



Chapter 5

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CHAPTER ~~SIX~~ FIVE

Sandler admitted he could have imagined the scent of sex, but not its glow—that was definite. Vida credited neither. The proof, she felt, was in her grandson's walk. Whatever the sign, both agreed that Romen was seeing someone, maybe even going with someone. The liked those terms—'seeing, 'going with'— suggesting merely looking, accompanying. Not the furious coupling that left an unmistakable fragrance Sandler believed he had detected and a moist radiance he recognized at once. And Vida was right about the walk. Romen had developed a kind of strut to replace his former skulk. Of Sandler's feelings—resignation, pride, alarm, envy—he chose to focus on the last, trying to summon the heat, the shield of well being created by the accomplishment of being spent. He remembered his own maiden voyage (free of embarrassment, now) as a ferocity that had never mellowed into routine pleasure. Romen's entry might be as cherishable as it was enviable, and although it would probably end in foolishness or misery, it seemed unfair to cut away the boy's swagger just when it was

fresh. He believed topping him now—introducing shame along with sound advice—was more likely to pervert future encounters without stopping them. So he watched the new moves, the attention to hygiene, the knowing smile replacing guffaws and sniggers, the condescension in his tone when he spoke to Vida. Most of all he savored the skin beauty as well as the ripple Vida noticed in his walk. Also, he appreciated the fact that Romen had stopped swinging his leg and grabbing his groin every minute in that obnoxious way that signaled more 'want' than 'have.' Let him preen a while, thought Sandler. Otherwise he might end up dog-chasing women his whole life. Forever on the prowl for a repeat of that first first time. He might end up like Bill Cosey had, wasting hours between the elbows of women whose names he could not remember and whose eyes he avoided. Except for Celestial, he had told Sandler, Cosey had never felt connected to a woman. His adored first wife, for whom he had saved himself, thought his interests tiresome, his appetite crazy. So he had quickly chosen the view he saw in the eyes of local women, vacationers, slightly tipsy vocalists whose boyfriends had not joined them on the tour. Thus buoyed up and simmered down, he had released his wife from all but the most perfunctory obligation.

Or, in Cosey's own words, "when pussies sleep, lions creep."

"You wrong," Sandler replied. "Lions mate for life."

"So do I," said Cosey, laughing softly. "So do I."

True, but it was a mating that did not change his bachelor's view which, after years of eligible widower-hood, he hoped to end by marrying a girl he could educate to his taste. And if that had worked out for him as planned, Cosey would have come to know what Romen knew: that the first is also the last.

But that was his male take on it. Vida would certainly read it differently. The big question now was who. Who was the girl who burnished skin and oiled a boy's stride? Romen went to no parties, was home when told to be, entertained no friends at home. Maybe she was older, a grown woman with afternoon time on her hands. But Romen's weekends and after school time were filled with chores. When did he have time? Sandler put the question to Vida who was urging him to speak to Romen.

"I need to know who it is before I start lecturing him," he said.

"What difference does it make?"

"I take it you content with his sheets?"

"I'll worry about the laundry," said Vida. "You worry about vd. Which, by the way, doesn't come with a biography. I work in a hospital, remember? You have no idea what I see."

"Well, I'm going to find out who she is."

"How?"

"I'll ask him."

"He's not going to tell you."

"Must be a way. This is a wee little town and I don't want to wait until somebody's daddy or brother bangs on my door."

"People don't do that anymore. That was in our day. Did you bang on Plaquemain's door when he was courting Dolly?"

"Would have—if you hadn't already fallen in love with him."

"Sandler, be serious. Plaquemain had two years of college. Nobody around here could hold a candle to him."

"Thanks for reminding me. Now I think about it, maybe we should leave it up to his college-y father. When are they due?"

"Thanksgiving, Dolly said."

"See there? Just two weeks."

"The girl could be pregnant then!"

"Thought vd was worrying you."

"Everything is worrying me!"

"Come on, Vida. The boy doesn't stay out late; he cut loose those raggedy friends and you don't have to drag him out of bed anymore to go to school. He's ready before you are, and works good and steady at the Coseys."

"Oh, Lord," said Vida. "Oh my Lord."

"What?" Sandler looked at his wife and then burst out laughing.

"You have lost your natural mind, woman."

"Uh uh," she said. "No I haven't. And 'steady' is the word, all right."

Suddenly Sandler saw thighs rising from tall black boots, and wondered again how icy the skin would be to the touch. And how smooth.

The halls of Bethune High were parade grounds; the congregation at the lockers was the audience of a prince. No more slide along the walls or safety searches in crowds. And no trumpet blast to be heard. It was that

simple. They knew he was scoring, but didn't know with whom. Obviously no class mate, no tenth grade party girl in pink plastic heels. Romen was polite, friendly with the girls in the hall, but his smile was merely tolerant. Theo, Jamal, Freddie—all left him alone, eyed him differently. Clearly he didn't need to get drunk, or tie anybody up, or require the company of a herd.