

Fast Cars

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August 1988

As I drove out of the woods and down into Allouez, the feeling came back. It hit me in the stomach, pressed me against the side of the car. Even on that bright summer morning, the buildings were still gray, the people overweight, and the cars rusty. Lake Superior smelled like dead fish and I stifled the urge to roll up my window.

This wasn't the homecoming I had imagined. My father should still be alive, and all of my friends should be just as I had left them. I was supposed to be driving an expensive car with an expensive man—preferably my husband—by my side. Of course, I had planned to make it by now. Not too unrealistic: many politicians got their start in their late twenties. I was twenty-eight and had completed law school. But I was working in

Legal Aid, shunning television cameras and ignoring friends who wanted to give me "important" cases.

I drove under the viaduct where we had been that wild drunken night of the Senior Prom. The memories here were untapped and dangerous;

I had run away from this town the night after my high school graduation and had never looked back.

I pulled out the map Johnny had sent and leaned it against the steering wheel. I turned down the grid-like streets, knowing vaguely where he lived. And then I found it, on what used to be a tree-lined road a few miles north of East Junior High School. Johnny lived in the Victorian

lumber baron's home that had been converted into apartments back when I was a kid.

Johnny was sitting on the porch. A chill ran through me. He had probably just been waiting; after all, I told him what day I would arrive. But his presence made that oppressed feeling even stronger. It reminded me of all those days when I would pick up the phone to call him only to find him already waiting on the other end; nights when I would walk over to his house and he would be on the porch, his mother saying that Johnny knew I was on my way; and even the letter with the map arriving the day I mailed him my letter telling him I was coming.

It seemed, in this town, that nothing changed.

February 1978

Snow glittered on the hills of Duluth. I stood on the rock beach overlooking Lake Superior and rubbed my hands against my open cloth jacket. The chill ran deep into my fingers, making the bones in my palms ache. I looked over at the car. Johnny was curled against the passenger window, his black hair crinkled against the glass. He said he had been up all night reading, but I wondered. Sometimes he showed up at my house, his eyes all puffy and red. Once I had opened up his journal and read a passage about which would be a quicker death, pills or sliding a razor blade across his wrists. Sometimes I wanted to check his skin, to see if it had been marred.

I got back into the car and kicked three empty beer cans off the floor on the driver's side. Their clatter against the concrete roadside made Johnny stir and sit up. "What're we doing, Carren?" he mumbled sleepily.

"Driving up to Enger Tower."

"It snowed."

I shrugged. "I'm a good driver."

He stretched and sat up, not questioning me. I wondered what he would say if he knew that my tires were bald and the last time I had climbed the hill, the car had slid back nearly ten feet along Skyline Drive.

I slammed the door shut and the car rocked with the impact. I started up, cranked the Doobie Brothers on the AM radio, and slid out into traffic. The steering wheel hummed under my fingers. I was a good driver—when I wanted to be.

"Do you ever think what you're going to do when you get out of school?" I glanced over at him. He had asked the question suddenly, blurted it out as if he had been thinking about it for a long time.

"First woman President of the United States, I guess," I said. I made myself sound casual, but I really wasn't. I was going to be someone. I had it all planned. "How 'bout you?"

"I don't know." He kept staring out the window as we crossed the High Bridge. The black waters of Lake Superior sparkled below us. "Things have changed a lot lately."

I looked over at him. He sounded so sad that I wanted to touch his hair, pull him over to me, soothe him. He was supposed to be the successful one. I knew what his father had planned: college, a career, a large family. But I didn't touch him. That sort of thing was off-limits for best friends, especially friends as good as we were.

The roads going up the hill shone wetly. Large chunks of salt and sand covered the surface. It was going to be tricky, getting those bald tires up there, a true test of my skill. I turned the wheel when Johnny put his hand on mine.

"Pull over," he said.

"What?" I asked, wondering if he knew about the bald tires, about the treacherous drive ahead.

"Pull this goddamn thing over." He only swore when he was scared. I yanked the wheel to the right and stopped the car on the shoulder beside a warehouse overlooking the harbor.

"Okay, what is it?"

I expected him to say something about me being stupid, but he just leaned forward and looked up the hill. His lips were pressed together so tightly that they were turning white.

"Johnny, for Crissake—"

"Shut up!" he snapped.

I sat back, more puzzled than angry. He would tell me in a minute. He always did. Then I heard squealing breaks, someone scream from a few blocks away, the wail of distant sirens. A vein beat against Johnny's forehead. He was clutching the dash with white-knuckled hands. Something thumped up on the hill, squeaking metal. I turned and saw the truck.

It etched itself against my memory in a single bounce: A new, shiny red pick-up with Minnesota plates, its front end scratched and slightly dented, and the driver, his hair plastered against his skull, his eyes wide

open, teeth clenched, clutching the steering wheel to his chest as if he could pull back and the truck would fly like something out of James Bond.

Then it went past, going almost too fast to see, swerving to avoid cars on the road Johnny made me pull off of, the last road before the harbor, too crowded for an out-of-control truck. He drove toward the harbor, hitting barrels to reduce his speed, succeeding only in sliding on the ice, finally spinning out of control and sailing into the cold waters. Cop cars were already making their way down the hill, and a single ambulance followed, its lights flashing.

"Why didn't he jump?" I whispered.

"He could have when he lost his brakes, back up at the top of the hill." Johnny was staring at the water. The cop cars had stopped. "But he decided to stay in, to make sure that the truck wouldn't take anyone else out."

I didn't ask how Johnny knew all that stuff. I had learned, in the last few weeks, that he wouldn't tell me. "He going to be all right?"

"Depends on your view of death," Johnny said. He took a deep breath, looked at me, and then passed out.

August 1988

I pulled over beside the curb, checking the rear-view and side mirrors constantly to make sure that I was parking straight. Somewhere I had lost confidence in my driving, enough so that even parking curbside made me feel awkward. I grabbed my duffel, locked the passenger's side and climbed out of the car.

Johnny stood beside the house. Over the years he had grown into his gaunt body, filled it out, made it his own. He looked like he lived in it now. When I'd left, it had seemed as if he were just renting.

"Always knew you would be tall and leggy."

I looked down my five-foot-four frame. "Always knew you could be wrong about things."

We grinned at each other. It wasn't quite like old times, but it was close enough. I stepped up the curb and he walked down the grass. When we met on the sidewalk, we hugged.

I felt like I was holding half a stranger. He used a new cologne and shampoo, slightly musky and oriental, but his smell remained the same, the dry, dusty scent of summer on the desert. I had never had a label for it before. I did now.

"Trust you to come a week after the reunion," he said into my shoulder. I started. I had forgotten about the reunion. When Anderson, my father's attorney, had called me yet again about the house, I had decided that I couldn't let the place sit empty any longer. Interesting that I had subconsciously chosen to return to Superior on the very weekend I had promised to return so many years ago. "I came, didn't I?"

"Rennie's party is tonight."

"Shit." I pulled out of the hug. The old gang back together. A party planned ten years before. A check-in, to see if the experiment had worked. Perhaps it had with the others; I had lost touch. As for myself, the importance of being someone—doing something to "make a difference"—had ended the night I left this place. My father never understood. To the day he died, he wondered what had happened to his promising little girl.

"So, how was the reunion?" I asked, a shade too brightly.

Johnny shrugged, a touch too casual. "One big party."

"Everybody going bald and getting fat?"

"And having kids. All except Glonski. She trimmed up. The hit of the place. No one recognized her."

"Glonski, huh?" Josie Glonski had been my first debate partner. She hadn't been the fattest girl in school, but she had been the most obvious one.

"Everybody asked about you. I didn't have much to tell them."

"Not much to tell," I said. Suddenly I was feeling restless. I wanted to be away from the house, away from Johnny, back in my car and driving as fast as I could. I had spent ten years forgetting this part of my life had ever happened. And yet, here I was, returning, as pre-programmed as a salmon on its death-spawn.

Johnny picked up the restlessness immediately. He grabbed my duffel. "Let me put this inside," he said, "and then we can stomp some old ground." I nodded but didn't go inside. Instead, I faced the street. One block from here, on December 18, 1973, Daniel West had kissed me on the way home from the Christmas dance. It had been two below that night, and I had been a shapeless wonder in my parka. But Danny hadn't cared. He pulled off my knit cap, stuck it in his pocket, and kissed me with all the aplomb a thirteen-year-old could muster. And I had savored that kiss for months. So had he. He had never given me my cap back.

"Ready?" Johnny said. He touched my arm as if he had been standing beside me for a long time. I looked at him sideways and wondered if he could pick up memories, too. "I'm driving."

I suppressed a sigh. And so it began. "Okay." I followed him around the side to the driveway. A large motorcycle was parked on the gravel rut. He handed me a red helmet and strapped the blue one on his own head.

I put the helmet on and felt as if the world had constricted yet again. If I got squeezed any more, I wouldn't be able to move.

I climbed on behind Johnny, and felt the machine vibrate as it roared to life. I wasn't fond of motorcycles, but I was willing, in this town, to try almost anything. He gave me a thumbs up, and then he pulled out onto the street.

Old neighborhoods whizzed by. Glimpses of memories too fast to be more than an impression. Somewhere down those roads sat the house I grew up in, the one the attorney no longer wanted to manage. I shivered thinking about that. But it wasn't until we turned on 28th Street that my stomach began to cramp. As we got closer to good old Superior Senior High School, the world in front of me shimmered. Even before the shimmering stopped, I knew what I would see. SSHS on a busy weekday morning before the first bell. Cars, kids, teachers. And none of them had aged a day since I left.

January 1978

Music floated from the cafeteria through the Link into the empty halls. A tinny piano accompanying Danny West's voice, trying to sound deep and powerful: *If I were a rich man* . . .

I stood outside the chemistry lab and listened. Music rehearsal for the winter musical. The first play I had missed in all of my years of school. JB, the drama coach, said I could stage manage when I was through

with the biochemistry project, but that wasn't the same. I liked being the center, the front, on stage with people applauding. JB had told me that I could have had Hodel or Golda, key roles in *Fiddler on the Roof*, but I had committed myself to this project too long ago to give up during the last phase.

"You coming, Carren?"

All four of the boys were looking at me. Dale was the one who had spoken. He was tall and slim, his dark eyes glinting with excitement. He sat on the big black desk in the front of the room and kicked the wooden frame with his feet. Five pyrex beakers with a clear liquid in the bottom sat beside him on the Formica surface. Craig was leaning against the desk, Johnny was staring at the formula papers, and Rennie was pacing nervously back and forth.

We called ourselves the four musketeers plus one. The guys assumed I was Constance, and while I didn't mind being compared with Raquel Welch, I liked to think of myself as another D'Artagnan out to, however poorly, save the day.

"Yeah." I came inside the room and closed the door. The click echoed in the stillness. I took a deep breath, inhaling fumes of long-dead projects. My hands were shaking.

"You got the right proportions and everything?" Rennie asked for probably the fifth time.

"Just checked it again," Dale said. His Nikes were making a thudding sound against the wood.

I stopped in front of the desk and leaned on one of the chairs. When people tried this in the movies, the mixture foamed and looked ominous. The liquid in those beakers seemed like water. "I'm a little scared."

Johnny looked up. A strand of hair had fallen across his eyes. "I don't have a good feeling about this either."

"Look," I said, rubbing my hands across my jeans. "We have the papers done. We did the projections. You're not supposed to test this kind of thing. Mr. Diller would have a bird if he knew we were up here."

"That's why he doesn't know," Rennie said. His eyes were round and clear. The eyes of an innocent.

"You don't have to do this if you don't want to," Dale said. He jumped off the desk and stood in front of me. "None of us do."

"I knew you guys would chicken out." Rennie took Dale's place on the top of the desk. Rennie's fingers drummed nervously. "You forgot the whole reason we're doing this."

"It's a stupid reason. Dumb little pipe dream." Craig sat in the desk nearest him and stuck his feet into the aisle. He was stocky, the most athletic of all of us. "As if drinking a magic potion can make our lives better."

"It's not a magic potion. You know exactly what's in here—" "Yeah," Craig said, "Wing of bat, eye of newt—"

"It probably won't do a damn thing." Dale smiled at me. "I was hoping more for the placebo effect myself."

"Well, we just jinxed that," Johnny said.

Dale ignored him. "Come on, Carren, what can it hurt?"

"She's got a point," Craig said. "We don't know what we're fucking with."

I sighed. I knew all the arguments. We had been over them twenty times. It was no more dangerous than mushrooms or LSD. And we weren't going for a one-time hallucination.

I grabbed a beaker. Rennie took one and so did Dale. Johnny stared at me for a long moment, then took his. Finally Craig picked one up.

"All for one," Rennie said, lifting his beaker in a toast. The half ounce of liquid sloshed against the sides.

"And one for all," we responded, knocking the beaker back as if it contained a shot of tequila. The stuff passed through my mouth so quickly all I tasted was something faint and burning. The burning became a tingling in my throat and stomach. I sat down.

"I don't feel anything," Craig said.

"How's it supposed to feel when you get smarter?" Rennie asked.

No one answered. We sat and stared at the clock over the observation deck. It clicked as each minute passed. It had clicked fifteen times when Dale closed the notebook. "I suppose we should stick together in case something happens," he said. "Anyone for a pizza?"

"Nothing's going to happen," Johnny said softly. "At least nothing anyone would expect."

August 1988

Funny how some things never changed. Johnny pulled the bike into the driveway in front of the gym area. The emptiness of the parking lot and the quality of the light made it feel as if it were a Saturday afternoon in early fall. The school was dormant, waiting for Monday when the students would revive it again. I got off the bike, walked up the concrete sidewalk and pressed my nose against the glass doors. The trophies still stood against the wall, and through the small break, I caught the vague scent of chlorine.

Superior Senior High School had been built in the late sixties with red brick. The front was a circle, hollow in the middle, with classrooms around the outside. That was attached to the rectangular gymnasium and cafeteria area by the Link, a glass hallway made up of doors. Between classes, most kids used to hang out in the Link because it was the central area, the best way to see everyone. I wanted to go inside, walk the empty hallways, smell the sweat, chlorine, and cleaning products mixed with the musty smell of books and paper.

Johnny stood beside me, a key in his hand.

"Where'd you get that?"

His smile was pained. "I'm the night janitor here now."

"Jesus, John."

He shrugged. "I roamed around, did a few other things for a while. Came back here last year. Almost like something called me, you know?"

I did know, but I didn't want to admit it. Johnny unlocked the door, pushed it open and crossed the hall. He opened a wall cabinet near the trophies and shut off an alarm system. Apparently some things had changed.

But not much. The smell was as I remembered it, and with it came the memory of my first encounter with the school. I couldn't have been more than twelve, my swimsuit wrapped in a towel under my arms,

waiting for my friends to show me the locker room. The pool had community swimming all summer, and I had been determined to take advantage of it. The light came in from the large glass doors at the end of the hallway, and through it, I could see the lockers standing tall and proud along the polished tile floor. My locker at the grade school had been tiny, little girl-sized, and I hadn't yet seen the junior high school.

Now, standing in the same hallway sixteen years later, the lockers looked small. The whole place had a feeling of age, of memories and violence, and of lost dreams. I turned to Johnny and put a hand on his arm. I couldn't imagine working there every night, seeing students, realizing how young they were, watching as the old memories got whittled away, detail by detail, only to slap him again as signs for the Senior Prom went up every spring.

He didn't move, but stared straight ahead, as if he were facing the same memories as I was. "Why did you leave?" he asked.

The question didn't make me angry as I expected it to. Over the years, I had rehearsed this moment a thousand times, thinking of a hundred different answers, and never had I predicted the one that came out of my mouth. "I had to, Johnny."

He nodded, as if my non-answer told him what he needed to know. Then he shook himself like some people did as they rose out of sleep, and began my tour of the high school.

Mostly we didn't say a word, just walked past rooms. I half expected to see Danny West rounding a corner or Josie Glonski sitting in the Link. But the building was empty except for us. And the ghosts. Finally, we walked up the stairs and stopped outside the chemistry lab. He opened the door, and we stepped inside.

The sharp scents of chemicals I could no longer identify rose and then disappeared as my nose became accustomed to them. The room seemed bigger than I remembered and was obviously modernized. The place I remembered had been cramped, so cramped that Dale's voice had sounded loud in my ear, and I had felt an almost physical pressure from the three others.

Come on, Carren, what could it hurt?

I had gone over that scene, that one memory, so many times in my mind that it didn't seem real. It had seemed to us then, with our ever so-logical teenage brains, that if lithium helped manic-depressives and other chemicals eased unbalanced brains, then certain chemicals would hike brain power, as if the brain were not a complex organic instrument, but a vial of solution that had been diluted by evolution to a weakened state. Perhaps we had caught a bit of sixties insanity as children, believing that drugs were everything—expanding consciousness instead of limiting it—or perhaps we would have come to this conclusion anyway, the combination of the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time. The biochemistry project took hours and hours and hours of work after school. I dropped out of drama for it, Rennie quit the basketball team, Dale nearly flunked English lit, and Craig did flunk his driving test, at least the first one. Only Johnny took the whole thing in stride.

"Looks different," I said at last.

"Yeah." Johnny leaned against a black lab station and pushed aside a bunsen burner.

"How is everyone?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I was the only one who showed up."

"Then how do you know there'll be something at Rennie's?"

He looked at me. I had been stupid to ask, and we both knew it.

April 1978

I was sitting on my front porch in shorts, smoking a cigarette and trying not to cough. The forty-degree weather felt almost warm. Dale sat cross-legged on the sidewalk. Above us, Rennie slept against the door, a pose that was becoming so common that Johnny had started calling him Dormouse.

"I vote we ditch them," Dale said.

I flicked the cigarette into the rose bushes, the only thing that remained from my runaway mother. "Let's give 'em fifteen. It's been taking them forever lately."

So we waited. Somehow it wouldn't have felt right to go anywhere without Craig and Johnny. Much as I liked Dale and Rennie, they simply weren't enough. It was as if it took the five of us to for anything to be enjoyable these days.

Craig's car pulled up, a white 1962 Ford Falcon without a spot of rust. He owned three of them and cobbled the spare parts into the working one whenever it broke down. He was alone. Dale and I looked at each other. We had planned the outing, the five of us, so that we wouldn't spend Prom night moping around the house. I could have gone with Trevor Fredericks or Danny West, but I opted to be with the group.

I got up and brushed off the back of my shorts. "Where's Johnny?"

"Don't know." Craig said. He held up two six-packs. Craig always offered people something when he lied.

Dale and I looked at each other. We both knew what had happened. They had had another fight. Ever since that night in the chem lab, Craig had grown increasingly angry at Johnny. Johnny was the only one who showed any signs of change.

I tapped Rennie and we walked down the steps. Suddenly I wasn't so sure I wanted to be with these guys. I wished I had let Trevor take me to the dance—watching him pin a corsage on my spaghetti strap, feeling his broad fingers brush the top of my breast, seeing where that led. Except I knew where that would lead. I had watched friends go down that path, former SSHS football stars disappear into Murphy Oil Company and become fat within two years. Somehow, Prom Night seemed like destiny and I was determined to make mine.

I grabbed one of the six-packs out of Craig's hand as I got in the front seat beside him. "Let's get Johnny. It should be the five of us."

Craig flushed as his anger rose and then he checked it. I glanced at the other two, wondering if they felt the radiation as strongly as I did. But Rennie was busy pulling a beer from a pack in the back seat. Dale had already started his. It looked like it would be a night of heavy drinking and not much talking. That was okay. We had been talking too much lately.

Craig put his hand on my knee. His palm was warm against my bare thigh. I twisted toward the back seat and moved away at the same time, hoping that he wouldn't notice. Dale handed me a beer which I passed to Craig.

"Too bad Johnny isn't here," Rennie said with a yawn. "He's the one who can find people without looking."

"I know where he is," I said. The car started moving. Trees touched with early evening sunlight whizzed by.

"Yeah, sure." Craig was clutching the wheel so tightly that his knuckles had turned white. "What, are you psychic now, too?"

"No." I scooted even farther away from him.

"So where is he?" Dale had become my ally. Somewhere in all of this, only he seemed to understand how pinched by the group I was beginning to feel.

I leaned against the car door. The armrest dug into my side. "Down near the trailer park in Allouez."

"What the hell's he doing there?" Craig asked. He reached back and grabbed a beer, one hand on the steering wheel and his gaze on the back seat.

I sat up and watched the road, ready to grab control of the car. "He's just walking." Johnny always walked when he was upset. Then he didn't have to focus on the world around him, as if movement kept him sane. And if he and Craig had fought, they would have fought near Johnny's house—at the trailer park.

Craig's attention was back on the road again. He steered with his knees as he pulled open the ring-top on the beer and proceeded to chug. Fortunately the traffic on Highway 2 was thin, because he had speeded up.

I heard the clink of cans in the back seat as both Rennie and Dale finished their first. They were almost done with their second by the time we reached the viaduct.

Johnny was walking on the shoulder of the highway. In the dimness of twilight, he seemed like a shadow moving across the road. His walk was so familiar; the brisk clip, the no-nonsense posture. Craig flicked on his headlights, and Johnny reflected the glare like a phosphorescent ghost.

"There he is," I said, but Craig didn't seem to hear me. He aimed the car down the highway, sliding onto the shoulder. His foot pressed into the gas pedal, concentration heavy on his face.

Dale leaned forward from the back seat and wrenched the wheel. The car swerved slightly, almost going into the other lane before it righted itself. "Cahrist!" he said. "Stop this goddamn junker."

I snapped alert as if I had been in a sound sleep. Craig pulled over. My temples pounded. A headache was building behind my brain. I reached back and grabbed a beer for myself.

"You could have killed him, you asshole." Dale's car door thumped open. "I'm driving."

"No." Craig spoke thickly. "I'm okay now."

"Bullshit." Dale was half in, half out of the car. "You're drunk and pissed off, and in no state to drive."

"He's not drunk," I said. The others stopped and looked at me.

"So you let Craig drive, Carren?" Johnny was peering in the door. "You should know better."

"Cut it out," I said. "I'm not responsible for everything around here. You're the one who got him mad."

"Oh, but you are responsible," Johnny said. He pushed on Dale. "Get back in. I'm coming, too."

Dale climbed in the back seat, and Johnny climbed in beside him. As he slammed the door closed, the air filled with the scent of whiskey, but Johnny didn't seem drunk. I was clutching my hands together, my fingernails digging into my palms. Craig put the car in gear, drove a few blocks to the Black Steer Restaurant, and turned around in the parking lot. I was beginning to feel giddy. Rennie had passed out.

Craig crumpled his beer can and tossed it out the window. Then he reached back, grabbed the remaining can of the six-pack, guzzled the beer and tossed out that can. My giddiness had grown worse. I should have stopped him from driving. Johnny was right. Craig would do what I said. He belched, wiped his mouth, and said, "You ready, kids?"

I didn't nod so much as let my head droop. Craig pulled out onto the street, revved engine and shoved his foot against the floor. The car peeled forward, heading toward the viaduct at top speed. Buildings whizzed past us and suddenly a blast of cold air fanned my back. I turned. Johnny had opened his door. He was leaning on it, riding the door frame straight toward the viaduct. If we went under, the door would shear off.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" Dale grabbed Johnny's legs and tugged. The door swayed slightly.

It felt as if I had swallowed my heart and it was beating in my throat. I slapped Rennie as I turned around. He shook his head and, almost brainlessly, yanked Johnny's ankle. A sharp stab of fear pierced my headache and the cobwebs in my brain. My best friend was going to die. I half leaned over the back seat, grabbed Johnny's thigh and pulled. The door closed on Johnny's back as we zoomed through the viaduct and under the overpass into East End. Not even a nick.

"Stop the goddamn car," Dale yelled. Craig kept driving. "Stop the goddamn car or so help me god I'm going to kill you, Craig Stener, you asshole!"

I couldn't let go of Johnny's thigh, so I kicked Craig. "Stop the car, stupid."

The car swerved and then righted itself. "Stop the fucking car," I said.

Pain echoed in my back, my side and down my leg. The car slowed and gradually stopped on the shoulder. Craig opened his door and got out, holding his hip—the place my foot must have contacted his body. We finally let go of Johnny. The door creaked open, and he almost fell. He made himself stand, slowly. His shirt was creased into his back, and he seemed to be having trouble drawing his breath.

"Jesus, what the hell were you doing, man?" Rennie asked.

"Nothing." Johnny shook his head and nearly fell over. "Just like from now on." He grinned, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. "Some people, they make it by the time they're fifty. And some people make it before they're eighteen. Did you guys know that?"

His words depressed me. I didn't want my greatest claim to fame being salutatorian for the class of 1978. "Get in the car."

He looked at me. "No real reason to now. I could drown in Lake Superior tonight and it wouldn't make a fucking load of difference. My folks would be upset, but they'd get over it. So would you guys. The world wouldn't change."

"Get in the car, Johnny," I repeated, making sure that my voice was softer.

He shook his head, but got into the car anyway. "I don't even have the guts to prove my own theory," he said.

Dale pushed Rennie out of the way, opened the other door and climbed up front. "I never realized you got suicidal when you were drunk," he said to Johnny. But I knew that it wasn't just when he was drunk. Johnny felt more and more like a failure, and somehow the experiment had simply made things worse.

Dale made Craig slide over next to me. Craig's eyes were glazed, and I knew that if we didn't get him home soon, he'd be sick. "Great prom night, huh?" Dale said.

"Oh, yeah." I was trying to keep a distance between myself and Craig. "Something to remember for the rest of our lives."

August 1988

I pulled the car up in front of Rennie's house. The house—Rennie's parents' house, really—hadn't changed. It stood in the center of the block on East Fourth Street, surrounded by oak and bush pine. The little arched doorway draped in vines hinted at the house's redness. Rennie's dad's Studebaker sat in the gravel driveway, the collector's plate gleaming proudly against the shining chrome.

Johnny got out and stared at the house for a moment before closing the car door. A chill ran through my back. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps, over all of these years, Johnny had lost that gift Craig had nearly killed him for. Or perhaps he was as nervous as I was.

I climbed out. The air smelled faintly of pine and damp earth. I took a deep breath. If we were wrong—if Johnny was wrong—we could have a short visit with Rennie's parents, and then a quiet dinner somewhere unfamiliar.

Johnny waited for me on the walk. I took his arm, and together we crossed the cobbled brick. The lower step was cracked and Johnny nearly tripped. I grabbed his arm tighter. When we reached the top step, I was the one who knocked.

Voices sounded inside the house, and so did some soft jazz. I was about to knock again when Rennie pulled the door open.

"Carren," he breathed. His face was soft, rounded, like the face of a child yet to lose his baby fat. "And Johnny. Jesus." He stared at us as if he couldn't believe we were there, and then he stepped back. "Come on in. Craig and Dale are already inside."

We walked through the narrow entranceway into the small living room. A fire was burning in the fireplace. The Risk game sat on the table, unopened, as it had so many Friday nights in our past. Craig was hunched nervously on the rocking chair beside the window. Dale had poured himself a drink and was examining the photo rack Rennie's parents had mounted on the wall. Those pictures, the VCR on top of the television, and the touch-tone telephone were all that showed ten years had passed.

"I half expected you, John," Rennie said. "But where did you find Carren?"

"She found me." Johnny extracted himself from my grip and sat on the couch.

I still stood in the center of the living room. Craig wouldn't look up, but I could feel Dale's gaze on me. I met it, and was startled to see the intelligence that had lined his features. "We've been wondering about you, Carren." He swished his drink and looked down at the swirling liquid as if, with that one sentence, he had said too much.

"Suppose you made good." Craig tossed the toothpick he had been using into the fire. He still wouldn't face me.

"I don't know what made good means," I said.

Silence followed my words. We were together again, the four musketeers plus one, ten years later—or was it ten years after? It didn't matter. We were ten years strangers, with the memory of friendship, or something similar.

"Where's your parents?" Johnny asked Rennie.

Rennie walked over to the bar built into the wall. "They took my wife out. Said old friends are better seen alone." He took a glass off the shelf against the mirror. "Get you guys anything?"

I shook my head, and so did Johnny. It was hard to imagine Rennie with a wife. It was hard to imagine that I was in this room with these people. Craig leaned back in the rocker. The wood creaked. "I still want to hear about Carren."

"If I'd made good, you would have heard about me," I snapped. All four men looked at me. Each face held something—fear and a little regret. And something that I couldn't read.

"You should have stayed," Dale said for all of them.

I turned away from him. "I'll have that drink now. Scotch, if you have it."

Rennie took a decanter from the back of the bar, uncorked it, sniffed the contents, and poured. His hands were shaking. "I suppose," Dale said, "since we all showed up as originally planned that we should continue with the original plan."

"What? Compare notes? See how well we've done since our little experiment?" Craig stood up. He had become beefy, almost fat, but he moved with a sense of power. "Okay. We'll start with the failure first." He braced himself near the fireplace. "I'm here only because I got paroled six months ago." He finally met my gaze. "Manslaughter. My attorney tried to claim self-defense, but I couldn't help him since I had blacked the whole thing out. I managed to get time off for good behavior, amazing, they think, since I have an anger problem. Impressed, aren't you, Carren?"

I didn't know why he was picking on me. I had done better, yes, but not that much considering all the promises I had made to myself. "Craig, look—"

"Shit. Carren speaks, we all listen. Hasn't changed at all. You know how hard it was for me to interrupt you just then?" He ran a hand nervously over his thick arm. "Shit."

"I've been going to the sleep clinic in Minneapolis," Rennie said. He shot a quick glance at Craig, as if hoping the soft words would calm Craig down. "They didn't diagnose me until last year. Narcolepsy. I'm taking speed a couple times a day. It's helped."

"I'll say." Dale grinned. "You should see his wife!"

Rennie blushed. "Dale helped me find the sleep clinic. He's been working at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester. One of their youngest doctors ever. Everyone says he's damn good."

"Shut up." Dale smiled as he spoke. He walked over to Craig. "You know, anger is sometimes caused by a chemical imbalance, too."

Craig moved closer to the fire, his back half turned to the group. "One success, two if you count marriage. You're not married, are you, Carren?"

"No," I said softly. I had never even been asked—or found anyone I wanted to ask. Funny, I had never felt sad about it until Craig had mentioned it.

"Neither am I," Johnny said. "I'm working as the janitor over at Senior High."

"Shit." Dale whistled through his teeth. "I expected you to be working at some high class brokerage firm by now—or doing something with those prognosticating skills of yours."

Johnny just smiled. "I told you ten years ago I wasn't going to amount to anything. At any given decision point, our futures spread before us like a handful of rainbows. Each rainbow carries its own network of paths. Once we've made the decision, the paths narrow, until often, there is only one. From eighteen on, it seems, I've only had little rainbows. Somehow I discarded the big ones a long time ago."

We all let that sink in. I took the drink from Rennie. The glass was cool against my palm. I didn't want it so much to drink as to hold.

"And what about you, Carren?" Craig asked. "I haven't heard anything yet."

"I'm an attorney." I took a sip of the Scotch. It burned against my throat much as that clear liquid had ten years before. "I work for Legal Aid in Milwaukee. I make eighteen thousand dollars per year, and I live alone. I have always lived alone. I went to law school and graduated summa cum laude. That's my claim to fame. I haven't done anything either."

Craig let out a series of short barking laughs. He turned and faced us fully, still laughing. We watched. It took him a moment to catch his breath. Then he shook his head. "Rainbows, janitors, and angry drunks. I expected us all to be on the road to something by now. But I suppose I should have known better once Carren left."

I squeezed the glass between my fingers. I could feel the fragile sides and knew that in a minute they would crack. "Don't blame it all on me."

"Why not?" He leaned against the sofa—an animal movement, practiced relaxation hiding a potential spring. "We were a unit. And you could have made us combine our strengths, use what we had—"

"You were bickering so badly about who got the best deal, it was all I could do to hold us together."

Craig rested his hands on his knees. "You could have stopped the bickering."

"I did." I waited for him to say something, but a slow flush crept along his cheeks. Finally I set my glass down. The Scotch spilled over the rim, leaving a small puddle on the coffee table.

Rennie grabbed a napkin and placed it on the spill. Dale set his drink down, too. "We always listened to you," he said. "You could have told us to stop."

The squeezed feeling was growing, pressure in the back of my head and chest. "I was an eighteen-year-old girl," I said. "I didn't know if I should wear a bra or not, or what my dad would do if I came home late too many nights in a row, and you wanted me to control our lives, choose our destiny and lead us all into the promised land? Jesus, that's as stupid as drinking a little scientifically mixed magic potion so that we can raise our IQ points."

"It worked for me," Dale said softly.

"Yeah, and it gave Johnny ESP and made Craig angry and made Rennie sleep. I'm the only one it didn't help, and because of that, you all expect me to lead you, guide you, as if I got an extra helping of wisdom by not getting anything at all."

"Oh, you got something," Johnny said. He was sprawled along the couch, his body as taut as Craig's. "You were always attractive and interesting, Carren, but you were never the center of attention until that night."

"Charisma," Dale said. "So much of it that I can't believe you've managed to hide all these years."

I stared at him, and as I stared, I started to shake. All the people, wanting me to do this project or to help with that. All the men who approached me, cautiously, in bars or at dances. All the years of saying no or closing my door or turning away. People wouldn't leave me alone. And somehow, I thought everyone suffered from it. Or, at least, I had convinced myself of that after graduation night so long ago.

May 1978

Cars littered the parking lot behind the gym. People stood outside, holding robes wrapped in clear thin plastic. My father dropped me off and went to park. I carried my robe over my arm and walked cautiously across the unevenly paved sidewalk. My high heels clattered against the concrete, the sound almost hidden by the rise and fall of excited voices.

"Hey! Carren!" A couple of the girls hurried over and asked my opinion on the way their graduation robes looked. I straightened one collar, decided not to tell Glonski that she looked like a balloon, and kept walking. People continued to greet me as I walked in the side door beside the orchestra room. Inside, I could hear the squeals of violins, the rise and fall of loose-lipped trumpets, and the squeak of a piccolo. Someone was banging Middle C on the piano in order to get everyone to quiet down and tune. For the first time, I wasn't in the orchestra at graduation. I was in the procession itself.

The students were gathering under the signs bearing the first initial of their last names. I scanned the large hallway for a "B," finally found it and pushed my way toward it. As I passed the "S's," Craig grabbed my arm.

"Meet me after the ceremony."

I pulled away. "I'm going to Trevor's graduation party. And then I'm heading home."

"Come on, Carren. The others will be there."

His acne-covered face seemed serious. I could say no, but that would leave me wondering what they had planned. Besides, these guys were supposed to be my best friends.

I sighed. "Just as long as it doesn't last too long. I really do want to go to Trevor's."

"It won't. We'll be at Rennie's." I could see the envy on his face. Trevor always held the most popular parties, and no one was allowed to crash. A few guys tried a year or so ago and found themselves ostracized by the entire school. Trevor didn't take kindly to people who didn't listen to him.

I walked past him, and made my way to the "B" line. We were crowded against the trophies, the second row to walk in. "Better put your robe on, Carren," Mr. Bellen, the principal, said as he hurried past. I nodded. I balanced the hanger on top of the trophy case, and ripped open the thin plastic surrounding the robe. It was navy blue with a white collar. My cap had two tassels attached to it: a white one to designate my honor society membership and a pink one to show that I was graduating second in my class. On this night, I was relieved that I was graduating second. Danny West, the valedictorian, had to

make a speech. I had no idea what kind of speech I would have made.

I slipped the robe over my head, adjusted the collar and looked into my little hand mirror. Nothing was out of place. One of the girls helped me adjust my cap. The tassels dangled next to my eye like soft strands of hair. Butterflies danced in my stomach, and I felt, finally, as if my life were moving forward.

We stepped back as the orchestra marched past. The outside door opened and banged a final time. Johnny came sliding beside me. He put his hands on my shoulder. "Think they'll let a 'C' in the 'B' row?"

"Not likely," I said. "We're alphabetical."

He grinned, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. His eyes hadn't smiled since prom night.

"Craig talk to you about Rennie's later?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Craig hasn't talked to me much."

"I guess we're doing something."

"He'd have told me if he wanted me, Carren."

I touched his face, brushed the tassel aside. "I want you there."

The words had more longing in them than I would have liked. Johnny heard it and trapped my hand between his cheek and shoulder. "We fucked up, Carren," he said.

I shook my head. This night was my beginning. I didn't want to hear about past mistakes. "We're doing fine."

The line started moving. Miss Holmes, the phys ed instructor in charge of the procession, clapped her hands together. "Everyone in their places."

The butterflies in my stomach were doing a tap dance. High school was ending. College, adulthood would take its place. I was ready. I had been ready a long time ago. Maybe that was why I took part in the biochemistry experiment. I saw it as a chance to grow up quicker, to make choices faster, to have opportunities that I wouldn't have had otherwise. My SAT scores were high and I knew that I would get into a good school, but there seemed to have been more to it, other gifts that intelligence would give me—like the freedom to be myself. Sometimes I understood Craig's resentment of Johnny. I had wanted the experiment to work more than I ever admitted.

The inside of the gym was stifling. The heat from the day had accumulated in the roof and even the fans that were located around the building hadn't helped. The orchestra was playing "Pomp and Circumstance" as we filed in—all five hundred of us. Parents and guests peered down from the balcony, as did the juniors who were acting as ushers, wondering what it would be like to be standing on the shiny wooden floor, waiting to move their tassels to the other side of their caps. Up on the podium, Mr. Bellen stood with Danny West and a few of the teachers. The room smelled of sweat, old tennis shoes, and wood, and a sudden sadness pierced me. This was the last time I would stand on this floor as a student. My rights to Senior High ended here, my reign as a graduating senior—the top of the totem pole—was over. I was facing a future without the friends I had attended school with for the past twelve years, a place where the hierarchies were new and uncertain, where I would have to make choices that were not pre-planned. I sat down on the cold metal folding chair, listened to the music I had played several hundred times, and waited.

I waited during all the speeches, and during my father's smiles, through several dozen more bars of

"Pomp and Circumstance." As my row moved through the auditorium, through that oppressive heat and fake ceremony, I still waited. My heels echoed in the wood as I crossed the stage. Mr. Bellen winked as he shook my hand and gave me the plastic case holding my diploma. I stopped, moved the tassel to the other side of my hat, and felt a surge of disappointment. Nothing had changed. Graduation was as much of a cheat as drinking that potion. A slight burning, a momentary sensation, but nothing truly different.

I climbed off the stage and went back to my seat, watching as my friends crossed the stage one by one. After a few more bars of "Pomp and Circumstance," the entire affair was over. Graduation from high school—something I had worked toward since the day I entered kindergarten—and the ceremony itself had only taken an hour and a half.

My father took me home. He hugged me, told me how proud he was of me, and exclaimed over the diploma more than I ever would. Then I changed clothes, took the Astre, and drove to Rennie's.

Lights were blazing all over the house. The Studebaker was gone—Rennie's folks were always good about leaving us alone—and the front door stood open. My heart was pounding.

I had left my heels on and a touch of make-up to go with my jeans and blouse. My clothes were perfect for Trevor's—everyone there would be dressed as stylishly casual as possible—but they felt very wrong for what was facing me inside that house.

As I walked up the cobble brick sidewalk, voices reached me. Strident voices.

... cheated us. That's why I didn't want you here." Craig. "Carren invited me," Johnny said.

"I don't see Carren anywhere."

I hurried. My heel caught on the step and I had to yank free.

"You mixed the stuff. What, did you give yourself the real batch and not give any of us anything?"

"Craig, slow down." Dale, with panic in his voice.

"You cheated us, didn't you? Didn't you?" The slap of flesh meeting flesh made me run. I reached the door and peered in. Johnny was leaning on the couch, Craig pummeling at his face, with Rennie and Dale trying to pull them apart. Johnny was doing nothing to defend himself. He just watched, as if he knew that something—or someone—would save him.

Craig had an insane look, spittle rising from the side of his mouth as he hit Johnny and hit him again. Blood splattered across the clean living room, and Rennie was making little gasping sounds with each blow. He and Dale couldn't hold Craig off, and I was no stronger. I pulled off both heels, gripped one shoe like a weapon and walked into the living room.

"Stop, Craig."

He didn't hear me at first. He was so absorbed in his mutilation of Johnny that my voice didn't even penetrate.

I walked over to the other side of the couch, reached across Johnny and pushed Craig with the point of my heel. "Lay off. Leave Johnny alone."

Craig looked at me, and for a moment, I thought he was going to hit me, too. Then his eyes filled with tears and he stepped back. Johnny leaned forward with a groan. I didn't even look at him. The fact that he'd failed to defend himself—twice in the last three weeks—disgusted me.

"Dale, find something to clean him up with." I moved around the couch to stand between Craig and Johnny. I was shorter than Craig and less powerful, but at that moment, I felt eight feet tall. "Don't you ever pick on him again. That experiment was simply that, an experiment. Nothing else. Nothing special. It backfired and we could have all been hurt. You hate him for something he can't control, and I want you to stop it. Find someone else to hate, but leave him alone. Johnny never meant to hurt you or to cheat any of us. We all made the same mistake together, you got that? *Together*, as in all for one and one for all." I put my shoes back on. My hands were shaking. "It doesn't really mean anything."

"It does too," Rennie said. "We're a team—"

"We were a team." I glanced at Craig. "But we're not any more."

Dale was wiping Johnny's face. The blood was clearing, showing the bruises and his split lip. I put my arm around Johnny and helped him stand. "I'm taking him home."

"Go to Trevor's," Johnny said. He could barely move his lips. "I'm not going to Trevor's. I'm taking you home."

We started toward the door. Dale followed us. "Carren," he said. I turned. My gaze must have frosted him for he took a step back. "Take care of him, okay?"

"Johnny should be able to take care of himself," I snapped, and helped him out the door.

The outdoor air seemed to have gotten colder. I opened the passenger side of the *Astre*, helped Johnny inside, then crawled in on my side. As I started the car, he whispered, "Don't go, Carren."

"We're leaving." I flicked on the headlights and gunned the engine. Then I peeled away from the curb.

"No," he said, struggling to sit up. "I mean, don't leave us. We need you."

I hadn't realized that I was thinking of leaving until that moment. What did Superior hold for me? A father who was too busy to care much, friends who were not friends, and a school that was no longer mine. I felt old, and squeezed, and very alone.

"I make my own choices," I said.

And Johnny said nothing the rest of the way home.

August 1988

"We were like the perfect person," Dale said, bringing me to myself. "You were in the forefront, with me and Johnny as advisors and the passive/aggressive sides separated out. We were just so young . . ."

The perfect organization. For the first time in that house, I felt the need to sit down. I made my way over to the couch and sank in its folds. The cushions molded to a body different than my own. Johnny watched me from the couch's side.

Every politician dreamed of such an organization. A smart person in the lead, with even smarter ones behind him, a person who could foretell the future—with at least minor accuracy—and others to handle the ruly and the unruly. Reagan had such an organization. So did Roosevelt. And so did Hitler.

I shivered and looked at the men surrounding me. Craig was doing god knew what. Rennie had just married. Dale had a good job, and Johnny was drifting, knowing that this moment would come.

I smiled at him. "Quite a few rainbows in front of me, aren't there?"

He smiled back and didn't say anything.

"Quite a few in front of all of us," Dale said. The look on his face was intense. He had been waiting for this moment, too, and had, from his expression, thought it would never arrive.

"And as usual," Craig said, "the decision is Carren's."

His bitterness startled me, and I remembered seeing Johnny's blood spatter this room, seeing Johnny wait for me—as he was waiting for me now—as they all were waiting for me—to make their decision for them.

It would be so easy for everyone.

Except me.

Craig was clenching and unclenching his fists. He had said that he was beginning to deal with the anger problem. Dale was smart and had a good job. Rennie finally had his sleeping under control. And Johnny, Johnny seemed to have come to terms with the fact that he would never be someone in our old definition of the phrase, and he had become an interesting person in his own right.

If I stayed, I would change all of that, become responsible for them again, and use them, in some ways, for my own gain. In turn, they would continue to wait for me, wait for my decisions, wait, like Johnny did as Craig pummeled him on the night of our graduation. They would make no choices on their own, do no real growing on their own. It seemed that they might actually be better people without me, just as I would be a better person without them.

"I'm sorry," I said. I had made the correct decision a long time ago. And had been running away from it ever since. It was time I faced the choice I had made. No matter how out of control my life seemed, I had to know, like the driver of that truck careening down the Duluth hills so many years ago, that I had made my own future. Alone. "I'm sorry, Dale."

He nodded, hiding those intelligent eyes as he dipped his head. Rennie exhaled behind me, and Craig turned back toward the fire. Only Johnny didn't move. The smile remained, small and mysterious, the smile my father used to have when he was proud of me.

I finished my Scotch, and glanced at the Risk game. I had had enough of games. "God, I need a cigarette. Anyone have one?"

Craig patted his breast pocket and pulled out a pack and a lighter. I took a cigarette and was about to light the first smoke I would have in five years when Rennie said, "You'll have to do it outside."

His chubby face held an apologetic expression, but I didn't mind. Outside sounded good. Outside sounded better than good. Outside sounded wonderful. I got up and went out onto the front steps. My whole body was trembling, and the restless feeling had returned. I would see the attorney in the morning, tell him to sell the house. Superior held nothing for me any more, except memories.

It was time, then, to return to Milwaukee and stop hiding. To do the favors, date some men, prance before the television cameras. The four musketeers had actually come to terms with their problems. It was time that plus one, be she Constance or another D'Artagnan, did too.

I heard a slight rustle behind me and then Johnny sat down. "You haven't lit up."

I stared at the cigarette I had been twisting in my hand. "I gave up a few years ago."

He took the lighter from me and stuck it in his pocket. "I hate kissing a woman who tastes like nicotine." He leaned over and brushed his lips against mine. "That's for old times," he murmured. Then he took my face in his right hand and kissed me slowly, exploring my whole mouth. "And that's for new."

I smiled. He put his arms around me, and I leaned on him, enjoying the sensation of relaxing with another person, no promises, no magic potions, no silly dreams. I had been wrong all those years ago. Best friends could hold each other without harming the friendship.

"You staying?" he asked.

"You have to ask?" I replied. Even if his ESP wasn't working, my decision to leave again had to be obvious.

"No." He sighed softly, sadly, and tightened his grip on me. And for those brief moments, under the moonlit northern sky, I felt as if I had come home.