

Stark Raving Mad

A Note from the Author	2
Chapter 1: Starkly Put	3
Chapter 2: Little Sisters	14
Chapter 3: Skunks	29
Chapter 4: My Life Less Ordinary	48
Chapter 5: Players	56
Chapter 6: Mr. Bland	78
Chapter 7: The Magic Theater	99
Chapter 8: Mother's Day	126
Chapter 9: Romantic Notions	151
Chapter 10: Happy City Hell	171
Chapter 11: Glory Days	191
Chapter 12: Strawberry Festival	224
Chapter 13: Martini Toast	244
Chapter 14: A Traveler's Taxonomy	255
Chapter 15: Guerilla Rave	284
Epilogue	311

A Note from the Author

This story is a labor of love. Not a love of writing, because I have only recently discovered that, but love for the people in my life. I never imagined myself a writer – that was my father’s area of expertise. As it turns out, I seem to have a knack for it too. No one was more amazed than I, when a publisher actually offered me a genuine deal. Of course, one of the first things she asked was, “Is it a true story?” And that’s hard to answer. Yes and no. The Stark family and Dennis Bland are real people, and Happy City is a real place, but many of the events and all the other characters are fiction and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. That said, most of those fictional characters are combinations or conglomerations of people I’ve known.

Regarding the events, anyone with more time on their hands than they know what to do with could contact the Happy City Borough Office and request copies of the permits we filed, they’re a matter of public record. Likewise you could search back issues of the *City Sentinel* and read all about the Happy City Riots, an accidental fire that torched an old storefront, and the night a person or persons unknown hijacked a building and operated an “unsanctioned” and “illegal” gathering.

The fictional events in this story are of two distinct varieties – the ones I made up to make the book more interesting, exciting, or humorous, and the ones I made up because I’m not actually privy to all my family members’ thoughts and activities.

Speaking of my family, people wonder how they feel about the book. None of them have sued me yet so I guess they’re ok with it. Really, they like it. Each of us thinks we can tell the differences between the “real” Stark family and the fictional hybrid. Yes, we’re all in denial, but at least now we’re happy that way.

— *Martin Stark*

Chapter 1: Starkly Put

The sound of sirens drawing closer was affirmation that the strike had been a success. At the bottom of the hill we could still hear the dull roar and thumping bass, at least we could until wailing sirens drowned out all other noise.

“Are you sure Dennis will be ok?” B’s forehead creased anxiously. “What if they catch him?”

Kerry sighed, “Come on B, he left the same time we did. Anyway, they won’t hold him. They’ll question him. He’ll pretend he doesn’t know anything, and they’ll let him go. Worst case scenario, they’ll deport him.” Her confidence faltered, “He remembered his passport, right?”

I tossed a cigarette butt out the window as three police cars flew past us, momentarily distracting me. “You’d think someone had blown up a building,” I said gesturing at the police. It made everyone in the car laugh. Glancing into the rearview mirror I smiled at my kid sisters, “Don’t worry, we double checked – he had it.”

I turned my mother’s SUV onto the ramp of Happy City’s only limited access highway. Once we got back to the house it would only take a few minutes to load the little girls into their car seats and head off.

I took the next exit, pausing briefly for the stop sign before turning onto the bridge over Little Wet Creek and Panther Hollow road. The road followed the stream, winding past pretty suburban houses with perfectly manicured and landscaped lawns. Ten years ago practically no one had even heard of bark mulch or professional landscapers, now there were more landscape businesses than doctors listed in the yellow pages. I turned the van into the driveway of the house I’d lived in all my life.

Welcome to the adventure of a crazy American family. We’re the Starks. I’m Martin, the oldest child of Oliver and Ann Stark. I’m 27 years old, and yes, I still live at home with my parents.

Our house isn’t particularly noteworthy. It’s a standard American split-level. I’ll walk you through. Upstairs we’ve got a kitchen with attached dining area. It’s kind of crowded these days; 60s suburban homes were never intended to accommodate ten to twelve people sitting around the table for dinner every night. There’s a living room and down the hall are three bedrooms, two bathrooms, and the stairs. The walk out basement has a family room with a TV, some storage area that Mom converted into her “studio,” a guest room that my sister Kerry co-opted, another bathroom and my room. Sounds like a big house

right? Not really, the rooms are small. Off the kitchen we have the requisite attached two-car garage – not nearly big enough for the five vehicles that are perpetually going in and out.

The garage is home to the washer and dryer, all the gardening equipment, my brother Christian, and his family. Ok, they don't actually live in the garage; they live in the tiny apartment above it, where I was living till Annie found out she was with child four years ago.

That's a differentiation you want to be sure you make right off the bat – the Ann/Annie thing. Otherwise you could get the wrong idea about all sorts of stuff. My mother is Ann. My sister-in-law is Annie. There must be psychological studies out there about guys who marry girls with the same name as their mom. In this case it was my younger brother. He wanted to be the artsy one in the family, but kids and his lack of artistic talent sort of killed that goal. He and Annie have two girls – Avery's 3 and Ona's 18 months. The two of them pretty much run the whole complex; no one but their mother manages to tell them no.

The person who thinks she should be running the whole complex is my sister Kerry, and it's largely thanks to her that there's any story to tell, but I'll get back to that. My youngest sister, B, is almost as sweet and spoiled as Christian's girls. She and I are the family "accidents," Christian and Kerry were "tried for." That should tell you all you need to know about family planning. Not that I don't like my brother and sister; I do. It's just that they've always been the difficult ones. They'd probably disagree.

You might be wondering why my youngest sister's name is B. It's short for Beatrice, but everyone agrees that's a horrible name, even my mother who named her. To fully understand the whole B thing I have to explain a little about my parents. Now this gets complicated and I'm only their kid, so there have got to be things in their lives I don't know anything about. The simple fact is that my parents must really love one another because otherwise I have no idea what they're still doing together. Or what they were ever doing together. If you subscribe to that trite "Women are from Venus and Men are from Mars" bullshit, then my parents fall more into the "Dad is from Mercury and Mom is from Pluto" variation.

Oliver Stark, my old man, is a quiet, friendly guy. Mostly, he likes to read. And if he's not reading, he likes to be telling one of his kids what he was reading about. Dad reads everything, but he memorizes history books. History's his thing. He also loves little kids. So combine history and his four little kids, and you end up with me, Christian, Kerry and B all knowing more world history before we hit kindergarten than most people know by college.

This made my mother very happy, even though she has absolutely no interest in history at all. But she obviously did have four little geniuses all of whom were going to graduate from Ivy League universities and become world-renowned whatever. I was strike one. I decided to skip college and be a chef. Then I decided to skip culinary arts school too. Instead I packed a bag and headed abroad – where I really did learn to cook. When I came home I found a restaurant to work in, moved into the rent-free apartment over the garage and started saving virtually every cent I made so that I could open my own place. The problem is that the more time I spend in restaurants the less sure I am that I want to eat in one, let alone own one.

Christian was strike two, although he gave it a good shot. He went off to NYU to cultivate his metro persona and begin work on the Great American Novel. There he met Annie, conceived Avery and before you know it, he was back: living in **my** apartment with his wife and baby and finishing his degree at the local State University.

Kerry turned out to be strike three, which took everyone by surprise. She went off to an impressive little liberal arts college where she pulled the grades, avoided motherhood, didn't get into trouble for anything, and raved nonstop about how perfect it all was. Then she spent a semester raving in the UK and when she came home, finishing college was the last thing on her mind. That just leaves B to do something very impressive. A responsibility she is taking quite seriously.

Conveniently enough my mother isn't disappointed in any of us. When push comes to shove she doesn't care what we're doing as long as we're doing something. This is where we return to that Mercury/Pluto thing. Dad is happiest reading about interesting places and people. My mother wants to **be** one of those interesting people. Instead she's serving a life sentence as owner/manager of the little gas station ice cream shop that my dad thought would be a good idea to start fifteen years ago. Dad wanted a business that we could all work at together during the summers when he wasn't teaching. Yep, Dad's a schoolteacher. But now he's starting to look forward to retirement and piles of uninterrupted books. Oh, and these days he rarely sets foot behind the ice cream counter.

However, under my mother's driven management Stark's Ice Cream quickly evolved from a seasonal frozen custard stand and leased out one pump station to Stark's – a multi-pump mini-grocery, with a deli and breakfast/lunch counter that also serves ice cream and fresh baked goods, and is open daily, year-round, from 6:00 a.m. till 11:00 p.m.

I think Mom is considering retirement too, but “The Store,” as we all refer to Stark’s, seems to have developed a life of its own. Unfortunately, it appears my mother is its sole life force. That’s an ironic fate for a woman who’d planned to spend her life on stage. Not that there’s anything wrong with preparing macaroni and cheese bake or blueberry fluff for a deli case, or pouring coffee for grumpy old octogenarians, or any of the things Mom does everyday. And makes quite a tidy sum of money at, I might add. But it’s not exactly glamorous. And certainly it’s not where she imagined herself twenty-eight years ago when she decided to defer her MFA acceptance and get married.

Ann Gwyneth Kerry grew up moving from one foster family to another. Determined to make a better life for herself, far away from the mountains of western Virginia, she earned top grades and the state helped her attend college. With her standard ability to do whatever she’s set her mind to, Mom excelled at college and discovered a deep love of the theater almost immediately. She thought she was on her way to a serious acting career when she applied for and received a position in the *Bard’s Mid-Summer Festival*. Each year a different university hosted the event and student actors from across the nation competed for roles in three of Shakespeare’s works. That summer it just happened to be held at Genesse College in New York, the very same university my father was sporadically attending. Mom set out from Virginia on a Greyhound bus with less than fifty dollars to her name and leading roles in not one, but two of the festival’s plays. She’d just finished her sophomore year of college.

As it turned out, Mom never went back. She took audiences’, critics’ and my father’s breath away as Hermia and the Genesse College theater department offered her a scholarship. A few months later she and my dad started dating, and the rest, as they say, is history. The only low point of the experience being that when the director of *Much Ado About Nothing* saw her he decided to switch her from the coveted role of Beatrice to the less appealing Hero, “Leonato’s short daughter,” because of her size. But Beatrice always remained her favorite character. So when baby girl number two came along, Mom insisted on naming her Beatrice.

“But people will make fun of her,” I argued.

“Do you really like it?” queried my father. “It sounds like an old maid.”

“It’s beautiful in Italian,” replied Mom.

“But we don’t speak Italian,” argued my dad.

In the end Mom won, and Beatrice Argent was born. Argent being my mother's concession to my father for going along with Beatrice, which was shortened almost immediately to B. Mom even sent letters to teachers at the beginning of each school year asking them to use her nickname.

B always complains about how awful her name is, but I think secretly she likes it. After all she's the only one of us with a theatrical name. I'm Martin Henry after my grandfather Stark and Dad's writing professor and friend Robert Henry. Christian Michael was just a name out of a baby book. And Kerry Jean is named for grandmother Stark and my mother.

Speaking of my mother, it's largely due to her that Dad became a famous author. Knowing he was shy about his writing, she took it upon herself to make copies of the *Wales and Other Mythical Creatures* manuscript and send it off to an agent. Then she helped the agent convince Dad to make a few revisions here and there. And Mom was the driving force behind the decision to accept the teaching position in Happy City. She thought that having his evenings, weekends, and summers free would give them plenty of time together and still leave extra for him to write. I guess the joke was on her.

So, as you can see driven is not a word to be taken lightly when it's used to describe my mother. Neither is obsessive. While my dad's been living in a world of books and the Discovery channel, my mother discovered Aqua-Chi, Reiki, Self-Realization Workshops, and sculpture. Now besides working constantly, she has a bazillion classes or workshops a week. When Mom is at home, she's either in the kitchen, in her "studio," or fast asleep.

Dad spends all his time in one of the upstairs bedrooms that he converted into a study, or in the family room watching the tube. He rarely goes to bed before one in the morning, Mom rarely sleeps later than five a.m. I should also mention that my mom is completely oblivious to the fact that her life is the stuff TV sitcoms would be made of, if they actually were funny. Dad, on the other hand, seems to know; but his "head in the sand" approach has worked so far.

I grew up thinking we were a regular middle-class, suburban family. Call me oblivious. Christian, more aware of what really constitutes normal, recognized that his family was a bit eccentric. A teen-age Kerry, who was infuriatingly oversensitive to anything abnormal, announced repeatedly in hysterical tantrums, that her family was **weird**. And B, it turns out, prides herself on the fact that we are collectively about as far from normal as you can possibly get, without being downright odd.

That “not being downright odd” thing is the kicker. I mean here we are – Dad’s a schoolteacher, Mom runs a little store. We live in a typical house, in a typical development; we wear ordinary clothes. We appear to be normal. And that’s the key. Most people only look at the surface, as a rule they don’t dig any deeper. I was as guilty of that as anyone. But as the years pass it gets harder and harder to ignore the obvious. How many middle class suburban families have all of their adult children living at home? And we’re not here for financial reasons, though it makes a good excuse. The truth is we all want to be together. How strange is that? Even Kerry seems to need long periods at home recharging before she rushes headlong to her next short-lived obsession.

Thinking back, we were strange even when I was young, I was just too immersed to recognize it. Dad never took us to Little League or Cub Scouts; we didn’t read the same cheesy *Berenstain Bears* books that other kids read. Mom never let us watch Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles or wear them plastered on our PJs. We ate whole wheat bread and that organic peanut butter crap long before it was vogue, and by the time you could buy it in a regular grocery store, Mom, exhausted from constant battling, had stopped forcing us to eat the stuff. We had long, frequently animated, discussions around the dinner table – arguing about politics, celebrities, books, history, school and a million other topics. But we never, ever, ate like silent zombies while the TV droned on and on. We didn’t have step-parents or step-siblings; we never had to visit our estranged mom or dad on weekends and holidays. Basically, we had a gloriously idyllic childhood. Except for the peanut butter.

Even without all these other idiosyncrasies, my family could never have been just another iteration of the Bradys. Not with Dad’s book. How many kids get to grow up having the voice of a generation reading them bedtime stories? And it was a pretty hedonist generation at that. I spent hours as a young child staring at the poster sized copy of Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights* that my dad had hanging over his desk, trying to figure what those things were doing to each other. Anyway, the fact that Oliver ducked out of the spotlight and disguised himself as Everyman doesn’t change that we are the family of a notable personality. And that’s how the idyllic childhood thing ends. As the distance between my father the best selling author, and my father the middle-aged-teacher-next-door grew, so did the distance between him and my mother. After a while it seemed like the only thing holding them together was their children. Maybe that’s the real reason that we’ve all stayed at home.

When I was little, my folks did stuff together. They'd take me and Christian to outdoor concerts in the summer or we'd all go sledding down the hill in the backyard and then have a winter picnic on the floor in front of the fireplace complete with roasted marshmallows. Like all evolutions the process of change was slow. With four kids and Dad working full time they had fewer and fewer opportunities to talk with one another, let alone do things together. I guess years of not interacting leads to, well, not interacting. At least not very well.

Take a conversation the two of them had over the Christmas holidays. Mom and I had just come in from The Store and found Dad sitting at the table reading, discarded orange peels and candy wrappers heaped in a little pile beside an empty eggnog cup. She greeted him with a quick kiss on the cheek. He didn't look up from his book, but smiled and made some noise that I can only assume was intended to be an affectionate response. Mom immediately launched into a long description of her day: who had come into The Store, what the lunch special had been, how many pies the new woman, Darla, had ruined when she forgot to put them in the cooler before closing the night before, all the while scurrying to prepare dinner.

I watched in sort of horrified fascination as my father continued to read, occasionally nodding or saying *hmmm* or *uh huh*, but clearly not paying the least bit of attention to anything she said, while my mother rambled on and on, apparently unaware of his behavior. Finally she came over to clear away his trash. "Oliver, was this your lunch?"

He snapped his book shut as if it contained some secret message and shrugged, "B went over to Heather's."

I could feel my mother's temper growing. For reasons none of us understand completely, my dad refuses to do even minimal food preparation. Food either has to be set out in front of him warm and ready to serve, or come prepackaged and ready to eat. The man won't even use a microwave; he'd rather eat those canned raviolis cold, by god, than learn to cook. I don't want to think about his college eating habits. On the upside, he's not the least bit picky.

"The refrigerator is so full of leftovers things fall out every time I open it," Mom complained. "Even you could manage to find something without too much trouble."

"I know. I had to finish the eggnog just so I didn't have to wedge it back in. Elliot brought us a Christmas card from Linda," he said obviously trying to change the subject. He held up a silver foil card,

“Well, not Christmas per se. Actually it’s a “Season of the Earth Mother at Rest” card. Bet you can’t buy those at Hallmark,” he winked at me. “But she did send a letter for you, Ann.”

Mom snatched up the oversized envelope and settled into a chair. She ripped it open and quickly scanned the words. Then she read it again, more slowly. She handed it to my father and pulled a second paper from the envelope. “Linda’s started making lithographs. Isn’t it gorgeous?” she said holding an elongated cityscape in gray-green ink up for us to admire. We both agreed that it was beautiful. “Did Elliot have a good visit this time?”

“He said everything was very nice, quite calm for a change. Linda even let the kids get a Christmas tree this year. They had a little live one that she can plant in the yard. Terri and Sasha were there. But Chas is gone. Elliot said he and Linda made a mutual and very amiable decision that their Chis were restricting each other, so Chas moved in with his 26-year-old yoga instructor. Elliot said things are much better without him.”

“Mmmm. She mentioned that was probably going to happen when we talked on Thanksgiving.”

“Did she also mention that she’s currently dating Sasha’s boyfriend’s mother?” Dad asked with a smirk.

“You’re kidding?” I piped into the conversation, laughing. “The boyfriend’s mother, that’s a new one.”

Mom shot me a disgusted look but spoke to Dad, “Linda did mention that in her letter. She says she’s never felt so supported before. She seems to think that women understand **and** respond to women’s needs more effectively than men can.”

My dad opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it and closed it again. Mom hadn’t noticed and she continued, “Sasha nearly lost the baby. She had to spend three weeks in bed, but everything seems to be going ok now. The baby could arrive anytime. Did Elliot tell you how she’s feeling?”

“No, but you can ask him. He’s downstairs playing video games. He thought Kerry might call from the UK so he decided to hang around. I told him we weren’t expecting to hear from her today.”

Dan and Linda Tressler and their kids had been our neighbors. They were close friends to my parents and Elliot, ET for short, and his two older sisters were like extra siblings. Then, when I was about 15, Linda left Dan and the kids. She moved to California “to find herself.” Dan was devastated. For a while he and the kids practically lived here. But Dan eventually got on with his life, sold the house next to us, met someone new and remarried. Sasha and Terri couldn’t stand their new stepmother, so they moved to the west coast with Linda. But ET stayed here – so he could be near Kerry.

He and Kerry are almost exactly the same age. When they were babies they shared a stroller. Then they went to playschool, grade school and high school together. Once, when they were in about fifth grade he asked her if she wanted to “go-together.” She said yes, then broke it off at the very next recess, but ET has somehow managed to convince himself that this incident proves irrefutably that Kerry really does want to be his girlfriend, no matter how deeply she’s submerged her feelings. Therefore, ET’s spent the bulk of his childhood, adolescence and early adulthood bending over backwards to please Kerry. She in turn, regards Elliot as her greatest, most loyal friend; the kind of guy whose shoulder you can cry on, who will drive you places when your car’s in the shop, who’ll loan you money when you’re broke and who’ll go out with you when there’s nothing more exciting going on. The rest of us know that ET’s fighting a losing battle, but we’re all kind of pulling for him anyway. It’s an underdog thing.

“Poor Elliot,” Mom shook head, a sympathetic expression on her face.

We sat quietly for a moment, my mother drumming her fingers on the New Age greeting card. Then she spoke, “You know Oliver, we could go out to California and visit. Maybe this summer when school’s out. It would be nice to see Linda. And Sasha’s new baby. You love babies,” she added enticingly.

“At the rate Chris and Annie are going we could have a new baby here by summer. Anyway, I’m sure we’ll get to see Sasha and child when she comes to visit Dan.”

“But it’s been so long since we’ve gone away and we’ve never been to the west coast. We could see the sights, you know Big Sur, San Francisco, the redwoods. We could take the whole summer if we wanted to, drive across the country. What an adventure.” Excitement was growing in her voice. “We could take B or if she didn’t want to go, Martin and Christian would look after her. Kerry might even be home by then.”

I could see her planning the trip logistics as we sat there.

“I’ve never had any desire to go to California,” responded my father vaguely, apparently unaware of his wife’s budding enthusiasm.

“Who’s going to California?” boomed Christian’s good-natured voice. He, Annie and the girls suddenly appeared in the doorway, stomping snow off their boots and pulling off coats, scarves and hats.

“I’d just been suggesting to your father,” said Mom as she rose and took Ona out of Annie’s arms, “that he and I ought to go visit Linda this summer.”

“Dad on a cross country trip? That’ll be the day,” Chris grinned at me.

“He can go to California,” I corrected. “It’s not a mythical place he’s written about.”

Everyone laughed, even Dad, who added some comment of his own about smart-assed kids.

“Well,” Annie remarked, “I lived in San Diego for awhile when I was a kid. I certainly wouldn’t go out of my way to visit again.” Then noticing her mother-in-law’s crestfallen face she added “but if you have friends there, it might be a nice getaway.”

“Ann has a friend there,” Dad retorted with finality. Pushing his chair back, he stood up and handed his book to Avery. He reached for Ona and she leapt giggling from Mom’s arms into his. Then he took Avery’s hand saying, “Come on then. Let’s get out of the kitchen so Annma has room to make dinner. Which of you is going to read a story to Grando?”

“We can’t read yet Grando,” Avery answered seriously. “You have to read to us.”

“Hmmm, I suppose I could... but I’ll need help. Someone will have to pick the book,” he said as they headed into the living room.

Christian, Annie and I exchanged uncomfortable looks. None of us knew what to say about Dad’s abrupt departure.

“So much for a trip to California,” Chris said finally, standing behind Mom and massaging her shoulders.

She sat silently for a moment, enjoying the massage. When she stood up her earlier enthusiasm had been replaced by a flinty determination. “Maybe I’ll just go on my own. You could all get along without me for two weeks, right? It would give Linda and I a chance to really be together. Maybe I could take one of her art classes. A chance to do something totally on my own might be exactly what I need.”

“Mom, you’re not seriously considering driving to California alone are you,” Chris sounded worried.

“Don’t be silly. I’d fly.”

“But you’ve never been on a plane.”

“So? People fly all the time. All of you have.” She looked at each of us, “Why should I be any different?”

That particular evening might have proved important if Mom had bought a ticket and headed off to her Manifest Destiny. But she didn’t. In fact, none of us ever heard her mention going to California again. My speculation is that she never particularly wanted to go there, she just wanted to do something. And she wanted to do it with Dad. Instead she joined a new class here, which she attended alone, as her resentment factor rose to an all-time high. It was becoming clearer to all the Stark kids that our mother was

dissatisfied with her life or at least her marriage, but Dad's behavior and character remained steadfast – a fact that appeared to infuriate Mom all the more.

It seemed that they were on a collision course with only two unpleasant endings possible: either they were going to continue as if everything was alright but growing more and more alienated from one another till one of them died, or they were going to end up divorced.

Then everything changed. And maybe it would have no matter what. Who can say? The fact is that my sister Kerry set in motion a chain of events that not one of us could have imagined even a few months earlier. No kidding. If someone had suggested to me over Christmas that I should invest all my savings in a rave club, then co-run it with my brother and sister, I'd have known that they'd had a bit too much holiday cheer. But I'm jumping ahead of myself.

Chapter 2: Little Sisters

Kerry did a study abroad stint the first semester of her junior year in college. Since I'd traveled in France, Italy and Austria, Kerry decided to go to England. At first she found things a wee bit proper, but before long she'd become a right happy little Brit. Telephone conversations were carried out in full accent, and generously sprinkled with Anglicisms like "loo," "smashing" and "wanker." All too soon the semester was over and to her great dismay Kerry found herself facing a return to the good old USofA.

In an admirable effort to delay the inevitable, she managed to finagle some sort of short-term internship. Despite listening to nearly a million conversations detailing her experience, to this day I cannot tell you how she found it or what she was supposedly doing. All I know is that after a whirlwind trip home for Christmas (she was here for less than 72 hours), Kerry spent the rest of the holidays with her roommate Diana and her family and then moved in with some guy named Dennis (who we all assumed was her newest beau) for a brief three-week stint as a genuine Johnny Bull before the British authorities sent her packing. Apparently she'd failed to process all the required paperwork.

It was a sad Kerry, a "why oh why do these things happen to me" Kerry, who spent nearly an entire month on the family room couch suffering England withdrawal. Within a day and a half of her return she'd convinced Dad to add BBC America to his cable channels so that she could satiate her addiction to *Ground Force* and *Coupling*.

She had long, proper sounding conversations with her former roommate Diana Paxton, from whom packages containing tea, biscuits and lavender water arrived. She had equally protracted, but rather raucous, conversations with her other former roommate Melanie Hanson, who sent parcels containing Galaxy bars and techno mix CDs. She had secretive conversations with Dennis, who it turned out, might have been nothing more than a roommate as well, and who never sent her anything.

All this chatter notwithstanding, even the slightest trace of her accent disappeared after being home for only two weeks. Unfortunately, her love of all things British didn't fade so quickly. Anyone dumb enough to listen would be subjected to tiresome treatises about the many ways that England was superior to the USA. The worst part about this was that if Kerry's examples were to be believed, and even I could see no reason that she'd exaggerate, it seemed she was right. And the only thing worse than a self-righteous Kerry is a legitimately self-righteous Kerry.

Around the first week in March the entire Stark clan had ceased to have even the slightest interest in anything she wanted to discuss. And our mother seemed to think that it was about time Kerry stopped moping and got on with her life. It seems Mom said as much one morning when she called home with instructions on how much chicken to defrost for dinner because when I returned home from work late one sleety, snowy March night I found Kerry unenthusiastically perusing the Help Wanted ads in the *City Sentinel*.

On the table in front of her lay the empty wrapper of her last Galaxy bar, a steaming teacup, and a teapot wrapped in an ugly hand crocheted multi-color cosy that looked like a reject hat. Kerry did not look up when I entered or as I poured myself a glass of water. When I sat down in an opposite chair she finally spoke, albeit in an indifferent tone. “Did you have a good night?”

“It was another slow one. The roads suck.”

“It’ll pick up. Winter can’t go on forever.” Her tone was dismissive.

“You don’t have to tell me. Bruce on the other hand,” I scowled as Kerry looked up from the paper.

“Trouble?”

“No. Not really. Things are sluggish. Bruce’s cash flow is suffering, so he’s all uptight. I had to hang around tonight listening to ‘if things don’t pick up we’ll have to tighten the belt, cut expenses blah, blah, blah; no more gooseberry orders for a while Martin. Can’t you make gourmet entrees without gourmet ingredients?’”

“He didn’t actually say that?” B exclaimed entering the kitchen. She was wearing flannel sleep pants and one of my old sweatshirts. “Dad and I are having some ice cream. Do you want some?”

“Yeah, that would be great. Vanilla if we have it. Thanks B. And no he didn’t actually say it, but that’s what he meant. We go through this every year about this time. You’d think he have figured it out by now. A smart businessman might even budget for it. It’s hard to take his ‘I’m going broke’ sob story very seriously when he drives a 2005 Lotus Elise. In chrome orange of all things. Talk about making a classy car look bad.”

Neither of my sisters seemed to see the significance of this bit of information. I tried again, “He just bought a Lotus.”

“Aren’t they kind of *Fatal Attraction* era cars?” asked B as she dug cartons out of the freezer.

“Fatal Attraction?”

“You know, the movie that made Sharon Stone a big star.”

“I think you’re referring to *Basic Instinct*,” I replied shaking my head in amazement.

“Whatever, it was way before my time.”

“The cars in England were so much nicer than the ones here. When I was visiting Diana over the holidays I actually got to ride in her uncle’s Aston Martin. Now that is a luxury vehicle.”

B and I smiled across the room at each other. Before Kerry could continue B asked, “Kerry what flavor do you want?”

“Um. Oh I don’t know. I wasn’t going to have any. I’ve been jonesing for some Hobnobs all night.”

“Jonesing for a Hobnob? Give me a break, Kerry. Just eat your painfully inadequate American ice cream and leave off with the God-save-the-queen-bullshit. We’re all bloody tired of hearing about it, what.”

Kerry rankled visibly as I continued. “And don’t get yourself all in a huff or start acting like a right stroppy cow, or...” I grinned at B but she didn’t look amused.

“That’s right Martin. You can spend years telling us about how wonderful France was or running on and on about how much you love the Peroneilles and complaining about this food or that wine because it isn’t authentic Italian; but when I want to share my experiences or when I miss England it’s just a big joke. Everything’s always about you isn’t it? Don’t you think I’ve noticed all of you rolling your eyes at me or ignoring me completely? I should have stayed in England. At least there people had some respect for me.”

“You tried. They didn’t want you.”

The air crackled with anger and I heard Kerry’s deep breath as she prepared her comeback but B spoke first.

“Ok you two. I hardly think we need the Hundred Years War taking place in the kitchen.” B handed each of us a bowl of ice cream.

“What?” I asked.

“The Hundred Years War. You know England versus France, Edward the Black Prince of Wales, Joan of Arc...”

“Yeah, and Henry the Fifth. What’s your point?” snapped Kerry.

“Look Kerry, we’re all really glad that you liked Britain so much. I think it’s cool that someone in the family finally went there since Dad wrote most of a book about it. And I love looking at pictures of you

visiting places I've dreamed about seeing my whole life. But," she put her arms around her sister, "you are driving us all mad. It's all you talk about. Ever."

Kerry hugged her back and nodded contritely.

"And Martin. Just because your boss is an arrogant, self-absorbed prick doesn't mean that you should be one too," B added in a disgusted voice. "By the way, tell Bruce that I'm not interested in that hostess position, and I have no desire to become one of his 'select staff of servers.' I don't care how good the money is, it couldn't be worth having that scumbag leering at me all the time."

B picked up the ice cream bowls for her and Dad and headed back to the family room.

"Sorry, Ker," I shrugged apologetically, adding in a truly poor cockney, "I guess I over did it a bit there, old boy."

She smiled a little. "Me too. I just miss it, Martin. I really do."

Neither of us spoke for a few minutes. Then Kerry asked, "What job was B talking about anyway?"

"Oh that. Bruce thinks having B around would be good for business; I mean he was doing me a favor by offering my little sister a job. We're short staffed over spring break. He's desperate to find some help. I didn't think you'd be interested, but if you are come in tomorrow and talk to him. I'm sure he'll enjoy staring at your ass as much as B's, although he does prefer blondes. What a jerk. But he's harmless. He doesn't sneak up on waitresses in the cooler or shit like that."

Kerry grimaced. Then we heard an engine shutting off outside. I remembered that my mother's van hadn't been in the garage just as the kitchen door opened and quickly slammed shut.

Mom was already pulling off her parka.

"The roads are awful. Did you have any trouble, Martin?" she asked before disappearing into the hall to hang up her coat. She returned fluffing her damp hair, "Let me guess, your father is downstairs watching TV?"

"Yeah, he and B are entranced by some history of the Cathars show," Kerry replied, clearly amazed that anyone would choose to watch it. "Would you like some tea?"

"That would be nice," Mom said without really sounding interested. "I've been thinking Kerry, I could use a little extra help at the store. I'm not sure Darla is going to last. I almost fired her again today," she sighed. "However," her voice turned stern, "I'll need you some mornings and punctual."

A rebuke like that could easily put Kerry on the offensive, so I was about to excuse myself and avoid the whole thing when Kerry responded in a surprisingly cheerful voice. “Thanks for the offer Mom, but Martin and I were discussing a position at Wendell’s. I’m gonna talk to Bruce in the morning.”

“He won’t be there in the morning,” I muttered.

“Ok then, in the afternoon” Kerry shot me a dirty look. “Martin said they’re short staffed over spring break so I’ll probably have to start right away.”

“Oh, in that case I’ll put another help wanted ad in the paper.” Mom sighed again, “I should go to sleep, I need to be up by 5:30 a.m., but I was going to tell Oliver about my new class. I think it would be good for him to go. And the instructor is a great fan of his; she’d really enjoy it if your dad decided to join in. But if he’s watching something, I guess I’ll just go straight to bed.”

I hated seeing the disappointment in her eyes as she rose, suddenly over tired, and left the room. Kerry looked worriedly at me. “Do you think they’re ok?”

I shrugged. “So you’re gonna try Wendell’s?”

“I can’t work for Mom.” She stood up, “I better go pick an outfit for tomorrow.”

Not surprisingly Kerry found herself training as a Wendell’s server. And as I had suspected, Bruce thought Kerry was cute too.

“No offense, man, but those dark curls look much better on your sister than on you. I’ve never really envisioned myself with a raven-haired beauty. Does she like cars? She’s back from college, huh? So she’s a good bit older than B. Not as tall though.”

He was talking to me like my sisters were racehorses while I segmented chickens with a razor sharp knife. “Not a bright man,” I thought to myself. Aloud I said, “Kerry’s hair is even longer than mine.” He’d been trying to convince me to cut my hair for years.

“Well, women look good with long hair. I love the way B’s just covers her...”

“You know, they have places for middle-aged men who obsess over teenagers,” I shot at him, plunging the knife into a wooden block that for sanitary reasons shouldn’t even have been there.

He laughed as he walked away, “Yeah, it’s called Hooters.”

Kerry spent her first couple of days shadowing more experienced servers. She worked her first shift as a hostess on a slow Wednesday night. Her next shift was that Saturday evening, and it just happened to be the same night as a big benefit concert. Wendell’s was packed and jumping.

If you've never worked in a restaurant it's hard to describe the tension and pressure that hit when you get slammed with customers. Some people just fall apart. That's what happened to Isaac the prep cook. He'd been working since Christmas, but this was his first real rush and he lost it. He started setting up salad plates for tables that already had their salads, he plated smoked trout with raspberry dessert sauce instead of chutney, and he forgot to heat the garlic potatoes for several orders.

Each mistake put us further and further behind. Pretty soon we had a crisis on our hands. A more experienced hostess would have noticed the server's harried faces and wandered back to the kitchen to find out what the chef wanted her to do, but it was only Ker's second night, so she just kept seating more hungry customers.

I stopped speaking to anyone and plunged into warp speed. I'd almost caught everything back up when the fire alarm screamed to life and the kitchen sprinkler system issued forth its flame retardant goop.

Then all hell broke loose. Customers and staff evacuated the building while Bruce raged about assessing the seriousness of the situation. As it turns out, Isaac had placed six au gratin dishes with Scallops Breton in the salamander, then went out back for a cigarette to calm his nerves. The forgotten scallops flamed, igniting Isaac's apron, which he'd sensibly left hanging over the side of the salamander.

The rest of the night was a mess. Literally. Since there no longer was a fire – the sprinkler system had effectively put out the raging salamander – we really didn't need the fire department. But that didn't keep them from tromping back and forth through my kitchen for the next hour. Bruce put on a good face for the frightened customers and local media, who arrived in force within minutes of the alarm sounding. In a “these things happen sometimes and no one's at fault” speech he assured them that Wendell's would be open, business as usual, on Tuesday evening. Once the media, police, firemen and general mob had dispersed, Bruce returned to the kitchen where the rest of us had been putting forth a Herculean effort to get the water and goop cleaned up.

Before anyone could speak, Bruce launched into the most creative litany of expletives I've ever heard. I let him rant until his face began turning an unhealthy shade of purple and breathing seemed to be difficult for him before stepping in.

Pulling him around so that he faced away from the rest of the staff I said quietly, “You've got to calm down now, man. Take a deep breath. That's it. Now think about it. The restaurant's fine. All you lost is a salamander and a few dishes. No one was even injured. Tomorrow's paper is gonna run an article about

what a good job you did keeping things calm and getting people out. The whole thing could even be good for business.”

The purple color was receding in blotchy patches. “You think so, Martin. You might be right. And the insurance will cover the lost equipment right?”

“Yeah, no worries.”

His breathing slowly returned to normal.

“Bruce, why don’t you go home. I’ll oversee the cleaning and lock up. You can come back in the morning to take care of any details.”

“I could use a drink. Actually I could use more than a drink,” he said flashing me his cheesy smile.

In a louder voice he added “Martin, if you’ve got everything under control I’m heading out. He walked toward the door but stopped in front of Isaac.

“You’re fired. Don’t bother coming back for your paycheck.” Then he glanced at Kerry who was standing nearby looking wet and exhausted, “You did a great job. I’m very impressed. Martin’s gonna be here pretty late, and there’s no need for you to be cleaning the kitchen. You want a ride home?”

Kerry politely declined on the grounds that she wouldn’t be comfortable leaving everyone else with so much to do and Bruce left rambling on about how much he admired team players.

Two and a half hours later I locked the restaurant’s back door behind me and Kerry and I drove home in silence. As we parked she finally spoke.

“How can you stand it? I mean you’ve been working there forever now. And it’s...” she paused as if searching for the right word. “Awful,” she finished lamely.

“It’s the nicest restaurant in town.”

“That’s debatable,” Kerry retorted.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. But even so.”

“It’s not really very different from any other restaurant, tonight was just particularly bad. Anyway, Bruce likes you. He thought you did a great job. Another couple of nights hosting and you’ll start getting a few tables of your own. By summer you’ll be pulling down big bucks.”

“I’m not sure that I’m cut out to be a waitress.”

Secretly, I’d had my own doubts. But who am I to dictate my sister’s career choices?

She was watching me intently. “You don’t enjoy what you do at all anymore, do you?”

I lit a cigarette as I stepped out into the driveway. “It’s alright.”

The apartment windows were black. We headed quietly up the snowy deck stairs and into the kitchen. To our surprise Christian was sitting alone at the table, where a row of empty beer bottles formed an orderly line in the near darkness.

“You two didn’t have another row did you?” Kerry asked accusingly.

“Naw, I just prefer sleeping on the sofa at my parents’ house to my own bed.”

We stood around for a moment before Christian spoke again.

“You know how much she likes it here and all of you, right? Well tonight she actually asked if I thought Mom and Dad would let her stay in the apartment even if we split. Why the hell would she ask something like that? We keep fighting ‘cause we never get to see each other, and she seems to think that my solution to the problem is to leave her. Is it just me, or is there absolutely no discernable logic in that argument?” Then catching my eye, he quickly shifted gears, “Sorry about the beer. I’ll restock for you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“So why are you over here then,” said Kerry, arching an eyebrow reproachfully in a way that reminded me forcibly of our mother, “if you and Annie just need more time together.”

For a moment it looked like Christian was about to unload on Kerry, a decision that undoubtedly would have led to a fight capable of waking both Stark households and probably the neighbors. Instead he just shrugged, and lowering his head ran his fingers through his spiky hair. “I don’t know. It’s not supposed to be like this. You’re not supposed to meet the woman of your dreams, marry her, have the world’s most beautiful children and then never get to be with them. I’m almost twenty-five years old and I can’t manage to finish college.”

“Well you have been kind of busy, you know being a dad and stuff,” Kerry sounded more sympathetic.

“But it’s not that. I could have been finished ages ago. I just don’t know what to do. I thought I was going to write. I spent my whole life thinking I was going to write.”

“So write already.” Now Kerry sounded exasperated.

“I can’t. I’ve tried. But I just don’t have anything to say. You know? And anyway,” he added looking at Kerry, “just because you write something doesn’t mean you can earn a living. What I need is some way to take care of my family. And I keep going through stuff in my head; I could teach right? The hours are

great; I'd get my summers and holidays free to be with Annie and the girls. But I can't stand the idea. I don't want to spend my life putting up with all that shit. Look at Dad. I don't want to feel like that about my job everyday for the next thirty years. And it's not just teaching. I feel this way about everything. Law school means more time and money in school, marketing puts me smack in the middle of a lifetime sentence in corporate America. I could sell insurance or real estate, but that sounds like a new ring in Dante's *Inferno*. I could probably get work as an editor, but that would mean going back to the city and Annie doesn't want to do that."

"And neither do you," I finished for him.

Christian nodded. The strain of his situation was clearly taking a toll. His typically good-natured features and ruddy complexion had been replaced by a sallow, sunken look that was not improved by the shadowy light.

"I know it's elitist, but I never envisioned myself going to a regular job like every other regular guy. But where's the money's gonna come from if I don't? We can't live in the apartment forever. We barely fit in it now. And with both of us working we could probably afford to move into something bigger, but I don't know if we can survive both of us working. Not if we keep working opposite shifts. But neither of us wants to put the girls in daycare. It's like we're both single parents. Ona's into everything. She's practically the Energizer kid. I came home the other night and Annie was almost hysterical. It was 11:30 and Ona was still going strong. I feel so bad for Avery; it's not fair to make her suffer because we're exhausted and stressed," he paused, yanking at his hair again, then looked up at Kerry. "There are a few more in the fridge," he said gesturing toward his empty bottles.

Kerry nodded and brought three bottles to the table. She handed one to each of us, opened her own and drank deeply. "I don't think I'm ever going to get used to cold beer again," she shuddered and seated herself beside Christian putting a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I know just how you feel on the employment front. My first real night at Wendell's may very well be my last. It was ghastly."

Chris and I exchanged our secret we're laughing at Kerry look over her choice of words but neither of us commented. Instead Christian's expression changed as he looked at me. "How long have you been there now, Marty? Four or five years. Working like a trooper so you can open a place of your own. That was the dream, right?"

Kerry also turned her face toward mine. I decided to concentrate on my beer for a while. See, the thing is, I've been doing this whole restaurant gig for a long time. It started even before I'd finished high school. My first job was behind the counter at The Store. But I was never much good at running the cash register. Invariably I hit the wrong button somewhere along the way and charged the increasingly disgruntled customer one hundred fifty thousand dollars for their fifteen dollars worth of gas. So I found myself in the kitchen, very early in the morning, scrambling eggs and buttering toast.

Turns out I was good at it. I could turn breakfasts out in under five minutes, literally. Everyone was happy, especially my mom. And it was fun. Except for the morning part. The only trouble was that I could only be a short order breakfast cook during the summer; come fall it was back to school with me. So I looked for evening kitchen work and got a job washing dishes in a little Italian place downtown. After a couple of months they let me start prepping and after a year or so I was on the line. At eighteen, restaurants looked like the place to be. I liked cooking, I liked eating, working the line didn't stress me out, the money wasn't bad, and, as I pointed out to my parents when I argued against going off to college, the job security was great; people are always going to eat.

I hadn't really discovered the down sides of a food service profession then. I didn't understand that restaurant people are kind of like carnies; they have their own unique and extremely wacko culture. Nor had I noticed the chronic disorders that affect old-timers; like black lung, using Jack Daniels as mouthwash, and a general sense that life sucks. So I cavalierly set out to become a chef, fully intending to return and present gastronomic sophistication the likes of which Happy City had never imagined. Since I was tired of school, teachers and tests I avoided formal training in the culinary arts. Using some connections that my loving father had, I managed to get a position at a small and extremely exclusive café in Minerve, a small town in southern France.

To make a long story short, I spent about eight months as a member of the Peroneille family. There I learned the subtle art of sauces from Monsieur Frederic, the ancient art of sourdough from Madame Jeanine, the manly art of wine (drinking that is) from son Jean-Pierre, and the classic French art of kissing from 15-year-old daughter Marianne. I left them – love struck and twenty pounds heavier than when I'd arrived – to diversify my experience by working as a pastry chef with a friend of Frederic's in Salzburg.

I quickly learned that pastries are much more fun to eat than to make, so after several months I returned to Minerve and my surrogate family. After a few weeks of “fattening up” by Madame and with the

revelation that Marianne was now bestowing her kisses on someone else, I decided to visit Italy.

Accompanied by Jean-Pierre, I went looking for work, ideally on the Mediterranean coast. Jean-Pierre and I both learned quite a bit over that summer, but very little of it had anything to do with food, although I did stop missing Marianne's kisses quite so much. After one final short visit with the entire Peroneille family I returned home, an older, larger man.

Finding work as a chef wasn't as easy as I'd hoped. First, despite the intense scope of my education on the continent, I was only 20, just another college kid in a town with too many of them to begin with. Second, most restaurants in Happy City were not interested in hiring a chef; they wanted cooks. Even mention the word and they'd laugh you right back out into the street. But, no worries, as they say Down Under; I was full of enthusiasm. It didn't matter what title or position I held as long as I was earning money.

Rather than paying rent I fixed up, and moved into, the garage apartment that had been relegated to storage since Nanna Stark had never wanted to move in. I daydreamed about my own restaurant. In my little fantasies the Peroneille, named of course for my patron family, would recreate the country ambience of southern France. There I would develop culinary masterpieces while my partner – an attractive, clever woman with an alluring foreign accent, whose looks varied depending on my mood – would cordially greet customers and keep the dining room humming like clockwork.

However, reality hasn't resembled this dream in the least. First and foremost, I am still waiting to find my perfect partner, personally and professionally. Since I don't really have a life beyond my family and my job, I don't get much opportunity to meet people. Generally I make a point of avoiding workplace romances. When you're a male, heterosexual member of the food service industry there aren't really many dating options other than waitresses. And there are a million reasons why a cook should never get involved with a waitress. The biggest one is that screaming at your waitress/girlfriend ('cause that's what cooks do to let off steam) while trying to plate a bazillion interesting, flavorful culinary works of art, in 15 seconds or less, typically leads to the aforementioned female throwing something deadly across the kitchen at you, then quitting on the spot; which of course leaves the wait staff desperately shorthanded and everyone furious at you, the already harried and under appreciated chef.

Having actually witnessed this particular scene repeatedly in my long career as a restaurant lackey, I've never been foolish enough to land in this situation. Actually it's been pretty easy for me to avoid dating a

coworker. The bubbly, buxom coeds that boss man Bruce thinks make ideal servers, tend to see me more as a big brother type and not their own personal Brad Pitt. I'm the guy who doesn't make raunchy comments during cigarette breaks about what I could do to a woman with a body like that. I'm the guy who remembers to wish them happy birthday, who jump starts their car at 1:00 a.m. in the pouring rain, and who helps them move out of their psychotic boyfriend's apartment. It's obvious why I'm single.

Then there are the restaurants themselves. If I opened my own restaurant I'd get to do a few fun things like choosing the menu and deciding the décor, but mostly I'd spend all my time troubleshooting. Because owners of successful restaurants don't really have the luxury of worrying about the food. Nope. They get to hassle with food distributors who try to pawn off 20 lb boxes of generic strip steaks as "certified Angus" each and every delivery. Or with employees who work until you've fully trained them and then quit. People are constantly swiping food or spirits out of the storeroom; I mean, who's going to miss one box of frozen shrimp? Customers have the uncanny ability to turn any simple event into a mini-drama. And most importantly, owners never, ever get to leave. Vacations, family holidays, quiet evenings at home are nonexistent in the life of a restaurant owner/manager.

I thought about Kerry's question in the car; "You don't enjoy what you do at all anymore, do you?" She hadn't been entirely correct. I really didn't mind what I was doing, but I was pretty sure I didn't want to keep doing it. And I was certain that I never wanted to open my own restaurant.

"Dreams change," I answered dryly.

Christian nodded sympathetically.

"But you're a phenomenal cook, Marty. Isn't there some way that you could just make food for people, you know without all that other hassle?"

Kerry is a firm believer that there is always a way to have your cake and eat it too.

"I still like to cook, just not as a profession. I'll continue to prepare exquisite dinners for family and friends. Being good at something doesn't necessarily mean that you find it professionally rewarding."

Christian laughed hollowly, "Yes, and just dreaming of a profession doesn't necessarily mean that you'll be good at it. Funny how that works."

As a kid Christian had always been more comfortable in the outside world. He was good at sports; I was a klutz. He was tall, muscular, conventionally good looking, and gregarious, while I was smaller, rounder and painfully shy. Yet for all his apparent advantages, Christian has always treated me with an

inexplicable reverence. From even my earliest memories Christian has been my closest friend. And I was finding it very hard to sit by and do nothing while he was so miserable, never mind that he already had everything I could imagine ever wanting. Maybe that's why, for the first time in my life, I paid the least bit of attention to Kerry's next suggestion.

"I think we should open a rave club," she stated categorically.

Christian and I both laughed.

"I'm serious," she said, smiling at our reaction. "Think about it. We live in a town full of 18 to 22-year-olds and there's nothing to do but hang out at the bars. Most of them aren't even old enough to drink legally so they can't go out. They just throw house parties. So we have a ready-made customer base. The need is definitely there; we just have to provide the service. Set it up right and we could have underage nights that pull in the high schoolers too. The best part is we'd be improving the community by offering an activity that didn't revolve around the consumption of alcohol. We could make a fortune and be fine upstanding community members."

"Better yet, the overhead couldn't possibly be that high. Not like a restaurant where every part of the kitchen has to be stainless steel and you need high priced ventilation and refrigeration systems or fancy furniture. You could probably fund the whole thing with the money you already have saved, Martin."

Kerry's enthusiasm was growing and I noticed that Christian had stopped smiling. His brow creased as he listened thoughtfully.

"If we got creative, the décor could be really cool and cheap. Some of the low rent clubs I went to in England were brilliant. The key would be to really hype it. You know, spin it as a true European club, even hipper than a city club, right here in Happy City. We could do it together, so no one would have to deal with it all the time. It would get you out of Wendell's Martin, Christian could take classes during the day, and I can forget about becoming a waitress. Once it's open we'd each get a salary and then at year-end we could profit share, with Martin getting the lion's share until his initial investment was repaid. After that it would be a three way split."

"I'm not sure it's that simple..."

"Sure it is. Come on Martin. Remember years ago when there were no coffee shops in town, and someone tried to get Mom to start one? She thought there was no future in it right? Then that gay guy opened Café Bean and made a fortune. He ran the shop for a couple years and then sold it for a sizable

chunk of change. Now there's a coffee shop on every corner and he's retired and living in Barbados. All it takes is the gumption to *just do it*."

Christian suddenly sprang to his feet, "Hold that thought. I've got to make a pit stop." He left the kitchen swaying slightly.

"You're still looking skeptical," Kerry complained.

"You know me, a regular bah-humbug sort of guy."

"Oh piss off."

"One of the biggest flaws I see in this little plan is when do you finish college?"

Kerry shrugged and finished off her beer. "I'm not really interested in going back, you know?"

"That's stupid. You've only got a couple of semesters and then you'll walk away with the diploma. Why would you even consider not doing it?"

"You don't have a degree. Why is it so important that I get one? Just because you're some great chef doesn't mean that I can't find something that I'm good at too you know."

"I never said that you couldn't, my point is just that having already put a huge amount of time and effort, not to mention tens of thousands of dollars, into a college education it would seem sensible to sacrifice your bohemian I-only-do-what-I-want-to-do mantra and suffer through your final year. What are you going to do instead? Apart from convincing me to spend all my savings opening a rave club?"

"Actually, I do have something in mind. Mom knows this woman who's an aromatherapist, and she takes on two or three apprentices each summer. That's why I need to earn some money. She's quite well regarded in her field so working with her is very expensive."

Before we could continue the patio door slid open and Annie hopped in. She was barefoot, breathless and shivering, having obviously just run, wearing nothing but her silk pajamas, down from the apartment.

"Sorry," she whispered in a surprised voice. "I didn't think anyone would be up. Do you know where your brother is?" Her voice cracked a bit as she said this, and she looked away, biting her lip. "I don't want to leave the girls alone for more than a minute," she shivered.

"He's here," I answered trying to sound comforting. "He's in the bathroom. We were talking, I guess it got later than we realized. Sorry we kept him."

"Oh, It's fine. I thought maybe he..." a tear slipped down her cheek. If her red, puffy eyes were any indication, Annie had been crying since Christian left.

“Naw, he just needed to pull himself together.”

Annie smiled at me gratefully. And I realized, as she stood there, how much I liked her. We’d always got along well, but mostly Annie had been Christian’s wife and the girl’s mom. Our relationship to that point had been clearly defined by our familial positions.

Christian returned. “Annie, what are you doing? You’ll freeze baby.”

She started to sob, “I don’t know. You’ve never left before and I kept thinking you’d just gone out for some air and you’d be back any minute but the hours ticked by and you were still gone and I got so worried; till I had to come check on you. Now I have to get back, if the girls wake up and we aren’t there they’ll be terrified.”

“You can’t go back into the snow barefoot. Here.” Christian slipped past Kerry’s chair to where his wife stood. He looked sheepish, but happy and Annie wore a similar expression. The argument apparently was over. In a swift movement Chris lifted her into his arms.

“You can’t carry me home,” she laughed. “The steps are slick you might slip.”

“Never.” He pushed the door with one foot. “Thanks guys for listening,” he said over his shoulder to Kerry and me, “and as for Kerry’s latest scheme, she might have something this time. We’ll have to see. All things considered my judgment might not be at it’s best right now.”

Then they were gone. I stood up and pulled the door shut behind them.

“They’re too cute for me,” said Kerry yawning as she stood up. “I’m off to bed. Sweet dreams.”

Chapter 3: Skunks

A repetitive pounding woke me early the following afternoon. Sunday is my day off. And it's the day I sleep late, preferably till mid-day. The digital clock next to my head indicated the time was only 12:08, but I was never going to sleep through that din. It sounded like someone trying to knock the basement wall down with a sledgehammer. Fighting back the urge to yell some well-chosen obscenities in the general direction of the noise, wrap my head in a pillow and try going back to sleep, I stumbled out of bed and down the hall to the bathroom. The pounding caused the mirror to vibrate with each thump. There was no question; the noise was coming from Mom's studio. I finished in the bathroom and went to see what she was up to. I knocked on the door and then entered without waiting for a response.

Mom jumped as I came in, nearly dropping a large wooden mallet she'd been holding. "Martin! You scared me."

"I scared you? You're the one with the skull cleaving implement of destruction." I yawned and pointed at a large block of wood in the middle of the room, "What's that?"

"Oh, I'm just combining hobbies. You know, a little rage management with sculpture. My self-realization group thinks I have rage issues, so they suggested beating on stuff. Breaking old dishes or throwing glass bottles, that sort of thing, but only in a safe environment, of course, where no one can get hurt and the mess can be cleaned up. I don't have dishes that I want to destroy and B just took the recycling away last week. Anyway cleaning up your own rage outburst seems to defeat the purpose somehow, so I decided to try beating the hell out of this piece of wood. I was hoping a shape would surface from the dents and chips."

She stood staring at the wood in silence for a moment. Maybe she had noticed some inspirational form emerging, but it just looked like a brutalized stump to me. She looked back at me, picked the mallet from the floor and whacked the block again.

"Maybe I should use a few pegs to groove it, but then I'll need to use a more controlled hit, not these power strokes I've been doing. I'm not sure what the rage release value of that would be." She laughed and I smiled through another yawn. She looked surprised, "Did I wake you?"

Now, that had to be one of the stupidest questions anyone had ever asked me, but I couldn't really tell her, so instead I shrugged in a it's-no-big-deal sort of way, "I needed to get up anyway. I have to call Bruce

and make sure he didn't do something drastic after he calmed his nerves by drinking too much. You have heard about Wendell's?"

"It made the front page of the *Sentinel*. Kerry didn't start the fire did she?" she asked with a wicked chuckle.

I chuckled too. "It was an overloaded salamander. Kerry was in the other room at the time dazzling people with her beauty and charm." I watched Mom rub her fingers across the surface of the wood, then finding whatever she'd been looking for she raised her mallet again. "Mom," I asked hesitantly, "don't you think that rage therapy in which you destroy something and a sculpture project are sort of mutually exclusive by definition?"

Her face creased thoughtfully for a moment. "You're probably right," she agreed, "but it seems so pointless to hack something into pieces just for the sake of hacking something up, you know?"

"Yeah. Well if you decide to keep hacking, do me a favor and put on some goggles or something ok? I don't want to be the guy who pulls the three-inch shard out of your eyeball."

"Yes, that makes sense."

She began rummaging through a drawer and pulled out a pair of safety glasses. I turned to leave, then paused.

"Mom, do you think you have rage issues?"

She held a metal chisel at the edge of the wood. "Not really. No."

"So why does your group?"

"Oh we were discussing our childhoods. Mine sort of makes people gasp. I guess they just assume foster kid equals rage."

"But if you don't think it's an issue..." I replied.

"Well, something seems to be an issue, Martin. I figured it wouldn't hurt to give this a try."

"And?"

"And now I'm going back to sculpture."

I left the intrepid artisan behind and made my way to the kitchen for a pot of coffee, the Sunday comics and a cigarette, not necessarily in that order. It was one of those tricky March days that we get in the northeast – the sky was a high clear blue and the sun beat down with unexpected warmth. Birds trilling noisily were accompanied by the steady drip of melting ice and snow from the gutters. The snow was

nearly gone, only patches remained in shady spots, and the grass seemed to be turning green as I watched. To an inexperienced person it appeared that spring had sprung, but in fact, this was little more than a mirage. By tomorrow the landscape would be cold and gray and remain so for weeks.

With a cigarette in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other I stood on the patio barefoot, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, soaking up the sun. Not only had the snow melted off the deck planks, they were dry and pleasantly warm. I felt a pang of gratitude to my mother for waking me, if I'd slept till late afternoon I'd have missed this. But even in the glorious weather it was too cold to stay out like that for long. I returned to the kitchen, refilled my mug, scrounged a few stale muffins Mom had brought home from The Store, and settled down at the table with the disassembled paper. Usually I only read fun stuff in the Sunday paper – the comics, celebrity gossip, the sports page – but today I picked up the front page expecting to see a full-color picture of Wendell's in all its code red glory. Instead, there was a shot of Max Payne's old dairy over which appeared the headline: *Homeowners Fly the Coop Over Poultry Farm*. On the lower right side of the page was a single column article entitled *Dining Spot Gets Hot*.

I scanned it quickly: Happy City's trendiest restaurant. Blah, blah, blah. Anxious customers were kept well apprised of the situation. Blah, blah. "Bruce was very professional in the way he handled the entire situation, he kept his staff in control, was helpful to the emergency personnel, and very reassuring to his customers," said Happy City mayor Barry Wallace, who just happened to be dining there with his wife and friends when the fire broke out. Blah, blah, blah. Emergency services responded quickly to the alarm but found the fire under control, an excellent example of how strict Borough regulations concerning public safety equipment like sprinklers and alarms help reduce the overall impact of incidents like this one.

What crap. I don't know what I'd expected. They certainly weren't going to write something that said it was a puny little fire that anyone could have put out with a fire extinguisher. Or that the police and firemen stood around looking at stuff for an hour just to waste time. Or anything else that bore the slightest resemblance to reality. I dipped a date and cheese kolatchen into my coffee and picked up the funnies.

As I finished breakfast, Kerry and B came in accompanied by B's friends Zoë and Heather. ET wandered in after the rest. B greeted me with a hug and Zoë followed suit. I think she has a bit of a crush on me. "Isn't it gorgeous, Martin. It's spring. I can't believe you actually slept more than half the day away," B cried.

“I didn’t know it was so nice or I probably wouldn’t have. Where have you been? I asked uncomfortably aware that Zoë had taken the seat closest to mine.

“We’d planned to spend the afternoon at the mall, but we’ve decided not to waste the day indoors. So we’re going hiking instead. Do you want to come?” B said as she traded a pair of dressy flats for hiking boots.

“Yeah, come on Martin. It will be fun,” Zoë chimed in.

“We thought Annie and Chris might want to come along too, but their car’s gone. Chris didn’t have to work today did he?” B jumped to her feet, all set.

“I’ll walk over and see if Annie’s at home with the girls. They’ll probably come even if Christian can’t,” Kerry said with a concerned look at me. “Or maybe we could just take Avery and Ona. You know, give Annie a break.”

“Do you think Daddy will go with us?” B wondered thoughtfully. “He used to take us hiking. It’s too nice to waste the day away on the Internet. It’s not healthy to look at all the stuff he looks at and never go there anyway.” She marched down the hall toward Dad’s study.

“What does Mr. Stark do on the internet?” Zoë asked with a giggle. “I’m not sure I want to think about what B would consider an unhealthy site.”

Since Kerry and B had each gone off in search of other family members, I was the only one left to answer. I waited, half expecting ET to help me out, but he didn’t.

So sort of mumbling stupidly I replied, “Places. He searches for places.” She looked confused so I tried explaining. “The other day he found the ancestral home of William Marshall. You know pictures and stuff about when each bit had been built. A few weeks ago it was some castle in France he’d read about in a Barbara Tuchman book. He says he likes getting to see what the places he’s read about look like. You know, for real.”

No one responded.

“Well, if I’m joining you I’d better get some shoes and a jacket,” I said getting to my feet, happy for an excuse to escape Zoë’s gaze.

Back in the basement, I decided to suggest to Mom that she come along too.

“Where are you thinking of going?”

“I don’t really know.”

“When are you planning to be back?”

“I don’t know that either. Do you want to come then?”

“Hmm. It sounds nice but I have an Aqua-Chi class at four, and I should stop at The Store.”

“You can skip your class and do your check-up on The Store on your way home. I think Dad’s coming.”

She hesitated for a moment, then turned back to her sculpture. It looked much the same as it had before. “Next time. Your father will never go anyway.” Then as an afterthought she added, “Thanks for thinking of me, though.” She came over and smoothed my hair back from my face just the way she had for as long as I could remember.

“My Martin. My little man. Still the most considerate one I’ve ever met.”

“Yeah, you can see the good it’s doing me,” I joked dryly.

She shrugged, obviously at a loss for words. “Maybe if you took some classes or something. You don’t really have much of an opportunity to meet women...”

I bent down and kissed her forehead. She’s one of the few people I’m tall enough to do that to. “We’ll see.”

To everyone’s great surprise, B had better luck persuading Dad to play in the sun than I’d had with Mom. As we stood in the driveway working out how we’d best fit into the available vehicles, Chris and Annie returned from lunch out with the girls, and happily accepted the hiking invite. By the time the eleven of us finally reached the nearest mountain trail, the afternoon sun had lost its intensity and a slight chill was creeping back into the air. But even in its decline the day was perfect and the woods were truly beautiful.

B and ET, each carrying a small girl piggyback, charged noisily ahead, followed closely by Christian. They were playing some sort of knights and evil wizard game. Dad, Zoë, Kerry and I came next, making our way slowly and for the most part silently, along the trail. Annie and Heather were bringing up the rear, chatting about Heather’s future plans.

As the trail grew steeper and narrower we began to string out. I was starting to think a pit stop was in order when I turned a sharp corner and found the party’s intrepid leaders resting on a sunny boulder.

“Why can’t the horses climb up the mountain?” I heard Avery ask B.

“Because the wizard turned the horses into people. The people can hold your hand and help you climb up, but they can’t carry you. You’re too heavy,” B explained.

“Daddy will carry us,” Avery answered matter-of-factly.

Christian smiled at her confidence. “I can’t carry both of you at the same time. We should have brought the backpack, then Ona could ride.”

Avery scowled at the prospect of climbing the steepest section of the trail, but Ona was already toddling ahead, stumbling over roots and stones. Chris leapt down after her, as B and ET stood up. B offered Avery her hand just as Avery saw me.

“No thank you” she said primly. “I will walk with Uncle Martin.”

“Well, ok then,” B replied, trying not to laugh.

I hauled my out-of-shape self the rest of the way up the mountain with Avery’s little hand clasping my finger. By the time we reached the summit we were both huffing and puffing, but she never complained. As we approached the overlook Avery cried, “Ooohhh.” She stopped walking, tugged my arm and pointed out at the vast valley stretching below us. “Can we see my house?” she asked with a nervous giggle.

“Let’s look,” I said swinging her into my arms and moving closer to the ledge.

Christian was holding Ona; who was fighting like a tiger to get free of him. She wriggled and kicked, shrieking and bellowing angrily at her father. “She’s utterly fearless,” Chris stated in dismay. “If I put her down she runs straight for the edge.”

B and ET were standing guard, worried looks on their faces.

“Maybe I’ll just keep walking. The creek’s not too far down the path. Ona will like throwing things in the water, and I’d rather she got a little wet than tried to fly up here. We’ll wait for everyone along the water.” His eyes lingered on Avery for a moment, “I could take her too.”

Christian clearly had as much kid as he could handle with Ona but I admired his fatherly instincts. He didn’t want to take the little one away from the danger, only to leave the older one in jeopardy.

“I’ll make sure Ave stays back from the edge,” I assured Chris as her little body shivered at the very thought of it.

“Thanks, Martin.” He strode off, trying to distract Ona, who anticipating that her father was taking her away from the thing that most interested her, had begun wailing desperately.

They had just disappeared into the trees when Dad arrived puffing at the top. A few minutes later the others followed, still deep in conversation, and I noticed Annie looking around for Christian and Ona.

“I heard Ona yelling,” she said to no one in particular, “is she ok?”

“She’s fine Annie,” ET replied. “Chris took her down to the creek.”

“Good Lord. She’ll get soaked. What was he thinking?”

The rest of us watched as Annie rushed down the path, but since Dad was still out of breath we didn’t follow her immediately.

“Are you alright Grando?”

Avery pulled out of my grasp and joined Dad, a concerned expression on her small face. He nodded and smiled reassuringly at her.

“I ought to come out here everyday after school and make this climb. I’m too young to be so extraordinarily winded. There was a time when I could have run right up here without breaking a sweat.”

He shook his head in dismay and speaking to B and her friends added, “Don’t ever get old, ladies.”

“As far as I can tell getting old is far superior to the alternative,” B retorted.

Everyone chuckled. Dad took Avery’s hand and they made their way slowly down the path. Several of the others followed them.

“Did you know that the Roman Legionaries – you know about the Romans right? Well the legionaries had to be able to walk...” Dad’s voice grew more distant.

I walked to the very edge of the lookout and peered down. Below me a small lake lay nestled at the foot of the ridge. I intentionally lagged behind. Even though it seemed completely irreverent to spoil the fresh clean air with a cigarette, I was dying to light up. It appeared that Zoë had a similar thought, because when I looked up from the view, she was perched on a nearby rock, inhaling deeply.

“I don’t usually smoke around adults, but your dad caught me having one outside the library the other day at school, so there’s no point in pretending.”

She offered me one from her pack, but I declined pulling out my own.

“Did he bust you?”

“Naw. He was pretty cool about it. He confiscated my pack and told me if he caught me smoking at school again he’d have no choice but to write me up. But he said that since I’m over eighteen he thought I should have the right to do what I wanted.”

“Seems reasonable. Does B smoke?”

“No, not usually. I’ve seen her pick one up at a party you know, but not often. She thinks it smells bad. She complains about your clothes, before she steals them.”

I laughed.

“Your dad told me he used to smoke. I guess he quit a long time ago.”

“Yep, when I was a kid he smoked a pipe sometimes. I love the smell of pipe tobacco. He stopped smoking cigarettes ‘cause it was too expensive.”

Zoë’s face screwed up in a quizzical expression.

“He’d light up, and let it sit in the ashtray while he was reading. By the time he remembered it would be burned out.”

She laughed. “Only Mr. Stark.”

We had a good time hiking the rest of the trail together. I feigned oblivion when she intentionally brushed against my arm, and ignored a flirtatious challenge to chase her and reclaim my dropped glove. When we reached the others they were grouped around the cars in the parking lot. Kerry was holding her cell phone out to me.

“Bruce called. He thought I might be able to reach you. He wants to talk to you as soon as possible and he’d like to know why the hell you can’t get a cell phone like every other normal person on the planet.”

“Bruce can take a flying...”

I saw Avery, her head leaning against Annie’s shoulder, watching me.

“Leap,” I finished anticlimactically.

“Just ring him up. He’s already called me like four times.”

I took the phone just as I noticed Ona motoring away down a side trail yelling unintelligibly, her arms outstretched. I pointed in her direction but Christian shook his head saying “It’s ok. The path is flat. Let her run a little, maybe it’ll wear her out. I’m keeping an eye on her.”

“I get her,” Avery said as Annie put her down to race after Ona.

I dialed Bruce’s number. He picked up on the second ring, “Hey?”

“It’s Martin. Kerry said you needed to talk to me.”

“Man, where the hell have you been all day, Jesus. Did you see the paper? You were right. I couldn’t buy publicity like this. I sound like a 9/11 hero.

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Mmmmm.”

“The kitchen looks great. We won’t have any down time at all. The sprinkler people are coming on Tuesday morning. And the paper says they’ll run like a public service piece that day saying it’s business as usual. You guys must have worked half the night. If we’re as busy as I think we’re gonna be, I’ll have to think about a bonus. You think twenty bucks is good?”

Twenty bucks? Why bother I thought. But aloud all I said was, “It’s better than nothing.”

“Exactly – the thing is, we may get some newcomers this week, so I want you to do it up right, the very best Wendell’s can offer.”

“You cut my budget by a third.”

“That was before. This is really important; we need to have the showcase stuff out there.”

“I didn’t have the money to buy showcase ingredients.”

“That’s why I wanted to talk to you. See if you can order things tomorrow morning and have them add it to the Tuesday delivery. Tell ‘em we lost stuff in the fire, water damage, shit like that. You can take care of it. Hey, I’ve gotta run. I’ll talk to you later.”

I handed the phone back to Kerry. “What an asshole,” I said quietly, as Avery rushed back to us.

“Ona’s found a kitty. Can we bring it home?”

In a single movement every head turned in the toddler’s direction just in time to see her forcing her way through the scrubby bushes and brush lining the path in pursuit of a dark creature marked by a distinctive white stripe down its back.

“Ona, wait.”

“It’s not a kitty.”

“Stop.”

“No Ona. No!”

Annie took off like a shot. Before the rest of us had started moving she had scooped Ona off her feet and was jogging back up the trail, away from the groggy skunk.

“Did it get her?”

“I don’t smell anything.”

“If it had sprayed we’d know it.”

“Maybe it was a baby, little skunks can’t spray, you know.”

“No it’s too early in the season to be a baby.”

Ona clung to her mother, apparently aware that disaster had been barely averted. Avery stared wide-eyed at Christian.

“Was it a real skunk Daddy? A smelly skunk like Sam in my story book?”

“Yes, honey it was a real skunk. But it’s not like Sam. When skunks think they’re in danger they spray – and it smells terrible. The foul smell keeps other animals from hurting them. And if Ona had caught it, the skunk probably would have bitten her. You should never try to touch wild animals.”

“But the smelly skunk would not have bited Ona. She wouldn’t have hurted it, she only wanted to pet it.”

ET knelt beside Avery, “We know that Ona wouldn’t have hurt the skunk, but the skunk didn’t know that. Skunks are afraid of people, even little people.”

Annie and Christian exchanged tired smiles. “Ona-baby. You keep us hopping, that’s for sure.” He pulled Annie and Ona into a one armed embrace, kissing Annie’s forehead. “I sure am glad you’re so zippy, those legs come in handy.”

“Brrrr. I’m freezing,” Kerry complained rolling her eyes at our brother and his spouse. “Can we go home now?”

Despite the distinctly cold late afternoon air our entire hiking party headed to The Store for ice cream. We were crowded into the back, licking cones and making a huge commotion when Mom arrived. I suspect that seeing us all enjoying ourselves so thoroughly made her disappointed that she’d declined our invitation, and that, in turn, made her irritable; because in greeting she accosted B.

“I’ve been trying to reach you all afternoon. Didn’t you have your phone on?”

“Why would I take my phone? The whole point was to get away.”

“What if one of the little girls had fallen, or if your father had keeled over,” she threw him a disparaging look, “dangerous activities are exactly the sort of thing cell phones are ideal for.”

“The little girls aren’t my responsibility and we weren’t scaling Everest,” B muttered under her breath. Aloud she said, “Why didn’t you try Kerry, she always has hers.”

“I’ve forgotten her new number. While you’re here Kerry dear, write it down and put it on my office desk.”

“What was so urgent?” Dad asked.

“It wasn’t urgent. I forgot to put something out for dinner tonight, and I wasn’t sure how many to cook for anyway. I wanted to find out who was going to be home and have someone get it started.”

“Annie and I can make dinner tonight, Mom. We’ll pick stuff up on the way home. Are you guys staying?” Christian asked Zoë and Heather.

The girls shrugged and looked from one another to B.

“I have a better idea,” Dad announced. He was being unusually sociable this evening. “Why don’t I order pizza? Then no one has to cook or spend much time cleaning up.”

Dad held his hand up to stop Chris’s arguments “I appreciate the offer and I’m sure your mother would be happy to have you prepare dinner sometime, but tonight I’m buying pizza for everyone and that’s final.”

Two hours later the noise level in our dining room reached a dull roar as we crowded around the various pizza boxes strewn across the table. Conversation turned to the newspaper’s poultry farm article.

“Only Max would be audacious enough to threaten the community with a thousand bird poultry operation.”

“I’m not sure it’s just a threat, Oliver. He might be serious.”

“Oh Pishaw. If Max was running a full-scale farming operation again he wouldn’t have nearly enough time to antagonize the borough council. You know as well as I do, he’s just making a point.”

“My dad says that if the poultry farm goes in, his property value will drop by at least \$100,000 because of the smell,” Zoë added.

“\$100,000 seems like a stretch to me, but values will drop no question,” Christian said. “I noticed driving past the other day that the farm next to Max’s has a big *this project funded by Central Bank* sign.”

Ann nodded, “Word at The Store is that there’s a four-car garage, 5,500 square foot minimum for houses built in *Happy Heights*.”

“Happy Heights? You’re not serious?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“If you ask me,” I joined in. “Max is getting everyone all hot and bothered about a huge poultry farm so that when he starts spreading manure next month it won’t seem so bad by comparison.”

“I think you’re right, Martin. But it’s a risky plan. Did you read the article? He’s got the council worked into a frenzy. Marsden and Lenz have proposed a plan to the County Commissioners to rezone the

Borough and all adjoining townships to ban any agricultural business involving livestock. But they've included a provision so that recreational livestock is allowed."

"People get to keep their horses."

"Exactly."

"It wouldn't help them with Max anyway, would it? He's had the farm for generations, wouldn't he be grandfathered in?"

"Yes and no. He can continue to farm in the manner that he has to this point, but according to their plan he'd have to seek permission to expand into a poultry business."

"Not necessarily," Chris interjected, "only if a new structure is required."

"Well he'd have to build a new building to house a thousand chickens wouldn't he?" said Kerry. "So it sounds like they've got him beat no matter what. Even without the new proposal, Max would have to get a building permit and the borough'll never give him one."

"But only part of his property is in the borough, the rest is in Payne Township, and he's one of three township supervisors." B mimicked Max's gruff voice, "There were Paynes in charge around here long before anyone'd even thought of Happy City and its college."

Everyone at the table laughed.

"He told me that if the county supports Marsden's plan, then he'll hire a lawyer and fight. He says the plan is in violation of the state Right to Farm Act. I talked to him yesterday morning when I was working," B finished.

"Speaking of working," my mother looked at me apologetically. "Can I beg a favor Martin? I need someone to help me out with the baking in the morning. Darla may work out as a waitress and counter person, but she needs more training. Could you possibly give me a few hours tomorrow? I'm going to run another help wanted ad this week. Oh and I need to know what hours you want B."

My sister nodded.

"Yeah Mom, I can help out in the morning," I said snatching a mushroom off the corner of a pizza slice and tossing it in my mouth. "But I'll have to call in an order for Wendell's around eight. Bruce wants a showcase menu this week."

That was how I found myself rolling pie dough at The Store early Monday. I propped the swinging doors into the kitchen open to better eavesdrop on the local gossip that was liberally exchanged at the

front counter. Most of the customers were old men, who showed up there for breakfast or coffee every morning but Sunday.

While I worked my mother shadowed Darla, growing more dissatisfied and tight-lipped as the hours passed.

“What can I get for you?” Darla asked a tall, lean, white haired man in denim overalls.

“Same thing as yesterday and the day before that and the day before that,” Max Payne replied sounding mildly irritated. “What pies are fresh this morning?”

He looked through the open door into the kitchen.

“By god, is that Martin making pies back there? Ann you aren’t getting high falutin on us are you? You’re not gonna let him serve me my eggs with picante sauce or chutney or some such nonsense.”

He dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, “Not that I’m complaining about the pies. Your mother makes a fine pie, but they aren’t the same as yours boy. Not at all.”

Mom shook her head and chuckled. “Well, Max you can eat Martin’s pies whenever you like, just have dinner at Wendell’s.”

“Now why would I do a thing like that? A man’d have to be made of money. And half the stuff on the menu’s not even recognizable. You don’t know what you’re getting till it’s sitting on the plate in front of you. Pah.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the others sitting at the counter. I dusted flour off my hands and went over to where Max was seated. “Chutney seems to have made it into your vocabulary though,” I said quietly to him.

“Martin, the trout I had the other night was a delight, chutney or no. I expect that’s another of your own recipes. As for the red currant pie, I haven’t had a slice since I was a boy. My grandmother used to make it quite often, but my mother never cared for currants, and Gladys couldn’t have baked a pie that came out of a box. Worthless in the kitchen that woman was, but I do miss her company.”

“Well the peach should be cool enough to eat about the time you’ve finished your breakfast. The apple and shoofly are ready now.”

Max gulped his coffee and puffed in disgust. “Shoofly pie, now that’s a poor excuse for food. I’ll have the peach. How long does a man have to wait for his breakfast around here? You need to find some good help, Ann. I could have fried those eggs myself by now.”

He loves to get my mother going, but even Max could see that he had just touched a sore spot when Mom sort of growled to herself and strode into the kitchen to find Darla.

“Heads are gonna roll now,” he laughed. “So, you’re still working for that jack-ass Miller, eh? I saw his quote in the paper yesterday. Too bad a fire truck didn’t run over that fussy little vehicle of his. Years ago – when he was still in school – he tooted around in a Trans Am his old man bought for him. He thought he was pretty hot shit back then too,” Max snorted.

“I’d’ve thought you’d be tired of taking a back seat to Miller by now. When are you going to strike out on your own, put all those fancy hog troughs to shame? It’s not money that’s holding you back is it? I might know of someone who’d be interested in being a silent partner.” He cast me a knowing look, “Especially if they got their suppers on the house.”

“Supper I’d be alright with, but I might lose money on the pie.”

Mom returned with Max’s standard order on a large plate. Her scowl as she handed him two eggs, bacon, sausage, pancakes and toast elicited a meek “Thank you, Ma’am,” from Max and sent me back to the kitchen and my pies.

While Max ate, Tom Shenk, another old-timer, seated himself at the counter. “Darla!” Mom called once, but after a moment she filled Tom’s coffee cup and took his order herself. Tom sipped his coffee in silence for a moment then spoke to Max. “That was quite a piece in yesterday’s paper, Max. If you’re not careful someone’s likely to shoot you.”

“Aw, Tom, this is Happy City. We don’t have shootings here. There are all sorts of ordinances against that. Anyway, shooting would be too clean, they’d rather committee me to death, takes longer.”

Tom chuckled and sipped his coffee.

“Connie says she heard they took Wade to the hospital the other night. How’s he doing?”

“How the hell should I know?” replied Max wiping his mouth with his hand. “Haven’t spoken to the lousy son-of-a-Dutchman in seventeen years.”

“I know, I know. Not since he sold his half of the farm to the developers and destroyed your life. But for heaven’s sake Max he’s your brother. From what Connie heard it sounded serious, a stroke maybe. You must know how he’s doing, I see you and his boy Jeff having lunch together right here at least once a week.”

“The boy can’t help what his father is. What kinda person’d I be if I held that against him?”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t see Jeff. I’m saying he must’ve told you ‘bout Wade.”

“We don’t discuss Wade much.”

“I don’t imagine you do, but this isn’t ordinary gossip.” Tom sounded exasperated.

“That’s what comes of selling off your land and retiring. Man hasn’t done a day’s work in twenty years. I can remember when Wade could out run, out lift, just about out anything any man, includin’ me. Now he plays golf. Golf for god’s sake. Can you imagine? He should have kept the dairy right where it was. Jeff’s spent the last fifteen years rebuilding what we already had. Why? ‘Cause his father turned out to be a greedy, lazy bastard, that’s why. Did you see what I ate for breakfast? I’ve eaten eggs and bacon every morning for seventy-six years I haven’t had a heart attack. It’s the work that does it.”

Darla arrived with Tom’s order and Max’s pie. She put the plates down and carried the old ones back into the kitchen.

“So it wasn’t a stroke then?” Tom said staring at his plate.

“Naw, Jeff called me when they first took Wade to the hospital about 3:00 p.m. I went over and sat with Jeff through the night so his mother could go home and get some sleep. Mary’s not well you know. I didn’t want Jeff to be there alone if something tragic happened. But Wade made it. The doctors are doing some tests and he’ll probably have to have that angio-whatever thing they do. Then they’ll put him on a diet and send him off to one of those health clubs so he can exercise regular and he’ll be right as rain.”

Tom shook his head in disbelief, “You didn’t even talk to him. You were in the hospital and you didn’t say a word to your own brother?”

“He was in a coma. Wouldn’t have done much good to tell him he’s a jackass if he wasn’t conscious.” Max tossed a few dollars on the counter and stood up. “Tell Connie to call Mary. I’m sure she’d appreciate the gesture. I’ve got to go find a part for the spreader – the damn worthless piece of junk. It won’t be long before it’s time to fertilize my fields. I’m sure that will cause quite an uproar again this year.” He smiled widely at the thought, and strode toward the door pausing just long enough to help himself to a toothpick. With a final “Thank you Ann,” Max departed.

Several hours later I found myself carrying a huge roast beef sandwich with fries, gravy and two slices of my own pie to the traditional Stark family table in the back. Consuming the food with relish, I glanced at the front page of a *Sentinel* someone had left on the seat next to mine.

“Drug Line Dries Up.” Assistant District Attorney Bradley Kaufman informed reporters that a nearly ten month undercover investigation had culminated in the arrest of four men over the weekend. According to Kaufman investigators suspect that these individuals and their associates are responsible for more than 80 percent of the illegal substances available in the Happy City area. “I’d look to see even more arrests in the days to come. From the reports I’ve seen so far, we’ve managed to track these guys at every level – this is a serious victory in Happy City’s War on Drugs.”

I scanned the remaining article. “Just as I suspected,” I murmured to myself, kicking the paper out of view “they spend months taking down a couple of college kids who probably haven’t sold enough stuff to pay a semester’s tuition yet.”

“Talking to yourself is not a good sign, Marty.”

Bruce strode toward me with his usual seventies gait. I ignored his remark and pointed to the paper.

“Have you ever noticed that despite all the hype they only ever manage to arrest small time criminals in this town?”

It took him a moment to get up to speed before answering quietly “I hope it stays that way. I’m too old to go looking for a new supplier.”

Bruce grinned as he settled into the seat across from mine, helping himself to a few fries.

“Is everything taken care of for tomorrow?”

“I placed the orders if that’s what you mean. I had to pull out all the stops to get Sipco to agree but they did – eventually. Have you called Isaac to let him know he still has a job?”

Bruce laughed. “Are you joking?”

“No. It’s hard to run a kitchen without a trained prep.”

“Yeah let’s get him back. Maybe this time he’d like to poison a customer – put me out of business outright. Do you know how much this fire’s gonna increase my insurance premiums?”

I shook my head. I didn’t really care but since he’s my boss I tried to look sympathetic.

“Too much,” he replied emphatically, as if that inane statement expressed some otherwise incomprehensible gravity.

“I still need someone to prep,” I continued not bothering to disguise my adolescent eye-roll. “Especially if we’re producing ‘showcase stuff’. And I’m definitely not training someone new, if there’s someone with experience around. Anyway, it was his first real rush, it threw him he’ll be better next...”

“We don’t need him. Eddie’s back. I talked to him this morning.” Bruce flashed his widest grin. “It’ll be like old times.”

I shook my head, amazed by Bruce’s short memory. “The last time I saw Eddie he was waving goodbye from the passenger side of his girlfriend’s car about forty-five minutes before homecoming rush started. And as I recall, he liberated a case of Delmonicos and several bottles of pricey champagne before he left. At the time you were quoted saying that you hoped his psycho-bitch-girlfriend stabbed him in the chest with an ice-pick.”

Bruce swiped my last fry and chuckled cheerfully, “I did didn’t I? She pushed him through a plate glass window you know. Anyway that’s old news. Eddie’s a good cook. He can handle things when you’re not working. With him back I’m considering opening on Sundays. He thinks that would be cool. And he has some ideas for the menu.”

The last thing I wanted was someone else tweaking my menu. “Funny you should mention that,” I said handing him a piece of paper. “I’ve been working on some seasonal updates. It’s time to pull the Baekeoffe and Cassoulet. The Scallops Bretonne should go too; it’s been on the menu for years.”

“And it’s staying there. It’s one of our most popular dishes.”

“It’s boring.”

“So what?” he answered reading over the list. “What the hell is Gras Gris del’Auzonnet?”

“Snail stuffed mushrooms,” I responded dryly.

He gagged. “That sounds awful.”

“You loved them,” I said keeping my voice indifferent. We’d played this game before. “They were on the mayor’s birthday tray last fall.”

“Those little mushroom cap things?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“They were good. Snails eh?”

“Uh huh.”

“Hmmm. But Poussin in Cherry Sauce? And Pissadiliere? Who knows what that is? It’s all too French.”

“That’s what I do,” I said not bothering to disguise the edge in my voice.

His eyes flicked around The Store. “I’d hardly call this,” he gestured at the pies on the counter, “French. So come down off your high horse. Eddie suggested we add a few more California Cuisine type offerings. And I think it’s a good idea.”

I wanted to suggest that he try running a profitable restaurant with Eddie in charge instead of me. The man definitely could cook; you’d get no arguments from me there. And he’d come up with some fine recipes too. His crab quiche on a potato dill crust was one of our most popular summer dishes. But reliable, consistent and responsible were not adjectives one would use for Ed. Neither was honest.

I took the paper Bruce was holding out to me, studied it for a moment and scratched off several selections. “Ok, how about a Veal Ragout with Asparagus and Mushrooms. And maybe Halibut with a Zucchini and Tomato Tien?”

Bruce nodded smiling, convinced he’d out maneuvered me. “I knew you’d pull something more reasonable right out of the proverbial chef’s hat. The smoked trout, scallops Bretonne and lamb with those funny beans...”

“Rosemary Lamb with Fava Beans.”

“Yeah, that. I want them all to stay. And this Lavender Coeur a la Crème stuff sounds like a crowd pleaser. Oh, I want the onion-pie-appetizers you did last summer back on the menu too. I love those things. What’s in them again?”

“Roquefort, prosciutto and walnuts.”

“And lots of onions.”

“Yes. So what’s your thought on the snails?”

“We’ll try them as a special – see how they do. But come up with some other name. I hate trying to pronounce stuff in French.”

“How about Snail Stuffed Mushrooms.”

Bruce laughed again. “That’s what I like about you Martin. You’ve got a sense of humor. Snail Stuffed Mushrooms. That’s great.”

He rose straightening his watch. “I’ve gotta run. You and Eddie come up with some other options together. By the way, do you know a girl by the name of Katherine Prue, calls herself Kat? Said you two went to school together. Sort of looks like a health-food girl to me – a very well endowed health-food girl,

if you know what I mean. I'm gonna put her straight on the floor; she's waited tables at a bunch of fancy sounding places."

He stroked his chin in what he obviously thought was a *GQ* sort of pose, clearly thinking about Kat. Then returning abruptly to the here and now he added, "Oh and could you get in a little early tomorrow. The sprinkler system guys said they'd be there about nine, but that's when I work out. Thanks, Marty."

I watched as he left the building and waited for the sound of his car peeling out onto the street. It definitely was time for a career change. I tried imagining myself in the office of an ultra-modern, space age style night club, counting money while muscle bound thugs guarded the door. The thought cheered me up considerably. It was completely absurd, like watching a caricature of myself; and yet somewhere deep under all rational thought a little voice shouted, "Dare You."