

Chapter 1 – An Unusual Day (words 2587)

It was a chilly October day. The trees in Beth Murphy's neighborhood were turning bright red, yellow and orange. This delighted her, but in spite of her satisfaction with the change of seasons, she felt as though something were missing. A delicate, secretive, unbelievable loss. She tried to deny it, went about her chores like it was a normal day, but it was not.

Beth lived in Quercus Gardens Apartments, a charming garden apartment complex with lots of oak trees. The complex was named Quercus after the species *Quercus rubra*, which is Latin for Red Oak, the state tree of New Jersey. The garden apartments were surrounded by wide green lawns and tall oak trees. In autumn, the oak trees' leaves and acorns fell to the ground. Squirrels jumped and frolicked through the leaves like fur-covered children gathering and hiding nuts for winter. The squirrels and the trees gave Beth a feeling of being connected to the beauty and endurance of nature. It was a nice place to call home.

Today was laundry day. Beth lifted her laundry basket and strolled out the door and across the street to the laundry room that was provided for tenant use. She sorted the clothes, dumped them into the washers with some soap and turned on the machines. She sat on a small chair in the laundry room and read the news while the clothes churned inside the machine. When the bell went off, she transported the clothes into the clothes drier. The warm humid air of the drier filled the laundry room inviting her to relax. This gave her an idea. She stood and slowly moved into a few yoga poses, stretching her arms and legs. She let go of her worries.

But soon they drifted back.

It couldn't be happening. Not now. She was not in the mood for it.

When the clothes were dry, she opened the door of the machine and pulled them out. Some were so hot they almost burned her hands and arms, but still she embraced them. Oh, how she enjoyed that sense of warmth that made her feel safe and loved. She folded the clothes and marveled at how, having everything clean again, filled her with a sense of accomplishment. Now she gathered the folded clothes and placed them snugly into her

laundry basket. Out the door she went, looking up at the orange and red leaves of the mighty oak trees against a bright cool blue sky. She crossed the street to her apartment.

Ahead she saw a short chunky middle-aged man in a work uniform standing in front of her apartment door. She recognized him as a neighbor.

"Hello, don't mean to disturb you," he called. "I know it's inconvenient, but have you been getting any heat in your apartment? My wife, Arlene, says the temperature's been dropping all day. I just now checked the radiators. Put my hand on them and don't feel a bit of heat."

It was Ted Dillon from apartment A1. Beth had seen him many times. Ted was an Irish-American with light brown hair and blue eyes. His work uniform had his name tag above the shirt pocket. He was one of those guys you see walking among cars on hydraulic lifts at auto repair centers. Last winter when the snow was knee-deep, they had joked together as they dug their cars out. She hadn't seen him much since, except to wave as they passed on the sidewalk.

"I felt something was amiss. Maybe the furnace will come on later this evening," Beth said.

"Arrrrh," he groaned. "No, we can't wait, we need to do something about this place, you know what I mean?"

Beth nodded amicably.

"We need to do something, seriously, now," Ted repeated as he leaned forward and glared at Beth.

Ted Dillon had lived in Quercus Gardens Apartments for about fifteen years. Beth and her husband, Bob, for only two years. They had noticed that the superintendent of the property, Ramon Perez, seemed to aggravate everyone with some negligence in the maintenance of their apartments.

Ted took the opportunity to explain again how he had, over the years, angrily endured a leaky roof, a broken down laundry machine, a flooded parking lot, and numerous dead batteries in the fire prevention alarms. "I guess this winter the problem will be a lack of heat," he said. "Other problems affected a few people here and there, so most tenants can remain indifferent, too busy on their jobs to focus on someone else's problem. But when the heat

disappears throughout the whole building with winter coming, it's going to get everyone's attention." Ted stopped and looked angrily at Beth.

Defensively, Beth crossed her arms in front of her and raised her eyebrows, "What can we do?"

Ted huffed, "I called both phone numbers and so did apartment A6. No response. Perez is a pain in the butt."

Beth sighed, "I could go on the computer and see what kind of help I can find."

"Please! Do something," Ted said. "I'm going back to get that electric space heater out of our closet."

Opening her apartment door, Beth was greeted by a cool emptiness. She hugged the clothes basket for its remaining warmth. It was October, the heat should be on by now. She climbed the steps, wondering why it was up to her to solve the problem. What did Ted want? Someone to shoot Perez if he didn't fix the problem right away? Furnaces break. Parts take time to be delivered.

At the top, she stopped to listen for the old clicking sounds that the heating system made when it was responding well. But no sound came to her ears. She sniffed the air for the smell of the hot metal radiators that were a part of this warm-water heating system that sent heat into every apartment of this ten-apartment building. But the cold emptiness lingered.

It was Friday afternoon and if a repair was needed, a call should be made soon. She could not deny the possibility any longer. The residents might have to endure a whole night without heat. Worse than that, the superintendent of this complex took weekends off. If the call was not made immediately, there would be no heat until Monday.

Beth quickly set the basket of warm clean clothes in the bedroom. She grabbed the phone and made a call. She wondered if the superintendent, the "Super" as everyone called him, Ramon Perez, would pick up the phone. The ring tone repeated several times then the machine answered. "This is Ramon Perez, Super for Quercus Gardens, please leave your name, phone number and a brief message. I will get back to you as soon as possible. If this is an emergency....." Beth left a message about the lack of heat in her apartment at this number. She then called the emergency number and left another message there. She thought about

Ramon Perez. What would he be doing right now? Was he looking at his watch and declaring himself off duty for the weekend? He was a quiet, reserved person who said little. His dark eyes always looked angry. Beth always felt like she was bothering him every time she called about a problem. It would have been easier to let her husband make the call, but he was at work. Her messages went into the answering system. Beth listened for a return call. By late in the afternoon, with no answer from Perez, she knew it was going to be a long cold weekend.

Beth made a cup of tea and sat down at her computer.

On the internet she found a group that was supposed to help people who rent apartments. The site referred to them as “tenant advocates.” What an idea, advocating for tenants. Who would care to help renters? Beth clicked through and took a look at the web site. The group was called Tenant Action Network or TAN. The site suggested that tenants should act together to get the landlord to make necessary repairs on the rental properties. “Get your money’s worth in housing and “peaceful enjoyment,” the web site said.

The website advised that the first thing tenants needed to do was call a meeting to discuss their issues. Unfortunately, the apartments of Quercus Gardens were too small to hold much of a meeting. The apartment complex didn’t even offer a community room. The last big room that Beth was in was the laundry room. She sipped her cup of tea and thought. It would have to do. She put on her jacket and dashed down the sidewalk. A cool wind was now pushing heavy gray clouds into the northwest sky. Crazy how weather could change so suddenly. She rang her neighbor’s doorbell. Ted opened it.

Beth began her explanation, “We would need to get everyone in this building to come to a meeting. I was thinking, maybe the laundry room across the street? We could bring our own lawn chairs.” She went on describing the possibility of getting a tenant advocate to come to the meeting and speak.

He listened gratefully. “That sounds good, Beth. Can you set up the meeting? We really need to do something about this landlord.”

“Sure.” Beth replied. She could see that Ted was happy. She felt good that she had given him hope. She too was glad to have some hope.

Beth went back to her apartment, hung her jacket in the closet and sat down at the computer. She brought up that internet site again, signed up, paid the dues and learned more details about what to do. She laughed at herself. Her husband Bob would come home to find her deep in yet another adventure.

Beth now knew she had to let everyone in her building know about the meeting in the laundry room. The web site allowed her to download a standard template advertisement. She looked at the calendar. If her neighbors woke up tomorrow in a cold apartment, they would easily be persuaded to come to a meeting this Saturday afternoon. She typed the day, time and place into the document. "Bring your own lawn or beach chair" she advised them. She put an email where she could be reached. She hoped people didn't mind meeting in a laundry room. Fortunately, her old printer was working well enough to print all ten fliers for the apartments in her building.

As the printer pumped out the fliers, Beth sat back and thought. It felt good to know there was something that could be done about their predicament. They didn't have to put up with paying for services that they needed and were not getting. Now she had to get the fliers to her neighbors.

She grabbed her jacket again, stuck a roll of tape in her pocket and went out the door. It took only a few minutes to reach the five front doors with one apartment up and one down, ten apartments in all. She taped a flier onto each door. Just like that. It was done. She had alerted the tenants in her building.

Now it occurred to her that it was getting late. She still had to fold the laundry and put it away. What should she fix for supper? Her husband, Bob, would be coming home soon. He worked in a grocery warehouse, operating a jack which he used to lift and move large boxes of cereal or soap onto trucks which hauled the goods to local grocery stores.

Later, as Beth poked through the vegetable bin of her refrigerator, she considered what Bob might say about her signing up with TAN. He'd be in favor of it in principle. After all, he was a shop steward in his union at the warehouse, so to that extent she knew he would be in support. She also knew that he sometimes worried that she would get involved in something way over her head. With the economy on the rocks again, Beth was spending most of her day

on the internet looking for work. She was also taking college courses online. Beth laughed. Back when she was busy working as a sales rep at a printing company, she never thought of getting involved. Being unemployed gave her plenty of time to be active.

There was that uneasy feeling again. The temperature of the room was drifting downward. A stronger wind was pressing against the big window in the living room. It seeped in around the frame and along the cracks next to the air conditioner—an appliance that saved them in summer, but ruined the integrity of the wall in winter.

The whole apartment soon felt empty and cold. Abandon. Bob might not notice it right away, especially if she heated up the gas oven and made some bread. The heat might just last the night. But could she bake bread every evening just to keep the place warm?

She turned on the oven then pulled out a package of cornmeal. Soon she whipped together a small cornbread which she placed in the oven. After sizing up the options of the meats in her refrigerator, she mentally put together a menu. She pulled a skillet out of the cabinet and placed it on a burner. Soon the kitchen smelled like sautéing onions and oregano. As she stirred the onions, she dumped some chopped red pepper into the skillet.

At the bottom of the stairs, a key turned in the lock. Bob's voice called, "I'm home!"

"I'm so glad, dear," Beth said going into the hallway.

"Ah yes, and I had a great day at work as usual."

"I'm sure you did." Beth knew Bob's cheerful response had more sarcasm than truthfulness. She waited until Bob came to the top of the stairs. He stood with his shoulders slumped and gave out a sigh. "I'm glad it's the weekend. I need a beer." He gave Beth a kiss on the cheek. Beth smiled.

He hung his coat in the closet and went to the refrigerator for the beer. "Ah, the smell of good home cooking."

Beth returned to the kitchen and lifted the lid to stir in some chunks of pre-cooked chicken breast and frozen broccoli. Everything was going well. Bob leaned against the kitchen counter and sipped his beer. He began his "stories of the day" at work, assessing comments made by co-workers, admitting his curiosity about a notice on the bulletin board, and complaining about some equipment that broke down.

"I had a good day, too," Beth announced. "I joined the Tenant Action Network and I created a flier which I taped on every door of our building. We have a meeting to attend tomorrow to discuss problems in this apartment complex."

"Why would you do all this?" Bob asked.

"There's no heat in our building and there might not be any until Monday."

"What?"

"No heat, no hot water," Beth stated watching Bob's face.

"Oh no, I just wanted to eat, shower and go to bed," Bob sighed.

Beth grimaced, "I was thinking, you could go to the gym tonight to take a shower there."

"Honey, I'm glad you're taking action on this thing. We can't put up with this night after night. Besides, the holiday is coming." He shouted his favorite curse words and turned toward the bathroom. "I guess I'll have to wash-up a bit in cold water. I'm too tired to go to the gym tonight."