



Chapter 8

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There she is. No dancing brothers are in this place, nor any [laughing] girls waiting for the white bulb to be exchanged for the blue. This is an adult party--what goes on goes on in bright light. The illegal liquor is not secret and the secrets are not forbidden. Pay a dollar or two when you enter and what you say is smarter, funnier, than it would be in your own kitchen. Your wit surfaces over and over like the rush of foam to the rim. The laughter is like pealing bells that don't need a hand to pull on the rope; it just goes on and on until you are weak with it. You can drink the safe gin if you like, or stick to beer, but you don't need either because a touch on the knee, accidental or on purpose, alerts the blood like a shot of pre-pro bourbon or two fingers pinching your nipple. Your spirit lifts to the ceiling where it floats for a bit looking down with pleasure on the devilish excitement below. You know something wicked is going on in a room with a closed door. But there is enough dazzle and mischief here, where partners cling or exchange at the urging of a heart breaking vocal.

Dorcus is satisfied, content. Two arms clasp her and she is able to rest her cheek on her own shoulder

while her wrists cross behind his neck. It's good they don't need much space to dance in because there isn't any. The room is packed. Men groan their satisfaction; women hum anticipation. The music bends, falls to its knees to embrace them all, encourage them all to live a little, why don't you? since this is the it you've been looking for.

Her partner does not whisper in Dorcus' ear. His promises are already clear in the chin he presses into her hair, the fingertips that stay. She stretches up to encircle his neck. He bends to help her do it. They agree on everything above the waist and below: muscle, tendon, bone joint and marrow cooperate. And if the dancers hesitate, have a moment of doubt the music will solve and dissolve any question.

Dorcus is happy. Happier than she has ever been anytime. No white strands grow in her partner's mustache. He is up and coming. Hawk eyed, tireless and a little cruel. He has never given her a present or even thought about it. Sometimes he is where he says he will be; sometimes not. Other women want him--badly--and he has been selective. What they want and the prize it is his to give is his savvy self. What could a pair of silk stockings be compared to him? No contest. Dorcus is lucky. Knows it. And as happy as she has ever been

anytime. "He is coming for me. I know he is because I know how flat his eyes went when I told him not to. And how they raced afterwards. I didn't say it nicely, although I meant to. I practised the points; in front of the mirror I went through them one by one: the sneaking around, and his wife and all. I never said anything about our ages or Acton. Nothing about Acton. But he argued with me so I said leave me alone. Just leave me alone. Get away from me. You bring me another bottle of cologne I'll drink it and die you don't leave me alone.

"He said, you can't die from cologne. "I said, you know what I mean.

"He said, You want me to leave my wife?

"I said, No! I want you to leave me. I don't want you inside me. I don't want you beside me. I hate this room. I don't want to be here and don't come looking for me.

"He said, Why

"I said, Because. Because. Because.

"He said, Because what?

"I said, Because you make me sick.

"Sick? I make you sick?

"Sick of myself and sick of you.

"I didn't mean that part...about being sick. He didn't. Make me sick, I mean. What I wanted to let him know was that I had this chance to have Acton and I wanted it and I wanted girlfriends to talk to about it. About where we went and what he did. About things. About stuff. What good are secrets if you can't talk to anybody about them? I sort of hinted about Joe and me to Felice and she laughed before she stared at me and then frowned. "I couldn't tell him all that because I had practiced the other points and got mixed up.

"But he's coming for me. I know it. He's been looking for me all over. Maybe tomorrow he'll find me. Maybe tonight. Way out here; all the way out here. "When we got off the street car, me and Acton and Felice, I thought he was there in the doorway next to the candy store, but it wasn't him. Not yet. I think I see him everywhere. I know he's looking and now I know he's coming. "He didn't even care what I looked like. I could be anything, do anything--and it pleased him. Something about that made me mad. I don't know. "Acton, now, he tells me when he doesn't like the way I fix my hair. Then I do it how he likes it. I never wear glasses when he is with me and I changed my laugh

for him to one he likes better. I think he does. I know he didn't like it before. And I play with my food now. Joe liked for me to eat it all up and want more. Acton gives me a quiet look when I ask for seconds. He worries about me that way. Joe never did. Joe didn't care what kind of woman I was. He should have. I cared. I wanted to have a personality and with Acton I'm getting one. I have a look now. What pencil-thin eyebrows do for my face is a dream. All my bracelets are just below my elbow. Three straps are across my instep and at home I have shoes with leather cut-out to look like lace.

"He is coming for me. Maybe tonight. Maybe here.

"If he does he will look and see how close me and Acton dance. How I rest my head on my arm holding on to him. The hem of my skirt taps the calves of my legs while we rock back and forth, then side to side. The whole front of us touches. Nothing can get between us we are so close. Lots of girls here want to be doing this with him. I can see them when I open my eyes to look past his neck. I rub my thumbnail over his nape so the girls will know I know they want him. He doesn't like it and turns his head to make me stop touching his neck that way. I stop.

"Joe wouldn't care. I could rub anywhere on him. He let me draw pictures in places he had to have a mirror

to see." *the place for romance.*

Anything that happens after this party breaks up is nothing. It's like war. Everyone is handsome, shining just thinking about other people's blood. As though the red wash flying from veins not theirs is facial makeup patented for its glow. Inspiring. Glamorous. Afterwards there will be some chatter and recapitulation of what went on; nothing though like the action itself and the beat that pumps the heart. In war or at a party everyone is wily, intriguing; goals are set and altered; alliances re-arranged. Partners and rivals devastated; new pairings triumphant. The excitement here is to Dorcus' taste because here--with grown ups and as in war--people play for keeps. *Worse brings his jacket*

back "He is coming for me. And when he does he will see I'm not his anymore. I'm Acton's and it's Acton I want to please. He expects it. With Joe I pleased myself because he encouraged me to. With Joe I worked the stick of the world, the power in my hand." *I ought to be wide*

awake Oh, the room--the music--the people leaning in doorways. This is the place where things pop. Anybody from outside trying to disrupt or make a dent in this crowd is a fool. Any thrown-away lover in wet unlaced shoes and a buttoned up sweater under his coat should stay out of here. This is not the place for old men;

this is the place for ramance. hand holding mine is too tight "He's here. Oh, look. God. He's crying. I'm falling. Acton is holding me up but I am falling anyway. Heads are turning to look where I am falling. It's dark and now it's light. I am lying on a bed. Somebody is wiping sweat from my forehead, but I am cold, so cold. I see mouths moving; they are all saying something to me I can't hear. Way out there at the foot of the bed I see Acton. Blood is on his coatjacket and he is dabbing at it with a white handkerchief. Now a woman takes the coat from his shoulders. He is annoyed by the blood. It's my blood, I guess and it has stained through his jacket to his shirt. The hostess is shouting. Her party is ruined. Acton looks angry; the woman brings his jacket back and it is not clean the way it was before and the way he likes it. Now. So clear the dark bowl the pile of orange "I can hear them now. I don't know who is that woman singing "Who? Who did this?" by heart.

"I am tired. Such sleepiness. I ought to be wide awake because something important is happening.

" 'Who did this, girl? Who did this to you?'

"They want me to say his name. Say it in public at last. Acton has taken his shirt off. People are blocking the doorway; some stretch behind them to get a better look. The music is faint but I know the words by heart.

"Felice leans close. Her hand holding mine is too tight. I try to say with my mouth to come nearer. Her eyes are bigger than the light fixture on the ceiling. She asks me was it him.

"They need me to say his name so they can go after him. Take away his sample case with Rochelle and Bernadine and Faye inside. I know his name but mama won't tell. The world rocked from a stick beneath my hand, Felice. There in that room with the ice sign in the window. Felice puts her ear on my lips and I scream it to her. I think I am screaming it. I think I am.

"People are leaving.

"Now it's clear. Through the doorway I see the table. On it is a brown, wooden bowl, flat, low like a tray, full to spilling with oranges. I want to sleep, but it is clear now. So clear the dark bowl the pile of oranges. Bright. Listen. I don't know who is that woman singing but I know the words by heart."