

It was around nine-thirty-when I finally made it to Stiletto's, shaken and stirred by the close encounter with Brian Morse. As I locked the Camaro and slowly tread the stone steps, I thought of how nice it would be to be greeted at the door by a friendly face. Someone on my side for once. To be hugged and asked how was my day. Here. Have a glass, of something. Put your feet up and tell me all about it.

You didn't get that kind of treatment being a single mother at home with a teenager.

And, as I discovered, you didn't get that kind of treatment living with a guy, either.

Stiletto was in the TV room, the one with the cardinals on the drapes, feet up, watching a football game on the wide-screen TV with the lights out. I dumped my coat in the hallway closet and my purse on the end table below the large gilt mirror. I resolved to ignore my exhaustion and perk up.

No one likes a whiner, as Mama was always reminding me.

Fluffing my hair in the hall mirror, I applied a new coating of Hot Red lipstick and another of eyeliner. I was, presentable, even somewhat sexy, for a Tuesday night. Slinking into the darkened TV room, I approached Stiletto from behind, sliding my hands over his chest and kissing him upside down.

It was like kissing an ashtray.

"Oh, Mrs. Robinson," he said.

I shrieked the shriek of the tortured. G! I had kissed G! I had kissed my daughter's grungy loser of a boyfriend. I actually felt the metal ball of his pierced lip against my teeth.

I ran around the room, searching for the switch plate which I finally found on the wall. "What!" I screamed. "What are you doing . . . here?"

G blinked in the light and smeared the back of his hand against his now Hot Red imprinted lips. "Ugh," he said. "Give me some warning or something next time."

"Next time!" I was still shouting with all the power my lungs could muster. "There won't be a next time. I didn't mean to kiss you I meant to kiss Stiletto."

"Whatever, Mrs. Robinson." G aimed the remote at the TV and muted the sound. "I've heard how you middle-aged ladies are. Hitting your sexual peak while guys your age, old farts like Stiletto, are on the decline."

I yanked my hair with both hands This wasn't happening. "What do *you* know? You're a teenager who failed shop class. And I'm *not* middle aged. Stiletto is *not* an old fart."

"Geesh" He put up his hands "Is this like a blazing hot flash or what?"

"Aggh!" I had to leave the room. In Stiletto's expansive gourmet kitchen with the cathedral ceilings and smooth granite counters, I paced. I opened the refrigerator, the stove, ran the water. What if Jane found out? Wait, what was I thinking? There was no if. Of course, Jane would find out As soon as the football went into halftime, G would be on the phone.

"You'll never believe what your whacked mother did." I could hear it crystal clear.

Returning to the TV room, I said, "You cannot tell Jane."

"Okay, Mrs. Robinson." G's eyes were firmly glued on the Steelers. "But I'm

going to see Elaine, Mrs. Robinson. You can't stop me."

Great. G couldn't quite comprehend that N meant north on a road map, but every word of dialogue from *The Graduate* was committed to his memory thanks to twenty-four-hour cable.

"Do you know that Anne Bancroft was about your age, only thirty-six, when she played Mrs. Robinson, Mrs. Robinson?"

Cyanide. Where are these so-called natural sources of cyanide when you need them? I returned to the oversized stainless-steel refrigerator and pulled open the vegetable drawers. How come Stiletto didn't keep cassava?

Back to the TV room. G now had the split-screen thing going. The Steelers bashing each other on one side; on the other a stripper-like diva gyrating to MTV. "What happened to your hair? It was orange this morning. How come it's black?"

"Reminds you of Benjamin Braddock, is that it, Mrs. Robinson?"

I snatched the remote out of his hand.

"Hey!" G sat up in protest.

"You'll get this back after you start talking.

He slumped and folded his arms which were encased in a black fleece jacket. "I thought that was supposed to be my line. You know how we never talk before we . . ."

"What are you doing here?" I had no patience with this boy.

G let out a long sigh. "I called here about an hour ago to tell you what went down with that Kiera chick. You weren't home so I talked to Stiletto."

"Uh-huh." I rolled my arm. "Keep going."

"That was the part where you were supposed to say, 'Thank you, G. Thank you for risking your job at Hess's, of which I am so very, very jealous, to grill a client.'"

I pointed to the TV. "Stiletto hates this thing. I can have it removed tomorrow."

"He can move it to my dad's house."

"Where it'd be stolen in an hour? Don't think so. What did Stiletto say?"

"Your old man said he had to go on assignment or whatever. He said to tell you he found out something about cyanide at Steel."

Dang. I hate waiting, a side effect from having grown up in the instant generation of cereal and TV. "Okay, but what are *you* doing here?"

"I am your protection." G fingered his nose ring. "Stiletto didn't want you coming back to an empty house so he invited me to crash here, including full use of his entertainment system and domesticables."

"Domesticables?"

"Soda, food and junk, though there's no potato chips in this house so I had to settle on the fish eggs. Actually, they're not too bad if you put ketchup on them. You know where there's any more? The jars are so tiny."

Two hundred dollars of beluga drowned in ketchup and downed in one gulp: Stiletto would kill him if I didn't beat him to the punch. First, I had to squeeze all the information I could out of the delinquent.

"What did Kiera say about . . . everything? "

"Let's see." G focused on a replay "She said she doesn't care if her mom is

thinking about her. She hates her mom."

Spoiled kid.

"She said her dad was a great guy, but he had these dark moments where he would go off for days."

"Days? She say where?"

"No." G picked at his nails. "Said her pop was really into some tunnel. That's where he went the night he died. She knows because she talked to him when he came home."

Not according to the police report. According to the police report I read at the Northington County Court, she never heard her father come in.

"A tunnel?" I asked, trying to figure out exactly where Hal Weaver had been that night.

"More like a subway."

I thought about the possibilities and how they might be translated in G's feeble brain. "You don't mean the Underground Railroad?"

"That's it The Underground Railroad. He used to take her to the cave by Monocacy Park. You know it?"

Absolutely I knew it. Every kid who skipped school at Liberty knew it. It's where you went to smoke cigarettes and pot and any other illegal substance you could at ten in the morning.

"No," I lied. "Where is it?"

G gave me a telltale look. "Oh, you can't kid me, Mrs. Robinson. Don't tell me you were squeaky clean in high school, 'cause I'm not buying that."

"I think we'll donate the TV to the Salvation Army."

The phone rang.

"Phone's ringing," G said. "You might want to get that."

I tossed him the remote and went into the hall to answer it. Maybe it was Stiletto coming to the rescue.

"Bubbles. What are you doing to me?"

Susan Morse, if I had to guess. And she sounded close to hysteria.

"What's the meaning of this note you gave to Brian? He's absolutely livid. He's thinking of suing you."

"Oh, you wouldn't like that, Susan. Then you'd have to testify about where you were on the night of February 14, the night Hal Weaver was poisoned with cyanide."

Susan was silent. G had turned the TV to full volume. Nice to have a big house where I didn't have to shout at him to turn it down.

"This can be cleared up," she said calmly "When can we meet?"

"Now is fine by me. At your house?"

"God no. We need a neutral spot."

Where to meet. Where to meet. The library was closed. Diners and bars were too public. Not Stiletto's.

Not with G here. That left one choice.

"The House of Beauty," I said. "It's on Fourth Street next to Uncle Manny's Bar and Grille."

"I know it. My mother's housekeeper used to get her hair done there. Meet you in an hour, or later. I have to wait until Brian goes to sleep."

I hung up and thought about our conversation. Why did she want to meet in

a neutral spot? What was she hiding? Why after her husband went to sleep?

*Ding. Dong.*

"Doorbell," G announced from the TV room. "Anybody going to get that?"

What would I do without him?

All these people. It is not a healthy sign when your home is more stressful than work. I opened the door an inch in case it was the BB shooter with more normal working hours stopping by for a second try.

It wasn't a BB shooter: It was a hulking rectangle in tweed with a floral head scarf. At her black rubbered feet was a wriggling thing.

"For St. Pete's sake, Sally, it's chillier than a bucket of penguin spit out here. Let me in."

"What are you doing here??" I opened the door. Genevieve trundled in, a white plastic baby carrier in one hand and a diaper bag in the other.

"On baby-sitting duty." She unwrapped the scarf and handed it to me. "Meet Waldo."

I stared down at Waldo in the carrier, perhaps the ugliest baby God had had the cruel misfortune to create. Nearly purple in color with a mug that could strip wallpaper, he appeared to be about a year old. I pegged him as a howler.

"My first husband's great grandson," she said, pulling off her gloves. "I got called in on emergency. Waldo's mother collapsed tonight. Nervous exhaustion. Had to get Waldo out of the house"

"Why are you bringing him here?"

Waldo looked around, surveying the room for acoustics.

"Won't allow babies in the senior citizens apartment and it wasn't like I could sneak him in." Genevieve struggled out of her coat. "You can't take this tyke anywhere without him putting up a caterwaul that would empty a kennel."

White spit-up bubbled from Waldo's pink mouth. "He's cute," I fibbed.

"No, he's not. He's possessed. Now, where's that wide-screen TV I've heard tell?"

I pointed to the TV room. Genevieve hauled Waldo and the baby carrier in there, her rubbers squeaking on Stiletto's walnut floors.

"Change the channel, Butch. I'm here for the duration." She dumped the carrier next to G on the couch. G flinched like Waldo was a box of snakes.

"What's that?" he said.

"That, boy, is the product of sex. Keep that in mind the next time you get a hankering to walk your willy."

Genevieve, who had managed to steal the remote, switched to the *Home Shopping Network*. A two-piece lounge suit in rose or green terry cloth was on sale for \$69, without monogramming. Monogramming was \$10 extra.

"Now, that's what I call style," she said.

G and Waldo studied each other. Waldo scowled at G with what I took to be a particularly vengeful stare.

"Looks like he's about to let one loose," Genevieve said, reaching into the diaper bag and pulling out an insulated bottle. "Here. You ain't doing nothing, Butch. You feed him I gotta make a phone call about that lounge suit. I've been looking for one in green."

"A bottle?" G held up his hands. "No way, man. I don't do bottles. Not bottles for babies."

As though Waldo had understood this, he scrunched up his face, balled his tiny fists and opened his mouth. At first there wasn't a sound. It was strangely silent, silent like it is before a hurricane hits shore with 100 mph gale force. And then Waldo made landfall.

"Waaaaa! Waaaaa!"

"What the . . ." G slapped his hands over his ears as Waldo's bellowing cries became louder and louder. The TV, still at full volume, was muted in comparison. The mirrors on the walls shook. An antique Vase rocked precariously.

Genevieve, meanwhile, merely pulled a pair of headphones from her pocket, snapped them over her gray head and plugged them into the phone. Then Grandma Bell dialed the *Home Shopping Network* number from memory and calmly ordered the green lounge suit. At least, I think that's what she was doing. I couldn't tell because Waldo's cries had drowned out all sound.

"*Do something!*" G yelled. "*I can't take this.*"

Genevieve tossed the bottle into his lap.

G stared at me with pleading eyes.

"Here." I uncapped the bottle and stuck it in Waldo's gaping pie hole. It took him a few seconds to realize he had received what he had demanded, so we were forced to suffer more hearing loss. At last he settled down to sucking, his fat little cheeks working industriously as he replenished energy that would later be used for more caterwauling.

I handed G the bottle. Stunned and reeling, slightly, he held it dutifully.

"And when you're done feeding him, you can change his diaper," Genevieve commanded. "Peee-uuu. What a stinker that is."

Last sight before I left to meet up with Susan was of one terrified G gingerly holding Waldo, who continued to feed contentedly, stopping now and then to smile upward and give G's nose ring a lusty tug.