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Medium Real

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CHAPTER

1

Who besides me would have braved that picket line of libbers, boobs hanging down to their waists? thought Polly. Still, she was happy there was a back exit so she wouldn't have to face them again. She hustled underground to the car. I'm the reason the banquet went well, she thought, reliving the speech as she drove up the spiral. "Women need to just shut up and exploit the plumbing," she had proclaimed to the crowd. "Childbirth has always been a female's full time occupation and today's babies deserve no less." The ovation had

produced a better buzz than drugs. She gunned up the last incline. Life is Sacred, Inc. was her favorite charity, so she hadn't charged them for the appearance. Heck, she should pay them. Still if the damn feminine-nots inconvenienced her getting home, she'd regret not charging a fee. At the top, she glanced around for signs of trouble and there was none. "Bitch-free," she mumbled, proceeding across the sidewalk. "The whiners are going home to their lonely beds."

The drive was going to be great; on Saturday nights KTHK played the best of previously aired "Ask Dr. Polly" shows. She tuned in.

There had been some creaks and groans, and maybe a squeal, but it was the bang that forced Aimee into an upright shiver. Imagination could be worse than reality, she reassured herself, extricating her robe from the bedspread. Why did this have to happen the night before rehearsal, especially the first run through? Something crashed; her heart hammered; feet fled from the cold into scuffs. "Get out of my house," she yelled, skating on the wood past Justin's room, which awaited his return from whatever college students did at night while home from spring break.

A call to police made sense, but bubbling up from her frenzy was a hunch that this was not a crime in progress. Whoever made the noise, she thought, finding the kitchen undisturbed, had not gone for her purse, which lay on the sill next to an assortment of ceramics and candles that Justin had given her when he was a tyke. This was a

prank by one of his friends, no doubt, who were prone to pre-adolescent behavior. Last year the boys tee-peed the front yard without making any sound at all.

A carving had fallen from the mantle. She studied the family room beginning at the door, then the sofa, around the bookshelves and ... Behind the television was a creature that locked corneas with her, staring from holograms that sucked lumens in and bounced them out. The mask was fierce; she flipped on the light. Sconces illuminated a dirt bomb, frozen on the floor. "Get out of here," she yelled.

It moved like a human, ash swirling as it wriggled between glass fireplace doors and scrambled up the chimney. Its odor, decay and excrement, remained.

Knees gave way; she reached for a chair, but the raccoon (she recognized the species from cartoons) had soiled it; claw marks stamped the seat, table, mantle and mirror, then disappeared into a flower pot, leaves shredded by the incursion. The possibility of a return visit got her going. Gobs of dust in the tracks of the hearth doors made them hard to budge. That must have been one strong raccoon, she thought, jimmying them shut. Information that until this moment she had ignored – sounds, odors and droppings in the yard – finally added up. Justin hadn't noticed anything unusual, but he had just gotten home from college. Was the raccoon living in the attic and found a way into the chimney from there?

Avoiding another encounter was high priority. She dragged the couch to the fireplace and wedged objects that would clatter as they fell: a tray; a candlestick; trivets. Falling doodads would spook any animal that managed to get the doors open. The sound of a shifting body came from behind the wall. So those noises in the flue were not the expansion and contraction of masonry, and the mangey smell she'd noticed wasn't the neighbor's dog. It was all beginning to make sense.

She couldn't lock or tie the fireplace doors together, but she could duct tape them shut. Fix accomplished, she fell back to bed.

Justin slept through breakfast; most likely he had only stumbled in a few hours ago. She faced the war zone. Soot mapped the animal's trek which, if she hadn't awakened, might have included the kitchen and bedrooms. Most likely the raccoon couldn't get back in, but she had to find out whether he had many friends and whether there was damage inside the chimney. What she needed was advice from an expert. Animal Control would have been the place to turn except a few years ago the Sunville City Council cut its budget and now their assistance was limited to dogs and cats. Before that, the designated wildlife handler, Viola Weaver, showed up when Aimee had called because a skunk was using her porch as a lean-to. With Viola's help, Aimee got the stinker to vacate, then filled in the cavity and blocked it with hardware cloth. A year or so later, when a hedgehog fell into the window well (she recognized the species from Alice in Wonderland),

Sunville sent a dogcatcher who reluctantly lifted it out while protesting that now the city no longer handled wildlife. Viola Weaver, he said, would have gladly dealt with a hedgehog, but she had gone to work for Timber County, where her skills were more appreciated. Aimee looked up the number.

"Timber County Wildlife."

"Viola Weaver please."

"She's on a deer in backyard. She'll be back in a few."

"I knew her when she worked in Sunville."

"Nice town."

"I have a raccoon in my house and I need her advice. She helped me with a skunk a few years ago."

"If you had a bear I could help you. That's my specialty. I leave the raccoons to Viola. She shouldn't be too long."

The phone rang as soon as she hung up. "Hello."

"Aimee Goggin please."

It didn't sound like Viola. "This is she."

"Aimee, Breeanne Cobb, producer of 'Ask Dr. Polly'. I liked the CD of your 'Law Talk' show on KGRT. We'd like to interview you for a show on KTHK."

"Oh, my, wow ..."

 She pried her brain from the raccoon crisis.

"You're still with KGRT?"

"No. I left last month."

"Is that commercial?"

"No, I was a volunteer. It's public radio."

"And you left because ..."

"I'm tired of being a volunteer, and public radio doesn't pay."

"It doesn't?"

"Well, I could've gotten sponsors, I guess, but commercial radio might be a better fit."

"We agree. And Dr. Polly's ratings are okay but the calls are lagging a bit and we're hoping a show like 'Law Talk' can feed her some listeners."

"Wow."

"We like your straightforward approach."

"Thanks."

"Can you come in for an interview?"

"Sure."

"I'm going to have to put you off a bit because I'm going on vacation."

"No problem."

They scheduled a meeting.

"One last question, Ms. Goggin."

"Yes?"

"Do you have proof of your law degree? We didn't know till after we hired her that Dr. Polly's Ph.D. is in Botany not Psychology."

"Sure." She made a note to order a Good Standing Certificate.

Cleanup from breakfast was under way when Viola called. "Do you

remember me?" asked Aimee, collecting crumbs. "I'm in Sunville and I had a skunk who burrowed into the sprinkler box and ..."

"No, but it's okay. I still get a lot of calls from Sunville folks. What's up?"

She told the story as she swabbed the stove.

"Where's the raccoon now?"

"I don't know." The microwave rubbed clean.

"Is it in the house?"

"It went up the chimney, I guess." She ventured into the family room. There had been no further trespass, but a smell like rotting flesh lingered.

"It came in the fireplace?"

"Yes, and left that way. Then I pushed my couch against the glass doors and I stuck stuff there so I'd hear noise if it came back."

"It's probably living in the chimney."

"How can it do that?" Suddenly the couch and what she'd piled there seemed like a poor defense.

"There's a shelf up in there, and its family is living on it."

"What should I do?" She dropped bookends into the sofa gap.

"You're gonna have to open the fireplace up and ..."

"Oh my."

"... situate things in there that raccoons don't like so they'll leave."

"Such as?" The raccoons made a sound which, until last night, she had assumed came from outside the house.

"Noise."

"Noise?" A whiff of the wild made her gag.

"Do you have a radio you can stick in there?"

"Yes." Somewhere there was an old clock radio.

"And do you have any carpet deodorizer?"

"I don't have carpet so skip that. I could see using air freshener, but ..."

"No, not for cleaning. It's for the raccoons. They hate the fragrance."

"Oh." She found the clock behind a box marked "Electric Stuff" with a note on it that said, "Time broken - Radio works."

"Buy the granulated kind and pour it into a pan. Then put it in the fireplace with the radio tuned to the chattiest station you can get."

"Okay," she said, thinking the plan odd but ingenious. "And if I open the fireplace and a raccoon charges out?" The radio was going to need an extension cord; she dragged out the "Electric Stuff" box.

"Look inside before you open the door all the way."

"Can't they wiggle out?" She untwisted cords till one was free.

"And also put in a lamp. They don't like light."

"Okay."

"And no, they'll scurry up the chimney if you peek in."

The lamp, too, would require an extension cord. She found another in a tangle.

"Then check the roof to see if you have a chimney cap."

"What's a chimney cap?" She started on the snarl, poking the end between coils.

"A cover for the chimney. Keeps varmints out. I'm sure you don't have one. And make sure there's nothing living in you're attic. Then call me tomorrow."

"How can you cover a chimney when smoke has to ...?" She stuck the plug into a knot.

"It's got vents."

"Oh." She threaded the wire through itself.

"And whatever you do, don't touch the excrement."

"Of course not." The last loop gave way.

"No, listen, raccoons carry a disease called roundworm for which there's no cure in humans."

"Nice." The cords unraveled.

"While you're at it, check your closets to make sure there are no raccoons in them."

"Oh come on."

"One could have gotten inside besides the one you saw."

"But I would have noticed tracks. Their paws are black from the fireplace ash so you can't miss the prints."

"Just check, would you?. I don't want one to die in the closet."

"Okay."

After a peek into the attic, which didn't appear inhabited, she freed the extension ladder from its hinge and careened it to an eave, smacking the garage door on the way. She climbed up, quaking. A yelp backed her down until she realized it came from a neighbor's dog. At the top she crept to the chimney.

Reality hit hard. The stack brimmed with dung that flowed over flashing onto shingles. She was going to have to tidy up, but not without protective gear, and there was no point while the beasts were still in situ. Back on the ground, she ricocheted to the store and returned with carpet deodorizer, a key to Viola's plan. Pellets hit a cake pan, throwing off a powerful scent. When she had relocated the hillock of bric-a-brac, and pushed the couch away from the fireplace, she donned gloves and shoved the pan, the radio tuned to KTHK and a lamp base with a 100 watt bulb inside the doors. The cords kept the bi-folds from closing, so she taped the gap shut and stood back for a look at the unwelcome wagon. The soot, the disarray, the radio, the duct tape and the backlit fireplace had turned the room into something out of a horror film. Then she heard what sounded like animals stirring. Yuk.

Justin's closet was the last one she checked for raccoons.

"Hey Mom," said Justin, groping for the phone.

"What's going on?"

"Raccoon - only one it turns out. Go and look in the family room

and you'll see."

"Wow," he said, springing up.

"But I gotta get to rehearsal. Run through today." She took off to putty her face — the rash was as bad as ever. Damn doctors offered nothing much when it came to eczema. Maybe she'd try a naturopath. Then again maybe it would clear up, as it had a hundred times. Concealer gave her courage to face the world. She snatched her purse from the kitchen, where Justin had arranged his breakfast so he could observe the ruins in the Family Room like a kid watches for Santa Claus.

"Break a leg, Mom," he said, mouth full, as she whizzed out.

"I'll let you know if Rocky shows up."

"Thanks."

The theater was a half hour away and rehearsal started in twenty minutes. She drove speed limit plus ten, accelerated through yellows and detoured jams until she was across from the theater at the only place to park that was left. The door was at ground level in a Victorian too small to be a mansion and too big to be a house. The cast milled, pretending not to notice as she slipped behind the set. In this dressing room there were no frills. Cinder blocks propped full length mirrors; water pipes doubled as clothes rods; the makeup table consisted of a counter top over bookshelves; an assortment of mirrors and light fixtures hung from screws in walls that had lost most of their plaster.

It was a badge of bravery to work in the Crown Playhouse, where actors couldn't use the john once the play began because sewer lines ran out of the dressing room and into the theater, drowning out the show during a flush. She put her jacket on a hook and dashed to the stage, where the Director had unveiled Snoopy's doghouse, the latest piece of scenery in the production, "You're a Good Man Charlie Brown". Perched on its roof, from which he would deliver the bulk of his lines, was Jerome. "We're glad you could make it," he said, drawl overlaid by diction.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Let's begin," said Delilah, script before her. "We've got to get 'Glee Club' down before we start the run through. As you know, this is a mundane song into which the lyricist has inserted interjections of you arguing. The reason for this, actors, is ..."

"It's funny?" said Aimee.

Nathan and Jerome laughed. LeRoy, the accompanist, normally too dour to participate, said, "Musical irony. Also counterpoint."

"Yes. And each outburst must be done so that the audience hears every word."

This was Jerome's second show with Delilah, and he had already warned the cast that Delilah coped with the stress of tech week – they opened in five days – by feigning patience and optimism like a burned out kindergarten teacher.

"So when there is an exclamation," said Delilah, "everything must

stop and the character whose line it is needs to enunciate clearly. Any questions?" She faced the script away from her and showed the cast the music like a librarian shows a picture book to toddlers.

Condescension was annoying, thought Aimee, but it was better than rage which, according to the other actors, rained down from most directors during the week before a show opened. On Thursday Delilah lectured about the importance of using a prop table (Linus' blanket, left around, had almost been taken out with the trash), and she assigned each actor a spot in the dressing room.

"Oh and before I forget," said Delilah, waving a water bottle, "it is very important that all of you drink plenty of water and also that you get lots of sleep this week."

Delilah's outlet for tension, excessive nurturing, made Laura smile, which produced a wink from Nathan. Connie, who played Lucy, moved to the piano to check the libretto. Aimee smiled back.

Leroy pounded the intro; Connie scrambled back to the stage.

"Oh give me a home ..." Nathan as Schroeder, leader of the glee club, tapped time with his baton. "... And the skies..." Here comes the cue, Aimee thought. "... are not cloudy all day."

She belted Sally's interjection. The role of Sally was a smaller role than Lucy, but she had no theater credits and she was lucky to get the part.

"Home, Home on the range ..."

Keeping focus was a challenge with Nathan staring at her. He was

dreamy and ten years younger.

Delilah signaled to Leroy to stop the music. "Triplets, Leroy," said Delilah. "Three notes to the beat."

"I know."

"Well it sounded more like a ..."

"Close enough."

"Try to get closer." She displayed the script again like a picture book. "Let's start where we left off, at 'Oh give me a land ...'"

Leroy played.

"Oh give me a home," they sang.

Delilah cut. "From 'Oh give me a land'."

They made it through without a botch but by the final notes, Delilah had turned purple over Leroy's inexactitude. "Let's take a break."

Cast and crew assembled backstage and the theater came alive with flushing.

"Whatddya' think," said Connie, modeling the wig.

"A little lopsided." said Jerome, reaching for the bangs. "May I?"

"Sure."

He tugged.

She mounted the "Queen Lucy" crown.

"Nice," said Aimee.

"Aimee, did you bring jokes today?" said Mike, wrapping Linus' blanket in a turban.

"And are they funny?" said Jerome, finishing his review of the script.

She shrugged. Her attempts at standup comedy had been failures so far, but she'd keep trying, especially with a willing audience. "I'm ready if you guys are."

Chairs turned toward her.

"Anyone here single besides me?" said Aimee. Everyone except Connie raised a hand. "I've decided I don't want a relationship unless it's really great. It's the opposite of desperate — I get asked out but I'm picky about when I say yes. So I made a list of solo tasks that may sound awful, but for me they're preferable by far to a C minus date. Each activity corresponds to an activity I've turned down, and you have to guess what I passed up. First hint. Sitting-home-in-my-bathrobe-reading-the-newspaper was what I chose to do. Can anyone guess what I declined in order to do that?"

"Railroad museum?" said Connie.

"Good guess. Something else I found to be more boring than the bathrobe deal."

"A war movie?" said Nathan.

"Elk hunting?" said Jerome.

"Close. The car show."

No one laughed.

"Here's another one. Organizing kitchen, specifically matching containers and jars with their lids. Any guesses?"

"Buskerfest?" said Jerome.

"Close – bowling," said Aimee.

Not a giggle.

"Okay, folding grocery sacks."

"Paper or plastic?" said Jerome.

Another laugh.

"Both. And compressing bags is a better expenditure of energy than ...?"

"A slide show of his vacation in Graceland?"

Everyone laughed.

"Dog track." Aimee chuckled. "And laundry, sweeping the driveway and darning socks are more fun than ...?"

"I got this one," said Nathan. "Mini golf."

"No, Watching the Super Bowl," said Aimee. "However there is one exception to my list – dusting and vacuuming my house. I would rather do almost anything, even go to the car show, than clean."

No one laughed.

She curtsied. "That's all for tonight."

Nathan put his arm around her. "Keep trying."

"What is the matter with me? Why aren't I funny?"

"I'm not a comic but I think it's your writing and your delivery," said Jerome.

"Places everyone," said Delilah. "We've got a few people in the audience to pump you up."

There were no costumes or props except the Lucy wig and Sally's jump rope, which Aimee intended to tie in a different knot every time she went on. They lined up for the first song, "You're a Good Man Charlie Brown."

"Is he gonna make it?" said Nathan, nodding toward Leroy as they waited.

Leroy, foaming from the corners of his mouth, flexed the spine of the libretto.

Aimee shrugged — logistics were not her problem; all that mattered now was art. From the first bar to the finale she entered an exalted state known only to those who were living their passion. Her bliss even survived Delilah's notes about the performance.

"So if we fix the kinks," said Delilah, "you guys are gonna be awesome. In fact, you already are. Great job. See you tomorrow."

"Aimee, come out with us and we'll buy you a drink," said Jerome.

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"Busy."

"Date?" said Nathan.

"Maybe."

"Cool. Pay attention because there'll be a quiz tomorrow."

The high stuck. At home, music shouted from Justin's bedroom.

"You're gonna scare the raccoons," she said, closing his door. She took her journal from her sock drawer. The last entry said:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Person</u> <u>no.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Date</u> <u>no.</u>	<u>Post Date Comments</u>
Jan. 4	66	John Castle	0	I hope he calls
Jan. 19	66	John Castle	1	This guy is amazing
Feb. 3	66	John Castle	2	Hot! Hot! Hot!
<hr/>				
<hr/>				

The first meeting didn't count as a date, of course – he'd answered her personal ad – but there had been chemistry. On their two formal rendezvous, John had left her breathless. His gentle and wild approach whipped her desire into a froth. Every cell of masculinity was intact; he moved like no other man. "Baby," he'd said, knocking her hair back, "you're hot." "And you," she said, inhaling him, "make me that way." She filled in:

<u>Date</u>	<u>Person</u> <u>no.</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Date</u> <u>no.</u>	<u>Post Date Comments</u>
Mar. 30, 2002	66	John Castle	3	

Anticipation and the spell from rehearsal made her head swirl. In the shower she relaxed. She dried and moisturized everywhere except her face, which she spackled. The doorbell rang. "Justin, will you get that?"

He must have heard her because when she was ready she found them in the kitchen.

"... had a whole different meaning in the South Pole," said John.

The sight of him started a pheromone fountain. Justin stood, mouth open, bewitched by John's stories of cooking for a research team in Antarctica.

"Here it's about presentation and service first, then taste." John said while Justin made tea. "But in the South Pole what I most needed was to make sure the food was delicious and ready on time." He dunked the tea bag; Justin offered honey, which John took and raised in a toast. "Compared to being a gourmet chef it was a piece of cake." Nectar drizzled into the mug. "And speaking of cake, I made a lot of that every day, even though in every restaurant I had ever worked before there was a pastry chef."

She tried to nab the gooey jar before Justin set it in the cabinet but he got to it first, rinsed it and put it away as if he'd been doing that for years.

"One big hit," said John, "was oatmeal bars with frosting in the middle. Also crumb cake. I experimented some of course ..."

"I want to learn how to make cake and cook too." Justin leaned over the counter, head on his elbow, which just missed landing on a sponge.

"Sure, baking, cooking, you can learn it. There's a school here."

"What school?" he said, his face animated in a way she had not seen since he passed his driver's test.

"Denver Chef College."

"The problem with Anthropology," said Justin, "that's my major, is that you can research anything and make up a theory to fit." His brow creased. "It only exists in the library and in the minds of anthropologists who like to use what they pretend to find out to discredit other anthropologists and elevate themselves." He picked up the sponge and looked at it as if it was a relic from the distant past. Then he used it, faltering at first, and growing confident as he wiped more counter.

"Yeah well I don't know about that, but I do know that if you can read a recipe, you can cook." John brought his cup to the sink, plucked out a spoon and pointed it at Justin. "And let me tell you something else. Being a chef is seventy percent show and thirty percent talent." He waved the spoon, which Justin danced into the dishwasher. "Of course if people don't like what you cook they won't go to your restaurant. But it's not hard to make food that's good to eat." John popped the cabinet under the sink and found cleanser. "Actually, it's easy. The challenge is to do it with finesse." He grasped the canister as if to warm the scouring powder. "And you can't ask anyone to show that to you. It's something you've either got or you don't."

"Do you think I might have it?" asked Justin, raising the scrubber.

It was surreal, thought Aimee, to see her son and boyfriend clean up while chatting about cooking.

"I'm sure you do," said John, sprinkling a trail into the basin which Justin plowed with the sponges.

So far she had restrained herself from commenting; smothering Justin's ambition was the last thing she wanted to do. On the other hand, mothers were invented to reinforce reality. "Don't you think if cooking was your passion you would have made yourself so much as a hot dog during the past couple years?"

"I've made hot dogs."

"Boiled them, you mean."

"So I still made them."

"Okay, eggs then."

"Why make eggs when I can bake a souffle?"

She tried to hide her astonishment.

"Knock 'em dead, kid," said John, venturing toward the family room. "Hey I'm impressed by the, uh, decorating. Backlighting a fire pit, now that's what I call interesting." The wall inside the fireplace, chars and scars illuminated by the bulb, was the eyesore around which the disaster area revolved. "Not to mention the static."

"It's talk radio."

"Nice touch. Who's your decorator?" He tracked the paw prints to the planter and looked for signs of life.

"Animal control. It's guerrilla war against raccoons."

"The scent in here is reminiscent of ..." he sniffed, "... aftershave from the dollar store. Lovely."

"It's carpet deodorizer."

"You have no carpet." He slid back to the kitchen.

"It puts wild animals in a bad mood. Or so I'm told."

"More importantly, they'll smell like they came from a good home." He reached for her. "Hey, we better get moving if we're going to that party. Great meeting you, Justin."

The car was still warm. Their lips connected as he searched for her buttons. "You baby are so hot ..."

She wound a leg around him.

"You look young enough to be your daughter." He bit her breast through her blouse. "And you taste like gingerbread." The fabric yielded where he tugged. "Let me in." A hand swam down her pants.

"Should we be doing this now?"

"Why not?" He snacked on her. "I like to hang out."

"I do too but parties are fun."

He squeezed and let go. "Yes they are."

On the way they discussed waste disposal in Antarctica, mercury in fish, genetically modified foods and the future of bottled water. Conversations with John were troves. He was in the middle of explaining why critics of distilled water were wrong when they pulled into the parking lot of the country club.

"Are you ready to party?"

What she really wanted was to hear him cover every subject until there was nothing left to explore but the tangible. "Now I'm thinking

we should have just hung out."

He held her. "You are beautiful. I love your body." Hand on her butt, lips to her ear, he exhaled.

"Thank you." This was her first experience of love as she had imagined it.

"Will you have phone sex with me?"

"Why?"

"Because it's fun."

"When it comes to sex I prefer to do it in person."

He grunted and shot out the door. She followed him to the skating lodge, a short walk; the rink shimmered in the distance. Touching in public, he had warned her the first time they met, was not allowed, and questioning him about it was not allowed either. She stumbled; he didn't extend a hand.

"You okay?" he said.

She nodded, thinking this quirk could get annoying. Come to think of it, the fact that he'd been married twice was also unsettling.

"It's pretty at night," he said, panning the milky way. "Last time I was here the sun was up."

Her attempt to lock arms with him failed. "Who'd you come with last time, John?" she teased.

"I was executive chef for a wedding." His strides widened. "I'm going to say hi to my friends. I'll see you on the ice."

"Is this the Fenner party?" said a man so drunk he fell into a hedge.

"Yeah." A glance toward John to confirm the host's name made her spin in search of him. "I think the birthday boy is Doug Fenner." The clubhouse had swallowed up her date. She trudged the perimeter to find the entrance. The path ended at steps which she took to a verandah. Someone inside pushed the door open to let her in. Log walls supported a ceiling centered by a chandelier hung with crystal snowflakes. On the far end, heat surged from a hearth. Every bench bustled, scarves dragging the floor as skaters hunched over to tie skates on, straining against their socks so they wouldn't wrinkle at pressure points, and when they were done, attaching to each other for support. The line for skates doubled back to the counter. John was in the queue; she approached.

"Aimee, this is Doug," said John.

The impulse to plant a kiss on John to annoy him passed. "Happy Birthday Doug. What a great idea for a party."

Pushing off the bench, Doug grabbed the handle that operated the door. "Thanks. I wish I could stay and talk but I'm ready to do some hot dogging." He waved his skate clad foot and lurched outside.

The line moved fast. As soon as John had his skates, he leaned out the door. "See you on the ice," he said.

As soon as her feet were in skates, before she got out of the chalet, she could barely stay upright. Getting both feet on the ice

was a challenge - she fell a few times - but eventually she found a stride. "Bend your knees," she remembered from skating lessons, "... and face the forward foot." Skaters whooshed along, mufflers flying. Nods from John as he went by were the only signs of affiliation. Every glide grew more comfortable, and she gained confidence. No point in getting upset about John's insistence on privacy, she thought. He was the sexiest man she'd ever dated. On the next turn she passed him. After all, he had confided his problem with public affection the first time they went out. On their second date, when he got her off in a booth at Ginorello's Cafe, she decided he wasn't serious about it. And since then his phobia was intermittent, apparently, a mere foible relative to his strong points. Anyway she had quirks of her own.

The session was almost over when John signaled their exit. In the car, one hand explored her as the other drove. "Baby you are on fire," he said, his hand reaching flesh. At the next pullout he stopped for a kiss. His tongue traveled her cheek.

"Beware makeup," she said, wondering if he'd exposed a red patch.

"Don't care." He nibbled down her neck. "Mmm."

Darkness was a gift. "Mmm."

"You're the sexiest woman in Colorado."

"Have you been with every single one?"

"No but I have eyes." Mouth met mouth.

"I bet you say that to all the girls."

"No I don't." He disconnected.

"Thanks, then." Feet akimbo so she could turn around, she clutched his head to her chest.

He gnawed. "You're welcome."

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot." One hand massaged her back; the other kneaded her front.

"Why won't you hold hands in public?"

"Off limits."

"Why?"

"Not comfortable." Teeth scraped her neck.

"Why?"

"Why don't you want to do phone sex?" Again he pulled away.

"It's crass."

"More reason to do it."

She buttoned up, regretting her inability to stay off his case.

"Do you think there's life on other planets?"

"Yes. And there's a universe here." He nudged her earring.

"And here." He pulled her hair. "And your teeth sparkle." Buttons came undone again. "You're delicious."

Their desire was more important than his past, she thought. And this time he had at least answered her questions, so things were progressing from silence. There was probably no cause for worry.

The rest of the evening was a dream.

In the morning, she harpooned the paper.

"Hey."

A neighbor whose name she could never remember waved. She waved back.

"Hey ..." He left his rake and trotted to his property line, as if to go further would be an infringement. "... saw raccoons climb down from your roof this morning."

"Really?"

"A mother and her babies. Yeah. They popped out of the chimney and walked down the block."

"To where?"

"No idea." He shrugged, dragging the rake along the pavement.
"No idea."

She called Timber County and reached Viola. "They're gone, or so says the neighbor." She related the story.

"Good because you need to get a chimney cap. But before you install it you have to lower a light bulb down the stack and make sure no animals are still in there."

"Church is in an hour and I'm still in jammies."

"Do it when you get back."

Justin's door was closed, probably because he was recuperating from the night before. She skipped breakfast for fear of being late to church and getting shut out of the prelude. She made it inside during a Jacques Brel song that curled from the piano as she looked

for a seat. The soloist was the Music Director, Corinne Zyzwyski, whose grace and expression soothed every nerve. The seat next to David Mell was open, but Aimee went for the one near Paula Dixon instead — David was married and she didn't want people to gossip. Paula hummed the tune and gave Aimee a hug. The welcome launched her spiritual sojourn. Corinne transformed the piano into an emotion machine that would have catapulted Aimee and everyone else into a state of bliss except that Corinne's midriff bounced as she pounded, backside extruding from the bench like an under inflated inner tube. Unitarians cared little about appearances, and Aimee hated to be so superficial about presentation in the sanctuary and faced with such talent. Grandma Ruth had always said, "Each human being is gifted in some way. No one is left out." If Ruth was alive, she would have offered to help Corinne look as good as she sounded. "The only thing worse than worrying about what you look like all the time," Ruth preached, "is never worrying about what you look like."

Aimee didn't remember a time when she hadn't found Ruth to be beautiful, and she lived to eighty-four. Ruth knew the business of beauty — it was her gift. The first time Aimee saw Ruth perform a miracle was when she was ten years old. Aimee tuned church out to pursue the memory. Her parents had taken a vacation to Florida and left Aimee and her brother Paul with Ruth. After breakfast Paul took over Ruth's bedroom so he could work on model airplanes and Aimee shadowed Ruth, whose life was a swirl of activity. She remembered

rubbing silver flatware with a polishing cloth in preparation for Ruth's Mah Jongg group, which meant company was coming.

"Grandma, why don't we have to shine the other spoons?"

"Different material, Sweetheart. Most people use stainless steel because it never gets dull, but when I have people over I like the table to look special."

"Are you going to have these?" She lifted bags of bridge mix and mini chocolate bars from a grocery sack.

"Yes."

"Can I play Mah Jongg?" Eating candy was reason enough.

"No Aimee. You'll be asleep."

Leaving Ruth and the candy to go to bed was worse than dousing a sparkler before it burned out. "Can I have candy first?"

"You certainly can."

The doorbell rang as Ruth set out the napkin rings. "Can I help you?" she said into the intercom.

"Girdle Garden?" said the voice.

She buzzed the woman up.

"What's a Girdle Garden?"

"I have underwear that makes ladies bloom." She wound the first cloth into the ring.

Aimee pictured flowers growing out of panties.

There was a knock; a woman with enough flesh for two entered, eyes bright, and introduced herself as Harriet. "I need a dress for

my son Jimmy's wedding." She shrugged and threw up her hands. "But look at me."

"You're in the right place." Doors to a cabinet that stretched the length and height of the living room folded out, revealing rows of drawers and a ladder that slid on tracks above the frame. With one hand Ruth pulled inventory from bins, and with the other she undid a hook, causing a board to fall from the woodwork. Extending its legs and bracket, she used it to catch parcels she threw down from ever higher levels. Because each item was swaddled in tissue paper, Aimee couldn't tell what was on the table. When Ruth was on the top rung and could go no farther she stopped pulling. After a return to terra firma, Ruth sent the customer and the merchandise behind a screen that doubled as a full length mirror.

The buzzer rang again. "May I help you?" said Ruth, activating the speaker switch.

"I'm looking for the Girdle Garden."

Ruth pressed the entry button.

This customer was not much taller than Aimee, but several times as wide. "This is my Pesach skirt." Arms against her hips, she dangled a dirndl, its waistline expanded to demonstrate that her middle was several inches wider than the elastic. "The ladies at shul, we're serving Seder and we all have to wear the same skirts. There's no time to order another size!"

Ruth fetched several bundles; the last lost its tissue as it

descended and was revealed. The high waisted girdle fell into Aimee's hands. She gasped, thinking the thing way too small for this customer. Ruth restored it to its wrapping and thrust the selections, along with the woman, behind a screen across the room from the one that hid Harriet.

"Grandma, doesn't it hurt to wear those?"

"Not always."

Aimee didn't get it, but just then Harriet, smaller by a third than at last sighting, appeared in clothes.

"I can't believe it," said Harriet, executing a turnabout in front of the mirror. "I can't wait to go dress shopping. What do I owe you?"

The second woman emerged, skirt snug but wearable. "What a relief," she said. "I eat too much and I know it!"

There was a parade of patrons after that, and any time Aimee visited Ruth, women arrived too big for something and left smaller, satisfied customers. There were also slender customers, but Aimee didn't find them to be very interesting because the transformation wasn't dramatic, except when Ruth warned that someone who needed "special handling" was on her way. Nearly all of them were compact. When they said, "It still hurts to reach around," or "Can you help me with my clothes?", Ruth would join them behind the dressing panel, tri-fold spread to accommodate two bodies, and Aimee climbed the ladder to fetch stock. That's how Aimee could see there were scars

where breasts had been.

"Don't worry about fit" Ruth would say, hooking a prosthetic.

"If it's not comfortable, we'll re-measure and send it back."

"Thank you so much," said Rev. Daniel, basking in applause that knocked Aimee from her reverie.

"Wasn't that profound?" said Paula.

According to the program, Aimee had daydreamed through an adaptation of "The Ugly Duckling," not to mention announcements and the readings. The minister rose for his sermon. "To consider today's topic," he said, "'Rebirth,' I look first to my forefathers. Mine were slaves in Mississippi, working themselves to the bone without pay or dignity. Mine were not free until ..."

This was what she had come for.

"Yours were immigrants, or pioneers, or outlaws, but whoever they were, their actions affected you and made you what you are today. To the extent that they did good things, they benefitted you. Where they did evil, I'm sure you feel, and rightfully so, that ..."

Without Grandma Ruth I wouldn't be an attorney, thought Aimee. Ruth used to say, "Learn a skill then sell it. That's what America is about." And Ruth bore that out. She was an immigrant child in New York City, made it through high school and worked for a boutique where she learned about the clothing business. While her children were in school, she market tested her philosophy, "Inner beauty is no substitute for looking your best," in the foundations business.

Eventually, when she turned seventy, she switched from underwear to jewelry because it was easier to store and retrieve. But Ruth didn't go a day without selling, which for her meant treating customers with the same interest and care she showed her family and friends.

"An Indian prayer," said Rev. Daniel. Again Aimee put her memories away.

"Do not stand by my grave and weep.

I am not here. I do not sleep.

I am a thousand winds that blow.

I am the diamond glint on snow.

I am the sun on ripened grain.

I am the gentle autumn rain.

When you awake in morning hush.

I am the swift uplifting rush

Of quiet birds in circling flight.

I am the soft starlight at night.

Do not stand at my grave and weep.

I am not there, I do not sleep."

Branches waved outside the colored glass as the congregation spent seconds in meditation. For Aimee, Ruth was there.

"Go in peace," said the minister.

Beautiful, thought Aimee, excusing herself from Paula because she needed to hunt for a chimney cover.

Home World's biggest store was a short drive, but it turned out

their chimney accessories were in storage. Such things, the salesman said, were in the category of fireplace supplies which were seasonal, and winter was over. In Builder's Market she went straight to seasonal, which was stocked with patio furniture. Her last resort was Bob's Hardware, tucked behind a vacant supermarket in a deserted retail center. To save money, Bob kept the lights and the inventory low. She parked at the door – hers was the only car – and crossed the threshold into a sea of waist high pegboards, each hook holding a single item. Bob, skin molded to his cheekbones, stooped behind a display case, spreading its wares to make it appear more full.

"Mornin'," he said.

"I need a chimney cap to keep raccoons out," she said, wondering if her purchase would supply the funds he needed to break even that day.

He inflated with possibility. "Lemme look in the back."

That was more promising than anything the other hardware stores had to offer, she thought, perusing switch and outlet covers. These were some of her favorite do-it-yourself purchases because they added instant charm and were easy to install. A balloon man design, each outlet and switch plate a variation, called to her. Too bad Justin was too old.

"Got it," said Bob, beaming over the carton he clapped it to the counter. "Chimney Cap," he read off the side of the box. "Keeps out rain, trash and animals. One size fits all."

"How much?" Not that it mattered. She needed it bad.

"Eighty-nine ninety-five."

Probably twice what it would be in Home World or Builder's Market, but only a fraction of what she was willing to pay. He pinched the credit card from her hand and entered the transaction, maybe his first that day. Then he carried the purchase to her car.

Justin was gone when she returned; the note he left said "Mom - Dennis", its meaning as clear to her (that he was in the company of someone with that name) as it was useless. She had no phone number, and the name Dennis didn't bring to mind anyone she knew. So it was time to face a dreaded task and she would have to do it alone, and in a snowstorm, which had begun about the time she pulled in the driveway. She exchanged church duds for jeans and squeaked a bulb into the work light. With a fifty foot extension cord attached, she snaked it around the yard from the outlet on the porch. Ladder hoisted, she mounted. The raccoon waste had disappeared - apparently the critters cleaned up after moving. Snowflakes alighted on trees that overhung the eaves, sprigs shivering. With a prayer for protection, she lowered the light into the chimney and checked for signs of life.

CHAPTER

2

"... concluded that thirteen year olds don't need to go to dances," Polly copied into the laptop, its font the size she used for all her lectures. "Other studies have shown that teenagers need time with their parents, not with their peers. They have enough of their fellow students during the week and there's no need to extend contact after school."

Perfect. Start the show with new data that would change the world of many a teen, not to mention their parents.

A note from Breeanne hung from the back of the chair. Today's Sunday, she thought, ignoring what was certainly another nit pick.

Tomorrow will be soon enough to find out what it said.

She did a dry run of the speech. "I get a lot of calls from panicked parents about middle school teenagers going to dances so I did some research. There is not one researcher who will tell you that there is anything age appropriate about ..." Her mind wandered – years ago she had discovered she could read aloud and think at the same time. The biggest problem with teenagers was their weak, oversexed parents, she thought. The world was a bottomless pit of shameful behavior, and she wasn't going to let a day go by without letting listeners know there was more to life than sex. "... there's no need to extend contact with fellow students into the evening," she ended. With a tap the stopwatch froze at 00:02:18. Perfect.

There were no cars around when she pulled up to the parking booth. She rolled her card and dropped it high, forcing a grab by the cashier to prevent its fall. Lucky catch, thought Polly, pleased the woman had made the save yet gratified by the grime on her hands, which meant she'd already scrounged the floor for fumbled payments. Polly sped up the ramp, pronouncing the attendant a fool for not using hand cleaner. Breeanne might accuse her of being contemptuous but she wasn't. Included in her bundle of obligations was the need to challenge minimum wage earners to go the extra mile. If Polly had to come all the way downtown to plan her show on a Sunday morning, why shouldn't these butt warmers have to extend themselves beyond their kiosks? She merged onto the highway south. Flurries melted on the

windshield; she hit the defroster and the button that controlled the seat heater.

"Contempt is what made you popular, but at this point you'll need more diversity to improve ratings," Breeanne had said on Thursday, a repeat of what she'd bleated for months. On Friday the harangue was, "More diversity, better ratings. If you want to extend your contract something has to change." The comments were nothing more than liberal dogma camouflaged as critique. Breeanne had some nerve. Polly had worked hard, so hard she had a mansion and a Lexus® while Breeanne drove a Honda or something. Who did Breeanne think she was? Anyway Polly's ratings were high, maybe not as high as they used to be, but still good enough to stay on the air.

In the shoulder, a car had raised its hood; traffic slowed and picked back up. It had taken her years in Boise radio to work up to Denver, and she had done it without ever hearing the word diversity. If Breeanne wanted a smorgasbord of callers so bad, let her find them and pay them to dial in. But Breeanne wouldn't have a clue as to how to do that or anything else to help the show – her background was in television.

At the highway, she took a breath. The further she got from the studio and back to the house that "Ask Dr. Polly" had bought her, the more relaxed she was. Her mental blog ended as the garage opened. Home sweet home. Beneath the mail slot was a pile of envelopes; bills went to the nook and the rest she tossed in the trash. A letter from

Breeanne, still on the sill, announced that KTHK was in discussion with several attorneys about doing a consumer show before hers because "Ask Dr. Polly" needed a stronger lead-in.

Baloney, thought Polly, pouring a drink. Damn Breeanne, but eventually she would get hers. With those kids in day care she would carry a load of guilt when they turned out rotten. Polly opened the shutters and looked for signs of life on the golf course, but there was nothing going on except snowflakes filling in between blades of grass.

The chimney was as sooty and as vacant as could be; Aimee reeled in the bulb. She clamped the cap on the stack and climbed down, returning the ladder and light to the garage. Time to clean up for rehearsal. Punctuality today, a run through, was a must.

At twenty minutes to curtain, she announced her comedy routine and the cast gathered around.

Getting a part in "You're a Good Man Charlie Brown" has been a great experience for me. How about you guys?"

Nods.

"There's nothing that says "Kids are cute" more than this show. Anybody here have kids?" said Aimee.

No one.

"Has anybody here been a kid?"

Hands went up.

"And which of you was a cute kid?"

Hands.

"Well I was adorable when I was little. I had pointy blue glasses and I loved my doll house. Then I got bigger and started to get into trouble. In middle school I used a fake credit card number to make long distance calls, and when my parents got a huge bill for it, I don't think they thought it was cute. Still, some things stay cute, like young love for instance. My crush on Anthony gave "puppy love" new meaning. Anthony was an exchange student. When he asked me to come home with him to Italy all expenses paid, my parents freaked out because I was eighteen and didn't need their permission. I was all set to go when my mother brought home a puppy. When Fluffy came into my life I didn't give Anthony a second thought."

No reaction.

"How about kids with cell phones. They're cute. One kid got expelled because he called a reference librarian in the middle of an exam. I hear elementary schools have bins of lost cell phones. I saw a cell phone drop out of a boy's pocket when he was on the monkey bars."

Connie chuckled.

"Fifteen minutes," called Delilah.

"Everyone's pet peeve is cell phones. That's gotta be the height of self-centeredness. The ring disturbs everyone in a movie theater and the person figures no one will notice if he answers and walks out

while in conversation. Not cute, huh?" That was the end of her material and no one was laughing. "That's all for today. Thanks for listening." The gallery dispersed.

"Keep trying," said Nathan, his hand brushing her behind. He winked. "You'll get it."

Polly spilled wine on the way to the tape recorder. So what — the carpet was burgundy. The dub from Wednesday's show that had set off Breeanne's last whine licked into the recorder; she settled on the chair, bottle and glass beside her. She hated the feel of leather, but it made the place look so damned posh compared to any fabric in the world that she'd ordered it in a set.

"This is 56 KTHK. Welcome to 'Ask Dr. Polly'. A listener contacted me because she and her husband have been arguing about how much T.V. the kids should watch. Well, a recent study of television viewing habits showed children whose television was restricted, or who watched no television, were less likely to have learning problems, and more likely to develop skills in art, music and sports. If you're creating, you're contributing. If you're watching television you're not providing a useful service. Not to mention being exposed to gratuitous violence and sex. In my opinion there should be no television at all. No Sesame Street, no Mister Rogers, no cartoons until they're old enough to separate the information into what's moral and what's immoral."

Polly poured herself another glass.

"Let's take the first call. Hello Fort Collins."

She pushed the bottle to the other side of the end table so she wouldn't drink any more.

"Fort Collins are you there?"

That damn first call being a no show was what sent Breeanne's doubt meter into the red zone, thought Polly, amazed that her glass was already half empty.

"Hello? Our caller may have left us. Hello Fort Collins?"

That's when Breeanne started to jabber about how I was so harsh I put Fort Collins off, thought Polly. But I didn't. I can't take the blame when they hang up before I talk to them. The woman probably had to answer the door or something.

"She must have hung up. What I was saying about television should be obvious to all of you. If you're consuming T.V., you're not serving a purpose. Oh, here's a caller. Hello Lakewood."

"Dr. Polly I love your show. You're a voice of sanity in a crazy world."

"Thanks."

"My husband is upset because I like the house very clean and he is not as tidy as me."

"How clean is your house?"

"As clean as I can get it."

"Do you have kids?"

"Yes."

"How old are they?"

The last gulp of wine called to her.

"They're little – four and two."

"How do you keep a clean house with kids that age?"

"I'm constantly picking up, dusting and vacuuming. If I didn't, this place would be a horrible mess."

"Don't you have anything better to do than clean?"

She stared at the empty glass, pleased that she still had the bottle. If it had been in the kitchen, she might have fallen getting to it, or if not, then dropped it on her way back to the chair.

"I'm so bored at home I have to keep busy."

"Well take up quilting or crafts or something and quit cleaning so much."

"Yes Dr. Polly."

"Next call."

Polly belched, wishing she could reach the napkin, which had fluttered to the floor. A little more wine wouldn't hurt, she thought, wiping her mouth with her sleeve. She extended the end of the goblet to catch the bottle and scoot it toward her and poured another, then pushed it away, certain this would be her last one.

"There is no next call," she remembers hearing in the headphones. That apparently put Breeanne over the edge. "You've alienated everyone but homemakers, and there aren't enough of them to make

ratings."

If there hadn't been so much dead air already, she would have turned off the microphone and defended herself, pointing out that callers or no callers, she still had a sizeable market share in Denver metro. "Oh, here's an article I've wanted to share with you about the devastating effect day care has on children. I hope all you working mothers out there listen up and quit your jobs. This eight year survey of forty-eight mothers in Akron, Ohio showed that parents of children who attended day care full time were twenty percent more likely to have marital problems than parents of children who had not been in day care full time. And another survey, done of ninety mothers in Little Rock, Arkansas, showed ... Oh I see we have another caller. We'll get back to the survey in after a call from Georgetown. Hello."

"Dr. Polly, my mother won't let me try out for cheerleaders because she wants me to play soccer. I hate soccer and I've always wanted to be a cheerleader."

"How old are you?"

"Fourteen."

"Why do you hate soccer?"

"Because some of my teammates are gay and it makes me uncomfortable."

"Your teammates are homosexual at fourteen? What business do they have being sexual at all?"

"Uhh ..."

The wine glass took a dive when she reached for it, so she sucked some from the bottle. Droplets slid down her chin; she wiped them with her hand, then licked her fingers.

"Find another team to play on."

"It's my school team."

"How about club soccer?"

"They're gay too."

"Are they bothering you?"

"No, but ..."

"Then tell them their lifestyle is immoral and forget it. We have another caller, Jane from Wheat Ridge. Hello."

"Dr. Polly my husband thinks I don't need to go to the dentist and I do."

"How can he think that?"

"He thinks if teeth rot they should be replaced by dentures."

"Well he's ignorant, then."

"I know but I don't have any money of my own. I'm a stay at home mother of three beautiful ..."

"Then make an appointment with a dentist willing to bill your husband. Loveland, Hello."

"Dr. Polly my husband and I always get absentee ballots and up till now he has filled them in for me and had me sign them. I want to vote myself this time and ..."

"Who does he vote for?"

"Do I have to say?"

"This is a talk show."

"He always votes Republican."

"You're going to vote Democrat?"

"Well, I ..."

"You've always let him vote before. What's changed?"

"I, uh, I ..."

"You don't seem very articulate about your choice."

"I ... I'm ..."

"How can you vote if you're uninformed? Why don't you just let him help you until you have the facts."

Getting up seemed like too much of a challenge so she rolled onto the floor.

"Hello Colorado Springs."

"Dr. Polly, my husband says I should lose weight."

"And why don't you?"

"I've tried, Dr. Polly. I just get fatter every year."

"Try harder. Do you exercise?"

"I try to, but I stay at home with my children, Doctor, like you say to ..."

"Working isn't going to make you lose weight."

"But if I wasn't home all day long with the refrigerator calling to me I could ..."

"Refrigerators don't speak, last time I looked. Anyway, your husband is right. If you're fat, he deserves better."

"Even if he's ..."

"Exercise in the morning before your children wake up."

"But sometimes I'm up in the middle of the night with them and I'm exhausted."

"My advice is my advice."

"Even if ..."

"I don't want to hear your excuses."

"... he's fat himself?"

"I'll say it again. If you're fat get to work. If he's fat get to work. Either way."

It was then that the calls stopped, thought Polly, thinking she'd better get up so she could relieve herself.

"We have lines open."

"No wonder," Polly remembered Breeanne said through her headphones. "The only people who want to talk to you are skinny housewives, and there's precious few of those!"

"The Countryside Journal reports that children with only one working parent score higher on standardized tests than children whose parents both work. Now doesn't that say it all? What more do you people want to figure out that children need to be home and not at day care centers? You guys who want money so bad you'd abandon your kids

all day are a bunch of child abusers."

The tape ended. The wine bottle was empty. Curled into a ball, she lost consciousness. It was three A.M. when, realizing she had wet herself, she took a shower and went to bed.