

A photograph of a colorful crocheted snake, possibly a garter snake, resting on a dark wooden branch. The snake has a pattern of red, yellow, and black. In the background, a house is visible through bare trees, suggesting a winter or late autumn setting. The overall tone is somewhat somber and artistic.

AUTHOR OF THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

THE ART FORGER

B.A. SHAPIRO

The
SAFE ROOM

The Safe Room

Barbara Shapiro



To all those who have been forced to flee their homes in search of freedom

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“It is as if their lives left a weaving of invisible threads in the air of this house ... and I stumbled and fell into them.”

—Shirley Ann Grau, *The Keepers of the House*

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And the names remain surprisingly the same. Thanks to my first readers: Jan Brogan, Thomas Engl and Floyd Kemske. Thanks to my second readers: Diane Bonavist, Deborah Crombie, Scott Fleishma Gary Goshgarian, Tamar Hosansky, Pat Sparling, Vicki Steifel and Donna Stein. Thanks to my agen Nancy Yost, my publisher, Ed Gorman and my editor, Mary Smith. And, as always, thanks to Dan Robin and Scott.

CHAPTER ONE

A single, sharp sound woke me. I sat up in bed, disoriented, askew, and struggled to listen through the fog that hangs between sleep and waking. But all I could hear were the whispered sighs and creaks of Gram's old house struggling through the night, nothing as sharp and clear as the noise that had torn away my sleep. Had I dreamed it? I lay back and closed my eyes, thinking of all those who'd lived and died within these walls: seven generations of Hardens, whom I counted in the night the way that insomniacs count sheep.

I had gotten as far as Colonel Stanton Harden, when I heard it again. A faint rasping, a grating, as if something, or someone, was scraping metal against metal, a manacle against stone. Digging? The noise rose from deep within the house, yet at the same time, it came from outside. From all around.

I crawled from bed and looked into the yard. It was hooded in shadow, and as the wind played through the trees, the streaks of darkness shifted and deepened and assumed odd and alien shape. No one was there. I opened my bedroom door and peered into the murky hallway. A stair riser creaked, the aging furnace rumbled its protest against the chill, but as I strained toward the scraping, I could hear nothing. No one was there.

In the morning, my bedroom was filled with the brilliant light of early May, and the phantoms of the night had departed to wherever it is phantoms go when the sun is out. The brilliance of a New England spring was powerful enough to banish even the most resilient of ghosts, and by the time I climbed into my car and headed for work, I had forgotten all about the strange sounds that had haunted me in the darkness.

Although I was twenty-seven, I was only a bit more than a year into my first real job—waitressing and substitute teaching didn't seem to qualify, although they had felt real enough at the time—and I still secretly reveled in the idea of being a part of the “grown-up” world of commuting and carrying a large unpaid balance on my credit card. Of course, my mother and my cousin Beth, both of whom were committed to curing what they considered my protracted adolescence, would have claimed I was far from grown-up.

Hadn't I broken off an engagement to the “perfect man”—perfect, that is, except for the fact that he caught him cheating on me two months before the wedding? (“Everyone should be allowed to make a mistake,” my mother had explained to me. “Especially someone as brilliant and good-looking as Richie.”) Hadn't I wasted years getting a master's degree in a discipline as frivolous as sociology? And wasn't this proven by the fact that I was currently underpaid and underemployed as a part-time do-gooder with no chance of advancement? Not to mention that I lived with my grandmother. It was no wonder I could drag myself out of bed in the morning.

Still, there I was, up and out and actually enjoying my drive to work, which I liked to think of as a ten-mile trip across the social class system of America. I started from the modest, three-bedroom-two-and-a-half-bath colonials of Lexington, proceeded past the expansive lawns and mansions of Belmont Hill, and dipped into a corner of Cambridge jammed with teeth-gnashing rotaries, used-car dealerships, and loud signs announcing appliance sales. Then I headed east on Memorial Drive, the impeccably landscaped grounds of Harvard University lining both sides of the Charles River, and across the BU Bridge, pa-

some of Boston's toniest townhouses. But soon the well-kept boulevards melted into a grim sameness of garbage-filled streets and unpainted, tired structures, and I was in a place where the blocks were gap-toothed with the flattened, charred remains of futile turf wars—and grass only grew where it shouldn't. An introductory sociology course in forty-five minutes or less, depending on traffic.

That morning, when I reached the run-down intersection of Centre and Washington Streets, there was something about the angle of the shadows that flashed me back to the morning of my first job interview at SafeHaven. I had somehow lost my bearings, but I hadn't been scared driving in aimless circles around sagging porches crawling with children and three-legged furniture. I had been excited. It was so exotic, so exhilarating: the obscenities scrawled on the walls, the rusted cars haphazardly resting on their tireless rims, the bored stares of the mothers, the vacant stares of the addicts. This was real life, this was where real things happened.

A year later, as I swung a well-practiced U-turn and parked in front of a tattered gray house, I knew all too much about the real things that happened in real life.

Two signs were mounted on the house's porch railing. One sign, scrawled in barely legible Magenta Marker, read: "R. M. Masdea, DDS, No Appointment Necessary," and the other, neatly lettered, said "SafeHaven." I peered through the grimy window of Dr. Masdea's mean little office and felt a rush of sympathy for those who had to let that awful man touch their teeth. It was an easy bet he overcharged too. I pushed the buzzer under the "SH."

"It's Lee," I yelled into the intercom.

When no answering buzz released the door, I hit the button again. Things were always breaking down at SafeHaven, both physically and emotionally, and we often functioned like a MASH unit, rushing from one crisis to another, focusing on whichever one appeared to loom largest at the moment. "Triage mentality," Kiah, the program director, called it; and it was an apt description, for whatever the big problem of the day was, invariably, a new crisis would arise to push it to the back burner, where it heated up and boiled into the next day's crisis, which pushed that day's crisis to the back burner, where it heated up ... It's the nature of cycles to keep cycling, and SafeHaven had yet to find a way to beat them. But we kept trying.

A wary brown eye filled the broken peephole, then there was a grunt and the door swung inward. "Lee," Joy said with a scowl. "Damn button's busted again. Pain in the butt. Every time somebody comes, I gotta get up and let 'em in myself. Then the phone rings and the door goes again and I can't get a damn thing done. Kiah says we can't fix it 'til the next check comes from the feds. Pain in the butt," she muttered as she walked down the narrow hallway to her office. "Fucking pain in the butt."

I followed Joy to her desk. She sat down and her frown deepened. "We're running out of everything and Kiah says she's gonna have to turn clients away—even if they're in a real bad way."

Joy had only been on the job for a few months and hadn't yet caught on to the rhythm of life in an inner-city drug program. For once, I felt as if I was the insider, one of the in-crowd, rather than the outsider I knew myself to be. In many ways, I was in a foreign land, a place with different customs, different rules, even a different language—and as hard as I tried, as long as I stayed, I would always speak with an accent.

I leaned over and gave Joy's ample shoulders a squeeze. "Kiah's never turned away a woman who needed her, and she's not going to start now. I'm finishing up the report, and they're going to give us the money for next year—I promise." I only hoped the god of procurement at Health and Human Services was listening.

"You don't think we're gonna have to close down?"

"No way." I raised my arms and clenched my fists. "Super researcher to the rescue: in search of truth, justice and a speedy buck!"

Kiah stuck her head out of the door of her office. “Truth, justice and a speedy buck?” She walked over and gave me a hug; she was tall and thin and moved with the willowy grace of a ballet dancer. “Thanks for coming in today, girlfriend.”

It was officially my day off, but “officially” didn’t count for much at SafeHaven—one of the many things I liked about working there. Kiah was another. She was a remarkable woman: tough and confident and extremely competent, but softened, and made even more remarkable by an amazing ability to get inside a person’s head and understand—truly understand—why she did the things she did.

I shrugged, slightly embarrassed by my pleasure at Kiah’s gratitude and her use of the word “girlfriend.” In the year we’d been working together, she and I had evolved an odd kind of friendship—one that contained mutual respect and affection, but also a touch of distance, a wariness in some circumstance we couldn’t quite overcome: I left at the end of the day, and she did not.

“You didn’t leave your grandmother home alone holding the bag, did you?” Kiah rubbed the heel of her hand against her cheekbone, a habitual gesture of both exhaustion and determination. Kiah’s skin was a gleaming ebony that I’d always admired; when I once mentioned this, she told me her mother cried at its darkness when she was born. Now she said, “I wouldn’t want to be accused of standing in the way of Tubman Park.”

Not only would Kiah never be accused of standing in the way of Tubman Park, she was the reason I was involved with it—or more accurately, why my grandmother was involved with it. I lived with Gram in a house built by my great-great-great-great grandfather, Colonel Stanton Harden. He had been an ardent abolitionist and Civil War hero, and the house had been a station on the Underground Railroad—and that was the connection to Kiah. Kiah was a board member for the new Harriet Tubman Network to Freedom National Park, which, when it was completed, would connect hundreds of Underground Railroad sites into a six-hundred-mile-long park—actually, more of a six-hundred-mile-long archipelago. According to the *Boston Globe*, the Park would revive the spirit and history of the Underground Railroad “from the fraying edges of national memory.”

“I’m bringing Trina back with me to help when I’m done here,” I said. “Want to come give us a hand?” When I had first told Kiah about the history of Harden House, she immediately arranged to meet Gram and get a tour. Before I knew it, Gram, my cousin Beth and I were overseeing the house’s designation as part of the Park. It was an ongoing joke that Kiah was responsible for the mammoth workload this had created—as well as the mammoth obsession that drove my grandmother.

“Don’t I wish I could.” Kiah waved her hand in the direction of her cluttered office. “Everything’s pretty much on schedule?”

I shrugged. “I guess I’ll find out soon. We’re meeting with the contractor this afternoon.”

“And your report?”

“The budget’ll be ready for the accountant before I leave—if everything checks out with her, it can go out tomorrow.” A large part of SafeHaven’s money came from research-demonstration grants awarded by the federal government, and the next year’s funding was dependent on the quality of the previous year’s report. I could feel the weight of this responsibility lying heavy across my shoulders. I told Kiah I’d better get to it, and left.

Although I was officially a research assistant, no one at SafeHaven was slotted into a single job description. In my sixteen months on staff, I’d been a therapist, employment counselor, baby-sitter, carpenter, chauffeur and secretary—just to name a few. I did whatever I could, relishing the idea that although I might be working a “real” job, I wasn’t working a “straight” one. Pantyhose were not my thing.

As I headed to the back stairs that led to my tiny attic office, I couldn’t resist poking my head in the living room. Another reason I liked working at SafeHaven was that it was part of my job to mind other

people's business—and I'm a nosy person by nature. I waved to Jayce, who was washing windows and to Darla, who was mopping the floor. Jayce gave me a sad, sweet smile, but Darla ignored me. Darla was in the "week two funk." She was sure to come around after she had worked through her "week three fury." Either that or she'd leave.

I stopped outside the dining room, which doubled as a therapy room when it wasn't meal time, and watched morning group through the clear spot at the top of the etched-glass panel in the door. When the heavy wood-frame doors were closed, it was hard to hear what was being said—which was why the dining room was a good site for therapy sessions—but it was possible to see what was going on if you pushed your eye to the tiny piece of unclouded glass. Often, seeing was enough to know all.

A dozen women were sitting around the long scarred table: eleven clients and one counselor, Ruth Thompson, the head of treatment and a reformed addict like most of the staff. (SafeHaven was a grassroots, community-based type of place, and I was almost singular in both the paleness of my skin and the lack of drug or alcohol abuse in my history.) I knew all the women, liked some and disliked others. I looked more closely when I saw that Trina Collins was sitting next to Ruth.

Although impartiality was the watchword at SafeHaven, it was impossible for individual staff to respond equally to all clients. After all, SafeHaven was all about connections between people, and chemistry was a big part of connection. Right from the start, Trina had sparked something in me, and it wasn't just the notoriety of her case, or the unfairness with which she had been portrayed in the media. Nothing made what she did justifiable, but right and wrong weren't as clear-cut as they appeared on TV. The first time I saw Trina—excluding the nightly news—she had been sitting in that shabby armchair in Kiah's office, shell-shocked, her handsome face dimmed by all she had been through. She was so skinny her jeans had been fastened around her waist with a shoelace.

Now, as I watched her lean over the table, full of good health and resolve, her face stern but her eyes warm, I felt a swell of pride. She was speaking earnestly to Shirleen, who sat across from her. Trina had come a long way since that first day, and although all the hard work had been hers, I liked to imagine that my friendship had been of some assistance. And although she still had much farther to go, and more battles to fight than either she or I might care to think about, I believed that Trina was going to be one of the few to break out of the cycle. Kiah wasn't as certain.

I turned from the window and climbed the stairs. Even if my mother and Beth thought I was wasting my time, my great-great-great-great grandfather, the Colonel, would be proud of what I was doing.

"Bitch!"

Trina took the abuse, sitting quietly, knowing that though nine of ten times it wouldn't make a bit of difference, there was that one of ten that just might. This was what she needed to do. To make it up to Hendrika for what she had done to her. To stay out of prison. To stay alive.

"Chill," Trina finally said to Shirleen, knowing it wasn't personal, but feeling like it was. "It might be hard to hear, Shirleen, but you gotta look at what came down. You need to get Willie back and you don't want what happened to Willie to—"

"I never did nothing bad to my baby!" Shirleen screamed. "I took care of him from the day he was born. My baby loves me!"

"Course he loves you," Trina said. "You're his mama. But that ain't always enough."

Shirleen glared at Trina, and Trina understood the other woman's anger as if it were her own. She had been exactly where Shirleen was. In that same seat. Shirleen was bullshit at the cop who bagged her instead of Thatch, the asshole dealer who deserved more time in the hold than he could serve in ten lifetimes. Shirleen was bullshit at the skanky sister from Children's Services who took Willie away. And Shirleen was bullshit at the judge who ordered her here. But mostly Shirleen was bullshit at Shirleen.

"Puttin' on airs," Shirleen muttered. "Ms. Trina Collins and her fuckin' straight fuckin' airs."

Trina glanced over at Ruth, hoping she'd run interference, but Ruth just sat there like some round, peaceful Buddha doll, all calm and serene-like. So Trina conjured up the sweet, tiny face of her little girl and tried again. "Drinking while you was pregnant was bad for him," she said. "Willie had a bad time—a really tough time. All those weeks in that premie ward hooked up to all that shit. And now that you're pregnant again you gotta think about—"

"Who the hell are you to tell me what I got to do?" Shirleen demanded. "To tell me all the bad shit you did? At least my baby's still alive!"

I headed home to Lexington with Trina in the passenger seat beside me. Trina wasn't the first woman I'd brought home on SafeHaven Furlough—part-time work during the last phase of treatment—but she was the first success. Kiah claimed Gram and I were too trusting, that it was hard for white folks to understand, that we tended to go overboard in whatever direction we chose. And after what happened with Anet, I guess I'd have to admit Kiah had a point—but that didn't mean the point was valid in every case.

Trina had been working for my grandmother for almost a month, officially as a secretary, but she was a good sport, and did pretty much whatever Gram needed. And my grandmother needed lots of assistance—not because she was old or infirm, actually nothing could have been further from the truth, but because of the incredible amount of work that had to be done before Harden House could become part of Tubman Park: schedules and renovations and deadlines and contractors and inspections and paperwork and paperwork and more paperwork. Although Gram had been indifferent to family history before meeting Kiah, now the Park was her prevailing preoccupation, her passion surpassing even her zeal for tennis. Unfortunately, Gram's organizational skills did not compare to her backhand—which was where Trina came in: Despite Trina's lack of formal education, or maybe because of it, she was a whiz at organization.

To my grandmother's credit, she had taken out a rehab loan and found a company named Preservations to do the necessary renovations—although calling Preservations a company was a bit of a stretch. Preservations was really Michael Ennen, a nice guy who was long on good looks and charm but short on experience. Gram was convinced that his two years of architecture at Harvard (he had dropped out), two more studying history at BU (he had dropped out), and a dozen summers spent working carpentry jobs with his father made him the perfect contractor for Harden House. His work had to be completed before the US Park Service would certify the house as an official "station" in the Park, and I worried that Michael's charm wasn't going to carry as much weight with the inspectors as it did with Gram.

"Is Michael going to be there?" Trina asked, as if reading my mind.

"Did you ever notice how neat he is all the time? How can a real contractor have such clean fingernails?"

"The man likes to take care of himself."

"I bet he spends more time getting ready for a date than I do."

"Check it out."

"I don't think so."

"Suit yourself." Trina shrugged. "But remember: a piece of a man is better than no man at all."

"You're so full of shit," I said. "You think I'm going to believe you think a piece of Lionel is better than no man at all?" One of the first real conversations Trina and I ever had was about Richie and Lionel. She had told me how Lionel got her hooked on him and then on heroin, and how he took a powder as soon as he found out she was pregnant. I told her how I had discovered Richie in bed with one of his graduate students—Richie was a real, live rocket scientist, at MIT, no less—two days after he mailed out the wedding invitations. "Guess a man doesn't need to be black to be a shit," Trina had

said, and we had solemnly promised we'd help each other to stay away from handsome men. Trina was not holding up her end of the bargain.

Trina grinned. "I admit Lionnel's a sleazy, slimy, rotten dog, but the man has his uses."

I stepped on the accelerator, passed an old Chevy on the right, and zipped under a light as it went from yellow to red—all right, so it was completely red, but the two cars behind me went through too. The successful Boston driver is the one who knows which risks to take.

"I saw you with Ruth in group today," I said, changing the subject. "You seemed like you were doing real well."

Her smile disappeared and she turned away. "You must've been doing your spying early on."

"Oh?" I waited a good couple of seconds, then said "oh?" again. When Trina continued to stare out the window, I switched the radio to a rap station I knew she liked and didn't say anymore. It wasn't easy. No one has ever accused me of being reticent, but over a year at SafeHaven had taught me to hold my tongue. I kept quiet for an entire song.

Trina watched the rowers out for crew practice on the Charles. Her shoulder-length braids were gathered in a tattered ribbon, and her neck was exposed; it was so innocent, so vulnerable, such a heart-breaking creamy brown. Trina was twenty-three, but looked seventeen, maybe younger. As we crossed the BU Bridge, she turned and followed the path of a sleek boat full of college girls, racing toward Boston Harbor, its oars disappearing then rising from the dark water. A place she'd never been. A life she'd never had.

Yet, weren't they more alike than they were different? Trina and those girls? Trina and me? We all wanted the same things: a comfortable existence, health, love, peace, safety. Trina was smart and beautiful and had everything going for her except the facts of her birth and every day of her life. Unfortunately, we got what we deserved even less often than we got what we wanted.

"Shirleen can be a real bitch," I said, meaning it. Shirleen had attitude taller than the Prudential Tower. She once told me to fuck off after I offered to help her set the table.

Trina turned from the window and looked at me sadly. "Oh, Shirleen's not so bad. She just wants that baby back so much that she's all twisted around by it—that and the guilt."

The expression on Trina's face reminded me of the first time she had told me about Hendrika's death. She claimed she had felt the spirit of her child rise and wrap itself around her, full of love and forgiveness. Trina said Hendrika came to her often, at daybreak, the hour of her birth.

"Do you still feel like Hendrika's with you?"

"Sure," Trina said. "The dead don't ever leave."

CHAPTER TWO

August 28, 1858

Today is my seventeenth birthday, and Papa has given me this diary as a gift to commemorate the day. Though I have often wished for just such a chronicle, I find it difficult to feel gladness as my dear Mama is not here with me. Mama passed on in the spring, on March twenty-one, one hundred and sixty days ago. I know Mama is with our Lord, in a happier place, but still, I am sad. Papa says if I read my Bible, the words of our Lord shall provide the comfort I seek. I read, I do, or try my best to do so, but comfort eludes me. Papa does not understand me as Mama did, but he is a man and has many important things to which he must turn his attention.

Still, I have much hope for the future. I have two beaux, or rather, two boys with whom I would consider keeping company. One is called Lewis Campbell, of the Connecticut Campbells, and the other is Wendell Parker, whose family was among the earliest settlers of Lexington, way back when it was still named Cambridge Farms. Lewis is quite handsome and took three dances on my card last year at the Buffrum-Chase Christmas Ball, but he resides in Hartford, a day's journey from Lexington. Although Wendell could not, in truth, be described as handsome, he has a kind soul and his home is just across the Common from Harden House, which is where we live.

Dear diary, please excuse my rudeness, as I have not yet introduced myself or my family. I am Sarah Abigail Harden, daughter of Stanton Elijah Harden and Charlotte Margaret Harden, nee Abbott, late of Lexington, Massachusetts. I also have one brother, Caleb Lloyd Harden, born in 1842, one year after I.

Papa is a famous man. He is known throughout the Commonwealth for the strength of his religious and moral convictions as well as his speeches against the sins of slavery. He has many enemies and takes far too many risks to help runaway Negroes, and I am often concerned for his safety. But Papa says he is doing God's work, and that the Lord protects his own. I, of course, do not question Papa, but nonetheless, I cannot but wonder how the Lord can maintain vigil on all of those who claim to be his own.

September 3, 1858

I received a letter from Lewis Campbell today by the afternoon post! Nancy Southwick had stopped for tea, and the two of us did giggle so over the contents of the correspondence. Lewis spoke briefly of his studies and his father's business plans, then said that his thoughts were already turning to Christmas and the Buffrum-Chase Ball. He added that he hoped he would have the pleasure of dancing with me again, and he signed the letter, "yours very truly." Nancy claims that this is a sure sign he has marriage on his mind!

I admit, I do admire him greatly, and his family would be acceptable, yet I am not certain I wish to be such a distance from Papa and Harden House. Nor, as Nancy remarked, do I wish to be separated from my dear friend Nancy Southwick. Wendell Parker does not cut nearly so fine a figure as Lewis, but he is of mild temperament, and Papa does admire his moral leanings. Nancy tells me Mr. Elijah Parker, Wendell's father, left him a parcel of land in his will, and that Wendell intends to build himself a grand house. I do confess it would be quite wonderful to be mistress of a great house, or

from under the thumb of the dreadful Mrs. Harrington, and, truth be told, a bit more removed from Papa, whose pioussness, at times, can be trying.

September 15, 1858

We went to a gala dinner party this evening at the home of William Lloyd Garrison of Boston. He is the publisher of *The Liberator*, and the most famous abolitionist in the entire United States! Everyone knows of the mock gallows that were built outside his house by the anti-abolitionists and how, while he was jailed for opinions printed in *The Liberator*, he wrote, "I am in prison for denouncing slavery in a free country!" He and Papa are grand friends.

Although there was much talk of the great injustices of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and the "conspiracy of silence" perpetrated by those who prosper from exploiting the Negro, the party was most enjoyable. There were twenty in attendance for dinner including Lawrence Cabot Adams and Mrs. Chas. Thayer Perkins. There were cold oysters and oyster pate and three kinds of wine. I was seated next to Wendell Parker whose talk was more lively than usual, although I dare say it was a few too many glasses of Roman punch which loosened his tongue. Papa would not agree with my assessment as he is most taken with Wendell due to his strong opinions against slavery.

I know that the conditions of the Negro in the Southern states are deplorable and wish with all my heart that those in bondage might soon be free, but I also wish that the men would not have taken so much time in the discussion of this matter in what otherwise was a lovely and gracious evening.

October 10, 1858

Just as I have feared, Papa was almost caught today helping a runaway slave. As the sun set, he arrived home with Dr. Howe and Mr. Weston Chapman, all three breathless and covered with leaves but unharmed. As I wiped the dirt from Papa's cheeks, he instructed me to remain close-lipped about the comings and goings at Harden House. He said we must always be on our guard against those "respectable citizens" who seek to undo the good we are trying to do. So I have decided to lock away this diary within the back drawers of my chiffonier until it is safe for these words to be read.

Despite my misgivings, it is true that I am most proud of Papa, who is doing God's work by providing safe passage for those who seek freedom from the subjugation of slavery. He always leaves a light glowing in the front parlor window, a back door ajar, and keeps an ear pressed to the grapevine dispatch. He feeds, conceals, then helps the refugees along their way. He is watched by our neighbors, threatened by the authorities, and sometimes betrayed by his friends. But Papa says that the laws of God must take precedence over the laws of man. He is a very wise and brave man.

Neither Caleb nor Papa is ever afraid, and I venture to guess that were dear Mama still alive, she would have no fear either, but I am only seventeen and a girl. Nancy Southwick whispers that the house of Papa's friend, Professor Samuel Hillard, was stoned and that the professor is no longer allowed to teach at Harvard College. She also said a man named Lovejoy was killed and another man's hand was branded with the same horrid instrument they use to mark ownership of cows. "SS" the letters were burned into his skin. "SS" for Slave Stealer. What if such things should befall Papa or Caleb?

October 24, 1858

In consequence of Papa's near arrest a fortnight ago, Papa and Caleb and Wendell Parker are constructing a secret room in which to conceal the fugitives. Although Wendell is two years older than Caleb (one year older than I), they have been friends since they were small boys. Wendell's father was an abolitionist too, but he died of consumption last year, and it has been left to Wendell to carry on for him. Wendell is usually silent, but I must admit that it is nice to have someone about Harden House besides Caleb and Papa and Mrs. Harrington, whose only conversation is of the torment of her go-

and the weight of her unfinished tasks.

~~The men do all their work at night, in bits and pieces, and hide hammers and wooden planks in the bottom of the carriage to be brought into the house under cover of darkness. I am most impressed with their cleverness. They are building a door with concealed hinges that opens into a space no one would ever suspect is there! It is behind the landing of the staircase, between the east and west parlors. It is most exciting!~~

But I must say no more, as these days there are many bounty hunters about, and Mr. Harrison Gray Otis spoke of Papa at one of his Whig meetings, calling him a “d—abolitionist” and a “curse and contagion” to the good people of Lexington. Papa has never pretended to be anyone save the abolitionist he is, but being named by Mr. Otis will make it increasingly difficult for him to carry on. He has oft been watched before, now he will be watched always.

It's difficult to know whom to trust. Papa was most surprised when Mrs. Lucretia Child did loudly click her knitting needles last Sunday when Reverend Lyman declared in his sermon that “those men who speak against slavery speak against the Union.” Mr. Child's family hails from Kentucky, and he is quite vocal about his proslavery beliefs. Although Papa was encouraged by Mrs. Child's act of defiance in so public a place, he found it distressing to hear such sentiments spoken of from the pulpit of our little church.

Papa reminds me that despite the words of the reverend, I must never question the righteousness of our mission. He nods gravely and pushes his spectacles up on the bridge of his nose, a gesture I always equate with his compassion and humanity. I nod in return, but do not reveal my true thoughts. I do not tell him it is not righteousness that I question, but safety. Is it so very wrong to desire the safety of the ones I love most dearly? As I write these words I see that I must open my heart and drive away my fears, for what else do the poor fugitives desire but the safety of those they hold most dear?

October 25, 1858

There is a family coming, a mother and her little girl, and the safe room is not near to ready! Papa got word last night from a station master in Hartford, Connecticut. God and weather permitting, a young woman named Rachel will arrive with her baby, Chloe, just before dawn tomorrow. They have come a long way from the Carolinas.

Papa, Caleb and Wendell hurry as much as they are able, and even I have been pressed into their assistance. Although I recognize the seriousness of the work, and the many dangers it poses for the poor fugitives, as well as for my own family, I cannot help but be exhilarated by partaking in activities beyond keeping my receipt book and overseeing the cleaning and cooking of the peevish Mr. Harrington.

Although I would not admit it to anyone but you, dear diary, I have always felt myself to be a bit apart from Nancy Southwick and Cousin Lizzie and even dear Mama. They are well-satisfied with their activities of embroidery and handwork, entertaining and visiting, with ensuring the housekeeper has properly laundered the linens and that the children are clean. Although I do desire to be wife, mother and mistress of a fine home, I sometimes find myself also desiring more, although what “more” is, I know not.

It is enough for me today to feel of so much use, to God and to my fellow human beings, for today I do more than just pull the ropes and handle the ribbons of our small household.

This morning I went out to the carriage, as if in search of a missing hat. Papa instructed me to place three pieces of wood inside my gray cloak, and then walk nonchalantly back into the house. I did just as he asked, pretending that losing my bonnet was the most vexing event of my day. Wendell told me I was very clever, and I could feel my face flush with pleasure at his praise. Caleb whispered that Wendell is sweet on me, and appeared surprised when I calmly acknowledged the truth of his

observation. Men can be so foolish.

~~As Papa, Wendell and Caleb work on the safe room, my job is to keep watch for slavers and bounty hunters and those nasty, prying persons who wish the Negro to remain within the chains of slavery. As a good Christian woman, I try to have compassion for all souls, for all ways of thinking, but I cannot understand why anyone would wish to see another human being in bondage.~~

October 26, 1858

Rachel and Chloe have arrived safely! The mother is weak and quite sickly, but the child, a little girl of about two, is chubby and healthy and a very happy sort. It appears Chloe's father was a white man, but mother and daughter don't seem to notice any difference between them. Papa says that is because there is none. The soul has no color. Neither do the ties of family.

It breaks my heart to think that there are so many men about, maybe some as close as the apple orchards behind our house, who desire to tear this little family apart. Harriet Exeter told me bounty hunters take babes from their mothers' breasts, then sell the little tykes down river. In almost all of these occurrences, mother and child never see one another again. Harriet also told me there are many children whose skin is far lighter in color than that of their mothers. Another great abomination of slavery, but one of which we rarely speak.

Rachel rests on the trundle under the bed in my room. Her fever is high, and she has no interest in taking any sustenance. When I tell her she must, for her little girl's sake, she gamely attempts to swallow the soup. Often, it comes up again.

Mrs. Harrington is not happy with our guests. She prefers to pretend that they are not present and to thwart any efforts I might offer on their behalf. When I requested that she put up a quart of split peas to soak overnight so that Rachel and Chloe might have the hearty sustenance of winter pea soup, she claimed there were no peas among the provisions. I was certain there were at least two quarts of peas in the canning cupboard, and told her as much. But when I went into the cellar to retrieve them, I found there were none and was forced to admit she was right. Mrs. Harrington smiled for the first time since Rachel and Chloe's arrival.

October 27, 1858 (morning)

Papa says we must find a way for Rachel and Chloe to leave tonight. Bills have been posted at the depot with their description and the offer of a large reward. It is also reported that Mr. Child (the one from Kentucky) has told Mr. Harrison Gray Otis that the fugitives are in Lexington. We cannot fathom how Mr. Child came upon this information, but we do know if fugitives are believed to be in Lexington, it will also be believed that they are at Harden House.

But Rachel is far too ill to travel and the safe room is not yet complete!

October 27, 1858 (afternoon)

As if there were not troubles enough in our little household, another fugitive has arrived at our door. He comes to us with tales of near capture and is dragging a broken leg. Until Dr. Miller can tend to his leg, which is very nasty indeed, this man is no more prepared to travel than Rachel. It is a wonder he was able to elude the slavers and make it here. Papa says it is a sign that God is with us. Despite her claims of deep piousness, Mrs. Harrington is extremely vexed.

Wendell and Caleb found the man in the barn. Papa says he's really just a boy, barely twenty, but he looks twenty-five to me. His name is Silas Person, and he hails all the way from Louisiana. It is easy to see from the manner in which he handles his pain, that he is a strong and brave man. He is also very handsome, but his smile is so sad. He too had a white father.

Wendell and Caleb work on the safe room as much as they dare, and often Wendell takes tea with

me in the late afternoon. He is a nice enough boy, but I cannot in all truth say I am much taken with him. ~~I wish Mama were here to advise me. Is it necessary to be taken with a man to become his wife?~~ I feel in my heart that it is, but think that it may not be. Nancy reminds me of the goodness of Wendell's soul and the fine house he shall build for his bride. I wonder what Mama would counsel.

Every day, Papa takes a stroll about town to show that he is not occupied with anything more than acquiring a good cigar. I do my featherstitching and tend to our patients as best as I am able. I play with little Chloe, who is the delight of my day. I also keep watch. For unless we find a place to hide our three guests, they will not be guests for long. And we shall be in jail.

October 27, 1858 (evening)

Mr. Silas Person (Papa says I should refer to him as such) is a most remarkable man. Although it is evident to any who might see that the condition of his leg causes him great pain, he never utters a word of complaint. He plays with Chloe and makes her laugh so that I am free to nurse Rachel. I pray that Dr. Miller will arrive soon, as I fear infection will set in.

Mr. Person can also read! I came upon him with his head in one of Caleb's books, and he confessed that Master William, the eldest son of his master, had taught him when he was just a child. His master knew of it, but never spoke of it, as it is illegal in the South for a Negro to read. The master turned a blind eye to all of this and gave Silas free roam of his library. Mr. Person has read many of our great authors: Hawthorne and Franklin and Thoreau. Even Mrs. Stowe! I dare say he is far better read than I. Perhaps better read even than Caleb or Wendell Parker.

Mr. Person's job on the plantation was to be a companion to Master William. In the morning, Mr. Person would work alongside the other house slaves, but in the afternoon, when Master William had finished with his tutor, Mr. Person and Master William would go fishing and hunting and sometimes even drink corn liquor together. Every afternoon, Master William would teach Mr. Person what he learned from his tutor that morning, and now Mr. Person is as educated as any fine gentleman. It is jarring to hear him talk though, for he speaks with the long vowels that bring to mind the speech of the Southern anti-abolitionists.

October 28, 1858 (morning)

News has just arrived that Mr. Alexander Lyman, the constable of Concord, has organized a party of men to patrol the forests of Lexington and Concord in search of runaway slaves. Mr. Lyman claims that the Fugitive Slave Act decrees it to be every man's patriotic duty to support slavery, and that those who do not are criminals as common as any thief. He told Mr. Weston Chace that he is coming this way that he knows all too well what Papa is "up to," and that he will put Stanton Harden down "by fair means if I can, by foul if I must." He has dogs with him.

Papa says he does not care about Mr. Lyman's blustering, that he is not afraid because he is in the right. When I asked Wendell what he thought of Mr. Lyman's threats, he told me not to worry my pretty head over such things, assuring me that many strong and wise men were on their side and that neither Papa nor I had anything to fear. But I was not comforted by his words and admitted as much to Mr. Silas Person. To my surprise, Mr. Person said Mr. Lyman and his like are to be feared, but that they can also be beaten.

After Dr. Miller set his leg, Mr. Person hobbled down the stairs to help Wendell and Caleb finish the safe room. I do not know how he has the strength, but Wendell says he has been of great assistance. And Lord knows Wendell and Caleb need all the assistance they can muster, for Mr. Lyman and his men are certain to be here any moment, and neither Rachel nor Silas is near able to travel.

October 28, 1858 (afternoon)

Mrs. Lucretia Child has just arrived at our back door with the news we have been most dreading: Mr. Lyman is at Charles Phillips' farm, just a short ride from us, and he is headed our way! He told Mr. Phillips he knows for certain that Rachel and Chloe are here, and that he would be willing to stake his life that the slave from Louisiana, the one they have been tracking since Providence, Rhode Island, also being harbored under our roof, in defiance of the laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the United States of America. He claims he shall return "the property to its rightful owners" and "punish all those who believe they are above the law."

I imagine I hear the barking of dogs as we hurry our guests into the safe room. The hidden panel still needs another coat of paint, and I cannot imagine how anyone will be fooled. When everyone is concealed, Papa and Caleb settle in the west parlor, and Mrs. Harrington takes the seat across from me in the east parlor, her face as cold as a January night.

Our darning needles click in the heavy silence, although I mend nothing.

CHAPTER THREE

Grandma Clara liked to describe herself as a “knee-jerk liberal whose knees don’t jerk as well as they used to,” but her razor-sharp tennis game belied her words—at least the part about her physical condition. And although she also liked to think she wasn’t the grandmother type—she was a terrible cook, wouldn’t be caught dead knitting and was captain of the senior women’s team at her tennis club—there were certain emotions that even the least grandmotherly of grandmothers couldn’t escape. And worrying about my love life was one of Gram’s. I was guessing thoughts of that nature were mingling with her annoyance at my tardiness as she waited with Beth and Michael for Trina and me to get home.

“So what’s the problem with Michael Ennen?” Gram had asked just that morning, raising a single eyebrow. (As kids, Beth and I used to spend hours in front of my mirror trying to imitate that gesture. Beth finally got it, but I was never able to isolate one eyebrow from the other.) I tried to explain about women not needing a man to define them anymore, about it being the twenty-first century and all, but Gram would have none of it. “Some things don’t change,” she declared. “And a man who is nice to his sick mother will be nice to his wife.” I had rolled my eyes.

The squeal of my tires interrupted my thoughts. I was taking the exit off Route 2 a bit too fast, and I hadn’t put air in the tires since I had bought the car from Richie over a year ago.

“Hey,” Trina shouted as we fish-tailed slightly in the curve. “Just ’cause I said the dead are still hanging out doesn’t mean I’m ready to be one of them.”

“You really believe all that stuff?” I asked as I drove more slowly toward Lexington Center.

“Stuff?” Trina’s smile was amused. She was clearly baiting me.

But I wanted to hear her answer, so I said, “You know, heaven and hell and life after death—that’s the stuff.”

“I’m not all that sure about the heaven and hell piece, but yeah, shit, there’s got to be an afterlife.”

“Why?”

“Look around you, girl—at you, me, the trees. Wouldn’t you say the fact that we’re alive at all, that all this shit is here, is much weirder than thinkin’ we’ll stay that way?”

I knew her argument didn’t really make sense, but still, I couldn’t immediately come up with a repudiation. I shrugged.

“Plus,” Trina said. “There’s got to be more to it than this.”

That argument made more sense—especially from her point of view. I drove through Lexington Center as fast as I dared. There were these damn crosswalks every half-block, and the law in Massachusetts—which was ignored in Boston, but upheld in Lexington—was that a vehicle must stop for a pedestrian in a crosswalk. Another difference between Boston and Lexington was that the cops in Lexington were far less busy than their big city compatriots—and I had a fistful of crosswalk violations to prove it.

It was almost four when Trina and I pulled up to Harden House. “Harden House” may sound stuffy and pompous, but that was what we’d called it since I was a kid—and the things learned in childhood are not easily undone. Gram was my mother’s mother, and that side of the family had been blue-blooded since the beginning of time. My father’s family, on the other hand, was New York Jewish, coming up

the hard way through the garment district and City College. As there hadn't been a glimmer of dissonance among my mother's relatives when she brought a Jew into the clan, the use of a proper name for the house seems a forgivable transgression.

In defiance of the pretension of its name, Harden House was rather small and sat close to the road. But it was also beautifully proportioned and classic in design: the consummate black-shuttered, white colonial farmhouse, complete with attached barn and red front door—although crying out for a new coat of paint. At one time, there were acres of land, cows and corn and even a small apple orchard, but over the years the land had been sold off bit by bit, and now the property was similar in size to the quarter-acre lots that abutted it.

The Hardens were big on lineage and principle, but short on business savvy, and it was sheer inertia that had kept the house in the family for so long. Local prosperity and the quality of Lexington's school system had increased its value. Michael estimated that, after the renovations and including the furniture—mostly quality pieces the Colonel had imported from France before the Civil War, and no one had bothered to sell or give away—the whole shebang was worth well into seven figures. Although Gram thought Michael could do no wrong, on this point she was sure he was in error. “That’s ridiculous,” she told him. “Bad plumbing, a rotting barn and eight crumbling rooms can’t be worth a million dollars.” “It’s authentic,” Michael had assured her. “Authenticity and walking distance to Lexington Center are worth a lot.”

When Trina and I came through the back door, Beth and Michael were sitting at the kitchen table drinking iced tea. Gram was leaning against the counter, a carton of milk at her elbow, still in her tennis clothes. She looked pointedly at the clock over my head.

“Sorry,” I said.

Gram hugged Trina. “I’m in the middle of *Having Our Say*. Great recommendation. Those Delaware sisters are amazing—feisty and smart and so embracing of life despite everything. Bessie and Sadie—vinegar and molasses—I love it. What a perspective they’ve got, 101 and 103, like living through multiple lifetimes. It makes even me feel young.”

Trina smiled happily. “Figured you’d like it. *Jackie By Josie*’s cool.”

I was surprised to hear that Trina and Gram were swapping books: the few times I’d offered Trina a book, she’d refused politely. I had figured she didn’t like to read. “*Jackie By Josie*?” I asked Gram. “Isn’t that about some woman infatuated with Jackie Kennedy?”

“I also gave her *Le Divorce* and a new novella I just read called *The Underachiever’s Diary*.”

“Aren’t those a bit frivolous?”

Gram frowned at me.

I reached into the refrigerator for the pitcher of iced tea, poured a glass for myself and one for Trina. “Sorry we’re late,” I said to Gram again. “I got stuck at work.”

“Held captive by WaifHaven?” Beth grinned at Trina. “Present company excluded, of course.”

Although Beth had a huge heart when it came to her friends and family—she was always making surprise parties, finding the perfect gift, and was the first to drop everything and get to the hospital in any emergency—she was basically a snob. It wasn’t that she was especially prejudiced, or had an aversion to any particular minority, it was just that Beth was very Beth-centered, and poor, black, drug addicts were not part of Beth’s world—despite her own past struggles with prescription diet pills.

Trina and Gram ignored Beth, continuing their conversation, but I said, “If only there was a haven for the intolerant.”

Beth turned to Michael. “Lee was always the smart one in the family. Maybe one of these days she’ll get herself a real job.”

Gram raised an eyebrow. “Interesting comment from a woman whose ‘real’ job is golf and decorating.”

“You forgot shopping,” I said.

Beth laughed merrily and waved her manicured fingernails at me. She was unabashedly into things expensive cars, jewelry, furniture, even her golf clubs were embossed with some fancy-schmand designer’s logo. “My obsession with image over content,” she called it, adding that it was a damn good thing her husband Russ had taken her advice and sold his software company to Microsoft for stock instead of cash—and then, against all logic, gone back to school to become a dentist. The observation was inevitably followed by a boisterous, bubbling and contagious peal of laughter. Beth was an astounding mass of contradictions: pretentious and a bit ostentatious, but better with a drill and a wire-stripper than any man I knew; overweight and bullying as a child, but svelte and strong and a true friend now; nosy and opinionated, but charming and funny and unfailingly self-aware. She was the older sister my mother had never given me—for both good and ill.

“You’re just jealous of my impeccable taste,” Beth said.

I had no response. Beth’s words were true, and we both knew it. I’d always envied her unique style, her flair, and especially the way she carried it off, looking so put together without appearing to have tried. Being around Beth always made me wish I had made that hair appointment or bought those green shoes or noticed the stain on the collar of my blouse before I left the house.

Michael carefully inspected the clipboard in his hand, all lanky and loose-limbed as he flipped through pages, clearly uncomfortable with our affectionate-antagonistic banter.

I felt sorry for him. “You don’t have any sisters, do you?”

“Good guess.” His smile was boyish and appealing, and I noticed one of his front teeth was chipped. “Two brothers.”

I felt a flush climbing my cheeks and made a rather clumsy, puffed-up production of taking a sip of iced tea. I didn’t look at Trina.

“I have to show Beth and Trina something upstairs,” Gram said to Michael. “Why don’t you and Lee get started, and we’ll catch up with you later?” She smiled sweetly at me.

“What do you have to show them?” I asked suspiciously.

Michael jumped from his chair before Gram could answer. “Sounds good,” he said to Gram. “The inspection’s next Monday, and we’ve got to make a decision about filling the hole in the foundation—fast.” He turned to me and his dimples flashed. “Want to start with the cellar? I’ll show you what I’ve done to shore up the safe room.”

“The cellar?” I hated the cellar. It was small and mean and dark, and the clammy smell of long-dead animals rose from the dirt floor like cold fog off a swamp. The ceiling was low and lit by bare bulbs spaced so far apart that the walls were draped in shadow. Knee-high mounds of dirt pimples the hard-packed ground, and despite a few halfhearted attempts, no one seemed to be able to figure out where they had come from. “How about we start somewhere else?”

“Beware of the woman with the iron teeth!” Beth taunted in the same sing-song voice she had used to torment me when we were kids. She raised her hands in front of her face and transformed her long, blood-red fingernails into menacing claws. Her eyes gleamed with the gloating pleasure I remembered all too well.

I stuck out my tongue at her. The woman with the iron teeth was the mistress of the cellar, the evil witch of my youth, the antagonist of my dreams. According to Beth and her brother Tommy, the woman with the iron teeth lived in the tunnel behind the small root cellar, and she loved to eat little girls whose first names began with “L.”

My mother maintained it was Beth and Tommy—and the woman with the iron teeth—who were responsible for my childhood nightmares and sleepwalking, but I’d always been afraid I’d inherit the crazy Harden gene. This gene had caused at least one Harden woman in every generation to experience a “breakdown” in which she heard voices, saw people who weren’t there and spent a lot

time wandering around the house talking to the walls. “Dotty” Aunt Hortense, as she was affectionately known in the family, had walked off the roof after a particularly spirited encounter with no one. As of yet, none of my female cousins had been committed, and as far as I knew, none were even on Prozac.

“Stop it, both of you,” Gram said, shaking her head. “I swear, Beth, sometimes you act just like the mean little girl you used to be.” Then she turned her exasperated gaze to me. “And you can’t possibly still think there’s anything down there that will harm you.”

Once, when I was about eight, I had seen a huge rat in the cellar, and now the hairs on the back of my neck rose at the memory of that disgusting tail disappearing into the fieldstone foundation. I rubbed my arms and avoided Gram’s eyes.

Beth grinned wickedly. “Michael will protect you,” she said. Then she grabbed Gram and Trina by the hands and pulled them from the kitchen.

Trina was annoyed, but she let Beth drag her into the dining room anyway. She knew the cousins didn’t do well with contradiction, and it didn’t seem worth it to start up all that squawking. But as soon as she could, she yanked her arm from the spiky grasp, though she had to admit the cousin’s fingernails were awesome: long and square and painted a dark, sparkly red. Trina pulled herself to a stop in front of the fireplace and stared at the carved mantelpiece, not wanting Clara to see how pissed off she was.

The fireplace was nearly as tall as she was, and before she realized what she was doing, she reached out and touched it. Behind the bricks, between the chimney and the stairs, was a secret place with no windows and a hidden door. A safe room from the Underground Railroad days. The entrance was on the other side. You got to it from the landing of the stairs in the front of the house.

The first day Trina had come to Harden House, Lee showed her a panel in the wall halfway up the stairway and told her to push it. Lee didn’t tell her why, and Trina didn’t want to do it, but Lee promised she’d be glad if she did. Trina needed the SafeHaven furlough gig to work out, so she swallowed her suspicions and gave the panel a shove. It fell away, and she stared into a deep, narrow slice of space no one would ever have guessed existed. It looked empty down there, but Trina knew it wasn’t. It was tight, dark and smelled bad, and there was something struggling inside those walls. Whatever, or whoever it was, tugged at her soul.

When Lee described how the house had once been a station on the Underground Railroad, how whole families had crowded into that hot room with no air, Trina understood who was tugging at her. It was all those folks who had come before. Her ancestors. Trina had never cared much about politics or all that black pride shit the sisters and brothers were always spouting, but she liked thinking about the ones who had had the guts to fight back. That was when she felt proud to be black. Right then and there, she had jumped into the safe room. Just like that. She was hoping to get closer to the ones who made her feel proud, but once she was in there, it wasn’t pride or closeness she felt, it was the pain of remembering.

The safe room was way too much like that closet he had put her in: smelly and cramped, with a ceiling you couldn’t see but could guess was full of spiders and other scary creatures. It was after Lee finally let her out of the closet that she stopped going to school and nobody noticed. She never understood that. How could nobody notice? Didn’t the school call or something?

Standing in the safe room, Trina had felt all those men and women, little children too. Scared and brave. Beat down and hopeful. They were there. Here. Feeling them, thinking about what they’d been through, made her even more certain about getting her own life turned around, even more determined to make it up to Hendrika. Hendrika hadn’t done any more to deserve being dead than any of the lost souls hanging around in that tight little room.

Beth poked Trina in the side, bringing her back to the present. “Pretty subtle of Gram, huh?” Beth said. “She wants to show us something upstairs. Ha!”

Trina dropped her hand from the fireplace. The cousin was one of those white folks who figured they were touchy and friendly, it’d prove they weren’t prejudiced. She didn’t answer.

But Clara did. “One of the advantages of being old is that you don’t have to be subtle—you’re forthright and direct and everyone’s so impressed when you ‘speak your mind.’” She rolled her eyes at Trina. “Can you imagine what Beth’s going to be like when she hits sixty-five?”

Trina tried to smile because she liked Clara, but she just couldn’t believe Clara wasn’t seeing what was right in front of her face. Like the cousin ever said what she was really thinking. That girl would say and do anything that would get her her own way. “Kind of scary,” Trina said, meaning it, but not in the way Clara thought. Trina didn’t have any interest in the likes of the cousin. The cousin’s words would never be any wider than what she saw.

“Now, what can I show you upstairs that you could possibly have any interest in?” Clara winked at Trina. “Let’s go up to my bedroom—I’m sure you’re just dying to see the new dress I bought for Karen’s wedding.”

“I’m interested,” Beth said. “Where’d you get it?”

Clara didn’t answer. She just went into the hall. “It wasn’t your interest I was concerned with,” she told the cousin.

Trina followed Clara up the stairs, trying not to laugh. Clara wasn’t like most white folks—white folks either ignored you or sucked up to you because you were black—Clara just treated everyone the same. Like, for example, the cousin had never offered Trina a book, probably because she didn’t think Trina could read, and though Lee offered her books all the time, the books were always about some down-and-out black person or some other shit-on group, like American Indians or women in Afghanistan. But Clara gave Trina books just because she’d read them and liked them, and figured if she liked them, Trina might too. Last week, Clara had asked Trina to suggest a book for her to read. It didn’t take nearly as much energy to be around Clara as it took to be around most white folks.

The stairway was real narrow, turned on itself twice, and ended in a small landing. Trina had never been up this way before; she’d only come up the back stairs one time when Clara asked her to fetch some papers from the bedroom. At each side of the landing was a bedroom, and Trina knew there were these two smaller bedrooms too, but the only way to get to them was by going up the back stairs or by walking through one of the front bedrooms. The house was smaller than it looked from the outside, and the way the rooms were set up wasn’t too practical. Trina winced at what she was thinking. Like she knew anything about houses and what made them practical.

Trina followed Beth into Clara’s room because she didn’t know what else to do. It was nice in there. Lots of windows and a painted floor with these small rugs that looked as if some little kid had made them. Clara picked up a stack of books from a chair and told Trina to sit down in it. The cousin frowned and sat on the edge of the bed.

“As long as we’re here, I might as well show you the dress,” Clara said. She pulled a black dress from the closet. It didn’t look like much.

Beth stood up to feel the fabric, and Trina tried to look interested, but she wasn’t. The furniture was all real old, and some of it looked like it was ready to fall apart, but she could see it was quality. Antiques. The kind they auctioned off for thousands of dollars to people who already had too much furniture. Trina thought about morning group at SafeHaven. No one in that room ever had too much furniture.

Trina noticed a small dressing table in the corner she hadn’t seen the first time she was in the bedroom. On the top, in the middle of a mess of brushes and powders and perfume bottles, was a jewelry box. The bottom drawer was pulled open, and a bracelet was laying half in and half out of it.

was a beautiful thing, sparkling in the sun. Must be real diamonds. And emeralds. It was so little couldn't weigh more than a bit, but it had to be worth a fortune. A year's rent. Maybe more. —

Trina looked at the bracelet and thought about morning group again, about how none of those sisters would ever have enough furniture or a year's rent. She wondered what the chances were, even if she managed to stay clean and keep herself out of prison, that she would have enough furniture or a year's rent.

When Trina looked up, the cousin was staring at her.

The entrance to the cellar was under the back stairs; it had been dug at the time of the kitchen addition, an afterthought judging from the steepness of the wobbly risers and the narrowness of the top of the stairway—only children could descend facing forward; for adults, sideways was the only way down. The original house had been just five rooms: dining room/kitchen and two parlors on the first floor, two bedrooms up. A full kitchen and two rear bedrooms were added sometime around the turn of the nineteenth century. No one seemed to know how access to the cellar was gained before the addition. I didn't care much. I hadn't been down there once in the year I'd been living with Gram.

Michael pressed the latch of the cellar door, but the door stuck. He kicked the bottom panel; the door lurched forward and a musty odor blew into my face. The cellar smelled just as it always had: dampness and mold and all sorts of things dead and decaying. The rat's skeleton was probably somewhere under the stairs—or worse, his living descendants. I took an instinctive step backward. Michael cupped my elbow and smiled indulgently, as one would at a child who's afraid to go down the playground slide.

I pointedly withdrew my arm from his grasp. "I know there's no such thing as the woman with the iron teeth."

His smile widened. "I'm relieved to hear that."

I started down the stairs, lifting my chin and turning my shoulders with a false bravado that was probably just as telling as my hesitation. But I didn't swagger for long: after the cramp of the top two steps, the wall dropped away, and there was no railing and little light. I slowed and pressed my hand to the damp fieldstones to keep my balance. I didn't know what was worse, touching the slime-covered stones or falling headlong into the gloom.

Michael snapped on his large flashlight and focused the beam on the rickety stairs. The light helped but it also emphasized the creepiness. I took a deep breath and slowly made my way down to the hard-packed dirt floor. When I got there, I turned, crossed my arms, and looked up. "Coming?" I asked.

The cellar was actually two cellars: the one under the original house (the "old cellar" was what we had called it as kids) and the one under the kitchen (the "new cellar"). Both had low ceilings and dirt floors—and bugs and spiders and rats and, for all I knew, snakes. The cellars were connected by a tall and narrow hole cut through the old field-stone foundation.

I forced a smile as Michael came down the stairs. "The safe room's above the back of the old cellar, isn't it?" Of course I knew it was, but I was hoping that somehow the house's architecture had been rearranged since the last time I had looked. I really hated the old cellar.

"Yup." He nodded toward the opening. "Shall I lead the way?" he asked gallantly. "Or is it ladies first?" If he'd been wearing a hat, I'm sure he would have removed it and placed it over his heart.

I thought of Gram, Beth and Trina, two floors above in the sunlight, probably giggling about me at this very moment. It was thrilling to be able to provide everyone with such amusement. Michael waited patiently, and the annoying twinkle in his eye reminded me of Richie.

To get into the old cellar, you have to bow your head, twist your shoulders and step up, all at the same time. I flawlessly executed this maneuver, and, although it was darker and mustier and nastier—and was the actual home of the woman with the iron teeth—once I crossed the threshold, I felt better.

sample content of The Safe Room

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