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J. A. McMullen's

# The Scent of Delilah

The Rise and The Fall and  
The Rise of  
a Redheaded Witch

Volume One



Redheaded Witch Publishing LLC  
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## Preface

*Malleus Maleficarum* ("The Hammer of Witches") was written in 1486 by Inquisitor Heinrich Kramer, a Dominican monk.

It elevated sorcery to the criminal status of heresy and recommended that secular courts seek confessions by torture and then execute the accused. The year after its publication, Pope Innocent VIII issued a papal bull empowering the Inquisition to prosecute witches and sorcerers using *Malleus* as the instruction manual.

In it, Kramer fabricates this tale: *"We have already shown that they [i.e., witches] can take away the male organ, not indeed by actually despoiling the human body of it, but by concealing it in some glamour. In the town of Ratisbon, a certain young man had an intrigue with a girl and then wished to leave her. Immediately thereafter, he lost his penis. It was as if some spell was cast over it so that he could see or touch nothing but his smooth body. He approached a witch who he suspected of giving the girl a spell to cast upon him. He threatened to kill the witch unless she restored it. The witch touched him between his thighs, and it was restored by her mere touch. For it has been shown that they can remove the male organ, not by destroying the human body itself, but by hiding it in some brightness."*

Kramer brought to trial one Helena Scheuberin on charges of witchcraft. The case was suspended because of Kramer's obvious obsession with her sexuality. The very next year, Kramer wrote the *Malleus*.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, an estimated 50,000 women were hanged or burned alive at the stake in a mass psychosis triggered by the eight words of Exodus 22:18, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." When the burnings quelled, one town in Switzerland had no women left in it.

*The Scent of Delilah*  
is (very) loosely modeled  
after that classic thriller  
Homer's "Odyssey."

## Prologue

### A SPECK IN THE OCEAN

**It had been three days since he killed Mackie.**

Mackie's dried blood was all over his clothes, all over the deck.

The typhoon hit five days ago. He had been talking to himself for the last 48 hours.

It was as if his mind resided outside of his body and looked down on himself. It saw a wretched man who had murdered his first mate and was alone in the ocean. The face it saw was blistered and raw, the body rail-thin.

Only two gallons of water remained. In his madness, Ulysses Odets laughed himself to sleep.

He awoke with the taste of saltwater in his mouth. Half his body was immersed in brackish water, and the rocking of the boat splashed it on his face. There was a leak. Through the typhoon, the hull had held, but there must be a crack in the bilge. The urgency of imminent sinking and the prospect of becoming shark chum shot adrenaline through him. Instantly his mind cleared. He grabbed a piss pot and began to bail as quickly as he could. The leak was slow, and he was making headway. His arms gave out, so he rested and napped. When he awoke again, there was as much of the fatal surprise as there had been before. It became a zero-sum game between the leak and the bailing that he knew he would inevitably lose.

Some Generals in War or Quarterbacks in the Playoffs can tune out a barrage of artillery shells or an onslaught of murderous linemen. Ulysses Odets, CEO of Odysseus Corporation, could tune out the anxiety of most any situation. It helped enormously in business negotiations.

Luckily, the toolbox had been bolted down. In it, he found some plastic sheeting and hyper-sticky tape that might hold out saltwater. He jumped in the water, ducked under the stern, and taped the plastic over the hole. The water pressure sucked the patch up against the hull and immediately sealed the leak. It held. If only he could hold on.

The stars were bright when he ran out of water. He slipped and

banged his head on the rotting wood of the bunk. It was the second time he'd banged his head on the voyage. The first time, he'd been out for a while. This time he lay there stunned, not quite conscious.

He might have laid there longer if he hadn't heard a very loud beeping. He accepted that this auditory hallucination was from sunstroke or dehydration or a concussion, and the end stages were, setting in. When he saw the flashing light from under the bunk, he assumed that seeing visions was the next phase.

To imitate the sea journeys of old, Odets had banned any electronics on board. One of the crew had been sensible enough to ignore his edict. He looked under the bunk and found a device a satellite phone taped there. He dialed 911. Nothing rang.

Half-daft and mesmerized from staring at the stars, he was startled by a helicopter. He held the phone above his head and turned it in circles hoping the pilot would see the light.

The plane flew past.

He let the device run until it ran out of power. No one came. No ships, no helicopters, no circling airplanes. With the last swallow of water, he took the two fentanyl tablets he kept in a pill case in his ditty bag. He curled up in a fetal position under a sweat-stained, fetid mattress, and went to sleep.

When he awoke, he was in a helicopter. An Air Force medic was taking his vitals, a dextrose/saline IV was stuck in his right arm and a blood pressure cuff was on his left. Later, he would wonder why the device had come to life. Like we do with many things we can't explain, he shrugged, dismissed the mystery, and counted himself fortunate.

They had been about to abandon the search when a helicopter pilot received a longitude/latitude coordinate. No explanation, just a read-out on the com-device. He turned the plane over a grid path that had been searched multiple times.

For years afterward, the pilot would wonder about the message. He wanted to tell Odets about the extraordinary circumstance, but Odets was incapacitated, and by the time he had come around, the pilot thought it better to keep it to himself.

## Book One

# CORPORATIONS ARE PEOPLE, TOO

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### Chapter 1

## HOMECOMING

**Delilah Kirke sat in the 8:00 a.m. meeting of Odysseus, Inc.** She'd brought her delicious pastries. She used butter like a French chef, much to the detriment of the waistlines and health of the middle-aged men who sat at that table.

The subject of the meeting was the return of Ulysses Odets, the CEO and majority stockholder. The order of business was the PR roll-out for the grand reception of their photogenic leader with his eye-catching red hair and beard.

He'd taken nearly two years to sail around the Mediterranean on a small ship with only wind power and a crew of twelve. They were thought to have been lost at sea.

The voyage had taken three times longer than planned. They had made port—if you could call it that—at many uncharted islands, and battled some extreme weather. The crew had perished; only Odets survived. Now he had come home to a hero's welcome. The company was going to make the most of it.

Penny Odets and her son Telly had refused to give up hope. Board members lobbied to declare Ulysses lost at sea and appoint a new leader. His wife, his only son, and their battalion of lawyers held them off.

Penelope Beaulieu Odets was an astonishingly beautiful woman. She had a figure that drew men's gaze. They did well to avert their eyes when Odets was in the room. He had been violent more than once with ogles.

She was a true New Orleans Southern Belle from a wealthy family, and, true to her training, she was active in many charities. She held grand parties even in her husband's absence; she never had any

doubt of his return. Some thought she was heavily in denial. They suggested counseling, and, perhaps, pharmaceuticals. She remained steadfast. Many men pursued her, trying to convince her she should start to live her life again—with them. She laughed them off. More than once, Telly had taken men aside who attempted to court his mother over what they imagined to be his father's beached corpse.

Delilah had not yet met Ulysses Odets. She was fascinated that he, too, had red hair. She had read that only one or two percent of all the people in the world had it.

"We should start our own society," she mused.

## Chapter 2

### MASTER OF HIS FATE

**News crews. News crews. News crews. Odets softly murmured** the rhyme like it was a mantra. It calmed him.

The procession of cars passed the cheering crowds and white news vans with the satellite dishes on top. There were big video cameras, and everyone in the crowd had their cell phones aimed in his direction.

They were nearing the 32-story, corporate office building with "Odysseus" emblazoned in gold at the top. Anyone who called their offices that morning was routed to voicemail. Every employee was outside to receive their long-lost leader. It got them out of work, broke the boredom, and gave them the rush that comes from cheering the home team.

Fans and curiosity seekers extended for a dozen city blocks. The cheering moved like a wave down those blocks. It was a conquering hero's return, the kind reserved for astronauts and winning sports teams. The crowd went mad for the chance to applaud this adventurer and his glorious rescue.

Odets sat up on the back of his Bentley Silver Cloud convertible like a politician or an MVP. His son Telly drove, and his adoring wife Penny sat on the back passenger seat instead of up beside him. She knew it was important for him to be the sole attraction. She held



his hand and looked up at him adoringly. A couple of times, she kissed his hand and put it to her cheek; when she did, the crowd roared.

He hadn't conquered the sea as he'd set out to. His triumph was escaping Neptune's wrath. He had come within hours of being a victim of his own hubris. His penchant for risk-taking, the very characteristic that had made him billions, proved to be very costly. Things had happened. Things had captivated him. Things that had compelled him to put everything at risk.

He had risked it because he wanted to swagger through the club and hear them whisper, "There goes Ulysses Odets! He did it as the ancients had. He risked it all. Flying without a net. He is the lone man against the storm. Indeed, Ulysses Odets is by far the most intrepid among us."

Twelve men had followed him. They bet their lives on him and lost. Remorse dogged him. This parade made regret bite at him with even sharper teeth.

He had objected to this ostentatious display, but the board was adamant. He owed it to the company, they said. They said that the employees needed festivities. They needed to witness the homecoming of the man whose name was on their paychecks. Revering him and cheering him would be good for morale, they said. Mainly because the board was personally overjoyed at his resurrection, and they wanted to honor him – or so they said. This band of sycophants had had many knives at the ready. Those knives had been stayed by Penny's shield and sharp maneuvering. Ulysses' long record of infidelity notwithstanding, she idolized him, and there was never a woman who loved her husband more. Loyalty was in her genes.

Maybe the grief over his sailors made him relent to the insistent voices begging for a public spectacle. The old Odets would have said no, and not permitted further discussion. When the board left their meeting with him, they exchanged looks of astonishment at getting their way, but knew not to utter a word about this new vulnerability they had just witnessed, not even to one another.

Guilt was a new experience for Ulysses. Chief Executive Officers, builders of empires, dictators of small countries, as well as

the heads of more unseemly organizations often bury that soul-crushing emotion deep in their psyches. Some are wholly devoid of it. As astute as he was in assessing the vulnerabilities of others, it was Odet's psychiatrist who had to point out to him that he may feel guilty because he was the lone survivor.

He descended from his "chariot" into the arms of his people as security guards cleared the path. The oversized glass double doors parted, and he entered his kingdom. It was a palace of commerce that he had built. It was replete with a gymnasium, gourmet food court, and even a movie theater and bowling alley to keep the troops amused. The objective was to make them feel beholden, and made it so they had little need to ever leave.

The executives lined up on the grand, curved, double staircase. Halfway up the left staircase, a saturated, red-copper color caught his eye. Even with Penny on his arm, his eye would often wander. But now he quickly looked away and kept his eyes on his wife and the crowd. Though only a glimpse, the glimpse stuck. A familiar longing made him catch his breath. With that transient glance, fear and curiosity were once again at war inside him. Mr. Ulysses Odets was admonished by the reminder that, though he may be master of all he now surveyed, he was certainly not master of his fate.

## Chapter 3

### KISMET

**She saw him, too.**

"Redhead, pissed the bed, blamed it on a cabbage head."

That childhood taunt came loud and clear into Delilah's memory. It came to mind every time she passed a "ginger," which was another name that made her cringe.

She knew he had seen her.

She was sad for the beautiful woman beside him. Delilah knew that it would happen between her and that fellow "ginger." There was no stopping it, even if she wanted to. Kismet, kiss me, fate, fatal, destiny, chemistry, helpless, mess, breathless, jealousy, devilry—she saw the words line up like a crossword puzzle.

When and how she could not reckon, but she was eager to watch it unravel.

She wished she were on speaking terms with her mother so that she could ask her about what this might hold—and how dangerous it could turn out to be.

## Chapter 4

### INTRODUCING MS. D. KIRKE

**Delilah Kirke was not your average witch. She had an MBA** and worked in several different corporate environments. She charmed everyone in each of them. Lateral moves rapidly turned into vertical moves in the short time since she graduated from Wharton. She dressed in the corporate fashion and spent lavishly on her apparel. For evenings and special occasions, she wore haute couture.

Not bad for a girl raised on a clothing-optional commune in Humboldt County, California.

Delilah's red hair was that classic shade that was notoriously exciting to the eye. It could change from rich red to wine-colored depending on the lighting. Some would say it changed according to her mood.

When she was a child, her hair fell in ringlets. Now she kept it short to be taken seriously in the businessman's world. Her skin had no freckles and went beyond fair toward pearlescent. Her eyes were a somber blue which gave her a formidable poker face, perfect for business. Her figure was slim. Her bustline was small, and there was not much of a ratio between her hips and waist. She was 5'1", but she compensated with 4-inch Jimmy Choo heels which shaped her calves so that they captured men's attention as they watched her walk away.

Delilah's lips were full and voluptuous. When she gave a presentation, executives had their eyes glued to her mouth. If you looked closely, their eyes betrayed lecherous fantasies brewing.

With those features, you'd expect great beauty or at least prettiness. She possessed neither.

It was the way she smelled that made those in positions below her and those above her smile whenever she passed.

The corporate world uses the term “meteoric” for such a swift ascent through the ranks. She was Odysseus Corporation’s new wunderkind. They knew they were lucky to have her, and wanted to keep her, so her compensation was in the high six figures.

There were other non-cash bonuses and perks. Executives of her station did not ride the IRT. After she had been to her gym and eaten a protein-filled breakfast from her blender, she met the Odysseus corporate car outside her high-rise at 7:45 a.m., six days a week, regardless of the weather. Even in the petri dish of Manhattan, in wet and wintry weather, with eight million people coughing and spreading anything and everything, she never even caught a cold.

Delilah dated often and nearly always those who were in vertical positions above her on the organizational chart, and often in positions to which she aspired. However, when horizontal, she was superior in all ways. Occasionally, she would allow herself to be romanced by a colleague of the same station, but only if he—or she—was a competitor with similar ambition. She liked the opportunity to disarm them.

What was it about Ms. D. Kirke that made her so special? Ask the men who dated her. Most likely, they would be reluctant to disclose what had occurred.

Ms. Kirke stole penises.

And she turned men into pigs.

## Chapter 5

### DILLY

**Little Delilah had fair skin that did not get on well with the sun.** She also did not get on well with the naked, California sun-kissed blonde-streaked children she was raised with. She preferred the company of the adults who worked in the gardens with sunscreen slathered all over their bodies. Even SPF 50 applied hourly could hardly rescue Dilly from blisters and burns.

Dilly was what the commune had diminished her name to. This took a toll on her spirit. It started when her father tagged her with it at one of their weekly Saturday get-togethers.

It was an unseasonably hot Northern California night for this Summer Solstice. In other countries, they celebrate the longest day and call it Midsummer's Eve. An ancient word for it is Litha, and some still follow the old ways.

It was her birthday, so her mother let her stay up late.

The closest thing to air conditioning the commune dwellers had was icy cans of beer applied to the armpits or between the thighs or poured down the throat. A vinyl disk played "Sugar Magnolia" on the battered stereo. It sat under an old poster of a red and blue skull split with a white lightning bolt. The women were dancing in that wavy way people did after they drank a brew of Delilah's mother, Lilith. She used almonds, fennel seeds, watermelon kernels, rose petals, cardamom, saffron, milk, and coriander—a special coriander. Coriander was always used in love potions. She ground edible grasses and mixed in honey, so it tasted like sweet green delight. To finish it, she added her potent cannabis infusion.

Eight-year-old Delilah sneaked sips from a hand-thrown ceramic mug that held her mother's delectable concoction. After her third serious sip, little Delilah took a Rubik's cube from the coffee table next to the bong. She twisted it a few times to take its measure. In a flurry of turns and clicks, she got all the colors to align.

Her father's buddy was bug-eyed. "Fuck, man! Am I high, or did your little girl just blow our minds?"

"Both, dude. That's my girl. She is a dilly!"

When they use that phrase, "and the name stuck," they don't take into account how that stickiness can hold a person back. It did not matter that "dilly" meant "an excellent example of a particular type of person or thing." It was too close to "silly." Worse, "willy" in the sense of a "teeny weenie peenie." Easy rhymes are the ammunition children use to bully the outcast. Delilah wanted her name back.

Her mother, however, never used Dilly, but always her full name. Never "sweetheart," or "darling," or any of those names by

which mothers everywhere address their daughters. Sometimes she would call her “Daughter.” Some mothers in the commune thought Lilith was cold because she addressed her daughter so formally. The name Delilah was biblical and foreboding, not at all like Meadow or Petal. Every time her mother called her name, Delilah treasured the sound and came. She was her mother’s daughter more than daddy’s little girl. She loved him, but it was only her mother’s lap she curled up on to take a nap.

Her mother, Lilith, had a name somehow like hers. She felt it made them on the same side against the world.

This birthday night did not end when her mother put her to bed. It was a significant night in the life of an impressionable and sensitive girl.

Delilah lay awake listening to the voices. She liked to hear each couple depart and say their goodnights. Her bedroom window looked out on the little house where the meetings took place. When it got quiet, she would look out the window till the lights went off, and she heard her momma and dad downstairs.

The sips from the cup made her feel light and happy. It made the colors around her shimmer, and the world look like something out of a storybook. She was hyper-aware of the world and of every sound.

Tonight, she heard none of the goodbyes. Instead, a hush came over the group, and she heard many footsteps crunching through the twigs into the woods behind the little house.

It was the night of the yearly orgy, a rite as old as time for those from the northern climes. Lilith led them into the woods to celebrate—and worship.

Worship takes two forms: sacrifice or revelry. The former brings pain and death. The latter is filled with joy and pleasure—and sometimes brings new souls into the world.

The commune embraced the Old Ways Lilith brought to them.

Delilah crawled out of her bedroom window and lowered herself to the ground. She walked softly and kept out of sight as she

followed the hushed voices. Their volume increased as she got deeper into the woods.

She hid behind a tree and watched them build a bonfire. Lilith gave a signal, and they all disrobed. It was a clothing-optional commune, so this was not the traumatic moment that it would have been for your typical eight-year-old.

They laid many blankets on the ground. She heard a panpipe. Tambourines appeared, and the women danced for the men. The men knelt and leaned forward, entranced by their dancing. They changed places, and the women laughed and would touch the men between their legs when they danced close.

To get a better view, Delilah climbed up a tall tree. Quite a feat for an eight-year-old, but Delilah was not your typical eight-year-old.

All the adults began to kiss and touch; couples who were not the husbands or wives or partners of the other entwined, sometimes in threes and fours. They were touching each other in places where she touched herself when she couldn't sleep. A woman got on her knees and put the man's "thing" in her mouth. Soon, they were all lying on the blankets with limbs wrapped around one another, making noises that she heard sometimes from her mother's bedroom—but to hear all of them make the noise, particularly the women, was shocking to the child.

She saw her mother riding on top of her dad.

What shocked her as much as the act was how stunningly beautiful her mother was with her red hair glittering in the light of the bonfire. Lilith raised her arms, and, with both hands, she piled her hair on top of her head. A moment later, she let it drop, threw her head back, and made a noise that sounded for all the world like the howl of a wolf. Several couples stopped to watch and then applauded.

The next moment made Delilah catch her breath and hold it. Lilith dismounted her dad and climbed on top of the next man. Women gathered around her and touched her all over. This continued until she had been with all twelve men. Lilith rode each one until he jerked and bucked and shouted her name, then she moved on to the next.

Lilith stood, and the women gathered around her again with towels and water to wash her between her thighs. She felt something watching. She looked up at the tree, but Delilah had shimmied down, run back to their house, and climbed in through the bedroom window. She lay in bed shaking with the vision still vivid in her brain, the vision that was many times enhanced by the sips from the cup she'd had earlier. It made her sweat, it made her afraid, and it made her want to rub herself down there more than ever.

The orgiasts rested until dawn when Lilith awakened them. They chanted prayers and paeans to the Sun, naming him the life-giving Consort and Brother of the Goddess who appears as the Moon.

The bonfire had burned down to ash and the smoldering had gone, just as their curiosity about their neighbor's partner hopefully had.

When Delilah heard her mother and father downstairs, she awoke from what she thought was a dream. Between her bed and the bathroom, the memory of what she had seen faded away as dreams do.

## Chapter 6

### "WHERE HAVE YOU GONE, JOHNNY WEISSMULLER?"

**On those solitary Saturdays, she plopped herself down on** the futon in front of the black and white 17" screen, the sole TV in the commune. She was enthralled with the former Olympian-turned-actor living in a tree with a chimp, fighting off wild animals armed only with a knife and his bare hands, or bathing in the lake with Jane. They were nearly naked when they bathed or swam in the river. Naked like she was. She lived in safe, rural California, where there was little worry about having to kill a monster crocodile with a knife, and you could scare away a coyote with a shout and a flashlight. Plus, the security detail of men on dirt bikes with automatic rifles to guard the crop was reassuring.



"Dilly is a monkey! Dilly is a monkey!"

The children would point up at the live oak Delilah was climbing like she was in one of the Tarzan movies.

Delilah was one of those children who had a high tolerance for fear and needed danger to get her blood up.

She was fearless and would scale the tree until she was almost out of sight. "Dilly" would walk out onto the limbs like a tightrope walker. She would descend in a sort of free fall, catching branches like Tarzan.

The adults gathered around the tree to urge her to come down, some crying and begging, some chanting and praying for the protection of the small figure two stories or more above the ground—while the children cheered her on. They were cheering her, though last week they were jeering at her, so she did not seek to make friends with them now. She heard they had a name for her, "The Ginger Singe," because she burned so quickly in the sun. But they knew not to say that name within her hearing. The few times her peers challenged her, they soon backed down. A boy two years older said, "Man, the way she looked at me scared the shit out of me. It was like she saw right into my brain or something. I don't know how to describe it, but it was spooky." A girl her age agreed. "Oh, boy, I know. I saw my cat look at a mouse that way." They weren't embarrassed to admit it, because they weren't the only ones. Everyone knew to stay the fuck out of her way. They didn't exactly know why, because there had never been a real confrontation or playground fight. But they knew.

Sonny tried to talk to his wife about how he worried about Delilah's daredevil tree-climbing, but Lilith never said a word. When her husband asked her to speak to her daughter, Lilith just gently shook her head and with a shrug said, "It's better to die doing what y' love than t' live in fear." His jaw dropped. He found his wife both fascinating and disturbing. The way she thought and spoke often mystified him. She was impossible to persuade, quietly convinced that she knew the way. It made him respect her. She never argued, just smiled. Her husband always kidded her that there was more cat in her than Scot.

More than once, he'd heard her words, "That's my way. It might not be y'rs, but that's what I thank, and I know what's good fer me... 'n' what's good fer m' daughter."

Delilah was never sick, never vaccinated, and never broke a bone. She inherited it from her mother. The other commune members marveled at it, but there was an unspoken rule not to speak of it. In some subconscious way, Lilith's unnaturally hardy immune system may have moved the inhabitants of the illegal cannabis farm to be in awe of her.

It was hard not to spontaneously hug Lilith. You just knew she would hug you back. She was love and warmth.

Her daughter—not so much.

## Chapter 7

### INITIATION

**The women would dance under the full moon every month,** even in the chilly, wet winter. It rains a lot in that renowned county.

Teenage Delilah had grown peevish and rebellious, and her relationship with her mother had taken that typical turn from duckling love to ferocious malice. She snarled the word "Fine!" whenever her mother asked her to do something or told her she couldn't.

Menarche can make a girl crazy. Lilith knew this well. In her role as the commune's pharmacologist, she helped many girls with cramps and mood swings. When it was her own exceptional, red-headed daughter, she had to repress a phrase she had heard more than once back in the Kentucky hill country: "Beat her like a red-headed step-child."

The third time Delilah asked her mother for the homemade Kotex, Lilith decided it was time.

"Tonight is th' full moon, 'n' y're comin' with us t' dance. Y're a woman now, 'n' there are some thangs y' should know. Thangs that'll open y'r eyes." It was not an invitation so much as a directive.

"Are you crazy? It's 58 degrees and raining. I'm not going out in that!"

Lilith did not respond. When it came time to go and dance and

pray, she told her daughter, "Alright, it's time." Delilah replied, "No, fuck you, I'm not going."

Delilah had never spoken to her mother like that before, and a cold rush went through them both. Though Lilith was seen as stern compared to the other mothers, she had never laid hands on Delilah. She went over to her daughter, bent down, and kissed her on the forehead. When she stood up, in her right hand she had Delilah by her thick, red hair. She did not speak but walked out with Delilah in tow. She did not even pause for her to put on a sweater or a slicker, but hauled her out into the wet night. Delilah protested vehemently with a burst of profanities. Lilith stopped and looked at her in a way that made all resistance cease.

The ceremony began with passing a ceramic goblet that held a different potion tonight, a peyote brew. It was sweet at first sip, then the shockingly bitter aftertaste hit, and Delilah spit it out. The chanting stopped and a dozen women stared aghast at the sacrilege.

"Drink." That one word from her mother resonated and echoed like it was amplified. Later, Delilah wondered how anyone could speak that loud and not shout.

She drank.

One by one, the women went into the bushes to vomit up the residue, while the others continued the worshipful singing. When Delilah returned from her turn, the women saw the wonder in her eyes and smiled at one another knowingly, each remembering her first time.

Her mother took her into the middle of the circle and announced her installation into their ranks.

Lilith opened her arms wide to the sky and humbly supplicated the Goddess.

"Mother Bear Moon, accept m' daughter Delilah into y'r heart 'n' your protection. Help her t' see Th' Good 'n' t' follow it always."

The women droned her name, which was easy to make melodious. Lilith kissed her daughter on both cheeks. Delilah looked at her mother again with that love that comes from first imprint and years of nurture.

Her mother slapped her hard, hard enough to knock her down,

and hollered, “Wake up, bitch! Y’re one o’ us now!”

The coven cheered and gathered around Delilah. They boosted her up, and, still chanting her name, carried her deeper into the woods.

No one in the commune ever called her Dilly again.

## Chapter 8

### 9:00 A.M. MEETING

**The morning after the Odets’ restoration celebration, the meeting commenced at 9:00 a.m.**

The croissants were hot and buttery, just begging to be slathered with more butter and apricot preserves. Paired with crisp bacon and washed down with triple-shot lattes. How Delilah kept it all hot and fresh was her secret.

Delilah sat in the middle of the long table so she could serve. Chief Operating Officer Randall Cunningham-Blake sat at the head. The middle seat on the opposite side of the table from Delilah was reserved for Odets.

Randall Cunningham-Blake was the “executor” type of COO. He oversaw the day-to-day administrative and operational functions—that is, he kept things on track. He was a first-class analyst, a good manager, and kept dispensable concerns and situations from bothering his boss. In fact, he installed a firewall between Ulysses and the upstarts and whiners who clamored for an audience with the king.

Randall was second in command, but there was no doubt who the boss was, and Randall reported to him daily—or had, until Odysseus sailed over the horizon. Randall was not the heir-apparent, but he was beyond loyal, and moving to another company would never have occurred to him. Ulysses was the face of the company, but in his absence, Randall hired a man who was one of their lobbyists to speak to the outside world. He knew that his own presence would not reflect well on the corporation. He could have played the dormouse in Alice, as long as it was a fat dormouse.

Innovation was not his forte. He liked a well-oiled machine and

drove the same Mercedes he bought ten years ago. But he kept the business running for two years, never knowing when he would be replaced, since he couldn't be promoted. He doubled down to keep the company solvent by streamlining a lot of things that Ulysses might have hemmed and hawed about if he were around. He was also a great friend to Penny, and backed her resistance against some board members' desire to sell off the corporation and take the money and run.

He considered Delilah Kirke to be a godsend, and Randall believed in God. She was everything he was not, and she had some incredible insights which helped him keep the ship afloat, while, beyond some horizon, Ulysses was sinking.

At the same time, he smelled ambition on her—along with another fragrance that made him feel some things he thought were long gone. He was very uncomfortable that the balance had been disturbed, but still very proud that he had hired her.

Cunningham-Blake asked for another croissant while he reached under the table to loosen his belt a notch. Fifteen pounds in the last six months. Twelve points added to his cholesterol, the bad kind. It was worth every bite, he told himself. Mrs. Cunningham-Blake did not like fatties. Her time was taken up with the shirtless pool boy with a six-pack who lately arrived from Chihuahua. Mr. Cunningham-Blake would rather eat than fuck anyway.

At 9:09 a.m., Odets entered. They stood and applauded until he sat and slid his hand across his throat to cut it out.

"Good morning. Thanks for the outlandish greeting. Now let's get to work."

No bullshit, back in the saddle. Odets in fine fettle, the same as before. Almost.

Odets did not look at Delilah.

Cunningham-Blake piped up, "Ulysses, we have some new faces here. May I introduce—"

"I'm sure I'll meet them all in due time. Let's start with the financials. How much have we lost in my absence, and what's our stock price? I haven't had the *cojones* to look for fear it would kill me when the ocean couldn't."

Abuse and sarcasm were his style. It kept all the underlings in line. Men who spoke too loudly and insistently were gone the same day. Once, one disrespected him. He walked to where the upstart sat, pulled him out of his chair by the collar, grasped the seat of his pants, and bum-rushed him to the door. A security officer opened it so that Odets could give the objector a swift kick to facilitate his exit. Once, a woman had objected to an “inappropriate” joke he’d told. He walked around to her, humming a waltz. He extended his hand in a bow as if he was asking her to dance. She looked around, confused, and he caught her up in a swirling dance worthy of any ballroom. With a final twirl, he spun her out the doors which closed behind her.

Cunningham-Blake beamed, “I am happy to report that profits are up. Stock prices rose 2.5% in the last quarter and 4.5% since you embarked. Everyone has put in long hours figuring out how to do things better so that you would be pleased upon your return—”

“Thanks, everyone. I appreciate your hard work. I don’t think anyone here thought I was coming back; I know I didn’t. So, let’s cut the chase.”

“Absolutely, Ulysses. Business-mode only. Just wanted to finish my kudos to a particular individual who has been a real asset to the company. Her insight into the market and her prognostication of where the economy would be even when there were no discernible markers are remarkable. Not only does she regularly out-guess the economists, but she also guides a lot of our strategies and investments, and is a bit of a marketing genius on top of it. Everyone at this table acknowledges that. Let me introduce you to De—”

“—Delilah Kirke. Of course. How could I not know your name? But you pronounce it ‘Kirkee’? Not ‘Kirk’?”

“Yes, sir. We pronounce the ‘e’ on the end. It’s Scottish”

“Well, Ms. Kirke, congratulations, and happy to have you aboard.”

She smiled that she got that much out of him.

His ever-assessing blue eyes did not land on Delilah. His gaze was all around her. To the others, it seemed as though he was

looking at her. He looked at her shoulder, just above her head, but past her.

Delilah couldn't believe it. *He's afraid of me. That's terrible. Why would he be afraid of little old me?*

How could she get to a man who wouldn't look at her?

"So nice to meet you, Mr. Odets. I'm glad we both lived to see the day. They say I make a mean croissant. Can I tempt you, sir?"

The timbre of her voice made his insides churn.

Without giving him time to answer, which was good because Odets was frozen and unable to reply, she continued to tell him how she made this flaky ambrosial pastry. She prepared him a plate, deftly slipping the sweet and tart preserves inside the horn-shaped croissant, and poured him a cup. He was looking down at the table, but because she stole the show no one noticed. She set the plate down in front of him. *If you won't look at me, look at my delicacies.*

When he bit into it, the only sound was an extended, "Mmmmm." The sound continued through the last bite and his licking his fingers. He drank the latte like mother's milk.

The execs around the table were speechless as this scene played out before them at 9:22 a.m. on this Monday morning.

He finished and said nothing. But, as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, he looked Delilah straight in the eye and smiled.

## Chapter 9 POWER POINT

**The uncomfortable moment of the Great Leader and Man-of-the-Hour** grinning like a schoolboy at the pastries of the brilliant young executive was cut short when Odets abruptly rose from his chair.

"Thanks for the meeting. Good to see you all. I'll have Randall make appointments with each of you. That way you can tell me what you really think instead of worrying about groupthink." He stood up and marched out.

A pen dropped, and everyone looked at it. Cunningham-Blake

had dropped it at his astonishment at being blindsided by Odets' imperious dismissal of the meeting for which the COO had long prepared. The pen's clatter was Cunningham-Blake's only show of exasperation with the man who had abandoned his responsibilities to flaunt his bravado to the world. Odets had pitched the seafaring as a great publicity stunt, but there was never any inquiry into what the board thought; he just told them what he was going to do. Stockholders be damned. Executive Board be damned. His Penelope—well, not damned—but very likely not consulted.

At the next Monday morning meeting, matters got worse. As the meeting was concluding, Delilah cleared her throat.

"I have some questions."

Her questions were incisive, and aimed at Odets about the decision to close the Argos dog food factory, a "shoot from the hip" decision that was his first action "back in the saddle." Her marketing skills were exacting, as were her powers of persuasion, and her talking points were peppered with many "all due respects," as she projected spreadsheets and charts which made an overwhelmingly convincing case for why it should stay open. Which implied that his decision was hasty and unfounded. At one point, it smelled of a lecture.

Her point was to keep the dog food company open because it gave the world pictures of cute puppies on the side of the bag and handsome hounds on the label of the can, a can that came from the factories of the Odets Corporation. Her point was that it would soften the world's heart toward the company. Given the other divisions—military, industrial, and often complex—it would convince shoppers that Odysseus Corp were the good guys. The division's closure had been announced, but Delilah spun it so that they would announce, "By popular demand, we have reversed our decision to close our pet goods section. Thanks so much to our loyal dog-owning customers." Her point was that showing how this enormous corporation responds to its customers would be a marketing coup. She reeled off the many rationales while she showed pictures of puppies on the screen with the company's logo at the top. Then she recounted them to drive her points home.



She wanted to urge him to dissolve the ties with the military, but that was a battle for another day.

COO Cunningham-Blake tried twice to move on from Delilah's spiel, but she continued as if he hadn't spoken. Everyone's attention was so focused on Delilah that none seemed to hear him. Half of them could likely not tell you the details of what she said; they were high on her sublime tones. Those sitting near her were spellbound by her scent.

Odets said nothing, but just stared at her. He had named the company after his dog. The day Ulysses returned, his dog of 14 years limped over to him and licked his hand for a full minute, then stayed by his side for the rest of the day. In the morning, he found him lying outside their bedroom door, guarding it as always. He had died in the night doing his duty. Odets shook his head and pushed away the heartbreak, rationalizing that his dog had overlived his life span, that he'd had a good life. When he told his psychiatrist that he was closing the dog food division, his psychiatrist suggested he may be trying to distance himself from tender emotions.

One function of some Chief Operating Officers is mentoring. On her way out, Cunningham-Blake took her aside and chided her. "Are you out of your mind? He's just back, he doesn't have his land legs yet, and he doesn't know you from Adam. I don't care how good a baker you are or how much revenue you've brought in, I'll be surprised if you're not gone by the end of business!"

She smiled, put her hand on Randall Cunningham-Blake's chest, and replied, "I'm so glad you look after me." She adjusted his tie, saying, "By the way, were any of those poor decisions I pointed out your idea? It will make him feel better to have someone to share the blame with. Or just to blame." She patted his ever-expanding belly, and said, "And I am a good baker, aren't I?" She winked at him and walked away.

Randall Cunningham-Blake took a quick look left and right to make sure no one was watching, or if they had been, that they had the good sense to look away. He surreptitiously reached down and adjusted his erection so it was not pointing outward, but tucked up in his tighty-whities, and he buttoned his coat over

it. When he did, he noticed that the button was about to pop.

Delilah only had one mentor, and he was the daddy of all mentors.

When Delilah passed Odets in the cafeteria, he glanced up at her and smirked. He admired her boldness, and could not wait to find out what endgame she had in mind.

## Chapter 10

### BAKED GOODS

**The secretaries loved Delilah. She was no beauty, so there** was no cause for jealousy. And she treated them as colleagues.

Women who reach the corporate heights often behave like men, or else have a faux sweetness about them. Delilah overheard a secretary expound on the differences. “A male boss will say, ‘I need this done today.’ He means that he expects you to stay until it’s on his desk. A woman boss will say, ‘If you can get around to this when you have a chance, that would be great...’ Which in female-boss-code means the same thing. But, if you don’t know the code, you might think, ‘Well, okay, it doesn’t sound like it’s that urgent. I’ll do it first thing tomorrow.’ When you come in the next morning, she’ll be all pissy, and tell you, ‘I needed that done yesterday.’ Or, worse yet, she won’t say anything, and you won’t know what the peeved look is about until review time.”

They admired Delilah’s taste in clothes, which was never to turn a man’s head, but made “the girls”—as the men called the secretarial pool—want to reach out and touch the fabric.

When she started to bring them goodies from her kitchen, the younger ones and the ones who hadn’t given up and were still counting calories had mixed emotions. One of them piped up, “Are you trying to get us fat?” quickly followed by, “I’m only kidding.”

Delilah always paid attention to the underlying message. She had anticipated this one. “Not to worry. I eat them. Enjoy them, and if you put on more than a pound or two, let me know, and I can adjust the recipe.” None of them gained much weight. Delilah had been taught how to use sweet roots which, when mixed together,

didn't add calories, yet tasted like butter. This was the version of her baked goods that she fed to them.

She fed the men a version with more melted butter than a French chef's wet dream.

The secretaries begged for the recipe, but Delilah said, "I swore to my momma I'd keep this recipe a secret. It's one of those family things, passed down and all." She said it in a Kentucky accent, the way her momma talked, which softened it, and they laughed at how well she did it. It made them wonder if she had a little hillbilly in her background and rose despite it. She was something of a mystery to them, but she soon became their hero. Her pastries became their heroin.

## Chapter 11

### DELILAH SEALS THE DEAL

**To get access to Odets, one had to go through Randall Cunningham-Blake** who served as his chief of staff. Randall Cunningham-Blake had an Irish secretary named Marjorie who served as his Cerberus. She was a no-nonsense woman who was extremely proficient at her job and took no "bollocks"—which everyone soon found out was what they called "bullshit" in Ireland. If one tried to schedule an appointment for that day, she would look up at them as if they were asking something ridiculous, and say, "Ask me bollocks!" which, everyone came to understand, meant, "Are you kidding me?" Behind her back, she was known as Marjorie Bollocks. She knew it, and waited for the day someone's tongue slipped, and they said those words out loud.

Cunningham-Blake, who she referred to as "CB," prized her candor and let her be. He liked her nickname for him because it sounded like one of those old-time movie producers. Marjorie was not the kind of person who could be easily charmed. When Freud said the Irish were impervious to psychoanalysis, he was talking about Marjorie; outside of irascibility, she seldom revealed true feelings.

Soon after beginning at Odysseus, Delilah went to Marjorie

and introduced herself with respect and without any ingratiating smiles. She called her Missus Halloran rather than Ms. because Delilah had heard her correct a secretary on the title: "I'm married thirty years, and I've earned the Missus."

Whenever Delilah went to her to schedule an appointment, she brought something. The first time, it was Irish soda bread. Like the rest of her breadstuffs, it was delectable. She came in to make the appointment just before Marjorie's lunch break with the soda bread wrapped in a white cloth napkin and smelling grand.

The week before Christmas, she'd given her a \$100 bottle of Redbreast 15-year-old Irish Whiskey. Not too expensive, but top-shelf. The card read, "From one Gael to another."

By late January, Marjorie took to asking when Delilah would like to see him instead of dictating the time of the appointment as she did to all others.

For Valentine's Day, Delilah brought a devil's food cake and told her, "Just between us? I've had some other offers, but I like it here, and I plan to stay. When Mr. Cunningham-Blake retires, I'll be shooting for his job. Some new executives like to use the 'new broom sweeps clean' approach, but they're fools. If I'm ever lucky enough to sit in that office, and if you would consent to it, I'd like you here to advise me on the things I'd need to learn that only you could tutor me on. I hope your husband likes the cake."

When Delilah turned to leave, she looked back and saw Marjorie wipe her eye with the same Irish linen napkin Delilah had wrapped the soda bread in.

Delilah had sealed the deal.

## Chapter 12

### AMENDS

**She realized she had behaved badly with Mr. Cunningham-Blake that morning, and knew she had to make amends. Her first stop was Marjorie's desk.**

At 4:45, Delilah stood outside the glass door so Marjorie could see her. Delilah stood there for a few minutes. She got out a

handkerchief which could easily have been interpreted as blotting away tears.

Finally, Marjorie gestured for her to come in. Delilah's lip quivered, but she stood erect to regain her composure and faced Marjorie. Feigning repentance is important in situations such as this one.

"Oh, child. Not a smart move. He's fumin'. What in God's name did you say to him?"

Delilah's hard work was paying off. Marjorie, if not on her side, was being kind to her. Anyone else who had crossed her boss would be persona non grata until CB specified otherwise.

"I need to see him to straighten things out, to make amends."

"My advice is to let it rest a bit. I'll feel him out and call you tomorrow. He's going to Atlanta tomorrow night, so it'll give him a chance to cool down. Go home, pour yourself a whiskey, and have a hot bath. Worry is interest paid on trouble." Delilah had a friend on the inside for sure.

The next day, Marjorie rang her.

"No need to see him, he says. But not in a bad way. He mentioned that you might be right. I t'ink he just didn't want to hear it from someone who had only been here for less than a couple of years as you have been. Comin' from a woman, too. But in my opinion, and I've been around him a lot, just don't bring it up; no apologies, and bygones will be just that. These men see an apology as weakness. Just carry on like whatever donnybrook you two had never happened."

"Don't know what I'd do without you, Marjorie."

On Wednesday, Delilah phoned Marjorie and said, "I got a note that Mr. Odets wants to see me. I know the protocol is to go through Mr. Cunningham-Blake"—Delilah always used his full name to show proper respect—"but he's in Atlanta. Should I wait till he gets back? Will Mr. Odets think I'm putting him off? I need your advice."

Marjorie thought for a moment. "I can't ask for an appointment with The Man behind the Great Wooden Doors without Mr. CB's approval. But I do know that Himself stays late on Fridays. His secretary tells me he exercises at the gym downstairs, after which

he sits in his office and has a gargle. My advice would be to wander through the office after his secretary is gone. She told me that when she's not there, he leaves the door open to see if anyone's approachin'. Seems he's still up to high doh from his ordeal, the poor man. Maybe bring him some of that pie, or whatever you fed him that caused such a stir. About 7:30, after everyone has left to get a pint and wash away the week."

Delilah went to her computer and searched for "up to high doh." In a millisecond or so, the result came back: "Northern Irish or Scottish expression meaning that a person is very stressed or nervous." Why would a man who was that rich and powerful be nervous? Did it come with the territory? Did something happen on the voyage?

She dismissed her speculation. She would find out soon enough.

Delilah sat back in her chair and smiled. Her strategy had paid off. She had entrée to the "Great Wooden Doors" and the chamber of "Himself."

It should go without saying that she had received no note from the man with the red beard.

## Chapter 13

### COLLECT CALL

**"This is the California State Correctional Center calling with a collect call from Percival Davis. Will you accep—"**

"I accept, operator," Delilah interrupted. "Hi, Dad! How's it going?"

"I'm good, honey. Nothing bad. Reading a lot of Thich Nhat Hanh. Got into mythology, too. Your momma was always talking about it. Very illuminatin'. You?"

"I'm good. I work a lot. The guy who runs the company—"

"Yeah, yeah, I saw that big parade on TV. I was goin' to ask you about that."

"I met him, but haven't really spoken to him yet. I started after he went off on the expedition, or cruise, or journey, or whatever."

"We're all on a journey, honey."

"Right, Dad."

"On the TV it looked like he had red hair, too, pretty much the same color as yours. Freaky, huh? But that was on TV, and the colors could be different."

"No, you're right. I hadn't thought about that, but you're right. It is just like mine. Huh." Sometimes Delilah lied just to keep in practice.

"Be careful, though. Guys like that don't have much of a conscience. Are you happy, honey?"

"Sure, Dad. I'm good at my job, I'm healthy, I'm not lonely."

"Are you gettin' laid?"

"Dad! How inappropriate!"

"That's the new word, huh? I hear that word a lot on TV. Dilly, it's a natural thing that keeps the hormones flowin'. It keeps ya young and balanced."

"Dilly, huh?"

"Sorry, I'll never remember. Delilah. I love you, Delilah."

"I love you, too, Dad. Shall we do it?"

They had a ritual. It kept him sane and her hopeful.

"Six years, 10 months, 12 days down."

"Three years, 1 month, 28 days to go."

Together they said, "Or sooner for good behavior!"

After they laughed at it together, Delilah repeated, "I love you, Dad."

"Delilah?"

"I know what you're going to ask, and no. No reply, no contact. She doesn't want to talk to me, Dad."

"She can be a hard woman, honey. Kentucky redneck, raw-bone, redhead hard, and hill-country proud. Stubbornest woman ever, and the best. I miss her, Delilah. She comes to visit less, but still some."

"Have you talked to her lately?"

"Yeah, sure. Every week. When I ask her to call you, the line goes quiet, so I stopped tryin'."

"Dad, it is fucking crazy that you are in prison when it's legal now. Please let me hire a lawyer to see what he can do about early release."

"Honey, if you can't do the time, don't do the crime. As you now know, we made a shitload of money sellin' weed, and that's not allowed no how. When I get out, I'll come to New York City, and you can show me around. That's why I want to do the whole time. I don't want some parole officer comin' round to break into my place and roust me, or tell me I can't leave the state to visit my Delilah in the Big Apple. Sounds tempting. Hell, it sounds biblical!"

"I love you, Dad. Next week."

"Same bat time, same bat channel."

"I still don't know what that means, but I love to hear you say it."

"Good night, honey. Keep the faith."

"Good night, Dad."

Lilith would not answer her calls, her emails, nothing. Radio silence ever since Delilah transferred from astrophysics to business. Ever since she gave up The Faith. Ever since she stopped worshipping, and had no "group." Ever since she used what she knew and what she was given for her own advancement, her own aggrandizement, and her own profit instead of following the Goddess and doing good.

## Chapter 14

### THE GOING-AWAY PRESENT

**It was 8:00 p.m., Wednesday, and time to play. Nothing like hot sex to make you forget your heartache.**

John Braxton-Mahon was 32, GQ handsome, and from old Virginia stock who had the good sense to invest in Northern factories when they saw the "War of Northern Aggression" coming. He had a marvelous cock, seven-and-a-half inches in length. Delilah kept stats. Ultimately, it was the girth that mattered, and his was a pleasingly snug fit. If only he knew how to use it. No matter; she did.

It was time to sign off with Mr. Mahon. One Last Time. There were bigger fish to fry. Much bigger.

He was a pretentious Yalie snot, Skull and Bones, who thought he had a treasure in his pants. His attitude reminded her of that old Pompeii fresco she'd seen where the man has his enormous member



laid on one side of the scales, and the other side is balanced with gold.

He admired her work, he said. He said he was surprised that a woman could be so savvy. He had married a Tri-Delt from Duke, a simpering, size 00 blonde whose world was the Junior League and Spin Cycling. He couldn't make her come, he whined. Delilah was tempted to show him how, but she met her at a cocktail party and found her to be snotty and supercilious, so she decided to leave her to her rabbit.

John Braxton-Mahon had succeeded Delilah in the previous three positions from which she had been promoted. Thus, she was the one who oriented him all three times in her nearly two-year rise within the ranks of Odysseus. Thus, he was always a rung behind. Though he tried to work her with his upper-class charm, it was plain that he resented her.

The last time they were together, he had overpowered her and tried to sodomize her. She always suspected his intentions were not just to do her, but to undo her, and that confirmed it. Getting ass-fucked against your will is not about sex, it's about power. She did a little maneuvering to slip it into the proper orifice, and from there she had control.

She had been vacillating about leaving him a going-away present, but after that little episode, there was no question. Hers would be a memorable gift, utterly unforgettable, as hard as one might try.

She prepped the ingredients from memory. She remembered the recipe from when her momma prepared the pie she took to the trailer on the fateful Saturday. Saltpeter was a myth from summer camp that was reputed to be added to the pudding so boys wouldn't get erections. However, if combined with other herbs in the correct proportions, there was some truth to it. Sort of an anti-Viagra. Her going-away present would present him with a lifetime of responding to ED medication ads and trips to the psychiatrist. That he and Ms. Tri-Delt were trying to get pregnant made Delilah relish it even more.

She soaked green olives in the brew. The salty olives would mask the taste.

"I want you to fuck me hard tonight. Just do it, and do it, and

do it, and see how many times you can make me come. I need that exquisite prize you carry around between your legs. I swear, I've never had anything in me that can do what it does to me. I'm so lucky that you fuck me."

Thus, Delilah's improvisation began. After two martinis and a couple of bong hits, she opened the little lacquered box that sat on the coffee table and extracted a small glassine envelope, a single-edged razor blade, and a hundred-dollar bill. She unwrapped the bindle, tipped out the cocaine on the marble coffee table, divided it into four lines, inhaled a line in one sniff, then handed the bill to John.

He waved off her invitation. She cocked her head and narrowed her eyes. It was a loud and clear non-verbal communication that if he wanted this evening to turn carnal, he had better play nice and get down and snort it up asap. It only took him a moment to weigh the alternative, and, of course, he accepted her offer and whiffed away.

Afterward, Delilah sat next to him with her knees curled up under her, and whispered those "fuck-me-make-me-come" words into his ear, punctuating them with little audible kisses. Every time she gave him one of those little kisses, she could feel the soft shafts of the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end.

She plucked olives from the bowl, put them into her mouth, and slid them into his. The warm, sensual slipperiness of olives and mouths was lovely, and she was almost swept away with it, until he opened his mouth wide like a Baby Bird as if begging Mama Bird to plop the food in. It was laughable, pathetic, and had just the chilling effect that Delilah needed to remind her of what the mission was and not get seduced by her own scheme.

She slipped off his pants, pushed a little on the inside of his thighs to get him to spread them, and began the performance others had actually applauded. Slow. With eye-contact. Ravenous. Dirty.

Alas, Mr. J. Braxton Mahon—thanks to that little potion in the olives—was not up to the task. It had never happened to him before, he protested. She consoled him, with a "don't worry about it." She snuggled up to him, and they turned on the TV.

She tried to arouse him again, and though his mind was all for it, the flesh failed him.

The third time, she giggled.

"What the hell is so funny?"

"Nothing. Nothing." The irrepressible giggling continued.

"What the fuck, Delilah, are you laughing at me?"

"No, no, John. I just think it's funny that, well, that, oh, I don't know, you wanting to get your wife pregnant, and spending your seed on me, and now you're all up in your head or something, and you can't...oh, God, I'm horrible, but..."

Delilah was laughing so hard that she had to hold her belly. If she didn't have the corporate bent, she could have been an Oscar winner.

"Why is that so fucking funny to you?"

"I'm just too high, honey. Here, let's try again."

"No. No. Don't laugh at me."

"I'm sorry. Really. Here, give me a hug." He'd crossed his arms and turned away from her like a cartoon of a little boy pouting. She hugged him from behind.

"Come on, sweetie. I'm so sorry I hurt your feelings. Have another hit, and I'll do something special that I bet will fix this little temporary problem. You refill the bong, and I'll be right back."

Delilah went to the bathroom, ran the hot water, and got two washcloths, one wet and one dry. A warm, wet cloth makes everything fresh and relaxes all the muscles around the sphincter. She had read about prostate massage and watched a video of it. She'd read that a man could have an orgasm without an erection that way.

She kissed and licked the inside of his thighs. She ran her fingernails up and down his belly, and around his nipples. She took off his socks and massaged between the bones in the ball of his foot, dug her fingernails into the heel, and ran her thumbnail across the arch. She had his legs bent back and kept kissing and licking closer to the little star—but avoided it. "Some things are just too yucky even for me," she thought.

She languidly stroked the top of his foot, running up the outside of his calf to behind the knee. When she tickled there, she was

afraid he'd jerk away, but he stayed motionless, trembling for fear she might stop. She used her thumbs to massage under his buttocks, up into the muscles and tendons between his legs. She dug her fingernails into his buttocks in little grabbing motions. She took her hands away completely, and he raised his ass in the air, begging for more. From between the cushions of the couch, she retrieved a small bottle of Astroglide—she smirked at the name—and a plastic ring with a vibrator in it. She poured a little lubrication on her finger and circled the target she was aiming for. She dipped her finger in just short of the first knuckle and made a little circle inside of him. She tugged her finger back and forth, and his muscles inside hung on, sucking the tip of her finger. She dropped a tad more lube onto her finger and, bit by bit, worked her finger further in, first to one side, then the other, then in the smallest of circles. She began to lick the place between his balls and his ass that some laughingly refer to as the “taint.” When she asked a friend why it was called the taint, she was told, “‘Tain’t one place and ‘taint the other.” Everything combined would have given most men a raging erection, but nothing happened.

She got more aggressive, with more lube. She found his prostate. She put the ring on her index finger and re-inserted that digit; the ring vibrated, and she moved it back and forth, up and down, rolling it over and over.

She could feel the bulb of his prostate swell and felt it pulse and twitch. His breath came more quickly, the little moans growing louder, and, without a sign of an erection, he ejaculated. For coming out of a flaccid penis, it was more than she expected. Delilah caught it in the washcloth so it wouldn't stain the couch. John flopped over on the couch, and, a moment later, was snoring. She washed her hands and turned on the television.

He awoke at about 3 am. She pulled him up, and they toddled down the hall to the bedroom.

Cuddling in her oversized bed, Delilah continued her devious little plan with a simple inquiry. “John, can I ask you something.”

“Sure,” he muttered.

“When you were in prep school, did you ever, you know, fool

around, like with other boys, maybe your roommate? I mean, like when you were drunk and horny?"

His eyes popped open. "What? No. Fuck no. I'm no faggot!"

"Calm down, sweetie. I did."

"Yeah. That's cool. But it's different with girls. You see two girls doing it in all the skin mags. But the idea of two dudes going at each other's hairy assholes is just beyond disgusting. Puke, gag, blah!"

A beat. A long beat.

"Why did you ask me that?"

"It's just, well, the way you came. Like never before. You liked it so much in your ass, and I was just wondering, I mean, I think bisexuality is cool, it's the thing now, and—"

"Wait, you think because you...because I...that makes me queer?"

"No, no, no, I know for sure you're not queer—I mean gay. It's just that the guys I've been with who like that kind of stuff, are—most of the time—bi. That's all I'm saying. But it's no big deal. Forget it."

"Hard to forget."

"Hey, not to worry. You came so much. You are a super-duper stud. Your other half should be knocked up in a twinkling now that you guys are trying, right?"

"Yeah. Right. Thanks. I came a lot, huh?"

"Yeah. Like more than ever before. More than I can ever remember anything squirting like that! Now, go to sleep, super-stud."

## Chapter 15

### STEP TWO

**His wife was at a spa in the Caribbean, so he stayed over.**

Delilah handed him his coffee, and inquired, "What are you doing for lunch?"

"I was supposed to meet with the operations team, but I got a text that their main guy has the flu, so they had to cancel. Why?"

"I want a rematch. I'll get a room at the Carlton. Meet me there at 12:30. I'll order room service, and we'll be back by two. Cool?"

"Uh. Ok. Sure. You randy little thing, you!"

"Wait a second, Mr. Mahon! You were the one who got off last night—and without an erection, which is really cool. I never saw that before! But I had to DIY it to get to sleep, so you owe me one."

"Ok. Deal."

"I'm out of here. Lock up, okay?"

"Delilah?"

"In a hurry, in a hurry!" She was putting on her coat and gathering her keys, phone, and purse. She didn't have anything to rush for. It was part of the improv.

"You never had a guy come without an erection?"

"My dear, that would be something I would have remembered. It was brilliant; I'm impressed. See you at 12:30. I'll text you what room. Don't you cancel on me, stud! Pull the door shut behind you; I set it to lock."

She was out the door. Mahon stared into his coffee and felt a dark heat surround him.

## Chapter 16

### COUP DE GRÂCE

**Delilah waited in the Starbucks across the street until she** saw him exit her building. She hurried back to her apartment to retrieve the zucchini bread from the fridge. She baked it with more "preparation" in it. A longer-lasting mixture. She was amused by the symbolism of the zucchini.

In the hotel room, they ate before getting down to business. He wolfed down all the zucchini bread for dessert. As expected, things failed to function. Delilah began to feign frustration. She noticed that, even in this limp state, his substantial member had shrunk a bit, as if it were shy and embarrassed.

She decreed, "Listen here. I want you at my place at 8:30 tonight. I'll make dinner. If we keep trying, we'll have a breakthrough. If I don't feel your dick inside me soon, I'm going to kill something."

"But I have to—"

"Don't give me any grief, John. If you ever want to get any of

this ass again, have *your* ass there at half-past eight!"

As an executive, she knew how to command.

At 8:32, she met him at the door in a raincoat and nothing else, flashed him, then ran into the bedroom. He did not give chase. She came out a few minutes later in a silky Japanese robe.

"You didn't follow."

"I don't know, I..."

"Forget it, let's eat."

Fettuccine Alfredo with crispy garlic bread. Garlic covered the strong taste of the larger, final dose in case there was any underlying taste.

Afterward, when he failed for the third time, her charm dissolved. She went from ridicule to disgust and back again. She ordered him out.

When John Braxton-Mahon got up to urinate the next morning, he practically had to reach up inside to bring it out. He sat down on the toilet to pee and cried like the little boy he'd never grown out of being.

A week later, there was a memo on the company's intranet that John Braxton-Mahon had taken a position at another corporation. Through a backchannel, she checked the salary. Delilah snickered when she found out that his new position came with a substantial cut in pay.

## Chapter 17

### THE GREAT WOODEN DOORS

**Delilah approached the office with the large oak doors at 7:32.** She scanned the other executive offices on the way there to make sure everyone else had departed. In her bag was a \$3,500 bottle of vintage Isaiah Gregg 20-year-old Single Barrel Kentucky Bourbon. She thought of Samael when she drank Kentucky bourbon. She thought of what her momma would think of this indulgence. She wiped away that hurt by concentrating on where she was headed.

Even in high heels, she made hardly any clatter when she

walked on the expensive flooring in the halls and cubicles. She did not wobble on the lush, plush carpet in the CEO suite.

Ulysses was sitting behind his glass desk, leaning back in his wide leather chair, just staring at the ceiling. Ulysses felt her there and jerked up in alarm. They didn't speak. She held the bottle by the neck and let the bag fall away to the floor. She walked around his desk, breaching the divide between the master and his minions. She twisted the cap to break the seal, popped the cork, took a big swig, and handed it to him. He sniffed it, inspected the bottle, looked up at Delilah, and took a long swallow. It was instant camaraderie, like a couple of sweaty sailors cracking open a fifth after they'd soogeed down the portside.

He passed it back to her. She took another long drink, banged in the cork with the palm of her hand, put it on the glass desk top, swung around, and lowered herself onto his lap in the roomy chair.

Still silent, she ran her fingers through his beard as if she had never seen one before, and she had never seen one of such perfect auburn, and so exquisitely trimmed. He smelled of Bay Rum. Clove, pimento oil, cinnamon. Their eyes met and latched. She edged toward his lips, backed off a half-inch to tease, and delicately touched her lips to his. All this with eyes wide open and still locked. Like melting, like the first taste of soft ice cream, their mouths joined, and their eyes closed.

It had begun.

On the desk, over the desk, on the leather couch, on the Afghani carpet. After they'd worn each other out, they lay in one another's arms on the carpet with a soft Afghan covering them. They had not spoken a word, except for crying out in nearly religious and very profane ecstasy.

With his head on her chest, he wept. The naked man with his body pressed up against hers and his limbs wrapped around her was in deep grief. What was he grieving?

Even Ulysses wasn't sure.

Finally, he sat up, wiped his wet face and leaking nose with his palm, and broke the silence with a big sigh and a "Well!" He reached over to his discarded trousers and got out his handkerchief.



When he blew his nose, it sounded like a goose's honk, which sent Delilah into a fit of giggles. He laughed with her, lay down facing her, and they just took in each other's face for a full minute.

Delilah kissed him on the nose, arose, and picked up the bottle. She took two glasses from the bar, squatted on the carpet, poured a splash of bourbon into each, and handed him one. In the glass, the nose was fuller. Scotch was his drink, but this sweeter, homier smell was warmer. She clinked her glass against his to toast their wordless, abandoned, inevitable fucking all over this magnificent office. Or was it a toast to the success their combined wits and acumen would do for the company? Unconsciously, they may have been toasting to the predictable, disastrous finale that anyone could have seen coming.

At 9:00 p.m., the phone rang. Ulysses jumped up to see if it was Penny calling. Delilah swooped in between him and the phone, sat on the desk, lifted her legs, clutched his rump with both hands, and pulled him into her. He had not been hard, but in the moment that it took from her grabbing his ass to the tip touching her, he swelled to full size and more. The metaphor of her getting between him and his wife was not lost on him. The wife he adored, the beauty queen wife who defended him with fierce loyalty, whose constancy and faith in him had never waned. Much like the faith of the crew whose skeletons rested at the bottom of the sea or in the belly of a shark. These thoughts, however, didn't retard his encore performance on the edge of the glass desk.

She used his used handkerchief to wipe between her legs. He reached for another in his desk drawer, gesturing for her to wait till he got her a clean one, but she shook her head and smiled. She kept wiping their mixed fluids, and her lascivious smile got him half-hard again.

She dressed. She put her cheek next to his. She whispered two words, "Next Friday." He nodded his head.

He invariably watched his lovers as they exited the room to admire their derrieres. This woman, who was equal to the most entrancing and exuberant partners he'd had—and he'd had among the hundreds—had no ass at all and could have been, with the

right clothing and a ball cap, mistaken for a boy.

He took a hot shower to wash off her smell. He intended to knock back a quick energy drink and get to Penelope with a loving expression and a big hug. As he sat to put his shoes on, he laid back for just a moment, and, exhausted, fell asleep in the chair. And he dreamed.

*They'd hit a fog bank, and were just coming out of it when the helmsman called down, "Captain, you've got to see this!"*

*When he came topside, the men were gazing at it.*

*"What an incredible mansion," one sailor said.*

*"That's too big for a mansion. Maybe a hotel?"*

*"Who would put a hotel out here?"*

*Odets' baritone always got their attention. "Friends, that is a palace. Make for there, and find their dock. We are out of the fog, and the moon is full. This looks like the start of the adventure I promised you."*

*"Captain?"*

*"For the island, man. Sail!"*

*"Captain...something's wrong!"*

*"For God's sake, what?"*

*"The compass, sir. It's spinning."*

*"Did you break it? Did someone drain the alcohol from it? Men, line up! Let me smell all your breaths."*

*The stench of each of their breath was wretched, but none smelled of alcohol.*

*"I see a dock, sir."*

*"Tie up there. We'll see if we can raise the inhabitants."*

*They must have hit a shoal. It knocked Ulysses backward. He fell and banged his head, and—*

His cell phone binged with a message from Penny, "Are you on your way?"

## Chapter 18

### "DON'T BLOW YOUR GODDAMN HORN AT ME!"

**He called Penny back immediately.**

"Penelope, darling, I am so sorry...I dozed off. What time...oh my god it's 10 o'clock! I was wiped out after that hot shower, and I must have conked out while I was getting dressed because I see that I only have one sock on. I'm coming home now. Or would you like to go out and have a late dinner and a drink? Hey, it's Friday night. Let's go see Angelo. Go ahead, and I'll meet you there."

At the stoplight, a car horn blared behind him. He had been lost in the memory of that fantastic and awful time, always wondering whether it had really happened. His knuckles were white from gripping the wheel. The horn blared again. He saw the light had turned green—but nobody blows his horn at Ulysses Odets.

He threw open the car door and strode toward the blaring, obnoxious Cadillac, brandishing the tire iron he kept on the floor between the door and the driver's seat. He was ready to smash the windshield of this rude, intruding honker.

When he saw it was a middle-aged woman whose eyes were big with fright, he looked at the ground in abject remorse and slunk back to his car. As he closed his car door, she sped around him and through the intersection, ignoring the red light in her panic. Luckily, she didn't get rammed, but now car horns blared at her.

To calm himself, he did the combat breathing he had learned from his friend and former bodyguard. If Sandy had been in the car, he would never have allowed Odets to do that. Sandy had kept Odets' impulsive actions, if not his temper, in check. A month before Odets embarked, Sandy had found a job at a Blackwater-type "security" company and was God-knows-where.

When he pulled up to the valet at the restaurant, he sat in the driver's seat long enough for the young man to ask, "Sir, is everything alright?" Odets smiled at him and said, "Just fine, son. Thanks for asking." He slid out and handed him the keys.

Angelo the owner burst out a welcome in a Neapolitan accent,

"Buona sera, Mr. Odets! Buona sera! We grieved for you, Mr. Odets. When you came back like Lazarus we were overjoyed!" For a moment, Odets thought he was going to hug him. "She's waiting for you, you lucky man," he whispered while escorting him to her table.

There was no problem getting a reservation. Angelo always held back a table in case his favorite guests might arrive.

Penny was perusing the menu, but when she sensed Ulysses coming, her face changed from indecisive to joyful. Ever since he'd been back, they had made love at least once every day. In the bed, in the shower, and even once in her walk-in closet. She couldn't get enough of him. In front of the entire crowd, she practically leaped from the booth, threw her arms around the husband for whom she had wept disconsolately for many, many nights, and kissed him deeply. Surprised, but smart enough to go along with this elated, passionate gesture, Odets responded in kind. He pushed away the twinge of guilt from the hour-old orgy in his office.

The diners applauded.

"Cosa c'è di buono nel menu stasera, Angelo?" Odets spent his junior year in Milan studying economics.

"We have a nice, fresh, grilled trout, but we know what you will order: the lamb stew!"

"Stufato d'agnello! Yes, yes, I'm a creature of habit. Good to see you, man."

"And for *la signora*?"

"The trout sounds delicious." She reached out, took Angelo's hand, and told Ulysses, "You know, darlin', when you were gone, I couldn't bring myself to eat here. After a month or two, Angelo called to beg me to come back. Telly answered the phone, so he knew what was up, and he insisted we come here at least twice a month. Angelo always picked the best wine, and never charged us! I am indebted to you, Angelo. You took good care of us."

"It was my honor. A nice pinot grigio with your trout? A Montepulciano to go with your lamb, my friend?"

"Sounds good. I'll start with a single malt."

"Of course! As always! I'll hurry the bartender along."

Angelo never left it to a waiter to take their order, and the

waiters knew to keep an eye on their table and anticipate their every need. Every Christmas, the Odets showed their gratitude. They had also arranged for Angelo's very bright oldest son to attend the same academy Telly had—on scholarship, of course. Angelo rightly suspected that they provided the scholarship.

It may have been an ethnic thing, but Odets didn't talk when he ate. His taste buds may have been more attuned to the flavors of food than others were. He ate like he was having sex, often peppering each bite with sounds of appreciation for what was in his mouth. Penny had to get used to it; dinner conversation was an art she had been schooled in by her mother. She finally gave up when she realized that she was roundly ignored whenever she attempted to converse with him while he was in the world of his food. The happy trade-off was that she began to enjoy her food more than ever. Fortunately, it all went to her bustline and her rear end. She had to buy a new wardrobe twice. His passion, while always at 60 mph, with her new, improved figure roared up to 100 every time she bent over or took her clothes off. Train a girl to be a size 2 all her life, teach her to wear white gloves to the soiree, skip the canapes, that it was salad for lunch, and four bites of whatever for dinner, to live on the stepper—then introduce her to a Greek, and see what happens. She was forever grateful to him for releasing her from her mother's clutches and that awful, rich-white-girl indoctrination.

For dessert, it was always tiramisu. Angelo allowed his best waiter Jeremy to take care of dessert since the after-theater crowd was starting to crush in.

"Please, Jeremy dear, I would be so grateful if you could find me an espresso to go with that luscious dessert. Sounds yummy, doesn't it?" Odets enjoyed watching her get her way, charming everyone from senators to waiters to maids. An espresso at 11 p.m. was a sure signal that she planned on staying up late. She just could not get enough of him.

While they waited, she slid over in the booth to be close enough to him to touch thighs. Still chatting—and Penny could chat endlessly, which made her the queen of the cocktail party—she put her hand between his legs. No one watching her animated gestures

with her right hand or listening to her rapid-fire small talk would have guessed what her left hand was up to. Ulysses didn't move, just scanned the room, and smiled as if he were half-bored and looking around to see if another woman was worth looking at.

To Penny's dismay, nothing was happening below the table. She chalked it up to their non-stop licentiousness all over their very large Manhattan townhouse. Although, he hadn't answered the phone when she called. He pleaded that he fell asleep. She always took a nap after her workout, so she castigated herself for being suspicious. He'd been under severe stress for a very long time and had thrown himself back into work against all her begging and his psychiatrist's caution. She knew he had that Mediterranean proclivity to infidelity, a cultural thing. She had learned to ignore her paranoia and made her peace with the jealousy. Her father had had his secretary—all the men at the country club did, either that or one of their clubmates' wives—so she had a lifetime to be inured to it. Still, she wondered and worried.

Ulysses was aware of her doubts and fears. When the waiter brought the check, Ulysses signed the bill, took the receipt, turned it over, and wrote, "It was the thought of you that kept me from giving up and letting the sea take me," and pushed it across to her. He watched the tears begin to glisten in her eyes. She sat back with her head down. "Keep your emotions out of view," she heard her mother's voice echo. He leaned over and kissed the tears away. When they got home, he took that little blue pill, even though the bottle warned against it if you'd been drinking. It was worth the risk to keep a happy home.

After he made love to his wife, he dropped off quickly, and the dreams came rushing back

## Chapter 19

### THE KISS

*The woman stood on the raised steps. His men were not there.  
His mind was foggy. Things were bright.  
"Kneel."*

*Did the guard say that? Did she say that? Was she some sort of queen? Was this the protocol? Was he a captive? Did they know who he was? Were they taking him for ransom?*

*She was dressed in white and gold. She was older. Was she near to his age? Still beautiful, but with “character” in her face. Her breasts sat up high, but that could be foundation garments. She was blonde. No, wait, she wasn’t—she was very much a redhead.*

*Oh, Christ, he thought, how did I get so high? Now she’s a dark brunette, like an Indian woman. Did they drug me?*

*She came down to him. Red, certainly, her hair was red. She towered over him. She bent down, tilted his face up toward her, and stroked his cheek with the softest touch. He thought of Penny. Penny would stroke his cheek like that. Penny was movie star-gorgeous, Grace Kelly-poised, and this woman...this woman looks just like...*

*“Oh, fuck! She looks just like Penny! No, wait. The mind is playing tricks again. That look, though. She is looking at me like, what, like, like a little girl looks at a puppy, like a woman looks at an infant, the same adoring smile, the same dilation of the pupils. Am I a puppy? I am a fucking Titan of Industry, not a goddamn puppy! But the way she looks at me. It makes me warm. It makes me feel safe. When did I ever feel safe? Or want to? Her touch is...what? Elevating?”*

*She took his face in her hands, leaned close, and black dreadlocks fell over him. Music started. It was as if it was being played inside his head. In slow motion, she closed in to kiss him. The kiss went on forever. Swirling, Christmas-colored lights turned end over end in his mind. She smelled like opium.*

*A lifetime of kisses faded away. This was everything now. This kiss was his world, and he didn’t ever want to leave it.*

## Chapter 20

### TGIF

**On Monday, in the offices of Odysseus Corporation, nothing** passed between the CEO and his highly valued employee; not a word, not a smile, not a furtive wink.

Friday night next, without an appointment, Delilah showed up

at his office with a \$26.00 Mason jar of Little Black Mountain Sweet Tea Moonshine, Kentucky beef ribs, and her corn fritters with an extra side of butter. In the bag was a red and white checkered plastic tablecloth, four extra-large washcloths to be used as napkins (two of them damp), and some very expensive china.

No flatware. Hands only.

“De-lec-ta-ble!” He pronounced every syllable.

He smelled everything, cracked the lid of the jar, smelled that, too, and took a big chug. They passed around the ribs and the fritters and the jar, dove into the food, and munched and slurped. They were submerged in the delight of a picnic in his office on a Friday night, feeling the headiness of the corn liquor starting to build, and the anticipation of having each other for dessert.

He asked for more corn fritters. He remarked that the little flecks of herbs tasted like scallions and made them delicious.

However, they weren’t scallions.

After many sips of “sweet tea,” they were licking the sauce off each other’s fingers.

After their extraordinary fucking, which was better than the previous Friday—as the second time nearly always is when the first time is good—Ulysses took a gamble and started to talk.

“At the meeting. I was impressed. You berating me in front of God and everyone. I saw you talking to our esteemed COO afterward. He came to me about it. He reassured me that he lectured you on protocol and boundaries. He said that, in the possibility that you were right about the dog food thing, he was to blame since he advised me to do those things. Which he didn’t, but I didn’t object to his taking the blame.”

“If what I saw is an indication of your chops...” He interrupted the anticipated compliment with, “...but I’ve got to ask an important question. Where did you get the red hair?”

She leaned over and whispered in his ear, “It came with the head!” She licked his ear, then proceeded down a tickling path from the bristles of his neck around to his mouth. Her kiss took him back to The Island. Fear and illicit passion are a strange mix. Like skydiving, like jumping off the cliffs in Acapulco, like having



sex in the department store dressing room, winner-take-all, risking bankruptcy not only of the credit/debit sheet variety but of the mind and spirit. Hazarding the chance of losing friends, or worse, losing one's family and dying alone. It made the gamble all the more exciting.

As one would expect from a true redhead, Delilah's petite, perfect porcelain breasts and the inside of her thighs had a trace of blue from the translucency of the skin. Her hair was red down there, the very same shade as his beard. Her areolas and nipples were pink, but the inside of her nether lips were blood red. Ulysses' skin was freckled, and his eyes were a glittering blue, but the rest of the colors of his body were the same as hers. For a moment, he saw himself in her, some reflection of what he would be if he were a woman. Tasting, licking, drowning in her smell, it was difficult to get her out of his mind during the day when he knew she was just down the hall and could be summoned. But not without suspicion.

When the phone rang at 9:25, he answered it, and said, "Darling, I was just picking up the phone to call you. I just finished. I'll be home soon," and made a kissing sound.

Delilah dressed during his phone conversation. When he hung up, she went to him and put her arms around his neck. Barefoot, she stood on tip-toe and looked up at him.

"I saw her on your arm on your parade day. She's stunning. I don't think I ever saw anyone so in love as that lovely woman is with you. But you should know this about me. I'm like you. I understand the need for variety. Don't worry about jealousy from me. She's got dibs. We shall be colleagues who fuck on Friday nights. Well, not colleagues. I work for you, and I know that."

It is worth repeating that sometimes Delilah lied just to keep in practice. Disguise the endgame. Distract with reassurance of "not to worry," that there would be no trouble, that they were two of a kind. This savvy kingpin with a nose for bullshit could not detect it because...well, because his nose was full of The Scent of Delilah.

A light brush on the lips, and she disappeared into the night.

As the hot, soapy water washed away the smell of her, he thought to himself, "I am, without a doubt, one lucky motherfucker!"

## Chapter 21

### M1CR

**There is more to say about the nature of redheads. And Delilah.**

First, some science:

The M1CR gene determines red-headedness. The pigment pheomelanin gives red hair its distinctive color.

In his 1886 book, *“Le Parfum de la Femme,”* Dr. Augustin Galopin was the first to report that redheaded women emitted a particularly distinct aroma; he described it as that of ambergris, an earthy and sensual scent. Science agrees that the skin mantle—a thin film on the skin’s surface—is more acidic in redheads, causing perfume to more quickly evaporate when applied, and potentially emitting a unique smell of its own.

Delilah never used perfume.

Redheads need more anesthetic in the dentist’s chair. Conversely, science has noted that redheaded women release natural opiates, and can endure up to 25% more pain than others. This may account for the preference Delilah had for her sex partners to be rough with her. When she returned it, it put off some men, but the majority came to desire it even when they wouldn’t have allowed it if had come from anyone else.

Cultural considerations are even more intriguing...

Had Mark Twain met Delilah, the meeting might have prompted his famous quote, “While the rest of the species is descended from apes, redheads are descended from cats.”

The ancient Thracians worshiped red-haired, blue-eyed gods.

Two percent of the world population has red hair, but 30% of TV commercials feature redheads. 8% of the world’s population has blue eyes. The chance of red hair and blue eyes? 0.17%. Which translates to about 13 million out of the entire population of 7.6 billion.

Many English monarchs from Henry II to Henry VIII to the first Queen Elizabeth have been redheads—not to forget a current second-born (albeit displaced) royal prince. Another English King—ironically a Scottish one like the Kirkes—not only had red

hair, but, even more ironically, wrote a treatise entitled “Daemonologie” in which he warned of the “fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaves of the Devill, the Witches or enchanterers.”

A third irony is that The Bible—the one that dictates “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”—carries that King’s name.

If one can abide a final irony, that King’s mother was a redhead who crossed her redheaded cousin the Queen, and regrettably lost her red head.

Hot-tempered and hypersexual are two traits imputed to redheads.

In many parts of the world, redheads are distrusted and feared as pixies or vampires or witches.

She was diminutive like a pixie.

Some who stood in her way were drained of ambition and vigor.

The third superstition...well, that has been established.

## Book Two ULYSSES' ODYSSEY

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### Chapter 22 HOMER'S POEM

#### *THE ODYSSEY, Book X.*

But venom'd was the bread, and mix'd the bowl,  
With drugs of force to darken all the soul:  
Soon in the luscious feast themselves they lost,  
And drank oblivion of their native coast.  
Instant her circling wand the goddess waves,  
To hogs transforms them, and the sty receives.  
No more was seen the human form divine;  
Head, face, and members, bristle into swine:  
Still cursed with sense, their minds remain alone,  
And their own voice affrights them when they groan.  
Meanwhile the goddess in disdain bestows  
The mast and acorn, brutal food! and strows  
The fruits and cornel, as their feast, around;  
Now prone and groveling on unsavoury ground.  
*Translation, Alexander Pope, 1725 C.E*

### Chapter 23 VEXATION

**Odets pondered that it had been two years ago to the day** since the national media gathered at the dock to report on this mega-wealthy, newsworthy figure casting off on his seafaring adventure.

The day before they sailed, three brothers who had signed on to the crew came down with hepatitis from a meal of bad clams. The timing of the departure was vital for the weather, but perhaps more so for the PR since all the media would be there.

He and Mackie, his first mate, went down to Battery Park on the off chance of finding replacements. They got lucky—or so they thought—because the first man they hailed said he had been recently discharged from the Navy and had experience with sailing yachts. He said he had two friends he could recruit for the exorbitant pay Odets was offering for the short notice.

Odets had always been careful to check the background of all employees, but, with this last-minute crisis, he bypassed the process and took the man at his word. A hurried oversight often creates future vexation. His new hire had been discharged dishonorably for a raft of sexual assaults, and was sought for prosecution in two Southern states. His cronies' records were not much better.

Throughout the voyage, conversation among the three was disturbing even to the rough-hewn seamen. Out of patience, Ulysses took the men aside and told him that if he heard any more ugly, sicko-pedo talk he would set them adrift in a dinghy and sail on without them. With the formidable Mackie standing behind him, they nodded obsequiously.

They stifled their obscene stories, but on the night watch, Mackie regularly heard them whispering to one another and chuckling licentiously.

He reported it to Odets, but his attention was focused elsewhere. Anyway, setting them adrift would have been tantamount to murder. Though the crew would not have objected, nothing ever stays a secret, so he shrugged his shoulders at Mackie's concern—but it was never far from his thoughts.

## Chapter 24

### A VOLUPTUOUS PALACE

**Penny had been awakened more than twice by Ulysses' fitful sleep.** She tried to imagine the lingering dread of being lost at sea. She never awakened him, but slipped out of bed and slept in one of the many guest rooms, always setting the clock so she would be beside him when he awoke.

Tonight, he was especially restive. “The Dream” was in full force.

*They had disembarked and were staring up at this white and gold palace. Before them was a stone staircase of eighty steps. The way was lit by many torches. He counted the steps as he climbed them. It was an old habit. It occurred to him that was exactly the number of steps up to the Parthenon. He’d climbed it many times on his many trips to Athens, often as a tour guide for his latest inamorata.*

*As he was soon to find, this was not a temple to the chaste Goddess Athena Parthenos.*

*At the top was an awe-inspiring structure of Corinthian columns, egg-and-dart cornices, a gold-leafed pediment, and a frieze with figures in relief that depicted only women—dancing, giving birth, nursing—but the crew was dumbfounded by several of the figures in Sapphic poses. With their long celibacy imposed by the close quarters and no privacy, this was doubly stirring.*

*The crew traipsed up the stairs after their captain. All were wobbly since they had not yet got their land legs. At the top of the staircase, the landing had a statue on a pedestal. A form in stone on a stone base, the figure was at least twelve feet high. The nude sculpture was of a dauntingly beautiful woman with a perfectly proportioned figure. Unlike the Greek sculptures in modern museums which time and the elements have whitened, this was fully painted. Eyes painted blue, and hair painted red.*

*As the crew was ascending the steep staircase to the palace, revived by the prospect of getting a closer view of the female colossus, the three degenerates hung back. They saw a girl, not yet a woman but “just starting to bud,” as one whispered to the other, who replied with a hushed “Tasty!” The girl wore a short, gauzy garment that was folded over at the waist. She was carrying a basket of fresh laundry. A shift fell out of the basket, and she bent to pick it up.*

*She looked up and saw the unshaven, unkempt man.*

*She backed away and was about to call out, when the man squatted down to make himself seem less threatening.*

*The man reached into his pocket and brought out a half-eaten candy bar. He took a bite of the candy, smacking his lips and making the universal*

sounds of tasting something delicious. The others, hidden behind a bush, chuckled and murmured “pogey bait”—what sailors call candy that is used to lure a new sailor into sex during the long, dry times at sea. He extended his hand with the candy bar in it.

*This was a new creature to her, with a hairy face like a dog, but smelled worse. Like most children, her curiosity and taste for sweets got the better of her instinct to be afraid. There were no predators on the island, so she knew nothing of the crouch from which predators spring.*

*His hand was over her mouth as he fell upon her. In a moment, the others were pinning her limbs, and the tears and fear and muffled screams of pain only provoked their fervor.*

*It had been a long time since they had been with a woman, and her body was still like a child’s, so they were doubly inflamed; therefore, the gang rape was over quickly. They laughed and mocked her weeping in that fetal position to which we all resort when the unspeakable befalls us. As they cleaned her virginal blood from themselves with the soft, white dresses from the basket, breathing in the lavender scent, an enormous African appeared behind the two. The ringleader looked up, and the other two saw the fear in his face, but they had only turned halfway around to see the source of his terror when they were struck unconscious by their heads being smashed against each other. The massive man kicked the other in the face, squashing his nose and knocking him out.*

*He covered the violated girl with his long coat, dragged the villains away, returned, and carried her to his mistress.*

## Chapter 25

### THE ISLAND

**The next morning Odets fell asleep with his head cradled in his arms on his desk.**

His dreams were no longer confined to the night, and the disturbance made him groggy. Not a good quality in a CEO.

The intercom’s buzzing jarred him awake.

He was grateful to be released from the dream, though he didn’t answer the call.

He had probably come back to work too soon. That’s what his

shrink said. Odets complained to the doctor that he was falling asleep in his chair at work and wanted a prescription for Adderall or the new drug Provigil to keep him alert. What he didn't tell his psychiatrist—the one person he should have told—was about this repetitive dream. Did it happen, or was it a delusion that the sun on the waves had burned into his brain?

He'd missed his morning dose and left his pills at home. His eyelids would not cooperate, so he stumbled over to the big leather sofa in his office and was back in REM a moment after he hit the cushions. This time the dream was in high resolution and all too real.

*He was in full recline on the curved lounge.*

*Like most young, rich men growing up in the late twentieth century, he had tried almost every form of psychedelics, pharmaceuticals, and any substance that was smokeable or snortable. He twice repeated to himself, "I've never been this high before!"*

*"Where are my men?" he asked aloud to no one in particular.*

*"They are all well, save three who violated my handmaiden. Men long at sea should bail out the backwash of their juices before venturing back into society and the company of women. Those three are—indisposed." Her voice made Odets buzz like there was a cello inside of him.*

*Incensed that another would usurp his authority and punish his crew without his approval, Ulysses arose with protests and oaths.*

*"Think before you speak. They raped a virgin. What would your orders have been?"*

*His mind tried to excuse it, to push it aside, to quash it, to force it down, but the indubitable truth screamed in his mind that he was to blame. Like all men of power, he covered it over with anger.*

*"What the hell do you want from me?"*

*"I want you. Your companionship. Your conversation. Maybe your seed. Anything else that comes to mind, I suppose."*

*"Why?"*

*"You came. You wanted to see. You've been conquered. Enjoy it. It's better than being crammed in your ship with a dozen men in a typhoon that might drown you all. Or drown them all, and leave you alive. The captain always goes down with his ship. What happens when a captain doesn't?"*

*Her words were like a scouring pad on his brain. He did not answer.*



*No woman had ever spoken to him like this. Her words befuddled him. He closed his eyes for a moment to calm himself and consider his next move. He was still floating. When he opened his eyes and sat up, the Lady was gone. Or was he still sleeping? It was becoming difficult to tell the difference.*

## Chapter 26 THE PIGGERY

***The African awakened him and handed him a gilded goblet.** His mouth was dry from the drugs, so he gulped down half of whatever was in it and snapped awake. The African gestured for him to follow. As Ulysses trailed behind the manservant, he was transfixed by the rippling of the Black man's immense muscles—in his limbs, his back, neck, buttocks, everywhere. They descended a narrow, spiral staircase along whitewashed walls to a dimly lit long hallway. At the end of the hallway was a wooden door with a bar across it like a door to a dungeon in an old movie. As they approached, a sharp smell of animal shit jolted him.*

*"What the hell is that smell?"*

*"I was instructed to bring you down here so you could see the three men of your crew who committed an outrage on the girl. Prepare yourself."*

*In the dim light, through the bars in the small window, Ulysses saw pigs in a pen. He heard the oinks and grunts, but there were indistinguishable sounds mixed in. The African turned a switch, the torches brightened, and, among the pigs, he saw three men. They were on all fours and wore pig masks. At the African's gesture, the swineherd threw a bucket of slop on the opposite side of the pigpen, and the real pigs dashed for it, which gave Ulysses a clear view of the three. He saw that they were not actually on all fours; their arms and legs had been amputated at the elbow and knee, and the stumps served as four legs. The stumps were wrapped in bloody bandages. He could hear the men wailing.*

*There are few smells as noxious as pig manure; add to that the sight of the horror of the three crewmen mutilated, and Ulysses puked. He called out to them, "Men, I'm here. I can't tell who is who since they've put... masks on you." He caught himself before he said "pig masks." No reason to rub salt in such grievous wounds. They were in enough torture.*

*They continued to wail inarticulately, and even louder at the sound of Ulysses' voice. The African explained, "They cannot tell you, for they have no tongues to speak."*

*He realized that it could only be the unsavory three. His impetuosity of hiring them unvetted had come back to bite him.*

*Ulysses sat with his back against the door. If he were in their place, he would want someone to kill him. Gangrene would set in from standing in the muck with the wounds that had severed their arms and legs and bring a painful, septic death with it. He asked the African, "Do you think that I could kill them to end their suffering?"*

*"The mistress anticipated you might ask that mercy for them. She has given me license to end their miserable lives, but with the caveat that you must witness it. Since you are the captain of their ship, you must report their deaths. Also, to remind you that it was you who unleashed them on the girl."*

*"But how was I to know—?"*

*"They are your crew; their actions are your responsibility. You should have known their character, that they might commit such an outrage. Do you agree to watch?"*

*"Yes, but please, kill them quickly."*

*The African pulled on a pair of rubber boots that sat by the door. He lifted the bar, opened the thick door, walked through the muck to the men, and pulled off their masks. They looked at their captain and cried out with open mouths, and he saw the bloody mess where their tongues had been sliced out.*

*A boar spear appeared in the African's hand. Even though he knew it was the right thing to do, Ulysses involuntarily shouted in protest, but the African had already begun to slaughter them in the fashion of "harvesting" swine. He stuck each in the neck and twisted to sever their jugular and carotid. They squirmed and screamed when they saw him come at them, but, within moments of his thrust, each was quiet. The unseen swineherd opened the door of a larger chute and hogs barreled in. He must have been starving these boars because they went directly for the dead men to make a meal of them.*

*The African came out, secured the door, pulled off his muddy, stinking boots, and left them at the dungeon door. The two walked back the way they*

*had come. Ulysses, with head bent, sniffing and sobbing, followed him to The Lady.*

*He was shaking and furious at the savagery of their punishment, "Why?" was the only word he could mutter as he lay prone before the woman.*

*"Men's turgid appendages should not be used as a weapon against my kind." She was wholly unruffled, though there was a note of sadness in her voice. She spoke softly, but it echoed, comforting him even in his despair.*

*"Where are the others?" he begged.*

*"They are cared for and well-fed. They have asked after you. I told them you would eventually meet with them. Come here," she commanded. He was not one to be commanded, so he was confounded by his eagerness to obey.*

*In his dream, he thought he and The Lady made love, but he wasn't sure.*

## Chapter 27

### HAREM

***He did not know why, but, by the grace of The Lady, he had a harem.***

*Six women, a different one each night, in rotation. How does a fifty-year-old man keep up? He thought of his father. Ulysses didn't think of his father much because he didn't think much of his father. Achilles Odyssetes—a.k.a. Al Odets—liked to tell an old joke about President Calvin Coolidge that went like this:*

*President and Mrs. Coolidge were being shown—separately—around an experimental government farm. When Mrs. Coolidge came to the chicken yard, she noticed that a rooster was vigorously mounting many of the hens in succession. She asked the attendant how often that happened and was told, "Dozens of times each day, ma'am."*

*Mrs. Coolidge said, "Tell that to the President when he comes by."*

*Upon being told, the President asked, "Same hen every time?"*

*The reply was, "Oh, no, Mr. President, a different hen every time."*

*Upon which the President replied, "Tell that to Mrs. Coolidge."*

*That's how one keeps up.*

*However, there is no denying that sex six days a week keeps one*

*drained even with that one night off. The fight slips away, napping is frequent, and it doesn't seem like one is ever fully awake or aware.*

*He had this paranoid idea that each of these different women was actually her, The Lady, transformed. He tried to talk sense to himself, to convince himself that he was fantasizing. They all had the same minuscule tattoo, a circle with crescents facing out on either side, like the moon in different phases.*

*They all smelled the same, but that could have been a shared perfume. The smell was tantalizing. It was a smell he knew well from another world, another time, another reality, but he could not put a face to the scent.*

*They all had sex differently, preferred different positions, touched him differently, and were moved by different caresses. Each made different sounds, different durations of climax, with a different feel to their insides. Different voices, different dialects, and much, much different bodies.*

*"Lillian! Your turn this evening, is it?" he greeted the willowy blonde. Lillian appeared a proper English woman until she lay down, then behaved more like a certain whore in London's Soho who he got to know when he was getting his MBA at Imperial College.*

*"You again," he joked with the Indian woman with black hair that shone so brilliantly that it looked blue. Each meeting was another chapter from the Kama Sutra.*

*"Mon cher, je suis tellement content que tu sois venu." Indeed, he was glad when the French girl came. She was barely of age. Lithe, blonde, the body of a 17-year-old. When she spoke softly to him in French, it took him back to his summer in Paris between his junior and senior years. It was romantic with her. As he gently glided in and out of her, he would caress her face and hair. When she orgasmed, she had the look of an angel.*

*"Come sta la mia piccola puttana stasera?" She was a big-bosomed brunette who was an opera mezzo. She carried herself like the diva she was. Odets always enjoyed sticking the pin in the self-inflated, so he made a point of calling her a whore, which sounded much gentler in Italian. She was aroused by the word. She would entertain him with a different aria each time and would hit a note well above high C when she came.*

*The black-skinned girl with the African accent but with Jamaican dreadlocks was the only one who smelled different, like coconut oil and cannabis, and he basked in the difference. He remembered the kiss from her*

*full, purple lips the first night he was there that made him—the only word he could think of was “swoon.” He imagined how a maiden must feel the first time. She brought joints of very pungent ganja, and the sex was glorious and surreal.*

*Though he enjoyed them all, it was trysting with the redhead he most looked forward to. There was a bond between them. Her hair was near to his own color. He wondered if he preferred her out of narcissism. He was too comfortable with her, and let down his guard far more than with the others, which only magnified his fears. It was her smell that drove him to frenzy, more piquant, more moving than any other. Afterward, remembering the frenzy frightened him. There was a shadow of fear to everything there, and he was only relieved of it when lost in passion.*

## Chapter 28 POST-COITAL TRISTESSE

### ***Can one have a dream within a dream?***

*He dreamt that all six members of the harem were with him—or, more accurately, at him, all at the same time. He got weaker and weaker, and, as he did, they laughed more and more. Finally, he looked down to see his penis shrink until it was no longer there, and all that remained was a smoothness like the neighbor girl's Ken doll.*

*After that dream, he crumpled for a while. Every time one of the women came into his room, he curled into a ball and wept. His weeping could be heard up and down the hallway.*

*The Jamaican came to him and spoke softly. She filled a pipe with opium. He sank even deeper into his dreams, but they were fitful, and he shouted out more than once.*

*The African suddenly appeared, lit the pipe again, and put it to Ulysses' lips. He slipped into bed with him, and Ulysses curled up under his arm. His armpit smelled as good as the opium. His touch was so light that Ulysses arched himself up for more. His kiss was like the Jamaican woman, but better. Was it her? Did his mind combine them? Ulysses sunk his teeth into his gargantuan muscles. After that, it was hazy, obscure, blissful. When he awoke, he was sticky all over. It was much more semen than he could ever have shot out of his weakened body. More even than when he*

*was young and fit. His mind rejected the evidence.*

*The Lady called for him daily. She sat on her dais, dressed in the same white gossamer gown with gold trim. It was sheer, and, from what he could see, there was little doubt that she was the model for the sculpture at the entrance. The African would shove him to his knees when he forgot to supplicate himself. She sat on an elaborate, gilded throne, decorated with pink painted rosettes and blue crescents. Most times, she stood to address him, well above him on the dais, but this time she descended to him, offered her hand, and raised him up. They sat together on the same level on a marble bench. She asked about his life, about his joy, about why he had gone on this dangerous adventure for seemingly no reason, not to discover, not to conquer, not to find wealth, not to find a new life in a new land, or any of the reasons that people risked their lives by challenging the sea. She laughed when he told her it was for reputation. Her laugh echoed through the hall as if it were amplified, and continued longer than an echo should. He was frightened by it. She took his hand, kissed his cheek, and whispered, "I am so glad you came."*

*After their talk, his energy returned, and the schedule resumed.*

*One by one, when each of the women came to him, he saw their swollen bellies. Was this why he was kept captive?*

*After all their bellies had grown, Odets was permitted to see his men. They were clean-shaven, not unhappy, but with many questions. They had been well-fed. Too well-fed. He went wide-eyed to see that most had gained twenty pounds or more. When they arrived, they had little fat on them because of the hard work of sailing and a diet of canned rations and fish. The sumptuous food here was hard to resist. They spoke of the beautiful women each of them had once a week. As they described them, Odets was speechless; they were the same women that came to him.*

*They asked him when they could leave. He didn't have an answer.*

*When he was next called to an audience with The Lady, he saw that her diaphanous gown was distended. She was pregnant, too.*

*"When can we leave? Or, can we ever leave?" he asked.*

*Ulysses interrupted this assault of questions. "The day you hear an infant cry is the day you may depart. So long as the infant is male."*

*Her words made him dizzy. Did his paranoid fantasy have some proof?*

*After that, no women came to him.*

*He began to exercise. He hadn't had the strength or ambition before. He knew he had to get ready to sail.*

*Time passed. His men complained of their new celibacy. They made up for it by eating. He warned them, even begged them to cut back, but they pooh-poohed him. Some accused him, "You got us into this, so don't deprive us of the only pleasure we have."*

*"Have you tasted the food? It's as mouth-watering as the women—the women we've been deprived of."*

*"When can we leave?"*

*"The Lady said we can leave when we hear an infant cry—a male infant," Ulysses explained to them.*

*"If you believe her. She's a woman, and women lie."*

*"We'll probably be here forever!" they bemoaned.*

*It was as if they couldn't hear him, as if they were stuck in their own beliefs.*

*After so much sex, abstaining had been a welcome relief. Now it had been months, and he missed it. He was getting fit, exercising in his room, and in the sunlight in the garden. The roll around his middle from the lavish meals had disappeared. His fantasies always began with the woman with the red hair. He fixed on the memory of their fucking, and stroked himself to get back to sleep. Nature's Valium, he called it. Sometimes his fantasies wandered to the memory of the other five women, each in turn, flashing back and forth. It set off a montage of all the women he ever had. Just as he was getting close, without any warning or any choice, the African would flash into his mind; his smell, licking his underarms, between his legs, biting into his muscles. Each time, he was horrified at the memory of The African hijacking his fantasies—but he was most disturbed because it was the thought of him that always made him come.*

*It brought back a college memory he thought he had erased.*

## Chapter 29

### ITHACA

**He snapped awake, clenching his teeth and sweating in his air-conditioned office. He didn't know why.**



When he was drinking his second morning espresso at his desk, his secretary brought in the mail. There was a letter from the Ithaca Alumni Association asking for a donation. As soon as he saw the return address, it triggered a panic attack from a memory.

It was a colorful, upper New York autumn. He was in his sophomore year at Ithaca College. He had a new roommate, an effete Asian boy from England with delicate features who was a concert pianist.

It happened one warm night after an unsatisfying rendezvous with a bottle of red and a shy and anxious virgin. It was too close to curfew for him to persuade her to do something about the bulge in his khakis. With balls of blue, he limped back to his dorm room.

As soon as the door shut, he smelled him. Yan used a cologne that smelled close to perfume—expensive perfume. Though the boy was modest, Ulysses noticed that he had no hair on his body except a wisp in the usual places. It was sort of like rooming with a girl.

Nineteen-year-old Ulysses unceremoniously dropped onto his single bed fully dressed, and kicked off his shoes.

"Hello." A soft voice with a British accent came out of the darkness. "How was your evening, Ulysses?"

Lys was Ulysses' nickname, but Yan called him Ulysses. He didn't mind. Like most names, it sounded better spoken in a British accent.

"Disappointing. What did you do?"

"Read. Wrote a letter home. It's Friday night, so I was bad and didn't study or practice."

"That's what you call being bad, huh?"

Ulysses struggled up and stripped off his clothes, leaving them in a pile at his feet. He rowed crew and had no fat on him.

When Yan saw his figure in the moonlight, Ulysses heard a little gasp.

Their beds were set at right angles. He flopped on the bed face down with his feet toward Yan.

Then he uttered a baleful wail, "My feet are killing me."



The complaint hung in the air. Yan asked, "Are you ticklish? On your feet?"

"No, in fact, my cousin Electra and I used to tickle each other's feet when we were little kids. You should see Electra now. She is as big as a house. But whenever I visit, she always plops herself down beside me on the sofa, picks up my feet, pulls off my shoes and socks, and strokes her long fingernails backward from heel to toe endlessly. My family has just come to accept it as a tradition; they think it's 'cute' that we can play together like we were children. I think it's perverted since she's my cousin, but it feels so good I have to try not to moan. No way I'd fuck her. She's the kind of fat where, if you wanted to fuck her, you'd have to roll her in flour and look for the wet spot. Why do you ask?"

He lied. He fucked his cousin every time he went home, and had learned to appreciate girls with lots of flesh.

"In Chinese culture, there is the notion that a light touch can heal. May I?"

Without waiting for a response, Yan proceeded to drive Ulysses to moaning. He stroked his feet better than his cousin ever had. He continued up the back of his thighs, up his back, down his wiry, muscular arms, over his face and ears.

Then Ulysses rolled over for more. Yan's long fingers, with which he could play Rachmaninoff's Third from memory, stroked and stroked. His touch gave Ulysses unutterably intense sensations that were prolonged way past the time the thrill should have lasted. He imagined himself as an instrument Yan was playing.

The vigor of 19, the hopeful erection he had had in the garden with the girl, and this boy's Chinese knowledge made him spray wildly when he came. It jetted all over Yan, his own belly, his chest, the sheets, and even on the wall next to the bed.

Ulysses stayed away most of Saturday. He went to a kegger and drank too much. At 2:00 a.m., he came back to his darkened dorm room. He smelled Yan's cologne. It smelled the same as last night, but the effect it had on him was different. He stripped off his gold sweatpants and blue Ithaca sweatshirt and pulled off his shoes without untying them. He got into bed, laid on his back, and held

very still. Yan made him wait, listening to him breathe. Without a sound, Yan slipped across the divide between the beds so surreptitiously that he surprised Ulysses even though he had been waiting for him.

It went further that night. Yan kept him on the edge for longer than he thought possible. He rolled him over and tickled him in a place that, if he hadn't been so aroused, floating on Yan's every touch, there would have been violence. He watched himself in his mind's eye open up like a woman to Yan's small member.

They came together.

On Sunday morning, Ulysses rose early, went down the hall to the telephone with a handful of quarters, and made a phone call. He went to the library, then to the cafeteria, then back to the library, and did not come back to the room until well after dark.

Yan was gone.

When the other boys on the floor asked about him, Ulysses just said that Yan had been unhappy, and had talked about going home or changing schools. He had just up and left without telling him, not even a note.

But Ulysses had seen to his removal.

## Chapter 30 SOMEDAY SOON

**The recollection upset him. Ulysses told his secretary to make excuses, cancel all appointments, and only disturb him if the building was on fire. He took a Xanax and lay down on the leather couch. It still smelled faintly of Delilah.**

It takes 90 minutes before we fall into REM sleep which is when we dream. Ulysses' dream—if it was a dream—commenced seconds after he closed his eyes.

*Each week, the African escorted him to visit his men. They were not losing weight. Quite the opposite. They had begun to grow "man tits." The beards that were usually dark by sundown seemed light in some, and, in others, not present at all.*

*Odets joked, "How are you doing without sex? It's killing me!"*

*His men said nothing, just looked at him as if he had spoken these joking words in a language they did not understand. Maybe they were having it off with one another.*

*One man stood and walked to the toilet. As he walked away, Odets could see that his rear end was pear-shaped like a woman's. He sat to pee.*

*How could he sail with fat and weak women as his crew?*

*He went to Mackie, his first mate, the toughest one, the one he had known the longest and swapped the most stories with, and spit the words in his face. "You fat-assed faggot! You're turning into a goddamn woman. I bet you can't even get it up anymore." The big man pushed himself up with a growl and grabbed Odets around the throat. It surprised Odets when he found Mackie to be so weakened that he could pry his enormous hands off him with the ease that he would have pried off the hands of a woman. He bent back his wrists till he cried out, and the pain pushed him to his knees.*

*He shouted at Mackie, "I love you, man! You're my first mate! I'm sorry I brought you here, but snap the fuck out of it. Can't you see they are fattening you up for some kind of kill, and putting something in the food to make your balls shrink? Stop eating so much of the fucking food!"*

*He released Mackie, who stood up and saluted.*

*"Yes, sir, Captain. Right away, Captain. Fuck you, Captain."*

*Ulysses punched him hard, in the gut. His fist went into Mackie's belly nearly six inches, and Mackie puked. Before they landed here, Odets' punch would have bounced off Mackie's midsection.*

*The men helped Mackie to his feet. To show their contempt for their leader, they all moved to the ever-present buffet.*

*Then, one morning, everything changed. He was awakened by a baby crying.*

*The African came into his room.*

*"The Lady says that you can go."*

*"Go? It's a boy? We're free to leave?"*

*"Yes. I hope those fat pigs don't sink your boat."*

*"When can we leave?"*

*"Today. You must be gone by sunset."*

*"Will I be able to say goodbye to The Lady?"*

*"You have fulfilled your purpose. I would not hesitate to board your*

*ship and sail away. The Lady has been known to change her mind."*

*Ulysses hurried to where the men slept. It stunk of blubbery men who had not showered and of food gone bad. Nearly all were naked. A few had pieces of food stuck to their backs and asses where they had rolled in it while eating in bed.*

*"Get ready. We're leaving immediately."*

*No one moved.*

*"Here's how it is: she is letting us leave if we leave now. She may change her mind. Since we have 'fulfilled our purpose,' I can only imagine what our fate might be if she were to reconsider."*

*Four of them got up and put on their clothes. Five did not move. Three had died in the piggery.*

*Ulysses went over to Mackie who was one of the immobile five.*

*"Help me. If you get up, they might. If you don't, I'm betting that the big African fellow will kill you all. Do you know what happened to the three who are gone?"*

*Mackie went from half asleep to showing great interest. "What? What happened to them? We all want to know."*

*All the men gathered around, and Ulysses told them the story of the rape and the piggery. Three wept. One threw his plate of food against the wall. Two went back to bed. The others sat and stared.*

*Mackie piped up, "Men, get your clothes on. We are going to kill that bitch before we go."*

*"And you'll do this with what? Your bare hands and your waddling bodies that have been lying in bed for months?" Ulysses spoke slowly, emphasizing each syllable to make it clear, "Do you think she is unguarded? I am going to the ship to lay in water and supplies. As soon as that is done, I am sailing away. You decide."*

*Only two stayed behind. No matter how the others cajoled, they both curled up in their beds. One pulled the blanket over his head. With seven fat and weak sailors to man a ship that should have had a dozen able-bodied seamen to sail it, they cast off.*

## Chapter 31

### LOST AT SEA

**Odets told his psychiatrist what happened after they left The Island.** He never mentioned The Island or of having sex with six women who may have been one woman or with the African man or the horror of the piggery. He limited what he told him to just the bare facts of how he escaped the wrath of the Sea God.

It went something like this...

They sailed into a fog bank. He slipped on the wet deck, fell, and was knocked unconscious. He awoke in his bunk. He heard Mackie call out, "He's awake," and the crew applauded. He should have been muddled from the head injury, but he was as clear as he had been moments before the palace appeared. A few moments after he came around, the fog lifted, the sun was shining, and the skies were clear.

With no warning, the winds blew up, and a typhoon appeared as if conjured. There was no chance to turn the bow into the waves or secure the gear—or themselves. All but Mackie, Odets, and one last sailor were washed overboard. Most of the supplies were washed away. Luckily, the water was spared. But the compass was broken. Mackie could find his way by the stars, but they'd lost the antique astrolabe that Ulysses had insisted upon instead of the more modern sextant. The forbidden sextant was needed for celestial navigation. In the day, Mackie could find due north with his watch. At night, when it wasn't overcast, he could find the North Star. He continually cursed Ulysses for forsaking a radiotelephone till they nearly came to blows.

On the fourth day, the third sailor—who Odets had been nervous about because he was overweight even before they sailed from New York harbor—had a heart attack. No matter how much CPR they did on him, he was gone. Mackie was a believer, so he said a prayer before they put his body over the side, or, as Mackie said, "Down to Davy Jones' Locker."

That left Ulysses and Mackie alone together at sea, and there was bad blood between them. It had rained hard for two days, so

their actual position was moot. With only two men operating the sails, and both increasingly weary, it became impossible to maintain a course.

Eight days out to sea, tempers exploded. Though they were bound together in this mortal predicament, in the heat of fury it did not matter. Mackie came at Odets with a rigging knife. Ulysses turned Mackie's wrist, and the knife plunged into Mackie's solar plexus. As he watched the life leak out of Mackie, Ulysses cradled him on his lap like the Pietà. After Ulysses put his corpse over the side, he knew he would die at sea himself unless he either got lucky or some god—or goddess—smiled upon him.

And smile they did. That time. But sometimes those who survive are meant for something else the gods and goddesses have in mind, sometimes better—and sometimes worse.

## Book Three

# HOW DELILAH GOT TO BE THAT WAY

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### Chapter 32

## HOW DELILAH LOST IT

**On Saturdays, twice a month, Delilah and her dad would** drive into Eureka. The commune made excellent cheese that her father sold to small local groceries. As well as the other product from the commune.

They would arrive in town about 10:00 a.m., so Delilah had the whole day. Which meant there was always time for a movie. If she got lost in romances on a little B&W TV, imagine what Technicolor 70 mm could do for a girl—and to a girl.

She'd have a hamburger and a Coke float at the soda fountain. They didn't eat burgers at the commune. She'd bide her time till five o'clock, then meet her dad back at the truck. They had agreed not to mention the grease burgers and coke floats to her mother who vehemently disapproved of the "white death" of refined sugar. The other part of their deal was not to ask him what he was doing.

Truth was, he was delivering the real cash crop secreted under the cheese to a storage facility where he met the woman who was the go-between for the outlaw motorcycle club that distributed the weed. Then he'd fuck her up against the storage facility cage. She was submissive and liked it rough; it was a change from his wife who, if she was anything, was not submissive. He made sure that the dealer never wore perfume or washed the day before or even used deodorant. He always cautioned himself, "Lilith has a sense of smell like a hungry dog, and she is one bitch who can bite."

When Delilah was 15, she met Ted at the soda fountain. He was blonde and a surfer and beautiful like the picture of the sculpture of David she saw in an oversized art book in the school library. His eyes were a startling blue, and he could pick her up off the ground

with just his hands around her waist. The boy was 19. To her, he was “an older man,” which was a very big draw. The boys at the commune were still children, and they never liked her anyway.

It wasn't long till Ted and Delilah were headed toward his trailer. They would “fool around,” deep French kissing, getting in each other's pants. It graduated to fellatio and cunnilingus—which Surfer Ted used other words to describe. There weren't all that many words between them. Her eager anticipation for her semi-monthly Saturday visits did not include an expectation of having an intellectual conversation with him.

After a while, of course, Ted wanted to go all the way. She wasn't ready yet, and she was perfectly happy to continue the status quo of “everything but.”

Ted got more frustrated and pissed off. They had a big fight about it, and he pulled back his hand to hit her. She stuck out her chin and growled, “Worse mistake you'd ever make!” He backed off.

The next time she came to town, he was nowhere to be seen.

A month later, he found her at the soda fountain on a rainy Saturday. He was warm and sweet and wanted her to come back with him to the trailer. A month of celibacy and missing him urged her to go. And he was beautiful with his hair wet from the rain. It was only 2:00, so she had lots of time. She paused for a long minute of uneasiness, but her hormones overcame it, and she said yes.

“Wait a minute, I've got to make a call,” he said.

He was outside under the awning in the rain for about ten minutes, then he looked through the window and motioned for her to come out. She did, and they ran through the rain together to his truck.

She was more ready for his body and his touch than she thought she would be. She was more than ready to have him relieve her virginity on this rainy Saturday afternoon.

As soon as they got to his trailer, she ran into the bedroom, stripped off her clothes, jumped into bed, and pulled the covers over her head. He stripped off his clothes and crawled under too. She imagined they would start by cuddling and listening to the



rain on the trailer's metal roof while she touched him all over. But this time he was rougher and more forceful than usual. For some reason, probably the long dry spell, Delilah responded to it.

When she was in her tree-climbing phase, Delilah slipped off a branch and fell onto the one below, banging on it hard between her legs. It hurt, so she climbed down, and when she looked at her shorts, they were stained with blood. Lilith calmed her down and reassured her that she'd just broken her hymen, and, while it hurt now, it would probably not hurt that much the first time she had sex. Lilith was candid about sex, and this afternoon proved her right. No resistance; she just opened up to Ted like a flower.

After about a dozen strokes, she could tell he was close. But just before he came, she heard the trailer door open. She must have squirmed in reaction to the intrusion, and that pushed him to climax.

Four boys around his age burst in while she hugged the covers up around her chin.

"She's all yours, boys. Not that great, but something to do on a rainy Saturday afternoon."

You can imagine the rest. They reenacted all the disgusting acts they watched on the internet. Pinning her legs and arms, pushing their way into every orifice, every humiliation, calling her names, urging each other on, then high-fiving after two of them finished by covering her face with semen.

She heard them leave. She was under the blanket in a fetal position, sobbing.

Ted roughly pulled the blanket off her so that she was cold and exposed, and said, "Worst mistake *you* ever made, bitch! Get your shit and get out."

She grabbed her clothes and ran outside naked. She struggled to put them on while a neighbor kid watched.

It was only 3:30. It took a half-hour to walk back to town, and she wept every step of the way. The next hour till the 5 o'clock meet-back-at-the-truck time would be hell. She sat on the curb feeling their semen drip out of her, then sitting in it and trying to stop sobbing in public. She thought about going to the police, but

bringing the police into it when her dad was bringing bales of weed into town would not be smart, and she was a smart girl, though she chided herself for how stupid she was for hooking up again with someone who had nearly hit her.

She went looking for her dad. She knew where the storage place was. She was a curious girl, so one time she followed him because she wanted to know where he went so that she could find him if anything ever happened. She had a sense of what was coming all her life, and, most of the time, planned for it. How she couldn't foresee what had been planned for her this afternoon, and that she ignored her intuition, ate at her as much as what they did to her.

She found her father banging the dealer up against the cage with his hands around her throat. The woman seemed to like it because she was in the throes of orgasm when her dad saw Delilah. He immediately stopped and shouted, "What the hell, Delilah?" while pulling up his trousers. "Our deal was five o'clock. What the hell?" Then he saw the look on her face and knew something had happened, but when he tried to go to her, she ran. She was leaning against the truck when he got there. It had begun to rain hard, which hid the tears streaming down her face.

She resolved not to tell him. That would be his punishment.

She never once glanced at her dad on the way home, and it would be years before they had a real conversation again.

## Chapter 33

### SOLACE

**As soon as she got home, she filled the tub with water as hot as she could stand it.** They had moved from a yurt years ago and had a real house with bedrooms and an indoor bathroom. They were the only family on the commune to have a house, but then it was Lilith's recipe that made the cheese so smooth and flavorful, and it was her green thumb that made the marijuana so smooth and powerful, so they earned their "civilized domicile," as Lilith's snarky pal Janice called it.

Delilah went directly to the bathroom and from there to bed

without coming to dinner. She lay there with her skin blazing because she had rubbed it nearly raw trying to get the memory of them off of her.

Ordinarily, Delilah would sit and tell her mother about the movie she'd seen. When she didn't, Lilith knew something was wrong. Unlike other mothers, Lilith did not knock on the bathroom door. She would let Delilah come to her in her own good time. She knew her daughter, and she had only forced her to do one thing, one time. Since the ceremony had deemed her a woman, Lilith resolved not to intrude on her privacy or her thoughts and let her live her life—except maybe for eating sugar.

Other mothers would have taken a tray to her, but that wasn't Lilith's way. Other mothers would certainly have been caring and worried, but Lilith always thought that it was a ploy to get into their daughter's room and into their daughter's thoughts.

Instead, she sat up all night waiting for her. At about 3:00 a.m., Delilah came down for something to eat. Lilith never looked up from her knitting. She just said, "Delilah, I'm here when y' need me."

Delilah made a cheese sandwich on seven-grain. She had to throw away the first piece of bread after she smeared it with mayonnaise.

She sat at the table with Lilith and ate. She ate half of the sandwich, then laid her head on her arm and sobbed. Her mother put her hand on her arm. No patting, just letting her know that she was there. No hugging; when she was a baby, she didn't want to be hugged unless she came and crawled onto your lap. Delilah now maneuvered onto her mother's lap, and for the next 20 minutes sobbed without ceasing. Other mothers would have panicked and searched for a Valium. Lilith just held her without asking a question, without a "Now, now," without an "It'll be alright."

Her dad heard her weeping but never came out of the bedroom. He was ashamed, and, besides, she would never talk to him, not really, because she was "her mother's daughter."

When her weeping ebbed, Delilah went to the sink, ran the tap, and bathed her face in cold water. She looked out of the window

over the sink at the very dark landscape unlit by moonlight. It was a *new* moon, which meant there was *no* moon. Delilah always thought that was strange. It was like yesterday. The sex was *new*, then it turned into *no, no, no, no, no, no, no* until her voice failed her.

She turned around and leaned against the sink.

Then the awful words, "I was raped."

Lilith gave no reaction. She half expected to hear that.

"And..." she said. That was as much urging as Lilith ever did.

"There were four of them, no five, counting him." She didn't say much about the details, and omitted the part about finding her father rough-fucking his buyer.

"Do y' know 'em?"

"I know one. His name is Ted. I've been, well, I guess you'd call it 'seeing him' when we went into town on Saturdays. I recognized a couple of the others from around town. Two of them I never saw before."

"But this Ted, he knows 'em."

"Oh, yes, he knows them, alright."

"Okay. Don't tell no one 'bout this. Above all, don't tell y'r father. Y' don't know him like I do. He was different when he was young, and he's still got some o' that poison left in him. If he hears this, he's gonna go kill those boys. I don't mean he's gonna beat 'em. He's gonna lay 'em in their graves, then end up down th' road at San Quentin fer the rest of his natural-born days. You 'n' me will take care o' this. If y' want true vengeance, th' kind that satisfies 'n' heals, then y' have t' take it y'rself. I will show y' some ways, 'n' I will hold y'r hand while y' do it if y' want, but it's up t' you t' fend fer y'rself. Understood?"

There was something in Lilith's matter-of-factness that calmed Delilah. It was her momma's clear signal that "This will be dealt with," and the message that it was Delilah herself who would wield the knife, or whatever the plan was, and not some champion white knight to the rescue. A decade later, the term "empowered" would come into fashion.

A cup of Lilith's tea allowed Delilah to sleep that night; the nightmares only awakened her once. She didn't know what she

was going to do, but she was determined to think of something that would satisfy the rage inside her.

## Chapter 34

### BACKWOODS PSYCHOTHERAPY

**The next morning, when Delilah came down to the kitchen,** Lilith held out her arms and hugged her while she cried again. That would become their morning ritual for the next few days.

After coffee and oatmeal, Lilith said, "Let's you 'n' me take a li'l walk, and git some fresh air 'n' sunshine."

She held her hand, something she had not done since she was a child, and they walked without talking, stopping a couple of times to smell wildflowers. Lilith pulled up some roots and put them in her apron pocket. When they got far enough away from the commune, they sat on a fallen log, and Lilith began. It was time for a little backwoods psychotherapy.

"First thang, I'm not much fer tellin' y' what t' do, but if y' c'n bring yourself t' do it, it's good t' recount th' outrage that has been done to y'. If y' want to tell me th' particulars of what they did t' y', I'll listen. If'n y' do, it's gonna rip at y'r innards, but gittin' it out is good fer th' soul, and part o' he'pin' t' heal. You share th' burden, 'n' I'll carry half. Then we'll take some steps t' put that burden back where it belongs."

They sat for a while before Delilah could stop crying long enough to speak a sentence. Finally, when the tears were exhausted, she started to recount the crimes visited upon her.

She recounted every intrusion, every slap, every humiliation in such detail that, when Delilah finished, Lilith was more resolute than ever.

"Now, we got t' make a plan. We got t' find out all we c'n 'bout these rapists. Are they from th' high school?"

"No, they're all out of school. I don't know their names except for Ted."

"Well, y' don't want t' go askin' 'round or people will git suspicious. Y' know not t' tell anyone else. Y' know not to tell y'r daddy,

but don't tell any friends or th' school nurse or anyone else neither, 'cause they will always thank of y' as th' girl who got raped. Or someone at th' school might call th' police, and y' know we cain't have th' police comin' out here. Y' don't want to have t' go t' court 'n' have some lawyer call y' a whore in public. Like I tol' y', you 'n' me will work this out together."

"Alright, Momma."

"I've heard about this Internet. That y' c'n find out a lot 'bout a person on it. What do y' know 'bout it?"

"We use it all the time at school." This was Delilah's first year at public school. All the commune children were homeschooled until high school. About two or three kids from the commune went each year, but this year Delilah was the only one to go. Delilah discovered the wonderful world of Google and Microsoft Office, and the universe of articles and journals about astrophysics, which was what she loved.

"You need a computer and a modem, and you have to have a cable to connect to, but there's no way we can get a cable out here."

"Is there a place we c'n git t' a computer fer a spell?"

"For a spell." The words were comforting to hear, but so different. Delilah was very young when she realized that her mother used words and phrases that none of the other mothers or fathers used, and she had a different accent. But everyone respected her. When Delilah started to talk like her mother, her mother told her, "Delilah, that's th' way *I* talk 'cause that's th' way they talk where I come from. Y're from these parts—y're from here, I mean—so y' oughta talk like where y're from."

Lilith sometimes corrected herself when she used the "back-home words" when talking to Delilah.

"Why, Momma? I like the way you talk."

"In th' bigger world where y're headed, it's important not t' stand out in a way that makes other people think they're smarter'n you. Sad t' say, but people who don't know me tend t' treat me like I was some kinda dummy jist from hearin' me talk. I don't want that fer you."

Lilith remembered that the farmer down the road who she

supplied had a computer. Lilith went into the drying house with a grocery bag and cut off an amount that could have bought two computers. She wasn't taking a chance on the farmer having any compunctions about leaving her and Delilah to use his computer for most of the rest of the day.

They only found one boy in an online high school yearbook.

Delilah was downcast, but told her mother, "Let me think about this some more."

## Chapter 35

### THE PLAN

**The next morning when they had their time together, Delilah told Lilith, "I think I know what I want to do."**

Lilith nodded for her to continue. Nothing before in Lilith's life got more attention than what Delilah was about to say.

"I want to humiliate them. I hear the boys at school teasing each other about being queer. I guess it's the worst thing they can imagine. They are horrible to this one boy who acts like a girl. Anyway, I want to make them do things to each other that queers do."

"Queer is a word like th' N-word, Delilah. It hurts people's feelin's. Better t' say 'gay.' Nothin' wrong with bein' gay. Jist like bein' left-handed. Th' only problem is when they try t' make y' write with y'r right hand. Or when y' have other boys tauntin' y'. Now, how do y' intend t' do this humiliatin'?"

"I'll get them all together. I'll get them aroused. Then you come in with a shotgun, and I make them fuck each other while I take pictures with my cell phone."

Lilith was stunned by her daughter's imagination and the palpable hatred that must be throbbing in her to dream up such a devious scheme. It was a plan she herself could never have dreamed of, and she was no stranger to hate.

"How are y' gonna git me in thar?"

"I'll tell them that I told a girlfriend about it, and she was interested and wanted to join in. Then, when you knock, they'll think it's her."

Lilith saw that she had thought this through.

The next step was that Delilah had to work up the courage to call the man who had organized her defloration-by-gang-rape. She decided to wait till late at night when he'd probably be in his trailer. But he didn't answer, so Delilah left a message.

"Ted, it's Delilah. You really are a son of a bitch. When I think of it...that was so cruel and hateful. I called to tell you that I have a really big problem I expect you to fix. No, I'm not worried about being pregnant. I took the morning-after pill."

Lilith had prepared a drink for her that was as effective and tasted like lavender and chocolate.

"Here's what my problem is, shithead. I can't stop thinking about it. Whenever I think about it, I touch myself. Even when I don't want to, even when I'm tired, I can't get it out of my mind, and I can't keep my hands out of my pants. I want to do it again, this time without crying and being freaked out. I need to see if this is just some sort of reaction to being gang-raped—yes, asshole that's what you and your friends did to me—or if I am like one of those girls you showed me on the internet who like a lot of dicks coming at her all at once. Round up your rapist buddies, and tell them that I want an encore performance. Noon Saturday at your trailer. No, I'm not bringing the cops. You have this recording to prove it. But I have to find out. I'll be at your trailer on Saturday at noon. Did I leave anything out? Oh, yeah—fuck you."

She knew that if they had the chance to do it again, with the idea that she might like it this time, there was no way Ted and his crew would turn it down. They would be beyond enthusiastic about having sex like in the movies they jerked off to, but without the crying and the fuss.

Lilith monitored the conversation with her mouth agape. When Delilah hung up the phone, Lilith just stared at her.

"Where did y' ever learn t' talk like that?"

"What? Nowhere. It just came out."

"I only knew one person who could talk like that—n' lie like that."

"Is that a compliment? Who was it?"



"Someone who is long gone. Long, long gone."

Lilith saw that Delilah was hyper from the phone call and all, and needed a little respite. She lit a joint and took a long hit, then passed it to Delilah. It was a strain of indica that would relax Delilah and make her sleepy.

"So, tell me. Who was this liar?" Delilah pressed, as she took the joint.

"Someone I knew back home. Someday, we'll have a long talk, 'n' I'll tell y' all m' secrets. But we got business t' tend to fer this li'l shindig come Saturday."

Lilith sat reassured that Delilah was going to weather one of the worst storms that could befall a young woman because of the way her words spilled out so easily into the phone. Lilith remembered who that person was that Delilah sounded like, someone who could talk you into anything. She didn't consider that Delilah might end up as powerful and as much like the one Lilith never spoke of.

## Chapter 36

### FLY IN THE OINTMENT

**Lilith was making the usual morning oatmeal when Delilah** came in and sat down at the table. This was the first morning that there were no tears, but Delilah was chewing on a fingernail.

"Momma, I have to talk to you about something before we go after these boys." Lilith sat down to listen.

"Something happened to me when they were doing it to me. I hated them, I wanted to kill them, and it hurt. Then, out of nowhere, I had an orgasm. It's like my body betrayed me. I kept having them, over and over. I hid it. I was crying and trying to claw at them and screaming, so I don't think they saw it. Whenever it happened—and it happened a lot of times—I just squeezed my eyes and my lips and shook real hard like I was trying to get them off me or I was having a seizure or something. When they were done with me, I didn't know who I hated more, me or them. Am I bad, Momma?"

"Y' had it right...almost right. It was y'r body takin' over. The only betrayal was theirs. An orgasm c'n be like a sneeze. If y' git

somethin' up y'r nose that tickles, y' cain't stop yourself. A lot o' girls have a problem ever havin' one, so y're lucky in that way. Y'r body loves you. Y' take good care of it. The only blame is with them boys. They tricked y'r body th' same way they tricked you."

"That helps a lot, Momma. But it goes way beyond that. You know that phone call I made? Where I said I couldn't stop thinking about what happened, and couldn't keep my hands off myself. That wasn't made up. I don't know what to do about it."

"Y' have t' sit with y'rself 'n' work that out. Might be that y' feel like y' lost y'r power over y'rself 'cause they took away y'r choice. Sometimes that happens, 'n' y' git attached t' th' ones who hurt y'. M' granny tol' me a story that one of th' old wimyn who her granny befriended tol' her. This womyn had been a slave. Now, t' have a Black friend in Eastern Kentucky was not looked on kindly, but m' great-great-granny was not one t' care. This Black friend o' hers tol' her a story 'bout bein' a slave that I'm gonna tell you. Th' story that got passed down was 'bout her master who started in t' raping her 'fore she even got her first blood. She was purty, so he brung her up t' th' house t' be a servant 'n' t' serve his lust. She was sure that she was in love with him, or thought it was love, but it was t' protect her mind from goin' crazy from hate. Love 'n' hate are real close. Her body tricked her, too. A lot of wimyn confuse sex 'n' love. She figgered that if her body loved what happened t' her when he did what he did t' her t' make her 'sneeze,' then her heart must love him too.

"When th' Union soldiers came, her master was hidin' in th' basement, 'n' when they asked her where he was, she tol' 'em right off. She said that, at first, she didn't know why she tol' 'em, but right then 'n' there, a part of her mind knew that down deep she hated him. When th' soldiers brought him out, they hanged him, and left him hangin' there on the front porch. She got herself a poker from th' fireplace 'n' beat his lifeless body hangin' from th' front porch rafter till his legs fell off. She got free o' his hold on her. If y' git y'r power back, I thank this will pass."

Lilith paused. "About your plan. I was thankin' that there might be one li'l fly in th' ointment. Have you thought 'bout, well,

will they be able t' do them things y' want t' take pictures of?"

"What do you mean?"

"A man's gittin' hard c'n be an iffy thing. It c'n git real shy with a shotgun pointed at it."

"I hadn't thought about that."

Lilith knew how to keep them up, but didn't know whether to share it. She hated these boys—but to hold a shotgun on them while her daughter made them do those things?

"Maybe it won't work. Maybe I should go to the police."

"Now we talked 'bout that. We don't call th' police. Anyway, they'll want t' examine y' t' see if y' got their semen in y', or if y' got bruises or tears down there, but y' washed, plus it's been days, so it's y'r word 'gainst theirs."

Delilah hung her head. "Then I don't know what to do."

Lilith decided to help.

"How about if I bake y' a pie t' take with y'?"

"A pie? Why would I—?"

"I c'n bake a pie that'll solve that problem. What I put in th' pie will keep 'em hard no matter what. I hear they got a li'l blue pill they give men t' do that. This recipe has th' same effect."

"Even if they don't want to, they'll still get hard?"

"That's what I'm figgerin'. All th' wimyn I give this to fer their husbands say it works real good. Never had t' give Sonny none, though."

"Momma!"

"I know y' don't want t' hear 'bout me 'n' y'r daddy, but we're people, too, 'n' have love 'n' lust fer one 'nother. That's one of the reasons why people stay together. It's in our nature, jist like it's in th' nature of all th' other animals. It's how people come into this world, and sometimes it's th' thang that gives us th' will t' go on. One of th' problems with th' world is that they fight ag'in it, all 'cause folks in a desert far away decided a long time ago that it was wrong. It makes people hide in corners, 'n' do it in shame, and sullies it. We're lucky 'cause th' Goddess blesses it, as long as both people want t' do it, and it don't hurt nobody."

"So, you'll bake a pie?"

"I'll do it on Friday, 'n' we'll go into town t' do y'r plan on Saturday like y' tol' 'em."

"If your granny taught you all these things, what about your mom? You never talk about her?"

"My momma run off 'fore I knew her. The story was that she had too much power in her, 'n' sometimes that can make a body crazy."

Lilith went back to the stove, threw out the dried-out oatmeal for the chickens, and made a fresh batch.

That night, Lilith couldn't sleep for worry, but she'd given her word, and that was sacred.

Delilah thought about what it would be like to have your momma run off and leave you. It was the first time Lilith ever told her anything about her past. She wanted to know more.

As Delilah passed into sleep that night, her last thought was, "What would I do without my momma?"

## Chapter 37

### HOW DELILAH GOT IT BACK

**At 11:45 Saturday morning, Lilith parked her twenty-year-old Toyota on the road alongside the entrance to the trailer park.** Delilah got out and picked up the banana cream pie from the box on the passenger side floorboard. She put it there instead of holding it on her lap, so it would be safe in case her momma had to stop suddenly. Ever since that fateful Saturday in this same trailer park, Delilah had become circumspect about everything that could go wrong and acted to prevent it. It was as if she was expecting bad things to happen.

"Now, Momma. You call me on your cell like you're my friend coming over to join in. You've got that ski mask if you want to wear it. Do you see that yellow pickup in front of that trailer? That's the one. The trailer's got a blue neon sign in the window that says 'Budweiser' with a girl bent over that looks like a stripper or something. Give me fifteen minutes, then call me. If I'm not ready, I'll just say,

'I'll see you in 10 minutes,' or whatever time I need to get them where I want them. Keep the shotgun wrapped in the blanket until you're inside. Make sure it's loaded, but maybe don't pull back the hammers unless you need to."

"Delilah, you be keerf'l. If thangs git outta hand, start t' scream, 'n' I'll kick th' door in."

"No worries, Momma. I got this covered."

Lilith had an adventurous spirit, but this plan of her daughter's was beyond anything that she could have imagined. She still couldn't believe that she had her husband's twelve-gauge shotgun wrapped in a blanket on the back floor of the Toyota. Or that she was going to hold it on five men. Or that she was going to shoot them if they tried to take it off of her. If they did take it off her, she could only imagine what they would do to both her and Delilah. She resolved that if they made a move for it, she'd shoot through the roof, then aim at the nearest one.

What both impressed and distressed her was Delilah's absolute fearlessness and resolve. Her hands didn't shake, her voice didn't quake. She was in charge. Like she said, she had it covered.

Delilah had picked out the shortest skirt she had and asked Lilith to take up the hem two inches. She'd headed down to the neighboring farmer to make another trade of marijuana for the use of his internet for an afternoon, and he gladly agreed. She typed in P-O-R-N and watched it for two hours to learn what to do. After ten minutes of watching, she was overwhelmed, so she got up, locked the door, and put her hand down her jeans. Five minutes later, she could concentrate on the various techniques of what to do to tantalize five guys and still keep her panties on.

The Budweiser sign was flashing. She knocked on the door, pie in hand, with a big smile. They were all there, lounging on the chairs and couch, their legs spread or with one leg hooked over a chair.

"Long time, no see." *A little humor to make them relax and break the ice, she thought. Not a victim this time. An eager participant.* She wanted to get on an equal footing as quickly as possible. Playing together, rather than preying on her.

"I brought a little offering. My momma bakes pies, and I snatched one. She made over a dozen. She'll never miss it."

*Talking too much. Be cool.*

"You snatched one, huh? Speaking of snatch..."

*Such a lame attempt.*

"This little snatch snatched a snack."

*Not just lame but abusive. I need to take charge.*

She remembered watching an old movie with Mae West on TV one Saturday instead of playing out in the sun. Mae West went in to teach a classroom full of rowdy boys, and she got in charge right away. Little Delilah would put her hand on one hip, play it in the mirror, and crack herself up. For a month after she watched it, Delilah called everyone, "My Little Chickadee."

She reenacted the scene for them in her best impersonation.

"Boys, stand up."

They all played along.

"Sit down."

And they did.

"Very good. That's your first lesson in discipline."

They all cracked up, high-fiving each other, and whooping and shouting, "This is gonna be an afternoon to remember!"

"Let's have a little snack. No cracks about 'cream pie,' or you get no pie—of any kind!"

Two hours on one of those websites can be a lesson in lasciviousness and the slang that accompanies it. When she clicked on "cream pie," she expected some kind of comedy routine with a pie in the face, or like in "American Pie" where the guy sticks it in his mother's apple pie while it's still warm and his father catches him. She soon learned, "cream pie" was when the man ejaculates inside the woman. Then there would be a close-up of her squeezing out his semen from her vagina. She quickly realized that most of these type of videos on the internet were meant for guys, and saw how it could put ideas in guys' heads that would not turn a girl on—unless the girl was into that kind of stuff.

"Sure, but you have to eat a slice first, so we know that you didn't lure us here to poison us."

"Of course. My momma makes the best pies. I can't resist." She said the last phrase provocatively as she leaned her back against the counter. She felt like a lion tamer. Like a lion tamer, she made sure that none of them got behind her. She had to stay in charge.

She didn't know what effect the pie would have on her. She kicked herself for not anticipating this, but she was committed. She ate a small piece, saying, "I have to watch my figure," and crammed it into her mouth. It was delicious, and the bananas hid any under-taste. Momma was a genius—if it worked.

They devoured the pie. When they were done, to keep them from devouring her, she started in. "The reason I've called this meeting..." She paused for the laughter. *Keep them laughing, and they'll stay on their perches until I crack the whip.* "I want to act out my fantasies with you all. But I have another surprise that you are all going to love me for. I told my friend about this, and she said she wanted in on it. Now, you might be disappointed because she doesn't have red hair!" They all laughed again. She felt like a stand-up comedian. "But...she's blonde, and her tits are ridiculously large. She wears a double D-cup. Sometimes I don't know why she doesn't fall over on her face." One laugh built on another, and one guy was on the floor holding his sides. "And she's 18, so she's legal—unlike me," and they all went, "Oooo!"

"She's going to call me so I can tell her which trailer it is."

She had planned to get started right then and there, but she also hadn't asked her mother how long the pie took to take effect. She decided to stall to give it time to work.

"I need to go to the bathroom. Don't start without me!"

She was totally in charge.

She was in the bathroom for about 10 minutes, when Ted knocked on the door. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah."

"What's taking you so long?"

"Keep your pants on. A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do. You'll like me better, trust me. About five more minutes. Let me finish, so we can get down to business."

"Business? Are you charging?"

"Fuck you. I may be a slut, but I'm not a whore. Shut up before you turn me off!"

"Okay, okay." Ted shut up and went back into the living room. She had him in her spell, and he was the main target.

When she came out, they all cheered. Then her phone rang.

"Hi, Linda. Are you here? Where are you? You're coming from town? Take a left on Fox Lake Road, and it's about a quarter-mile down on your left." She turned to Ted, "It's about a quarter-mile, right?"

"Almost exactly."

"It's the seventh trailer down on your right, number 14, and it's got a flashing neon Budweiser sign in the window that I think you'll get a kick out of. Listen, girl, this party is starting, so I'll see you in, like, ten minutes. Ten minutes, right?"

She turned to the pack of boys who, if they had been a cartoon, would have been slavering wolves.

"I'm impressed! She's really gonna come. Speaking of which, let's get this party started."

She knelt in the middle of the floor, stripped off her t-shirt, took off her bra, and said, "Gather 'round."

She remembered the videos, and slowly unzipped Ted's pants, reached in, pulled it out, and started to lick the tip. The rest of the boys unzipped themselves. She went around to each, holding onto two, and using her mouth on a third, then switching around.

She realized she was getting hypnotized and excited by the feel of them in her mouth. She slapped her mind awake, remembering the Saturday before.

"Ow! You bit me!"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I got carried away. You just taste so good."

*God, I'm good at this. The improv, that is. Maybe this other thing too.*

There was a knock on the door. Ted started to zip up to answer it.

Delilah jumped up. "No, let me get it. We don't want to freak her out."

She grabbed her t-shirt and slipped it over her head on the way to the door.

She turned back, "Wait! I got a great idea! Everybody, drop your



trousers and shorts. Let's give her a visual to remember!" Visual. She had the jargon down.

*If none of my first-choice schools come through, maybe I'll go to LA and make a living in triple-X movies.*

She realized that she had been entertaining herself, too—in part to keep herself from freaking out and running away screaming.

"You heard the little lady. Drop trou', dudes!"

She opened the door wide and stood to the side.

Lilith came through the door with a look on her face that could turn anyone to stone. She'd put her long red hair up on top of her head and put on an Angel's ball cap she found in the back seat. They didn't know it was a woman until she spoke.

"Y' li'l fucks did what t' m' daughter? Git down on y'r knees, 'n' thank y'r lame-ass god that I ain't cut any of y'all in half with this 12-gauge. Yet." It was Delilah's turn to be taken aback. She had never seen such fury in anyone before, much less her mother. She was a lioness set on ripping out the vitals of the jackals who had hurt her cub. Delilah was afraid that Lilith would just shoot them all.

Luckily, they complied immediately. One of them started to cry.

"Okay, Delilah, what now?" Lilith asked. It was her show.

"Gentlemen, we're gonna have a little photoshoot. Think for a minute. Can you imagine the fury of a woman gang-raped when she's a virgin? Imagine that four shitheads held you down and took turns sticking it in your ass. What would you want to do to them? First thing, Ted, stay down there on your knees, and open your mouth, and, you, skinny guy, get up and stick your dick in his mouth. Do it!"

They didn't move.

In the small trailer, the kitchen was within reach. She saw a big knife in a wooden block. She pulled it out and slashed the arm of the one closest to her, and he screamed.

"You scream like a little girl. Shut up, or I'll cut you again, and this time it won't be your arm. Here." She threw a kitchen towel in his face. "Press on it hard."

She turned to her target, "Now do it, skinny boy, stick it in his mouth, or I'll carve you too."

They were all shaking like it was zero degrees. Ted and the

skinny one did as she directed, while Delilah's cell phone camera clicked away.

"Now, all gather around Ted like you did around me, and do, what do they call it? Oh, yeah, a 'blow bang,' just like I was doing. Everybody but Ted, stand up, gather 'round, and start jabbing your dicks at his mouth. Come on, Ted, get frisky and act like one of those girls in the videos. Now!"

The mask of fury dissolved from Lilith's face as she watched. She was mesmerized and terrified at the bile coming out of her daughter, and how she seemed to have the scenario all laid out. She could not imagine where she got these ideas. In the early days of the commune, there had been some trading off, and an orgy to celebrate Midsummer's Eve to make the grass grow green, but that stopped when the kids got older and started asking questions. But this was beyond anything that she had ever seen or thought of. How did Delilah know all the terms for these disgusting things?

"Let's get some photos of this. Come on, Teddy, look like you're digging it."

He did as he was told.

She did different poses with each of them sodomizing one another.

"Now for the grand finale. But before we go any further, have any of you considered that you just might be queer—I'm sorry, Momma—gay? Ask yourself, why do I still have a hard-on? If you hate it so much, if it disgusts you, why doesn't your dick just shrivel up like you were swimming in cold water? Think on that!" Delilah winked at Lilith. Lilith smiled back weakly, wanting this to end.

"My idea for the final shot is that you are all going to fuck each other in the ass at the same time."

Delilah reached inside her pocket and pulled out a small bottle of lubricant she took from the drawer in her mother's nightstand.

"Here, I'll make it easy on you. Easier than you made it on me. Lube up your dicks and assholes, boys, we're going from stills to video for this last shot."

She directed Ted to stay on his knees, and for the skinny one to insert his penis into Ted's anus, then the next boy to get behind the

skinny one, drop to his knees, and put his face between the skinny one's ass cheeks. Then the fourth one was to bugger him, while the boy she slashed was to lean over and fuck him.

"I think I got what I need. God help the person who gives me a lick of trouble. These will go on the Internet so fast that your dicks will shrink. Which I see they haven't. Hey, skinny kid...did you actually...? Yes, you did! You gave Ted a 'cream pie'! Turn your ass around here, Teddy Bear, so I can get a shot of that. Squeeze it out now, like in the movies. Believe me, boys, this was a lot easier on you than if I'd told my dad. At least you got to keep what's between your legs, even if you might have a hard time using it again any time soon. Be sure to remember this afternoon the next time you look at a woman with bad intent."

She grabbed her bra and gave them the finger. "Come on, Momma, we gotta go. Bye, y'all."

Delilah laughed all the way to the car. Lilith was shaking like no leaf ever had. Delilah had to drive back home.

"I'm hungry, Momma. Let's be bad, and stop at Mickey D's. You can get a fish sandwich. I want a Big Mac."

Lilith had not eaten fast food for 20 years.

With a trembling voice, she said, "Sure, sweetie. Whatever y' want."

*"Sweetie." I like that.*

She wouldn't hear Lilith call her that again for years.

## Chapter 38

### "THE SCENT OF DELILAH"

**Her reaction to the trailer incident was astonishing.** Instead of driving her away from sex, she became a carnal volcano. Her transformation astonished her classmates. Even in California, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in a county synonymous with cannabis, where the stats reported over one-third of the high school students admitted to having sex—and another third were lying because they didn't count blowjobs—she still got herself a reputation. Ironically, the Great State of California—the home of the

XXX movie—has a law against having any kind of sex with anyone under the age of 18. There were no Romeo & Juliet loopholes, so that made Delilah a multiple offender. She liked to seduce both the innocent and the proud. She sweetly introduced two freshmen to sex when she was a junior, and three when she was a senior. The beefy quarterback and the 6'4" center had a fistfight over her, though she never went to a football or a basketball game.

Her limit was the commune. No sex with anyone on the commune. Like her dad always said, "You don't shit where you eat."

She'd saved enough from bussing tables and washing dishes over at the local diner to buy a 1992 Chevy Malibu. If a policeman had flashed the "luminal" light on the backseat like they did in the TV cop shows, he would have seen a veritable blanket of sex fluids. Delilah found that she loved to fuck. Her mother was right when she said that when Delilah "took back her power," her fantasies of being an abused sex toy would change. It had changed, and it had unleashed a formidable libido on the County of Humboldt.

Lilith had said that Western medicine did, in this instance, have a superior method of preventing pregnancy, so they went together to Planned Parenthood. Lilith remembered very well that condoms were regularly used for the first few times that two people had sex, then they collected dust in the night table drawer after the wonders of skin-on-skin were felt. She wanted Delilah to avoid the dilemma of teenage pregnancy that had changed her life.

Ever since the trailer incident, she had noticed that she started to smell like her momma. Her momma had all the good smells of her childhood—pumpkin pie, vanilla, doughnuts, invigorating like being under a waterfall, but with an undercurrent of pheromones that made you want to get up close—and do her bidding. When she smelled her momma, it was just sweetness and light, but when she smelled her own scent, it turned her on. She'd put her hand down her pants, dip in two fingers to get her scent, and bring it up to her nose. While she breathed it in, the other hand did what needed to be done down below.

"The Scent of Delilah" became a catchword around her high school. Every boy and the one girl upon whom she visited her favors

could not bring themselves to wash their clothes—and sometimes themselves—for days after they were with her. One girl suggested she start her own perfume line. Another girl, who had come back to school after having a baby, said that smelling Delilah was like smelling her baby, and that she couldn't get enough of her. There was a rumor there was a black market for her underclothing. She had to get a substantial lock for her gym locker after her third pair disappeared. She had "gone commando" for a week, but the attention she got was almost comical. Feminine hygiene sprays didn't do a thing to mask it.

Despite her reputation, the jealousy of the popular girls, and the envy of the nerds—who, of course, fantasized about her—she still got elected class president and was valedictorian.

Delilah's scent emanated mainly from between her legs and under her arms—though to smell her hair or even her skin was intoxicating.

When she told Lilith about "The Scent," Lilith sympathized, having had something of a similar dilemma. When Lilith shared that with her, Delilah wondered whether it had anything to do with why, whenever Lilith voiced an opinion in commune decisions, everyone agreed with her.

## Book Four KENTUCKY

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### Chapter 39 KIN

**When Delilah was in her second year at Columbia, she** decided to find out about “her roots.” She only knew her mother came from a place called Asher Knob, because her dad would tease her momma about being his “Asher Knob Baby.” She googled the name Kirke and Asher Knob. There was only one phone number with that name, so it must be her “kin.” She held her breath and dialed it.

When she introduced herself to the woman who answered as “Lilith’s daughter,” there was a long pause.

“I’d like to come and meet you. Will you have me? Just for a couple of days?” She didn’t want to stay in a motel. She wanted to stay in her mother’s room.

“Will Lilith be a-comin’ with y’?”

“No, just me.”

Did Delilah hear a sigh of relief?

The woman on the other end of the call told Delilah that she was her Aunt Ruthie but didn’t explain how they were related. She spoke with a country music accent just like her momma.

“Now here’s how t’ git here. Y’re gonna’ fly into Lexington, then take th’ bus t’ Manchester. That’ll take y’ ’bout an hour. Y’ call us when y’ land, ’n’ m’ son Jedidiah’ll pick y’ up from th’ bus station. We’ll all look forward t’ havin’ y’ visit, y’hear. When y’ figger you’ll be a-visitin’?”

“I was thinking I’d come down a week from tonight, that’s Friday, then fly back Sunday morning.”

“We’d sure love t’ have y’, but we’ll need to carry y’ back t’ Manchester, ’n’ that’s th’ Lord’s Day, so it’d be best if y’ make it so’s y’ travel back on Monday.”

"Sure, Aunt Ruthie. I'm looking forward to it."

"We'll be lookin' forward t' hearin' from y'. Y' take care, 'n' Godspeed."

Then she clicked off.

From Aunt Ruthie's reaction to whether her mother was coming, too, Delilah decided it might be better if she told her momma about her trip *after* she came back.

## Chapter 40 CLAY COUNTY, KENTUCKY

**She did some googling on where she was headed.**

It took six hours to get the 700 miles from JFK to Lexington, which was the same time it took to fly the 3,000 miles to SFO. Then forty minutes to Manchester by bus, then forty minutes to Asher Knob.

Ruth had given her further directions. "We live close t' Silvermine Ridge near Asher Knob, down in Clay County, not too far from Brightshade," she said.

There were other colorful names of little communities around it, like Red Bird and Nuckols. It was in the Appalachian Plateau of the Cumberland Mountains. The main attraction was Daniel Boone National Forest. Sugar Run Creek and Red River Gorge ran through it. In 2008, John McCain got 78% of the vote, and most of the rest were write-ins. Per capita income \$9,700. 13% unemployment, 12% disability. Most of the employment was in the coal mines which had laid off all but 50 men.

*For real?*

She found the photographs of sad people and their ramshackle homes very disturbing. She hoped that her family would not be "hillbillies."

She got off the bus but saw no one waiting for her inside the station, so she went outside to look.

Jedidiah was a tall, good-looking fellow, round-shouldered, wearing a worn green cap with a running deer on it, a red checkered flannel shirt, bib overalls, and work boots. He was smoking an

unfiltered cigarette. At least he wasn't chewing tobacco.

"You Lilith's girl?"

Was that how she would be known for the next couple of days?

He took her bag and put it in the back of the Dodge pickup. He still had not made eye contact. He looked down at the ground like a shy schoolboy—or a whipped dog.

Nervousness moved Delilah to "gab and blather," as her mother put it. She talked nonstop, asking Jedidiah a never-ending list of questions, including, "Can I call you Jed?"

"Yes, ma'am" or "No, ma'am" were the only two responses she could elicit.

"Please don't call me ma'am. I'm Delilah. We're about the same age, I'd guess, I'm 20, how old are you?"

"22, uh... Cousin Delilah." Maybe she could get them to address her by just Delilah, but she cautioned herself to tread lightly since she didn't know the customs, and wanted, at all costs, not to make them uncomfortable with an ignorant faux pas.

This was a world of trees like Humboldt County, but the trees weren't gigantic like the sequoias. And the sunlight was yellow instead of the bluish-white of the California sky. They drove through a veritable forest, and the trees were just starting to turn fall colors. Except there were no trees on the top of one mountain because it was bald and gray from "Mountain Top Removal"—the most despicable method of coal mining.

When they turned down a dirt road, she saw lots of shacks and trailers with tire swings hanging from tree limbs, and rusted-out pickup trucks and refrigerators with no doors in front yards next to piles of old tires.

Jed stopped to open the gate, and the road changed from dirt to gravel.

She breathed easier when she saw a two-story, white clapboard house with a clean front yard and a mostly gravel driveway, though there were some mud puddles. The house had a big porch that needed painting, and a big swing chained to the porch ceiling.

A woman in a blue-flowered house dress stood on the porch with her hands on her hips.



Jed said, "It rained purty good th' last few days, so's I'm gonna try t' gitcha close as I c'n t' th' front porch." He drove up close so that when she stepped out, it was onto the first step of four that led up to Aunt Ruthie.

"Watch out fer th' third step. It's loose, 'n' he ain't got t' fixin' it yet," were the first words she said.

Delilah found that rocking step, and Aunt Ruthie reached down to brace her.

"Lord, y' got y'r momma's hair, y' sure do!"

Delilah hugged the woman, who stiffened uncomfortably, and patted her on the back, a combination of reassurance and to signify that that was enough hugging.

## Chapter 41 THE GRANNY QUESTION

**She slept in. It was an Indian Summer morning, and the** temperature was in the 70's. From the little window in her room, she saw the glorious red and yellow foliage. Had the trees turned colors overnight? Aunt Ruthie had saved her some bacon and biscuits.

"Do you think it would be okay for me to take a walk? I grew up in the country."

"I don't see why not. Jist don't git into no thickets or git lost in th' deep woods. Keep an eye out fer snakes. If'n y' smell cucumbers, head in the other direction, 'cause that's what an angry copperhead c'n smell like."

Delilah ventured out. It was good to feel the dirt under her feet instead of concrete. She walked for hours. When she got back, she saw a little figure sitting on the porch.

Little Harriet was 4'9" and chubby, with Down Syndrome. When she told Delilah that she was 28, Delilah thought she was teasing, but Jed confirmed it.

"Sweetie, do you know that I'm your cousin Delilah?" Harriet smiled at being called "sweetie."

"Yes, they tol' me y' was comin', Cousin Delilah. Did y' see Granny yet?" Harriet asked Delilah.

Delilah went into the kitchen for a glass of water. Aunt Ruthie was kneading dough, and the smell of baking was a delicious addition to this home-spun day.

"Is Granny still with us? If she's in assisted living, I'd like to visit her."

Aunt Ruth's answer was puzzling. "Would y' like some pie, dearie? It's good strawberry 'n' rhubarb, 'n' I c'n hot up some coffee t' go with it."

Delilah asked again on the off-chance that she hadn't heard or understood.

"Uh, Ruthie, I'm sorry. I meant that, well, I would really like to meet my grandmother, uh, I guess I mean great-grandmother. I didn't know that she was still with us. Where does she live?"

"Got some real good cheddar. Y' like that on y'r pie, Delilah?"

Delilah didn't know what was going on, so she decided not to press it. Maybe it was a sore point that Ruth would rather ignore. Maybe that's what they did down here.

The pie was almost as good as her momma's, though the coffee was a world shy of Starbucks. She gobbled it. Before she could put the dish in the sink, Ruthie snatched it and washed it. Ruthie's house was "spotless clean," as Momma used to say.

Jedidiah was under the hood of the truck.

"Jed?" When she'd first used that nickname, he looked surprised, as if startled by her familiarity. Now he got a trace of a smile on his face when she called him by it.

"Cuz, I need your help"

"Sure. How c'n I he'p y', Cuz." He'd returned the familiarity of "Cuz." There was no "L" pronounced in "help."

"Is Granny around? Because I asked your mother, and she absolutely ignored my question. There is no way she didn't hear me."

"Gimme that there wrench, please?"

"Sure." She reached for the wrench.

"No, not that 'un...th' other one, please." There was never any dearth of please and thank you down here. They were polite if they were anything.

"What's the story on Granny?"

"Yow!" Jed cried as he pulled his hand away. "Gol'darn knuckle buster!" he shouted as he danced around holding it. "Sorry, I gotta go tend t' this 'fore it gits all swoll up." He loped off for ice or a band-aid. Delilah was looking at his big hands when he shouted. She didn't see him bang his hand or any blood. Did he fake it? Did he fake it to avoid the granny question? The situation now had a title: "The Granny Question."

There was no railing on the porch. Harriet dangled her short legs off the edge. She had on an apron and a lap full of peas. She'd shuck the peas into a colander and toss the pods into the yard for the chickens that clucked and pecked all around her.

Harriet looked up and smiled. It was radiant.

"Sweetie, where is Granny?" Harriet beamed every time Delilah called her that.

"Down t' her cabin."

"And where is that?"

"Y' go up over th' ridge jist behin' th' house, then straight down t' th' creek. Her place is right along th' creek." She pronounced creek "crick."

"Would you like to take me there?"

"Sure, Cousin Delilah." She'd made a fuss over her name. She said it tickled her tongue to say Delilah, and it sounded like singing. The best compliment she'd ever had. "Dilly" was long gone.

"You want to finish the peas first?"

"No, no, let's go. I like t' go t' Granny's"

"Should you tell Ruthie where we're going?"

"No, no, not if we're goin' t' Granny's. It wouldn't matter 'cause Mommy wouldn't hear it."

So she hadn't imagined it.

Harriet jumped off the porch and took off running with a "Let's go!" Delilah was surprised at how fast her little legs could carry her. Delilah did five miles daily on the treadmill at a number eight incline, and had no trouble mounting the hill and catching up, but she let Harriet keep the lead.

At the top of the ridge, Harriet stopped and waited for her. When Delilah arrived a few strides later, Harriet was pointing to a landscape that made Delilah understand why people stayed there. It went on for miles, with ridges and valleys full of color, and livestock and split rail fences like in a child's picture book of some imaginary 19th century bucolic harmony. There, indeed, was a little cabin down by the creek.

"So that's it. A little cabin down by the creek. Sounds like it could be a lyric in a country song."

"Yeah!" Harriet's enthusiasm was boundless. Delilah wondered if she understood, or was just in love with agreeing and being friends. Quite a change from NYC, where nobody agreed with you and friends were hard to come by.

"Race y' down th' hill!" Harriet said, and she was off again.

At the door of the cabin, Harriet hollered, "Granny! We're here! I brought Lilith's girl with me. Her name's Delilah. She's got red hair jist like you-know-who."

*Who the hell was "you-know-who"?* Delilah decided to take on one mystery at a time.

Harriet gingerly opened the door and peered in. "Hi, Granny!" she said and entered. Delilah hesitated, then came in behind. Harriet was standing in front of a rocking chair. There were cobwebs everywhere, and no fire in the stove. The old woman needed some help.

Delilah rounded Harriet with a big smile to greet the old woman, excited to meet her mother's mother's mother, and to hear stories about her momma.

The chair was empty.

She looked at Harriet.

"Yes, yes, ain't her hair red? I thought y'd like that." Harriet was addressing the empty chair where imaginary Granny supposedly sat.

If it had been anyone else, Delilah would have cursed at them for playing a cruel trick on her, but she couldn't imagine that Harriet would. Maybe it was just a game.

"Hi, Granny. I'm your great-granddaughter. I came from the

big city to see where my momma grew up.” She felt like an idiot, but what the hell; maybe Harriet needed to play, so she played along.

“Okay.” Harriet turned to Delilah and waited. “Well?” she asked her as if she was waiting for an answer.

“Well what, sweetie?”

“Hear that, Granny? She calls me ‘sweetie.’ Delilah makes me smile a lot. I like her.” She paused. “Uh-huh. Okay.” She turned again to Delilah. “Well, what are y’ waiting fer?”

“I don’t understand, sweetie.”

“What don’t y’ unna’stand?” Harriet was growing impatient. Delilah thought that it was like having her questions ignored, but only in reverse. Was this a game they all were playing with her? If it was, it had just turned sour.

“Harriet, what the hell is going on?”

Harriet cowered at the annoyance in Delilah’s voice, and her lip started to quiver. She was afraid Harriet was going to start to cry.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry, I just really, really don’t understand. I don’t see anybody in the chair. I don’t hear anything. I don’t know what you want. I thought you were playing a game, but I see now that you’re not, so you’ve got to explain it to me, okay?”

“You cain’t see Granny, neither? None of ‘em can, either. I thought maybe you could, ‘cause y’ got th’ red hair, ‘n’ y’re Lilith’s child. But okay.” She turned back to the chair. “I’m sorry, Granny. I thought mebbe...well, you heard. I’ll guess I’ll have t’ be y’r messenger.”

Delilah started to get spooked. This friendless little woman had an imaginary friend. If this was in Central Park, it would be sad and sort of sweet, but back here in the mountains, it was starting to get eerie. She wanted to open up to Ruthie about Wicca, but there were no signs, no totems, no hex signs, no Goddess symbols, only the Cross of Jesus in every room. She had hoped that Granny would be the one she could open up to.

“Granny says she got somethin’ fer y’...what was that, ma’am? Oh, yeah, she says she been waitin’ on y’ t’ come fetch it fer quite a spell now...but that she’s glad y’re finally here.”

“Tell Granny it’s a real pleasure to finally meet her, and that

I'm sorry we can't speak directly, but that I'm glad Harriet's here to help."

Delilah didn't believe in ghosts. She was studying astrophysics, and scientists do not believe in anything that can't be measured and the results replicated. *Hell, just think of it like you did in the woods with the women, that it's a metaphor, and the play-acting might give us some hope in this dark and heartless world.*

"Granny says she wants y' t' have The Book." When she said 'the book,' she said it like it was sacred. "She says y' have t' move th' table up ag'in th' wall 'n' climb up t' git it, 'cause it's high up in them rafters—way back in."

Delilah did what she was told. She'd never played these kinds of make-believe games with the other children on the commune. Maybe this was a second chance to play like a child, with this child-woman, in this creepy but somehow lovely old cabin.

"Right up in th' corner nearest th' winder. Way back... reach in more."

Delilah figured that those acting skills that her drama elective instructor said she had a real knack for would come in handy when she had to "see" the book and "feel the weight" of it, and pretend it was there with such conviction so that others could "see" it.

"Oh, shit!" Delilah exclaimed.

"You got a spider?" Harriet worried.

A book was there. A big book, coffee table size, but thick. A "tome." That was the word. A dusty, enormous, heavy, leather-bound volume. An old book, like it was a prop in "Bell, Book, and Candle," or "Doctor Faustus," or one of those other plays she had devoured.

*No way in hell that 4'9" Harriet could ever have got up here, and how the hell did she know that it was there?*

"No, I'm fine. I found the book."

"Granny knew y' would. She's real happy y' did. Now there's somethin' else. It's in th' cupboard under th' sink."

"Cupboard under the sink?" *Maybe she means the cabinet. No reason to split hairs.* She half expected a video crew to pop out and announce, "You've been pranked!"

Delilah found a wooden box with a sturdy clasp. In it, she found withered berries and dried roots and leaves, each in its own compartment, with a symbol on each.

"Granny says there's a poke in th' back fer y' t' carry 'em in."

"What's a poke?"

"A poke, you know, a poke. That y' carry things in. Oh, right. Granny says t' tell y' that it's a sack, and it'll be made outta burlap, a burlap sack. That's a funny thing t' say." Harriet repeated "burlap sack, burlap sack, burlap sack." Of everything her time on this trip had afforded her so far, the joy in this little woman was the best. Totally contagious. She hoped she could hold it in her mind when she went back to NYC, a place that was low on joy, and people had no time for it.

"Granny says we should git goin' 'cause Mommy will be callin' us fer dinner."

"In just a minute, sweetie." Delilah found the burlap "poke," put the chest and the book in it, and tied the string.

Delilah went over to the rocking chair, bent over, and kissed her imaginary granny. "I love you, Granny. I'll tell Momma about coming here."

"Bye, Granny. See y' soon. Let's go, Cousin Delilah. We should hurry up now."

At the top of the ridge, Delilah turned around to drink in the idyllic beauty of the woods, the creek, the cabin, and the fall colors. A lovely scene that was now fused with more than a little trepidation of what she may have gotten herself into.

## Chapter 42

### SAM-I-AM

**Delilah thought twice about showing the contents of the sack to Aunt Ruthie.** She sensed it would be trouble, so she stashed it under the porch and planned to wait until Ruthie was otherwise engaged to fetch it. She'd started using that most practical word "fetch," which meant "go there, get it, and bring it here." It wasn't just for playing with the dog. Her momma used the word but

gave her a correcting look when she used it.

She'd planned to hide the poke under the cot in the bedroom she was staying in after they all went to bed—which seemed incredibly early for a college student from New York who regularly stayed up till well past midnight studying—or partying.

She couldn't believe this was her mother's room, the one she wanted to sleep in. She asked Harriet, and Harriet told her that her mother always lived with Granny. As much as she wanted to rest her head where her momma did, Delilah was not about to sleep in the cozy but creepy "little cabin down by the creek."

She'd heard her momma use the words they used—all except "poke." She loved the flavor and the music of the words. It wasn't like the California monotone or the New Age cant or the ridiculous Valley Girl whine.

So far, this little trip had been very enlightening. She felt like an anthropologist visiting another country. She even planned to attend services with them tomorrow morning. In for a penny, in for a pound.

Dinner was going to be pork chops. They had a pigpen downwind from the house. Out of morbid curiosity, Delilah went and watched the pigs for a while. She'd never been around them before. The Humboldt commune population had lots of vegans and about a third were Jewish. Lilith raised chickens for eggs and protein, and had a goat for milk, but never ate meat herself. Her friend Janice was always eager to slaughter and butcher the chickens for her, cutting their throat with a knife Kosher-style like she'd seen her father do.

She could not believe the smell of pig manure. But the look in their eyes was intelligent, more than a dog even. They were big. She could only think of the pigsty in "The Wizard of Oz," and, in the dusk, she sat on the fence and sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." She had a nice voice like her momma's. At the end of the song, after the wistful question that ends that melancholy song, there was applause. She turned around, and an awfully good-looking man in a suit and cowboy boots was grinning and clapping. He had the same color hair as she and her mother.



"Simply heavenly, Delilah. You're a natural. I'm Samael. I'm your uncle."

The first thing that popped into Delilah's head was whether he was the "you-know-who" Harriet mysteriously spoke of.

"My uncle? Huh! My mother has a brother?"

"I am. She does. How is my sister? Did she ever mention me?"

"She never talks about any of her kin." The word "kin" was growing on her.

"Are you her older brother?"

"Sort of."

"What does that mean?"

"I hear you live in the Big Apple?"

She had a theory that no one who had ever been to San Francisco called it "Frisco," and the same went for that silly name for Manhattan.

"Yeah, I'm at Columbia. Astrophysics."

"Got stars in your eyes, huh?"

*This man was full of... trite phrases.*

"What do you do with astrophysics?"

*Where does this guy get off, grilling me about my choice of major? What the hell was his name?*

"Samuel. Right? Should I call you Uncle Samuel? Everybody calls everybody else cousin or aunt, like that."

"It's Samael. But Samuel's close enough."

"Is that from the Bible? Lots of Old Testament names around here."

"From the older, Old Testament. My guess is that your momma didn't teach you the Bible. We had to learn it, though neither of us much cared for it. I remember her sayin' that Eve got a raw deal. Your momma and I were close. Lilith was different. Even her name was different in a Biblical sense. The first wife of Adam."

"What? Adam had two wives? That's the first I ever heard of that."

"Google it. I think you'll get a kick out of it. Maybe a little insight, too."

*Where did he get off talking to me like he was some “Dutch Uncle” when we’d just met?*

But he talked easily about her momma, and maybe she could find the family secrets from him. After all, that’s what she was there for.

Though he wore a bolo tie, his suit was tailored and expensive. His accent was very muted, sort of like a down-home type Congressman.

“Speakin’ of names, did your momma tell you she changed her name? Her name was Tamar, like the sister of Absalom, daughter of King David. Maybe your momma thought David had too many wives for her taste. Maybe how he got with Bathsheba was the last straw. Or, maybe there was another reason. Wouldn’t let anybody call her Tamar. Stopped answerin’ to it, acted like they must be talkin’ to someone else.”

“My momma changed her name? Who is Bathsheba? Like the Queen of Sheba?”

“Not quite. Bible’s a good thing to know even if you don’t believe. Many people in this country believe in it, and lots of them live their lives by it. Like ol’ Thom Jefferson said, ‘Knowledge is Power.’ Wrote that in a letter about the first university in Kentucky.”

*This guy was like a walking encyclopedia.*

“You’ll find that story about David in Second Samuel. Easy enough to remember. Won’t be hard to find a Bible around here.”

The man was smart, even if he talked like a—oh, God!—she was about to say, “like a rube.” She hadn’t had a conversation like this since—well, maybe never. Conversation at college was about what’s your major, which professor graded hard, who you were fucking or wanted to fuck, which grad schools were on your list, how high did you get last night, and do you know a good place to score. There surely was never any talk like this on the commune. Christianity was a subject for ridicule. Most, except for her mom and some neighbors, disdained religion. They were spiritual, though. A hippie distinction she always laughed at.

But, damn, the man had good looks like a movie star.

She could see more than a family resemblance between her

momma and this man. The fact that she was not beautiful like her mother was something Delilah had to live with.

"Are you coming to dinner? It's pork chops."

"Doubt if they'd be too enthusiastic about that. I'm the black sheep. Harriet's another story. Sometimes she'll follow me around and hold my hand, other times she'll run from me like I'm the Devil Come to Take Her Back to the Underworld. She's a sweetie, though."

"Yeah, a sweetie. Good name for her. If they don't like you, what are you doing here?"

"I own it. Everythin' you see from one ridge to the other and down to the creek. Uncle Esau left it all to me. Didn't sit too well with Ruthie. But, then, women up here are used to gettin' the short end of the stick."

Just then, Harriet came running up. "Cousin Delilah, dinner, dinner, come t' dinner!" She stopped short. "Samael!" She ran up to him and hugged him hard around his waist. Then she looked up at him with a look of fear on her little face and turned and ran back faster than she'd come.

"Well, that's my cue. Nice meeting you, Samuel...uh, Samael, right?"

"That's my name, don't wear it out." *For all his smarts and good looks, the man was a cornball.*

"Really interesting talking to you. I came here to find out about Momma's family and where she came from. She doesn't know I came to visit. You're the only one who's said anything about my momma. Can I get your digits? I'd like to talk more if you'd be willing."

"My digits? Oh, my cell phone number. Sure, but I got another idea. Let's get a drink."

"Where? The nearest town is 40 miles away."

"Forty miles ain't nothin', darlin'. Not in my chariot."

"Chariot, yet?"

"I got a 1972 black Jaguar XKE, and it's a 30-minute fun ride to Manchester. Pick you up at the gate at 9:00 p.m. That is, if Ruthie still goes to bed at 8:30."

"She does, or at least she did last night. A little adventure sounds good. What should I wear?"

"Just wear what you'd wear when you go out dancin' in that city-so-nice-they-had-to name-it-twice." *Oh, God! Cliché-city.*

"I'd be wearing a little nothing with a slit up the side and 4-inch stripper heels," she lied. "But I didn't bring my outfit. See you then."

"I'll be waitin'."

As she walked back to the house, she was pretty sure that he was looking at her ass, as unassuming as her ass was.

*How inappropriate. What sort of adventure was this going to turn out to be?*