to Dallas. Imogene watched as Sara kissed him dramatically at the door, which seemed to underscore the importance of the game against the Redskins’ bitter rival.

Imogene was hard at work mixing cookie batter when Sara escorted Pamela and Beverly into the kitchen to introduce them. They were both attractive blondes—typical ex-cheerleaders, Imogene surmised, but, as Sara had explained, a study in contrasts. Pamela was sharp-elbowed and sharp-chinned, with a rather tense smile, while Beverly seemed softer around the edges and a bit more matronly. Both had two children, who had come along to play with Laraine downstairs. They had brought platters with an assortment of cold cuts, rolls, and deviled eggs, which they stored in the refrigerator.

“Oh honey, that looks like hard work!” Beverly exclaimed to Imogene. “Let me help.” Imogene gladly let her take a turn with the flour sifter.

Sara, sporting a mischievous smile, prompted, “Imogene, why don’t you tell the girls about your fascinating conversation with Reverend James Randall?”

“You talked to Reverend Randall?” Beverly asked, her mild Virginia drawl echoing his. “He’s absolutely one of my heroes. I’d love to meet him myself.”

When Imogene related the reverend’s pronouncement about nuclear war, Pamela rolled her eyes at Beverly, and Sara laughed. She evidently enjoyed driving small wedges between her two friends.

“Well, Bev,” Pamela said, “I’m just thankful we have you and Wendell running our prayer circle. It’ll be a comfort on that glorious day when all

the heathens are incinerated. I've never doubted the two of you are in closer touch with God than the rest of us. What better proof could we have than Wendell's amazing consecutive field goal streak? There's something uncanny about that."

"I've told you time and time again, Pam," Beverly replied, "Wendell and I are nothing special. Anybody can get close to God by opening their hearts. He's always there when we need Him . . . and miracles do happen."

"I still say it helps to have ultra-godly people around in a pinch," Pamela insisted. "Sara, when are you and Jim gonna join the circle? It could be good for Jim's career, you know. The head coach pops in all the time."

"Surely you're not suggesting that's the main draw?" Sara exclaimed in a teasing tone. "To cozy up to the devout Coach McLahan?"

Both of her friends denied that, Pamela rather sharply and Beverly with gentle chiding. "To be honest, girls," Sara continued, "life has made me cynical rather than spiritual. My childhood was so troubled, I guess I never developed that simple naïve faith that everything is for the best."

"You just need to trust that God has a plan for your life," Beverly pleaded. "Let go of that darkness in the past. Lay it all before the Lord."

"I might prefer to lay it all before the public," Sara said. "Imogene, here, is my new publicist. Her job is to chronicle my life for popular consumption—the good, the bad, and everything in-between. How would you say that's going so far, Imogene?"

Sara winked at Imogene, giving her a pleasant jolt. "It's going well," she said. "There's certainly enough material, every day. That's why I call it a live memoir." She thought Pamela and Beverly regarded her with more interest after hearing her mission defined.

The women continued their preparations in the spacious kitchen, while Yvette and Mrs. Jones bustled about in the living and dining rooms, cleaning and setting up the serving area. "Do those two get along?" Pamela asked Sara in a discreet voice, sounding to Imogene like a rich matron discussing the "servant problem."

"Well enough to work together," Sara replied, "most of the time. They get their jobs done, and they both love Laraine, so why should I worry?"

“Oh, no reason.” Pamela grimaced toward the living room. “Just keep your eye on that girl, especially when Jim is around. There’s something about young nannies and football stars. Trust me, they’re a lethal combination.”

“Yvette’s always been an absolute gem,” Sara protested. “Are you speaking from experience?”

“Oh honey.” Beverly seemed to choke on the idea of infidelity. “I don’t believe Brian’s little flirtations mean anything.”

“Whether they do or not,” Pamela replied, “I don’t intend to put up with them. I’ve had to fire one nanny already. Just a word of warning.”

Later, the women discussed the guest list for the brunch, focusing on the first-time invitees. Pamela remarked, “Danielle Starrett, Geoffrey’s wife, is some kind of a diva. I saw an interview she gave on the news a few weeks back. She obviously thinks her hubby isn’t getting the attention he deserves.”

“Her hubby’s the top wide receiver on the best team in the league,” Sara protested. “He’s a big star. What more does she want?”

“I guess she’s miffed that Brian and Jim get more press than Geoffrey,” Pamela said, “Brian being the quarterback, and Jim the newest sensation in town.”

“And Wendell’s field goal streak has everyone talking, too,” Beverly reminded them.

“What’s she implying?” Sara asked. “That it’s a racial thing?”

“Oh, she never says that in so many words.” Beverly sounded testy for the first time. “She doesn’t have to. Anyone as gorgeous as her gets attention every time she opens her mouth.”

“I’m looking forward to meeting her,” Sara said. “Maybe all she needs is a good pep talk. A winning team should take precedence over everything else, right? We all know football’s not a sport of individual stars, or shouldn’t be. The collective goal is to win the Super Bowl.”

Pamela emitted a harsh laugh. “Who’s being naïve now?”

That evening, after Pamela, Beverly, and their kids had left, Helene Frisk arrived with her crew to begin transforming the living room into a movie set. She alternately cajoled and barked orders at her technicians, pausing to explain

to Sara her plan, or lack of plan, for the next day. “Controlled chaos will be the theme,” she declared. “I’ve banned my chief cinematographer—affectionately known as Hotshot Charlie—from the set tomorrow. Charlie’s great, don’t get me wrong, but he’s *so* determined to do everything by the book. All I’ll need is my two cameramen, who’re both familiar with documentary techniques. They’ll film anything that looks the least bit cinematic, whether it fits the script or not.”

At Sara’s suggestion, Imogene passed around a batch of her cookies and glowed with pride as everyone in the crew pronounced them delectable. “I guess they passed their first taste test,” Sara said, winking at Imogene. She added to Helene, “They were specially ordered for Reverend Strickland. Reportedly his favorite snack.”

“Well done,” Helene said with an approving nod, as if it had been Imogene’s own idea. *Maybe the cookies will get into the movie, she thought, even if I don’t.*

After the technicians had finished upstairs, they moved downstairs to the recreation area, which contained Laraine’s playroom on one side and the imitation Pentagon office on the other. To test the cameras and microphones, they filmed the three-year-old sitting at the ornate desk, hamming it up in an imaginary telephone conversation. “Talk about a budding starlet,” Sara observed.

By early afternoon the next day, a slow-building “controlled chaos” had enveloped the Guthrie home. The wives arrived in small groups or individually, carrying their potluck contributions. They gathered around the wide-screen TV in the living room, some sitting on the long couch and others on floor cushions, chatting and munching hors d’oeuvres. As game time approached, the presence of the cameras, and a larger, more diverse crowd than usual, signaled that this was to be a wives’ gathering to remember. The women who were new to the group introduced themselves to the others and mingled somewhat awkwardly.

One of them, the wife of a defensive lineman, noted that Danielle Starrett had yet to appear. “I’ll bet she’s planning a dramatic entrance.”

“Yeah, a Danielle-type entrance,” another woman agreed.

The fifteen or so small children who'd been brought to the event seemed to flummox Helene. She ordered Yvette and Mrs. Jones to corral them, remove them from the set, and make sure they were confined to the playroom.

"But I want to be in the movie!" Laraine protested, and several high-pitched voices seconded hers.

"Sorry, sweetie," Sara told her daughter, "but that wouldn't fit into the story. I'm playing a character, Elsie, who's a big shot in the government but doesn't have a child. She isn't even married yet."

That's gotta be traumatic for a kid, Imogene thought. *Her mom's pretending she doesn't exist.* She watched Laraine pout for a moment and then nod thoughtfully and accompany the other children downstairs. *Already a child of showbiz. I guess she'll be okay.*

Twenty minutes before kickoff, Reverend Strickland burst in with his wife and an aide who seemed to be doubling as a bodyguard. The cameras whirled as he greeted all the women in the room. Those he didn't know received handshakes, while several whom he recognized from his congregation got a kiss on the cheek. *More politician than minister,* Imogene surmised, *at least today.*

The Stricklands took places that opened for them at the center of the couch, while the aide hovered nearby, never sitting down. "Let's get the reverend some coffee and cookies so he can get revved up for his speech," Helene ordered.

Since both Yvette and Mrs. Jones were downstairs attending to the children, Sara grabbed the coffee tray herself and moved toward the couple. "Imogene, why don't you bring the cookies?" she ordered.

Wow, a chance to get into camera range! Imogene jumped up from her floor seat, moved to the buffet table, and grabbed a plateful of cookies. As she approached the reverend, she tripped over a chord attached to a strobe light and went sprawling. Her face planted in the serving plate, she struggled to save the cookies from tumbling onto the carpet.

Laughter burst out all around. The reverend himself helped her to her feet and took the plate. "You saved the day," he told her. "These look too good to be wasted." Imogene reseated herself, her face flaming, unsure whether she had created a memorable scene or embarrassed herself beyond redemption.

Strickland devoured a cookie, took a long gulp of coffee, and rose to his feet. He began by thanking the hostess, complimenting the “dazzling” company he had been privileged to join today, and congratulating the wives on the Redskins’ recent success. Then he turned his attention to Sara. He addressed her in character as Elsie McIntyre, Secretary of Defense, a weekend friend and supporter of the Redskins. As he inserted himself into the plot of *Deterrence*, he embellished the few facts he apparently knew about the story in his own way.

“It’s both encouraging and eye-opening to find a high government official at a hen party like this.” He smiled teasingly at the women. “A winning football team can be a catalyst for bringing a diverse community together. That very phenomenon is unfolding before us now in this sparkling group. We see fans, players’ families, and VIPs uniting to celebrate a joyous occasion.

“Still, we can’t deny there’s a current of tension in the room. We can all feel it . . . a sense of crisis hovering over us, threatening to erupt. The upcoming game is at best a distraction from your weighty duties, Madame Secretary. You could be called away at any moment to attend to unfolding events that have the potential to shatter our lives.”

The reverend enumerated various crises that he perceived on the horizon, all of which dwarfed the game in importance. He continued in this vein until he caught sight of a late arrival. A striking black woman, whom Imogene was sure must be Danielle Starrett, posed in the doorway, cradling a large bowl. She had been listening to his speech with a lifted brow.

“Won’t you join us?” Strickland grinned at Danielle as his wife rolled her eyes. She seemed to acknowledge, without rancor, his appreciation for young beauties.

“So sorry to be late,” Danielle said in a silky voice, handing her potluck offering to Sara. “Vegetable soup,” she told the hostess. “You’ll need to serve it right away, before it gets cold, or it’ll be ruined.”

“We can’t let that happen, can we?” Sara gave Danielle a welcoming smile. “I’ll take care of this. Make yourself at home.”

Sara’s friends Beverly and Pamela jumped to her assistance. They brought a stack of small bowls from the kitchen, ladled the steaming mixture into them, and passed them around. Danielle seated herself to Strickland’s left.

"I *so* wanted to get here in time to hear you speak, Reverend," she told him, "but I might've known the babysitter would be late, and the car wouldn't start. Real-world problems, Chris, as opposed to movie problems."

"You can rest assured I understand real-world problems, my dear," Strickland said as he tasted the soup. "Delectable," he pronounced.

"So what subject is getting you so agitated today?" Danielle asked. "I thought campaigning on a game day was against the rules."

"No campaign speeches or sermons today," Strickland proclaimed. "I'm just here to enjoy the game with good friends."

"Friends?" Danielle said this sharply enough to silence the cross-conversations in the room. All eyes focused on her as she added, "Don't forget, Reverend, I'm in your congregation. You never preach without a purpose. And it's not to make friends."

"She's right," piped up another member of Strickland's congregation. "Your sermons have a way of turning into campaign speeches, Chris. But you never spell out exactly what you're running for. Is it mayor of DC?"

"That ain't good enough," another congregant said with a roar of laughter. "Junk tasks like plowing snow and filling in potholes are beneath our reverend. If I know you, Chris, you got your sights set on first black president of the United States."

"First African American president," Strickland corrected her. "Try to get with the new terminology, ladies."

"If we keep encouraging the reverend," Sara proclaimed with a grin, "maybe he'll announce his candidacy, here and now."

"And what about you . . . Madame Secretary?" Danielle turned her acute gaze on Sara. "Is that really what you're supposed to be? If so, that's an amazing gig you've invented for yourself—a powerful official with no housewife or mommy responsibilities. No wiping runny noses and slaving over a hot stove for you, as long as you stay in character. Instead, you get to plan wars in far-off places. Must be fun."

"Hold on a minute," Sara protested. "Even the Secretary of Defense has everyday problems." She paused, as if trying to remember where Sara left off and Elsie began.

"Some of the wars I fight are personal," she continued. "I didn't come from a rich or stable background, just like many of you didn't. It wasn't until my brother became a rich and famous rock star that we clawed our way to respectability as a family. And he and I have always had our conflicts." She glanced at Helene, who nodded approvingly.

"Speaking of your brother, Elsie," Strickland said, "I have to say he's a theoretical revolutionary. He stirs people's passions with his songs and then retreats into his recording studio or his faraway retreat, or wherever he goes to hide from the real-life consequences."

"Something tells me that's about to change," Sara declared. "In fact, the times are changing for everyone. Soon my brother will have no choice but to come out of hiding and face the music."

"Face the music.' Great line," Helene murmured. She motioned for the main cameraman to zero in on the reverend's response.

"I'll support him," Strickland said, gesticulating, "as long as his revolution embraces us all, with love and without anger. As long as he *owns* the message."

Some of the wives tried to turn their attention to the impending kickoff, but Danielle persisted in needling the reverend. "I know you too well, Chris. You're not only running for office; you're also running *from* something. Just as I am."

She tossed her carefully coiffed page-boy haircut and continued, "I'm just like you in a way . . . a one-time exotic dancer who turned herself into a model and hit the big time by marrying a football star. You're a ghetto kid who made a name for yourself preaching on street corners and managed to build your own church. But who're we fooling? At the core, we're both still outsiders who have to yell to get any attention."

Now she commanded the camera, cutting him off when he tried to respond. "How far do you think that'll get us? Preach your balls off, Reverend, and you'll still be just a black—excuse me—just an African American big-mouth. Go ahead and pretend to run for president of the United States, and I'll pretend my husband can be the toast of the town the way Jim Guthrie and Brian Ambrose are."

"But he can be!" Sara exclaimed. "If Geoffrey shines today—and why shouldn't he?—he *will* be the toast of the town, if only for a week. And if

someone else outshines him, so what? They're a team, and winning is the only goal that matters. It's the same in government, by the way. Everybody *must* pull together."

"Elsie" got the final word. The dialogue subsided as the game got going. The first half went the Redskins' way, and the living room erupted in frequent cheers. The team was known for jumping out to big leads, even against formidable opponents like the Dallas Cowboys.

Strickland's aide reminded him that he and Mrs. Strickland must leave at halftime for another engagement. "Oh please, stay through the break!" Sara exclaimed. "We've got something special planned. Remember the band Amorphous, who performed at the Martin Luther King Day celebration last January? They'll be playing an acoustic set for us today—that is, if they get here in time."

All the wives were in a partying mood as the lead grew to 21–0 and everyone's husband seemed to contribute. Jim Guthrie rushed for one touchdown, Geoffrey Starrett caught one, and Brian Ambrose scored on a quarterback sneak. The defense seemed impregnable. Danielle and Pamela created a photogenic moment by high-fiving one another when their husbands connected for a big play. "Danielle, your guy's got magic hands!" Pamela shouted.

The Amorphous musicians, now just three guitarists plus new lead singer Sherri, arrived as halftime began. Before launching the performance, Sylvan Moore took a long swig of beer, raised the can over his head, and yelled, "Hail to the Redskins and all their sexy women and other kick-ass followers!" Amorphous then played a medley of folk songs, including two associated with the legendary Byron Roberts, impressing Imogene with the band's versatility. They had sounded raucous in the recording studio, bluesy at the Martin Luther King event, and now were rendering the peacenik stuff sincerely, with Sherri to give them their first touch of elegance.

Observing the football wives, and even the Stricklands, singing and clapping to the familiar tunes, Imogene was reminded of the singalongs that used to be popular in her college dorm. *This set by Amorphous might fit* Nondescripts *better than* Deterrence, she couldn't help reflecting. *But who besides me will ever know?*

As halftime wound down, both the Stricklands and Amorphous exited to hearty cheers. Danielle jumped up to shake hands with Sherri and congratulate her on making a “splash.” After the singer departed, Danielle declared to Helene, “That girl is a walking black-chick movie cliché. Don’t you agree?”

Helene chortled and replied, “That was only an audition, but time will tell.”

The second half of the game got off to a rocky start, as the Cowboys scored immediately and thereafter continued to chip away at the Redskins’ lead. There would have been fewer worries if the placekicker, Wendell Cushing, had been his usual perfect self, but his fabulous streak of field goals soon ended with a miss. The other wives consoled Beverly, assuring her that Wendell would immediately begin another streak. Instead, in an unprecedented display of nerves, he missed his next two kicks.

At the beginning of the fourth quarter, the score was tied at 21–21, and a snarky tone began to infiltrate the sisterhood. Imogene overheard whispers to the effect that the Redskins would be coasting to victory if not for the failures of one player. “Not to worry,” Sara said, smiling at Beverly but sounding worried herself. “Football is a game of momentum, you know. It’ll shift back at some point. It has to.”

As nerves frayed, the lines for the two upstairs bathrooms grew long. Imogene found herself waiting ahead of two women who were comparing notes about their early pregnancies. Anticipating an accident, or maybe two, Imogene hurried back to the living room, determined to wait.

The mood brightened as the Redskins mounted a late-game drive. Soon the women were clucking and clinging to each other as they anticipated pulling out a win. The team’s balanced attack, featuring Geoffrey’s deft catches and Jim’s relentless crashes through the line, had the Cowboys giving ground rapidly. After one such run, Jim staggered to the sideline and lay down on the bench.

“Oh my God. What’s wrong?” Sara spoke with more emotion than was suitable for the casual fan that “Elsie” was supposed to be. She put down her beer and held her hand over her mouth as if she too were about to be sick. “Get up, baby, please,” she urged.

Jim did get up, but he still appeared woozy. He sat on the bench with his head down as trainers hovered over him. The Redskins' drive continued, as Geoffrey caught short pass after short pass. Imogene thought she detected a smug look on Danielle's face, but it didn't last long. Geoffrey, catching the final pass of the drive and lunging for the goal line, lost control of the ball, and the Cowboys defenders pounced on it.

Heartbroken moans and shrieks of dismay went up from the group, although Imogene didn't miss the relieved look on Beverly's face. Now the blame would have to be spread around. The Cowboys took possession of the ball on their own five-yard line, with about six minutes left on the clock. All the wives could do, as the opposing team began its own drive and time ticked away, was shout, "Defense! Defense!"

A sideline reporter relayed the trainers' opinion that Jim Guthrie had been stunned by a blow to the head but was shaking off the ill effects and would likely return to the game. Sara took a deep breath as Jim was shown getting to his feet and jogging in place.

Helene tapped Sara on the shoulder and whispered, "I know the timing's weird, but remember, we'd planned on shooting an office sequence today. We're already set up downstairs. No major acting required . . . just a few shots of you pretending to shuffle papers and answer the phone."

"Actually, the timing's perfect," Sara replied. "I'm too nervous to watch any more of this godforsaken game. Let's move downstairs now before another disaster happens."

She rose to her feet and addressed the room. "Ladies, I have some emergency business I must attend to right now. While I'm gone, I'm counting on all of you to hold the fort and keep the faith. We're the better team, and we're gonna win! Right?"

"Right!" shouted a host of female voices.

Mrs. Jones appeared, saying she needed some treats to placate the hungry gathering in the playroom. Sara caught Imogene's eye and commanded, "How about taking charge of that matter? Pass around some more of your famous cookies." Imogene, still eager to contribute in any way she could, grabbed two platefuls and accompanied the crew downstairs.

Arriving at the other set, Sara settled herself behind the desk in the imitation office. Before Helene could say “action,” the make-believe Secretary of Defense gasped, “Excuse me a minute.” She got up hastily and ducked into the bathroom, staying there much longer than a minute.

“If she’s pregnant,” Helene muttered, “I’ll kill her.”

“It’s probably just football nerves.” Imogene was sure Sara would have shared any news of that magnitude with her.

Imogene moved to the playroom to help Mrs. Jones and Yvette distribute the cookies. They were indeed a hit, as the children shrieked with delight and grabbed them by the fistful. She could see it would be a challenge to keep this group quiet once filming started at the opposite side of the room. Feeling unequal to that task, Imogene returned to the set.

While Helene and the crew waited for Sara, Imogene thought she might slip upstairs to check on the game. She was about to leave when a piercing sound rang out.

Who knew the fake office had a real phone? It kept ringing, and Helene eyed Imogene. “Pretend you work in the Pentagon,” the director ordered. “Answer the phone.”

Imogene moved onto the sound stage and sat down at the desk. As she picked up the phone, she noticed that one of the cameras was rolling. Here was a chance to insert herself into the plot. How would an aide or a personal secretary to “Elsie” behave? She blurted, “Strategy Office.”

“Jesus, that’s what you’re calling your outfit now? Who came up with that?”

“I did, just now. How are you, J—” She barely prevented herself from saying “Jake,” unsure if that was to be the fictional rock star’s name.

“You sure get around, toots. At least you’re more efficient today than you were at headquarters. You answered the phone without letting it ring a thousand times. But I wanna know, what’s with this new PR team my sister sent upstate to deal with Byron and me? I think Gus is encouraging his new girl, Janie, to try to seduce me. She ain’t my type physically, but it turns out she writes song lyrics, and that could tempt me. Are these two following Sara’s orders, or are they loose cannons?”

"That depends," Imogene said, "on what, exactly, they're trying to accomplish."

"They want Byron and me to return to headquarters and retake the reins, sooner rather than later. Is that what Sara wants?"

"I think it'd be a load off her mind to know that someone was holding down the fort in—" She choked off New York.

"Toots, you oughta know us better than that. Sooner or later, we'd blow up the fort. Or at least, *I* would. Byron might be into running things for a week or two, trying to rediscover those peace-and-love vibes he once inspired. Once that failed, he'd probably go off and sequester himself in the Village or somewhere, as if he was still at the commune."

"I have more faith in you than that," Imogene offered.

"Listen, as long as we're still up here, we're essentially harmless. After all these years of strumming campfire tunes and resting on my laurels, I've *become* Byron Roberts. I've had the rock 'n' roll winnowed out of me. Reviving it could be dangerous."

"Dangerous . . . how?" Imogene asked.

"Think about it. The minute we returned to the city, Byron would want to kick Leroy Pierce to the curb. He represents the money-grubbing part of our legacy. I know perfectly well we'd go straight down the tubes without old Leroy, but at least we'd be allowing Peace Enterprises to die a natural death. I'm tempted to let it happen."

"You can do better than that." Imogene pursed her brow for the camera. "There has to be a more sensible *strategy*."

"You think I need a *strategy*? Like maybe I should get cracking writing some new songs for the rejuvenated company? Why don't you come up here and inspire my creativity—before plain Janie gets her claws in me?"

"How close is she . . .?"

"She can write decent lyrics, I'll give her that, even if they're transparently intended to jump-start Byron and me. She's got my ex-wives all atwitter with her act."

"Now, *that* could be a dangerous situation," Imogene acknowledged.

"It means I can't stay in this cocoon much longer. The peace-and-love part of it is shot, with all these women fighting over me. But no way will I

reappear at headquarters just to turn into another of Sara's sycophants. I'm her big brother, damn it. I was famous when she was still a brainless coed. Once a rock star, y'know, always a rock star."

"Then prove it," Imogene said.

"Yeah, I'll prove it, somehow. Maybe I'll move to Vegas and make a career outa crooning my old hits, like some kinda modern-day Elvis. Or maybe I'll OD on something and check out for good."

"That's not what I meant." Imogene summoned a note of alarm as she eyed the camera. "That's crazy talk."

"Maybe you could help restore my sanity, like you did once before. Remember that Homecoming weekend at Glendary, when you invited me to chill out at your parents' farm for a couple of hours? I could maybe get into that again."

"I'll work on it," Imogene promised.

"You do that, toots."

Jake hung up at the moment Sara came out of the bathroom, wiping her face with a towel. "You'll have to hold on another minute, Helene, while I run upstairs and check the final score," she told the director. "My stomach won't settle until I find out. At least you're all set up, since Imogene was kind enough to stand in for me."

Imogene recoiled. *Is that all she thinks I did? Wasn't I really acting? The camera was rolling the whole time.*

Before Sara could depart, Yvette came downstairs, holding aloft a fresh plate of cookies. She stepped before the camera, effectively blocking Imogene.

"I saw how the game ended," the nanny announced. "It was amazing. Just when it looked like the Cowboys were gonna score a touchdown, they fumbled, and the Redskins got the ball back. They moved down the field, used up all the time, and then Wendell Cushing kicked the winning field goal. He turned out to be the hero, after missing all those earlier kicks. Everyone is ecstatic . . . especially Mrs. Cushing."

As Yvette finished, Mrs. Jones moved into the picture and took the cookie plate from her. "The children are waiting for these," she snapped.

Laraine ran onto the set, shouting, "My daddy won the game!"

"My daddy did too!" responded a chorus of indignant voices from the playroom.

"They all won. And what a relief." Sara picked up Laraine and hugged her, although she was being filmed, and the little girl wasn't supposed to exist for cinematic purposes.

"I'll say it's a relief," Helene put in, giving her crew the "cut" sign. "I was sweating it out as much as you, darling, since our movie fortunes are tied to the Redskins. No pressure or anything, but the town is hungry for a winner. I'm counting on you and Jim to remain local heroes for the duration."

"I get that, but my immediate concern is my husband's health." Sara put Laraine down and took her hand. "Let's go upstairs, sweetie, and find out how bad that bump on Daddy's head is. I bet he'll have a terrific headache for a day or so."

Imogene followed Sara and Laraine upstairs, where the wives were buzzing around Beverly Cushing. Since she seemed to be universally liked, there were no overt displays of jealousy or snarky remarks about Wendell's sudden transformation from goat to hero. The other good news was that Jim had returned to the game for a couple of running plays and had shown no ill effects. As the party broke up, the women collected their children and thanked Sara effusively for an amazing afternoon, although Imogene thought Danielle Starrett's smile looked forced.

CHAPTER 10



HELENE'S WORDS ABOUT the importance of winning resonated in Imogene's mind a week later, when the Redskins started to look vulnerable. Jim was held out of that Sunday's game as a precaution after being diagnosed with a mild concussion. The Redskins went down to a shocking defeat at the hands of one of the league's weakest teams.

The following day, Imogene and Sara found themselves obliged to cross a picket line to get into their office. About a dozen people stood outside the building, holding placards with variations on the messages "Evictions Are Cruel" and "We're Out On The Streets." In their midst stood Reverend Strickland, wielding a bullhorn. His bellowing had attracted a couple of news cameras.

"What a difference a week makes," Sara remarked to the reverend with a strained smile. "I don't remember this issue being raised when you and Mrs. Strickland were guests at my house."

"It's nothing personal, Mrs. Guthrie," Strickland replied. "We did appreciate your hospitality, and I thank you again for it, but the quest for social justice never ends. When I see people suffering, I must do what I can to alleviate it. I'm trying to open your eyes to the fact that the evictions in your building—which you stand to benefit from—are displacing people who lack the resources to fight back. You can't evade responsibility for them."

"You're honestly telling me I'm responsible for a nonprofit organization's failure to pay its rent?" Sara asked.

"Yes, Mrs. Guthrie, I am. This particular group, in case you didn't know, supports arts education in the inner city. I believe those of us who've received many of life's blessings are obligated to give back to those less fortunate. We're

all members of the same community. These folks you see before you, humble though they may appear, don't deserve to be collateral damage in your quest for greatness. They're your brothers and sisters."

"You don't ask a girl for much, do you? Just to save the world." Sara frowned and sweated a little as she glanced at her "brothers and sisters."

"Not the whole world, Mrs. Guthrie. One small part of it is all I ask."

Imogene feared Sara might blurt something rude or dismissive. Anything she said now would surely be broadcast far and wide. After a few tense moments, her look of agitation lifted as she eyed Strickland straight on.

"Reverend, I hear you. Give me a few days to speak with my advisors and come up with some ideas. I'm looking to hire people for my new operation, and I might have places for at least a few of these displaced folks. Those I can't hire, maybe I can help in some other way. Once I've developed a plan, I'll invite you upstairs, and we'll discuss it."

Sara and the reverend shook hands, and the crowd dispersed. Imogene breathed a sigh of relief as she and her boss proceeded to the office. As Sara sat down behind her desk, she said, "Imogene, please get Leroy Pierce on the phone right away. If I'm gonna be a neighborhood savior, I'll need sensible advice. Only Leroy is qualified to tell me how far I can take this. Better yet, try to get him on the next train down here."

Imogene rushed to her cubicle and placed the call to New York. She told the receptionist, a sleepy-sounding woman she couldn't identify, that this was an emergency. When she got through to Leroy, he asked, "An emergency? What's she done now?"

"She's in political hot water," Imogene said. "Reverend Strickland is on the attack, and she just promised him the moon."

Imogene explained the situation, finishing with, "She really needs a face-to-face meeting with you. How soon can you get here?"

"Christ, have I neglected to mention there's a crisis brewing here too? Actually, you could call it a full-fledged revolution. No sooner did Gus and Janie get back from their trip upstate than Jake and Byron and the whole commune crowd arrived on their heels. Yeah, the dynamic duo decided the time was right to return to the city and restart their creative partnership. They've

threatened to do it before, but this time they didn't crap out. They're really here."

"My God," Imogene said, "that's a huge development. When did they arrive?"

"Just a couple days ago, in separate vans. They parked their extended families wherever they could find space in the building. So now the place is crawling with women and kids of various ages and other unidentified hangers-on, crashing in offices, living quarters, whatever. No new songs to show for it yet, but Jake and Byron have already given notice to our house bands that they're about to be evicted from downstairs. The real geniuses are taking over the studios. They both claim to need their private space."

"What will become of Amorphous and Stuyvesant?" Imogene asked.

"God knows what'll become of any of us. There's no business plan I can see, and it ain't exactly a business atmosphere with the women fighting like cats all day long. Gus is trying to take charge of the zoo, which he's welcome to. It's up his alley, especially the stray women. But I can't stay tucked away in my office forever crunching negative numbers. Right now, apart from investments, there's no new money coming in, and a boatload going out."

"Sounds like the perfect time for you to vacate the premises," Imogene suggested. "Leave headquarters to Gus, and come to DC to help Sara. She'll listen to you, as she always has."

Leroy said he would consider it. By the time Imogene transferred the call to Sara, she was confident that help was on its way.

A week later, Sara's office was the scene of a daylong summit meeting. Sara, Reverend Strickland, and Leroy Pierce sat down together to hash out a hiring plan, with Imogene taking notes. As a result, during the next few weeks, the nearly empty office suite became energized with new blood.

Sara took several days to interview each of the displaced dozen to assess their employment potential. She agreed to hire a budget analyst, two administrative assistants, and a receptionist on sight and promised to consider a few others. The four new employees were to occupy desks in the common area; the inner offices, Sara explained, must be reserved for the Hollywood pros,

including the developmental editor and production manager for *Deterrence*, who often dropped by unannounced. Those candidates not selected for immediate jobs would be enrolled in retraining and job placement programs, with financial assistance from both Sara and Strickland.

When these measures failed to satisfy everyone, Sara gathered the group together and offered to put them all on the movie payroll as extras. They would be featured in a battle scene intended to be the climax of *Deterrence*, unfolding at ground zero of a dirty bomb attack on the nation's capital.

"The logistics will be tricky," she explained. "We've spent weeks negotiating with the National Park Service to use portions of the National Mall for an entire weekend in April. You'll all play sick and dying civilians, which will require you to exercise your dramatic chops . . . and who knows what doors that might open?" Sara and Strickland would again join forces to pay the first-year dues that were required to join the local Film Extras Union.

As the holiday season of 1988 approached, the newly hired employees of Peace Enterprises South, grateful for their jobs and anticipating at least a few moments of movie stardom, settled into the office. Leroy agreed to stay at least through New Year's to supervise the new operation. Imogene gladly took on the permanent title of publicist.

Leroy and Helene were occasional dinner guests at the Guthries' house. Sara still made an effort, as she had in New York, to arrive home "at a decent hour" every evening to cook dinner and spend quality time with her family. It was more challenging now that she no longer lived an elevator ride away from the office and had to contend with rush-hour traffic. "I still say the new lifestyle is worth the hassle," she told Imogene during one rough commute. "Your help in the kitchen is a lifesaver. And no one can say our mealtimes are dull."

One evening in mid-December promised to be even livelier than usual, with both Helene and Leroy expected for dinner. "I hope they don't get into a knock-down budget fight," Sara remarked to Imogene as the women shopped for the burgers, French fries, and beer that Helene favored. "Not good for the digestion."

"This meal won't be great for Leroy's cholesterol, either," Imogene remarked. Sara conceded this and picked up some salad fixings as an alternative.

While chomping on lettuce and grated carrots that evening, Leroy asked Sara if she was comfortable with her new employees.

"I'm not exactly uncomfortable," she replied, "although I'm sure they report back to Reverend Strickland on everything that goes on in the office."

"I get the same impression," Imogene put in. "In fact, two of them kidnapped us in the elevator the other day. I'm sure the reverend was behind that."

"Whaddaya mean 'kidnapped'?" Leroy and Helene both exclaimed.

"Only for a minute," Sara said, laughing. "Imogene and I had just gotten on the elevator at the ground floor when my studious-looking budget analyst and my hippie-looking administrative assistant got on after us and started talking about their issues. When we arrived at the third floor, the bespectacled one pressed the close button and kept his finger on it until he finished his spiel."

"Christ," Leroy sputtered, "that's damned near a—an abduction."

"They just needed me to listen to them for a minute, Leroy," Sara said. "That's not too much to ask, even if I can't give them everything they want. Seems Strickland has put into their heads that they should be allowed to join a local white-collar union. And I, of course, should pay their dues."

"We'll see about that," Leroy muttered.

"Maybe we better also see about a bodyguard for you," Jim said, regarding his wife with a somber look. Sara smiled at him and insisted she could take care of herself.

"Did you at least address your new employees by their names during your little run-in?" Helene asked, shoveling fries into her mouth. She swallowed and added, "Maybe that's all they really wanted. A little acknowledgment of their existence. Just like I'm trying to learn the names of every grip and assistant camera guy on the film."

"Seems to me you get away with calling them all 'darling,'" Sara replied.

"Yeah, but they like that." Helene chortled and grabbed another fistful of fries.

She caught Jim's eye and asked, "How come you're riding the bench these days? You look hale and hearty enough to me. It'd be better for the movie

if you were out on the field, doing your football hero thing. We rely on the kindness of the local authorities to open doors for us, and they're all rabid Redskins fans."

"Doctor's orders. They're making me sit for a couple of weeks to make sure I'm tip-top for the playoffs next month." Jim pointed to his head and then hoisted a beer. "Gotta have the old noggin unscrambled when it really counts."

"No pressure or anything, but I gotta reiterate that winning is everything," Helene said. "Just bring a Super Bowl trophy to this football-crazed town, and we'll get the keys to the city for sure. Shit, we'll *own* the National Mall."

"Wouldn't a victory parade on Pennsylvania Avenue make a fabulous backdrop?" Sara purred, beaming at Jim. "And a visit to the White House would be cinematic, too."

Laraine, who was having her dinner in the kitchen, ran into the dining room and grabbed some French fries from a platter. "I wanna see the parade!" she exclaimed. "When is it?"

"No more of those," her mother admonished. "First Daddy and the Redskins have to win the championship."

"Let's not count our chickens just yet," Leroy mumbled, staring at his salad.

"I wouldn't presume to count football chickens, Leroy," Helene said. "I realize the team could fall a little short in the end. But we'll keep featuring the local heroes playing and partying, as long as it's good for business."

"Business?" Leroy put down his fork and scowled. "You wanna start talking some serious business?"

"Here we go," Sara groaned. "The budget part of the meeting is under way."

Leroy pulled a wad of papers out of his jacket and waved them over his head. "Sara, my dear, do you have any idea what these are?"

"I know spreadsheets when I see them, Leroy. Believe me, I realize too much is going out for rent. Maintaining two offices in separate cities can't go on much longer, unless both start paying for themselves. My plan is to shutter

headquarters, except for the studios where Jake and Byron are composing. And they'll have to take over the condo payments, if they intend to keep the families living there like an urban commune."

"Fine, but, my dear, New York ain't your only problem. You have another major drain, right here at home." Leroy slapped the papers down on the table. "Take a look at the electric bills for your own private recording studio. I understand you're allowing two vagrant bands to occupy it, theoretically on alternate weekends but pretty much any damned time they choose. And for what? To spew out a pile of garbage that'll probably never see the light of day, either on a record or a movie soundtrack."

Imogene knew Leroy had struck close to Sara's heart. She watched Sara steel herself to defend the homegrown recording studio and whatever "garbage" it might produce.

"I appreciate your concern, as always, Leroy," she said, "but I've already given Amorphous and Stuyvesant keys to the studio. At the moment, they have nowhere else to work. I promised them a reasonable amount of time to give me some useable product. With all due respect, you're not a musician. Sometimes it takes the ear of faith to detect music emerging from chaos. I see potential in both outfits, and that's why I've been propping them up. I believe it'll pay off."

Leroy rolled his eyes and groaned. Pushing aside his salad, he piled his plate with fries and began chomping on them. "And when will this payoff be?" he demanded. "After they've driven you out of house and home? Look, I can see you supporting one deadbeat band for maybe a couple more months. Maybe stick your favorite one in the movie somewhere and cut the other loose."

"Obviously, Amorphous is the more professional of the two," Sara said. "Those guys already have something of a following in DC, and they're pretty versatile. But Stuyvesant . . . there's something about them I can't resist. Their atonal stuff might suit the *Deterrence* soundtrack, especially to underscore the chaos of battle. Although I'm not sure what Emily's singing would accomplish."

"Firing our old roommate would be awkward, wouldn't it?" Imogene pointed out.

"God, yes." Sara laughed. "She'd be my sworn enemy for life."

Laraine, drumming with a spoon, asked, "When can I go and see the bands? You said I could."

"I dunno about that, sweetheart." Jim's tone was cajoling, but his mouth was tight as he took the spoon from her. "I don't think those rock musicians are fit company for a little girl."

"But I want to hear the music," Laraine pleaded. "You promised!"

"We'll talk about it later." Sara sighed, as if she understood her daughter's longing. "It's bedtime for you, but you can take some dessert with you, just this once."

Jim fetched a cookie from the kitchen and then went with Laraine to settle her down for the night. When he returned to the table, he hoisted another beer and regarded the group with a grim face.

"I gotta be honest," he said. "Those raunchy bands spook me out sometimes. When they're camping in our studio, it's too damned close to where we live."

"They spook me out too," Leroy said. "I say, give these guys a hard deadline, like two months. Tell them they gotta start earning their keep, or they're outta here."

"You're talking finances, Leroy," Jim said, "but I'm talking security. Sure we could fire the bands and change the locks to the studio, but would that work? You think they'd go away quietly?"

"Both bands are close to a breakthrough," Sara insisted. "I'll know it when I hear it."

"What if that epiphany keeps threatening to happen but never does?" Helene asked. "Do you have the balls, darling, to take action?"

"I'll grow some, if it means keeping the company solvent. The two-month deadline seems reasonable to me."

"Of course, there might be an easier way," Helene continued in a joking tone. "Maybe all Jim needs to do is go out there and wave a shotgun at them, like he did to scatter those pesky reporters."

"That solution doesn't appeal to me." Sara set down her beer hard enough to send a few drops flying. "And it won't be necessary. I know how to cajole musicians, to speak their language."

"Of course you do," Helene said. "You were born to mesmerize that type. You're not only the sister of a famous rocker, but I believe you once had a fling with his partner, the folkie legend. That was the summer before you met Jim on campus, right? Excuse me, Jim, for bringing it up."

"It's okay." Jim grimaced.

"Yeah, I can be quite the charmer," Sara said. "But I doubt if God Almighty could bring back the golden age of Peace Enterprises, when the Murphy-Robarts partnership was gangbusters and they had a supportive backup band, the Sunburst. Too much success can be debilitating. When they decided they'd had a bellyful of it and split for the boondocks, they consigned themselves to the past."

"Only now that they've returned to headquarters," Imogene put in, "the past is intruding on the present."

"That's the goddamned problem," Leroy said, rubbing his neck. "When they were upstate, they were at least putting some of their resources into a working farm. There was sufficient space for both families and their cavalcade of guests, at least until the wife-swapping and other monkey business began . . . but I never wanted to know the details about that."

"Now they're trying to transplant that big, unhappy family into the heart of Manhattan. Not to be sexist or anything, but it's the women who're making me crazy—the wives and ex-wives and assorted hangers-on. When they're not squabbling and demanding the moon, they're smoking pot and forgetting to look after their kids. Nowhere in that zoo have I seen the least signs of productivity, much less any stirrings of the old Murphy-Robarts partnership."

"Then let's revive it ourselves." Helene's eyes widened as they always did when she was nursing a cinematic vision. "It's up to you, Sara, to cast Jake and Byron in the movie, whether they're gung ho for it or not. Have someone lock them up together in Studio One, away from the women and other distractions. Let them know their livelihood depends on churning out some new songs. Then sell them the climactic scene: a comeback concert on the National Mall, showcasing their new mind-blowing music."

"*I'm* supposed to persuade them of all that?" Sara protested. "When they both resent the shit out of me? My brother regards me as a raging capitalist,

and Byron hasn't spoken to me civilly since I ended our summer affair all those years ago and sent him back to his wife and kids. What do you expect me to do now . . . seduce him again, like I'm still twenty-one?"

As the group tittered, Jim drawled, "That's kinda where I draw the line. None of us are twenty-one, honey, and we ain't gonna act like it."

"That gang up there thinks money flows out of spigots," Leroy said, nearing the bottom of his mountain of fries. "If I threaten them all with imminent bankruptcy, who'll listen? I guess when I get back to New York, I could try sitting Marianne down and showing her these spreadsheets. Seems to me the first Mrs. Murphy has the closest thing to a business mind in the group. Jake's second wife, Jasmine, wanders around all day in a stoned haze, wishing everyone peace and love. And Janie, the ex-receptionist . . . I think she has designs on becoming wife number three."

"The last thing I need is another sister-in-law." Sara sat back and pondered. "God, Leroy, I'm sorry you've had such a rough time. Being a zoo-keeper isn't what you signed up for."

She sat up abruptly. "Say, Imogene, you're always ready for a quick trip to New York, right? How about tagging along with Leroy when he returns and reporting back to me on the state of headquarters? Poke around a little and find out if Jake and Byron are playing nicely together in the studio and which of the women are helping or hurting the process. Also try to figure out what Gus is up to. Like, is he still on that righteous kick about some of his ideas getting into the script?"

Imogene's pulse quickened, as always, at thoughts of the big city. "I'm sure I can handle all that."

The dinner ended on a positive note, with Leroy and Imogene discussing their return to the Big Apple and Helene mapping out the proposed National Mall climax, which she declared would involve both music and mayhem.

While Sara and Imogene cleared the table and Jim started loading the dishwasher, the phone rang. Sara answered it in the kitchen.

"Emily! Where are you?" She listened and then said, "I had no idea you and Stuyvesant were out there rehearsing tonight. It wasn't your scheduled time. Why didn't you come to the house? You and I are overdue for a talk."

Jim frowned and muttered, "Sounds like we're bleeding money as we speak. If the band's still out there, I want them gone. Right now."

"I'll take care of it," Sara told him. She continued on the phone, "Listen, Emily, you gotta go back and shut this session down. Tell your buddies it's over. I can't let them spend the night out there just jamming aimlessly. I just finished meeting with my advisors, and the consensus is we gotta stop pouring money into outfits that don't produce for us."

Leroy and Helene made approving noises at this "get tough" tone. Sara moved farther away and continued, more discreetly, "Of course I value our friendship, Em, but I don't think self-delusion benefits either of us. You're acting like a prima donna right now."

Imogene listened irresistibly as Sara continued, "What do I mean by that? I mean you're talking on a car phone while some lackey drives you back to a big-city apartment where you're shacking up with a famous actor. You call that success? You're thousands of miles away from your real responsibilities, pretending to front a band when you're not even a singer and occasionally practice-acting in a class full of other wannabes."

"Careful, Sara," Imogene murmured. "I don't think you want to make an enemy of her."

Sara told Imogene aside, "She needs to hear this for her own good." Resuming on the phone, she said, "The bottom line, Emily, is that I'm not running a charity for old friends with artistic pretensions."

Sara winced and then hung up. "She called me a world-class bitch and said I wouldn't know talent if it hit me between the eyes. Saves me the trouble of firing her, since she pretty much just fired herself, but we've still got problems. Seems that when she and Andrew, Stuyvesant's producer, split the premises, they left behind a couple of bandmates. They're still out there, searching for that elusive breakthrough."

Jim slammed the dishwasher shut and declared, "I'm going out there to evict those deadbeats." He stalked into the living room, pulled a leather jacket from the closet, and put it on.

"You taking your shotgun with you to disperse the squatters?" Helene asked him. "That's something I'd like to see."

"No way. I don't allow guns anywhere near my studio." Sara made a move to grab her own wrap from the closet. "Jim, you ought to let me handle this. I know how to reason with this type."

"Sorry to break this to you, Sara, but you really don't." Jim turned around at the door and blocked the way with his arms crossed, scowling in a way Imogene had never seen before. The Guthries stared at each other.

Then Jim resumed, in a softer tone, "Honey, I gotta be the one to do this. I liked the way you dealt with Emily just now, but we both know you've got a soft spot for musicians. They'll convince you they're on the verge of greatness, if they can just have six more months and another hundred thousand dollars. Hell, if Emily could really sing, I'll bet you would've sweet-talked her instead of scolding her."

"Fine. You handle it." Sara dropped her coat on a chair. "Just be careful, Jim. Struggling musicians always have fragile egos. Try talking to them. Explain that we appreciate their talents, but this is a business."

"God forbid I should question their artistic integrity," Jim said. "In fact, if I'm not back in half an hour or so, I've probably joined the band."

They all laughed, and the tension eased somewhat. After Jim departed, Sara and Imogene went on cleaning the kitchen, while Helene and Leroy continued their budget discussion.

Thirty minutes later, Sara observed, "It's taking a while. You suppose the musicians really did win Jim over?"

"Who're you kidding?" Helene shot back. "They've probably kidnapped him."

Sara tried to laugh, but after another few minutes, she said, "Enough is enough. I'm going after him." Leroy and Helene announced that they would accompany her.

As they pulled on their coats, Sara ordered, "Imogene, I need you to stay here, in case Laraine wakes up."

Imogene agreed. While the others were gone, she looked in on the sleeping child and then paced the length of the living room several times, growing jumpier with each pass.

A feeling of dread had possessed her by the time Sara burst in, Helene trailing her. Sara rushed to the kitchen phone, punched in 911, and gasped,

"I need an ambulance. My husband's been attacked. He's Jim Guthrie, the football player. Someone hit him on the head in our private recording studio and left him lying on the floor, unconscious." She gave the address.

Helene explained to Imogene, "The studio was totally dark when we got there. Sara switched on the light, and we saw Jim sprawled on the floor. The back of his head was bleeding. It must've been a sneak attack with a heavy object, maybe an electric guitar. Unbelievably eerie, him lying there all alone, with no sign of anybody else."

Sara hung up the phone and told Imogene, "Leroy agreed to stay with Jim until the ambulance arrives. I'm going out to wait for it."

Teary-eyed but controlled, she opened the door and stepped outside, only to find Leroy there. He stumbled past her and sank into a chair, his face ashen.

"I need help too," he said, breathing heavily.

"Better make that two ambulances," Helene said, moving toward the kitchen phone.

Both men were hospitalized for several days. Jim had a severe concussion and a hairline fracture of his right arm, sustained when he fell on the hard floor. Leroy was treated for acute angina.

Once released, they went to their respective homes to recuperate. Just before Christmas, Imogene traveled to Western Maryland to spend the holidays with her parents. Afterward, she returned briefly to the Guthries' house to prepare for her upcoming trip to New York.

"Rest assured, you'll still be a publicist," Sara told Imogene on the evening before her departure as the two women sipped coffee in Sara's study. "It's just that I need you at the front desk for observation purposes. I'll be fully occupied here, keeping the movie going and taking care of Jim, and Leroy will be in New York but under doctors' orders to stay away from the office. Your primary job will be to keep me informed. Let me know what the various hangers-on are up to and whether Jake and Byron are finally revving it up in the studio."

She paused and sighed. "And as usual, try to engage Gus casually. There's always a chance he'll reveal something I'm not supposed to know."

"I hate to leave you with everything so unsettled here and the police investigation still going on," Imogene said. Nevertheless, she breathed faster in anticipation of the big city.

"I expect the authorities will be poking around up there, questioning the Stuyvesant musicians," Sara said, "although it seems most of them have an alibi. I'm told the core of the band was playing a gig at its regular pub that night. Everybody was there except Emily, Andrew the producer, and two part-timers who were apparently new to the group, and who nobody has seen since.

"If you ask me, Emily's stonewalling the investigation. She told the cops she came south on a whim, having persuaded those three to come with her. She claimed she didn't really know the part-timers . . . they were just passing through. But when she got the idea for a new record, they volunteered to go along."

"Did she explain why she called you from the car on her way back to New York?" Imogene asked.

"Supposedly, she wanted me to come to the studio after she left and judge the track for myself, without any pressure. She insists she doesn't know why her backups chose to stay behind after the session. She can't explain why Jim was attacked, and she has no idea where the nameless musicians ran off to."

"Stuyvesant is a strange outfit," Imogene mused. "I wouldn't put anything past them. They get into fights, and they pick up and drop members with no rhyme or reason. I'm not that surprised they resorted to violence."

She paused and then added, "Still, I doubt the attack was planned. Whoever did it might've panicked when he heard Jim approach. Maybe thought he had a gun."

"You don't think it was planned?" Sara's voice rose. "The place was dark, as if the attackers were hiding. It was Emily's call that lured Jim into the studio . . . although it was meant to lure me."

"That's a serious accusation," Imogene pointed out. "You're talking about our college roommate. She's always been a snob, but she's never been a criminal."

"All I'm saying is she has plenty of reasons to hate and resent me. Or she thinks she does."

As Imogene shook her head, Sara added, "You don't know Emily like I do. Even in college she was jealous and underhanded, all the while putting on friendship airs. And now her show business dreams are fading, and she blames me. Who knows what she's capable of?"

Instead of arguing further, Imogene inquired, "You think there's any chance Jim will be able to play again this season?"

"He's raring to get back on the field, but it's not realistic. The concussion is more of a long-term worry than the arm fracture, since it's not the first one. Looks like the Redskins will have to claw their way to glory without him."

Sara sighed and added that she wasn't looking forward to the private team party she and Jim were scheduled to attend that evening to celebrate the start of the playoffs. It was being held at Joey Lambert's, a popular downtown hangout where many of the city's greatest sports triumphs were traditionally celebrated.

"Of course, we'll put on brave faces and try to be happy for everybody else. Jim says some of the guys can't wait to sign his arm cast. God knows what kinds of obscenities they'll write. We'll all pretend it's nothing but a boo-boo, I guess."

"I hope you can relax a little tonight, after the strain you've been under," Imogene said.

"Don't worry, I will. At least I'll get to hang out with a few girlfriends. Speaking of which, it's time for me to get dressed, because the Cushings and Ambroses will be here soon to pick us up in their hired limousine. Really fancy stuff, but we're not planning on a long night. I'll be up bright and early tomorrow morning to make you breakfast and see you off."

While Imogene got ready for bed that night, she turned on the eleven o'clock news. She was startled to hear that a fight had broken out at Joey Lambert's. She tried to shrug it off, figuring that sort of thing must happen all the time when teammates partied together, drank a little too much, and revisited some of their on-field battles.

A police cruiser was shown arriving on the scene. Imogene waited to find out who would be identified as the perpetrators. She could only hope Jim wasn't involved, considering the injuries he already had.

She burst out laughing to see a woman dragged out of the restaurant, her blond hair and elegant clothes askew. The detainee was spewing invective at another woman brought out behind her, whom Imogene judged to be a cock-tail waitress.

My God, she thought, they've arrested Sara's friend Pamela Ambrose. She was a perfect fashion plate when I glimpsed her just hours ago, and now look at her. Shouldn't the wife of the team captain be setting an example for the other wives? She looks like an insecure shrew.

The next morning, Sara and Imogene sat down to a continental breakfast in the dining room. Imogene brought up the previous night's incident, expecting her boss to laugh about it. Instead, Sara shook her head and muttered, "It was an eye-opener."

"How?" Imogene asked.

They fell silent as Jim came in and grabbed a bagel from the serving plate. He made a move to kiss Sara good morning, only to stop short when she glowered at him. "I guess all the husbands are in the doghouse after last night," he explained to Imogene. "The waitresses at Lambert's were a little too hot to be perfectly businesslike, and a few guys went too far in showing their appreciation."

"You all egged them on," Sara said.

"C'mon, we were just letting off a little steam. I'm surprised Pam took it as hard as she did. No way would her husband, Captain Perfect, actually cross the line."

"I think he *has* crossed it," Sara retorted.

She seemed ready to say more but broke off and allowed Jim to kiss her as he left for a meeting at Redskins Park.

Once they were alone, Imogene asked, "Did Pamela actually get hauled off to jail?"

"No, a team official intervened just in time, and both women got off with a citation. Actually, the cops had a good laugh over it."

"It did look kind of funny on the news." Imogene snickered but stopped when she saw that Sara still wasn't amused.

“Believe me, it was no joke when Beverly and I had to drag Pam to the ladies’ room afterward to calm her down. We had to persuade her not to step in front of the news cameras and denounce Brian as a liar and a cheat. Bev even laid hands on her and prayed. That soothed her enough to exit the place with a little dignity. Still, our ride home in the limousine was ghastly. So much for our illusion of being one big, happy football family.”

“You don’t think Pam maybe overreacted to a little flirtation?” Imogene ventured.

“Actually, this could be the tip of the iceberg. I pegged Brian for a hypocrite some time ago. His veneer is just too golden boy. Too all-American.”

“That’s a bad thing?” Imogene asked.

“It’s phony. I can see the stars in Brian’s eyes. If he wins the Super Bowl, he’ll go Hollywood. Or try to.”

Sara paused and took a deep breath. She slathered a bagel with cream cheese, bit into it and then washed it down with gulps of coffee.

She resumed, in a calmer tone, “Of course, I might have overreacted a little myself. It’s wrong of me to assume Jim and the others would follow Brian’s lead, just because he’s the team captain. I gotta apologize to Jim for that, as soon as he gets home.”

CHAPTER 11



IMOGENE RETURNED TO New York and tried to settle into her old place at the receptionist's desk, only to find it a hotter seat than ever before. The phone had started ringing again, since the local news media knew that Jake and Byron had returned to the city with their families. Imogene followed Sara's instructions to deflect any inquiries about the duo's musical efforts until something definite had come of it.

She proved adept at stonewalling callers, but her genuine lack of knowledge troubled her. The third-floor reception area and cubicles pulsed like a nonstop kaleidoscope as an assortment of unfamiliar characters wandered through. Whether family members or friends or collaborators, they all claimed some form of intimacy with Jake or Byron or both. Still, no one could confirm that the two legends were communicating, much less composing together.

On her first morning back, Imogene checked the studios downstairs and found them deserted, except for the Stuyvesant producer and a few of his musicians who drifted in and out of Studio Two. She learned that Jake, his two ex-wives, and their kids had taken possession of both condos on the fourth floor, while Byron and his still-growing family had resettled in his former Greenwich Village digs.

This presented an unexpected complication. At midafternoon, Imogene picked up the intercom phone to call Jake's first wife, Marianne, who had set up business in Leroy's office. She would ask if there was a quiet corner upstairs where she could stay until she made other living arrangements.

She aborted the call when Gus came charging out of his office and approached her with his usual abruptness. "Welcome back. I need these travel vouchers typed up and signed by close of business, please."

Imogene took the forms without mentioning Sara's recent assurance that her proper title was publicist. Even if this clerical task was beneath her, it might yield some information. "So you and Janie are going to Los Angeles this time," she remarked, looking at the drafts. "And the purpose of the trip?"

"Script development," Gus replied.

After an awkward pause, Imogene offered, "Sounds exciting. Does Sara know about this trip?"

"Jake has approved it." Gus turned on his heel and exited.

Imogene typed the vouchers, reflecting on the head publicist's defiant tone. He wanted it known, apparently, that he had the rock star's ear.

She took the finished paperwork in to Marianne, who was making an impressive show of filling in for Leroy. She had taken steps to modernize his office. Resting on a side table next to her desk was a television-like contraption that displayed a bright-green spreadsheet on its screen. Imogene watched as Marianne scrolled through rows of mysterious electronic numbers and then looked away from them reluctantly. She tossed her long, dark tresses and jangled her bracelets as she signed the vouchers.

When Imogene asked about living space, Marianne gave her a searching look. Then she replied in her Brooklyn-tinged voice, "It's a tight fit upstairs. Unless, of course, your plan is to slip into Jake's bed. It won't be the first time, will it?"

Before Imogene could respond, Marianne laughed as if the old college fling didn't matter. Then, to forestall any further reminiscences, she held up a manicured hand with its shiny silver ring now on the middle finger. "A word of warning. There'll be plenty of competition for Jake's attention, but it won't come from me. I have a strictly business relationship with my ex-husband now."

"I . . . I'll try to make other arrangements." Imogene left Marianne's office, her cheeks burning, and hurried to the Xerox machine to copy the signed vouchers. She delivered the originals to Gus and deposited the others in the office file. As she was completing this task, the phone rang again. Sara greeted her and asked how her first day back at headquarters was going.

"Lots of strange stuff going on." Imogene gave Sara her impressions of the colorful office atmosphere and then moved on to her exchange with Gus.

"I wonder what the bastard's really up to," Sara pondered. "I'll bet I know. Script development, my ass. He's gonna try to convince my closest contacts that I stole the *Deterrence* plot from him. And he says Jake approved this trip? Why would my brother stick his nose in my business, so soon after his return? Have you caught sight of him or Byron?"

"Not a glimpse," Imogene said. "They're not in the studios. I hear Jake spends most of his time holed up with both ex-wives and their kids on the fourth floor, while Byron and family are hanging out like freelance artists in the Village. I asked Marianne if there was any space for me upstairs. That was kind of an awkward conversation."

"I imagine it would be. Why even go there? Don't you still own half of Steve's condo?"

"Yeah, but for all I know, he's moved in his sexy paralegal." Imogene felt a wave of anger sweep through her, although she had no idea if her accusation was true.

"Maybe it's worth finding out," Sara said. "I gotta run, dear, but let's make a point of talking daily."

After she concluded the call, Imogene punched in Steve's office number. Once she got through the gatekeeper, she found herself relieved. Steve seemed interested in her adventures and immediately agreed that she should stay with him during her time in New York.

Then he added, "The only thing is . . . I have a business dinner with Emily tonight. You're more than welcome to join us."

"Emily Palmer?" The name made Imogene jump. "What business do you have with her?"

"We're discussing the future of Stuyvesant. Now that it looks like Amorphous has the upper hand for being featured in the movie, I'm trying to get a similar deal for the other band."

"Has Emily mentioned that the police are investigating Stuyvesant?" Imogene asked.

"I'm aware of it, but no one's currently being questioned. All the regular band members, except Emily and the producer, were accounted for the night Guthrie was assaulted. There were a couple of part-time guys who apparently

used assumed names, and seem to have disappeared, but that's not my problem. My job is to keep the band on its feet financially."

"Does Emily still claim total ignorance about the part-timers?" Imogene asked.

"Pretty much. Andrew too, even though he's the one who brought them in on a trial basis. He and Emily both say the guys must have fled out of fear. After all, Guthrie's a football star, and his injury is big news."

Imogene met Steve at seven that evening at a lively restaurant and bar in the Upper West Side. They were sipping tall beers when Emily burst through the door, to be greeted warmly by the bartender and several patrons. Steve explained to Imogene that this was one of Stuyvesant's regular hangouts, and the band was always well received when Emily fronted it.

"Greetings, Imogene," Emily said as she sat down. "What are you doing back in town? Did Sara boot you out of her DC office?"

"Not at all," Imogene replied. "I'm back at headquarters for a few weeks on a . . . special project."

"So, basically, you're Sara's eyes and ears in New York. That must make you feel important. I know her big thing right now is getting Jake and Byron together to create some new music for her epic movie, but I think that's a pipedream. Those two have always been oil and water, personality-wise. If they couldn't produce anything new while communing together on a farm all those years, what makes her think they'll start now? She might be forced to fill in with lesser bands."

"Amorphous has the inside track on that," Steve reminded her.

"Yeah, but Stuyvesant shouldn't be shunted aside just because a renegade member got confused or paranoid one night and took a punch at her husband."

"That was no simple punch," Imogene said. "It was a sneak attack, and Jim's still feeling the effects of it. He hasn't been cleared to play football."

"Jim's a big boy. Trust me, he'll get back on the field when it really matters."

Steve, adopting a mildly prosecutorial voice, asked Emily, "What caused you and Andrew and those two mystery musicians to split off from Stuyvesant that night and head south?"

"That's totally normal for this band," Emily replied. "I had a tune in mind I wanted to record, just a little folk-style ditty, so I got together a satellite group to help me with it. I've learned that if I don't take matters into my own hands and innovate like that, I'll never get anywhere. As I told the cops, Andrew and I were headed home when the attack happened. That's the extent of my knowledge."

As they devoured barbecued ribs and salads and washed them down with more beer, Emily talked up her acting career, which had recently picked up steam. "Not that Sara has been any help with that. For some reason—jealousy, no doubt—she's always belittled my dramatic talents. Doesn't she realize how much I'm sacrificing to pursue my career? Being away from my son is brutal, but it's as important to his future as it is to mine."

"Thank God, I'm finally making some headway. Not only am I understudying Russell Mellini's play, but I'm being featured in an experimental piece at a small arty theater on the Lower East Side. It's so experimental that I'm helping with the daily rewrites, but we've gotten some critical acclaim already. I'd love it if both of you could drop by one night and tell me what you think."

Steve and Imogene agreed to do so. Emily continued, "With credentials like these, I can build up enough of a résumé to take back to LA when the time comes. I'll be sending my clippings to Sara, not that she'll appreciate them."

Imogene, her tongue lubricated by the beer, responded, "Why wouldn't she appreciate them? Sara knows all about experimental theater. Remember, her parents were famous for that in their day, although it didn't exactly create a stable childhood for her and Jake. Anyway, Emily, you're wrong about her. It's not jealousy that motivates her."

"Then what is it?" Emily demanded.

"She's devastated by the attack on Jim, and that's made her suspicious. The injury shattered Jim's season and put the Guthries' long-term livelihood in jeopardy. Someone meant to do them serious harm."

"And she thinks I'm that someone?" Emily stared at Imogene.

"You *were* in the studio that night," Imogene pointed out, "and it was your phone call that lured Jim out there."

"That's not how it went down," Emily protested. "I didn't 'lure' Jim out there. I called Sara from the car as I was leaving that night to tell her we'd recorded a track that she might find intriguing. Instead of taking that on good faith, she sent her husband to the studio to chase away any remaining riffraff."

"I didn't say the attack was your fault," Imogene countered, "and neither did Sara, really. She's just upset and looking for answers."

"She damn near accused me of a crime," Emily spat. "I could sue her for defamation of character. I'm not afraid to call her out. *My* career doesn't depend on her good will, like yours does. I don't kowtow to her."

"Of course you don't," Imogene said, "and neither do I."

"You don't, Imogene? Why aren't you promoting your own screenplay?"

"That's wouldn't be appropriate," Imogene said, "as long as *Deterrence* is the ongoing project."

"Screw the 'ongoing project.' Everybody's writing a screenplay these days. You need to put yourself forward or you'll get lost in the crowd. Must you always let Sara set the agenda?"

Imogene laughed. "I really must, since it's her company."

"Have it your way." Emily shrugged and then spent the rest of the evening talking up her theater project and the chances of getting serious reviews.

After parting from Emily outside the restaurant, Steve and Imogene walked to the condo. Imogene ventured, "Do you get the feeling Emily's holding something back about that night in the studio? I know I do."

"Yeah." Steve mused and then continued, "Like she says, the Stuyvesant lineup has always been volatile. There've been fringe members before who didn't stick around long. As the band's legal consultant, I'm supposed to make sure everyone is accounted for and properly compensated. Emily's story about two nameless renegade musicians who vanished into thin air is strange, even for this band."

"But I don't know why Emily would lie about it," Imogene said. "What reason would she have to protect the attacker?"

Steve shrugged. "You tell me. You know her better than I do."

"Maybe it's the recording she's trying to protect," Imogene said. "She might be cherishing some notion that it's her ticket to fame."

"Have you heard it?" Steve asked.

"No, but Sara has described it to me. Every time she listens to it, she seems to hear something different. Right off she pegged the guitarists as unaccustomed to electronic instruments, and Emily as equally amateurish, trying to make up a folk song as she went along. At some point, a falsetto voice chimes in with her, and they perform a weird peace-and-love duet. Then suddenly there are loud bursts from the guitars that sound like gunshots or explosions. A mixed bag of confusion."

"I'll bet there's a message in it somewhere," Steve said.

Imogene stopped in her tracks and shivered. "Just the thought of it is giving me déjà vu. I'm remembering that road trip Sara and I took from college to New York senior year, to bring the Sunburst band back to campus for Homecoming. When we dropped by the studio that weekend, there was a so-called album in progress, but the band was on the verge of breaking up, and the musicians couldn't agree on anything. Byron had already walked out by then and was nowhere to be found."

"Yeah, you told me about it," Steve said. "That lost album with the working title 'Chaos.' I wonder what became of the tapes."

"The timing sucked for me," Imogene recalled. "I was trying to write my senior honors thesis on the influence of poetry in rock music. I arrived at headquarters to find the Murphy-Robarts songwriting partnership that inspired my idea kaput. Luckily, the rest of the Sunburst held together long enough to return to campus with us and play the scheduled concert. That turned out to be the band's last hurrah."

"So you think this new song might be 'Chaos' all over again?" Steve mused. "As if the old Sunburst had reared its head after all these years?"

"Who knows?" Imogene turned to Steve, so abruptly that he jumped back. "I'm gonna dig up my thesis and reread it, carefully. It might give us some clues."

"Wouldn't it be funny," Steve joked, "if your school paper ended up in the police files?"

At the receptionist's desk the next morning, Imogene telephoned her parents with a request to locate her thesis and send it to her at Steve's address. They agreed but not before questioning her decision to live with her estranged husband again. "I'm not exactly living with him," she explained. "I'm in New York on temporary assignment, and the condo is convenient and inexpensive for me."

Her mother wanted to talk further, but Imogene said, "I'll call you back later, Mom, when I can get some privacy. This place seems to be returning to the way it was when I first visited it during my senior year. Amateur musicians are wandering in all day long and auditioning for anyone who'll listen to them—including me."

After she hung up, she got a prolonged stare from one such amateur, a long-haired girl dressed like a hippie in multicolored gown, beads, and headband. For the past hour, she had been squatting on a rug that she had spread in front of Imogene's desk, first meditating and then singing softly while strumming an acoustic guitar.

"Did you say amateur musician?" Her gentle voice seemed to acquire an edge. "Don't you know who I am?"

Imogene thought she looked familiar. She was pretty enough to be an actress or a model, with her blond locks and smooth, pale face. She didn't look strung out or hopped up like some of the desperate artists who managed to talk their way past the security guards, only to be flushed out at the close of business each day. Still, her blue eyes struck Imogene as lost.

"I can tell you're a real Byron Roberts fan," Imogene offered. "Your medley of his songs is really nice."

The girl slammed the guitar down, causing an un-Roberts-like discord. "For your information, I'm Mrs. Jake Murphy. And I'm not singing Byron's songs just to sing them. I'm trying to save my husband's soul from corporate greed."

"Of course you are," Imogene said, thinking the girl must be crazy. She would have to be indulged as much as possible until she could be removed. Imogene eyed the phone and wondered if she should alert security now. Then Marianne breezed in, decked out for business in a smart blue dress suit, accentuated by high heels and a briefcase.

"You're pushing it, Jasmine," she said with a laugh. "You're the discarded Mrs. Murphy, just like me. And there'll be other contenders for that title before long, trust me."

"Oh, I recognize you now," Imogene told the girl. "Sorry I didn't at first."

She knew Jasmine had been a rising star in the fashion world, making a name for herself as the first "hippie supermodel," when she had married Jake Murphy following his divorce from Marianne. During the extended family's five-year sojourn at the upstate commune, she had given birth to son Jade but had made no other waves.

Marianne continued in a jocular tone but with cold eyes, "I think Imogene here was once in the running herself. I'll bet she's come back here to try her luck with Jake again."

Imogene was about to protest that she was married, but a look of disdain from Jasmine stopped her cold. "You?" the girl sneered.

"God, Jas," Marianne admonished, "you can be so judgmental. It's obvious Jake appreciates brains as much as he does glamour these days. Why else would he be fooling around with that chick Janie, the so-called assistant publicist?"

"I can't believe it," Jasmine spat. "That girl's so plain."

"Janie has a leg up because she's Gus's new girl," Marianne said. "That means she gets to pose as a screenwriter too. They're claiming they wrote part of Sara's new movie."

Imogene sighed to hear this canard repeated. Jasmine, apparently jealous of Janie or Imogene or both, picked up the guitar again and slammed it down.

Marianne laughed. "That temper of yours kinda spoils your peace-and-love act, Jas. I thought you decided Byron Robarts was your messiah, and Jake was more or less the devil. Shouldn't you be seeking out Byron in the Village and washing his feet or something? It's no use hanging around here, obsessing over who Jake is screwing now. The sooner you get over that bastard, the sooner you can put his assets to use like I'm doing."

"Shame on you." Jasmine recovered her beatific demeanor. "That's so crass. Byron came back to the city to restore the original Peace Enterprises, which was about spreading love, not making money. He went into seclusion to protest the corporation."

"If Byron doesn't like the way the company is being run, he can come in to talk to me about it. I'm in charge of the money now."

Marianne slapped her briefcase against her hip and proceeded to Leroy's office, slamming the door shut behind her. Jasmine tossed back her locks and then picked up her guitar to fashion another Byron Robarts medley. Lulled by the gentle tunes, Imogene decided the girl was deluded but hardly dangerous. She figured Jake's flaws as a husband were enough to drive any woman close to the edge, and his two wives had reacted in opposite ways.

Imogene waited until the singer took a breath, and then ventured, "Jasmine, both Sara and I feel it's very important—not only to the company but actually to the whole world—to try to bring Jake and Byron together so they can once again write great songs. They still have the potential not only to make lots of money but also to inspire millions of listeners. Hearing you play—you do it so nicely—makes me feel like you must have influence with Byron."

Imogene paused, trying to gauge the reaction in Jasmine's eyes, but they were unfocused. Gesturing toward the switchboard phone, she added, "Could you possibly contact him—wherever he is in the Village—and persuade him to come back to headquarters? That would be a start, if we could at least get him and Jake in the same place."

Jasmine recoiled from the phone as if it were a lethal object. "I can't do that," she declared. "Byron and I are spiritual cousins. I'm drawing him to me right now through our psychic bond, but I can't rush him. He'll be here . . . when he's ready."

She's crazy all right, Imogene concluded.

After the reception area emptied that evening, Imogene telephoned Sara with her daily report. She described the exchange between Sara's ex-sisters-in-law. "It sounds fairly typical," Sara responded. "Even when they were pretending to be sisters at the commune, I suspect they were at each other's throats. Bottom line is, they're both still in love with Jake. They just have different ways of showing it."

"Janie's really burrowed in as assistant publicist," Imogene reported. "She and Gus are still pushing the claim that the original idea for *Deterrence* came from the PR office."

"Total bullshit," Sara groaned.

"To top that off," Imogene continued, "Marianne thinks Janie is trying to seduce Jake."

"If she is, I'll bet Gus is the one pushing it, for his own underhanded reasons. Damn it, I'd like to fire Gus's ass, but then he'd be totally free to create PR nightmares for me. As long as I own him, I can make some use of him."

Sara paused, as if to consider the problem of Gus and his "girls." "Christ, what more does the man want? I'm prepared to give Sherri at least a singing role in the movie. Maybe if I offer Janie a screenwriting credit, everyone'll be satisfied for the moment. Until he finds his next girl to mentor. That seems to be his thing."

Imogene agreed, knowing she would never aspire to be one of Gus's girls. Much better for her, she thought, to remain open and honest with Sara. She proceeded to describe her recent dinner with Emily, during which their former roommate had talked up her theatrical experiences.

"This new play of hers is one of those experimental pieces that changes every night, but her famous actor friend Russell Mellini has attended a few performances, and that's given it some legitimacy. Emily is playing at least three different roles. Must be challenging."

"Yeah, and a great way for her to escape reality," Sara remarked. "As long as she's onstage, creating and improvising, she doesn't have to deal with real-life messes like the abandoned child in California. And the assault on Jim, which happened the same night she was on my property without my knowledge. I'm sure she knows more about that than she's letting on."

Imogene mentioned that she and Steve planned to attend a performance of Emily's play the following night. "Where's the theater?" Sara asked. "Way up East Fifteenth Street? I guess it's in the same way-off-Broadway neighborhood where my parents used to cavort."

Sara pressed Imogene for the exact address, prompting Imogene to ask, "Why? Are you thinking of catching the show next time you're in the city?"

"No, I'll probably pass on that," Sara replied. "I'm just curious. You never know what kind of crazy stuff can happen in experimental theater. Reality sometimes intrudes without warning."

She laughed as she added, "My parents were legendary for attracting the cops to their shows. Usually they put on some clothes when they were ordered to, but once or twice they refused, in defense of their artistic integrity. They were hauled down to headquarters, smothered in blankets. Later, they advertised it as part of the show."

"Emily made a point of telling us her play is mostly about ideas, and the nudity is incidental," Imogene said. "So I guess it's of no interest to law enforcement."

"You never know," Sara repeated, before saying good night.

Imogene pondered Sara's mysterious warning as she and Steve sat in the half-full theater the following night. She tried to follow the intricate dialogues and monologues delivered by the five-person troupe, but something kept her on edge.

One of Emily's characters, evidently running for political office, gave a rousing stump speech during which she exposed her breasts to underscore her feminist convictions. At the raciest moment, two police officers burst into the theater. "Just what I expected," Imogene declared to Steve. "Reality intrudes."

Emily, red-faced and swearing, was escorted offstage and into a patrol car outside. Most of the audience applauded. Steve joined in, while asking Imogene, "You think Sara is behind this?"

"Looks like she and Emily are improvising together again, like they did at college. Only now it's not the Junior Follies. It's the School of Hard Knocks."

Emily telephoned Imogene at the front desk two days later to explain why she had been arrested. It had not been about her fleeting display of public nudity. In a voice of pent-up rage, she described being held overnight at precinct headquarters, interviewed the next morning by an FBI agent, and released.

She declared it a pointless exercise, designed only to humiliate her, since she had previously been questioned about the sneak attack on Jim Guthrie. She still professed to know little about the two renegade musicians who had invaded Sara's recording studio that night. One of them, she now remembered, had called himself "Jordan River," an obvious stage name. He had

struck her as a shady character but a gifted improvisational musician. The other guy, whose name she couldn't recall, mostly followed Jordan's lead and supplied an occasional high tenor voice to the mix.

"It's time Sara accepted some of the blame for what happened," Emily sputtered. "She's always been careless about security. It's not the first time her house bands have picked up anonymous musicians off the street who do their thing and then disappear. My bandmates tell me it's happened many times before, although it never had such serious consequences. Sara's trying to brand me as a suspect, but it won't fly. You can tell her she's made an enemy of me, and she'll regret it, big-time. I'm still thinking of suing her ass."

"Instead of threatening to sue Sara," Imogene argued, "why don't you try putting yourself in her place? Someone assaulted her husband. Only you and the Stuyvesant producer saw the musicians who were in a position to do it, including this Jordan guy. Yet you both claim total ignorance about who they are and where they went. Why would a musician make a record if he intended to conceal his identity?" Imogene paused and then added, "It really does look like you're protecting someone."

"Bullshit. Why would I protect Jordan River when, for all I know, he had it in for me too? I think Sara's trying to deflect responsibility because her marriage has been shaken up. She'll turn on you too one of these days, Imogene, after you've devoted your whole career to propping her up. The minute something goes wrong, it'll be your fault. Just a word of warning: you better look after yourself. You're still working on your screenplay, right?"

When Imogene admitted that she was, Emily exclaimed, "You're kidding yourself if you think Sara will ever produce your movie. But maybe once *I'm* more established, you and I can get together and do something about it. By then, we won't need her."

Imogene couldn't deny that she'd love to see *The Nondescripts* on the big screen, by any means possible. "And in the meantime," Emily added, "I'm gonna make sure Sara's little plot against me backfires. My arrest got some attention in the local rags. It's free publicity, and our troupe plans to ride it for all it's worth."

"That might work," Imogene acknowledged.

"I gotta run to rehearsal now, but just think about what I said, Imogene. Remember, Sara isn't in business to look after your interests."

After Imogene hung up, she realized she'd allowed herself to be flattered. For a moment, she'd even shared Emily's indignation about her arrest. She had always felt much closer to Sara than to Emily. Maybe that could change?

Snap out of it, she ordered herself. Sara was the one who had given her a job and put up with her early shortcomings and mistakes. Not to mention befriending her all those years ago at college, when her other roommate had barely noticed her existence.

On the phone that evening, she related to Sara most of what Emily had said, omitting the mention of her own screenplay. Sara continued to insist that Emily must be protecting some friend of hers.

"I still don't see why," Imogene said, "unless this Jordan River character promised to help her become a rock star. Was their recording good enough for that?"

"I'll admit it has a certain weird energy," Sara replied. "I've been listening to it obsessively. It has Stuyvesant's trademark chaos and indiscipline, but there's also something idealistic about it . . . like folk musicians trying to master electric guitars on the fly, and not quite succeeding. I keep thinking it's gotta mean something."

"Is Emily's singing . . . passable?" Imogene asked.

"Let's just say it takes all of her acting skills to pass herself off as a singer. And her spur-of-the-moment lyrics aren't exactly poetry. I don't see that performance lifting her out of the showbiz doldrums."

CHAPTER 12



IMOGENE WILED AWAY some time at the front desk by rereading her honors thesis, mining it for clues. Among other things, she pondered what kind of musician or musicians could have produced the kind of impromptu recording Sara had described.

A few days later, on her phone call to Sara, Imogene read aloud a local newspaper report about the sudden popularity of Emily's play. The publicity following the arrest had indeed done the job. The small theater was selling out every performance.

"Good for Emily," Sara scoffed. "Let her have her fifteen minutes of fame. Maybe now she'll drop her silly threat to sue me for defamation of character. She'd have to stand in line behind certain other colleagues who want to sue me for plagiarism."

Sara sighed and then added, "Right now I've got much bigger worries. It seems insane that so much can be riding on a football game. But Helene has practically convinced me if the Redskins don't win the conference championship game against San Francisco on Saturday, our movie will be jeopardized."

"What's Jim's playing status?" Imogene asked.

"He's made a pretty miraculous recovery, and he wants to try. I realize the team needs him, but what about my need for a healthy, clear-minded husband? Another blow on the head could—"

Instead of finishing this thought, Sara gathered herself and continued, "I told Jim his health was more important than the game, and we ended up fighting about it. The team left for San Francisco three days early to get acclimated to the West Coast." Her voice wavered as she admitted, "He barely kissed me good-bye."

“Sara, I’m so sorry.” Imogene reflected that she had never known Sara to give way to tears. “The team won’t put him out there if it could endanger his health . . . will they?”

“Are you kidding?” Sara laughed bitterly. “If they see fit, they’ll squeeze the last drop of lifeblood from him and then toss his empty husk onto the trash pile. I’m telling you, if that’s what it takes to win, it’s not worth it to me. And if we can’t promote a film any other way, we should get out of the business.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that,” Imogene said.

“I’ll have to put on a brave face for the wives’ watch party on game day,” Sara continued. “Believe it or not, Danielle Starrett is hosting it. She had to be dragged kicking and screaming into our group when *I* was the host. Her buddy, Reverend Strickland, will be coming by to say grace again. We’ll need all his prayers, that’s for sure.”

“I like the Redskins’ chances,” Imogene said.

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, dear. By the way, I’m stealing your chocolate chip cookie recipe for my potluck contribution. You’ll remember what a hit those cookies were at my party. Bev is coming over on Friday to help me bake up a storm. I just hope I don’t end up choking on the goodies out of nervousness. I gotta admit I’d be perfectly happy if Danielle’s husband turns out to be the hero and Jim stays safely on the bench.”

“That could happen,” Imogene said. “Or Jim could play and do just fine.”

Despite Sara’s gloom, Imogene felt herself riding a shot of energy from revisiting the idealistic ramblings of her college thesis. “Sara, even if the Redskins lose, and Jim’s heroics aren’t enough to boost the movie, it doesn’t mean all is lost. You could still pull off that Murphy-Robarts reunion concert on the National Mall.”

“I think the local authorities might go for our plan,” Sara mused, “but that won’t mean anything if we can’t get the two geniuses together. How can we expect them to compose new music when they’ve barely talked for weeks? I’m beginning to think there’s too much baggage between them. Not only musical differences but also that wife-swapping business at the commune. I doubt if they would come together just to save my movie.”

"Maybe they would," Imogene insisted. "I just finished rereading my senior honors thesis. We used to believe anything was possible if opposing factions sat down together and worked out their differences—or, better yet, sang them out. Jake and Byron were such opposite personalities, yet their partnership was inspirational as long as it lasted. I know it was a different era, but there must be ways to reignite that spark."

"It'd probably be easier to strike a peace deal in the Middle East."

"Let me see what I can do about it." Imogene hardly knew what she was promising.

"I'm too distracted right now to even question that. I trust your good judgment, Imogene, but for the love of God, be careful. I don't particularly trust either of the geniuses."

It was not a time to be overly cautious. Imogene felt that if she didn't throw something of a bomb into the mix, all would be lost.

She eyed Jasmine, who had just gotten settled on her rug and tuned her guitar in preparation for another afternoon-long session of musical "Byron worship." *She's really not half bad as a musician*, Imogene reflected. *No worse than if we had constant Muzak in the office, although the "constant" part could drive me crazy.*

"Listen, Jasmine," she said, "you want to get Byron's attention, right? You'll never do that by just strumming away in the reception area. He needs to hear you play. He would be amazed at what you can do with his songs."

The girl stared at Imogene, those spooky blue eyes sending a shiver up her spine. "He already knows me. Very well."

"Yes, I remember what you told me about your psychic bond." Imogene strove to keep her voice light and friendly. "But I'm talking about his physical presence. That's what we need . . . right here, right now."

On a hunch, she picked up the phone and called Studio Two. The place had been officially vacant since Byron's departure for the Village, but she'd seen evidence that Stuyvesant was trying to reestablish itself there.

She sweated out several rings before Stuyvesant's producer answered with a growl. "Yeah? Who's this?"

"Andrew, this is Imogene Wittier, the publicist at the front desk. We've met before. Remember when your lead guitarist got into a public fight with Amorphous's lead guitarist, and I had to spin it for the press?"

"Yeah, right," he said. "So what're you accusing me of now? I already told the cops I don't know any more about who the fuck clobbered that football player."

"I'm not calling about that," Imogene assured him. "I've been listening to a girl singer here in the lobby, and I'm curious to see if her folk act can go electronic. I think she deserves to be heard. We need help setting up an electric guitar, an amplifier, and a microphone on the rooftop sound stage. Can you do that?"

"I know who you're talking about. That spacey chick who used to be married to Jake Murphy. Yeah, she's pretty nice."

"You already know her?" Imogene asked.

Andrew fell silent. Imogene hurried on, "Actually, I suggest you set up two guitars, in case somebody else drops by."

"I can't do all this on just your say-so, sweetie. Far as I know, that rooftop stage is only used for late-night parties and shit. Never during the day."

"It's not just my say-so." She might as well take the plunge and lie wholeheartedly. "These orders came direct from Jake Murphy himself."

"You shitting me? Nobody's seen the bastard for weeks, but suddenly he's issuing orders from his bedroom like the voice of God? Just to prop up his ex-wife?"

"He's nothing if not unpredictable," Imogene said.

"Guess I gotta obey, don't I? I'll get the stage ready, and you can bring your talent up there in an hour or so. She'll have enough amplification to blast the neighborhood, if that's what you want."

Imogene felt like a mad scientist whose experiment might blow up the surrounding city block. Jasmine struggled at first to hoist the heavy electric guitar and sing the poetic tunes over a microphone. She stuck to it gamely, and her performance soon penetrated to street level. During the hour Jasmine played on the rooftop, Imogene kept glancing down to see a crowd gather, disperse, and then gather again.

“She’s pretty good with the Robarts shit,” Andrew remarked, “but, Christ, it’s fucking cold up here. How long’s she supposed to keep this up?”

A week, Imogene thought, *if that’s what it takes*. “Why don’t we wrap it up for today?” she said. “Let’s do it again tomorrow. Same time, same place.”

The rooftop Robarts tribute continued for three afternoons despite a two-inch snowfall on day two. The crowds on the street came and went, at times clogging the sidewalk. On day three, a newspaper reporter and a police officer stepped off the elevator and onto the rooftop plaza. Imogene explained to them who Jasmine was, and that her performances were intended to honor Byron Robarts and awaken the original spirit of the company.

As the reporter scribbled in his notebook, the cop told her and Andrew, “It’s a little too heavy on the awakening part, folks. We’ve received several noise complaints, so I’m gonna have to ask you to shut it down.”

Andrew scowled, and Imogene sighed to think her experiment might have run its course without producing results. She gave Jasmine the “wrap-up” signal, but the girl had already stumbled to a discordant stop, and was staring past Imogene with wide eyes.

Imogene turned to behold Byron Robarts himself, looking more hermit-like than she’d ever seen him. His bushy blond hair and beard were overgrown, his gut was hanging out, and his eyes were bloodshot. He wore the garb typical of him in every kind of weather, jeans with holes at the knees and a T-shirt. Only a leather jacket protected him from the cold.

Byron looked sternly at Jasmine, and she looked pleadingly back at him. Everyone on the rooftop froze. Then he grinned, and they breathed again.

“So you’ve found your audience,” he told Jasmine, sounding gruff and gentle at the same time.

“Only because of you,” Jasmine replied with a tremor. “Following you is the only way to live. Together, we can touch so many hearts.”

Jasmine fixed Byron with a longing gaze. He shook his head and protested, “Better ease off a little, hon. Everybody knows I’m married.”

Nevertheless, he strode toward the stage and grabbed the spare guitar. The two played a prolonged version of the famous anthem “Impractical Dream,”

uninterrupted by any city authority or the chilly wind. As Byron's distinctive wail penetrated the neighborhood, sometimes reaching falsetto heights never heard before, cheers rose up from the street.

The police officer nodded in approval. "I guess the public has voted. More people think it's music than noise."

"You ain't asked for my vote yet," bellowed a voice behind them.

Jake Murphy had just strode off the elevator. He stood with his arms folded against his chest and his brow furrowed like a stern boss, although the effect was negated when his overcoat opened to reveal the pajamas underneath.

"You're on my turf," he growled at Byron.

"*Your* turf, asshole? You maybe forgetting I started this company?"

"Yeah, you started it," Jake replied, "then you wasted it. That electric guitar is a weird look for you. If you're trying to rip off my style in your old age, it ain't working."

"That's a laugh." Byron struggled to hoist the guitar higher. "You were a bum in the street, literally sleeping on my doorstep, when I took you in all those years ago."

"Yeah, and I saved your ass. If you hadn't signed me, Peace Enterprises woulda ended up an empty shell. That peace-and-love shit of yours was passé by then."

"So why'd you come back this time?" Byron asked. "Just to cash in again? Maybe you better go somewhere else and start your own fucking corporation. Or maybe join your sister's latest quest for world domination."

"Watch what you say about my sister. At least she's serious about what she's doing. You're still pissed at her because she dropped you for a football player. That was ages ago, asshole. Get over it."

As the two has-been musicians went on sparring, Imogene whispered to Andrew, "Get another guitar and amplifier up here, quick. Before they throw each other off the roof."

"I call it a miracle," Imogene told Sara on the phone that evening. "They started out fighting on the rooftop, and before I knew it, they had moved their battle to Studio One. They're collaborating, just like old times. Still hurling insults at one another, but actually playing."

No need for false modesty, Imogene thought, as she reported the latest developments and her role in bringing them about. "They'll never be bosom buddies, I guess, but at least they've come in out of the cold. I have a really good feeling about it, since they're occupying the same spot where they made those two great albums, and Andrew is down there recording their efforts. Jasmine is trying to participate, but mostly she's stirring up their competitiveness. Jake may have divorced her, but he's freaking out at the way she's latched on to Byron."

"Jake made his own bed," Sara said. "I don't know how you did it, Imogene, but congrats on a job well done. I wish I could be there to hug you in person, but right now I'm knee-deep in cookie batter ... your recipe, as you'll recall. I'm not too concerned about the geniuses fighting, as long as it's creative differences and not left hooks. I'm hoping for the best, music-wise."

"And I'm hoping for the best football-wise, when the Redskins take on the Forty-Niners tomorrow," Imogene said.

"Christ, yes. That too."

Sara laughed when Imogene related how her brother had defended her against Byron's attack. "That's too heartwarming for words, but believe me, Jake has been known to turn on me without warning. And when he does, it isn't pretty. I need to make use of his good will while I have it. Please keep dropping by the studio, and let me know the minute it looks like they've come up with a legitimate song ... something we can use to sell the National Mall reunion idea. We gotta get both the musicians and the Park Service on board, pronto."

As directed, Imogene slipped into the studio the next afternoon to witness the first serious Murphy-Robarts collaboration in more than six years. Jake, hoisting his guitar like a rifle, launched a hard-driving rant against the fickleness of women. Byron, strumming on his instrument, offered poetic ramblings about love at its most idealistic. Jasmine had retreated into a corner, and kept smiling at both musicians as they tried to reconcile their differences.

By early evening both had tired, but they agreed to return the following afternoon to continue the process. Jasmine followed Byron out the door, as if she intended to trail him all the way back to Greenwich Village, where his wife and three or four kids were presumably living.

Jake scowled at her departing back. Then he turned to Imogene, making her shiver once again like a naïve college girl.

"How about we go upstairs and talk? I need to hash out a few things. Maybe get an idea what my sister is up to."

Did he really just want to talk? Imogene promised to join him upstairs, after she stopped by the front desk to make a phone call.

When she got through to Steve, she told him about Jake's invitation, which would delay her getting back to the condo that evening.

"I'm betting you won't get back at all." Steve's clipped tone surprised Imogene. Could he be jealous? The thought sent a pleasant tingle up her spine.

"I have to meet with Jake when he asks," she explained. "Part of my job is serving as liaison between him and Sara."

"Yeah, right. I'm sure that's all it is."

Steve backtracked quickly, probably realizing his moral ground was shaky. "Just be careful, okay?" he advised. "The guy's temper is legendary. If he's angry at Sara for some reason, he might take it out on you."

Imogene rang the doorbell at the Guthries' former condo and was startled when Marianne answered. "Come in," the first ex-wife commanded, motioning Imogene through the door and toward an empty seat at the dining-room table. Jake sat at the head of it, scowling at a pile of papers and fiddling with a pen.

"We have business to conduct," Marianne explained, seating herself opposite Jake with a toss of her dark mane. "Just so you know, Jasmine and I live next door with the kids and their caretakers. I stay close enough to Jake to keep an eye on our interests, but I have a strict policy never to interfere with his personal life."

Imogene reflected that Marianne, besides being exotically beautiful, had always been plain spoken and hard-driving. She seemed to have Jake cornered now. He cast a bitter glance at her, and then picked up the pen and signed the top document with an exaggerated flourish.

"I'm playing along with your corporate game, y'know, since it's not like I have any damned choice," he spat. "I don't wanna be poor, ever again. Byron is the one who says poverty is holy, and he's full of shit. Since we've been back,

we've produced a couple of song fragments, and already they're generating paperwork like they're surefire moneymakers. Which means we gotta finish them, whether we feel like it or not."

"That creative playground you call Studio One takes big bucks to run," Marianne lectured. "The hours you spend screwing around have to be paid for. Just a fact of life . . . dear."

"Well said," Jake replied. "I must congratulate you, Marianne, *dear*, on slipping so easily into Leroy Pierce's shoes. You seem to have mastered the numbers game just by parking your cute ass in his vacant chair. Not that I'm surprised, of course. Even back at college, you were a hustler. Who could forget the way you 'performed' with the Sunburst? You mostly just shimmied across the stage and mesmerized every male in sight."

"There's always been more than one way to sell a song," Marianne acknowledged.

With a troubling sneer, Jake went for the kill. "At least my other ex-wife can carry a tune. She's getting herself a real reputation by crooning those Byron ballads."

"All of Jas's crooning won't heal her schizoid brain. That's why I've gotta be the practical one." Marianne made motions for Jake to go on signing the papers.

Jake held the pen aloft and then pointed it at Imogene, setting off her schoolgirl-like tremors again.

"So what're *you* doing here?" he demanded, evidently forgetting he'd invited her. "Representing my sister's interests, no doubt. I wonder what the two of you are cooking up."

Imogene flushed as Jake continued, "Are you and Sara gonna keep denying that she stole her movie idea from her own employees?"

"That's utter bullshit." Imogene pounded the table, seeming to startle everyone, including herself. "The *Deterrence* script belongs to Sara and Helene Frisk. They've been brainstorming and revising it from the start. Why do you believe a couple of . . . of office troublemakers over your own sister?"

Jake sat back with a grin. "I dunno who to believe. I always thought you had an honest face, Imogene. You still do, even now that you're shilling for Sara. I just have one question. What's in it for you?"

"Nothing," Imogene proclaimed, "except the thrill of seeing you and Byron play a reunion concert on the National Mall at the climax of *Deterrence*. Imagine the huge crowd you'll draw to an event like that . . . thousands, maybe millions, grooving to your new songs."

"Damn, you're good." Jake laughed. "I'll have to congratulate Sara, next time I talk to her, on hiring such a perfect sycophant. Don't ever change, toots."

Marianne gave Imogene an ambiguous smile and then returned to business. "As soon as you're finished signing those agreements," she told Jake, "I'll make myself scarce."

Once this was done, Marianne gathered her papers and left. Imogene found herself alone with the temperamental rock star for the first time since that incomparable fall day back at college, when he had dropped by her dorm room the morning after the Homecoming dance. Somehow, she had impressed him as the kind of wholesome, studious girl he had never experienced. He had asked to be taken to her father's farm and introduced to her parents. Afterward, during a stroll in the fields . . .

What does he think of me now? she wondered, shaking off the passionate memory. *As Sara's skill and nothing more?* She stayed in that mode, continuing to talk up the wonderful contribution he could make to *Deterrence*.

"I get it," he interrupted. "Sara needs me to costar in her movie. To provide some revolutionary music and portray her character's estranged brother, sort of an exaggeration of our real-life relationship. The ironic thing is, Sara needs me to do this to save her financial ass, especially if her football life threatens to go to shit. From what I hear, her precious Jim isn't up to snuff."

"He's determined to play through his injuries, Sara says."

"I'll bet he is. Hail the wounded hero, soldiering on against all obstacles." Jake got up from the table and motioned toward the living room. "That fancy new TV in there gets all the cable sports channels, including one just for football. Why don't we check and see if there's any news about Guthrie?"

"You watch football news on cable?" Imogene couldn't help chortling. It was hardly a rock-star type thing to do.

"Look, I don't give a shit about the games themselves. They're barbaric rituals for a bloodthirsty public. But it's one way to keep up with what's going on in my sister's world. The Guthries are a big deal on the NFL network."

Imogene seated herself on the couch, at some distance from Jake, while he picked up the remote control from the coffee table and turned on the TV. He flipped through several news channels before he arrived at the sports report he was seeking. A panel of commentators and retired jocks was discussing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the next day's combatants, the Redskins and the Forty-Niners.

Jake pulled a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of his shirt pocket and lit up. Imogene refused his offer of one and tried not to cough as he smoked. After a few minutes, he hissed at the TV, "Enough of this analytical shit. Get to the juicy part. The up-close-and-personal stuff."

He soon got his wish, as the report moved on to interviews with key players, taped during their earlier practices. The two quarterbacks pronounced their respective teams more than ready for the matchup. A star wide receiver for the Forty-Niners appeared, exuding confidence. Then Geoffrey Starrett of the Redskins popped up, exuding the same.

Finally, Jim Guthrie appeared, sitting on the sideline while the rest of his team worked out. He explained, his usual grin a little strained, that he was skipping practice as a precaution.

"How tough has it been, not being able to play these past few weeks?" the interviewer asked.

"Tougher than I expected," Jim said. "I guess I miss being a hero."

"What have you been doing to stay involved with the team during your downtime?"

Such inane questions rarely produced more than upbeat platitudes from athletes, but Jim had always been different. A dark cloud seemed to trouble his features.

"I'm mainly just hanging out at practice, trying to soak up some sympathy from my teammates. That beats moping around at home, where I got injured in the first place. My clash with the rock 'n' roll culture on my own property turned out to be more hazardous than anything on the football field."

"When you say 'rock 'n' roll culture,'" the interviewer inquired, perking up, "do you mean your wife's associations?"

"Yeah, you could say that." Jim hesitated, as if realizing he'd stepped on a land mine, but then continued, "My wife and I do come from different

cultures, so to speak. As everyone knows, my brother-in-law is a big-time rock star."

"You're speaking of Jake Murphy. How friendly are the two of you? Do you spend time together?"

"Not much," Jim replied. "He's not the kind of guy who tags along on my hunting or fishing trips."

He paused again and then proceeded, "The last time Jake came to our place for dinner, we went out afterward and had a long, weird conversation over a couple of nightcaps. He tried to explain rock 'n' roll to me. How it should be a declaration of war against the entire establishment."

"And did you feel threatened by that? Do you still?"

Jim shrugged. "Doesn't matter. All I care about is getting back on the field. Once I do, I'll be fine with everybody. I'll even put up old Jake and any female companion he chooses as my special guests at the Super Bowl—assuming we get there."

As the interview ended, Imogene ventured, "Wow. Jim's known for his honesty in public, but he went pretty far this time."

Jake blew out a cloud of smoke, crushed his cigarette in an ashtray, and glared at the TV. Then he picked up the remote and slammed it on the table.

"Honesty, my ass. He just torpedoed his marriage. I don't give a fuck what he says about me, but when he disrespects my sister . . ."

The rock star clenched his fists. Imogene was dumbstruck for a moment. Who knew Jake was capable of caring about his sister's feelings?

Imogene finally managed, "I don't think Jim meant—"

"For Chrissake, stop shilling for their marriage. That's not your job. He implied she was part of some evil plot to injure him. That's some crazy shit."

Jake's enraged face loomed close to hers. "That bastard's gonna betray her, just 'cause he can't get it together himself. I can see it coming."

"Sara can take care of herself," Imogene declared. "She's stronger than you think. And she and Jim really do love each other. I've known them long enough to be sure of that."

Jake sneered, "You think you know them 'cause you were there, all those years ago, when they first stumbled across each other in the Glendary dining

hall. They struck up a relationship that violated the campus social protocol. It brought the jock and rock cliques together, Romeo-and-Juliet style. You're a hopeless romantic, you know that?"

"I really am, about Sara and Jim," Imogene said. "I want to believe they can make it."

"Yeah, I'll bet they're your role models." Jake's angry features gave way to that half grin, half grimace that always set her heart pounding. He pulled out another cigarette and lit up again.

Dragging on it, he continued, "We might as well admit we're both screw-ups at marriage. Why else are we hanging out together like this? I should be next door, begging forgiveness from one ex-wife or the other, and you should be across town, trying to reconnect with that brilliant legal mind you married."

"I'm not just hanging out," Imogene reminded him. "I'm here on business."

"I know you're Sara's PR girl, but her husband just made your job a lot harder. He's declared me his enemy."

"'Enemy' is a strong word," Imogene protested. "Jim's a plain talker, just like you. His fans love that about him."

"If he were really being honest," Jake said, "he'd admit what really happened during that drunken conversation we had. That's when *I* came up with the original idea for *Deterrence*."

"Jim did sort of admit it, during our first story conference with Helene Frisk," Imogene said. "He told us about those thirty-eight caliber bullets you pulled out of your pocket and used to illustrate a point. He freaked out a little, because he couldn't imagine where you got them."

"Christ, they were a joke gift from some underground journalist who'd written an article about my music with the headline, 'Songs of the Resistance.' I pulled them out and set them up on the bar as if they were little soldiers. I made up a scenario where I was an amateur general, leading amateur soldiers into a hopeless battle against the establishment. That's all it was, a fantasy off the top of my head. I can't believe old Jim took it as a threat."

"It does sound like one of the *Deterrence* themes," Imogene reflected, "but there's a lot more to the movie than that."

Jake shrugged off her argument. "The Guthries can't deny I lit the spark that set the whole thing in motion. They snitched the idea and ran with it."

"Then why are Gus and Janie claiming it's their idea?" Imogene asked.

"They're following my orders. I approved their Hollywood trip, y'know. For one thing, I needed to get Janie out of my hair. A homely chick who writes cheesy song lyrics just ain't my type. I thought if I sent her and Gus to consult with that big shot Hank Frisk, the directress's ex, we'd have a chance to take back the project."

"I can't believe you'd sabotage Sara like that." Imogene searched Jake's stony face for a glimmer of humor. "After claiming to care so damned much about her."

"I'm doing her a favor. She's in over her head."

"I think she's handling everything just fine," Imogene said. "And who knows where ideas come from, anyway? Story conferences are free-for-alls. Whenever creative minds come together, all sorts of threads get tangled and untangled and altered. Everybody talks at once."

"I can see you're ready to defend Sara's project to the death. That's your job." Jake's characteristic half grin reappeared. "But what about *your* ideas? What if they start snitching those, too?"

"Not likely," Imogene said. "My college story isn't what they're looking for . . . at the moment."

Jake crushed out his second cigarette and then drew closer to her on the couch. "Pitch it to me. I'm all ears. Who knows, you might convince me your project is a better fit for my skills than *Deterrence*. You gotta dream big, toots."

As he leaned in for a kiss, Imogene told herself she ought to feel insulted at such blatant flattery. *He can't play me like this*, she thought. *Or can he?*

The seduction was blissful, but what would the aftermath be like? She rested by his side, breathing heavily as she recalled their only other intimate encounter, a lifetime ago in the Western Maryland countryside. She half expected him to nudge her off the couch and order her to disappear, to avoid any entanglement.

Instead, he opened the coffee-table drawer and pulled out a bag of weed and a pipe. He lit up, took a long drag, and passed the pipe to her. She took only two hits, reminding herself that she was supposed to be working.

Jake leaned back in a relaxed pose. “Stick around for the weekend. Or at least for the football game tomorrow. Some experts are predicting a Redskins debacle. I’ll need a smart, sympathetic commentator to nurse me through that.”

“I don’t think it’ll be a debacle.” Imogene wondered how a weekend with Jake would work. She was sure he didn’t cook or keep house, and he couldn’t expect her to pitch in. How did he manage to spend so much time holed up here?

She soon discovered that the ex-wives still attended to his needs as they had reportedly done at the commune. They’d continue their servitude, Imogene assumed, as long as they lived on Jake’s largesse. At 7:00 p.m., Marianne brought in a carry-out dinner from an Indian restaurant. Giving Imogene a brief sneer, she set up the meal in the dining room and then beckoned her and Jake to the table.

As Marianne slipped out the door, she passed Jasmine, who was carrying in fresh sheets for the bedroom. When Jasmine finished in there, she came into the living room and eyed the couch where Jake and Imogene had cavorted. She straightened up the pillows and then exited. Jake had acknowledged the efforts of both women with only the coolest of nods.

Imogene excused herself to put in a call to Steve from the living-room phone. When she got no answer, she remembered that he had predicted she wouldn’t return to the condo that night. Was he keeping himself occupied with the sexy paralegal? She shrugged off the question. *He’s staying out of my business, so I’ll stay out of his.*

CHAPTER 13



JAKE AND IMOGENE slept in the same huge bed that night, far apart, their passion evidently spent. In the morning, before they got up, Jasmine brought in a tray with coffee and pastry, put it on a side table, and disappeared with a toss of her long blond hair.

"Do Marianne and Jasmine mind waiting on you constantly?" Imogene asked.

"That's the wrong question, toots," Jake replied with a sharp laugh. "They're parasites. The real question is, should I tolerate them? They take decent care of me, and even raise the kids when it occurs to them, but they spook me out in their own unique ways."

"I guess divorce is always messy," Imogene ventured.

"Christ, they've elevated it to an art form. You didn't think they were scorned women, did you? They're more like divas who know what's best for me. Marianne forces me into business deals that could be lucrative but violate my personal sense of morality. Jasmine is the anti-businesswoman, which I'd respect if she didn't ram it down everybody's throat. She's so goddamned moral about the profit motive that it makes me wanna spew. Now that she's Byron's biggest devotee, she's more fanatical about pacifism than he is. I swear, sometimes I could choke on peace and love."

"I'm in no position to give marital advice," Imogene admitted, "or ex-marital advice, for that matter."

That afternoon, the two ex-spouses prepared the condo for football-watching. Marianne set up trays in the living room full of tacos and other treats from the neighborhood cantina. When the game started at 1:00 p.m., Jasmine prepared margaritas, for which Imogene was especially grateful. From kickoff on,

it seemed that every play brought potential disaster to the Redskins. Imogene barely managed half a taco before her stomach clutched with nerves, but the drink went down smoothly.

After the Redskins had fallen behind the Forty-Niners, 14–0, they mounted a scoring drive. Geoffrey Starrett caught several long passes, and Jim's backup at running back gained modest yardage. Then Jim himself came in and crashed through the line for a score.

When the tacklers got up from the pile, he stayed down. It took him a full minute to sit up. A trainer arrived and gingerly removed his helmet.

"Christ, not again," Jake said. "How many times is he gonna milk this 'wounded warrior' act?"

"Sara's watching this with a group of Redskins wives," Imogene murmured. "She must be dying right now."

Several team assistants helped Jim to his feet and escorted him to the sideline. Halftime arrived, with no news of Jim's condition. During the break, Jake ate and drank heartily and then lit up a cigarette. Imogene coughed but covered up by washing down her one taco with another margarita.

When the second half began, the Redskins struck quickly with medium-to long-range passes and tied the score. Then came the announcement that Jim Guthrie had suffered a recurrence of his previous concussion and would not return to action.

"Too bad for Sara," Jake said, "but the Redskins don't seem to be missing a beat without Guthrie. Maybe that black dude with the magic hands and the great name—Starrett, right?—is the hotshot player for now."

Imogene gave him a long look and then got to her feet unsteadily. Jake grinned at her and asked, "You leaving? Is it something I said?"

"No, but I gotta get back to work."

"You in the habit of going into the office drunk?" Jake asked with mock severity.

"I'm not that drunk. Besides, I have a feeling Sara is gonna call. She asked me to be available on weekends."

Jake kept grinning, holding his cigarette aloft. "Yeah, I guess you and Sara better not lose any time putting your pretty heads together and figuring out how one silly football game will change your destinies. Give her my love, of course."

"Sure," Imogene said. She left the condo and stumbled to the elevator. She made her way to the third floor, sat down at the front desk, and buried her dizzy head in her hands. The Saturday afternoon silence seemed to immobilize her. After the wall clock had loudly ticked off thirty minutes or so, she got up and moved to the coffee machine in Sara's office. If only she could remember how to work the damned contraption.

The sudden ring of the switchboard phone made her jump and spill coffee grounds all over the table. She lunged out of Sara's office to answer it.

"Imogene? I took a wild guess you'd be there. I came home early from the watch party. I couldn't stand being with those clucking wives a second longer. Their exaggerated sympathy just grated on me."

"How's the game going now?" Imogene asked.

"I couldn't care less, and that's the truth. I just want Jim to stay out of it. A man with his looks and charm doesn't need to play an insane sport like this. I can find him a meaty role in *Deterrence*. After that, I could star him in another action hero movie like *Bloody Skies*. There are ways of making him a nationwide hit again, but not if his body and mind are impaired."

"Sara, forgive me, but . . ." Had the margaritas liberated her tongue? She felt compelled to speak out. "If you propose something like that to Jim, you'll insult his manhood."

"Insult his manhood? Seriously?"

"I know I'm unqualified to offer marital advice," Imogene continued, "but if you try to save your husband from his primary career—"

Imogene started to apologize again. Sara interrupted, "Never mind. You're probably right. But it looks like football might fail us, no matter what we do."

After a moment of reflection, Sara asked, "Have you been in touch with Jake?"

"Um, yes. In fact, we've been hanging out all weekend." Imogene hesitated and then hurried on, "He says if he consents to be in *Deterrence*, he'll do it his own way. And he's still claiming the original idea was his."

Imogene related as many of Jake's remarks as she could remember. She couldn't resist adding, with a self-deprecating laugh, "He even asked me about *my* movie. I guess the idea of going back to college appeals to his sense of nostalgia."

Imogene filled the long pause that followed with more nervous laughter. Finally, Sara said, "Believe me, Imogene, I'm not trying to quash your dreams,

but we *must* stay focused on the task at hand. Getting both Jake and Byron on board for *Deterrence* will be challenging enough. That's what I need your help with, as long as you're at headquarters."

"Of course," Imogene said, recoiling from Sara's rather sharp tone. "Believe me, I'm all in."

"Thanks, dear." Sara recovered her characteristic warmth. "I know I can count on you."

Imogene couldn't resist saying again, "I wonder how the game is going."

"If you're that curious, I'll check. Let me grab my TV remote." A few moments later, Sara reported, "The Redskins just went ahead. Bully for them."

"That's good, I guess," Imogene said.

Imogene returned to the condo that evening and told Steve about her encounter with Jake, skirting the most intimate details. He nodded, as if it had been a strictly business meeting that happened to last all night. Steve filled her in on the details of the Redskins' amazing come-from-behind victory, which meant they would be advancing to the Super Bowl in two weeks.

She arrived at the office on Monday morning sobered up and determined that her next telephone report to Sara would be strictly professional. But when her employer's call came on Tuesday around noon, Imogene had a traumatic story to relate. "All hell's broken loose," she told Sara, forcing out a laugh to minimize the impact, although her hand trembled as she gripped the phone.

"That's all I need. What's going on?"

Imogene took a deep breath to steady her voice. "Byron Robarts came in a few hours ago, with Jasmine trailing him. That was kind of a shock. I've seen him on the rooftop stage and in the studio but never right here, in front of my desk. He announced he was there to make sure nobody was hassling Jasmine about playing his songs in the reception area, whenever she chose to. I don't know who complained about her playing, but I assured him it had never been a problem, and never would be.

"Byron thanked me for my cooperation and turned to leave, only to run smack into Marianne on her way in, carrying her briefcase as usual."

"Oh God," Sara said. "What happened?"

“She had on her trademark high heels and smart business suit, in total contrast to Byron’s grungy jeans and T-shirt and Jasmine’s psychedelic gown. She just kind of sneered at them and proceeded to her office—Leroy’s office, that is. I saw Byron and Jasmine exchange some kind of look. Then they followed Marianne into the office.”

“Holy crap.” Sara groaned. “Did they strike a mighty blow against corporate greed, like Byron’s always threatened to?”

“I heard a crashing noise and then Marianne yelled, ‘Stop it, you idiots!’ By the time I got in there, they’d overturned a couple of file cabinets. They were pulling folders out of them and flinging papers around like confetti. I told them if they didn’t cut it out right that second, I’d call building security. They laughed at that, so I threatened to call the real police. They left the premises then, but not before Byron told Marianne, ‘Someday, Mrs. Moneybags, we’ll burn this place down.’”

“Christ, what did Marianne say?” Sara asked.

“She was shaken up, but only for a minute. When I asked her if she was okay, all she would say was, ‘I’ve got work to do, so please help me clean up this mess.’ We put the cabinets upright again, and I reorganized the files as best I could.”

“I’m so sorry you had to witness that, Imogene, but I’m glad you were there to help restore order. I never dreamed Mr. Peacemaker himself would go off the rails like that. Maybe it’s Jasmine’s influence. Does it make you feel less safe in the office?”

“Not really,” Imogene reassured her. “It makes a weird kind of sense. Byron’s always genuinely loathed the business side of the company. Jake says he does, but admittedly, he likes the wealth and fame it brings. You could say Byron’s invasion of Marianne’s space was a symbolic protest, like setting fire to his guitar in Central Park all those years ago.”

While she was interpreting Byron’s act, she caught a glimpse of Janie approaching her desk. Oddly, on this bright winter day, she was carrying an umbrella.

“It looks like Janie’s back from California,” Imogene told Sara. She turned toward the new arrival and said, “Welcome back. How was your trip?”

Getting only a shrug and a scowl in response, Imogene returned to the phone and said, "She doesn't seem to be in the mood to talk about California."

"Tell her she better get in the mood real fast," Sara replied, "because she'll be giving me a full report about her West Coast activities before the day is over."

Imogene turned to Janie and let out a scream. The grimacing woman held the umbrella aloft with both hands, as if she had intended to bring it down on Imogene's head while her back was turned. Stopped in mid-motion, Janie smiled ambiguously. Without a word, she tucked the umbrella under her arm and exited.

"Holy Christ, Imogene!" Sara exclaimed. "What now?"

"Janie looked like she was about to bean me with an umbrella. Unless I'm imagining things." Imogene broke out in nervous giggles.

"Now I know it's getting dangerous at headquarters. What's her beef?"

Imogene gasped, "Maybe she's jealous because I've been hanging out with Jake."

"Then I guess you asked for it, Imogene, but I'm still concerned about your safety. You just witnessed two acts of violence in a single day. Knowing you, you'll probably say they're both merely symbolic."

"I don't mind if the atmosphere's a little volatile." Imogene felt a surge of excitement. "What's important is keeping the peace between Jake and Byron so they can get creative together."

"Yeah, and it better happen soon. How do you think it's going?"

"If they can just tolerate each other long enough, it'll happen. They'll fight and then they'll create, just like they did before." Imogene was again fired up to defend her senior thesis, which had explored that musical miracle when it was new.

"Opposites do attract in the studio," she insisted. "Jake can bring the popular appeal, and Byron the idealism."

"You're not in college anymore, Imogene, and I'm not your thesis advisor." Sara laughed indulgently. "It's got to be more than a fancy theory."

"Catching lightning in a bottle isn't easy," Imogene said, "but I can feel it starting to happen."

“Okay.” Sara sighed and then continued, “Imogene, I’m thinking of asking you to return to DC as soon as we get back from the Super Bowl. I know you’ve settled in at headquarters, but I’m gonna need you here.”

“Are you all right?” Imogene asked.

“What do you think?” Sara laughed without humor. “Things are falling apart in their own unique way, but through it all, the shooting continues. We’ll be incorporating some real-life scenes in the next few weeks. First, there’s a fashion show featuring local celebrities, including several Redskins wives. Then Jim, Laraine, and I will be off to LA for the pre-Super Bowl festivities and to attend the game itself as honored guests. We’ll find a way to include some of that hoopla in the film.”

“It’s such a shame, Jim being sidelined,” Imogene ventured.

“Yeah, he’s been moping around the house like a lost soul, but I’ve dreamed up a big-time distraction for him. I’m proposing he take a role in the movie as one of my military aides—a general, no less. We’ll have him perform some heroics for Elsie in the climactic battle scene.”

Sara paused and then resumed, “My main reason for recalling you, Imogene, is pretty simple. I need a friend at my side. A real friend, not those cackling football wives with their jealousies and backbiting. There are exceptions, of course—my closest neighbors, Pamela and Beverly, are good people—but I’m pretty sure most of the bitches wouldn’t mind seeing Jim and me go down in flames.”

Hearing footsteps behind her, Imogene turned to see Marianne approaching the front desk with a grim face. *Is she gonna attack me too?*

“If that’s Sara on the phone,” Marianne bellowed in her Brooklyn-tinged voice, “I need to talk to her. Put her on speakerphone, please.”

Imogene did as instructed, and Marianne announced, “Sara, you haven’t found time to talk to me since I became Acting Fiscal Officer. So I’m letting you know now, I’m expanding my reach, ’cause somebody’s got to start kicking some serious ass.”

“Just what I need to hear,” Sara said. “Whose ass are you planning to kick?”

“Jake and Byron’s, whose else? You’ll get those new songs you need, even if I have to lock the two geniuses in the studio under armed guard. If you approve, I’ll bring in the old Sunburst production team to crack the whip.”

"You think the old crew's gonna reassemble on your say-so?" Sara sounded incredulous, yet intrigued. "Honey, I know you used to front the Sunburst band in its glory days, but you gotta admit—"

"I know what you're thinking!" Marianne snapped. "That I was more decorative than musical back then. But don't underestimate my skills in that area. I'll seduce anybody I need to."

"I believe it." Sara laughed.

"And don't belittle my financial skills, either. I'm figuring this business out. No one else around here will come off their pedestals long enough to deal with accountants and bankers, so I have to do it."

"I appreciate your effort to fill Leroy's shoes," Sara said, "but, Christ, Marianne, you're only a few months removed from the commune yourself. Where did this hard-assed businesswoman come from?"

"It's always been part of me. While everybody else was blissing out around the campfire, I was putting in calls to headquarters. I found out from Leroy that the farming operation was no longer self-sustaining, and our days of easy country living would have to end. Once poverty reared its head, Jake and Byron lost all their qualms about returning to the city. They make a show of hating money until it starts to slip away."

"You sure you can light a fire under them?" Sara asked. "Persuade them to churn out a few antiestablishment songs we can use in the movie?"

"Shit, I'll just show them a few spreadsheets with plunging bottom lines. I'll warn them that if this trend continues, they'll be out on the streets with the derelicts they pretend to admire, playing their old hits on crummy acoustic guitars for pocket change."

"They both started out as street musicians, more or less," Sara reminisced, "which couldn't have been much fun. I'm sure Jake, at least, will cling to the rock-star lifestyle, but what about Byron? He's moved back to his artist's loft in the Village."

Marianne gave a sarcastic laugh. "That one has always sung a good revolution. Peace, equality, and liberty in perfect rhymes, with millions of followers singing along. Trust me, girls, there's nothing impoverished about Byron's digs in the Village. He likes being rich as much as Jake does. The only difference is that he hates himself for it."

"Maybe overturning a couple of file cabinets doesn't make Byron a true revolutionary," Imogene put in, "but what about those followers? They've been dormant for so long, but they could get stirred up when Byron reappears. It's happened all through history. Even people who claim to be pacifists, once they get organized and angry . . ."

"What then?" Sara asked teasingly. "You think the Robarts groupies are capable of forming an army? A real one?"

"I'm just saying," Imogene explained, "*Deterrence* could raise stronger passions than we're prepared for. What if your character, the Secretary of Defense, is targeted as a warmonger? What if people take it literally?"

"Don't worry about me," Sara declared. "I'm a tough enough gal to handle anything. Coincidentally, so is Elsie. And those passions you're talking about can only help the movie."

"Sounds like you're playing with fire," Marianne observed coolly, "but it could work."

"We'll make it work." Sara spoke with renewed energy. "I'll let you girls get back to it. And, Marianne, if the spirit moves you, feel free to fire any hanger-on at headquarters who annoys you or doesn't seem to be on board. We gotta start reducing staff, and I trust your judgment."

"I already tried to fire that creepy Janie," Marianne said, "but it didn't take. She's Gus's girl, so I guess she's untouchable."

On an unseasonably warm Saturday morning in early February, Imogene set out for DC from Penn Station, hoping to retrace the steps of her earlier journey with a minimum of drama. The train ride to Union Station was smooth, and the rental car she picked up there behaved this time. She arrived at the Brook Road house in northern Virginia by midafternoon, relatively unflustered, and noticed that snowdrops and crocuses were already blooming. It seemed a good omen for a new beginning.

Sara greeted her at the door with a hug, and Laraine jumped into her arms, shouting "Miss Imogene!" The nanny, Yvette, followed up with a warm smile and a handshake.

Sara and Imogene lounged in the living room while Yvette brought in coffee and a platter of fruit and crackers. Sara allowed Laraine to eat some grapes and show off her latest crayon drawings. Imogene made appreciative noises while she glanced around inquiringly.

"Jim left this morning," Sara explained. "He's on a week-long hunting trip with some teammates. It's an annual end-of-season thing. And, of course, this year they're really whooping it up, since they're the world champions."

Sara waited until her daughter and the nanny went downstairs to the playroom, and then continued, "To be perfectly honest, Jim and I needed a break. The tension around here hasn't let up. I thought the fashion show, and then the Super Bowl, would keep us involved and active with the team, but the festivities only made things worse."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Imogene said, "but I'll bet you got some great footage from those events."

Sara looked at her and then gave a hollow laugh. "God, Imogene, you're beginning to sound like me—a cold-hearted businesswoman, only concerned with keeping the cameras rolling. My husband damn near accused me of that. Sure, we got some usable shots, but it looked to him like I was going about my business as if nothing was wrong. As if his career wasn't in jeopardy."

"That's not fair," Imogene protested. "He knows you can't afford to stop the shooting. He needs to be reminded it's his business as well as yours. Maybe you should do more than cast him as a general in the movie. Give him some decision-making authority too."

"No matter what kind of job I give him, he'll be my employee. That's just what he doesn't want."

Imogene couldn't help wondering what would become of her "live memoir" project if the Guthries' story went sour. Sara wasn't in the mood to discuss this or any other business during the rest of the weekend. The women relaxed together and entertained Laraine, who whined periodically about missing her daddy. Once or twice Sara seemed on the verge of tears herself. She shook them off and always managed a smile when her daughter was around.

CHAPTER 14



ON MONDAY MORNING, Sara and Imogene arrived at the office early for a meeting with Helene Frisk. They sat at a round table in the conference room, while one of Sara's new administrative assistants kept the coffee machine going and piled candy from the vending machine into a communal basket. The women fueled themselves with chocolate and caffeine as they discussed how much of the recent filming might be suitable for the movie.

"Obviously, darling, we can't use anything that jeopardizes Elsie's strong front." Helene chomped down on a caramel-filled bar and chewed arduously.

"And keep in mind," she added as chocolate sauce dripped down her chin, "real life is supposed to add spice to our stew, not dominate the whole meal. Frankly, reality has been intruding too much these past few weeks."

"What reality are you talking about?" Sara asked, unwrapping a bar.

"Darling, it's the football culture you married into—star players misbehaving, and their wives reacting hysterically. Who expected the quarterback's wife to stop in the middle of the runway at a fashion show and pitch a hissy fit when she glimpsed a suspected rival in the audience?"

"Oh my God." Imogene glanced at Sara. "Your friend Pamela did that?"

"She pointed out the floozy for the benefit of the DC media." Sara laughed as she recalled Pam's theatrics. "Then she started to strip off the designer outfit she was modeling, while screeching, 'How about a little burlesque show right here and now? I'll prove I can be just as slutty as her, if that's what my husband likes!' Sharon Cushing and I had to rush out on the runway and escort Pam backstage, with me trying to stay in character."

"I'll probably keep that scene," Helene said, "for comic relief if nothing else. But you got way too real, Sara, at the Super Bowl a week later. Elsie was supposed

to be attending the event as an honored guest, representing the DC establishment. She was there to watch the Redskins win the whole shebang and cheer them on as a fan—or, at most, a former girlfriend who once had a fling with a player but moved on long ago. Your jealous shrew face was way out of proportion.”

Helene picked up a napkin and wiped her mouth. “You wanna tell us what’s up with that?”

Sara put aside the candy bar she had half-eaten and buried her head in her hands. When she lifted it a moment later, her eyes were shiny with tears, but she thrust her chin out.

“Sorry if I broke character a little that time. But I couldn’t help reliving the pregame party two days before, when I walked in on Jim and one of the team’s cheerleaders in a bedroom. They were getting it on, and I could tell from their babbled excuses that it wasn’t the first time. I told the girl if I caught her near my husband again, she’d be cheering in a body cast.”

“That’s all you got on him?” Helene exclaimed. “Honestly, don’t all the players fool around with cheerleaders?”

“No, Helene, they don’t all do it. Sharon Cushing’s husband certainly doesn’t.”

“Yeah, but he’s one of those Bible thumpers, right? How could *he* do anything, with Jesus and the holier-than-thou head coach always on his case? Sara, you gotta consider what Jim was going through. He was drinking, depressed, and not even on the roster for the Super Bowl. His life goal was gone . . . vanished.”

“I know he’s depressed, and I *am* taking that into account, but he blames me for his injury and everything that’s gone wrong since. As he sees it, I’m the one who allowed that guitar-wielding maniac, whoever he was, into the studio. How’s he supposed to forgive *me*?” Sara tried to resume eating her candy bar but choked on it.

“I’m so sorry, Sara.” Imogene reached out to pat her boss’s shoulder. She asked gingerly, “What’re you gonna do about it?”

“I don’t know yet. All I know is I need to finish this godforsaken movie, or I won’t have any future, with or without my husband. But God, how will I get through it? Just shooting those Super Bowl scenes was brutal.”

Sara gulped down some coffee and continued, "I felt damned near disembodied, being wined and dined in a luxury suite, with Jim and Laraine just out of camera range. Trying to pretend, to preserve my child's innocence as well as the movie's integrity, that I was having the time of my life. That I actually gave a damn who won the Super Bowl. That everything was fairy-tale wonderful, when in fact my life had just crashed and burned."

"It's called acting, darling." Helene pounded the table. "Otherwise known as being a professional in front of the cameras."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Sara's face hardened, and her eyes became clear. "From now on, I'll be a cold-blooded warrior when the cameras are on. You'll think I *am* Elsie."

"Bravo! That's the spirit." Helene pumped her fist and then unfurled it to massage Sara's other shoulder.

"Believe me, Sara, I sympathize. We've all been through this shit. Men are pigs, but we have to pick our battles. A cheerleader can't compete with you. Christ, I used to tolerate the ingénues who flocked around Hank, seeking his 'professional advice.' I knew they were just dessert for him, nothing of substance. It wasn't until he took up with a pseudo-intellect, a budding screenwriter and producer, that we had major problems."

"So you're telling me if Jim is apologetic enough, I should forgive him his one bimbo?"

"Hell, no, don't let him off the hook." Helene roared with laughter. "Make him pay, as only you can. Force him to take a subservient role in the movie. Have lots of makeup sex. Just don't break up your marriage over it. I'm betting your friend Pam won't kick her quarterback to the curb over a floozy, either."

Imogene figured if she applied this advice to herself, she should forgive Steve his dalliance with a mere paralegal. An affair with one of the lawyers in his firm would be another matter.

The meeting turned into an all-day workshop, as Helene passed out copies of the latest shooting script that she had drafted in consultation with the Hollywood Triumvirate. Sara's administrative assistants brought in sandwiches for lunch and kept the coffee and candy flowing as the women worked their way toward the climactic scene on the Mall. Sara jumped up periodically and paced around the table.

"We're betting everything on two wild cards," she declared. "Even if Jake and Byron come up with new songs, how do we know they'll be suitable for the movie? Christ, what if one or both of them stands us up for the Mall concert? We'll be stuck with a story without a climax. So what's our backup plan?"

"Don't worry, darling," Helene said. "There are always creative alternatives."

After pondering a moment, the director pointed to Imogene, causing her to jump in her seat. "Aren't you working on something, Imogene? Some small-town college drama? Why don't you pitch it to us? Maybe we could use some of your scenes as backstory. Or if worse comes to worse, grab some of your wide-open spaces as an alternate concert venue."

"It's called *The Nondescripts*," Imogene struggled to tamp down her excitement, fearing Sara might disapprove of any self-promotion. "It's a nostalgic tale inspired by some of my experiences at Glendary College—and some of Sara's too. Our roommate, Emily, also appears in it as the drama queen she was. The title refers to a group of girls in our hall who seemed unimportant on the surface but gradually . . . made themselves important."

"Cute title," Helene said. "Cute story too. Something to keep in mind."

"I should add," Imogene said, "my father owns several acres of land west of the college. There'd be plenty of space for a movie crew to camp for a week or two." *What would Dad say if I proposed that to him?*

"There's no way a plot of farm land in Western Maryland can substitute for the National Mall," Sara objected. "Besides, *Deterrence* is a political drama set in DC. Imogene's story has a different theme, setting, pace . . . everything. There's no way to incorporate the two."

"Maybe there is," Helene spoke to Sara but winked at Imogene. "Open your mind, darling. Why not give Elsie's backstory a small-town flavor? We could take her back to some relatively bucolic college life. That would be a nice contrast to the DC maelstrom."

Helene winked at Sara in turn. "Besides, there's always a chance that returning to your alma mater might jump-start your personal life. Maybe rekindle that Romeo-and-Juliet feeling you once had with Jim."

Sara frowned. "There are parts of my Glendary history I wouldn't care to revisit. Certain people too."

"I can't believe what I'm hearing," Helene teased. "Sara Murphy shying away from painful shit in her past? I thought you were fearless."

"I guess I gotta be." Sara seated herself and re-tucked her blouse, which had gone slightly askew. "Imogene, I'm sure you can dig up your latest screenplay draft. Why don't you go get it, and we'll give it a look."

Imogene jumped up and raced from the conference room to retrieve the script from her private files. Parts of it were in different places, requiring her to gather and reorganize it. This gave her time to consider how insistent she should be in pushing her own work, as Sara seemed wary of it.

When Imogene returned to the conference room, hugging her papers, the business meeting had devolved into something else. Helene and Sara were passing a lit pipe back and forth, both relaxing noticeably.

"Now I know I'm back in college," Imogene joked. Her two companions giggled.

"We've stressed out enough for one day," Helene said, handing her the pipe. "For the record, this isn't Sara's stuff. I know she runs a respectable drug-free workplace, and even frowns on cigarettes. But I always keep some California pot in reserve for when meetings turn hairy, and this story conference meets the threshold. It's not every day I contemplate spending millions of dollars to stage a war in the nation's capital."

Imogene took her first hit tentatively. Even in college, she had thought at least one person in a gathering should remain clear-headed. But how could she resist immersing herself in this soon-to-be carnival? She inhaled deeply the second time, her inhibitions fleeing as the room pulsed with creativity. "This is some strong shit!" she proclaimed.

"Has the office emptied out, Imogene?" Sara asked. "Lock the door, will you, just in case. I don't know yet how cool my staff members are with this sort of thing."

"I think a couple of them are still around," Imogene replied as she passed the pipe and then did Sara's bidding. "Ready to report back to Reverend Strickland, no doubt. Kinda like he's their real boss." She laughed, although she wasn't sure this was funny.

Helene sucked in a huge amount of smoke and let it out in two blasts. "Now, girls, I'm here to reassure you that if our production goes haywire, as it

well might, I still have Hollywood connections that can save us. What we're trying to do here is generally regarded in the industry as crazy but brave: setting the stage for a cinematic war in the heart of DC without being in total control of all the elements. The experts—including my ex-husband, the brilliant Hank Frisk—don't believe any of it can be done in real time. If it were up to him, he'd smother it in special effects."

"Could he be right?" Sara asked.

"I'm out to prove him wrong, if I can do it without getting anyone killed or maimed or thrown in jail. I'd like to drive the production right up to the edge of mayhem. If I call in Hank, he'll give us all his combat specialties—blood spurting like geysers, decapitations galore, spaceships with laser beams incinerating whole city blocks. I might as well be frank about my personal goal in all this, ladies. I want to escape fantasyland. I want to tell my ex to take a leap."

"It's also important for us to dramatize real people," Imogene put in. "I mean people who aren't necessarily warriors or politicians or celebrity wives. Regular citizens on the ground. They're the ones who'd suffer in any conflict. Even though they may be 'nondescripts' in a way."

"Clever of you to sneak in that word, Imogene." Sara grabbed the pipe and waved it, her tone chiding rather than scolding. "Nondescripts, indeed. You're still pushing your own movie."

"Yeah, I am." Imogene reflected that might be almost a firing offense under normal circumstances, but for the moment it seemed cool. She sat back, savoring her contribution, only to jolt forward at the sound of heavy footsteps outside the locked door. Before she had time to warn the other women, a loud knock sounded.

"Oh God." Sara pushed out a cloud of smoke. "Maybe it's kidnappers. That's always been my worst nightmare."

"More likely, it's the fuzz. We gotta hide this shit." Helene grabbed the pipe and slipped it down the front of her blouse. "Holy crap, that burns!" she yelped.

Sara tried to wave away all traces of smoke before she called out, "Who is it?"

"Nighttime security, making the rounds, ma'am."

"Just a minute." Sara got to her feet unsteadily and took her time unlocking the door. A middle-aged uniformed police officer stood there, looking at them. Imogene gasped at the sight of his holstered gun. *So this building has real security*, she reflected. *Not the bouncers we're used to at headquarters. Why are we all grinning at the cop as if we're daring him to bust us?*

"Your receptionist told me you were still here," he said. "If you don't mind, I need to do a quick run-through."

"Of course," Sara said, stepping aside and motioning him in.

He sniffed the air and said, "You ladies mind telling me what you're doing?"

"Not at all," Sara said. "I'm conducting a very important meeting. A marathon session, in fact. Vital decisions must be made tonight."

The armed guard seemed to be revving up to search the room, when the phone rang in the outer office.

"I'm sure that's an important call!" Sara exclaimed. "I better take it myself."

The officer stepped back, and Sara rushed out. "Allow me," she told the receptionist at the front desk, nearly pushing her aside.

She picked up the phone and gasped, "This is Sara Murphy. What's the good word?"

A moment later, she shouted, "Marianne! So glad you called. I'm gonna put you on speakerphone, so everyone here, including law enforcement, can hear your news."

She fumbled with the base of the phone until she found the correct switch. Marianne's voice boomed through the office. "I want you to know I've done what I promised. I confined Byron and Jake to the studio, under threat of losing their cash flow, until they wrote some actual, identifiable music. Damned if they didn't come up with two songs, both of them perfect for our purposes. One's a gentle singalong-type tune about social justice, and the other's a kick-ass indictment of power-crazy leaders."

"Fantastic, Marianne. When can I hear them?"

"Our dynamic duo is on their way to DC in the company limo, armed with just their acoustic guitars, to give you an audition. They should be there by around six-thirty."

"They're coming here tonight?" Sara exclaimed. "Christ, why didn't you warn us before now?"

"I wasn't sure I could keep Jake on board. He claims not to approve of the songs . . . too 'Byronesque,' he says. I've been telling him to snap out of it, that he can rock them up to his heart's content later on. I guess I was persuasive enough, because the limo driver just called. By some miracle, they're both still in his custody and about to arrive on your doorstep."

"Holy crap! I better get this place ready for them. Thanks for the heads-up, Marianne."

Sara ended the call and flashed a triumphant grin. "Let's hop to it, folks. There's a tape recorder and a microphone stashed away somewhere. We gotta haul those out, pronto. And I gotta call Yvette and ask her to stay late, yet again. If that girl didn't have a heart of gold . . ."

One of the administrative assistants, a muscular guy, unearthed the items from a storage closet. Under Sara's direction, he set up the equipment in her office. The receptionist offered to call home for Sara.

The guard watched this activity with seeming interest and then snapped back to duty. "Well, folks, it looks like everything's under control here. I'll be getting back to my post downstairs."

As he made a move toward the elevator, it opened. "Oh shit," the cop said, literally caught off guard. Everyone waited to greet the "dynamic duo," but only one musician appeared. It was Byron Robarts who stood in the entrance, holding a twelve-string acoustic guitar by the neck and waving the body of it at his audience.

"Wow," Helene said, "it's as if he just stepped out of a time capsule." Imogene nodded, remembering his legendary farewell concert at Central Park in the early 1970s when he had symbolically incinerated his career by setting his guitar on fire. The faded jeans, stained T-shirt, and denim jacket were all as usual. Imogene noted that his blond hair and beard, as well as his potbelly, had grown a bit since his rooftop performance in New York. She feared his recent stint in the studio hadn't done much for his health.

"Greetings, folks," he said in his gentle midwestern voice. "Seems like I'm about to audition for your movie but without my esteemed partner. He

decided, at the last minute, this wasn't his scene. We dropped him off at a bar down the street."

"Oh, that's just great!" Sara exclaimed. "God knows how much hell he'll raise, but at least you're here, By. Welcome." She moved forward as if to embrace him, but a hard look stopped her.

Imogene's mind raced back to the brief romantic history between these two—that summer fling of almost eight years before, when Sara had been working as a temporary clerk at Peace Enterprises. The affair had wound down when Sara returned to college, and once she took up with Jim Guthrie a few weeks later, she never looked back. Now Byron was glaring at her as if the wound were fresh.

Sara stepped back and then motioned toward her office. "We're ready for you," she said in a businesslike tone. "Let's see what you got."

Byron strode into the spacious room and positioned himself before the microphone. He tossed back his unruly blond locks, grimaced at Sara again, and announced, "Ready or not, this is a tune called 'The Twelve-String Hammer.'"

Sara switched on the recorder, and Byron started spraying chords as if his guitar were indeed a "hammer." After he had sung two verses advocating brotherhood and sisterhood among all factions of society, his listeners picked up the chorus. As he launched into the third verse, they clapped to the rhythm. Even the police officer swayed to it.

Byron finished with an emphatic chord and a stomp of his right foot. "How's that?" he asked Sara. "Did I pass the audition?"

Sara approached him without hesitation and planted a kiss on his cheek. "By, you're about to become a national treasure again. That song is as good as any of your old-time anthems—better, in fact. It's catchier, and right on for these times. I swear, it's your ticket to movie stardom. I'll see to that."

He smiled at her for the first time and then transitioned back to a frown as he hoisted his guitar again. "Better hold off canonizing me until you hear this next piece. It's a bit sharper edged. I call it 'Cross-Eyed Elsie.'"

"Jesus!" Helene exclaimed. "Since when does our heroine have cross eyes? And what does that even mean?"

"That's for you to decide, Madame Director." Byron launched into an ominous-sounding tune, striking intermittent harsh chords and crooning obscure lyrics that Imogene strained to understand. She surmised that the

cross eyes he attributed to Elsie were the mark of some demon—a silver-tongued woman who mesmerized people, only to lure them to destruction. Byron's voice rose to a near-shriek of condemnation:

“And every lowly suppliant
who looks into her eyes
is served a stew of poison
and a platter of her lies.”

The song ended abruptly. He gave a mock bow and then smirked at his audience. “Well? Am I fired from the picture?”

“That depends,” Sara said, rubbing her forehead, “on just what you’re trying to pull, Byron. My character is supposed to be a tough-minded public figure but not pure evil. Your song could incite your followers to attack me . . . attack Elsie. I’m not sure that’s what we want.”

“I’m not sure it isn’t, either,” Helene said, a slow smile forming around her prominent lips. “This movie is all about taking risks. The crowd at an open-air concert is bound to be unpredictable, no matter what we throw at them.”

“The dramatic potential of that song could be amazing,” Imogene heard herself say. Was it the weed talking?

“As for your audition, Byron, well done,” Helene continued. “For all I know, the ‘cross-eyed’ song might serve our purposes better than the peace-and-love ditty. I gotta ponder that awhile.”

“You movie moguls can ponder it to your heart’s content. I’ve given you all I got.” Byron un-hoisted his guitar and waved it like a scythe as he strode toward the exit.

He turned around at the elevator and announced, “If you decide to cast me, I’ll need a private trailer on the set. I gotta do my centering exercises and purifications before I perform. And warn Jake, no screwing around with my songs. My limo’s waiting, so I’ll say good night to you all.”

The guard, as if shaking off a spell, declared, “I’ll escort you downstairs.”

“My God, Sara,” Helene said as the elevator door closed, “you and the legendary folk singer must share a helluva steamy past. Whatever you did to him, he’s still stewing about it.”

"He can stew about it until he marinates," Sara said, "just so long as he draws the big crowd we need to the Mall."

Imogene piped up, "Have you forgotten about Jake?"

"Yeah, what about Jake?" Helene echoed her. "He'll want a private trailer too, if Byron gets one. I suppose that's doable, but I don't know how we're gonna persuade him not to mess with Byron's songs."

"I mean, what about right now?" Imogene asked. "Are Byron and the limo driver heading back to New York without him?"

"Jesus, they probably abandoned him!" Helene exclaimed. "What say we go out and look for him?"

The phone at the front desk rang. "Speak of the devil, I hope," Sara said. She rushed to answer it, once again brushing aside the receptionist. "It's so late, dear," she admonished. "Don't you ever go home?"

She waited until the girl moved away and then spoke into the phone. "Jake . . .? Are you still at the bar? How drunk are you?"

She listened and then demanded, "Why didn't you come in with Byron? He, at least, had the guts to audition . . . You were pissed because he wouldn't let you smoke in the limo? He must be on one of his cleansing phases. Wouldn't hurt you to try that yourself, sometime . . . Wait, I'm gonna put you on speakerphone."

She flipped the switch under the phone, allowing Jake's diatribe to fill the office. "Understand this, sweetness," he yelled. "Even if Byron is panting to restart his mega-crowd-pleasing career on the National Mall, that ain't me. Furthermore, you don't get to dictate how and when I become a movie star. Remember, I was a big shot when you were still a star-struck kid."

"I know that," Sara said, attempting a soothing tone. "All the more reason why I need your help. If you're not totally out of it, I'd like you to come to the office right now so we can discuss your role in *Deterrence*."

"I already know what my role is expected to be . . . water boy to the rejuvenated Byron Robarts. If I try to do my own thing, I'll upset the worshippers who treat his songs as if they're sacred hymns. I'm saying no thanks to that, sweetness. Give me a different script, or I ain't playing."

"*Deterrence* is the movie we're making, hon. There is no other script."

"You sure about that?" Jake asked in a needling tone. "What about the story your pal Imogene is working on? That nostalgic piece about our carefree college days?"

"That's a project on the back burner," Sara explained. "We've been considering using a few scenes from it as backstory, but that's all." She gave Imogene a perplexed look as she added, "Since that script isn't currently in production, I'd have preferred that it not be discussed outside the office."

"Don't blame Imogene for that," Jake said. "I coaxed it out of her during a close encounter we had recently. She had every right to pitch it. Is she there now? Why don't you speak up for yourself, Imogene?"

Imogene's face turned hot under Sara's gaze, but she kept her voice steady. "I'm right here, Jake. My script is nearly complete, but as Sara says, *Deterrence* is the movie we're making, not *Nondescripts*."

"Yeah, yeah, that's the company line. Exactly what I'd expect from a nice sycophant like you. But you better snap out of it, toots, or you'll get eaten alive by those showbiz sharks surrounding you. I wanna see you step out of the shadows. Sara, you got no business trying to keep her there."

"I'm doing no such thing," Sara retorted. "I've always encouraged Imogene to exert her creativity, as I do with all my employees. Imogene, why don't you take the floor as Jake suggested? Describe some of your favorite scenes from . . ."

"*The Nondescripts*," Imogene prompted. Her mind seething, she brought up several scenes based on real incidents that struck her as high-action. There was the Homecoming football game during which Jim Guthrie had been injured when his blockers inexplicably failed to protect him . . . a possible act of treason. That very night, while onstage at the dance, Jake had been attacked from behind with a broken bottle wielded by his own drummer. Several weeks later, Emily Palmer had barricaded herself in the dormitory room she shared with Sara and Imogene, and staged a fake suicide over what she called a political issue.

Running out of steam, Imogene sweated as she waited for reactions. To her relief, Sara erupted in laughter. "That stunt of Emily's wasn't one of her greatest moments, in my opinion, but she probably thinks it was. If we decided to recreate it, I'm sure she'd love to portray herself."

"I'd love to portray myself," Jake said, "just for the chance of redoing that Homecoming concert. I'd rock it the way it should've been rocked then, if my bandmates hadn't all been egotistical traitors."

"I'm thinking I could utilize a few of those scenes to illuminate Elsie's youth," Helene said. "So how about a compromise, Jake? You agree to appear onstage with Byron at the National Mall, and we'll also find a way for you to revisit your younger, carefree rocker self in the boondocks of Western Maryland."

"You ladies go ahead and work on that," Jake said. "Well, whaddaya know. Our trusty limo driver just walked in to retrieve me. Guess I'll be riding back to the Big Apple with the legendary folk singer, after all. Gotta skedaddle now."

After the call concluded, Sara and Helene congratulated each other on finding a way to placate Jake. They seemed to ignore Imogene's contribution. *Maybe that's showbiz*, she thought. *Hopefully, if they use my ideas, I'll get a minor writing credit. A few crumbs tossed my way wouldn't be too bad, as long as they're tasty ones.*

CHAPTER 15



“WHAT’S THE REAL focus of your story, Imogene?” Helene demanded a week later, hoisting her coffee cup and passing the candy basket. The conference room and round table were again in use, but the subject of the meeting had shifted to backstory, and the director had invited two additional participants who might figure in those scenes.

“You have such a diffuse cast—football heroes, football groupies, cheerleaders, hippies, Jesus freaks, frustrated virgins. Who’re we supposed to root for?”

Imogene took a deep breath and discarded the pitch she had rehearsed in private. Flattering as it was to have her script discussed at a genuine story conference, she flinched at the prospect of harsh scrutiny. “I call it *The Nondescripts* for a reason,” she explained. “The true heroines aren’t the stars or the activists on campus. They’re the dowdier, less visible girls who nevertheless make things happen.”

Seeing that Helene looked skeptical, Imogene was grateful to Jim Guthrie when he laughed and remarked, “From what I heard back then, some of those wallflower types could be the most diabolical chicks around.”

“Those fat-asses in our hall, Betty and Shelley . . . they’re the ones who started the rumor that cost me the election for Homecoming Queen.” Emily smirked at Imogene and then added, “That’s probably the most significant thing your ‘nondescripts’ ever did.”

“As long as we’re revisiting those days, Em,” Sara said, “I’ll concede that everyone from the college president on down knew you would’ve won any fair contest for hottest babe on campus. But admit it: if you’d been elected, you would’ve blown off the halftime ceremony, just to prove you were above it. All you cared about by then was seducing Mark Piluras, the drama instructor with the Hollywood connections.”

"So you actually barricaded yourself in your room to protest Mark's threatened firing?" Helene asked Emily, fascination in her voice.

"Damned right I did," Emily proclaimed, laughing. "I stayed holed up there until the college president arrived and withdrew his threat to expel me and fire Mark. After he'd capitulated, I emerged from the room with a knapsack slung over my shoulder, charged down the hall, and met Mark waiting in his car outside. A friend of mine from the drama department got it all on videotape. We headed for Hollywood and never looked back."

"Yeah, you never looked back," Sara observed, "until the day you left Mark and your kid in Tinsel Town and came back east with a famous actor you somehow seduced, to try and restart your stalled career."

Emily choked off her laughter and flushed beet red. "It's a complicated situation. And it's really none of your business."

Helene held up a restraining hand. "Let's can the catfight for now, girls. Imogene, here's my opinion of *Nonscripts*. It's a sweet, nostalgic tale that Sara might consider producing in its entirety at some future time, if she decides to return to low-budget fare. As far as the *Deterrence* backstory is concerned, there *is* one element I find especially intriguing."

She paused and then rendered her judgment. "I'd like to make use of the real-life rivalry between Emily and Sara."

"What do you mean 'rivalry'?" Sara demanded. "I'm the boss here. Emily has asked me, numerous times, to hire her in various capacities. That makes her my employee, not my rival."

"Yeah, yeah, we all get that," Helene said, "but your competitiveness with her goes way back. Imogene's script makes that clear."

Helene's intense gray eyes roved between Sara, Emily, and Jim, causing them all to flinch. "The small-town campus will be the incubator where Elsie starts to develop into the future national leader and emotionally complex woman she's destined to be. She'll have an Emily-like best friend, sometimes a collaborator and at other times a competitor. Of course, there's a fly in the ointment, the kind that can turn best buddies into eternal enemies quicker than anything else. I don't have to spell it out, do I?"

"Why're you looking at me?" Jim's tone was jocular, but he picked up a napkin and wiped his brow.

“Two ambitious, hormonal girls fall in love with the same guy . . . who just happens to be the campus football hero. It’s perfect.”

“That never happened.” Imogene glanced frantically around the table. “Not in real life or in my script. Sara and Emily were competitors for sure, but they didn’t . . . it wasn’t like that.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Helene shot back. “I’m rewriting history. Elsie will lose that football hero, the only boy she ever loved, to her former best friend. A decade or so later, we pick up her life as a workaholic career woman, who in her spare time follows a pro football team and its star running back, that very same lost love. What will happen when she reconnects with him as a powerful and prominent woman? Will she succeed in pushing aside her ancient rival?”

As Helene paused, Sara snapped, “Don’t leave us in suspense. Tell us. Which woman, in your scenario, wins this battle?”

“Guess,” Helene teased.

Sara frowned at her husband, as if he’d created this “rivalry” for his own amusement. He wiped his face again and then put down his napkin and returned her gaze. Imogene detected a trace of the boyish grin that always lit up his face when he chose to let it loose. That look had rarely appeared since he’d been declared unfit to play football.

“What’s the matter, honey?” he wheedled. “You gotta admit that’d be a much juicier role for me than just being another of your military aides. You got a problem with that?”

“Shit, no,” Sara shot back. “Who could be better suited than you to play a stud that women fight to the death over?”

She shifted her gaze to Emily and resumed, “As long as we’re clear it’s just acting.” “Sure it’s just acting,” Helene agreed, “but if I manage to stir up a hornet nest and capture some of it onscreen, so much the better.”

She looked them all over and then chuckled. “Frankly, the bigger challenge will be making you people look like college students again. Luckily for you, I know some hotshot makeup artists. And once we get to the boondocks, we’ll put out a casting call for extras from the Glendary drama department. I’ll bet that place is hopping with young talent, just like it was in your day.”

Helene began to plow through Imogene’s script, marking with a red pen the areas to be expanded or revised. As the love triangle that Imogene had

never quite concocted herself rose from the ruins, she bounced from elation to dismay. She feared she would barely recognize her creation once the director was done with it.

Then she realized Sara's steely gaze had shifted to her. *My God*, she thought, *what if this revised story causes more trouble in Sara's marriage? Will she blame me, even though it wasn't my idea?*

On a moderately warm, pre-spring Friday in early March 1989, a partial cast and crew traveled the eighty miles from DC to Glendary College to begin filming the planned backstory scenes. They had arranged to spend three days shooting in the dining hall and one of the women's dormitories and then return a few weeks later to organize and shoot a party scene at the campus amphitheater.

The technicians nearly filled the one hotel in town. The actors and the director stayed in unoccupied dorm rooms on campus during the weekend, where they continued to refine and rehearse the scenes. Imogene took this opportunity to visit her parents at the farm.

She sat with her mom and dad at the dinner table, explaining how and why a portion of an actual movie was about to emerge from the pile of writing that used to litter her room. They listened in silence.

"Well, what do you think?" she prodded. "I know how skeptical you were that I'd ever make any waves in the filmmaking business."

"It's a beginning," her mother conceded, "but how far will it take you toward a real career?"

"You better not start packing your bags for Hollywood just yet," her father said.

For the love of God, can't you be proud of me for once? Imogene nearly blurted this retort but held her tongue. They were infuriating, but they had a point.

"It's not much," she said, "but you never know. This one credit could take me farther than you think."

"How?" they both asked.

"I'm still figuring it out, okay?" Imogene spoke defiantly, while reflecting that there was also a chance her small step forward could backfire.

The cast and crew set up their first shots in the dining hall. This scene would feature young Elsie, portrayed by Sara, and fellow students played by Jim and Emily, as a dicey chemistry developed among the three. Imogene stood on the sidelines with a crowd of students, who watched enviously as a chosen few of their classmates grabbed some camera time. Several seemed impressed to learn she had written the original script.

Imogene admitted that the scenes she had conceived, based on her own experiences as a Glendary student several years earlier, had been altered during the collaborative process. "That's the way films get made," she lectured. "It takes an army, practically. Everyone pitches ideas constantly. No one person can claim ownership of a script."

After the dining hall filming was complete, the crew set up in Mary Ellen Clemens dormitory. A screaming showdown would occur between the two girls, during which Emily's character, "Jennifer," would push "Elsie" out of their room and lock the door.

Helene was pumping up Sara and Emily to "let it all out" during their confrontation, when a student approached and informed the director that there was a long-distance phone call for her in the front office.

"Is it Jake Murphy, by any chance?" Helene demanded. "I left a message at headquarters asking him to call me here." The student shrugged.

"It better be him," Helene said. "I need confirmation he's gonna show for the party scene two weeks from today." She hustled down the hall to the office.

"Who's she kidding?" Emily said. "She's counting on Jake Murphy to keep his word? Good luck with that."

"I think he'll come," Sara replied, "if only because he gets nostalgic for the old campus sometimes."

"I'm sure he'll be here," Imogene put in. "He says he wants to recreate the Homecoming performance that went wrong all those years ago. Get it right this time."

"I'll believe it when—" Emily began.

"From what *I've* heard," Imogene interrupted, "he's more gung ho about returning here than he is about performing with Byron on the National Mall."

Sara smiled at Imogene's newly assertive tone, while Emily stared. *I'm standing up for my piece of the action*, Imogene thought, eyeing both of them. *Don't act so surprised, girls.*

Helene returned to the group and announced, "Well, it isn't Jake on the phone. No such luck." She gave Imogene a look as she continued, "It's your husband."

"I wonder why Steve's calling me here." Imogene made a move toward the office.

"Not you, darling." Helene put up a hand. "He's calling Sara and me to discuss his latest plan to get both the bands he manages, Amorphous and Stuyvesant, into the movie. We might as well settle this with him right now, Sara. Come along."

As Sara accompanied Helene down the hall, the director called over her shoulder, "This might last awhile, folks. Take thirty minutes."

The crew dispersed in search of snacks and soft drinks from the vending machines scattered through the dorm. Imogene drifted down the hall toward the office, hoping to eavesdrop on the discussion. All she managed to overhear were a few dry facts and figures, so she gave up after a few minutes and returned to the set.

Her breath quickened as she realized the crew had left Jim and Emily alone. She approached the room stealthily, expecting to see something shocking yet inevitable. Sure enough, the two of them were on one of the beds, rolling around and groping. Imogene took it in for a prolonged moment.

She backed away, ran down the hall, and burst into the office where Helene and Sara were still on their conference call. "Excuse me for interrupting," she panted, "but Sara . . . can I have a word in private?"

Sara joined her in the hallway. "Well, Imogene? This better be good."

Imogene fumbled for the right words. What if Sara blamed her somehow for conceiving this scenario?

She blurted, "Is it too late to withdraw my scenes from the picture—the ones featuring Emily?"

A look of horrified comprehension passed over Sara's face. "Why? What did you just see?" she demanded and then added, "Never mind, don't tell me. I can guess."

Sara motioned toward the equipment-packed upper hall. "How do you imagine we can stop now? And write off three days of location shooting?"

"Even so, if I were you, I'd fire the bitch. Until this moment, I never fully realized what she's capable of."

"Listen to me." Sara put a hand on Imogene's shoulder, perhaps to steady herself. "It's a bit naïve of you to be so shocked. Besides, it's my problem, not yours, so put it out of your mind. Once I wrap up this negotiation with Steve, we'll proceed with today's shoot as planned. Please don't mention this to anyone else. Understood?"

"So it's just business as usual?" Imogene asked in disbelief, but Sara had returned to the office.

Imogene lingered outside until the conference call wrapped up. Soon thereafter, the cast and crew reassembled on the set.

Helene beckoned Sara and Emily. "Now, girls, remember what we discussed before. I want you to take this scene as close to over the top as you can, without actually killing each other."

"Got it," Emily said with a grin. Sara nodded coolly. Jim excused himself and moved down the hall, as if embarrassed to watch.

"Action!" Helene said. Sara and Emily began shouting lines, their voices rising with each insult. At the peak of the argument, Emily gave Sara the scripted push toward the door. Sara was supposed to stumble into the hall. Instead, she regained her feet and pulled back her fist. She landed it squarely in the middle of Emily's face.

Emily screamed and fell backward, hitting the hard floor. She sat up and put a hand to her mouth.

"Are you crazy?" she yelled at Sara, spitting out a tooth along with a spurt of blood. "Oh my God! Look what you've done."

"Cut!" Helene said. "What in Christ's name—"

Sara was brazen enough to smile at the director. "I guess that was a little more over the top than you expected. I got carried away with the improvisation. Sorry about that."

"Improv is one thing, but altering the face of one of my actors is something else. I dunno if this is fixable. Mabel, what do you think?" Helene beckoned her makeup assistant.

As Mabel rushed forward, Helene put up a hand. "On second thought, maybe I'll keep it real. Keep the punch in the scene, so to speak. Guys, let's get some close-ups. She's swelling up already."

The crew moved in to capture Emily's angry, wounded face. "Yeah, be sure to get plenty of close-ups," she spat at them. "It'll give me all the evidence I need to sue Sara Murphy's ass."

"So Emily's going ahead with the lawsuit? On top of everything else she's done to you?"

Imogene put this question to Sara one Friday night in late March as they sat at the dining-room table after dinner. Yvette had put Laraine to bed and then taken her leave. The women were having a nightcap, which had become a frequent ritual in the few weeks since Sara's life had blown up. It was touch and go whether they would gather enough energy to do the dishes before they went to bed.

"I've already paid her dental bill," Sara said. "And now that my husband has moved into her new rental in Manhattan, it makes her look so silly and vindictive to come after *me*. She can't seriously claim I've ruined her acting career. Christ, I gave her the one legitimate opportunity she's had since she came east. Why can't she just declare victory and leave me alone?"

"It's not much of a victory, in my opinion," Imogene said. "When you threw Jim out, he was fair game for Emily. He had to do something. I doubt hooking up with her was what he really wanted. He'd barely spoken to her since college."

"Tough shit. All I know is, *I* can't live with him anymore." Tears welled up in Sara's eyes, but, as usual, she fought them back.

"I gotta say, though," she added, "I think Emily's biggest mistake was letting Russell Mellini go. He should have been her best option, career-wise—an established actor with coattails."

"You snapped him up pretty fast yourself," Imogene observed. "For the movie, I mean."

"Who could be more perfect? He has just the right maturity and dignity for the role of Elsie's deputy. It was amazing, the way he auditioned for me on the phone the day his play closed and plunged right in the next. The scenes are literally being written as we film them, but he takes it in stride."

Sara smiled through her tears, making Imogene suspect she found her new costar appealing in a more than strictly professional way. Russell Mellini's dark-eyed Italian good looks were quite a contrast to the curly haired, blue-eyed, fun-loving Jim. Russ was a decade older at least and seemed made for three-piece suits and business attire.

"Speaking of fast writing," Imogene said, "it looks like you're finally putting Gus and Janie to good use. I hear they've been faxing new shooting script pages from New York practically every day."

"Yeah, although they probably don't realize everything gets rewritten on the spot. At least they've backed off their threat to sue me over the original script. Hopefully it'll stay that way, if they get the screenwriting credits they want."

Sara caught Imogene's inquiring eye and continued, "Don't worry, dear, you'll be recognized too. We've shot three scenes based on your script. Whether we use them or not, you've got a credit coming."

"I'm sorry the backstory stirred up such . . ." Imogene fumbled for a strong enough word.

"As I've told you repeatedly, Imogene, I don't blame you. We should both stop confusing the movie with real life. It's just that *Deterrence* has ignited issues that must have been simmering beneath the surface for years."

Sara let out a deep sigh and chugged the rest of her drink, while Imogene continued to sip hers. She could see Sara was putting up a brave front, although her hands shook, and there were dark circles under her eyes. At least, Imogene reflected, this nervous and weary look would suit "Elsie" perfectly.

"It's Laraine I'm most worried about," Sara continued. "She cries every morning and asks when daddy is coming home. I try to explain that we're having a disagreement but that he's still her daddy and always will be. He usually calls her during the afternoon, when I'm out. With my schedule as crazy as it is right now, and Jim not around, I know she's being shortchanged. Thank God she has Yvette and Mrs. Jones."

Imogene made sympathetic noises and then pressed on: "I know the party shoot at Glendary the other day turned into a bust, with Jake not showing, but it was still kind of fun. Any chance it'll end up in the movie?"

"We'll try to salvage a few shots." Sara smiled indulgently at Imogene. "I know you were thrilled to see your 'nondescript' friends Betty and Shelley on

the dance floor, basking in the spotlight for a minute just as you promised them. But most of the kids found Stuyvesant's music weird and un-danceable. Hardly a substitute for Jake's."

"Of course not," Imogene said, "but how worried should we be that Jake might stand us up again when it's time for the really big show?"

"I'll threaten to sue him if he does. I know we barely have even a verbal agreement, but he knows how important it is. And people are always threatening to sue *me* with less basis than that."

The women discussed the upcoming weekend filming to take place in the imitation Pentagon office downstairs. Imogene observed: "I understand it's just you and Russell in the scene tomorrow. Any chance of romantic feelings developing between Elsie and her deputy?"

"It's not written that way. Tomorrow's scene is supposed to be combative, not flirty. We'll air our policy disagreements, especially about how dangerous Elsie's brother is. The deputy will advocate having him arrested on suspicion of planning a bomb attack against the government. Elsie will insist on standing up to her wayward brother without the assistance of law enforcement. That's all I can say right now. I don't have any lines past tomorrow's."

Sara let out a staccato burst of laughter, as if to acknowledge the craziness of this on-the-edge production. She added, "Feel free to come downstairs tomorrow morning and watch the shoot. If you have any suggestions about adding some romance to the mix, tell Helene. She's open to all kinds of improvisation."

The next morning, Imogene tried to slip downstairs as unobtrusively as possible. She half expected to glimpse something strange going on behind the scenes, as she had at Glendary.

Stealth proved useless when Laraine spotted her from the playroom and yelled, "Hey, Miss Imogene!" She took the little girl onto her lap so they could watch the filming together. The scene between Elsie and her deputy was argumentative as expected, but Imogene thought she detected a spark of something else barely beneath the surface.

Sycophants

Laraine stayed quiet while the filming was in progress, focusing her wide eyes on the actors. When they took a break, she whispered in Imogene's ear, "Does that man want to marry my mommy? He's smiling at her!"

"Honey, it's just . . . part of the story." Imogene gave the child an awkward pat on the head.

CHAPTER 16



WHEN APRIL ARRIVED in Washington, cherry blossoms burst forth, and the National Mall became a riot of pink and white. It seemed a made-to-order setting for the climactic scenes of *Deterrence*, which were scheduled to take place on a weekend late in the month, rain or shine. Imogene figured that the local populace would be in lingering party mode after the Redskins victory parade along Pennsylvania Avenue several weeks earlier. The sight of movie production trailers and arc lights on and around the Mall, and the prospect of a historic concert near Capitol Hill, would reenergize the city.

Since DC was the seat of government and political agitation, Helene predicted there would be real battles galore, leading up to the fictitious war. “We’ll capture as much of that as we can during our two-day shoot,” she told Sara and Imogene during a final consultation. “Trust me, there’ll be plenty of turbulence popping up everywhere, without us doing anything to encourage it.”

“And the idea is for Elsie to put herself in the middle of it, mixing in and mediating wherever she can,” Sara added.

“Is she really gonna fire her whole staff and try to go it alone?” Imogene asked. The latest shooting script, leading up to the Mall event, called for Elsie to fly into an epic rage and declare that her deputy and top military advisers were all cowards, unfit to serve her. Imogene suspected Sara was pushing this story line for personal reasons. She didn’t want either Russell Mellini or Jim Guthrie, who had briefly played those roles, to appear on the battlefield set where they might run into each other.

Helene explained the out-of-sequence shooting schedule. “We’ll film the post-battle scenes first, on Saturday. We’ll wrap those up early Sunday

morning and be ready to launch the preconcert around one-thirty or two. Hopefully, Amorphous will keep the crowd reasonably entertained for at least ninety minutes. And then . . . the miracle reunion that music fans have been waiting and longing for. When Jake and Byron finally take the stage in late afternoon and deliver their new songs, I want the crowd to be mesmerized and joyful, not anticipating any trouble. Later, as the performance reaches its climax . . . that's when things turn scary."

"And that's when the Secretary of Defense is called upon to save the day," Sara declared.

On the Friday evening before the weekend shoot, Sara and Imogene watched the local news at home. It appeared a religious war was brewing downtown. Two diametrically opposed ministers, Christopher Strickland and James Randall, had organized groups of followers to demonstrate the following day. The two flocks planned to start on opposite sides of the Mall and march toward each other.

Pre-demonstrations had already begun. Reverend Strickland was interviewed against a backdrop of supporters who shouted and held placards denouncing predatory rent increases and police brutality. The report then switched to Randall, whose troops were shouting with equal fervor about the evils of abortion, gun control, and secular politicians who feared nuclear war and didn't trust in God's plan for the end times.

By dawn the next morning, Sara and Imogene were headed downtown in Sara's car. They would first join Helene at the anticipated site of the religious battle, which the crew would film documentary style. Later, they would accompany the director as she conducted an inspection tour of the stationary facilities and equipment.

The city authorities had been generous in allotting space for the production. Three trailers had been set up on Constitution Avenue: two for various unit managers, production designers, and other crew to allow easy access to the Mall; and one near the bandstand at Capitol Hill to facilitate the concert and accommodate the musicians. Sara and Helene had been granted exclusive use of parking spaces for their cars, and there were additional spots for two

large equipment trucks. Jake and Byron, on their arrival, would each have use of a private mini trailer near the Hill.

While Sara merged onto the Capital Beltway, she asked Imogene to pick up the car phone and punch in Marianne's number at headquarters. She took the phone and demanded of her ex-sister-in-law, "Do we have your absolute guarantee that both Jake and Byron will be in DC by four p.m. tomorrow, ready to take the stage—even if Jake isn't feeling Byron's songs, and Byron is pissed about that?"

She listened to Marianne's reassurances, gave a brief "okay" and then handed the phone back to Imogene.

"Is it gonna happen?" Imogene demanded. "What's the backup plan if one or both of them doesn't show?"

"There isn't one," Sara admitted, "but don't worry. Marianne will light a fire under them. Now that she holds the purse strings, she's damned near Wonder Woman in their eyes. Anyway, that's tomorrow's problem. Our first order of business is to catch up to the battling ministers."

Sara motored downtown in good time and located her designated parking space, near the site of the anticipated Strickland-Randall confrontation. Helene was there, positioning her crew and bellowing into a walkie-talkie. The two ministers were approaching one another, followers in tow. With tensions running high, Imogene wondered if the two men of God would end up throwing punches or rolling around in the newly sprouted grass. If they became combatants, would their respective flocks start a mini war of their own?

From a distance she could see Strickland and Randall greet one another with a handshake and engage in what looked like a spirited but civil discussion. Both aspiring politicians, they seemed determined to show their most reasonable faces in public. After the two preachers finished talking, they shook hands again and exited the scene in opposite directions, as if late for their next appointments. Their congregations lingered behind, casing each other.

A young black woman decked out in a flowery spring minidress, stumbling somewhat in platform shoes, burst out of Strickland's group and pointed a manicured finger at someone in Randall's group. A blond woman, older,

stockier, and wearing a conservative skirt and blouse, obeyed this summons. The two women approached one another, glowering.

"Looks like a catfight brewing. Hell, yes!" Helene directed her crew to zero in. "This is more like it."

"Oh my God." Imogene felt a shock of recognition. "Sara, isn't that Danielle Starrett and Beverly Cushing? From the Redskins wives club?"

"Holy crap, you're right." Sara burst out laughing. "Who knew those ladies would grab the spotlight out here, so far from their usual boudoirs?"

Helene waited until the fight escalated to a screaming and shoving match, and then turned to Sara. "Well? What're you waiting for? Get yourself in character and go out there and mediate."

Sara sprang into the scene and placed herself between the women just as they were beginning to throw punches. She took an accidental hit on the chin, which seemed to bring both Danielle and Beverly to their senses. They apologized to "Elsie" and to each other and turned contrite faces to the cameras, each declaring in her own way that God had sent her there to spread love, not hate.

"Cut!" Helene said. "Enough of that mush." The two congregations and the two Redskins wives drifted apart. Sara approached the director, rubbing her chin.

"Are you all right?" Imogene asked.

"It hurt a little," she replied with a grin, "but it was worth it. I needed to demonstrate that Elsie has the balls to plunge into conflict, wherever it rears its head."

"Her diplomatic skills are impressive," Helene agreed, "and her willingness to take a punch in the face is a good sign. It'll build up momentum for later, when she finds herself confronting a real terrorist."

All day Saturday, Helene and her crew set up and filmed the out-of-sequence scenes depicting the aftermath of a dirty bomb attack. Many shots were taken of ordinary citizens in various stages of medical distress. The makeup team worked furiously on the afflicted, while "Elsie" roamed among them, nursing and comforting as many as she could. Among the extras caught up in the battle were all four new members of Sara's office staff, as well as others who

had been in the evicted group that she had pledged to help. They threw themselves into their roles, writhing and suffering with gusto.

On Sunday, at the break of day, Sara and Imogene arrived to observe the wrap-up of the post-battle phase. Once the ghastly scenes were in the can, the Mall slowly returned to its more accustomed identity as a site of ball games and demonstrations and a destination for music fans.

At 1:30 p.m., the preliminary concert got under way. Reverend Strickland, the MC, burst onto the bandstand and grabbed the center microphone. Sara, Imogene, and Helene positioned themselves as observers on the rooftop of one of the equipment trucks.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Strickland proclaimed, his voice booming far and wide, "it gives me great pleasure to introduce a band that has made incredible progress since I agreed to give them their first major exposure at a historic Martin Luther King Day celebration last year. To be honest, I had my doubts about this outfit back then. I took a chance on them as a favor to Sara Murphy, a great friend of mine, although I personally found them disheveled and ill mannered. More importantly, I have no choice but to cry foul whenever I see all-white bands trying to expropriate black music."

A penetrating groan arose from somewhere deep in the crowd. Was the reverend deliberately fanning racial flames? He allowed the murmurs to spread and then tamped them down with hand gestures.

"I'm here to reassure you that since that rocky beginning, the band has changed and grown incredibly in terms of its diversity and versatility. Today, I can honestly say I'm a big fan. And so I urge everyone, as far as my voice reaches, to give your warmest welcome to . . . Amorphous!"

The crowd cheered as Sherri, the lead singer, moved to the center microphone with a demure smile. She was the picture of elegance in a long-sleeved, low-necked gown of green silk with a slit in the bottom to reveal her legs. Her four bandmates took their places behind her. Sylvan Moore, the lead guitarist, smirked in Sherri's direction and grabbed his own microphone. "Greetings, DC!" he yelled. "Thanks for the love! We love ya back!" They were indeed a classier-looking act than before, Imogene thought, outfitted in suit coats and slacks instead of T-shirts and jeans.

Before Strickland left the stage, he gave Sherri a prolonged hug, his chest crushing her breasts. Sylvan's eyes popped out as he guffawed. Imogene could imagine the indulgent Mrs. Strickland watching from some close vantage point, smiling and rolling her eyes.

Amorphous indeed showed off its versatility with a grab bag of musical styles. The band started off slow and bluesy to suit Sherri's low-pitched, sexy voice. They moved on to their more typical loud and raucous sound, which animated the guitarists and tested Sherri's vocal range. As the spring sun beat down, the musicians removed their suit coats and drank frequently from plastic bottles, presumably containing nothing stronger than water. Toward the end of the ninety-minute set, they switched to acoustic guitars and recreated the Byron Roberts tribute that they had performed at Sara's potluck football luncheon.

"I'm sensing this imitation folk music has limited appeal," Sara observed, taking out a handkerchief and patting down the sweat that was seeping through her facial makeup. "The crowd's getting restless."

"Restless is good, up to a point," Helene replied, checking her watch. "It'll build up anticipation for the real thing, but Jake and Byron better damned well get here on time. I propose we head over to the musicians' trailer and use the phone there. We'll call Marianne and ask for an update."

"And we gotta congratulate Amorphous on a decent set," Sara added as the band left the stage to moderate applause. "Let them unwind in the trailer for a bit. Maybe stumble on a cooler of ice-cold beer with their name on it."

The women took seats inside the equipment truck, and the driver inched through heavy traffic to Capitol Hill. When they disembarked, Imogene spotted the five members of Amorphous standing outside "their" trailer, the men red-faced and shouting, pointing with their guitars. She realized that someone was denying them access.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Helene shouted. "Who're those fools blocking the doorway?"

"It's Gus and Janie!" Imogene gasped. Gus was waving a fistful of papers, while Janie was remonstrating with the musicians, who turned their backs on her.

“What’s gotten into those two?” Helene demanded. “What’re they even doing in town? It’s your fault, Sara, for pampering them. Christ, you let your PR people write a few lines of dialogue, and next thing you know, they barge in and try to take over the set.”

“I should’ve fired them long ago,” Sara acknowledged, “but they keep pulling new tricks out of their hats. I wonder what this one is about.”

“I think it’s their latest shooting script,” Imogene told her. She found herself admiring the way the skinny head publicist stood up to muscular Sylvan, who was shaking a fist at him. Gus kept waving his papers in the guitarist’s face.

“Another catfight brewing,” Helene observed as Sherri gave Janie a shove. Janie pushed back, and Sherri went for Janie’s plain face with her long, manicured nails.

Gus jumped in and separated the combatants. “Calm down, ladies. Let’s talk this out.”

“Yeah, let’s,” Helene said. “Who, or what, have you got stashed away in the musicians’ trailer?”

“Musicians, of course,” Gus explained in his reasonable voice. “It’s the four current members of Stuyvesant and their lead singer, plus a brand-new mentor. Janie and I have written them all into the script. I propose putting them onstage, right now.”

“Jesus, talk about a leap into the dark,” Helene scowled. “Is this Stuyvesant outfit really a band at all? And who’s crazy enough to mentor them?”

Ignoring her questions, Gus argued further, “What if Jake and Byron are late? What if they don’t arrive at all? You’ll need to improvise.”

“Stuyvesant’s already had their shot,” Sara snapped. “We featured them in the Glendary concert sequence last month.”

“Which you don’t intend to use,” Janie said. “At least, that’s the rumor.”

“The improvisers may have a point, Sara,” Helene said. “If the dynamic duo is way late, it’ll be desperate times for us. Putting this group on will at least keep anticipation building.”

“Nobody out there knows who Stuyvesant is,” Imogene pointed out. “How will the crowd react to an unknown band?”

“We’ve addressed that.” Gus waved his papers again. “They’re about to be introduced by a prominent person.”

He had barely gotten this out when a new voice boomed forth from the stage, far-ranging and southern-tinged like Strickland's but more wheedling than bombastic in tone. Within moments, the speaker was in full sermon mode.

"Christ Almighty, that's James Randall!" Sara exclaimed. "The lunatic preacher who wants everybody to embrace nuclear war."

"He's perfect," Janie proclaimed. "A doomsday preacher to introduce a doomsday band. I helped write his speech."

The reverend was drawling, "I can't say I know these musicians whom I've been asked to introduce to you good people today. I do know that some critics have called them destructive, anarchic, even nihilistic. If so, I believe I can relate to their vision. Our world, dear friends, is at a precipice, staring into the jaws of doom. How will we choose to meet our inevitable fate? By walking hand-in-hand with God or with the devil?"

"You helped write that shit?" Sherri spat at Janie. "Then you must be as fucking crazy as he is."

"I'm contributing actual dialogue to this movie," Janie hissed back, "while all you do is flaunt your bare legs in front of everybody."

"At least I've got the goods to do that. *Your* bare legs would make everybody puke."

The two were inching toward each other again, when Helene ordered, "Enough with the catfight. Trust me, those get old real fast."

The director turned to Gus. "Let me into the trailer, right now. I gotta talk to these guys before they go on. Get an idea of what they're gonna play."

"I've listened to a soundtrack of theirs several times, so I've got an idea," Sara said. "Just call it creative chaos. I'm okay with it, as long as Emily isn't fronting them today. She's already grabbed more than enough camera time out of my hide."

Sylvan growled, "We left some of our amps and mikes onstage. I don't want these Stuyvesant assholes using our shit."

"What if I made it worth your while?" Gus tucked the sheath of papers under his arm and then took out his wallet and extracted a wad of bills. He slapped it into the lead guitarist's hand.

Sylvan stared at the money. “Fucked if this isn’t the biggest payday I’ve ever seen. “What’m I supposed to do with all this?”

“Go out and paint the town,” Gus advised, displaying his characteristic half smile. “Just try not to get arrested, okay? No one has time to bail you out of jail today.”

He turned to his assistant. “Janie, why don’t you accompany the band? Show them a good time, but keep them out of trouble.”

“Great idea!” Janie exclaimed. “C’mon, guys. I’ve heard about some great hot spots downtown.”

All of Amorphous, including Sherri, departed to immerse itself in the DC partying scene. “Plain Janie” hung onto Sylvan’s arm, directing him as if she were the most knowledgeable partier around.

The head publicist opened the trailer door and stepped inside ahead of Helene, Sara, and Imogene. “Hey, guys,” he told the musicians, “you’re being introduced onstage by the reverend. Ready to get out there and strut your stuff?”

A heavy silence greeted him. Then Imogene heard Emily respond in a shaky voice, “Gus, the guys are as far from ready as they can possibly get. Why’d you have to bring that crazy girl in here? I could’ve handled them myself, if not for her ‘mentoring.’ What’s the deal with that, anyway? It’s like she’s hypnotized them or something.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘hypnotized?’” Helene bellowed. “I don’t want them pacified in any way. I want them onstage, playing their nihilistic shit, on the double. Let me in there.”

The three women entered the trailer behind Gus, to find a room fitted out for comfort. Long couches with cushions lined the walls. The Stuyvesant musicians were sprawled on them, three fingering guitars and the fourth manipulating drum sticks, as if they had no intention of moving. The only concession to business was a small desk with a pile of papers and a phone in one corner. In another corner was a stove with a kettle whizzing on top. The beer cooler that Sara had alluded to earlier stood next to the stove, unopened.

Emily was seated next to Paulie, the lead guitarist and ruffian who had fought Sylvan Moore in a New York bar several months earlier, handing Imogene her first public-relations crisis at headquarters. Both motioned

toward the young woman who supposedly had brought about the current pacification. Paulie was smiling, an unfamiliar look for him, while Emily flushed and took deep breaths.

Imogene breathed harder herself once she realized it was Jasmine who held their attention. The “hippie model” sat cross-legged on her accustomed meditation rug, looking both beautiful and beatific. She strummed her ubiquitous acoustic guitar as she nodded at the new arrivals.

“Greetings, everyone. Why do you all look so stressed out? That’s so unnecessary. Sit down with us, and be in the moment.” Jasmine motioned toward the stove. “Have some tea. It’s very soothing.”

“You mind telling me what’s in that tea?” Helene demanded. “And while you’re at it, explain exactly who you are and what you’re selling here.”

“Helene, I guess you’ve never met my second sister-in-law, Jasmine,” Sara said. “My second ex-sister-in-law, I should say. She’s been gaining quite a reputation lately for spreading around Byron’s brand of peace-and-love, but this is a surprise. I didn’t expect to see her on the set today.”

“She’s decorative enough,” Helene spat, “but what’s she doing here?” The director turned to Gus. “Is she your latest project? What’s your plan for her?”

“She’s been a calming influence in the office, so I thought she might do the same for the band.” Gus spoke with his usual dignity but grimaced, as if he feared he’d miscalculated.

“Jas, sweetie,” Sara said gently, “it makes no sense to me, your hanging out with Stuyvesant. They’re not folk-style musicians like you.”

“But they can be,” Jasmine purred. “All music is the same, as long as it’s heartfelt. I feel a psychic bond with these guys. I felt it even before I knew them.”

“Yeah, the chick speaks the truth,” Paulie said, looking Jasmine up and down with a hungry grin. “We’re soul mates. We feel psychic bonds and all that shit. She says that’s been Byron Roberts’s message from day one.”

“What message is that?” Sara asked.

“That everybody must go on the same journey,” Jasmine said, “whether we’re folkies or nihilists. We must blast the evil world. Only then can we start to rebuild.”

"Enough already," Helene said. "Right now the only journey I wanna see this band on is straight up to the bandstand. That's an order."

Jasmine's blue eyes turned ice cold as she thrust her chin at Helene. "They won't take orders from you, or from anybody. They have to feel it themselves."

"The crazies have been taking control, Sara," Emily said, her voice still shaky, "and frankly, you haven't condescended to notice. You've been too busy making your epic movie and blaming everybody in sight for the collapse of your perfect life."

"And I suppose you're just the person to set me straight," Sara shot back. "Helene, why don't we get a camera in here so we can record the wonderful pearls of wisdom that're about to drop from Emily's mouth?"

"Nix on that," Helene said. "I already told you, no more catfights."

Helene turned to the girl guitarist and continued, "I'm pleased to meet you, Jasmine, really I am, but I don't know quite what to do with you. See, we're shooting a movie here, and you're in the way. I need to get your soul mates onstage right now, doing whatever it is they do, to keep the cameras rolling. If their mission is to tear down the bandstand, figuratively speaking, and then build it up again, I'm cool with that."

"Besides," Sara said, "we gotta put the brakes on Reverend Randall, and soon. If he's allowed to go on jawing much longer, he'll lose the crowd. Maybe to mass suicide."

"This is your chance for movie stardom, guys," Gus told the band. "Time for you to go up there and grab your . . . your destiny."

"I dunno about that grabbing shit," Paulie looked perplexed. "Ain't that kinda what Byron is against? Grabbing for too much stuff is bad."

"I can't believe my ears," Emily nearly screeched. "This has gotta be some kind of spell."

"Fuck that," Helene shot back. "I'm the director here, and there'll be no spells or anything the least bit mystical without my say-so. I'm ordering the Stuyvesant musicians to take the stage. But first, show me the playlist."

"There ain't no playlist," Paulie told Helene in his unnaturally passive voice. "Jasmine says we gotta make our music all instinctive, not profit making. So it don't even matter what you pay us."

"That works for me," Helene said, "as long as you get your asses up there right now and start making some kind of noise."

"How about it?" Paulie favored Jasmine with a goofy grin. "Should we obey the director?"

"Do it for Byron," Jasmine said, "not for her."

The four Stuyvesant musicians piled out of the trailer, guitars and drumsticks in hand. Emily jumped up to follow them. Jasmine's suddenly harsh voice stopped her. "Not you. I know you're about money and fame. You're not one of them. Sit back down."

"But I *am* one of them," Emily protested. "I've sung lots of gigs with Stuyvesant. I gotta be up there too."

"Sorry, but I agree with the hippie girl on this one, Emily," Helene said. "I've heard you sing."

"So have I," Sara added. "Club singing is one thing, Em, but you don't want to embarrass yourself in front of a huge crowd."

As Emily fixed Sara with hate-filled eyes, Helene said, "I gotta get going now. I'll be backstage during Stuyvesant's set, getting things ready for the dynamic duo. Gus, why don't you tag along with me? Maybe the opportunity will arise for you to churn out some actual dialogue. Sara, I'll send for you when I need you. In the meantime, you girls hang back and chill. Maybe have some of that bliss-out tea." With a wave and a flourish, she exited the trailer, Gus on her heels.

"Sit down, all of you," Jasmine said, eyeing Imogene and Sara as well as Emily. It sounded like an order.

"Only for a minute," Sara said. "Helene's gonna need me sooner than she realizes." She and Imogene seated themselves on either side of Emily, facing Jasmine.

Sara gave her ex-sister-in-law an amused smile. "I wish I had more time to catch up on what's really going on in your head, Jas. But this movie is occupying all my attention. Important scenes are unfolding as we speak."

"I know all about your movie." Jasmine put aside her guitar and tossed her blond locks. "I've heard about 'Elsie.' She's a war-mongering official who tramples on ordinary people and even threatens their lives."

"That's not quite fair," Sara protested. "I'm doing my best to make Elsie a nuanced character. It's just that she's up against a cruel world, and her choices as Secretary of Defense are never easy. Once you see the movie, I'm sure that'll come through."

"I won't ever see it." Jasmine pouted like a stubborn child. "And I hope it never sees the light of day."

"It better," Sara told her with a rueful laugh. "I'll be ruined if it doesn't. *Deterrence* is unfolding all around you, Jas. Right now it feels like a wild experiment, with script changes every few minutes. But it'll all come to a head in ninety minutes or so, when Jake and Byron take the stage."

"Yes, it will." Jasmine's eyes grew wide and bright. "That's when Byron will tell the whole world the truth about you. That you're Elsie in reality."

Emily let out a hysterical giggle. "You'll need all your acting chops, Sara, to convince everyone you're really the Secretary of Defense. If you manage that, I'll concede you're a better actress than I am. Your performance might even get you nominated for an Oscar. Although it'd be a shame if Byron's followers somehow did away with you before the awards ceremony."

"Jasmine," Imogene began, wondering if she could reason with the girl, "I think you have some misconceptions about the story. Elsie's not the one instigating violence on the Mall. She'll be trying to diffuse it. Sooner or later she'll face down her rock-star brother, who claims to have an arsenal of bombs. Their life-long sibling rivalry will spark a much wider conflict as she looks for ways to disarm him."

"Get it, Jasmine?" Sara asked. "Jake and Byron won't have much dialogue, since their new songs will say it all. It'll be Byron's music, and his reputation as a peacemaker, that'll inspire the siblings to make peace."

"Blasphemy! There can be no peace with Jake, or with you. You're corporate skills."

Jasmine's fiery eyes and rising voice accosted her audience like a Pentecostal preacher's. She recovered her composure on a dime, which spooked Imogene even more.

"Anyway, why should Byron follow your script?" she asked sweetly. "He's perfectly capable of creating his own."

Sara's smile wavered. *Is she thinking what I'm thinking?* Imogene wondered. *That maybe the flower girl knows Byron's mind better than we do?*

"I think the real reason you're angry at me, Jas, is because Marianne and I have been cleaning out the hangers-on at headquarters." Sara was trying her most soothing voice. "I realize some of them were friends and fans of yours, but they were mooching off the company and bringing in nothing of value. That was a business decision. It doesn't mean I don't have your interests at heart."

"A business decision?" Jasmine's voice rose again, almost to a shriek. Sara seemed to have spoken a trigger word.

"You're missing an obvious solution to this impasse, Sara." Emily's tone was mocking. "Just offer Jasmine a juicy role in the movie. That's your usual way of buying people off."

"I wouldn't compromise my soul to be in your movie," Jasmine said. "Not unless I could tear up the script and write my own."

"You think I don't know why Byron resents me?" Sara pursued further. "The history between us is still rearing its head after all these years. He thinks I left him for Jim Guthrie, but the truth is, I'd already broken up with him before I went back to college that fall. No way was I gonna stay in New York and be his mistress, hiding in the shadows whenever he chose to be with his family. But if that's the life you aspire to, Jasmine, go for it."

"That's not what it's about!" Jasmine exclaimed. "It's—"

"I know, I know. It's a psychic bond. The fact remains, you're a follower of Byron, and I'm not."

Sara rose to her feet. "I can't tell you how fascinating this has been, but it's time for me to get back to work. I gotta catch up with Helene backstage, before she starts making vital decisions without me. You girls should just stay here and chill as she suggested."

"Sit down, Sara," Jasmine said. "We're not finished here."

"Yes, we are. At least for now." Sara gave Jasmine an indulgent smile as she headed for the door. A tall man with long blond hair stepped inside the trailer and blocked the exit.

"You're in my way," Sara told him. "Step aside, please."

"You heard the lady." He jerked his head toward Jasmine. "Sit back down."

CHAPTER 17



SARA LOOKED THE man up and down and then laughed in his face. “What if I don’t feel like sitting? You gonna force me?”

Imogene broke out in a sweat, even as she admired Sara’s foolhardy courage. Her former roommate was again that fearless college gymnast who had tried out risky stunts in competitive situations and had even gotten a few moves named after her.

“Why don’t you make things easier for yourself and do what I say?” the man growled.

Sara kept studying him. “Do I know you?”

“I ain’t surprised you don’t know me. You never show up at our gigs or rehearsals. I’m Stuyvesant’s producer, Andrew Decker.”

Imogene found her voice. “I remember you, Andrew. We met when I was the publicist in the New York office. You and I had to smooth over a bar fight between Sylvan and Paulie.”

Emily put in, “Sara, don’t be a wiseass. We all know you could take this guy in a fair fight, but I can see he’s armed. He’s got a gun under his vest. I have to assume that makes us hostages.”

“Why stress out about it?” Jasmine purred. “Andrew is a friend. He’s here to protect our private space while we talk.”

Sara glanced from the Stuyvesant producer to Jasmine and back, with annoyance rather than panic. “Well, which is it? Is this Andrew fellow a kidnapper or a security guard? It’s not exactly the same thing.”

Getting no answer, she sighed. “Okay, guys. If you’re that determined to lay out your grievances, we’ll have us a meeting, right now. What do you want from me, Andrew? Spit it out quick, because I have work of my own to attend to.”

"You won't be attending to anything until we say so." Andrew grinned theatrically and patted the left side of his multicolored vest. The burgundy and blue seemed to match the flowers in Jasmine's gown.

"Fine," Sara said. She sat down beside Emily and gave her a quizzical glance.

"So tell me, Em, are you really a hostage too? Or are you in on this plot?"

"Damn it, Sara, you still don't know me," Emily shot back. "We've fought a lot over the years, but I've always been your friend. I would've saved you from this nightmare if I could." She was shaking again, her voice barely controlled.

"No need to snap at me." Sara remained eerily calm. "Truthfully, I'm not all that surprised a crazy band would try to kidnap me, although the timing sucks. I know that Imogene is an innocent bystander, but I'm not so sure about you."

"It's . . . complicated," Emily admitted. "The thing is, I know too much about Stuyvesant."

"Then I suggest you spill it," Sara said. "For starters, tell me the facts you've been hiding about the attack on Jim in my recording studio. I want to know, once and for all: who did it?"

She turned to Andrew. "Was it you?"

"Fuck, no," he spat back at her. "It wasn't me, or my band. Stuyvesant is small potatoes, lady. We were just cover. It was somebody a lot bigger than us."

"Oh Christ!" Imogene blurted. "You don't mean—"

"It was both of us," Jasmine declared. "Byron and I took over your studio that night. You never guessed that, did you, Sara? You really gave us no choice. We had to leave a message—a warning."

"I might be slow, but I get it now." Sara gave a hollow laugh.

"The two of us together struck a blow against corporate greed," Jasmine proclaimed, "and it was only the first of many battles."

"I'll bet," Sara said. "So what will Byron do when he gets onstage today? Declare full-out war on me and all corporate types?"

Emily grabbed Sara's arm as if to steady them both. "Please understand, Sara, why I didn't tell you this before. I realized the whole concept of the movie depends on Byron appearing in the climactic scene and presenting his

new songs. I couldn't let anything interfere with that. My only motive was to protect you and save the project."

"Bullshit," Sara said, shaking her off. "Your motive was to protect your place in the film and promote your own career."

"Either way, we have to pull together now," Emily pleaded. "We have a crisis on our hands."

"Yeah, you sure do," Andrew sneered. "One wrong move, and the whole shebang could blow up in your faces."

"What does that mean?" Sara glared at him. "Is your crazy band going out there to incite violence?"

She was still speaking when the Stuyvesant musicians launched their performance. They played a slow, diffuse piece, foregoing melody in favor of mingled rhythms. There was nothing loud or jarring about it, Imogene thought, but it was unnerving all the same.

"My guys are just supposed to set the mood until Byron arrives," Andrew said. "Then things will get interesting."

"Interesting, how?" Sara asked.

Jasmine replied sweetly, "Byron's peace army will have infiltrated the crowd. I can feel them gathering now. His foot soldiers will wait for a signal from him. If he tells them to, they'll take action."

"What signal?" Sara demanded.

"It'll be in 'The Twelve-String Hammer,' a song he wrote as a call to arms." Jasmine picked up her guitar and played the opening chords. "I helped him write it, Sara, whether you believe that or not."

"I believe it, I guess," Sara said, "but I don't get the 'call to arms' part. Byron auditioned 'The Twelve-String Hammer' in my office. I heard it as a folkie-style peace song."

"I thought it was open to interpretation." Imogene's pedantic tone sounded awkward to her own ears, but something told her to press on. "It had contradictory themes, like many of Byron's songs. A plea for peace, but with a core of anger behind it."

"You and your interpretations." Sara looked at her and groaned. "This is no time to write another academic thesis about music—especially when what

I'm hearing now is giving me such a headache." She buried her head in her hands as the atonal sounds from the bandstand began to intensify.

After a moment, she raised her head and refocused on Imogene. "On second thought, suppose we go with your theory. If Byron's songs are 'open to interpretation,' won't at least part of the crowd interpret them as peace songs? And won't those people embrace Byron as the peacemaker of old? The guy who wouldn't hurt a fly?"

"Don't forget Jake," Imogene said. "He's a wild card in all this. He'll be alongside Byron, interpreting the songs in his own way."

"Then we're screwed," Emily said. "We all know Jake. He's the great disrupter. He'll do everything possible to fuck with Byron's message and enrage that peace army."

"He better not." Jasmine slammed down her guitar, producing a wild chord that blended in with the sounds coming from the stage.

The flower child's eyes flared as she continued, "If that happens, I can envision someone rising up out of the crowd to throw a bomb at Jake. He'll lose an arm or a hand, or worse. Then he'll never play the guitar again."

"Don't be a ninny," Emily hissed. "Don't you realize a bomb thrown at the stage could take out your beloved messiah too?"

"Even if Jake is destroyed," Jasmine proclaimed, "Byron will rise from the ashes."

"If Jake is 'destroyed,' Jas, I hope you don't expect to be remembered in his will. Being his ex and the mother of his son won't make up for being an accomplice to murder." Sara paused to rub her forehead and wince. "Fuck that noise. I won't be able to think straight until it stops."

"It's your new soundtrack, bitch," Andrew said. "Might as well get used to it."

"No way," Sara said, rising to her feet. "This is *my* movie. I get to write the soundtrack. I've waited my whole life to do that."

"Sara, be careful!" Imogene cried out. She watched as Sara approached Andrew, stopping within a few feet of him.

"Didn't you hear me?" Emily shouted. "I told you he's armed!"

"You need to step aside," Sara told the scowling band producer. "Someone has to warn the authorities there's a live threat out there. And my brother

needs to know that his partner could trigger it. If I don't try to warn them, I'm no better than an accomplice myself. The same is true of you, Andrew. So for the love of God, let me and my friends out."

Andrew pulled a handgun out of a holster that was concealed underneath his vest. He aimed the weapon at Sara's midriff. Imogene froze, but her thoughts kept tumbling forth. *Could he be bluffing? His hand is shaking a little. What if Sara decides to test him, and he . . .*

"Come back over here and sit down, Sara," Emily pleaded. "Don't you see we're dealing with crazies here? We can't win."

Sara didn't move. The gun in Andrew's hand trembled. Overcome with panic, Imogene jumped to her feet and approached her boss. Emily copied her move. Each taking an arm, they dragged Sara back to the couch.

"You got some fucking nerve trying to intimidate me on my own movie set," Sara told Andrew, squirming in their grasp as he tucked the gun away. "If my husband was here, he'd deal with you."

"Your husband?" Emily laughed, almost hysterically. "Now's a fine time to bring up the great stud Jim Guthrie. Have you forgotten you sent him packing so you could take up with Russell Mellini? You know, the guy who used to be my detective lover on TV? You think a football hero and a pretend cop can get us out of this fix?"

"Those dudes . . . are they around here?" Andrew glanced over his shoulder.

"They're not anywhere on the set," Imogene told him. "Sara fired them both. Or Elsie did."

"For all we know, our guys are drinking together in some downtown pub," Emily continued, still laughing. "Maybe comparing notes about Sara and me as lovers and what a bitch Sara was to fire their asses."

"Enough with the babbling!" Andrew snapped. "Everybody shut up and listen to my band."

As the Stuyvesant concert droned on, the atmosphere in the trailer became thick with silence, barely relieved by Jasmine's soft guitar accompaniment. When the sounds from the stage came to an abrupt, unresolved stop, the reaction of the crowd seemed mixed between cheers and jeers.

"Byron is getting closer," Jasmine murmured. "I can feel his approach." She segued into the opening chords of "The Twelve-String Hammer."

"I'm starting to feel Jake's vibes, too," Sara said. "I'm supposed to greet him backstage when he arrives. Helene must be setting up our showdown scene now."

"In case you hadn't noticed, the script's been changed." Andrew patted the bulge in his vest. "You ain't going nowhere."

"In case *you* hadn't noticed," Sara retorted, "the script doesn't change unless Helene or I say so."

Sara rose to her feet, scowling at the armed sentry. Imogene edged forward in her seat and noticed that Emily did the same. Would Sara try another foolhardy move?

Imogene and Emily remained on edge, while Sara stood in place, massaging her head. She glanced around the trailer, as if looking for an alternate exit.

"Would you stop playing that damned song?" she snapped at Jasmine. "It's nothing but a piece of—"

The girl set down her guitar and turned cold eyes on Sara.

"What I meant to say, Jas," Sara resumed, "is that I can think of a much better way for you to present your version of 'The Twelve-String Hammer.'"

Sara stepped to the middle of the trailer, waving her arms as if calling a meeting to order. "Listen, folks. In Helene's absence, I'm taking over as temporary director. This movie is a collaborative process, so from now on, I won't be making any decisions without consulting my fellow actors. That includes everyone here."

She pivoted to face the band producer. "Even you, Andrew."

Trust Sara, Imogene thought, *to find a way to command a room, even at gunpoint*. Her boss continued, "There are a couple of ways this scene could go. If I try to barge past you, Andrew, I risk getting shot. Not a good look for me. So I propose you protect me instead. It just so happens Elsie needs a new head of security and a new top assistant, since she petulantly fired the ones she had. You could take either job. Maybe even both."

"How about it, Andrew?" Emily exclaimed. "You'd be the focus of an upcoming scene. The climactic scene, in fact."

"It'd be your job to escort me—Elsie, that is—safely backstage," Sara explained, "where I'm scheduled to meet up with my brother and negotiate a peace treaty of sorts. Think about it, Andrew. A minute or two in my film will bring you more fame and glory than you'll ever get from fooling around with Stuyvesant."

Andrew's eyes lit up. *He can be flattered*, Imogene thought.

Then he shook his head. "Nah, that's not the way this is going down. I'm a soldier in Byron's peace army. I got my orders. I'm supposed to keep you right here."

"What a waste of your potential as a young stud." Sara looked him up and down. "We both know you're no soldier, and kidnapping ain't your bag, either. Why not try your wings as an actor?"

"You're talking trash," Andrew said. "If I say yes, I'll probably just end up on the cutting room floor."

"We bit players all have to deal with that possibility, Andrew." Emily grimaced at Sara, as if her resentment had momentarily overtaken her fear.

"I give you my word, Andrew," Sara said, "you'll be featured, if only for a minute. It'll open a whole new career path for you."

She took two steps toward him, leading with her set chin and firm mouth. He flinched and then his face reddened.

"I think you're shitting me. You take me for an idiot or something? Sit back down!"

As Sara stood her ground, arms folded against her chest, he fumbled with his vest. *Do something*, Imogene screamed to herself.

"Stop!" she screamed aloud. "Both of you, stop. I have an idea for the next scene."

Imogene jumped to her feet and stood there, vulnerable, having succeeded in freezing the potential combatants. *What now?*

Glancing around the trailer, she caught sight of a notepad and pencils on the desk. *There it is*, she thought. *My key to power.*

"Now that Sara's taking over as director, I'm taking over as screenwriter." Imogene strode to the desk, snatched up the paper and a pencil, and returned to her seat.

"Here's how I propose changing the concept." Imogene began to scribble furiously. "I think we should de-emphasize the so-called heroes and bring unexpected antiheroes into the spotlight, like Andrew here. With apologies to Elsie," she continued, smiling slyly at Sara, "her negotiating skills might not be adequate to the situation. It's too personal, with her brother involved."

She concentrated on writing several lines of dialogue legibly. "I'll need a few minutes to get this right," she told the group. "I know Helene welcomes new ideas, but she insists on having everything written down, just so, before she sets up a scene."

"You sure you can get me in the movie?" Andrew demanded.

"I've already featured you." Imogene kept scribbling and then paused to rest her hand. She caught a glimpse of Jasmine's slowly burning eyes.

"I almost forgot. We're supposed to be making a musical, aren't we?" she exclaimed. "Jasmine, why don't you play 'The Twelve-String Hammer' again? I want to hear it all the way through."

It appeared Jasmine could be flattered too. She picked up her guitar and rendered the piece with skill and precision. The turbulence in her voice when she began gradually smoothed out, as if the song itself had cast a spell. By the time she finished, her sincere tones seemed to lighten the oppressive atmosphere.

Imogene looked into the singer's now softened, moist eyes. "That's a peace song for our times," she declared. "Don't you agree?"

"It will be," Jasmine said, "if I can perform it in the movie."

Before Imogene could confirm this, a woman's voice began booming from the stage, claiming credit for the historic musical reunion that was about to happen. She proclaimed it had taken a combination of hard-nosed business skill and gentle persuasion to bring the two legends together for this occasion, and only she could have done it.

"Well, if it isn't Marianne, grabbing the spotlight for herself!" Sara exclaimed. "Looks like she's delivered the stars of the show like she promised. I guess she's entitled to take a bow."

"No, she isn't," Jasmine hissed. "She's nothing but a stuck-up money-grubbing bitch."

"Is that really fair?" Imogene implored. She must prevent, at all costs, a backslide into anger. "Don't forget you and she are sisters in a way, Jasmine. You share a bond, a history that's more powerful than any . . . petty jealousies about Jake."

"Besides, I thought you'd moved on," Emily said. "You know by now that Byron's a much bigger hero than your ex."

Jasmine smiled, and Imogene returned to her script. They could hear Marianne droning on about the past greatness of Jake and Byron and the miraculous nature of the upcoming reunion. Imogene suspected Marianne was stalling for time until the two legends could get themselves in the right frame of mind to take the stage together. She was grateful for the delay, which allowed her to sketch out a scene involving Jake, Sara, and Andrew. It was essential to give Andrew the appearance of a trusted aide who had facilitated this encounter for "Elsie's" benefit.

"You done writing yet?" Andrew barked, making Imogene jump in her seat and drop her pencil. His restless movements seemed to match the growing impatience of the crowd outside.

Shouts could be heard, demanding that Marianne get off the stage and leave it to the stars.

Marianne was standing her ground until the time was right, and so must Imogene. She retrieved her pencil and said, "Almost finished. It just needs a touch more polish."

"Fuck the polish. Lemme see what you got. Bring those pages to me."

He motioned Imogene to approach him. She got to her feet and moved forward, her eyes darting from his stern face to the left side of his vest. Her hands trembled as she thrust the pages at him. He snatched them away from her.

Imogene stood frozen in place as he read through the scene. His growing scowl brought sweat to her forehead.

"If you have any suggestions—" she ventured.

"This is total bullshit," he interrupted. "You make me out to be some sorta lackey for this fucking government official. Get it straight, bitch. I ain't no lackey for anyone. I'm Stuyvesant's producer. That means I'm high up in Byron's peace army. A captain, or something."

He tore up the pages and threw them in Imogene's face. She remained rooted to the spot as the scraps of paper fell around her like huge, misshapen snowflakes.

"Don't blame her, Andrew," Sara said. "Imogene writes to my specifications. If you don't like the way the script is going, deal with me, not with her."

"Yeah, okay, I will." Andrew shifted his glare to Sara. "What you gonna do about it?"

Sara sighed. "What *can* I do about it? You say you're Captain Andrew in Byron's peace army. I don't know which wannabe screenwriter put that brilliant idea in your head, but there's no use fighting it. Right now, I can see only one way out of this mess."

She grinned at Andrew, as if alight with a new idea. "Keep me here as your hostage," she commanded, "and release everyone else."

The group contemplated this in silence. Even as Imogene trembled with fear, her heart swelled with admiration. *Sara's proposing to sacrifice herself for the rest of us*, she thought. *Or is she being overdramatic?*

"Nobody leaves this trailer until I say so," Andrew shot back.

"Then say so, for God's sake. Think about it, Andrew. I'm your ideal partner in this. The others are just excess baggage. Let's send them on their way, and you and I will stay here and hash out a new scene that'll satisfy your ego."

"Where're you sending us?" Emily asked.

"You three girls gotta join Helene backstage, pronto . . . before Jake and Byron launch 'The Twelve-String Hammer.' Helene will freak out that I'm missing, but just tell her we're all experimenting with new roles. I think she'll buy it. She'll have to."

"What new roles?" Emily demanded. "In case you hadn't noticed, we don't have any lines. The latest excuse for a script just got torn up."

"Play it by ear," Sara ordered. "It's not about the dialogue anyway. This scene will revolve around 'The Twelve-String Hammer.' That song is a potential trigger for war . . . or a plea for peace. We gotta make sure Jasmine's version is the one that prevails."

"It *will* prevail." Jasmine rose gracefully to her feet, grabbing her guitar by the neck. She waved the body of it at her listeners, a Byron-like gesture.

"This is my sword," she breathed. "My magic wand. I'll play Byron's own song to him, and he'll *listen*."

"You do what you have to do, Jas. Seduce him if you can." Sara turned to Emily. "Your role, Em, is to support Jasmine when she goes onstage. Grab the nearest microphone, and harmonize to your heart's content. But keep it subtle."

"No kidding?" Emily jumped to her feet. "Now you're telling me to sing after forbidding me to just minutes ago?"

"Hold on, you stupid bitches," Andrew snarled. "You're crazy if you think Murphy and Robarts are gonna let a couple of chicks waltz onstage and take over."

"You've got a point, Andrew," Sara said. "That's why I gotta send in a negotiator ahead of the girls, someone who can smooth their path. The logical choice for that role—the only choice, in fact—is Imogene."

"Me?" Imogene exclaimed.

"Why not?" Sara's grin resonated with creative excitement. "You did it once before, remember? You answered the phone in my fake Pentagon office like a trusted assistant. You talked Jake down from whatever was bugging him that day. I need you to do it again, Imogene. Tell everyone I'm indisposed and that I've designated you to negotiate in my place."

"What'll I say to him?" Imogene gasped. "Without a script?"

"Didn't you just prove yourself capable of writing instant dialogue? Speak from your heart, Imogene, and Jake will listen to you. He genuinely likes you, and this is no time to be coy about that. Use your feminine wiles to convince him not to screw this up. Whisper in his ear that the peace song is the way to go, even if it's too 'Byronesque' for his tastes."

A prolonged roar from the crowd announced the arrival of the dynamic duo onstage. Neither Jake nor Byron spoke as they went through intricate sound checks with their electric guitars and amplifiers. Screams and shouts could be heard from excited fans, demanding that they play well-known songs from the past, like "She Moves Me" and "Glowing Strings."

Byron finally addressed the crowd with his typical midwestern gentleness. "Greetings, everyone. Wow, this is some turnout. I guess the promoters didn't

lie . . . this really is a historic occasion.” Imogene could imagine his eyes opening wide in amazement at his own enduring popularity.

Byron continued, “You all know Jake and I used to make hit records, but that’s not why we’re here today. Celebrating our past isn’t as important as shining a light on the future. Right, Jake?” He got only a mumble in response.

“So, to kick off my new electronic career, here’s a song written just for this occasion. It’s called ‘Cross-Eyed Elsie.’”

“So they’re doing the hate song first,” Sara observed as the duo eased into the tune. “The one that demonizes poor Elsie. God only knows how the crowd will react to that. Just as well I won’t be showing my face out there anytime soon. You girls have a few minutes to get to the stage before the ‘hammer’ comes down. I suggest you get going.”

“Fuck that.” Andrew took a step forward, causing the women to jump back. “They ain’t going nowhere. You think I’m stupid? The minute they got out there, they’d report me to the cops.”

“But they won’t, Andrew,” Sara said, eyeing the women. “They know it would screw up my plan. Let’s send them on their way so you and I can put our heads together and figure out how to showcase your unique talents. I was on the wrong track earlier when I proposed making you one of my aides. I realize now you’d do much better playing yourself—Stuyvesant’s producer, a promoter of weird soundtracks. Just the thing for this movie.”

“No shit?” Andrew regarded Sara with the first hint of a smile playing around his lips. Then he turned to the other women and yelled, “What’re you bitches waiting for? Get outta my sight.”

As the trio rushed past him and through the exit, he roared with laughter at the way they’d jumped to his command.

Once outside, the women made for the backstage area, taking in deep draughts of air. By the time they had covered the fifty yards, Imogene was panting and sweating, a delayed reaction to the panic she had bottled up while in the trailer. Policemen swarmed the area, warning off stray fans. A few eyed Jasmine’s guitar.

Emily stopped short and declared, “We gotta tell the cops what’s going on back there.”

"You better not," Jasmine hissed.

"That's the wrong move, Emily," Imogene said. "It could trigger a disaster. I think Sara's plan is better."

"Sara's plan? Seriously?" Emily turned on her. "Jesus, Imogene, when are you gonna stop believing Sara walks on water? She's in a desperate spot right now, even if she keeps talking out of her ass like she's still in charge. We gotta save her from herself."

"But she's right," Imogene insisted. "There are bigger issues at stake."

She tried to whisper in Emily's ear, to avoid Jasmine, but the turbulence all around forced her to shout instead. "Don't you realize that some of Byron's fans out there believe they're an army? If they have bombs, what can the police do? Only we can pacify them."

"Imogene, snap out of it. We're off script now. This isn't the movie; this is real life. It calls for real law enforcement. Or are you turning into such a prima donna that you'll do anything to grab the spotlight for yourself?"

"I'm no prima donna!" Imogene shot back. "I don't even claim to be an actress. That's you, not me. I'm just saying there's a threat of bloodshed, and we can prevent it."

"You're both being prima donnas." Jasmine waved her guitar in their faces. "You can't do anything. It'll take a musician, singing about peace, to stop this war."

The women arrived at the backstage door, where a cordon of policemen stopped them. "We have to get through," Imogene told a grim-faced officer who was blocking the way with his arms crossed. "Helene Frisk, the director, is expecting us."

"There's a situation in one of the trailers—" Emily began, but Imogene thrust an elbow into her ribs, causing her to shriek.

Jasmine pointed the neck of her guitar at the officer, who uncrossed his arms. "Please put that down, miss," he ordered, placing a hand on his holstered gun.

"I can't put it down. It's too powerful a weapon. More powerful than any gun—even yours."

CHAPTER 18



THE BACKSTAGE DOOR opened, and Helene stepped out. “Well, well, look who’s here. All my bit players have arrived but without my main star. You girls better have an airtight explanation for that. Let them through, Officer.”

The guard frowned but stepped aside. The three women piled into the backstage area and surrounded the director, all talking at once as they related the events of the past hour. “Hotshot Charlie,” the cinematographer, hovered in the background, stroking a monstrous-looking camera. Helene groaned and held her hands over her ears as the strains of “Cross-Eyed Elsie” reached a crescendo.

“I should’ve known Sara would get herself into hot water. I’ve encouraged her to play with fire from the beginning. But, Christ, what’m I supposed to do now? I’m about to shoot the climactic scene of my first movie, and my central character is a goddamned hostage for real.”

“Nothing to worry about, according to Sara,” Emily said. “She still thinks she’s in charge. She’s got the whole plot figured out.”

Imogene ventured, “Since Sara—I mean, Elsie—is unavailable, she’s designated me, as her assistant, to conduct the negotiations with her brother. Even though I don’t have any lines prepared.”

“And I’m going out there to sing ‘The Twelve-String Hammer’ my way.” Jasmine, with a sweet smile, thrust the neck of her guitar toward the director.

“Are you all serious?” Helene’s disbelieving stare took in the three women. “That’s your idea of a plot? It’s my idea of a disaster.”

Then, to Imogene’s amazement, she broke into a grin. “But necessity is the mother of creativity, as I’ve said many times before. I’ll just have to make this scene work with supporting actors taking charge—‘nondescripts,’ if you

will. Trouble is, none of you look like camera-ready heroines at the moment. You're all sweating like pigs. Makeup, please!" She motioned toward the assistant, who lurked behind a table that held a variety of containers.

"Touch them up as best you can, Mabel. Nothing else we can do at the last second. No time to consult wardrobe, but I'm not too concerned about that. Except for *yours*." She looked Imogene up and down.

"Darling, when you're working for the most important woman in government, you're on call all the time. You should look like it. What's with the jeans and T-shirt?"

"I didn't know . . . I didn't expect . . ." Imogene sputtered.

"Never mind," Helene snapped. "We'll go with it. In fact, we might as well play up your unpreparedness. You got any idea what you're gonna say to Jake when you get out there? On second thought, don't tell me. Just wing it."

The duo onstage paused at the end of "Elsie," evidently testing the reaction. Loud cheers from the crowd were interspersed with voices screaming denunciations of corrupt government officials like the one in the song. Byron and Jake retuned their guitars and waited for the multitude to calm down.

Then Byron spoke, a rough edge creeping into his voice. "This next song is what we really came for. It's a call to action for our modern times, so I want you all to sit up and pay attention. Put aside your booze and your joints and anything else you're using to dull your brains. Even Jake has cleaned up his act, at least for today. Right, Jake?"

"Anything for you, buddy," Jake confirmed in his craggy voice. "Folks, the audience participation part of the program is about to begin. As soon as you hear this, you're gonna want to hit the streets of our nation's capital, rioting for peace. Just like the good old days."

"Christ," Helene remarked, "did he have to put it like that? Rioting in the streets is more than I bargained for today. Girls, I'm counting on you to go out there and soften the blow." But she held them back until "The Twelve-String Hammer" was under way.

The duo seemed to draw out the first verse. Helene tapped her feet and then barked, "Enough already. Show time, girls. Imogene, your job is to corral Jake. Jasmine and Emily, you get in Byron's face. Take them by surprise."

The women burst onto the stage and did just that. The music stumbled to a stop, and boos arose from the crowd.

"What you cunts think you're doing?" Byron gaped at the two women who had popped up on either side of him. "I'm trying to play a song here."

Jasmine nudged him aside with the neck of her guitar and stepped in front of the microphone. She announced, "I'm here to bring 'The Twelve-String Hammer' to all of you as a message of peace."

"What's this about love?" Byron asked. "We ain't practicing on a rooftop anymore, y'know. You have any idea where you are?"

"We're standing together in front of the whole world." Jasmine cast her bright smile over the crowd. "And I'm asking you to trust me with your song."

Imogene sidled up to Jake and tried to catch his eye, but he was staring at Byron and Jasmine. Hostile rumblings from the crowd shook her. *We just interrupted the most famous duo on earth, for no apparent reason. Should we try to explain?*

"Be gentle with my crazy ex-wife," Jake admonished Byron. "She's both crazy and my ex-wife for a reason. She really believes you're a musical messiah, and your songs are meant to bring peace and joy to the world. Whereas I'm the great Satan who's out to destroy them."

"I'd advise you not to mess with the song," Imogene told him, assuming the official voice of Elsie's assistant. "Let Jasmine interpret it in her own way."

Jake scowled at her. "What're you doing here, toots? You were never in the script, as far as I remember. I thought I was supposed to negotiate with my sister."

"She's . . . indisposed," Imogene faltered.

"What in shit does that mean?"

"It means the script has changed," Imogene replied, finding her normal voice. "I'm negotiating in her place."

"You?" Jake laughed. He hoisted his guitar and played a few distended notes that got the crowd murmuring in anticipation.

He stepped away from the microphone to address Imogene. The technicians onstage kept recording their dialogue, while fans in the crowd, unable to hear, yelled in frustration.

"Listen, this whole scene stinks. I ain't gonna pose as Byron's puppet just to keep some lame story line going. If he's still carrying a torch for my sister 'cause she jilted him all those years ago, that ain't my problem."

"You're confusing a real-life issue with the movie," Imogene countered. "As her brother—as Elsie's brother—you're supposed to stand up for her when it really counts."

"What a heartwarming tale. But you know perfectly well, toots, I ain't political. I'm just a rock star. All I ever did as a music idol was, pick up chicks and groupies one-on-one. I never had a horde of followers like Byron does. So whatever they do is on him."

"All I ask is don't goad those followers. Just respect the song." Imogene felt sweat beginning to penetrate her newly applied makeup. "Please put down your guitar."

Jasmine had begun to render "The Twelve-String Hammer" in the same sweet, soothing tones as she had displayed earlier. Imogene gestured toward her, saying, "Just listen. Give it a chance to work."

Peace is a song, both a whisper and a scream.
Through all the ages, in every regime,
It shakes the heads that wear the crowns,
Like a twelve-string hammer, crashing down.

Vaguely unsettling though it was, the song seemed to pacify the crowd. Byron joined in, restraining his electric guitar so as not to overpower her acoustic one.

"Ain't that just the sweetest thing you ever saw?" Jake exclaimed. "A duet for the ages. Two musicians in love. Maybe he should take her right now, in front of the world."

"You have no reason to be jealous," Imogene said. "You divorced her, after all."

"Jealous, shit. I'll show you what a generous guy I am. I'll make this a threesome."

Jake re-hoisted his guitar. Before Imogene could protest, he sent an ear-piercing riff through the crowd. He proceeded to improvise on the original

tune, adding twists and turns that made it almost unrecognizable. The peace song that had been flowing through the multitude like a warm bath now reverberated with the power of rifle shots.

A feeling of dread rose in Imogene's gorge. "Stop!" she yelled, grabbing the neck of Jake's guitar and pressing down on the frets as hard as she could. He tried to wrestle the instrument from her, but she held on tight, although the strings cut her fingertips.

She glanced around the stage in search of help. Byron and Jasmine had gone silent as they watched the struggle. Emily frowned at her, as if this were merely a ploy for attention. The only eye contact she managed was with the technicians who were busy filming and lighting her. *What am I doing in the spotlight?* she asked herself. *I'm a writer, not an actress. I should be off somewhere rewriting this scene.*

Imogene tried to speak discreetly, backing away from the microphone. "Listen to me, Jake. When you mess with Byron's song, you're endangering your sister. I gotta tell you the truth, but you can't tell anybody else. Sara's being held hostage in the musicians' trailer by Stuyvesant's producer. He's armed and dangerous and claiming he's a captain in Byron's army."

"No shit." Jake grinned at her. "What a weird plot twist." He turned toward the crowd and shouted, "Can you believe it? My sister's being held hostage!"

"No! I said don't tell anybody!" Imogene screamed, covering the microphone with her free hand. She began to tremble when she realized it was too late: the news had been received by at least part of the increasingly agitated crowd.

"Now that we know what's really going down," Jake yelled, snatching the microphone away from her, "you folks get to decide where the script goes from here. Is it up to me to save my little sister?"

The fans roared. "That sounds affirmative to me," Jake said, turning to Imogene. "Let go of my guitar, toots. I'm done playing for today. You're gonna lead me to that trailer so I can act like a hero. Or at least talk to the crazy bastard who's holding her, since I'm a crazy bastard myself."

Emily stalked up to them, scolding, "You blew it, Imogene. You spilled the beans, after warning me not to." She shook a finger in Imogene's face. "Now the police will be taking charge. Just what you said you didn't want."

She was still speaking when an explosion rocked the three of them off their feet. *Our worst nightmare*, Imogene thought. A bomb had detonated somewhere down below, near the center of the stage. As smoke rose up, and pandemonium seized the crowd, musicians and technicians moved toward the stage exits. Only Byron and Jasmine stood still.

"Now the movie's really blown," Emily said. "The fire department will be moving in too, thanks to you both."

She turned back and pointed toward Jasmine. "What's that girl doing? Is she suicidal?" Flames were crackling beneath the smoke, and Jasmine was inching toward them, dragging Byron along.

"She thinks she's a martyr," Imogene said. The women watched, agape, as Jasmine tossed her guitar into the fire. Would she throw herself in too?

"Join me, Byron," Jasmine implored him, her voice resonating over the center microphone. "We're in this together." Cheers of approval arose from the crowd.

"Stop acting like a crazy cunt, would ya? You're not gonna do this shit." Byron grabbed Jasmine's arm and pulled her away from the edge, still clutching his own guitar.

"But this is our fate!" she screamed. "You and I will rise from the ashes, purified. I promise you that."

As several police officers emerged from backstage, Byron summoned the closest one. "Get me outta here. And have this babbling bitch committed or something." Many fans booed, as if Byron's unwillingness to sacrifice himself was a huge betrayal.

Moments later, Imogene found herself backstage, hardly remembering how she got there. A general stampede had overtaken everyone, including Byron and Jasmine, and borne them away from the fire. Performers and crew gathered around Helene, who was waving her arms, her shrill tone belying her attempt at soothing words.

"Listen up, everybody!" Helene shouted. "No need for alarm. We prepared all along for the possibility of violence. The authorities have been on high alert all day, and they're on top of this. Right, Lieutenant?" She gestured toward a camouflage-clad man, whose walkie-talkie burst periodically with official-sounding voices.

"That's right, Mrs. Frisk," he said. "My officers will contain the immediate damage. Nevertheless, it's a volatile situation. There could be more bombs out there. I suggest you folks clear out of the area, just in case. Remove yourselves to a safe distance."

"I'll send most of my people on their way right now, Lieutenant," Helene said, "but I need at least a skeleton crew to remain. I understand the risk, but we can't afford to stop shooting now. Recreating this scene later would be next to impossible." With stern decisiveness, she selected a handful of assistants to help Hotshot Charlie, the cinematographer, and Mabel, the makeup woman, to create art out of turmoil.

"I'll be in my trailer. Alone," Byron said as he turned to leave.

"You'll need an escort," the lieutenant told him. "It's a zoo out there." He directed two of his officers to follow the folk singer out.

"Yeah, go ahead and flee the scene, Byron!" Jake yelled after him. "Way to lead an army, dude. Nothing matters except saving your own skin. Go sequester yourself in your *private* trailer, and leave me to deal with your shit."

In Byron's wake, Jasmine burst into tears. Marianne approached her with open arms, crooning, "So your idol turned out to be a bastard, Jas. What a shocker." She patted her rival's back and added, "I wouldn't waste a minute crying over him. They're all like that, you know. The bigger they get, the scummier they are."

"Yeah, you got that right, Marianne," Jake said. "Sorry it went down this way, Jas. Byron obviously didn't deserve you. Neither do I, but at least I'll keep taking care of you."

The two ex-wives made for the exit, arm in arm. Jake watched them go and then turned to Helene, hoisting his guitar. "I'm still in the middle of this, Madame Director, as long as my sister is in danger. I've asked Imogene to lead me to the spot where she's being held."

"I admire your brotherly concern, but it's a little late," Helene said. "Right, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, ma'am, it is. We're in the process of surrounding the trailer. No one except law enforcement will be allowed in the vicinity."

"I promised the crowd I'd be a hero," Jake protested. "If I don't rescue Sara—or Elsie, or whoever—I'll look like a bum to everyone out there."

"It's a little late for that too, sir. We're gonna have to disperse the crowd as quickly as we can."

Fire sirens blared in the distance, drawing closer. Helene ordered her skeleton crew to return to the stage and record as much of the bombing aftermath as possible.

She turned back to Jake and hissed, "You blew it, darling, and you knew exactly what you were doing. You just had to play that self-indulgent riff and get the Byron fanatics all riled up."

"Sorry about that," Jake said, tapping his guitar, "but I'm an artist with this thing, just like you are with the cameras. I wield my instrument by instinct. It was time to expose Byron the Peacemaker as a secret warmonger, and that's what I did."

"You blasted everything to shit." Helene stamped her foot. "We had Byron's army contained and pacified until you pulled your stunt. Now all hell's broken loose, and our movie's being reduced to just another police procedural. Where's the message in that?"

"You'll have to excuse me, Madame Director." Jake turned toward the exit. "My work here is finished. You can consider me retired from the movie business. I'll go sequester myself like the legendary folk singer, if I can get a police escort like him."

Emily piped up: "Imogene, why don't you go with Jake?" She explained to Helene, "If anybody can keep Jake out of trouble, it's Imogene."

"Perfect." Helene jerked her head at Imogene. "Go do your thing with him, darling. Whatever that might be."

Emily's got something up her sleeve, Imogene thought. *What could be her motive for pairing me with Jake?* As she followed the guitarist out, she glanced back. Her former roommate was aglow with creative excitement.

"We gotta summon Jim Guthrie," Emily was telling Helene, gesturing toward the lieutenant's walkie-talkie. "I'm sure there's a way. Jim and I returned to DC together last week because we both knew, somehow, we weren't done with this movie. And now it's his wife who's trapped in that trailer with a madman. Besides, as much as I hate to admit it . . . he still loves Sara."

"That's sweet," Helene said, "but I don't know how Guthrie would work for us, cinematically. We never slated him as a major character."

"Christ, Helene," Imogene heard herself shout, "what difference does that make? We know it isn't in the script. It's real life, and Emily has it pegged right. In spite of everything, Jim and Sara belong together."

The director continued to brood over her options. Jake tugged Imogene's arm and said, "Time for us to vacate the set, toots. If I know Guthrie, he won't be content to sit on the sidelines. He'll plunge right into the game. Let Madame Director deal with it."

When Jake and Imogene stepped outside, several policemen jumped to their aid. Forming an escort, they led the way to Jake's private mini trailer on the far side of the Mall. Once inside, with the door locked against intruders, Jake paced the small room. Imogene turned on a television, and the crisis at the musicians' trailer burst into view.

Reporters and news cameras had it covered. An eerily calm woman commentator described the unfolding events. A negotiator with a bullhorn could be heard, urging Andrew to give up his prisoner and himself before any real harm was done. Another negotiator pounded on the door and urged him to open it.

"To summarize what we know at present, Sara Murphy, sister of rock musician Jake Murphy, is apparently being held hostage in this trailer we're showing you, at Constitution Avenue near the east end of the Mall. We're hearing speculation that her assailant may be a disgruntled employee. Sara Murphy is the producer and star of a movie that has been filming scenes on the Mall all weekend. Jake Murphy just wrapped up a concert with his long-time partner, Byron Robarts, which was intended to be part of that film.

"As far as we know at this point, the hostage is unharmed, but no one has been able to determine what the assailant wants. There's a phone in the trailer, we're told, but it may be disconnected. Negotiators are urging this person to at least open a window so they can communicate with him.

"Billy, I'll throw it to you. What else do you have?"

An on-the-ground reporter picked up the narrative. "Jess, no injuries have been reported as the result of that bomb that went off near the stage at the end

of the Murphy-Robarts concert. Authorities are now in the process of clearing the Mall and scouring the area for additional explosives. They're instructing the public to stay away from the area if at all possible."

Jake grabbed a fistful of his dark flowing hair, as if to literally pull it out. "Those goddamned cops will get Sara killed with their Gestapo tactics. They oughta let me try to talk to the bastard. I know how to relate to frustrated musicians."

"Sara has claimed that about herself." Imogene sat down on a couch, while Jake went on pacing. "But this isn't just a frustrated musician. This is a seriously disturbed man. He's proclaimed himself a captain in Byron's army. He probably sees you as an enemy. It's a tricky situation, Jake. Better let the professionals handle it."

"Either way, I'm scared shitless." Jake's voice trembled. "I should've protected my little sister, somehow. I don't trust the so-called authorities to do it. What if this maniac has a bomb of his own? What if he blows up the trailer, with her in it?"

The rock star seemed to crumple before Imogene's eyes, all of his usual bravado gone. She stretched out her arms, and he collapsed into them.

"I gotta go out there," he repeated, several times. Imogene stroked his hair and then gently prodded him to rest beside her on the couch. In an instant he was on top of her, and their clothes were coming off.

As the encounter intensified, she told herself she was doing Madame Director's bidding and also helping the police. The easiest way to keep Jake Murphy occupied and out of trouble was to make love to him.

They rested from their exertions while the television voices droned on. Then a sudden exclamation from the primary commentator made them sit upright. "Billy, I see a man bursting through the crowd. It looks like the police are letting him through. Is he who I think he is?"

"Jess, if you're thinking it's Jim Guthrie, Sara Murphy's husband, you're absolutely right. He's beating a path to the trailer like a . . . I can only come up with the most obvious metaphor. He's like a star running back who's busting loose after being benched for too long."

“There’ve been reports that the couple is separated,” the commentator said, her heretofore dry voice swelling with emotion, “but I gotta say, it looks like he still cares.”

The negotiators at the scene, who had yet to make any headway, stepped aside for the estranged husband. When Jim reached the trailer, he paused and breathed hard. Then he pounded on the door.

Cameras and microphones were close enough to pick up his words. “Open up, you bastard. I’m Jim Guthrie, and that’s my wife you’re holding prisoner. At least have the balls to open a window and talk to me. I’ll put my fist through one if I have to. Don’t matter to me if I injure myself. I’m already damaged goods.”

The commentators gasped as the small window near the top of the door opened. Andrew could be heard saying, “I got no argument with you, Guthrie. I’m just a captain in Byron’s peace army.”

“Whatever you say, Captain. But this ain’t the first time you and your stupid band have menaced my family. Why don’t you finally man up and tell the world what went down in our recording studio, the night I was sucker-punched?”

The door flew open, and Andrew stood there, red-faced, clutching Sara’s left arm. He pushed her slightly forward.

“Listen, you dumb jock. Stop trashing my band. Stuyvesant is good people. They ain’t to blame for that incident.”

Jim’s eyes seemed drawn to the bulge in Andrew’s vest. He asked Sara, “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Jim.” Sara’s voice was loud and clear. “I think you should hear this man out. He’s only defending his livelihood. His band means everything to him.”

The commentator asked, “Billy, can you confirm the man is armed?”

“I’ve glimpsed a holster under that vest,” the reporter replied, “but he hasn’t made any moves to show his weapon. At the moment, he seems rather . . . mesmerized by the attention he’s attracting.”

Andrew’s eyes had indeed opened wide. He squeezed Sara’s arm tighter, and she winced. With his left hand, he motioned the news cameras to draw closer.

He kept beckoning as he proclaimed, "You're an idiot, Guthrie, and so is everybody else who can't see the truth. It was the Great Peacemaker himself who smashed your skull in with an electric guitar. Yeah, our leader was in the studio that night, trying to help us make a record that might have a chance of impressing your wife."

He squeezed her arm again, and she said, "I believe you, Andrew. Byron was there to help you, not to hurt anyone."

"Yeah," Andrew snarled, "and then your hubby came roaring in there, itching for a fight. What else could Robarts do but take him out?" The Stuyvesant producer raised his voice. "Hear that, everybody? You think a folkie can't fight? Byron Robarts don't need no fucking army to defend him. He's his own fucking army."

Andrew balled his left hand into a fist and waved it above his head like a salute. Wrapped up in his newfound fame, he apparently didn't notice Sara's right hand moving toward him, as swiftly and silently as a cobra. She reached into his vest and snatched the object that was making it bulge. Pushing the nonplussed Andrew aside, she stepped outside the trailer, holding the weapon aloft in a triumphant, non-threatening pose.

"Honey, I was getting ready to do that," Jim said, sounding deflated even as screams, followed by cheers, rang out far and wide.

"Don't start taking no bows, you two," Andrew sneered, spreading both arms as a team of police officers surrounded him. "I was ready to give up, anyway. I couldn't have stood this woman's yacking much longer. She oughta run for office in real life."

Sara passed the gun to the nearest cop. Then she eyed Jim, no longer the heroine but once again the indignant wife.

"What do you think of your intimate friend Emily now?" she burst out. "At the very least, she's guilty of criminal stonewalling. She knew all along it was Byron who attacked you, and she said nothing. She lied not only to us but also to the authorities. She's in a shitload of trouble."

The commentator in charge of the coverage burst out laughing, as if all tension had been released in that instant. "Sounds like these two are about to air some dirty linen. How far do you think they'll take that, Billy?"

Sycophants

“They have to know the whole nation is listening in by now.”

“Forget about Emily, would ya?” Jim grinned at Sara as if his paramour had indeed ceased to exist. Moments later, Imogene surmised, both Guthries had grown oblivious to the commotion around them, as if preoccupied with retrieving the Romeo-and-Juliet saga of old. She half expected they would slip into the newly unoccupied trailer and lock the door.

CHAPTER 19



“WE NEED TO be careful about making public statements that inflate my heroine credentials too much,” Sara instructed Imogene. She spoke firmly but smiled irresistibly at the memory of her swift action on that memorable spring day in the nation’s capital. “Part of our message has to be: folks, don’t try this on your own. Disarming a madman is generally a job for the police. Not for a lone woman, no matter how stupidly brave she is.”

“That’s good advice,” Imogene replied, “but it doesn’t change the fact that your story is both inspiring and cinematic. What better way to promote a movie about a female warrior than to perform a daring feat that makes headlines?”

Sara laughed and settled into her high-backed chair, a duplicate of the one in her main office. It had been installed behind the desk in her private recording studio to provide extra comfort while she put finishing touches on several musical sequences for the *Deterrence* soundtrack.

On this Saturday morning, six months after the explosive events on the Mall, she rubbed her growing belly and reflected, “It was mind-boggling, the way we all lost track of where the movie ended and reality began. Somehow, I took on the mentality of Wonder Woman. As for Jim, he seemed to believe he was Superman and Batman rolled into one.”

“You were heroes in my book.” Imogene went on scribbling notes for a biography that would accompany the release of *Deterrence*. “You took on a man who has since pleaded insanity and has been sentenced to a loony bin. And he claims to admire you.”

“Be sure to put that in. I like it when my enemies turn into admirers.”

“Can you remember what you were thinking, just before you grabbed the gun?” Imogene asked.

“Overthinking the situation could’ve been fatal. I believe my gymnastics training kicked in. Pulling off a quick move like that wasn’t all that different from improvising new tricks on the balance beam. I relied on my natural athleticism and muscle memory.”

Sara paused and smiled at Imogene across the desk. “Put that in too. Wouldn’t hurt to remind people that Jim and I do have something in common: we both excelled at college sports.”

“True,” Imogene said. “Are you and Jim . . . all primed and ready to have a son in about three months?” For some reason, putting this question made her feel uneasy.

“We’re getting there. Jim tries to play it cool, so as not to make Laraine jealous. But there’s something special about a pro athlete having a son. Jim can already envision playing catch with the kid, dressing him in little jerseys, going to his schoolboy games. And it’s an extra incentive to stay healthy and keep his own career going as long as possible. He wants to drum up some heroics on the field that little Jason—or whoever—will remember.”

“So you’re pretty sure that’s gonna be his name?” Imogene asked.

“It’s Jake’s real name. We hope he’ll feel honored enough by that to be a decent uncle. And who knows, the kid could turn out to be a musician. Maybe he’ll spend more time hanging out here in the studio than on ball fields.”

Imogene smiled, but a shiver went up her spine. Sara seemed to notice her jumpiness.

“You must find it a bit spooky here, considering what happened, but there’s no need. All of those old ghosts are gone. I’ve been turning this spot into a hotbed of creativity. Once I complete my film score, it’ll be the place where my dreams were reborn.”

With sweeping gestures, Sara motioned toward the sound stage, the recording apparatus, and the storage area that held her own tapes, as well as those left behind by Amorphous and Stuyvesant. She gazed proudly at the new electric piano and Moog synthesizer.

“My little studio in the woods may have a checkered past, but lately it’s become my comfort zone. Jim realizes that too. We’ve agreed that any bands we mentor in the future will be fully vetted in advance. This has to be a place where we all feel safe . . . where we won’t hesitate to bring our kids to listen and learn.”

Sara opened the desk drawer and took out a black object the size of a business envelope. Imogene jumped in her seat, thinking at first it was a gun. Then she realized it was a cell phone.

"Jim did insist I make this one concession to security while I'm out here." Sara waved the phone. "It's all charged up and ready for any emergency."

"I'm planning to get one of those myself," Imogene said.

"How about a quick demonstration of how it works? Helene's back in Hollywood, but I've got her on speed-dial. I've been meaning to schedule a conference call with her."

Sara connected with the director quickly. "What can I do for you, Sara?" she yelled. "I'm knee-deep in post-production, and you should be too."

"Beg pardon for interrupting, Madame Director, but I'm sitting here with my official biographer, Imogene, and we're pondering several nagging questions. Like, when do you estimate this godforsaken film we're still piddling around with will be ready for release?"

"Darling, it's long since turned into a morass, as you well know. We lost control of that delightfully simple mock documentary we originally planned to make about a powerful DC woman. Now it might as well be *Cleopatra*. I had to bring in my genius ex-husband, on the assumption that we'd all prefer not to lose our shirts over my first major project. We've got thirty thousand feet of film to be boiled down to ninety minutes. The release date will be whenever Hank says it's ready, and not a minute before.

"And as I've already told you, we both think it needs one more scene to resolve matters more clearly between you and Jake. We'll set it up in the fake Pentagon office, where the two of you will sign a peace treaty of sorts and exchange congratulations on not killing each other. He'll tentatively endorse Elsie's future political ambitions. And I'm still thinking about that really cute touch of bringing in your real mother to facilitate your reconciliation. She's still trying to be an actress, I've heard."

"She'd be thrilled to do it," Sara said, "but she's not the problem, Jake is. How will I get him here to do that scene? You know how he is about following a script. He won't let us put even one word of dialogue in his mouth. And how will we explain my sudden pregnancy—especially since we made it clear Elsie had outgrown her college football flame?"

"There're other local football heroes she could choose from, darling. Or maybe she took up with someone on the Redskins coaching staff or in the front office. Don't worry your little head about details like that right now. Let Hank and I keep putting our heads together."

"I'd say that's a fair tradeoff for the Guthries," Sara said. "We've sacrificed our creative independence to a big-time financier-distributor, but it'll be nice to hold onto the house and property we've come to love."

"Yeah, yeah, but I'm still plenty pissed I couldn't pull off the concept my way. This was the project that was supposed to empower women in general and a certain ex-wife in particular. I thought doing it documentary style would make it look real all the way through. Now Hank's planning to enhance the Mall battle scene with his usual special effects, which will necessitate another big bank loan. That'll eat up any profits for the foreseeable future, especially after he takes his cut as distributor. And then we gotta start considering an advertising budget. All in all, just the same old showbiz shit."

Helene sighed and then added in a softer tone, "Don't get me wrong, I'm damned grateful to Hank for saving my ass. He and I both believe in the long-term viability of the project. Besides, it's kinda cute, the way we're cozying up on all these decisions. We were rarely this close when we were married, especially toward the end. Christ, I might end up remarrying the bastard out of gratitude. Maybe I'll even get pregnant for good measure. That's working pretty well for you, isn't it, Sara?"

"Didn't Hank have a vasectomy?" Imogene blurted.

"Oh, hi there, Imogene," Helene said. "Trust you to remind me of inconvenient facts. I'll bet by now you've gotten pretty disillusioned by the grim realities of our business. Sara has told me when you first started working for Peace Enterprises, there were stars in your eyes. Probably dollar signs too."

"I've learned a lot since then," Imogene admitted.

"You're really berating the wrong person, Helene," Sara put in. "When it comes to unrealistic expectations, Emily's your girl. She seems convinced the few brief scenes she shot, plus some intermittent wailing on the soundtrack, will be enough to restart her career. Like she's never heard of the cutting-room floor."

"She's pretty safe from that, judging by the impression she made on Hank when he first glimpsed her in the rushes," Helene said. "His eyes really popped open. He demanded to know who she was."

Sara's response was a prolonged groan. Helene chuckled and teased, "Surely you're not jealous, Sara? You would *never* let your obvious animosity for a fellow actor affect your artistic judgment, right? Not that Hank would listen to you if you did. He's gonna cut the picture exactly as he sees fit."

"Fine," Sara said, "but Emily has yet to settle her score with me. I still have fantasies of seeing her in prison stripes. Don't forget, she misled the authorities and everybody else about the attack on Jim. She covered up for Byron to protect her own career. She should've told *me* the truth, at least."

"I'm not saying what she did was right," Imogene offered, "but she had a point when she claimed to be protecting the movie. What if Byron had been arrested on assault charges? We needed him singing at the Mall concert, not defending himself in court."

"Yeah, and how would his followers have reacted if their troubadour had been slapped in jail because of you?" Helene demanded. "I suspect they would've made more trouble than they actually did. Maybe set off a couple of extra bombs with your name on them."

Helene's words made Imogene glance around the studio in a sudden sweat. The director breezed on, "By the way, what's going on with that crazy girl who almost jumped into the fire literally? Does she still think Byron is Jesus Christ?"

"It seems he's fallen off his pedestal in her eyes," Imogene said, steadying her voice with an effort. "I heard Jasmine's gone back to singing in the lobby at headquarters, but she's no longer performing his songs. She's trying to write her own."

"And for some obscure reason I can only guess at," Sara added, "she's been claiming it was her and not Byron who assaulted Jim. She's even taken the stage name 'Jordan River.'"

"Any chance she's telling the truth?" Helene asked.

"Nobody's really buying it," Sara said, "and anyway, Helene, I'm past caring. Jim has fully recovered, and we've moved on. Better yet, Jake and Byron

are on a big old love fest of a road tour, promoting their new songs and rejuvenating the old ones, all over the country. It's not only a small miracle that they're sharing so many stages but also the best free advertising the movie can possibly get."

"More amazingly yet," Imogene put in, "we heard Byron's written a song about Jim . . . sort of an apology."

"Christ, don't let him buy you off that easily," Helene objected. "At least think about acquiring the rights to that song."

Wrong move, Imogene thought. *That'll make Sara look like a money-grubber and maybe rile up Byron's anticorporate troops again, just when they've settled down.*

Squelching this unnerving thought, she said, "The important thing is that Jim is back on the field and looking strong. He and the Redskins are rolling again."

"Yeah, they are," Sara said, smiling, "and I'm happy to report that the players and their wives are one big, happy family again. The Ambroses, who almost cracked up publicly last season, are working on their marriage. They're being counseled by the Cushings, who've established themselves as the team's lay ministers. If Jim and I ever get into trouble again, we'll know who to consult."

"So what're Emily's immediate plans?" Helene asked. "Hank, at least, would like to know."

"You better direct that question to Imogene." Sara shot her a glance. "The two of them are buddy-buddy these days."

"Hardly," Imogene said, "but we did talk last week, maybe for the last time. Emily says she's accomplished what she set out to do on the east coast. She's returning home to LA."

"With her mentor Russell Mellini?" Helene asked.

"No, Russell has a new Broadway gig coming up. I gather he's the one who convinced Emily it was time to return to her husband and kid. She sounded happy and relieved about it. Said she couldn't wait to hug them both."

"So that makes two of you who gave up the great Mellini without a qualm," Helene remarked. "Right, Sara?"

"All he did was console me a little when I was down and out," Sara said. "I'm not in the habit of gossiping with Emily about mutual boyfriends. I have no clue where she stands with Russ."

"Didn't mean to ruffle your feathers, darling. Just confirming the guy's availability. That's something to toss into the showbiz rumor mill. Speaking of which, it's time for me to return to the salt mines. Be good, you two, and keep working with all your might to make Peace Enterprises South the juggernaut I know it can be."

"That's our plan," Sara said, "to reconstitute the nation's capital into our own brand of Hollywood East."

After ending the call, she sat back and grinned at Imogene. "Well? How does that task strike you?"

"Challenging, for sure." Imogene gasped at the scope of Sara's ambition but soon felt a surge of her own. "Challenging, but doable."

"Glad you agree." Sara gave her an inquisitive look. "I guess now's as good a time as any, Imogene, to discuss your long-range plans. I know you think New York is the hub of the universe, but I need you to decide if you can commit to a permanent position here. I'm literally attempting to establish a new industry in a city that has never really embraced it before. If I'm gonna succeed, my staff has to be all in."

"It's an amazing opportunity," Imogene said. "Truthfully, there isn't much left for me in New York these days. Not that it wasn't fun while it lasted."

"The future is here, Imogene," Sara said. "We've mastered the independent movie business as well as it can be mastered. We learned the hard way what it takes to salvage a project. We swallowed our pride when we had to and made our operation flexible enough to accommodate Hollywood-style production and financial experts, but without selling our souls. There's no way we could've pulled all that off in the old headquarters. At best, we would've ended up with a home movie."

Imogene nodded in agreement. "Last time I checked in, the office up there had slipped back to chaos mode. You know, the old party-all-day-and-into-the-night scene. As soon as Marianne left to go on the 'dynamic duo' tour, the business facade crumbled. The useless wannabe artists and hangers-on are in

charge again, and the receptionist's desk is a merry-go-round, if it's occupied at all."

"So it's official," Sara said grimly. "The winds of 1981 are blowing through headquarters again."

"Gus and Janie don't seem to care," Imogene continued. "They mostly stay sequestered in his office. Probably trying to write the next Great American Screenplay."

"They feed on turmoil," Sara observed. "That was their main contribution to the *Deterrence* script. It was their brilliant idea to mix Stuyvesant up with Byron's peace army. But now that they're bona fide Writers Guild members—like you—I'm obligated to pay them for ideas that almost got me killed. God only knows what kind of apocalypse they'll come up with next." Sara sat back and laughed in anticipation.

Imogene ventured, "I'm guessing New York will remain a zoo. Unless Leroy comes back."

"And that's why you can kiss Peace Enterprises North good-bye. Who can blame Leroy for staying away from the place that made him sick? He and his wife are semiretired, on a prolonged cruise, and loving life now."

Sara paused and then refocused on Imogene. "By the way, what's up with you and Steve? I know you're still hanging out with him at your big city condo most weekends. How will that work, once you make the permanent move south and have your own place?"

"Steve's firm is opening a DC branch, and he's a prime candidate to move here," Imogene reported. "It'll help his cause if Peace Enterprises South keeps throwing assignments his way. For example, he'd like to work on signing Jake and Byron to long-term contracts and keeping their new partnership intact."

"I'll do what I can to help. If this means the two of you are on your way to being fully reconciled, then I'm thrilled for you."

"Thanks, but . . . it's a little more complicated than that." Imogene found herself rubbing her stomach as Sara was doing.

"Of course it's complicated, Imogene. Marriage is a roller-coaster ride in the best of times. After all the dips and turns you and I have taken, we should

probably be checked out for whiplash. But if we're still standing after all that, maybe our marriages are meant to last."

No doubt because she was expecting it, Imogene was struck by a wave of nausea. She bent her head to ward off a dizzy spell. It was the first time she'd felt ill at work, although it had happened several times on the train to and from New York.

"I gotta tell you something, Sara." She choked a little as she looked up. "I still have to confirm it, but it seems pretty obvious. I just hope it doesn't wreck our plans."

"I thought you were sitting on something." Sara smiled at her. "You've been looking a little green around the gills lately. I'll bet you're a couple of months late too. Imogene, if it's true, it's great news. I'm so happy for you and Steve, and believe me, we won't let it spoil our plans. We'll make it work for both of us, even if we have to set up a nursery onsite."

"It's not quite that simple," Imogene persisted.

"Isn't it? Of course you're scared . . . everybody is, especially the first time. But admit it, you always wanted this to happen someday. So what if 'someday' arrived a little sooner than you expected?"

"Yeah, but . . ." Imogene paused and took a deep breath, hoping her gorge wouldn't rise again before she could get this out.

"Remember what I told you when I first separated from Steve? That he was considering getting a vasectomy? We never discussed it again, but he seemed pretty sure about it."

"What're you saying?" Sara demanded. "You think he went ahead? And this could be someone else's baby? Whose, for God's sake?"

Sara's warm expression faded, and a hard look replaced it. "Imogene, please don't tell me you were still fooling around with Jake that recently. How could you be so stupid? Just as you're getting your life together, you blow it up?"

Stupid, indeed. Imogene reflected on the near-magical power that her longtime idol still could exert over her. "It's not like I plan these encounters," she said. "Every time it happens, I vow never again. But it *did* happen again, just before he left for the tour. I dropped by his condo, like you asked me to,

to gage his interest in shooting that final Pentagon scene. I didn't realize he'd be alone. I can't explain it, Sara. He's the rock hero of my youth, and there he sat, looking so vulnerable . . . and irresistible."

"Irresistible, shit," Sara spat.

"Steve and I may be getting closer lately," Imogene continued, "but we still haven't resolved all our issues. And anyway, once my husband cheated on me, it just seemed silly to have any scruples of my own. You should understand that . . . right?" Imogene managed to lock eyes with her boss before giving way to tears and burying her face in her hands.

"Fair enough," Sara admitted, "but when I threw away my scruples and had an affair, I wasn't reckless. I took some precautions."

She sighed and continued, "I do understand how it happened, Imogene. Just don't expect me to comfort you. I've warned you, over and over, that Jake is trouble. He's my brother, and I love him dearly, but he's never grown up emotionally. He's already married two women under protest, once he got them pregnant and they refused to get abortions. You saw how those marriages turned out."

"I know," Imogene said, raising her head.

"He takes care of the wives and kids financially, as the law requires, but he pays no real attention to them unless it's convenient." Sara paused, keeping her stern gaze on Imogene. "So is that your plan? To follow in their footsteps?"

"God, no!" Imogene exclaimed. "It's not love with Jake, it's lust. There's no plan to it. Sara, I'm plain confused. Steve is my soul mate in a lot of ways. And I'm not against abortion, but somehow . . . I can't stand the thought of aborting this baby."

"You're crazy if you expect Steve to help you raise somebody else's child. Especially when he threatened to have an operation expressly to prevent having children at all. Does he know about your little mess?"

"No," Imogene said. "You're the first person I've told."

Sara picked up her cell phone. "Well, here's *my* plan. I'm putting my offer of a permanent position on hold until you come clean. You're gonna speak with both the men you embroiled in this dilemma and tell them exactly what you just told me. We'll proceed from there."

Sara triggered a call on speed dial, and a sleepy-sounding Brooklynese voice answered. "Who the fuck's this? We need our rest. How'd you get this number?"

"I have this number, Marianne dear, because you work for me. Maybe it's time I reminded you of that. I know it's an hour earlier in Chicago, but what're you doing still in bed?"

"We had a late night," Marianne replied, awakening quickly. "You know our schedule. And we're having productive days too, I must say. New songs are pouring out of the guys like you wouldn't believe. They've been rolling them out onstage every night, and the audiences eat them up. Peace-and-love has married rock 'n' roll, just like it's the late seventies again."

"I'm impressed, Marianne," Sara said. "At one time I wasn't sure Jake and Byron would ever talk again, much less compose together."

"That's just it. They *don't* talk when they're not playing. Half the time they look ready to spit on each other, but nobody cares."

"I heard a rumor that Jake dedicated a new song to you," Sara said. "Does that mean he's into you again? Or is it your financial skills he's enamored with?"

"All I can tell you is he's growing up amazingly on this tour. He finally realizes that just because I handle the money doesn't mean I don't get him. I've always been able to see the real Jake, beyond the dollar signs. I won't let him let you down. He'll be ready for that reconciliation scene in *Deterrence* when you need him."

"I appreciate that," Sara said, "and I'd be delighted if things worked out between you and my brother, but I need you to wake him up right now and put him on the phone. My colleague, Imogene, has something important to say to him."

Sara motioned Imogene forward to take the phone and then sat back, fixing her with a grim look. Imogene grasped the phone, her hand growing sweaty as the transfer took place on the other end. After at least a full minute, she heard Jake's groggy voice. "This better be good. Who is this, anyway?"

"It's Imogene, Jake."

She felt a wave of panic and almost gagged as she waited for him to reply. Finally, he said, "Oh yeah, Imogene. What do you want?"

“Jake, I have to tell you . . . I think I’m pregnant.”

Another few moments of silence shook her. Then he barked, “What’s that got to do with me?”

“There are only two possible fathers, my husband and you. And Steve told me, a while ago, that he was considering a vasectomy.”

Jake burst out laughing. He kept it up until Imogene demanded, “What’s so funny?”

“Toots, I had a vasectomy, right after Jasmine’s kid was born. I said I’d be damned if I ever went through that entrapment scene again. So if that’s what you had in mind, you can just forget it.”

Imogene breathed in deep draughts of relieving air. She felt light enough to float away. “Jake, that was the last thing on my mind. You just made my day. God, you just made my *life*.”

“Not sure how I did that but glad to oblige.”

After ending the call to Chicago, Imogene gave Sara a significant look as she punched in Steve’s office number in New York. She told the staff member who answered that she urgently needed to speak to Mr. Wittier. Her call was put through.

“Steve, I’m going to ask you a question. It’s a simple yes or no. Did you ever have that vasectomy you were talking about last year?”

Steve seemed dumbstruck for several moments. Then he asked, “What’s this about, Imogene? It sounds like you’re on a speakerphone, asking me about an intimate matter.”

“Ordinarily I’d keep it private, but I need my boss to hear the answer too. So which is it? Yes or no?”

“I . . . actually, I still haven’t gotten around to it. You know me. I can be indecisive when it comes to big decisions.”

Imogene’s heart leaped in her chest, but she kept her voice even. “Then I guess the purpose of this call is to thank you for your indecisiveness. And, by the way, congratulations.”

CHAPTER 20



WITH A PLETHORA of issues to discuss and plans to make, Sara and Imogene prepared to remain in the studio all day. At noontime, Yvette and Mrs. Jones brought a sandwich platter and a jug of iced tea from the house. They seemed to work as a team as they set up the meal on a side table, retrieved glasses from a cabinet, and refilled the coffee pot. "Call us if you need anything else," Yvette said with a bright smile.

"I'm making fruit cocktails for dessert," Mrs. Jones added. "We'll bring them out later."

After the pair departed, Sara observed, "As you can see, we have peace in our time. Who knows how it happened? Maybe the way we're ending the movie, with Elsie's peacemaking instincts winning out, has had a calming effect on my household. I gotta say, both of those ladies have stood by me during all my crises."

Imogene, having spilled her secret, found her appetite had returned. She bit into a turkey sandwich and washed it down with iced tea, avoiding the coffee. When she remarked that Steve had seemed shaken up by the big news, Sara reassured her. "He just needs time to process it. Most men are like that. There's gotta be a reason why he didn't get that vasectomy. Truthfully, Jim was knocked for a loop by *my* news. A second kid will complicate our lives quite a bit."

After lunch, Sara set up the playback equipment to listen to what she called her "opus." Imogene continued to take notes about Sara's creative process as the sounds of her film score filled the studio.

"It's amazing what you've done with just an electric piano and a Moog synthesizer." Imogene gazed at those instruments, perched on the sound stage. "I could shut my eyes and imagine a full orchestra playing."

"I wish. Unfortunately, we don't have the budget to hire the actual DC Philharmonic to play my creation. Maybe next time. For now, I'm relying on the Moog to add synthetic warlike sounds and general atmospheric weirdness."

"Speaking of weirdness," Imogene ventured, "have you decided whether to use any of the Stuyvesant 'Chaos' tape in the soundtrack? The one time I heard it, there were parts that struck me—I mean, that seemed to suit the mood of the picture. The falsetto singing, for example, sounded downright ominous. It would build suspense, for sure."

Sara regarded her with a teasing smile. "Maybe you'd rather save the 'Chaos' soundtrack for your college movie, in case we ever get around to producing it in its entirety. What did you call it again?"

"*The Nondescripts*," Imogene replied patiently.

Sara glanced at the drawer where the 'Chaos' tape was stored and let out a sigh. "You want to hear it again, don't you? It speaks to you in some way. Well, I gotta admit, it affects me too. Even though it mostly freaks me out."

Sara retrieved the tape and fired it up. They listened to it, cringing a little. Afterward, Sara asked, "Well? Did you get any blinding insights from it this time?"

Before Imogene could reply, the studio door opened. She shrieked when several people burst in, looking like a mob as they filled the space between her chair and Sara's desk. Her heart pounded as she clutched her midriff.

After a panicked moment, she saw Reverend Christopher Strickland stride in behind the others, dressed in a suit and tie as if for a business meeting. She breathed easier as she assured herself this was no threat but merely one of the reverend's stunts. As she glanced at the rest of the group—three men and one woman—they looked familiar yet strange.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Guthrie," Strickland said. He placed himself in front of Sara's desk, while the others scattered. He turned to give Imogene a nod and grin and then faced Sara. "We knew you were working offsite today, so we took this opportunity to drop in for an impromptu meeting. There are several issues that my friends and I urgently need to discuss with you."

"Reverend, I'm busy at the moment," Sara said in an even tone, "and you're on private property. I'm perfectly willing to meet with you and the others, but I prefer to schedule meetings in advance and hold them in the office."

"That's the problem, Mrs. Guthrie," Strickland replied. "These folks have tried repeatedly to get your attention in the office, but it seems you're always too busy to address their concerns. So I'm asking you to take a few moments, right now, and focus on them for a change. Do you even know their full names? Or are they just anonymous assistants who do your bidding and serve as extras in your movie?"

"Do *you* know their full names, Reverend?" Sara shot back. "Or are they just anonymous foot soldiers you recruited for your latest crusade?"

Holy crap, Sara, Imogene thought, sweat popping out on her brow. Why must you keep trying to make an enemy of this man? You can't beat him at his own game. He's got not only a pulpit but also a growing, energized community behind him.

To her amazement, Strickland threw back his head and laughed. "Fair enough, Mrs. Guthrie. We could both do a better job of treating our supporters as individuals. Why don't we take this opportunity to hear what these folks have to say?"

"All right, Reverend." Sara sighed, leaned back in her chair, and glanced around the room. "I didn't prepare for a staff meeting today, so I'm afraid there aren't enough chairs. You'll all have to grab a seat wherever you can."

Imogene, detecting what she thought was a pregnancy bump on the woman, got up from her chair and motioned toward it. She moved around the desk and stood beside Sara, hoping for a show of solidarity. Her uneasiness increased as she realized how helpless she was. Strickland's grin suddenly didn't strike her as friendly, and the others glowered as if they expected to be blown off with empty words.

She reflected that she had rarely spoken to the three beyond a quick greeting. *Good God, she thought, that makes me just as elitist as Sara. I don't know these coworkers. She and I have spent months sequestering ourselves behind closed doors while they did the grunt work of the office. Of course they're individuals, each with a unique story. But didn't they form some sort of union a while back so they could speak as one?*

They introduced themselves by name and title. Thomas, who called himself the "lead budget analyst," looked like an office grind with his sports coat,

clipped hair, and glasses. He pulled a chair off the stage and sat down, propping a thick binder on his lap. The other two men, Chuckie and Bryce, looked much more hip in their jeans, colorful vests, and jewelry accessories. They introduced themselves as “full-time administrative assistants and part-time artists” and perched on the edge of the stage. The woman, Meadow Lark, described herself as a “receptionist-actress.”

Strickland remained standing and frequently gesticulating. “Why don’t you lay some facts and figures on us, Thomas?” he said, motioning toward the budget analyst. “I guess there are several rounds of ammunition in that binder.”

Sara jumped in her seat. “An odd choice of words for a man of peace, Reverend. But go ahead and show me what you’ve got . . . Thomas.”

The earnest young man explained, “Based on numerous discussions I’ve had with your production manager and your auditor whenever they’ve been around, as well as my own research, I’ve been able to track all the costs associated with *Deterrence*. That includes both those incurred to date and those likely to be in the future, once an advertising campaign is under way. I’ve also made projections of long-term earnings after the film is in full release. If it performs as expected, I believe it will pay for itself within a year, and afterward become profitable. Therefore, I believe you’ll easily be able to afford at least a twenty-five percent raise for every permanent member of your staff.” He went on to supply “facts and figures” in enough detail to fog Imogene’s brain.

“A rising sea should lift all boats,” the reverend put in. “Don’t you believe that, Mrs. Guthrie?”

“Of course I do, Reverend. Although I must tell you, Thomas,” she added, a smile popping out, “you’re giving me the rosier projections possible. We’d all love to see numbers like those come to fruition, but there are no guarantees.”

“The trade papers are very optimistic about the film’s profitability,” Thomas pointed out. “So are Mr. and Mrs. Frisk in their interviews. They believe they have a potential blockbuster. There are many factors working in its favor: the real-time newsworthiness, the publicity from the Murphy-Robarts tour, the innovative filmmaking techniques that already have the industry buzzing.”

"It remains to be seen if that buzz is real." Sara, always susceptible to flattery, was obviously basking in it now. She kept smiling as she remonstrated, "Just slow down a little, okay? If the best-case scenario comes true, everybody will benefit, but I can't sit here today and promise you the moon. We'll assess our position when the time comes. Some of the profit—assuming it materializes at all—will be invested in future projects."

"That happens to be the next topic on our agenda, Mrs. Guthrie." Strickland's grin got wider and his arm gestures more sweeping. "The creative members of our contingent would like to pitch a project of their own."

"I might have known." Sara couldn't suppress a groan. "You're all writing screenplays, right? Who isn't these days?"

"We're not just talking about a screenplay, Mrs. Guthrie." Chuckie, the more flamboyant looking of the two administrative assistants, rose from his seat on the stage, twirling the beads that were looped around his neck. "The three of us have teamed up to write a full-fledged musical. I'm working on dialogue and lyrics, and Bryce is composing the music. Meadow Lark is gonna be our star. She's a dynamite singer and actress."

"You don't say," Sara said. "What style of music . . ."

"I do mostly rhythm and blues," Bryce replied, "with a little hip-hop thrown in. Although I've heard you're not a big fan."

"I could get into hip-hop, given the right project." Sara seemed to force a smile. "Go ahead and pitch your musical."

Chuckie described the scenario of a predominantly black campus where bands kept forming, breaking up, and reforming. The college community he envisioned, with its mixture of jocks, stoners, and devout students, reminded Imogene of *Nondescripts*. *Almost as if they've plucked my ideas out of the air. Amazing, the way that happens.*

"Tell Mrs. Guthrie about your stage credentials, Meadow Lark," Strickland prompted.

"I did a lot of theater in college, both classics and musicals," the young woman said in a melodic voice. "I graduated from George Washington University as a theater and music major, and after that, I served as cofounder and producer for the Avant-Garde Project of DC. We've staged several pieces

that got written up in the local press.” She gave Sara a bright, hopeful smile. “I’ve always been versatile.”

“That reminds me of my old roommate Emily, who did the avant-garde thing in New York for a while,” Sara remarked with a chuckle. “I admired her persistence, even though she was a big-time pain in my butt. She used me to pad her résumé before scurrying back home to LA. More power to her, I guess.”

The reverend stopped gesticulating and folded his arms in a stern manner. “I sense you’re about to tell us, Mrs. Guthrie, that you have endless demands on your time and a slush pile of scripts a mile high. That my friends, being amateurs, will have to wait in line for years to get any attention.”

“That’s pretty much how it works, Reverend—”

“Personally,” he continued, cutting her off, “I believe that slush pile of yours is mythical. It’s a barrier you throw up to keep strangers like us out of your business. You barely sniff at any project that doesn’t fit into your preconceived, insular world. Isn’t that true?”

Sara tried to reply, but the reverend raised his voice over hers. “We’ve discussed this before, repeatedly. You have yet to elevate your business to the level of a public trust that benefits the community. You still regard it as a playground for yourself, your family, and a few chosen friends.”

Sara’s at a loss for words, Imogene reflected, maybe for the first time since I’ve known her. It’s up to me to say something. I’m the damned publicist, after all. How do I explain that even if these accusations were once true, Deterrence changed everything?

“You don’t understand, Reverend Strickland,” Imogene blurted. “There *is* a slush pile. I know, because my project is stuck there too, even though Sara and I are close friends. It can’t be helped. This isn’t a Hollywood studio where movies are churned out by assembly line. Nobody at Peace Enterprises sticks to a script. Nothing is predictable. All you can do is toss your ideas into the stew and hope they survive in some form.”

Strickland started to speak, but Imogene somehow kept the floor. “It’s about collaboration. We all participated in *Deterrence*, even if we were peripheral characters. In a way, we all own the project. And speaking of sharing

ideas, *I* wrote a campus movie too—the one you guys just described sounds so much like mine that it's almost eerie."

Imogene tried to summarize *Nondescripts*, only to find herself conflating the two tales. Her confusion gave way to a spell of dizziness. She grabbed onto Sara's desk to keep from falling.

"Are you feeling ill?" Strickland asked, sounding concerned. "Why don't you come over here and sit down?" He motioned Meadow Lark out of the seat and beckoned Imogene. When Imogene sat down, the reverend pulled a handkerchief out of his suit pocket and held it near her face. The scent seemed to work like smelling salts.

"Better?" Strickland asked. Imogene nodded.

Sara, apparently noticing Meadow Lark's midriff, remarked, "Looks like all the women here are in a delicate condition, Reverend. We're not in any shape to engage in your style of hand-to-hand combat."

"We do have to take care of the ladies," the reverend agreed. He eyed Thomas, who grabbed his binder and got up from his seat, allowing Meadow Lark to sit down.

"Are we all reasonably comfortable now?" Strickland cast his grin around the room. "If so, I have something else I'd like to say."

"I'm sure you have plenty else on your mind, Reverend," Sara said, smiling in turn, "but just so you know, I'm not prepared to reveal any more company secrets. And neither is my colleague." She gave Imogene a warning look.

"In that case, *you* ought to know I'm not fooled, not for a minute. What the two of you have been feeding us is a load of bull crap."

Imogene jumped in her seat as his sudden glare swept over her and then returned to Sara. He continued, "I don't buy this line about Peace Enterprises being the anti-Hollywood studio, where you make up your own rules on the fly. I know all about your Triumvirate, Mrs. Guthrie. Those ladies are as rich and powerful as anyone in Hollywood, and you get your marching orders from them—primarily, Mrs. Frisk."

"How do you know about my contacts?" Sara glanced around the room, frowning. "From your spies?"

"I don't need spies to figure out the basics. I read the trade news, just like my friend Thomas. What I don't understand is why you must keep on

reflecting the values of middle-aged filthy-rich white women who live in Pacific Coast mansions. I say you're too vibrant and smart to go on being dominated by some distant elite. Why not expand your board of advisors, so to speak?"

"To include you, maybe?" Sara inquired.

"Why not?" Strickland gave his supporters a wink. "Don't you all agree I could be a movie mogul of a different color?"

They looked back at him uncertainly, Imogene thought. The reverend returned his attention to Sara. "What'll it take to convince you we can all be creative contributors? How can we make you listen? Maybe it's time for an old-fashioned sit-in. Right here, right now."

He laughed, as if to make the notion fun. Imogene felt tension mounting on all sides. The reverend's followers glanced at the exit and then around the studio, perhaps in search of the bathroom. *We're all captives of this man*, Imogene thought.

"Not even you can make that happen, my dear reverend." Sara leaned forward in her chair and looked him in the eye. "There won't be any sit-ins or demonstrations on my property. If that's what you have in mind, take it somewhere else."

She sat back and added, "Now, if you don't mind, I need to end this meeting so Imogene and I can get back to our original business. And I repeat, next time you want to meet with me, call the office and make an appointment."

"Not good enough, Mrs. Guthrie." Strickland's grin disappeared as he folded his arms. "We're all prepared to sprawl on the floor if we have to and remain there until you stop stonewalling us."

Sara sighed. "You're making this extra difficult, Reverend." She opened her desk drawer and reached into it.

Strickland shook his head at her. "Who you plan on calling? I haven't seen any security guards around here, and your husband is away on a road trip. You gonna summon the police to drag us all out of your little studio? That'll bring you a crap-load of bad publicity, I assure you."

His tone had grown harsh, but now it shifted back to wheedling. "Wouldn't it be simpler just to talk to us? To treat us as equals? Maybe even partners?"

"I'm not reaching for my cell phone, Reverend. As you say, there's no one for me to call. But you're mistaken about one thing. I *do* have security . . . my own."

Sara's hand went deeper into the drawer. Imogene wondered what else she might be hiding besides the phone. She recoiled in her seat when Sara pulled out a gun and pointed it at the ceiling.

Gasps and shrieks arose from the group. Only the reverend remained unflustered. He remarked drily, "That's a cute trick. You'd really do anything to get me out of your face, wouldn't you?"

"I respect you greatly, Reverend, but I won't be held hostage again. Not by you or by anyone, for any reason. So I'm asking you once again to leave, and remember never to enter my private space again without an express invitation. This is my company, and I'll run it as I see fit. Got that? It's *my* company. Nobody—not you, not the Triumvirate, not even the original founders of Peace Enterprises—can tell me what to do."

Strickland threw back his head and laughed. His supporters tittered, as if unsure what was so amusing.

"You don't think I'm serious?" Sara held the gun higher.

"On the contrary, I think you are," Strickland said, still chortling. "You're a street fighter, just like me. You do whatever you gotta do, no matter how politically awkward it might be. It's plain to me now, Sara—may I call you Sara?—that you and I are destined to be partners. Strange bedfellows for sure, but underneath it all, we get each other. And you can call me Chris from now on."

He turned to Imogene. "I hear you've been tasked with writing her biography. Just out of curiosity, what're you planning to call it?"

Imogene had to clear her throat before she responded, "We don't have a title for it yet." She paused and then added, "We're open to suggestions."

"How about 'This is *my* company'?" Strickland said. "I loved the way Sara shouted that out just now. It sounded like a statement of purpose. A battle cry."

"'This is my company.' Pretty good." Imogene looked inquiringly at Sara.

"Not bad," Sara agreed. She smiled, but she kept the gun aloft and her hand steady.

The reverend turned toward the exit, motioning the rest of the group to follow him. "I'll make an appointment, Sara, just as you suggest. We'll have us a full-scale script reading and auditions when the time comes. I'm sure

that with enough advance warning, you'll be delighted to host us at *your* company."

The intruders seemed to vanish as abruptly as they had arrived. Imogene and Sara were left to shiver in their wake and stare at one another in disbelief.

Imogene pointed to the gun with a shaky finger. "I guess you can put that thing away now."

Sara regarded the gun in her hand and jumped as if startled. She laid it on the desk.

"You didn't think it was loaded, did you, Imogene? There's no way Jim would trust me with one of his weapons if it could actually harm someone. This thing is just for show. I'll bet Strickland—excuse me, Chris—suspected that all along."

"Maybe so," Imogene said, breathing easier, "but that doesn't mean he won't go to the police or the news media and spout off about how you threatened him, and he barely escaped with his life."

"Christ, it was only because I felt threatened myself. Still, you're probably right. Once he starts spreading the story, he'll make himself the hero of it."

After reflecting a moment, Sara returned the gun to her desk drawer and pulled out the cell phone. "I gotta get in touch with Jim in St. Louis," she said, punching in a number as she checked her watch. "Maybe I can catch him in the locker room. We gotta figure out how to handle the fallout, once the reverend finds a microphone."

Jim's voice came on the speakerphone. "I'm between practice and a meeting, honey. What's up?"

"I thought you oughta know I just threatened a famous preacher with a gun. He actually seemed to get off on it a little. You think I'll go to jail?"

"Forget jail," Jim said. "You'll go to hell."

As Sara filled him in about the incident, Jim mostly laughed it off. "Listen, Sara," he said, "when this hits the fan, let me take full responsibility. That piece is registered to me, and luckily, Virginia's a pro-gun state. I'm the one who taught you how to use it in an emergency."

"Yeah, and you should've seen the way I handled it. Such flair, such showmanship. I had the whole group bowing and scraping to me. Ask Imogene."

"If I were you, guys," Imogene put in, "I wouldn't let on right away that the gun wasn't loaded. Keep people guessing."

"Wow, Imogene," Sara exclaimed, "you're getting devious in your old age."

"I'm not suggesting we deceive the public, exactly," Imogene explained. "Just keep an element of mystery about it, for as long as possible."

"Right on, Imogene," Jim declared. "It'll send a message that the Guthries won't be messed with."

"All that matters, Sara," Imogene continued, "is that you won the skirmish with Strickland. He acknowledged it was your company and *only* your company. How empowering was that?"

"Damned empowering." Sara grinned at Imogene. "And that declaration of mine even gave us a title for our memoir."

She paused and reflected. "Although on second thought, it's not an entirely accurate statement."

"I don't follow you, honey," Jim said. "What's not accurate?"

Imogene watched as Sara's grin widened to take in both her and Jim as accomplices.

"Just one tiny correction. This isn't *my* company. It's *our* company."