



Chapter 7

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Chap. 7

"I don't know what to say to the boy."

"Well, think of something. Fast. Or I will."

"What? What can you tell him?"

"The purpose of a zipper. The responsibility of a father. The mortality rate of AIDS."

"AIDS?"

"Who knows where she's been or with who? Who is she, anyway? Got no people, nobody ever heard of her. Dresses like a street woman. Acts like a, a..."

"She wouldn't be working for them if she wasn't all right. Had references or some such."

"Are you kidding or just crazy?"

"Vida."

"Christine has a reputation make Jezebel cringe, and Heed's a Johnson remember."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means morals of any kind whatsoever are not known in that family. What would Heed, who got married at the ripe old age of eleven, know about morals, restraint...."

"She never ran around on Cosey and you know she never condoned Christine's past. You can't blame her for what her daddy did."

"No, but I can take note of what her daddy is. Did she or didn't she try to burn her own house down?"

"I never did believe that."

"Well the seed don't fall far from the pod. If they take in that kind of girl to work for them, what else might be going on over there? How can you trust either one of them? Just because Heed let Romen clean her yard doesn't mean she's changed."

"Changed from what?"

"From a deceitful bitch who has to control people."

"I thought this was about Romen's behavior."

"It is. Behavior influenced by an ex-hooker and a witch. Listen Sandler, I am not about to be a great grandmother or an unpaid nurse or a pocketbook for some trashy teen mama just because you don't know what to say to a fourteen year old boy. Besides, we're responsible for Romen. Our own daughter expects us to be. Counts on us to be."

Sandler grunted and let his wife's argument, point by point, roll on. He did know what to say to Romen, but he knew it wouldn't matter. It would just make the relationship hotter, more enticing. He wouldn't be telling him to choose one girl over another, but to give up the only one he had complete physical access to. Like telling a duck not to waddle. He would have to think up something else. Condoms at the least, but Vida expected more—an end to the relationship. Add to that the fact that he thought Romen was handling things pretty well, considering. He wasn't doping, ganged up, courting arrest and his house manners had definitely improved. But Vida was right. The neighborhood had changed and so had the times. They didn't know the girl, had no recent knowledge of the Cosey women. Just gossip, speculation and memory from local people who didn't know anymore than they did. Once upon a time, everybody knew

everything. Once upon a time, a man could speak to another about his son or daughter; or a group of women would swoop down on a fast girl.

Except the Johnsons. Nobody swooped down on them. They were not typical, especially in Up Beach where people lived on top of one another and every vip and vop was monitored.

Oh, Christ, he thought, that was fifty years ago. What was the point in remembering the good old days as though the past was pure. He knew for a fact it was simply hidden. Vida, in her tale of wickedness, had not said a word about Bill Cosey. She acted as though Heed had chased and courted a fifty-two year old man older than her father. That she had chosen to marry him rather than having been told to. Vida, like most people, probably hated the idea that she stayed married to him, liked it, and took over his business. In their minds she was born a ^{scheming} lying gold digger, unable to wait for her twelfth birthday for pay dirt. They forgave Cosey. Everything. Even to the point of blaming a child for a grown man's interest in her. What was she supposed to do? Run away? Where? Was there some place Cosey or Wilbur Johnson couldn't reach?

He had seen Heed more recently than anyone the day he knocked on

the door and asked her if she could take Romen on as after-school help. She was civil. Neat as a pin, as always. Offered him iced tea, probably to let him see Christine's status in the house. Sandler had always found her less of a pain than others had. Because of his friendship with her husband, he guessed. Still she was not easy to be around. He couldn't say whether she was good looking or not because ^{" "}false, ^{" "}touchy were the words that came to ^{his} mind about her. False the way anybody would be who had jumped from a log to a castle overnight. ^{*}Nothing like what Bill Cosey saw.

For him it was as though twenty-five years hadn't happened. The Heed ^{REMENISCED} Cosey ^(as though she were dead) talked about, in his cups on the boat, was not a frowning woman always on the look-out for a slight, a chance to find fault, but a long legged angel with candle eyes and a smile he couldn't help but join. Hips narrow, chest smooth as a plank, skin soft and damp like a lip. Cosey never explained the attraction any other way, except to say he couldn't wait to watch her grow. That the steady, up close observation most men never have and don't know the pleasure in, kept him young. Kept him faithful.

Uneasy with other men's sexual confidences (he certainly wasn't providing any of his own) Sandler always made it his business to change the

^{*} Touchy the way anybody would be who had ~~May~~ and town envy plus May on her back. But what Sandler saw was

subject. But he remembered Cosey's expression as he rambled on about his first sight of Heed. Although by then he was fully involved with grown women , the dream of his child bride still stirred him. Vida had nothing to say about that, and Sandler didn't want the grief of bringing it up, of tilting his wife's idol with a crack of insight.