



CHAPTER FOUR

It's the same old same old, walking down the crummy hallway of that school. Everybody turning their eyes away, trying not to look scared or embarrassed or disgusted. Admit it: some secrets you just can't keep. The way you look, you can be scoped out in a second by the biggest jackass. Talk about wearing a sign advertising what you are! A sign that everybody but you can read. Is it just you, or is God fucking with you in a big way?

Sometimes you go looking for trouble, craving hatred as clear as crystal, as plain as day. Once — it's a long story — you creamed a punk with a dictionary. If there would've been a femme involved, it would have combined all your interests.

Your femme figures it out within three months. She's cooking veal parmesan from a *Tribune* recipe one hot evening back in the day, and you're sitting at the table holding the sports section. You picked it up to look at a photo of a play at the plate. What is wrong with you? You've always said, there's no such thing as an accident. But now, you forget to have a headache; you forget to forget your glasses; you forget to say, I gotta go. Rolling and unrolling the paper in your hands, you're thinking how you're supposed to be used to the idea that a beautiful woman would fix you a meal, but you're not. You stretch out your legs with lazy pleasure, forgetting that her hands are wet and greasy, and that you're sitting right beside the recipe. So that when she says,

How much oregano, honey? Read that to me, will you?

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When she says that, you can only look up stupid and pop-eyed, like a cartoon character bonked on the head with a frying pan. *What? Huh?* Adrenaline rushing through you like a brushfire, newsprint bleeding all over your sweating hands.

She is very still. Then she backs away from the pot, takes off her apron, and carefully wipes her hands on it. Her cheeks are very red and her eyes very shiny, and for an awful moment you think she might start crying. She takes the newspaper from your hands, hikes up her skirt and straddles your lap, facing you. Rubs her face against yours like a blind person, and kisses your neck. You close your eyes. You worry that you'll ruin her dress, so your ink-stained hands hang awkwardly at your sides, like giant dirty paws. She stands for a second and quickly removes her panties, then settles back down and takes your hand, rubbing it up her thigh, guiding it into her. Surprise licks and rattles you. She's sighing, her arms tightening around your neck. She rocks on your hand and cries *Oh!* And when you remove your fingers, they are wet and fragrant, and clean.

You were never like the rest of the kids; you were always between radio stations, trying to tune out the crackle and get a blade of sound. You forgot your glasses, made wisecracks, knocked over the stuff on your desk, punched the kid sitting next to you. You calculated which line was yours and practiced — heart pounding, lips sputtering — before your turn. You were put into a special ed class, and made D's simply by showing up. You bluffed and cheated and procrastinated, got the instructions wet and had to call the manufacturer, carried around a newspaper and a roll of cash. You were a model worker and a genius with your hands. You stared blurrily, counting to twenty, at every form or petition handed to you, and then signed, a compliant motherfucker. You wormed yourself out of things so often you felt like an actual worm. You were such a liar you had to carry around a special fire extinguisher for your pants.

You always check the exits, and not just because of raids. You devise twenty appropriate things to order at restaurants, twenty ways to avoid this and that, twenty ways of not saying *I can't*. After a while it's such a habit your

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mind is on permanent speed-up. Whenever you drive somewhere you budget an extra twenty minutes for traffic, and run through alternate routes in your head. You're as bad as an old Italian grandmother, righteously certain that somebody's going to lose an eye, that roughhousing will end in tears. You can't do laundry without worrying that all the machines will be taken. Or tell a lie without fretting about its consistency with all your other lies. Or sit on a pier without worrying that your keys will fall into the lake.

Can it be so many years – decades! – since you first arrived? How you got there: by hook and by crook, that's how. You soon find out that this is the crummiest of the syndicate bars, with the filthiest johns, the most watered-down drinks, the nastiest manager. But for now, some big old raucous butches are crowded at the bar, leaning on their elbows and laughing and talking. One of them notices you and elbows her neighbor, and the next thing you know they're all squawking like chickens. They're busting your chops. You think, *Okay now*. Then one of them sends you a drink, something fluffy and *green*, for God's sake. You leave it right there on the table, march up to the bar in your sneakers and order a beer. You can see that some of the butches are surprised, and some are grinning. They make the bartender serve you; they shout, For Pete's sake, can't you see she's at least twenty-seven?

And then suddenly one night you're the toughest craziest butch around. You didn't set out to be. Your ambitions were modest: don't piss anyone off, maybe make a friend or two. But one night a fat man with a gold bracelet puts the moves on your date, and you whirl around and deck him, without even thinking. By now you're wearing boots; and when he pulls out a knife you kick it out of his hand.

What drama! Your buddies and the bouncer throw you out on the street. What were you thinking? They're looking at you with amazement as you stand up and wipe dirt off your new dress pants. Apparently you just decked the owner's cousin. You say: *oops*. You can never go back in there, or they'll kill you. You laugh thinking about it now: here you were clobbering a mob guy, when you should have been in algebra class.

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One of the toughest butches has just moved away, and another is shacking up with her new girlfriend. So there is a vacancy at the cat's meow position. The older butches start coming up to you and roughing up your hair, the younger ones mimic your clothes and gestures, and suddenly you have only the most beautiful girlfriends. You walk into bars and turn heads. People buy you drinks all the time. You can go out on a Saturday night with a dollar in your pocket, and come back with the same dollar. You are the high school quarterback of the perverts' team.

You feel funny about it then; but later, how you'll miss it! Especially after women's lib. You don't know if it's good or bad; all you know is that before it you were hot stuff, and afterward, you had to stand on your head to impress a woman. You're older now, and sometimes you throw out your back; you spend way more time on it than any butch should. On your feet, you feel like Lurch on *The Addams Family*. Put it this way: you haven't been assaulted for a long time, because you're no longer pissing people off by appearing to like the way you look. But you haven't been flirted with either.

You're attracted to your first real girlfriend because she's trouble; there's something about her that says *I'm wise to you, buddy*. You're living a little over your head, with a reputation as a rough stud and an expert lover. But sexually speaking, you're really just cutting your grown-up teeth. At most, you have one, maybe two tricks up your sleeve. This girl you like boycotts grapes and listens to the Rolling Stones. She talks so smart and dirty she makes you duck your face and reach for a cigarette to keep your cool. Your pals look her over and shake their heads. *Killer pussy*, is what they call her. It shocks you a little.

Those are the crowded carnival days at the women's bar. You're all working in card shops and printing presses, hanging out at the drive-ins and the roller derby, throwing unemployment parties where the working people bring food and pay for drinks. The bar is fielding six sports teams. People drop in while doing their laundry; the girls on the street come in to get into the air conditioning. Femmes in big chunky heels brush their bare arms against your jacket as they pass by. The

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drinks are short and strong; the pool balls drop at noon, crashing like thunder. There are raids on Fridays. The girls give a lot of lip. They don't mind lockup too much except for the strip searches and the bedbugs; they like the slices of baloney, the coffee and fresh doughnuts. You gauge when to haul off and when to go limp. You hold on for dear life.

You let this girl make you blush and make fun of you, you even let her make scenes at the bar, laughing like she's a character. But you never let her touch you. You pin her down, you make marks on her wrists, and when you feel her legs ease open you laugh at her. When she asks you put your head down there, you call her nasty. The truth is, it's very complicated down there, and you're afraid you'll fumble or hurt her or make her laugh. But it's also your first taste of butch power, of how to punish a femme. One night when you're messing with her head, she turns away and gives herself a lonely climax. You watch her naked back arch and her long hair sliding over her shoulder blades; it mortifies you so much you have to leave the room.

Can you be crazy about someone you don't even like? Once you smack her for being smart. It's like smoking, you say later: back then nobody knew any better. And she stuns you with a pop in the jaw, telling you to mind your manners. It doesn't hurt, but you sure are getting an education.

You smacked her because she called you stupid. Because of your opinion about something, which was, it's true, stupid.

Finally, you say it's just not working out for you. You say it in the bar, because you are a chickenshit and a coward. She tosses back some whiskey and gives you a smile. You think: if she found out, you'd have to kill her. It's kind of funny, feeling like a gangster in a movie, the phrase *rub her out* coming out of nowhere into your nutty head.

She has a fight with her boss when he tries to feel her up, and gets fired. She says she doesn't want to stay forever in this pit anyway. That's what she calls it, a pit. It hurts your feelings, but to be perfectly honest, you're also relieved. Her sister comes to pick her up in a station wagon on a cool October day, when the wind is carrying the pungent sulphurous air north over the lake. You watch them drive off

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with your hands in your pockets. Your hair is perfect, your head as messed up as it's ever been.

So almost ten years later, when your femme finds out, there's a letting go. It's like exhaling your first drag on a cigarette, like pancakes and syrup, like the time at the beach you lay on the warm sand in your shorts and t-shirt, looking through your shades into the blue blue sky. You wake in the early hours, a baby mammal, pink and hairless, eyes bunched shut; you burrow into her and sink back into sleep.

Your femme was married! — That poor sap lets her go to the bar with a friend because he trusts she'll be safe there. It's hard to believe, but they do that back then.

When she first comes in, she has her long hair pinned up in a leather barrette with a stick through it. When she fishes change out of her little change purse for a drink, she reminds you of a mom on a black-and-white TV show. You and your friends laugh at her and call her *The Little Wife*. You glide up behind her and growl, *Watch out darling*. Then one day she comes in with a tight-fitting blouse and her hair down around her shoulders, and you almost fall off your bar stool. You ask one of the femmes, who teaches you about the color auburn, and while she's at it, laughingly teaches you the word *luster*. It's like *shine*, she says, only somehow deeper and thicker.

You help her out of a jam you guess, but you use a little too much force. What can you say?: she finds what she wants with you. Her climaxes are like pictures you've seen of river beds swelling and spilling over. When you try to draw them out, show her a good time the way you've become expert at over the years, she half-laughs, half-pants, *Oh honey, don't get fancy!* You yourself could explode with pleasure, a millrat's wife coming all over herself beneath you, calling your name.

You try to hide the meanness of it from her. But you can't help it, you hate those guys. They cruise by you in their Chevys, taunting and throwing things. A guy throws a used rubber at you one night, and it splatters against your shoes. You take them off, pick them up with two

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fingers, and throw them right in the dumpster, walking home in your socks. Later, when the mills start closing, things get even worse. Once you get your shoulder dislocated. You hear the neighbors saying on the news, If someone was hurt or out of work, we brought them noodles, or strudel, or cash, or casseroles. You don't remember anybody ever bringing you noodles. There's a lot of stuff on Channel 7 about how they're losing their way of life. To be honest, you don't give a damn.

A cool summer night, another decade later: you're back from softball, after a quick beer with your team at the bar. You're still playing, but with taped knees now, like a lot of your teammates; you'll retire when you can no longer give one hundred percent to the game. Right now you may be slow, but you can still scald the ball. She's sitting in an armchair, her feet up, reading a magazine about show business. *Listen to this, honey*, she says, and *Imagine!*

Ooh! you tease her in falsetto, holding your hands up to your cheeks in mock marvel. You're on your back stretching, feeling huge and tired and muscular, contemplating the picture of Elizabeth Taylor in a tiara on the magazine's cover, and your femme's nice thigh where it disappears into her shorts. You have very satisfying grass stains all over your pants, and your team is in first place after winning tonight. You know that they're all busy bragging, and clapping each other on the back, and tormenting your right fielder, who's always shaky out there and who let an important fly ball get by her. They're calling her a weenie and a sieve, and comparing her handiwork in right field to how she must be in the sack. You clasp your bent knee closer to your chest. Her voice is grainy, like brown sugar mixed into oatmeal, or sand on a slick road, providing good tread. You'd kind of like to be at the bar, but you'd kind of rather be here, near the sound of her voice as she reads aloud about movie stars, near her beautiful lips moving.

The contract is a swirl of gray, like the PC boards you screw onto computers these days, with their inscrutable circuits and prongs and tiny teeth. You bend your heads and sign your names. She's in a nice dress

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with her hair drawn back in a bun, you're in dress pants and a jacket. It's the closing for your house, and you're surrounded by people in suits, only a few that you recognize. You follow your lawyer's guiding finger, huddling down in the penciled X's as though they're bunkers. You think, signing is like dreaming; it's not real but it is.

Your real estate agent is a gay guy with a slightly-receding hairline. Every estimate he gives you about what it'll cost to repair something in a house you look at is ridiculously low. Yeah right, it'll only cost five dollars to get the moisture out of that finished basement where the file cabinets are rusted from water! Your lawyer is a fat, clownish, badly-dressed lesbian. Your femme found them in the *Pink Pages*. The lawyer buddies up to you with long stories about her life with her girlfriend — as though you want to hear that boring crap, as though she doesn't have to act like a professional just because you're all lesbians.

Your back is killing you; this morning you wrenched it at work, bringing in some boxes of parts. The thought of needing workers' comp scares the daylights out of you, especially because you have a preexisting condition, and you've heard stories about that. You can't back out now; it's too late. So even as you sign the papers, you're doing frantic calculations, guessing what you would get on workers' comp, say you could even get it, adding it to your femme's check, deducting mortgage payments and food.

Your femme reaches into her purse and pulls out the certified check, hands it over to you to give to the bank person. You remember it later without any sound, like a pantomime. Most of it is not money you made; it's money she got from her aunt who died. Her aunt was a schoolteacher who lived for forty years in a little house in Gary, with her best friend.

Your new house is a tiny yellow brick house on a dead-end street on the North Side, around the corner from the Y. It has a fenced-in yard the size of a matchbook, and no garage. It makes you think of the houses you and your parents used to pass on the drive from the suburbs to visit your grandparents. It's the smallest house on the block, in a neighborhood they call up-and-coming; your realtor praises your far-sightedness, but frankly, it's just what you could afford in a white neighborhood in the city. The whine of construction becomes your life's background noise, and as

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you walk down the street, fine dust chalks your lips. You're not the only ones who have decided to move into the city.

You drive there following your real estate guy in his aging Honda. You park at the curb and walk together in your nice shoes up the stairs onto the porch, your back twinging with every step. It's the only thing you can feel; otherwise it's like when you've stubbed your toe, and you're waiting for your brain to get the message. There's some leftover adhesive where the previous owners peeled their name off the mailbox. The real estate guy stands back as you fumble with the keys and unlock the door, then grins: *Wanna carry her over the threshold?*

She's sitting at the kitchen table in her housedress, paying the bills. Your back is better. You've handed over your check from the plant, and the smaller one from helping out weekend nights at the bar. Her glasses are low on her nose, and her hand scuttles along the check she's writing, staccato and fussy. The skin on the top knuckle of her third finger is pressed flat and shiny from the pressure of the pen.

You lost part of your pinky finger about five years ago, right at that knuckle on your right hand. Good thing you're ambidextrous where it counts! you wink at your friends. Everybody thinks you lost it in a fight, or at the rendering plant, or in a motorcycle accident. The truth is you got a weird infection when you fell on the nailboards for carpeting you were putting in for a landlord over on Paxton St., and then delayed too long going to the doctor.

You ask her how you're doing this month; she says pretty good except for that new crown she needs. You pick up the mortgage payment booklet and flip through it with wonder and a little dread, feeling the tiny breeze spit at your chin. Thirty years worth of slips! You can't imagine even living that long, but the booklet seems to say with authority that you will.

She cranes her head up at you, and says *I'll do this, honey, why don't you go watch TV*. A spasm of irritation makes you turn away and go into the living room, where you sit in front of a stupid sitcom, useless and brooding.

How you got this way: it's a question you refuse to entertain on any

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level. To you, it's like the black people crying about slavery: milk so spilt it'd take a thousand overtimes to mop it all up. The question is: where do you go from here? With this body, this face, this so-called mind of yours with its evasions, its wasted energies, its hatred, its gaping holes?

One day you and your femme are sitting on your front porch when a Toyota hatchback drives up, and two very young dykes with pierced noses and eyebrows and God knows what else get out to ask directions. They get one look at you and their faces start to glow. Your femme turns toward you with a groan: Oh for God's sake, we're *foremothers*.

Suddenly, she's looking a little fat. She was always a big girl, a farm girl from a place in Indiana where nobody looks at you twice — where your codes get whacked out by the stocky and coarse-cheeked farming women you see in town, who aren't butches at all, but rather straight women buying Pepsi and diapers at Greene's store.

She was always a big girl, ample, with a hospitable face that blushed easily. You liked that she had a big appetite. Your mother, trying to look like an elegant wife in front of your father's friends, was always on a diet, and okay, you admit you have a mother problem. Once she put a padlock on the kitchen door and handed the combination to you, making you swear not to tell it to her no matter how hard she begged. Then she woke you up in the middle of the night. You could smell her and see her nipples through her nightgown. She said, *C'mon sweetie, please, and Indulge your old mother*. She wanted to get at those Sara Lee cakes in the freezer, shaving away with her knife one almost translucent sliver at a time, her bare feet cold on the linoleum, her throat warm and sweet. You felt sorry for her and also despised her; you knew the next day she'd be on you to dress nice and sit still, and here she was, loose and gross and cunning and hungry.

So when your femme starts looking fat, you wonder. Maybe she hasn't even gained weight, maybe it's just you. But suddenly you can't stand to watch her chew. And you think: *something's up*.

Who would have thought a car accident would come as a mercy? A guy

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in a suit, driving back from lunch, gets into an argument on his cell phone and clips you with his car as you're crossing Ashland Avenue, then veers into a light pole. You beg the bystanders not to call an ambulance, but they do anyway, and the fact is you can't get up, your leg is broken. You keep your mouth shut in the ambulance as they refer to you as "he," focus on planning when and how to present yourself as a female before they can take your clothes off and notice themselves. Once inside, you lay rigid on a hospital gurney, your pants off and your BVDs out there flapping in the breeze, wondering how many martinis that guy knocked back, getting a knowing look from the doctor, feeling the slap of wet plaster. The next day, your femme comes in with swollen eyes to tell you that the owner of the bar has dropped dead of a stroke. After the first shock it's hard to remember the news from one minute to the next, because whatever it is you're taking for the pain is giving you amnesia. Your boss comes to visit, bringing you a card signed by everybody at work. On the front there's a picture of a puppy with its paw in a splint. He sits, embarrassed, in a chair by your bed, and you hope to God nothing is showing through your hospital gown. He would put you on light duty at work, he says, doing filing and helping track orders, but he just doesn't have a vacancy there.

You lie in bed for weeks, for longer than they say you should, even after the cast comes off. Your femme is gathering the documents on your condition and taking in extra freelance work now. Before the accident you took up the old bathroom floor, but you're too crippled to lay the new tile. When you hobble out of the bathroom your feet carry grit all over the floors.

The bar is up for sale, you hear. You sleep twelve hours a night; when you wake up your head feels like someone poured concrete into it. Old hurt moves silently to the surface and breathes, sending up a towering jet of spray. During the afternoons, with the ball game on, you tilt your calculator toward the light and try to figure out how much you'll get per month for a year if you get the settlement your femme thinks you'll get. Then you calculate again, estimating the amount more conservatively. With the two months wages your boss is paying you, and the advance you're going to try to get on the settlement, you could probably make it for about a year without working. It's dawning on you that you've

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taken one for the team. A new thought pokes out its head comically, like a salamander. You lie there with your eyes closed, woozy on painkillers, fingering the calculator.