

## **Stark Raving Mad**

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## 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: Little Sisters

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 turned the car 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. The fact is that my younger sister Kerry recently set in motion a chain of events that not one of us could have imagined even a few months ago. 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 they’d had a bit too much holiday cheer. But I’m jumping ahead of myself.

Last fall, Kerry did a study abroad stint during 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. After a whirlwind trip home for Christmas (she was here for less than 72 hours), Kerry spent

the remaining holiday with her roommate Diana's family and then moved in with some guy named Dennis (who we all assumed was her newest boyfriend) 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 an 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.

Around the first week in March the entire Stark clan had ceased to have even the slightest interest in anything she wanted to discuss. Mom seemed to think that it was time Kerry stopped moping and got on with her life. And she must have said as much, 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 slow. 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?” our youngest sister, 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.

“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 its 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 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. We heard an engine shutting off outside and I remembered that my mother’s vehicle hadn’t been in the garage, just as the kitchen door opened then 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 that Saturday evening; 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 the prep cook, Isaac. He’d been working since Christmas, but it was his first real rush. He started setting up salads for tables that already had 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 Ker was a novice 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 his breathing became labored.

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 pausing 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,” I replied glancing up at the black apartment windows. The apartment above the garage had been where I was living until my brother Christian and his soon-to-be wife Annie found out they were expecting. Now it’s home to them and their two little girls.

Kerry and I 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 in a reproachful 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. 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 her. 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,” 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. I came home the other night and Annie was almost hysterical. It was 11:30 and Ona was still going strong,” 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.

Some fifteen years ago, my father decided to buy a little gas station and ice cream shop as a summer business. 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.

So, my first job was behind the counter at The Store, our name for Stark's. But I was never much good at running the cash register. So I found myself in the kitchen, very early in the morning, scrambling eggs and buttering toast.

And I was good at it. I could turn breakfasts out in under five minutes, literally. Everyone was happy 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 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. 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. Since I was tired of school, teachers and tests I avoided formal training in the culinary arts. With some help from my father's agent, Audrey, 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 – 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. I returned home an older, larger man.

Back in Happy City, 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 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 my folks bought the house. I daydreamed about my own restaurant. In my little fantasies the Peroneille, named 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.

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 girlfriend/waitress ('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.

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.

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, finally returning my siblings' gazes.

Christian nodded sympathetically.

"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.

## Chapter 2: Spring Skunks

“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. 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 high schoolers too. We’d be improving the community by offering an activity that doesn’t revolve around the consumption of alcohol. We could make a fortune and be fine upstanding community members.”

“Better yet, the overhead’s not so bad. 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. We 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.”

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 time 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. 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. 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 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’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. 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 goggles or something. 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 an 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, B came in from outside accompanied by her friends Zoë and Heather. Kerry and ET followed them.

Elliot Tressler, ET for short, 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.

So, ET 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.

“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.

“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 anyway.” She marched down the hall toward Dad’s study.

“What does Mr. Stark do on the internet?” Zoë asked with a giggle.

Since Kerry and B had each gone off in search of other family members, I was the only one left to answer. 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."

Zoë looked unconvinced.

"I should grab a jacket," I said getting to my feet.

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 wryly.

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 rest 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 stretched 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 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 intentionally lagged behind, walking to the very edge of the lookout and peering down at a small lake nestled against the foot of the ridge. Even though it seemed completely irreverent, I was dying to light up. When I finally caught up with the others, they were grouped around the cars and 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 and Christian shook his head, "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 and 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 indicating we open for 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?"

I grimaced, "It's better than nothing."

"Exactly – the thing is, we may get some newbies 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 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.

"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.”

Mom 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?”

### Chapter 3: Truth or Dare

That was how I found myself rolling pie dough at The Store early Monday.

Over the years, The Store has 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.

I worked with the swinging kitchen doors propped open to better eavesdrop on local gossip being 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.

Meanwhile, 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 loved 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. 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. 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’ll 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 start spreading, 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. As always the news made me grumble.

“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?”

Bruce shrugged 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 prepper.”

“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 ...”

“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. “Sounds awful.”

“You loved it,” 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 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. By the way, do you know a girl by the name of Katherine Prue, calls herself Kat? Said you 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."