



cast  
me  
gently

Caren J. Werlinger



## CHAPTER 8

TERESA'S VW CHUGGED THROUGH the snow like a little tank, its rear engine giving the back wheels the traction they needed to churn up and down the hills to the store. The snow that had fallen overnight made everything look fresh and clean—"the only time Pittsburgh looks clean," she muttered through chattering teeth—but she knew it would quickly become a gray sludge as the city woke up and traffic got moving.

In the back seat was a folded winter coat. "You cannot wear that anymore," Sylvia had declared when Lou had taken it from the closet a couple of weeks ago. "What will people think?" she said, clucking as she inspected the shiny elbows where the wool was worn thin and the one shoulder seam that had pulled away. She insisted he start wearing the new one he'd received last Christmas, folding this one into the bag headed for the Salvation Army.

As Teresa had come downstairs that morning, she had noticed the snow from the window on the stair landing. Down in the foyer, balancing on one foot to pull a boot on, she had nearly tripped over the bag that had been sitting there for days, waiting for someone to take it to the Salvation Army. Remembering that coat, she'd pulled it out of the bag and brought it with her. When she turned into the alley, she wasn't surprised to see Dogman behind the store, shaking the snow off his sleeping bag so that he could roll it up

and tie it to his backpack. Lucy came to her as she got out of the car. Teresa gave her a scratch behind the ears.

“Wait,” she said as Dogman called to Lucy. He turned to her. “I...” Now that she was face to face with him, his face expressionless except for those eyes—*why is that the only part I can ever remember?*—she wasn’t sure what to say. She held out the coat. “I thought maybe you could use this, now that it’s really cold.” When he just stood there, looking at her, not the coat, she added, “It was my dad’s. It was in a bag for the Salvation Army. I just thought...” She held it to him again, and this time he took it. “And,” she reached back into the car. “I have this for Lucy. To keep her warm at night.” She offered the woolen throw that Ellie had used. Wordlessly, Dogman accepted this also, then turned and limped on down the alley with Lucy beside him.

Teresa watched them for a moment, then closed up the car and worked the key into the lock of the back security grate. She had to wrestle the frozen links before they slid open. Once inside, she rummaged through the storage closet, looking for the snow shovel. She quickly shoveled a clear space for her mother to park. She looked down the alley, but Dogman and Lucy were gone. She couldn’t have said what it was that made her feel a connection to them. She’d never felt like this about any of the other homeless or out-of-work people she saw every day—and there were lots of them lately—but, *there’s just something about the two of them*, and it had something to do with Ellie. She paused her shoveling, enjoying the secret thrill she felt every time she thought of Ellie. She always remembered that the first day she had seen Dogman was the day she met Ellie. For some reason the two things were connected in her mind. And now, it was all tied up with that hug.

Teresa leaned on her shovel and closed her eyes. *That hug.* “Don’t be so stupid,” she’d told herself over and over, but... other than hugs from Aunt Anita every now and again, that was

the first hug she'd had from anyone since she was a child. Her parents weren't huggers, nor were her siblings. She'd never been kissed—not really kissed—never been held, never had a boyfriend, had never been... intimate with anyone.

She felt her face grow hot and knew it had nothing to do with the exertion of shoveling. Every night for the past two weeks, she'd fallen asleep smiling and remembering the feel of Ellie's arms around her. *How could something so simple be such a huge thing?* She'd avoided going back to the bank, certain she'd make an idiot of herself again, but that didn't keep her thoughts from turning to Ellie at the most unexpected—and inconvenient—times, like yesterday when she'd been in the middle of counting pills for a prescription, and had to start over because she found herself standing there, daydreaming, with no recollection of how many pills she'd counted.

Part of it was every horrible thing Ellie had been through. It broke Teresa's heart to think about it, and she wanted to hold Ellie and try to make it better, but "you can't make any of it better," she reminded herself again and again. "It happened—her parents, her brother, all of it," but there was still something so vulnerable about Ellie, something that made Teresa feel protective and... tender. It was such a new feeling that she didn't recognize it at first. "Teresa is tall, she can reach it" or "Teresa's strong, she can do it"—those were the kind of things she was used to being needed for. Her family relied on her, even if they also forgot about her, but with Ellie, she felt different. It was as if she were being molded into a new shape, a new Teresa - *just by knowing her*. Ellie had a way of turning her inside out, seeing the bits of her that no one else had ever seen.

But she knew better than to try and talk about this to anyone, not even Bernie. For years, she'd listened to Bernie talk about Tom, cry over him, scream at him—and then watched as she went back to him time and again, but "this is different." Teresa had a feeling

no one else would understand, because she didn't understand it herself.

"Teresa!"

She jumped, dropping her shovel. Mrs. Schiavo was waving at her. Teresa picked the shovel up out of the snow and went around to shovel the back entrance of the bakery. When she was done there, she went out front and shoveled the front walk of both the bakery and the drugstore. By the time she was finished, a small crowd had gathered. Mrs. Schiavo brought out her old bread and let Teresa hand it to the people waiting. They were more orderly with her. "Because I'm big enough to hit back," Teresa joked. She scanned the street for any sign of Dogman and Lucy, but they were nowhere. When the bread had been given out, Mrs. Schiavo made Teresa come back inside, where she tried to give her a plate of cannoli.

"Mrs. Schiavo," said Teresa. "Do I look like I need cannoli?"

Mrs. Schiavo cackled and waved her hand at such an absurd idea as anyone having too much cannoli. She shoved the plate into Teresa's hand and Teresa went back around through the back door of the drug store, leaving the plate on her dad's desk. "Not that he needs it, either," she said, but she knew he'd eat it.

By the time Sylvia got to the store, snowplows had cleared paths down some of the streets and traffic was moving. She placed a mop behind the cash register.

"We'll have to clean up after snowy shoes all day today," she said. "I don't want anyone slipping and suing us."

"We could just close for today," Teresa said from behind the pharmacy counter.

"What? And lose a whole day's business?" Sylvia said.

The telephone rang, and Sylvia answered. Teresa could hear her end of the conversation and stopped what she was doing, listening with a scowl on her face.

“What?” she asked when her mother hung up.

“Gianni is stuck at Angelina’s. Your father is going to the Morningside store until Gianni can get there. He wants you to do the deposit and take it to the bank.”

“Stuck at Angelina’s my ass,” Teresa said under her breath. She finished the prescription she was working on and went to the office, still grumbling.

“What are you saying in there?” Sylvia asked.

Teresa didn’t answer for a moment as she got on her hands and knees, dialing the combination on the safe bolted to the floor under the desk. She lifted last night’s moneybag to the desk and brushed her knees off.

“I said, it’s a good thing one of us makes it to work.”

“Your brother always has a good reason if he doesn’t make it in,” Sylvia said.

“Yeah, right. I got out and shoveled this morning. Why can’t he get his butt out and shovel and scrape and get to work?”

“He will,” Sylvia said.

“Why do you always make excuses for him?”

“I’m not making excuses.” Sylvia’s voice sounded far away from inside the candy case.

“You are. If he worked for anyone else and didn’t show up at work, he’d be fired. But you and Pop just let him get away with it. And for not showing up to work, he gets paid more than I do. I haven’t had a raise since I got out of pharmacy school.”

“He’s a man,” Sylvia said. “He has to save up to take care of a wife and family. You just have yourself and you live with us. What do you need more pay for, huh?”

“Maybe I’m not always going to live with you and Pop.”

There was a very prickly silence that stretched on and on, and then Sylvia’s heels clicked on the floor as she came to the office. “So you’re thinking about moving out?”

Teresa shrugged. "Maybe."

Sylvia threw her hands in the air. "Maybe you should."

"Maybe I will," Teresa shot back as her mother stalked away. Breathing heavily, she had to count the change five times before she got an accurate number. She threw the coins into the bag and marked the deposit slip. She finished counting the bills and checks and stuffed everything into the bag. She crammed her feet back into her boots, pulled a hat on, wrapped her scarf back around her neck, and donned her coat over top of the sling containing the moneybag.

"I don't know when I'll be back," she said as she stomped through the store. She didn't look at her mother and didn't wait for a response.

Outside, the sidewalk was a checkerboard of untouched snow in front of some buildings interspersed with short lengths that had been shoveled. Traffic was moving sluggishly. She passed more than one car whose wheels were spinning, trying to maintain traction going up a hill. She was glad she'd decided to walk as her legs pumped along like pistons. She was soon breathing hard with the effort of walking through the snow, but the exertion felt good. It wasn't long before she was away from the commercial section and walking past houses, most of them still quiet, the sidewalks untouched, as the city's kids had been given a snow day and weren't outside yet.

As Teresa walked, she muttered to herself, continuing her argument with her mother, until she passed two kids coming down their porch steps with a sled. They looked at her as if she were crazy.

She chuckled. "Yes, I'm crazy."

She got to an intersection and paused. Instead of continuing straight toward the bank, she crossed the street and headed toward her sister-in-law's insurance office. The front windows looked dark

as she approached, but when she stood in front of the building, she realized the glare of the snow outside masked the weak fluorescents burning inside. She pushed the door open.

Karen was at her desk, phone to her ear. She glanced up, looking harassed. When she saw Teresa standing there, she smiled and held up a finger as she took notes. "We'll get someone out there as soon as we can to assess the damage. You stay safe, Mrs. Brezicki."

Karen hung up the phone and took her reading glasses off, rubbing her temples. "I hate snow," she moaned. "But I love seeing you." She got up from the desk. Even on a day like this, she looked great, her slim figure shown to its advantage in a pantsuit, her blonde hair perfectly done—*oh, God, what will mine look like when I take this hat off?* Teresa suddenly wondered.

"Want some coffee?" Karen was saying. "You must be freezing. I can't believe you walked here."

Teresa stood on the mat inside the front door, stomping her snowy boots as she unwound her scarf from around her neck and flapped her coat. "Some coffee would be great in a minute, but your walk isn't cleared."

"I'm the only one to make it in so far," Karen said with a fake smile. "The phone has been ringing since I got here, and none of the men have dug their cars out."

Teresa glared at her. "Sounds familiar." She rewrapped her scarf and buttoned her coat. Reaching for the shovel leaning against the wall, she said, "Have that coffee ready for me. Be back in a jiff."

Several minutes later, she was back inside, stomping again as she took off her scarf and coat. "That should last you for a few hours unless it piles up out there."

"Thank you so much," Karen said, waving her over to a chair by the desk where a cup of steaming coffee was waiting.



Teresa held the cup in her two hands, letting the warmth soak in. “Oh, this feels good. Thanks.”

Karen sat back down behind the desk. “So what brings you down here?”

“I had to go to the bank,” Teresa said. “And I just had to get away from the store before I said something I would be sorry for.”

“What’s going on?”

Teresa didn’t answer immediately. She sipped her coffee, but just as she opened her mouth, the telephone rang.

“Sorry,” Karen said, picking up the phone. Teresa drank her coffee while Karen took down the details of yet another car damaged when someone else slid into it.

“That’s the third one this morning. Now,” Karen said a few minutes later as she hung up. “You were saying?”

Teresa shook her head. “I don’t even know what it is. I get up early to open the store, take care of whatever needs doing. I stay to close most nights. I have no life. Gianni goes in whenever he feels like it, leaves early to go to Angelina’s or out with his friends. He gets paid more than I do because he’s a man.” She stopped, feeling sudden tears sting her eyes. She never cried. She blinked down at her coffee cup as Karen watched her intently.

“It’s good to know some things in this world are constant, isn’t it?” Karen said.

Teresa hiccupped with laughter. “You’re right. It isn’t any different from what it’s always been.”

Karen sat back, still watching her. “Something’s different. Must be. Why is it bothering you now?”

“I don’t know,” Teresa said. “Maybe because it’s been going on for so long...” Her expression darkened. “I am in the exact same place I was ten years ago. And if my folks have their way, I’ll still be in that same place ten or twenty years from now.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that, if it’s where you want to be,” Karen pointed out.

“I guess,” Teresa said. “I never questioned it before, but now... I feel restless. Like my life is just passing me by. Everyone my age is married and having kids. I don’t want that, but I watch my aunts, all single, all heavy and unhealthy. I don’t want that to be me, either.”

Karen smiled. “Well, Rob found a way to break away. Maybe you should talk to him. Why don’t you come over for dinner one night? How about Saturday?”

Teresa’s expression brightened. “That would be great.”

“Bring someone if you like,” Karen said.

Teresa felt her face get hot. She leaned over to retie the laces on her boots. “Maybe. I’ll see you Saturday. Six o’clock?”

“Six is good,” said Karen, walking her to the door. “Thanks for shoveling.” The telephone jangled again. “Gotta go. See you Saturday.”

Bundled up against the cold again, Teresa headed back out into the snow. Inside the bank, the lobby was deserted. All of the tellers looked up at her entrance. “Hi, Teresa,” came a chorus.

“I can help you here,” said Linda.

Teresa stepped to her window, avoiding looking at Ellie.

“Cold day for a walk.”

“Better than trying to drive in this,” Teresa said, struggling to extricate the moneybag from the sling under her coat. She got it out and plunked it down on the counter. While Linda counted the deposit, Teresa stole a look in Ellie’s direction, but she was busy doing something and didn’t look up.

“Here you go,” Linda said, handing the moneybag back. “The deposit slip is inside.”

“Thanks,” Teresa said. “See you soon.”

She went to the counter in the middle of the lobby where she stalled, taking her time getting the moneybag tucked back into the sling. Another customer came into the bank.

“Need some help?”

Teresa looked up to see Ellie standing there. She looked very pretty in a navy turtleneck. “Thanks, I think I’ve got it.” The other customer had stepped up to Linda’s window. Lowering her voice, Teresa said, “Are you doing anything Saturday evening?”

“No. Why?”

“Well, my sister-in-law asked me over to their house for dinner on Saturday, and I just wondered if you’d like to go. If you’re not busy.”

Ellie’s face lit up. “No, I’m not busy. I’d love to meet your brother and sister-in-law.”

Teresa finished buttoning up her coat. “Great. I’ll pick you up at five-thirty?”

“Five-thirty. I look forward to it.”

Teresa didn’t remember much about the walk back to the drugstore. Her mind was occupied with the anticipation of spending Saturday evening with Ellie, and her heart was racing. She knew it had nothing to do with the exertion of walking.

“I wondered when you were going to get back.”

Teresa did a double take as she entered the store. Bernie was sitting at the counter, drinking a latte.

“Hey. What are you doing here?”

Bernie twirled on her stool. “Snow day. Thought I’d come over here and hang out with you for a while.” She glanced over to where Sylvia was vigorously polishing the glass of the candy display case, her back to them. She looked back at Teresa with a questioning expression.

Teresa jerked her head toward the back. Bernie slid down off her stool, carrying her latte back to the office where Teresa was peeling off layers.

“What in the hell is going on?” Bernie whispered. “Your mother’s been pissy since I got here.”

Teresa rolled her eyes. “I got mad because I got my butt down here early to shovel and open, and Gianni calls to say he’s going to be late over at Morningside. Do they yell at him? No. Do they do anything? No.”

Bernie held up her hands, sloshing her latte over the side of the cup. “So? That’s how it always is. Why is your mother so angry?”

Teresa grabbed a tissue and wiped up the spilled coffee. She closed the office door and sat down to unlace her boots. “I might have said some things.”

Bernie perched on the desk. “What things?”

“I’m sick and tired of Gianni getting paid more than me for not working.” Teresa sighed. “I said I might not always live with them.”

Bernie’s mouth opened and closed. “Holy shit! Are you moving out?”

“No,” said Teresa quickly. “I just... I want them to not take me for granted.” She shook her head. “I shouldn’t have said it.”

“Don’t go feeling all guilty, Bennie.” Bernie took a sip of her latte. “You always do this. When you finally get fed up enough to say something, you feel guilty about it. They know this about you. They use it. To hell with them.”

Teresa looked up at her.

“I didn’t mean that,” Bernie said. “But, Jesus, you need to stand up for yourself and not feel bad about it.”

Teresa flung an arm toward the store. “That’s easy to say. Until you have to live with the silent treatment.”

“You gotta get tougher. Outlast her. She won’t stay quiet forever. You’re not that lucky. She’s got more to say to you.” Bernie hopped down off the desk. “How about we go out this weekend? Saturday?”

“I can’t,” said Teresa. “I’m going over to Robbie and Karen’s.”

“I haven’t seen them in ages. I could go with you,” Bernie suggested.

“Um, not this time. Sorry. Robbie needs to talk to me about something.”

Teresa tried not to squirm under Bernie’s gaze.

“Okay,” said Bernie, watching her. “Maybe next weekend.”

“Yeah. Next weekend would be good.”

## CHAPTER 9

WHEN TERESA AND ELLIE arrived at Rob and Karen's house, Karen greeted them, taking their coats. She looked elegant—her blonde hair carefully styled, her slimness accentuated by tailored slacks and a cashmere sweater. "She always looks that way," Teresa whispered to Ellie while Karen hung the coats in the closet. "Not like the rest of our family, that's for sure," Teresa added, looking down at her own baggy sweater hanging down over her hips to hide as much of her figure as possible. Ellie, she noticed, looked almost as dressed-up as Karen, wearing nice slacks and a tucked-in blouse.

"I love this neighborhood," Ellie said.

"Thank you," Karen said. "We really like Shadyside."

When they entered the kitchen, Teresa had to stop and stare at her brother standing there in an apron, tasting from a pot simmering on the stove.

"Hey, Resa," he said.

"Oh, my gosh," Teresa said, reaching out to steady herself against the table.

"What?" he asked.

"You. In an apron. Cooking."

Karen laughed. "You can train them if you're patient and consistent."

“Thanks,” said Rob with a droll smile. “You make me sound like a dog.”

“Not a dog, hon, just a spoiled male with bad habits we needed to break,” said Karen, winking at Teresa. “Rob, this is Teresa’s friend, Ellie.”

“Hi,” he said, reaching out to shake her hand, while continuing to stir the contents of the pan with his other.

Teresa noted how much thinner his hair was getting. “He didn’t get that from my side of the family,” Lou always said, running his hand over his own thick hair. But Teresa thought now that it made her brother look more handsome, with flecks of gray starting to show at his temples.

“Can we help with anything?” Ellie asked.

“Oh, no,” said Karen. “Just pour yourselves some wine and keep us company.”

Teresa went to the counter where a few bottles of wine were sitting. “White or red?”

“White, please,” Ellie said. “Whatever is cooking smells wonderful.”

“Thanks,” Rob said. “We’re having roasted lamb with cannellini and spinach salad.”

“Wow,” said Teresa. “I’m impressed.”

“I have managed to expand his culinary horizons beyond lasagna and gnocchi,” Karen laughed.

“Better not let Ma hear you say that,” Teresa said.

“Little danger of that is there?” Rob said, and even though his tone was light, there was a hard set to his jaw.

“When was the last time you heard from them?” Teresa asked, pouring Karen a glass of Merlot.

“My birthday last July. They sent a card. Ma signed it for both of them.”

An awkward silence filled the kitchen.

“Your home is lovely,” Ellie said.

“Let me show you around,” Karen said, taking Ellie by the arm and leaving Teresa and Rob alone in the kitchen.

He turned to look at her. “Karen said you were having a bad day when she saw you.”

Teresa shrugged. “I don’t know why I let it get to me. It’s the same old stuff. You know how it is. Gianni gets away with whatever he wants and they expect me to pick up the slack. The dutiful daughter.”

He gave her a sympathetic glance. “I didn’t know how true that was until I was away from them.” He nodded toward the living room where they could hear Karen’s voice. “She doesn’t let me get away with any of that. Sometimes I don’t even know I’m doing it, but she always calls me on it.”

“Like what?”

“Anything. From leaving my socks on the bedroom floor to expecting her to get me a drink. All those things we watched Ma do for Pop. Karen’s right. There’s no reason I shouldn’t pick up after myself, and I can pour a drink as well as she can. It shouldn’t be her job because she’s my wife.” He opened the oven to check on the lamb. “It won’t change for you unless you make it change.”

“How? I can’t make him pay me more.”

Rob gave her a look.

“What?”

“You’ve got to be ready to walk,” he said.

“You mean, leave the store?” Teresa stared at him.

“You might not have to leave, but you’ve got to be ready to. Leave the store and move out. I did it.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Look, I know it’s hard. Believe me. It’s still hard sometimes.” He took a big drink of his wine. “I miss you guys. I miss Ma and Pop, but if you keep caving in to them, they’ll never see you as



anything but their kid, someone they can tell what to do, and nothing will ever change.”

Karen and Ellie came back into the kitchen.

“Until they accept Karen as my wife, as part of the family, they don’t get me, either. It’s that simple.”

Karen came over and wrapped her arms around his neck. Rob gave her a kiss.

“And that’s why I love him,” she said, wiping her lipstick off his lips. “But he better not let the dinner burn.”

“Shit,” he said, jumping back and checking the pot of cannellini simmering on the stovetop. “I think everything is ready.”

A few minutes later, they were seated at the table.

“So what do you do?” Rob asked Ellie.

“I work at a bank,” she replied. “That’s where I met Teresa.”

“She also moonlights as the window designer at Benedetto’s,” Teresa said.

Rob looked from Teresa to Ellie and back. “And Ma was okay with that?”

Teresa grinned. “I didn’t ask her.”

Rob looked at her appraisingly. “Good for you.”

“So you’ve met the Benedettos?” Karen asked.

“Yes,” Ellie said.

“And what did you think?”

Ellie flushed.

“Don’t put her on the spot,” Teresa said. “Ma was civil, but barely. Ellie’s just too nice to say anything.”

Rob reached for Karen’s hand. “That’s more than she’s been with us.”

“How long have you been married?” Ellie asked.

“Seven years,” Karen said, giving Rob’s hand a squeeze.

Ellie’s fork clattered to her plate. “Sorry. And they still don’t talk to you? Did they come to the wedding?”

Rob shook his head as he reached for another slice of lamb. "In their eyes, I'm still married to my ex-wife. We couldn't be married in the Church. We had a civil ceremony. Teresa was the only one from the family who came. I wasn't going to invite them at all, but—"

"But I told him we needed to extend the invitation and let it be their decision," Karen cut in. "If we hadn't invited them, we would have been the bad guys. This way, they can't blame it on anyone else."

Ellie turned to Teresa. "I'm not surprised that you did the right thing."

Teresa felt a hot flush creep up her neck to her cheeks. She saw Karen's sharp gaze flit back and forth between her and Ellie. Teresa focused on her plate.

"Ellie," Karen said, "is your family all here in Pittsburgh?"

"It's just me and my brother now," Ellie said. She hesitated a moment. "He's busy and I don't get to see him very often."

"Well, we're glad you could come with Teresa tonight," Karen said, and Teresa shot her a look of gratitude.

When dinner was over, Teresa and Ellie insisted on helping with the dishes. Rob poured more wine, but Teresa stopped him.

"I'm driving," she insisted. "Make mine a Coke."

Karen invited everyone out to the living room. "So, Teresa, what are you going to do?"

Ellie glanced up. "About what?"

"My folks," Teresa said. "I'm not sure." She looked at Rob. "Any ideas?"

"Well, you could try just asking Pop for a raise." At the expression on Teresa's face, he added, "Or you could put in a few applications with other pharmacies and see what happens."

Teresa gave a weak laugh. "Oh, yeah. And when they ask for a reference from my one and only job and they call my father to see if I've been a good employee, that'll go over just fine."

Rob spread his hands. "I didn't say it would be easy."

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Ellie shivered in the passenger seat as Teresa drove through streets still slippery with compacted snow.

"Sorry," Teresa said. "I need to get another blanket for the car."

"What happened to the one you had?"

"I'm not sure. Guess I used it somewhere else and forgot to put it back."

"It's okay," Ellie said through chattering teeth. "Your brother and sister-in-law are not what I expected."

Teresa glanced over. "In what way?"

Ellie paused and Teresa had the feeling she was trying to choose words that wouldn't offend. "I can see how different he is from your younger brother."

Teresa laughed. "He was different anyhow, but Karen really has changed him for the better."

"No." Ellie sounded so serious that Teresa looked over at her again, noting how the street lamps lit up the smooth contours of her face. "Love changed him. He would do anything for her." She turned to face Teresa. "Have you ever loved anyone like that?"

Teresa returned her attention to the street as she shifted gears, feeling her face grow hot under Ellie's scrutiny. She shook her head. "No." She opened her mouth and closed it again. She wasn't sure she wanted to know, but "Have you?" she heard herself ask.

"Not yet," Ellie said. "But I will."

"How do you know that?"

Ellie sounded so certain. Teresa had never known any such thing for herself.

"I just do. I know that someday, I am going to love someone so much that I will wonder how I ever felt whole without them."

Teresa thought about this. "I've never pictured myself in love at all. With anyone."

"That's not right," Ellie said earnestly. "Not for you."

"What does that mean?" Teresa tried to laugh, but couldn't.

Ellie reached out and laid a hand on Teresa's arm. "You have so much to offer someone. You're kind and sensitive and caring." Ellie stopped abruptly, pulling her hand away. She sat very still as Teresa shifted gears again.

The interior of the VW crackled with a sudden tension. Even through the layers of her coat and sweater, Teresa could have sworn she felt the heat of Ellie's touch and she wished Ellie would put her hand back on her arm—and *never let go*. That fleeting thought jumped into her head, startling her with the surge of emotion that came with it. She longed to continue driving, just to keep Ellie in the car with her, but soon enough, she was pulling up outside Ellie's apartment building.

"This was a really nice evening," Ellie said, breaking the silence at last.

"I'm glad you could come," Teresa said. "I'm really glad they got to meet you." And Teresa realized she was glad about that. It made her happy that Rob and Karen had liked Ellie, not like Bernie or her mother, where she felt like Ellie was under attack.

"Well, I guess I should go up," Ellie said, and Teresa heard the regret in her voice.

*Not yet!* She wanted to say it, but it was late. Ellie was probably tired.

"Would you like to come up?"

Teresa's heart leapt at the invitation. "Yes. All right. If you don't think it's too late."

Ellie smiled. "Come on."

Teresa followed Ellie up the stairs. They could hear KC meowing as Ellie unlocked the kitchen door.

“Oh, did you think I was never coming home?” Ellie asked, picking her up. KC immediately began making a vibrating noise.

“Is she okay?” Teresa asked in alarm as she took her coat off and hung it over one of the kitchen chairs.

Ellie laughed. “Yes. That’s the sound she makes when she’s happy. You really don’t know anything about cats, do you?”

“The only person I know who has a cat is my sister, and it always hides.”

“Would you like to hold her?”

“Um, okay.”

Ellie placed KC in Teresa’s arms and took her own coat off. KC stretched up, sniffing Teresa’s face curiously. Teresa chuckled. “Her whiskers tickle.”

“Come and sit down,” Ellie said, leading the way into the living room.

Teresa set the cat down and followed Ellie to the couch. Now that she was here, she didn’t know what to say. *What were you thinking, coming up here?* She only knew she hadn’t wanted the time with Ellie to end.

She felt KC wind around her ankles.

“There’s this guy, a homeless man, who hangs out around our store,” Teresa said, watching KC. “He has a dog named Lucy.”

“Really?” Ellie looked at her. “How does he feed Lucy?”

Teresa thought. “I don’t know. I mean, I’ve left food out for him before, and I think he fed her some of that, but—”

“No,” Ellie said. “She really needs dog food to stay healthy. She probably means the world to him. If anything happened to her...”

Teresa pictured Dogman sheltering Lucy with him under the sleeping bag, feeding her before he fed himself, and she knew Ellie was right.

There was a sudden knock on the living room door, startling both of them. Ellie unlocked it and Sullivan bounded in.

“Hey, how was—”

He stopped abruptly when he saw Teresa sitting there.

“Oh, sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know you had anyone up here.”

“Sullivan, this is Teresa Benedetto,” Ellie said.

“Hi,” Sullivan said, bending forward to shake Teresa’s hand.

“Sullivan’s my neighbor across the hall. He’s working on his PhD at Pitt,” Ellie said.

“In what?” Teresa asked.

“Biomedical engineering,” Sullivan said.

“Whatever that is.” Ellie sat back down as Sullivan took the armchair.

“No, it’s fascinating,” Teresa said. “Things like surgical hardware and artificial joints. Synthetic ligaments.”

“Yes!” Sullivan said, leaning forward. “I have so many ideas about how joint replacements could be so much better than they are now. And we’re just starting to explore how computers and robotics—”

“Oh, don’t get him started,” Ellie said. “Talking about this stuff is like drugs for him. He won’t sleep for days. Teresa is a pharmacist.”

“So you know what I’m talking about,” Sullivan said.

“Only a little. Things I’ve read in journals.” Teresa looked at her watch. “I really should go. It’s late.” She stood. “Nice to meet you, Sullivan.”

“Likewise,” he said.

Ellie walked her back out to the kitchen. “Thanks again for asking me to go with you tonight. I had a really nice time.”

Teresa looked into her clear eyes and felt lost. She stood there, not wanting to leave, but unable to think of any reason to stay.

Ellie impulsively flung her arms around Teresa. This time, Teresa held her tightly in return, breathing her in for several seconds.

Suddenly, she let go and reached for the door. "I'll see you soon," she said and nearly ran down the stairs. By the time she got to the VW, tears were running down her cheeks.

She got into the car and turned the ignition. She started to reach for the gearshift and then put her hands over her face and cried.

\* \* \*

Ellie looked up as KC meowed and placed a gentle paw on her knee. Wincing, she uncrossed her legs and looked around at the drawings scattered all over the living room floor. Her eyelids felt like sandpaper. She squinted, surprised to see sunlight coming in through the windows. She hadn't meant to stay up all night.

She leaned back against the couch and closed her eyes. After Teresa left, Sullivan had shown signs of wanting to settle down for a long visit. "I'm really tired," she'd said with a yawn, ushering him back to his own apartment as soon as she politely could. Only, once she was alone, sleep had been impossible. She was filled with a restless energy. Going to a dresser drawer, she'd dug out a drawing pad and an old cigar box filled with her charcoals, pencils and a kneaded eraser. She wasn't even sure what it was that she was going to draw, but the sketches took shape—hands, eyes, a bowed head with dark, wavy hair. Looking at the images now, she flushed as she realized they were all images of Teresa, or at least her impressions of Teresa. She picked up a sketch of hands and remembered watching Teresa's hands as they'd worked on the store window, fine fingers tying fishing line to the pretend-balloons. Such a contrast to the awkwardness of her large body. Last night, she'd been watching Teresa—the way she lowered her eyes when she was thinking about something, her dark lashes grazing her cheek, her strong profile with a prominent nose, something so sensuous about the curve of her lips, her hands as she twisted the stem of her wine glass. She was such a curious mixture of strong and... *what?*

*Delicate* wasn't the right word. Maybe *sensitive* suited her better. Ellie had looked up once to see Karen watching her watch Teresa and she had known in an instant that here was someone who saw everything, and that if she and Karen ever were to talk, it would do no good to hide or lie.

Ellie flipped to the back pages of her drawing pad, to images she hadn't looked at in years. They were only sketches—the line of a cheek and nose; an eye, smiling and coy; a head of short, pixie-ish hair and the graceful curve of a neck—but they were instantly recognizable. Ellie reached out and traced a finger along the curve of that neck. Katie was the Lockes' youngest daughter, just a couple of months older than Ellie. "*She'll be good company for you,*" the social worker had said when she placed Ellie with the Lockes. The two girls had bonded quickly. Katie was an athlete and knew everybody. The Lockes' sons were away at college, and so Ellie was given the boys' room, connected to Katie's by a Jack and Jill bathroom that became a secret passage, one that let Katie come to Ellie in the night. Nights spent with the girls' lying in the two twin beds, talking and giggling, had been like an endless slumber party. But that had all changed the summer between their junior and senior years of high school, the night Katie crawled into Ellie's bed—"You won't tell, will you?" Katie had whispered.

Ellie's heart had raced, and a part of her knew she'd been wanting this for a long time as she felt Katie's soft lips on her own, better than any boy's kisses, Katie's hands sliding under her pajama top to caress young breasts. She got to touch Katie's body as well, the wondrous feel of Katie's hard nipples pressing into her palms. They never strayed beyond teasing little tugs on the waistband of their underwear, but with Katie lying on top of her, their thighs pressing against each other's crotches, Ellie had experienced her first orgasm as she bucked against the pressure of Katie's leg.



But then, one day just before they were to start their senior year, Mrs. Locke said, "Come with me."

Mrs. Locke had looked unusually stern as Ellie followed her. They got in the car. Ellie remembered how her heart had pounded, thinking maybe she was being returned to social services, but all her clothes and things were still there at the house... They had driven to St. Ignatius, the Lockes' church. Ellie had been going to Mass with them there and thought old Father Patrick looked a little like a beardless Santa Claus, fat and kind of jolly-looking, only he, too, had worn a very serious expression when Ellie was ushered into his office that afternoon.

"I'll wait outside," Mrs. Locke said, backing out of the office and closing the door.

Nervously, Ellie had stood as Father Patrick came around from behind his desk and invited her to sit in one of the two chairs there as he took the other.

She had only seen him in the robes he wore to celebrate Mass. In his black shirt and collar, he looked different, more somber. Ellie remembered how her heart had continued pounding so fast that she could hardly breathe, wondering why she was there.

"Ellie," Father Patrick began. "I understand this is a delicate situation." He folded his hands together, and Ellie thought his fingers looked like fat sausages, with nails that were too long for a man. "Katie went to her mother and told her everything."

It took a moment for his words to sink in. *Katie told?* "We understand that you've been through a very traumatic time, losing your mother, and maybe you come from a different kind of family," Father Patrick continued, his voice taking on the tone it did when he was giving a homily. "But the Lockes are a good, Catholic family. Katie likes you, but not in that sinful way."

Ellie felt her face go red and hot, and she dared not look up at him. She stared at his fat fingers and said nothing.

Father Patrick cleared his throat. "I've spoken to Mr. and Mrs. Locke, and they have agreed to let you stay in their house, but with the stern warning that you must not go into Katie's room again, and you can never..." Here, even Father Patrick seemed not to know what to say. "You must not draw Katie into sin again. If you do, the Lockes will have no choice but to send you back to Social Services for a different foster placement."

The ride back to the house had been a silent one. When Ellie got to her room, she found that the door from her bedroom to the bathroom had been fitted with a lock, so that the only way into the bathroom was now through the hall. The Lockes were taking no chances that Ellie might slip into Katie's room again—"except I never went to her room!" Ellie wanted to scream. She couldn't even look at Katie. For days, she stayed in her room, leaving only to go to school, where she avoided Katie. At the house, she refused to come down for meals, surviving on a bowl of cereal scavenged during the night. How could she sit at the table while Katie pretended it had all been Ellie's fault? That was when the Lockes got her KC, thinking the kitten would be good company, and she was. She kept Ellie company through the long, lonely nights. She kept her company when the Lockes went to church on Sundays—Ellie refused to go back there. KC became her lifeline, her confidante. Ellie kept a calendar on the wall over her desk, counting down the last six and a half months until she turned eighteen and could leave their house for good.

"But it's only March," Mrs. Locke had said. "What are you going to do about school?"

"I'll manage," Ellie insisted, and since Social Services couldn't legally make her stay once she was eighteen, there had been nothing any of them could do.

Ellie packed her few things, put KC in a carrier, and left Duquesne Heights without a backward glance, and without ever

having said another word to Katie. She had to dig into her paltry college fund, just enough to rent that first room back in Squirrel Hill, promising herself she would pay it back when she could. She got a part-time job, registered herself for school—anywhere was better than where Katie was. She soon had to get a second job and then a third to earn more money, and even then, she had to borrow from her college fund which was getting smaller and smaller. Her grades suffered, but she graduated, thanks to Louise.

“Oh, God,” Ellie said now, pressing her hands against her eyes. It had been ages since she’d thought about Katie. KC crawled up into her lap. Ellie picked her up and squeezed her tight. “What would I have done without you?”

She gathered up all the scattered drawings and stuffed them into the drawing pad. She put all her pencils and charcoals into the cigar box, and tucked everything back in the drawer.

Her bed called to her. She glanced at the clock. There was nowhere she really had to be today. Next weekend, she would start her holiday hours at Kaufman’s, but today, she could do whatever she wished. She lay down on top of the covers and pulled the quilt over her. As she lay there, she could feel an upwelling of emotion—none of it good—and she knew thinking about Katie had not been a good thing.

“It never is.”

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BY CAREN WERLINGER

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