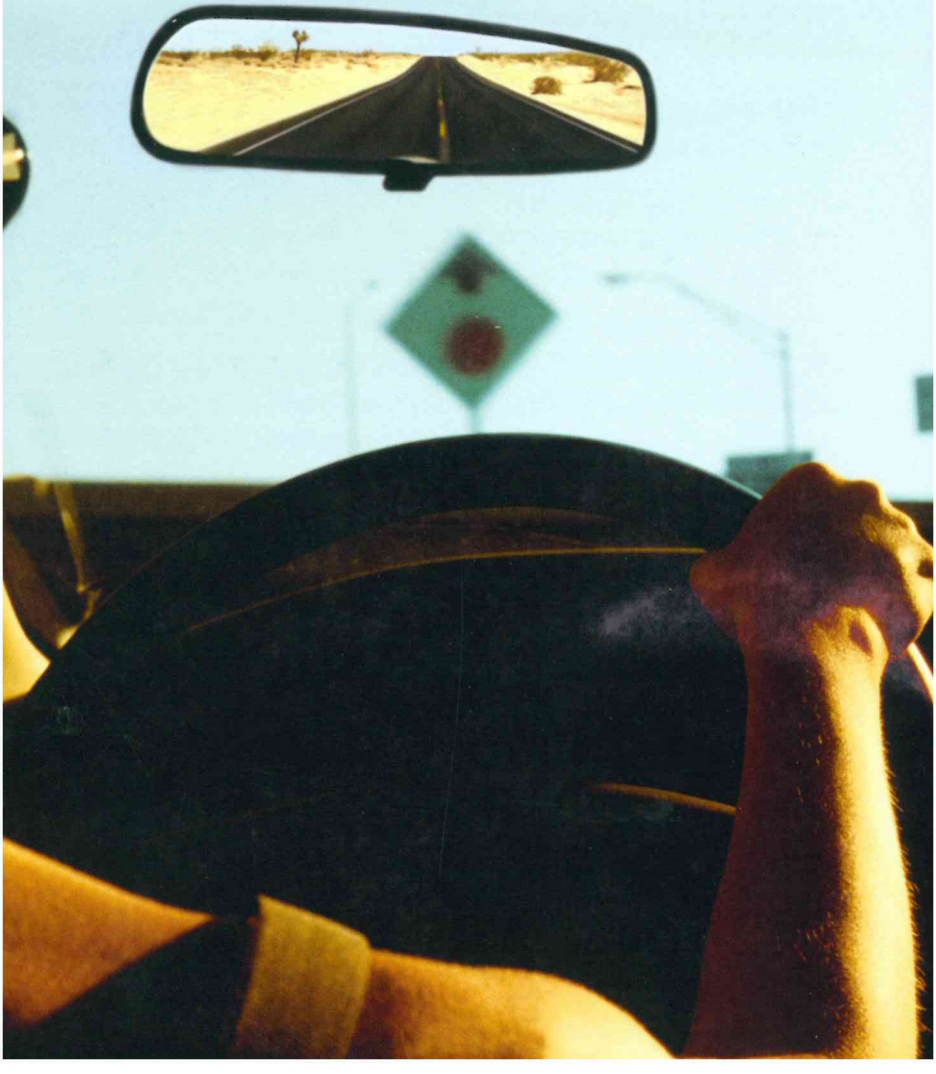
JOAN BAUER

NEWBERY HONOR author of *Hope Was Here*

Rules *of the* Road

Winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize



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CHAPTER 1

I leaped onto the sliding ladder in the back room of Gladstone's Shoe Store of Chicago, gave it a shove, and glided fast toward the end of the floor to ceiling shelves of shoeboxes. My keen retailer's eye found the chocolate loafers, size 13, I slid the ladder to the Nikes, grabbed two boxes of easy walkers (white and beige) size 4½ narrow, pushed again to women's saddles, found the waxhides, size 7, rode the ladder to the door one-handed. Children, do not try this at home. I am a shoe professional. I jumped off as Murray Castlebaum, my boss, rushed past me.

"It's a madhouse out there, kid." Murray grinned, rifling through shoeboxes.

We love it when it gets busy.

I walked quickly back on the sales floor, made eye contact with each of my customers so they'd know I cared. Every movement counts when you're selling shoes, especially when the store fills up with customers. You look at people calmly; you let them know you'll take care of them—you're not pan-

icked even though people are holding up shoes and barking sizes at you all at once. I just remember what Murray told me: People want to know someone's for them. I've sold lots of shoes this way.

The tired woman with the three screaming boys tried on the waxhide saddles.

"Mommy, I want to go!" cried the youngest boy and the other two chimed in. This could blow my sale because she was outnumbered. I took out my stopwatch that I used for emergencies, handed it to the oldest boy.

"Breath-holding contest," I directed. "The winner gets cow laces. Best two out of three."

"Cool." The boys started holding their breath, mere putty in my hands. The woman looked at me gratefully, freed to shop.

I raced to the older man, slid the loafers on his bony feet, felt the toe. His face went soft. I smiled. These shoes sell themselves. He stood up, did a little dancing movement.

Moved to the woman with the dangling Siamese earrings, the pouncing cat pin. Slipped the Nikes on her fat foot, mentioned the tri-density compression plug midsole that would energize her feet on pavement, told her to give them a good test. Circled back around like a good sheepdog, keeping watch.

"How are those feeling?" I asked Cat Woman, who grinned.

Showed the older man the hand-stitching and richly grained texture on his loafers.

Pointed out the classic, yet fresh appeal of the waxhide saddle.

The woman nodded as her boys argued over who won the contest—she'd take the shoes.

The older man took out his wallet. "I'll take them, miss."

A yes from Cat Woman.

The woman with the toddler I'd waited on earlier bought three pairs of baby sandals in white, pink, and dress black.

They can't say no.

I walked my customers to the counter, thanked each one, tallied up the five percent commission in my head, keeping my eye on the man and the little girl who just walked in. Murray pushed back his three strands of hair that he tried to comb over his balding head and did his dead chicken imitation, stretching his neck long, bugging his eyes out. This meant I wait on the man and girl. I headed toward them, stepping lightly.

"So what are you doing in school these days, Becky?" the man asked the little girl.

"Daddy," she said, "I already told you last week."

The man checked his watch. A weekend father, probably. Be thankful, Becky. At least yours comes around.

Becky tried on pink ballet slippers, white cowgirl boots, and black patent leathers.

She got them all.

I walked Becky and her dad to the counter.

"Listen," the father said as he flipped out his Visa card. "I'm going to have to take you back early today, Beck. I've got an appointment."

My dad used to say that to me on the rare occasion that he came around.

I handed her a balloon and told her how great she's going to look in her new shoes.

Becky stared at the children's shoe display I arranged. Murray said it was my best one yet. It had stuffed clown dolls and circus decals and a wind-up trapeze toy that moved across a wire. The kids always ran to it whenever they came into the store. Becky walked to the display, her little face caved in, watching as the toy man buzzed across the wire above the Keds.

I wanted to tell her I understood. I walked over to her, put my hand on her shoulder, and settled for one of those looks that passed between strangers. Her father checked his watch again, rushed her out the door.

Mrs. Madeline Gladstone, the supremely aged president of Gladstone's Shoes (176 outlets in 37 states; corporate offices in Dallas, Texas), stood by the cash register under the large white five-pointed Lone Star of Texas that was the symbol of Gladstone's Shoe Stores everywhere. She came to our store every day when she was in town. Mrs. Gladstone had houses in Dallas and Chicago, but lately she'd been spending all her time here. She was very short but made up for it like one of those little yippy dogs who barks at anything. She ran her fingers through her coarse white hair, made notes on a pad inside a blue leather folder marked "personal." Some people just naturally make you nervous. She was retiring this year, handing the business over to her son, Elden. Murray said retiring was

probably going to kill her because the shoe business had been her whole life. It didn't help that Elden was pond scum.

He came to the store three months ago, saying how the shoe business was changing and we were going to get new lower-priced merchandise that was going to fly off the shelves. The merchandise came, but it never made it on the shelves. It looked good on the outside, but Murray Castlebaum's got X-ray vision. He looked past the brushed leather and the fancy labels to the thinner soles and the wider stitching and the second-rate lining. Then Murray shoved everything in the closet and stood on the ladder in the back room and gave a misty-eyed speech about how you've got to live what you sell and he wasn't about to start living with garbage.

Most people think selling shoes is pretty ho-hum, but if you hang with shoe people long enough you plug into the high drama.

I looked around. The crowd had cleared. Customers come in swarms, like locusts.

"Break, kid."

Murray motioned me to the back room. I was fifteen and a half when I started at Gladstone's last year, sophomore year, the year of the Big Slump. I gained seventeen and a half pounds. I went from center forward to second-string guard on the girls basketball team because I just can't jump. I got a C minus in History, which knocked me off the honor roll because my history teacher didn't like my essays or my end-of-the-year term paper ("Our Shoes, Ourselves—Footwear Through the Ages"). I became the brunt of Billy Mundy's

mean jokes until I shoved him against the wall when he called me "*Ms.* Moose" for the zillionth time, told him I'd rip his left kidney out if he said that again. I just limped through sophomore year, all five feet eleven inches of me, wondering why God had invented adolescence.

But there was Gladstone's.

I succeeded here. I made money here. I didn't feel big, awkward, and lost. I felt successful. I helped people. They looked to me instead of away. I couldn't wait to come here after school, couldn't wait to head out to work early on Saturday mornings. My grandmother always said that everyone needs something in life that they do pretty well. For me, it's selling shoes.

Still, I nearly collapsed during those first weeks wondering how I was going to remember everything. But you know how it is when you start something new; you mess up for a while and then gradually you find the rhythm. Murray Castlebaum's a good, patient boss except when his diverticulitis acts up and then you steer clear because the man becomes Frankenstein, or Frankenbaum, as I call him. At the end of each week, Murray asks me, "Okay, kid, what did you learn?" At first I'd just shrug and say something about handling customers better, but Murray didn't like that because he'd been selling shoes for twenty-three years and figured something big should have rubbed off.

"The number one thing you gotta know to sell shoes," Murray said, "is that every shoe has a story. You know how it's made, you know how to sell it."

So I made it my business to know what was good and bad about each shoe. You can put four pairs of sandals in front of me and I can tell you which one to wear on the beach, which one to wear for a walk, which one to buy for the long haul, and which one to avoid altogether. And when it comes to selling sneakers you better have done your homework or you'll get blown out of the water. You sell road traction and heel alignment, and don't let anyone tell you that a cross-trainer is going to give you the strength of a long-distance runner. It's a bold new shoe world out there and not everyone knows how to compete.

I sat on the folding chair by the helium tank and the boxes of Gladstone's Shoe Store balloons with the Texas star that were blown up and given to every child who walked through the door. I turned the helium gage on, took a quick gulp of funny gas, and squeaked out, "Cat Woman lives."

"Watch the gas," Murray said to me, looking through boxes of loafers.

I let loose a high-pitched helium giggle, opened my purse, and took out what had become my most prized possession.

There it was, nestled between my Chicago Public Library card and my Red Cross CPR certificate—my own, personal driver's license—six months old today.

Jenna Boller
Eyes: Brown
Hair: Red
Height: 5′11″
Weight: None of your business

An official Illinois driver.

If only the photo wasn't so awful—my flat nose looked flatter, my round face looked like a globe, my auburn hair hung frizzed and heavy on my shoulders like too much fur. My dark eyes (one of my best features) looked guilty. My sister got the beauty in the family. I got the personality.

I held up my license and chirped out, "My passport to new worlds, Murray. Adventure. Romance. Freedom."

"The romance dies, kid, the first time you're wedged between two Mack trucks at rush hour on the Eisenhower Expressway."

Murray lumbered out as I cradled my license. I was a good driver, everyone said so. Cars never scared me. I had respect for their power, but I worked hard to learn the rules.

My big plan at the end of the summer, after clocking in many full-time hours at Gladstone's, is to buy a car—a red one—with a sunroof and leather buckets. Then, I'm going to explore all of Illinois, and then Wisconsin, and then—

"Where's my Jenna girl?"

I froze at the voice coming from the sales floor.

It couldn't be.

"Jenna girl, this is your father calling you!"

I looked for a place to hide. There was no back door.

"Sir . . ." It was Murray's voice. "We can't have you—"

"I'm here, sir," my father announced, drunk, "to see my daughter."

I couldn't move. Murray, bless him, said, "She's gone for the day."

"Now don't give me that now." My father swirled the words together. "Just want to see her for a little minute. Haven't seen her for a long time, very long."

Two years and seven months, to be exact. But who's counting?

Not me. Not anymore. I used to count the letters I sent him that he never answered, the presents I mailed on his birthday and Christmas.

I got up from the stool like I was dragging lead weights. I could get another job after they fired me. I was a good worker, everyone said so. I could sell anything to anybody. I stood at the door and watched my father in dirty jeans and an old golf shirt and grubby sneakers scratch his head and fall into a plaid chair as Mrs. Gladstone snapped her long, bony fingers at Murray to *do something.*

"Jenna girl! You got tall there." His cloudy eyes tried to focus.

Please, God, let the helium have worn off. I said, "It happens," but I still sounded like a cartoon mouse.

I walked up to Mrs. Gladstone, could smell her light perfume wafting up from her navy blue pin-striped suit. No customers in the store. That was something. I looked her straight in the eye, tried to aim my voice low.

"I'm sorry about this, Mrs. Gladstone. I'll take care of it." Better, but still Disney.

Her gray eyes blasted through me. She stood rigidly erect, every thick, snowy curl in place.

My face sizzled hot. I walked slowly toward my father, not

looking at the mirrors on the blue walls on either side of me, not looking at the white sign above the door, WE'RE NOT JUST SELLING SHOES, WE'RE SELLING QUALITY. I looked at the blue carpet with the white stars, took my father's arm to lead him out of the store, onto the street, somewhere, anywhere but here.

"Did you miss your old man?"

I led him out to Wabash Street, underneath the elevated train tracks. Dad was never a mean drunk, you could put him places, lean him against things and he'd pretty much stay put. That helped when I was smaller and I had to put him places when Mom had had enough.

I arranged him on the station steps, put his hands together to grip the rail. I was really glad that I was one of those people who had delayed reactions to trauma.

"Well," he blubbered, "watcha been doing?"

An El train barreled by overhead, shaking the street. Steel scraping steel, the train screeched around the corner. I gave him two years and seven months worth. "Stuff, you know." The gas had worn off. I'm definitely off helium for good.

"Me too." He swayed down on the steps as two old women moved quickly past us. "You probably think I'm drunk, Jenna girl, but I'm not."

"Really." He always called me "Jenna girl" when he was plastered.

"I'm on medication that makes me . . . funny."

I focused in hard at the Lemmy's hot dog poster (steaming

dog with everything, including grilled onions) so I wouldn't have to look at my father or see the staring people looking at me like I'm some poor, pitiful case.

Drunken Dad Disgraces Daughter.

We stayed there for a while not saying anything. When I was nine, Mom had sent me to a therapist, Ms. Lynch, after she and Dad got divorced so I'd have a place to yell and scream, which I never did. Ms. Lynch had a puppet, a brown furry chipmunk named Chester, that I'd put on my hand and tell him the story of my dad's alcoholism and how I'd never known if he was going to be a good dad one day or a bad one. One time, Ms. Lynch made Chester's voice and said it was okay if I got angry. I got angry all right, but not at Chester. I told Ms. Lynch that Chester was a chipmunk and *didn't* talk. Then I told her I knew that storks didn't bring babies so stop trying to snow me.

Dumb as it seems, I could have used Chester now.

"I'm going to have to get back to work, Dad." I said this low, mature.

Dad belched. He was wearing the Timex watch I'd sent him last Christmas. Nice to know it arrived.

"Jus wanted to see you, honey. I meant to call."

He always said that.

"Yeah. I know."

I felt the armor going over my heart and mind, the steel rod shooting through my back. I didn't ask where he was working now. The jobs never lasted long. He was always selling something—aluminum siding, screen doors, toasters, used

cars—I got my gift for selling from him, that's what people said. He had a brief stint as a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman; kept a ball of dirt in his pocket to throw on the carpet when the front door opened; got bit bad by an irritated pit bull who didn't appreciate the Eureka suction. Part of me wanted to walk away and leave him there, the other part couldn't. I'd worked hard at seeing his alcoholism as a disease he was stuck in. Love the person, hate the bad things they do. Sometimes loving from far off is a whole lot easier than eyeball to eyeball.

"Is there someplace you're staying, Dad? Someplace you need to get to?"

He tried standing up to reach in his pocket, fumbled badly, finally pulled a matchbook out, opened the cover, handed it to me. "Sueann Turnbolt, 1260 Wells Street, 555-4286," it read.

Another girlfriend probably.

"Is she there now, Dad?"

"S'waiting for me."

Mr. Romance. I hailed a cab, got him inside, gave the driver ten dollars and the address. "We can get together when I'm not working, Dad."

"Okey dokey, Jenna girl."

I shut the cab door and watched it head down the street. I felt exhausted, like I hadn't slept for days.

Daddy's home.

The last time he showed up was when I was a freshman. I was walking home from school with my friends and he pulled up in a broken-down Dodge, jumped out with a big toothy

smile like I should have been expecting him all along. Dad always made an entrance.

He hung around town that summer, drinking, not drinking, making promises, breaking them.

Daddy's home.

I leaned against the elevated train stairway, closed my eyes, threw back my head.

I didn't know if I could handle it this time.

CHAPTER 2

Keep going.

I ran back to Gladstone's Shoes pushing aside pain and anger. Murray said customers are like wild animals—they can tell when you're upset and they'll use it against you.

Smile.

A few people in the store, but Murray was handling it. Mrs. Gladstone was studying the Johnston and Murphy display like it held the secret to life. Maybe I could tiptoe around her into the—

"Your father," said Mrs. Gladstone in her soft Texas drawl, "is quite a—"

My body clenched. "I'm sorry about him, ma'am. If you don't want me to work here anymore, I'll understand."

Mrs. Gladstone folded her skinny arms across her chest. I was toast.

I would not fall apart if I got fired.

I'd just take my stuff and go.

"What manure," she spat.

I guess I wasn't fired.

"Why would I penalize you for something that is clearly your father's problem?" She stood there waiting.

"Well . . ."

What could I say to her?

What could I say to anyone?

My father has had this problem all my life and if I had one wish in this world it would be that he could beat it.

But you know how it is with wishes. Some you catch, and others are like trying to grab Jello.

Mom's note on the dining room table to me and Faith read:

> Daughters of mine,
> In case you haven't noticed, no one has seen the top of our dining room table in months. I seem to recall it is oak, but as the days dwindle by, I'm less and less sure. Perhaps this is because your school books, files, papers, magazines, letters, underwear, etc., are shielding it from normal use. My goal for you, dear offspring, to be accomplished in twenty-four hours (no excuses), is the clearing/exhuming of this space so that we may gather around it once again and spend quality time. Even though I am working the night shift, I will still be watching. Do it or die.
>
> Your loving mother

My younger sister Faith padded in, holding a box of extra-heavy garbage bags. At fourteen, Faith was beautiful beyond

knowing—blonde, green-eyed, finely cut cheekbones—an example of what God could do if he was paying attention. It used to bug me that she got all the gorgeous genes, but like my grandmother always said, there's a downside to everything. I can walk into a room looking like I've slept in a torture chamber with poisonous snakes, and people mostly ignore it. But when Faith looks bad, she's got a crowd around her telling her about it.

"You want the front half or the back?" she asked, turning up her perfect nose at the table. Faith always seemed put together—her head matched her neck; her long legs matched the rest of her body. I felt like I'd been glued together with surplus parts—my shoulders were big and boxy, my legs were long and skinny. I had a swan-thin neck that held my round head in place.

I studied the table to figure out which half had the least work. "If we split it lengthwise down the middle," I said, "you take the one closest to you—"

"That's got more stuff, Jenna!"

Precisely.

"I saw Dad."

Faith sat down. "You did?"

I told her.

"Oh, Jenna, you must have been mortified!"

"It hasn't hit me yet."

Faith fidgeted on the chair. She tugged at her long ponytail. "Did he mention me?"

"Yeah. Of course." He hadn't.

"Well . . . what did he say?"

"He misses you and wishes he could have come around more and wonders how you're doing."

I always told her this. There's a responsibility that comes with being a big sister. I guess she believed me, although you can't always tell with Faith. Last Father's Day she was storming around the house, slamming doors, telling everyone to buzz off, she was *fine.* Father's Day is my least favorite holiday. I can never find the right card. I can't send the "Dad, I can always count on you" ones; I nix "Thanks for everything" and "You're the greatest." What the world needs is an alternative card: "Dad, I love you, even though you haven't been there for me."

Faith lifted a stack of fashion magazines from the table like they weighed six tons. She is probably going to become a model someday even though I warned her that smiling and twirling under hot lights has been medically proven to cause shallowness. I think it's fine to look the best you can, but when that's the biggest thing you concentrate on, you can miss the fun of life's grungier moments like hanging around in men's pajamas, eating pork fried rice from the carton with chopsticks, and not caring how much gets ground in the rug.

"Do you think he does miss us?" Faith asked.

"I think he's got a disease, Faith, that keeps him from being the person he could be." I learned this when I went to Al-Anon, a group that helps families of alcoholics. Faith didn't go. "Faith is handling things," Mom explained. "She doesn't have the memories you do, Jenna. She was so young when your dad and I divorced." It made me feel like some big infected boil that needed lancing. Faith always got off easy.

Faith looked at the cover of *Vogue* sadly. "Do you think he ever misses us, Jenna? I mean *really?*"

I grabbed a garbage bag. "I don't know."

"If he really cared about us, he'd stop drinking."

"It's not that easy."

"Well, don't you think I know that, Jenna? What do you think I am, some moron?"

Faith flung her hand across a corner of the table, knocked my personal pile of *Travel and Leisure* magazines on the floor, ran into her room, and slammed the door.

Part of me felt like kicking in her door, telling her to grow up. It wasn't my fault she never saw Dad. It's not like she was missing much. Everyone loses when Dad comes back.

I knelt down to pick up the travel magazines, knocked one off the top with an article about Texas. "Everything is Bigger in Texas" the headline read. I threw it at Faith's closed door.

"I don't think you're a moron," I shouted as Faith's sobs filled the apartment.

I was standing at the stove, having just flipped my world-class grilled mozzarella and tomato sandwich in the pan. It was perfectly brown on one side, the mozzarella cheese was melting and oozing from between the seven grain bread. Ooze was the whole point of a grilled cheese sandwich—my grandmother taught me that.

I read my mother's note that she had taped over the sink of dirty dishes:

> Someone wash these. It doesn't matter who. What matters is that when I return home after ten hours on my feet patching up emergency patients that I will not see the pot roast pan from four days ago with petrified gravy still on it. Make no mistake about it—this is a test.

It was signed, "YLM" for Your Loving Mother. Mom is an emergency-room nurse at St. Joseph's Hospital and is working the night shift for the time and a half pay. We don't see her much, which is hard, but Mom's schedule is toughest on Faith. She needs more of Mom's time than I do. Faith is at that age where she hasn't seen enough of the world to know she can handle herself.

Mom works hard to spend time with each of us. She and I like to take long walks together all around Chicago—being Type A personalities, we do our best talking when we're moving. The thing we've got most in common is our independent streak—we know how to take care of ourselves and we like being on our own. But sometimes my mother goes into guilt overdrive. Saying how she should have been tougher on Dad and left him sooner. Then she tries to make up for everything in my life that she thinks made me the social zero that I am today.

Wouldn't you like to have a big party? she asks. I know we didn't have your friends over much when you were younger, but parties are a good way to get to know more people.

Not really, Mom. I don't like crowds much.

Maybe you should go to ballroom dancing class, Jenna. Having social dancing skills is always important later in life.

The boys come up to my armpits, Mom.

Maybe you shouldn't work such long hours, honey. I'd like you to have time to just be a teenager.

I'm trying to make money, Mother. I like selling shoes.

I'm more like my dad than my mom. That used to scare me because I thought it meant I'd end up like him. But Grandma sat me down and said how God had managed to give me the best parts of my father (his sales ability, his business sense) without all the tragedy.

I studied my sandwich in the pan. It had achieved perfection. I put it on a plate with red grapes and dill pickles, counted fifteen seconds, the exact amount of time to wait before biting into a grilled cheese without burning the roof of my sensitive teenage mouth.

The phone rang. I waited two rings, three. Faith, the phone queen, wasn't getting it, which meant she was still having her snit. Four rings. I grabbed it.

"Hello?"

"Jenna Boller, if you please," said the familiar southern voice.

"Speaking."

"This is Madeline Gladstone."

I stood at attention.

"Are you there?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am."

I racked my brain.

I locked the storage closet before I left today, counted the money. Murray took it to the bank.

"Is everything okay at the store, Mrs. Gladstone?"

"It is."

I waited.

"I have a proposal for you."

"You do?"

"You drive? I assume."

"You mean like a car?"

"That was the concept, yes."

"I've had my license for six months."

"You drive properly?"

"I guess . . . I mean . . . yes."

Faith had just come into the kitchen to forage for food. She was opening and closing doors, shaking Tupperware containers. She was doing this while practicing model poses and expressions. Fashion models don't smile much. They get paid to look like someone just pinched them from behind. Faith saw my grilled cheese, started toward it. I grabbed the plate, held it over my head. Faith tried grabbing it, but she's only five eight. I had three inches on her. Grandma always said it's a blessing to be tall.

"Come to my home tomorrow morning at seven o'clock, Jenna. You can drive me downtown in my Cadillac. After that we'll see."

"I don't understand."

Mrs. Gladstone sighed. "I need a driver."

"A driver . . . ?"

This was a full-fledged disaster waiting to happen. She gave me her address on Astor Street.

"Mrs. Gladstone, I've only driven a twelve-year-old Honda Civic, never a *Cadillac.*"

"That will change tomorrow, won't it? Good night."

"But—"

Click.

I felt the color drain from my face. I put the plate down.

"Who was that?" Faith asked.

I hung up the receiver, sat down on the wobbly stool by the sink. "I've never driven a Cadillac."

"You've never been in a Cadillac," Faith countered, grabbing half my sandwich.

Morning. Five forty-four.

I lay in bed looking at the ceiling; a spider's web hung between the corners, camouflaged against my ivory walls. A fly buzzed around it.

"Stupid," I said to the fly, "you're going to be brunch."

The fly buzzed closer to the web, too close. He struggled against the sticky threads. The spider came down from a string on the ceiling.

Any last words, fly?

The spider watched the fly until it stopped moving, then dug in.

Life and death played out before my very eyes.

You don't see these things if you clean your room regularly.

Five fifty-five. The alarm blared. I turned it off, eased my

numb self up. Headed for the shower, wondering if Dad made it to Sueann's; rounded the picture wall of family photo memories.

Mom glaring at a roasted pig at a Hawaiian luau.

Faith modeling a surgical pants suit at a hospital charity luncheon.

Me at the beach, submerged in sand from the neck down, "Beware of Teen" written across my stomach.

My grandmother, like I always remember her—bent over her Singer sewing machine, bright fabric everywhere. The photo was taken in her tailor shop on Clark Street before she was diagnosed with the Alzheimer's disease that took piece after piece of her memory until her old self was all but gone.

Grandma was my best friend. She understood everything about me—how serious I could get, how hard I worked at my part-time jobs. When I was twelve I won the *Chicago Tribune* "Blood and Guts Award" for selling more daily and Sunday subscriptions than any paper kid in the city or suburbs. Grandma said she always knew I was going to win something big. She took me out to dinner at Wok World, my favorite Chinese restaurant, and stuck my winner's plaque right on the table by the low sodium soy sauce.

Two years ago Mom and I brought her to a nursing home. It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Faith rode with us in the car for two blocks, but she couldn't handle watching Grandma just stare out the window. Faith jumped out at North Avenue and ran home crying.

I visit Grandma at the home. Take the 151 bus up Sheridan

Road past Belmont Harbor to Shady Oaks Nursing Home where she lives. Her roommate Gladys always remembers me. Grandma remembers me sometimes. Mostly she remembers how I used to visit her when she lived in Wisconsin when I was small.

I bring her flowers sometimes. Daisies are her favorites. I used to read to her from the newspaper, but she got depressed at how bad the world has gotten. Mostly I just sit with her and smile when she looks at me with her scared eyes. I tell her how when I get my own car I'm going to take her for a ride and we'll have a picnic with fried chicken and lemon cookies like we used to when I was little. Then I stand by the memory board I made her. It's a bulletin board with "I love you, Grandma" across the top in red felt letters. Below are photographs of me, Mom, and Faith, pieces of fabric like she had in her shop, a few postcards of Chicago, the satin ribbon she braided my hair with when I graduated from eighth grade, her huge flowered hat that she'd wear to church on Sundays. She goes up and touches the board sometimes, particularly the fabric; rolls the tweeds and silks between her fingers and for that moment she seems connected. Before the Alzheimer's got really bad she said to me, "Jenna Louise Boller, I'm counting on you. As this thing gets worse, you're going to have to help me remember."

If I were God I would wipe out every disease in the world beginning with the A's: AIDS, Alcoholism, Alzheimer's . . .

CHAPTER 3

It was 6:56 A.M. A fine summer mist covered the expensive brownstones on Astor Street. I never got to talk to my mom about Dad or Mrs. Gladstone or what a person needed to know to be the driver of a demanding rich person. I was extra loud in the kitchen making my breakfast to hopefully wake my mother up, but there are just so many times you can drop a stainless steel bowl without seeming suspicious and Mom slept through all of it. I thought of all the good drivers I'd ever seen, and I couldn't for the life of me figure out what made them that way. They just got behind the wheel, drove, and didn't run into things. The not running into things was important.

I stood in front of Mrs. Gladstone's ritzy three-story brownstone building. It was surrounded by pink and white azalea bushes and a black and bronze fence. I was wearing my khaki suit and my stacked heel leather shoes that were very good for driving. I pulled back the gold lion door knocker, gave it a ram.

A curly haired woman in a black maid's uniform opened it.

"I'm Jenna," I said, smoothing down my hair that had reached warp-frizz.

She looked me up and down, uncertain, then led me into a hallway that was filled with things that looked old and expensive. The wallpaper had gold peacocks and thick stripes, a grandfather's clock with gold around the edges bonged seven rings.

"I appreciate promptness." Mrs. Gladstone walked slowly down a spiral wooden staircase like a queen. She stepped onto a fat oriental rug. Her gray eyes studied me. A huge oil painting that looked like Mrs. Gladstone in better days hung over the fireplace the next room over.

This was not a place where you hunker down and have a grilled cheese.

"And what do you think is the most important qualification for being a good driver?" She asked this like we'd been talking for a while.

"Well . . ." I almost said luck, but that seemed irresponsible.

"Come now. A person with a six-month-old license should have an opinion."

Six months and a day. "Focus," I said loud and clear, which surprised me.

Mrs. Gladstone's face registered mild appreciation. "My late husband, Floyd, always said that the mark of a man was his ability to focus."

"My grandfather said if you weren't watching the knife you could hack off your thumb." She looked at me strangely. "He was a butcher," I added.

She laughed, the good kind from the heart, and motioned me to a door. "It's time you met the car."

"I'd love to meet him. I mean . . . *her.*"

"Believe me, I'm not that attached to it."

I groaned inside and followed her down the stairs.

"Floyd always said that a Cadillac offered the world's purest driving experience."

We were standing in the garage by the car—a white, spotless beast of a thing with a hood ornament and blue leather interior. I kicked the steel-belted radials like I knew what I was doing. The car was pointed away from the garage door, which meant that to get the car out, I would have to back it up. I was a C-minus backer-upper.

"A Cadillac, Floyd always said, is entirely trustworthy. It has been tested in any and all conditions and will perform to the utmost to protect its driver."

Was this a car or a Seeing Eye dog?

Mrs. Gladstone handed me the car keys like they opened the gates of heaven. I unlocked the driver door, started to get in.

"A driver *always* lets the passenger in first."

"Right."

I got out, slammed the door shut.

"And don't slam the door. This *isn't* a truck."

"Sorry."

I let Mrs. Gladstone in the back and gently shut the door like it was holy. Mrs. Gladstone nodded to me, which I guess

meant I could now get inside the car. I squeezed behind the wheel. Mrs. Gladstone pointed at a button near the dashboard. I pressed it. My seat adjusted perfectly.

I checked the mirrors, the dashboard monitor, buckled my seat belt. I felt like I was in a tank.

She sniffed. "Start the motor."

I fumbled with the key, started the engine, put the car in reverse, and decided not to ask if she was a praying person.

"Here we go," I said, inching the huge car backwards.

"Freeze!" she shrieked.

I slammed on the brake.

"I believe it's customary to open the garage door before backing out of it!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Gladstone . . . I'm kind of nervous."

"Press the button on the controlboard."

I pressed it. The garage door went up.

"Proceed," she said stiffly. "And may God Almighty be merciful."

"Amen," I said and slowly backed the white beast up the driveway onto Astor Street.

I inched down the street. Three cab drivers began honking behind me. This was probably because I was going fifteen miles an hour. They could honk their rotten little hearts out for all I cared. I wasn't going any faster. Numbers were blinking on the dashboard: Inside/outside temperatures, gas mileage. The cab drivers moved from honking to threatening gestures. I wanted my mother's twelve-year-old Honda. Gas, speedometer, broken radio. Nothing fancy.

"Turn left and take LaSalle Street downtown," ordered Mrs. Gladstone.

I turned left, steered the Cadillac behind a LaSalle Street number 11 bus for protection; it was the only thing on the road bigger than this car. My neck muscles tensed as I gripped the wheel and obeyed all the commands from the back.

"Turn left . . . not there, here."

"The light has been green for some time now."

"The driver to your left making those filthy gestures does have the right of way."

Driving makes you a trusting person. You're on the road with potential dangers everywhere and like an idiot you keep moving forward. Maniacs could be driving next to me and I wouldn't know until they cut me off and propelled me into oncoming traffic. A teenage girl honked loudly and raised an angry fist when I obeyed the law and stopped at a yellow light changing to red. There was no loyalty in my age demographic.

Finally, I pulled the car to the front of Gladstone's Shoes on Wabash Avenue, rolled it over the curb, actually, but at this point, I wasn't going to be picky. We were there. Murray was unlocking the protective chain and fence around the door that guarded the store from nocturnal shoe thugs. Gladstone's always opened at eight A.M. to get a jump on the competition. He nearly dropped his teeth when he saw us. I smiled my indentured servant smile, got out, gave the door a little tap shut, opened Mrs. Gladstone's door, held a hand out for her, helped her up. She told me to pull the car into the twenty-four-hour parking garage where Lorenzo would take care of it. Lorenzo

could have it as far as I was concerned. I wanted to say we both had a lot to be thankful for, beginning with the fact that we were still alive.

I stood rigidly as Mrs. Gladstone walked past me.

"At ease," she said, and walked strictly into the store.

I sold shoes like crazy all morning. I did talk one customer out of a sale because the shoes she wanted were all wrong. I never sell just for style, always comfort. If a customer is scrunching up her face, looking miserable in a pair of shoes that she says will probably break in, I tell her no, don't buy them. Your feet will guide you. Listen to your toes. Cordovan leather and pinched tips aren't worth torture. The next time she needs a pair, she'll probably come back to me.

I don't know what it is about selling shoes that I love the most. There's something about the whole experience that brings you closer to people—working with feet that aren't considered the most glamorous part of the body but are one of the most important parts; getting down on your knees to wait on people you'd never meet any other way. Murray Castlebaum said selling shoes is the quickest road to humility in all of retail.

I was going to have lunch with Opal Kincaid, my best friend, who worked in a Fotomat booth on State Street and had to get out regularly or her brain would bake. Opal had a fender bender with her father's new Dodge last week and was grounded until August, except for working (her father got her next six paychecks as payment) and having lunch with me. She had a

huge calendar in her room that she used to mark off the days like a prisoner in solitary confinement. She was standing on the street waiting for me, desperate for teen companionship. I was halfway out the door when Mrs. Gladstone grabbed me.

"I've asked Mildred to substitute for you at the store this afternoon," she announced. "You will drive me to Evanston."

Evanston was a near north suburb that required a trip on Lake Shore Drive, a piece of road where people tended to go very fast. Lorenzo pulled the Cadillac in front of the store, got out, and handed me the keys.

"I have a lunch date with my friend, ma'am."

"Which you will postpone." Mrs. Gladstone marched to the car.

Opal grabbed my arm. "Tell her you can't go, Jenna. We have *things* to discuss."

The *things* were boys—Bob Goldblume and Jerry Burgess—Opal's two new crushes. Opal always fell for boys in pairs—if one didn't work out, she had a backup. I've only liked one guy really—Matt Wicks—a seriously intelligent tall senior who (a) did not follow the crowd and (b) did not know I existed. Opal couldn't cope with my dateless state and kept trying to fix me up with sub-par guys like Morris, her second cousin twice removed, who, believe me, you want to be removed from at least twice.

"Important things," Opal said, hissing.

Mrs. Gladstone was glaring at me like a vulture who'd just seen mouse meat. *"Ahem,"* she said pointedly.

Opal looked at Mrs. Gladstone and shivered.

I sighed in defeat, released Opal's clenched hand from my arm. "I've got to go. We'll have lunch tomorrow. I promise."

I walked to the Cadillac, opened the back door for Mrs. Gladstone.

Starving Teen Shuns Lunch for Servitude.

"Mrs. Gladstone, what is happening?"

"Take Lake Shore Drive," she ordered, "and then we shall see."

CHAPTER 4

It could have been worse, I suppose.

I pulled up to Mrs. Gladstone's brownstone at 5:17, having made it to Evanston and back without anything too perilous happening, like premature death. I did get lost four times, forgot to click my turn signal on twice, almost got sideswiped by a library Bookmobile, in addition to being tailgated by a man in a Porsche with an advanced case of road rage who kept leaning on his horn to pass me even though I was surrounded by cars on either side. My grandmother used to say that some men *become* their cars. I almost ran out of gas because I wasn't watching the Cadillac tripometer that blinked digital displays that only a graduate from MIT could understand. I say almost because I was pulling into a Sunoco station just as the gas gave out and the great car sat there gasless in the middle of the street. This caused Mrs. Gladstone to have a screaming fit about responsibility and how people in Texas never let the gas gage go below empty because Texas is so big, it'll eat you up as sure as look at you. When the two attendants

pushed us to the pump, I said wouldn't it have been awful if this had happened on Lake Shore Drive and she didn't say anything.

"Here we are," I said coming to a lurching stop by her front door. "Safe and sound. Technically." I pressed the control button for the garage door. Up it went. I eased the behemoth car inside, pressed the button to close the garage door.

"I suppose you'll do," she said.

"I'm sorry?"

"You may be my driver." She said this like she was giving me a present.

"Mrs. Gladstone, I need to be honest with you. I'd rather sell shoes."

"I need a driver."

"I understand that, but I bet there are whole communities of people in this town who could—"

Madeline Gladstone stomped her foot at the back door. I got out, opened it, helped her out of the Cadillac.

"I need a driver for the summer, young woman. Someone who can drive me down to Texas for the annual stockholders meeting where I will officially retire as president of the company and hand the reins of leadership over to my . . . son." She said *son* quietly.

"You want me to drive you to Texas?"

"Not initially. First I want you to drive me to Peoria, Springfield, St. Louis, Kansas City, Little Rock, Shreveport, and then to Texas. There are stores there that I must visit."

"Excuse me for asking, Mrs. Gladstone, but why don't you just fly?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm seventy-three years old. I've been in the shoe-selling business for fifty of those years. Shoes get sold on the ground, not in the air!"

Got it.

I leaned toward her. "You want us to go on a road trip?"

Her cheek twitched slightly.

"But why me, Mrs. Gladstone? I mean, I'm not so good at this."

She looked at me hard. "Because you remind me of myself when I was a young girl."

I studied her. To begin with, I was nearly a foot taller. Maybe she started out larger and shrank.

"I'm not only in need of a driver," she explained. "I need someone who has a rudimentary understanding of the shoe business. I've watched you at the store. You have an unusual knack for appreciating the customer's needs. I will pay you double your daily salary and commissions because the hours will be long. I will pay all travel accommodations, meals, and provide reasonable spending money. Upon our *safe* return to Chicago, you could receive an additional bonus. We will be gone for six weeks. I trust that will be satisfactory."

Driving for Dollars. She wasn't that crazy.

"I'll have to ask my mother."

"I would be happy to discuss any concerns your mother might have."

"She'll have some, Mrs. Gladstone." I didn't say beginning with your sanity.

I looked at the Cadillac and tried to picture myself on the open road, driving away from everything.

CHAPTER 5

My mother put down her favorite paring knife, pushed aside the vidalia onions that were about to become baked sherried onion soup, and uttered a loud, immovable, "No!"

I had just thrown out the plan.

"Absolutely not," she continued. "You haven't been driving long enough, honey. It takes time to become a mature driver."

I tossed back my hair with total maturity and looked at the Rand McNally Road Atlas on the kitchen table that I had opened to Texas. My finger followed the wavy border separating Texas and Oklahoma.

"I think I'm being reasonable, Jenna. Six weeks is a long time."

I studied the map. Dallas, Houston, San Antonio.

"Just tell her you're terribly flattered, you wish you could help, but your protective, yet enlightened mother said no." Mom held her head like she was getting a migraine and let the window fan blow her short black curls back. "It's not," she added, "that I don't trust you."

I looked at the map and sighed.

Trusted Teen Takes Texas by Storm.

"It's the other people on the road," Mom said. "The maniac drivers, the idiots, the—"

"Rest-stop serial killers."

"It's been known to happen, Jenna."

"I've never been to Texas, Mom." I watched her face for signs of guilt. Her black eyebrows furrowed. Not good.

"Dad's back." I had to tell her.

The paring knife crashed on the cutting board.

"What?" I saw the shadow cross her face.

"He came to the store," I added.

"Drunk?" Her voice was thick with anger.

"I've seen him worse."

"How comforting." Mom slapped an angry fist on the counter. "What did he do this time?"

I threw up my hands. How do you explain it?

"What did he do?"

"He was yelling my name, he kept falling over, he embarrassed me in front of the world! Just the usual, Mother! *Okay?*"

Mom closed her green eyes that exactly matched Faith's. "I'm sorry, Jenna."

"Mom, I want to get out of town. It gets so weird when Dad—"

"You don't have to see him!"

"He's my father! What do you want me to do when he comes around? Walk away? Leave him lying in the gutter! I can't do that! I've got to

know he's okay! I've got to make sure he gets some place safe! I don't hate him like you do!"

"That's not fair!"

"None of this is fair!" I slammed the atlas shut. "Every time Dad comes back in town we all get crazy! He makes things so hard!" I picked up the atlas, hugged it to my chest.

Mom gripped the sink, steadied herself. "I need to think," she said quietly.

"I do, too. Mrs. Gladstone's offering me a lot of money."

"Yes," Mom said guardedly. "She is."

I kept thinking about Mrs. Gladstone's job offer, mostly with my calculator to get the full monetary impact. We were talking big bucks. Enough bucks with what I already had in the bank to buy a significant used car in the fall.

A car.

Freedom.

But then, as Opal said when I talked to her about it, there was the amount of money I would spend on psychiatric care because Mrs. Gladstone would drive me over the edge.

"Two weeks tops," Opal warned. "You'll be whimpering on the Interstate, pleading to come home."

"She's not that bad."

"She's a bonafide Hansel and Gretel–eating witch! We're talking here, Jenna, about the ultimate summer from hell!" Opal leaned closer, her blue eyes dulled by confinement. "And I know from *hell.*"

Mom was thinking about it, too. Collecting facts, actually—that's how she thought about things. She talked to Mrs. Gladstone. She talked to Murray. She took me out on the Kennedy Expressway in the Honda during rush hour and barked orders at me from the backseat. She gave me wrong directions and made me find my way home. She even pretended to have a heart attack when we were getting gas and I had to lay her out flat on the backseat and tell the woman in the Plymouth Voyager not to call 911 because my mother was a real kidder.

The phone calls started Thursday night, three A.M.

Dad was at a bar—drunk, sappy. "Now, Jenna girl, I want you to say a big hello to Sueann, the woman who's changed my life."

Friday night, two-thirty.

"Now, Jenna girl, you got to understand that your mother makes it hard for me to come around. It's not that I don't want to."

Saturday afternoon, 5:17.

"Now, Jenna girl, I'm coming over and we're going to have a talk like we used to and I'm going to bring a pizza and we're going to catch up."

"No, Dad."

He didn't like that so I lied and told him I was sick and had to get some sleep and maybe we could get together when I was feeling better.

"Dad," I said quietly, "are you all right?"

Never better, he said, and over the receiver I heard the sound of shattering glass.

Beer bottle, he explained.

After that, I stopped answering the phone.

"Did he ask about me?" Faith kept asking.

Mom was storming around, saying how Dad would push himself on us for a month or so every few years to make up for all the years he wasn't around. She confronted him the next time he called. He asked for me; she wouldn't put me on. He blew up, saying no one gave him a chance. He's coming over to talk to his daughter!

Not when you're drunk, Mom shouted back. And, by the way, you have *two* daughters, and let's not forget you haven't sent a child support payment in months!

I came into the kitchen as she slammed down the phone. She was steeling herself like she did at the hospital when a tough case came in.

Mom, please let me go.

"I need to get out of here," I said. "I need to go to Texas."

Mom leaned against the wall, studied my face.

"Okay," she said finally. "Okay."

CHAPTER 6

I had two days to pack, which was close to impossible since no one could tell me what to bring for six weeks on the road with a fussy rich person. There was so much to do, but packing wasn't as important as seeing my grandmother.

I walked into her room at the Shady Oaks Nursing Home. She was sitting in a green vinyl chair looking out the window at nothing in particular, holding her old sewing kit in her lap that Mom brought from her shop. One side of her hair was matted like she'd been sleeping on it. She was wearing the pink sweater I gave her two Christmases ago. She never went anywhere without that sweater.

I held out the bunch of daisies I'd brought her. She smiled at the flowers. She used to have a field of them behind her house in Wisconsin; we'd pick them fresh every day when I visited. Before she got Alzheimer's, her eyes had been a crackling blue. Now they were like looking into muddy water.

"I'm going on an adventure, Grandma. I'm driving to Texas."

"Texas." She said the word like it was a person she was trying to remember.

"I'm going to eat barbecue and learn the two-step and wear a cowboy hat and touch an oil rig."

"Oh," said Gladys, her roommate, "I been to Texas. Never seen such a place—sky so big, land so wide. You tell Texas hello for old Gladys."

"I will. I'll bring you back a piece of the sky."

Gladys laughed and jiggled the plastic blue bracelets I gave her at Christmas.

"Texas," my grandmother said flatly, but she took my hand when she said it. I sat there with her for the longest time not saying anything. I opened the quilted top of her sewing kit that had been the beginning of so many projects. Grandma touched the antique thimbles, the threads in every color, the fine scissors from France.

"Do you remember that rainbow skirt you made for me, Grandma? It had eight different fabrics, each a different color. It was my favorite thing to wear."

I took her big scrapbook out of her dresser drawer. When she knew the disease was coming, Grandma started stockpiling memories the way people collect canned goods and batteries when a bad storm is coming. She and I went through all her pictures, got them in books. She said memories were so precious, she wasn't going to let some infernal disorder take them from her. I opened the scrapbook to a photo of me at ten in the rainbow skirt, twirling in the park, the skirt flowing out, catching the wind.

I pointed to the photo. "That's the one, Grandma. You used your sewing kit to make it. It was the best skirt in the world. All my friends were jealous."

She studied the picture and held her sewing kit tight.

I walked to her memory board and put up a picture of myself with a sign I made that read, "Jenna's gone to Texas. She'll see you when she gets back."

"When I come back we're going to have that picnic," I promised. I put the daisies in water and kept one out. I put it in her hand. "I remember how we used to pick daisies, Grandma, at your house, and Faith tried to eat them once when she was small. I loved going to your house."

She squeezed the daisy tight like it held all her memories.

"Okay, Faith, you're sure you know how to take the bus up to see Grandma?"

Faith was sitting on the one corner of my bed that didn't have luggage on it. We'd been through the directions three times. She nodded. I handed her a supply of bus tokens.

"You've got to see her every week and go through her scrapbooks with her and put things up on her memory board and tell her about the times you remember." I handed her a container of thumbtacks. Faith took them, unsure.

"I just feel so weird in that nursing home, Jenna. I never know what to say and I can't wait till I leave."

"I know. I'll tell you my secret. I remember that Grandma can't help it. I remember how she never left us. And I tell myself that for one hour a week, I can be strong for her."

"I'll try."

"I know you will." I didn't say *you'd better,* even though I was thinking it. "And if Dad comes around, what do you do?"

Faith gulped hard. "If I think he's drunk, I tell him I can't see him now."

"And?"

She bit her lip. "I tell myself he's got a disease and it doesn't have anything to do with me."

I handed her a pamphlet: *Is someone you love an alcoholic?*

Faith took it and curled up in the patchwork quilt Grandma made me. I folded my yellow bathrobe carefully. Too much was swirling in my mind.

How would Faith and Mom manage without me?

Would Dad come around drunk?

Would Grandma be all right?

And what about Mrs. Gladstone and me in that car for six whole weeks?

I wondered if I was about to make the biggest mistake of my promising young life.

CHAPTER 7

"Well," Mom said, trying to be tough. We were standing at Mrs. Gladstone's front door, having been through the good-byes already. Mom cried a little at the house. Faith got hostile because I didn't have time to do the dishes. She got over it, though. We gave each other a suffocating, rib-busting Boller good-bye hug. Opal called and said I could phone her anytime day or night and she promised not to say I told you so. I rammed the lion door knocker as thunder sounded in the distance—a warning sign from God.

Maria opened the door, grinning. She was going to have the house to herself for six weeks. Mrs. Gladstone stood in the hall, wearing a trench coat and a hat with a feather; she was leaning on a cane. I'd never seen her with a cane before. It was probably to whack me on the head if I did something wrong. She walked slower than usual to Mom and handed her an itinerary of our trip with phone numbers and addresses.

I put my suitcases in the hall and told Mom she should

probably go. "I'm not going to camp," I whispered. "I'm being paid. It's a grown-up thing."

Mom nodded and left, her shoulders shaking. Thunder clapped as we walked to the garage.

Mrs. Gladstone stood regally by the car door and rapped her cane on the floor. "And now, young woman, how much experience have you had driving in storms?"

"Not much, ma'am." I opened the back door for her and watched her get in; her face looked pained when she sat down. "Unless you're talking metaphorically," I added, "and then I'm a total ace."

I gripped the wheel and stared through the wipers that were whizzing full blast against the heavy rain. The Chicago wind picked up a garbage can lid and hurled it over the Cadillac. I turned left, keeping an eye out for arks, and headed toward Lake Shore Drive, *slowly.* In Driver's Ed we spent an entire period on hydroplaning (what happens when you drive too fast in the rain)—water sticks to the tires, the tires ride up on the water, you have no control of the car. It basically means you're doomed. I drove fifteen miles an hour in a thirty-five mph zone, which the truck driver behind me didn't appreciate. Some people have a built-in prejudice against teenage drivers.

I looked at Mrs. Gladstone through the rearview mirror. She took a blue pillow out of her big purse and tried to place it under her right hip. She looked up, caught me staring.

"Eyes on the road," she barked.

I drove—past Oak Street Beach, Navy Pier, Grant Park, Soldier Field. I stared straight ahead at the Stevenson Expressway sign, just visible through the downpour. I could hear Mrs. Gladstone moving around, trying to get her leg pillow in place.

"Are you okay, Mrs. Gladstone?"

"I am."

"Did you hurt your leg?"

"This leg will make it to Texas," she declared and rapped her cane against the door.

That was good. You hate to leave things like legs by the side of the road. I pulled onto the expressway ramp, signaling to all approaching vehicles that I was attempting to merge in a monsoon. I prayed, gripped the wheel, pushed my right foot on the accelerator, and steered the Cadillac between an old school bus and a stationwagon.

I watched the Chicago skyline move away from me, caught the last of it in the rearview mirror. I had so many plans for this summer and now everything had changed. I waved goodbye to Gladstone's and Murray and all my regulars who would have to be fitted without me. Said good riddance to the dirty gray hallways of John F. Kennedy High, my so-so performance on the basketball team, the awful memory of Dad reeling drunk in Gladstone's, the drunken late-night calls. My heart tugged at the thought of my grandmother in her green chair; my mother being brave; Faith trying to be strong; Opal needing to talk about *things*. I had a quick flash of Matt Wicks and wondered what it would have been like if he'd

just noticed me once. My stomach rumbled at the loss of thick-crust Chicago pizza and Polish sausage with grilled onions.

I thought of all the places I was going where I had never been and wondered how I would manage.

But when you sell shoes, you learn first-hand about flexibility.

I embraced my motto, Cope or Die, breathed deeply, and headed for Peoria.

We made it to Peoria in southern Illinois in four hours flat due to the torrential downpour and the road construction on I 91 that kept traffic to one lane even though the construction crew had given up long ago and gone home.

I was getting pretty good at driving in the rain and so far Mrs. Gladstone had slept in the back, having taken two yellow pills. She did snore, unfortunately—loud, snuffling, Texas-sized snorts. My grandma always said that people who snored were sleeping with enthusiasm. I tried to remember this, but there's just so much enthusiasm a person can handle in close quarters.

Mrs. Gladstone and I had lunch in a diner overlooking the Illinois River, which was about to reach flood stage. Any moment now people would begin hurling sand bags along the banks. Mrs. Gladstone pushed aside her meatloaf Wellington lunch special.

"I suppose I should call Miles and let him know we're coming."

She was referring to Miles Wurlitzer, manager of the Gladstone's Shoe Store in Peoria.

"It's better to give employees short notice," Mrs. Gladstone said, pulling her cellular phone out of her canvas bag. "Gives you a better sense of what's really happening at the store."

Mrs. Gladstone pressed phone buttons. "Miles, dear, it's Madeline Gladstone. Surprise. I'm just down the road."

I pictured the poor man slumped in horror.

Mrs. Gladstone slapped her phone shut and watched the river, looking sad.

I thought about what it had to be like to be retiring from her business after all these years. My mother always said the best way to get to know someone was to walk around in their shoes. I didn't think my 9½s could squeeze into her size 6s, but I gave it a go.

"I bet this is a pretty complicated trip for you, Mrs. Gladstone, with you retiring and all."

She sucked in air and stared out the window.

"I heard when my grandfather retired from the meat department at Grossinger's, he missed it pretty bad, just spent hours opening and closing the refrigerator at home because he was so used to working in the cold slicing up all that beef."

Nothing.

"Well, I think like anything, Mrs. Gladstone, it's going to take some getting used to, but like my grandma always said, change is good for you. It might not seem that way in the beginning, but if you stay with it, you'll see. My grandma knew about change, too, because she owned a tailor shop. She said all

she needed was for people to gain weight or lose it, or for hemlines to shoot up or down—it didn't matter to her."

I told her how Grandma had been widowed three times. How when her third husband, Lars, died, she said if I saw her heading for the altar again I'd better scream bloody murder until she turned around.

"After that she just dated," I explained.

"Your grandmother sounds like a piece of work."

"She was that, Mrs. Gladstone. You could stick my grandma in a room full of men and in thirty minutes tops she'd find the richest one in the place."

Mrs. Gladstone made a little noise close to laughing. "Is this a gift that runs in your family?"

"No, ma'am. We don't hang with rich people much."

Oops. I tried to save myself.

"Not that there's anything wrong with rich people. I mean, personally, I like rich people."

I needed to change the subject.

"And what do you like about them?"

Jeeze. My mind reached for something.

"Well, I like you, Mrs. Gladstone, and let's face it, you're not hurting. I mean, you could have had any driver money could buy probably, but you decided to give me a chance and all this responsibility, not to mention a good salary and . . . " I trailed off here.

Mrs. Gladstone leaned forward, chuckling. "Jenna, in Texas we say there's rich and there's Texas rich. Just so you know, I'm somewhere in between."

▪ ▪ ▪

Miles Wurlitzer was buzzing around the cash register with a dust cloth and very wild eyes. He hid the cloth behind his back when Mrs. Gladstone walked through the glass door.

"Mrs. Gladstone," he croaked out, "what a wonderful surprise."

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

Mrs. Gladstone looked quickly in every corner, her gray eyes missed nothing. "Just exactly how are things in Peoria?" she asked.

Miles wiped his moist brow with the dust cloth. "Just great, Mrs. Gladstone. Really great."

I looked around the store, too. Only one customer. One customer on Saturday afternoon during peak shopping time after a rain storm. Not too great in my book. A thin salesman put a black pump on a woman, who made a face.

"Much too tight," she said, taking them off. Then she gathered her shopping bags and left. I wondered why the salesman hadn't shown her something else. Any true shoe professional could see that woman was on a mission for black pumps and she wasn't going to rest until she found the right ones. You've got to stay with a customer, even if they go through ten pairs. He just shrugged and watched her go. I sniffed the air. Something about this store didn't feel right. A rich-looking older woman walked in. He sighed, shuffled to her side.

"Need some help, ma'am?"

Now, true, I wasn't looking for shoes, but this guy didn't

know that. Mrs. Gladstone hadn't introduced me to anyone. I, a potential customer, was getting ignored and I knew why.

I was a teenager.

"Excuse me," I said to the salesman, "I'd like to see these loafers in a nine and a half wide."

"I'll be with you in a minute, miss." He returned to the older woman.

I stood extra tall, looked down at the thin salesman, and announced, "I believe I was here first."

Mrs. Gladstone planted her cane, watching.

Miles bit the end of the dust cloth.

The older woman smiled at me and said, "Yes, she was here first."

This was too much for the thin salesman who got maroon and flustered and knocked over half the Nike display which was near the back by the purses, a really dumb place, since anyone who knows anything about selling shoes knows the Nike display goes up front in any store because Nikes bring customers inside. And the purses by the Nikes weren't the nice, thick leather kind that we had in the Chicago store either. I checked the inside of one. Cowhide, the label read. I felt the grade. Not much of a cow.

The salesman scurried out with a shoe box, quickly put the loafers on my feet. I took two steps.

"They're tight," I said, feeling the cheap heels.

"They'll break in," he said, eyeing the older customer.

I told him no, I didn't think so, not today, put my stacked leathers back on, and studied the Nike display that Miles was

putting back together like he was a game show contestant and had sixty seconds to get it right or be rolled in glop. I picked up a pair of Nike cross-trainers. "Can I use these effectively for running?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," he said.

"For long-distance running?"

"For any kind of running."

"Thank you."

I walked away, not saying that I knew that cross-trainers were okay for short distances but not for long ones.

Mrs. Gladstone motioned me to the door with her cane. I walked slowly past the displays that did not show off the shoes in the best light. The work boots were right across from slippers, which you don't want together, no matter how small the store is. Work and leisure have to be on opposite walls. I looked at the fake leather pumps, felt the plastic soles on the children's oxfords. I strolled out the double glass door to the parking lot.

Jenna Boller, shoe spy.

I walked to the Cadillac, feeling the moist, hot air of freedom. I stared at the double glass door of Gladstone's Shoes/Peoria Branch, stared at the Gladstone's slogan, WE'RE NOT JUST SELLING SHOES, WE'RE SELLING QUALITY.

Could have fooled me.

Finally, Mrs. Gladstone limped out.

She was walking stiffly, every step seemed an effort. Her cane made clicking noises on the asphalt. I opened the back door and held it open like a palace guard.

She looked at me. "What did you see in there?"

I bit my lip because I'd seen a lot, but I wasn't sure if I should say it.

"Jenna Boller," she said, *"what did you see?"*

I took a fat breath and told her as she got into the car. I was getting worked up right there in the parking lot and I got very heated when I came to the work boot part because I am very good at doing shoe displays and know how to bring out the character in any brand. Put them in their natural environment is my secret. Display them so they look tough. Work boots always go on brick. Then I mentioned the part about being ignored because of my age and put in a word for teenagers everywhere.

"It happens a lot, Mrs. Gladstone. Our money is just as good as an adult's, sometimes we've had to work longer and harder for it. Kids deserve respect when they go into a store."

I didn't mention the shoddy merchandise.

"And what would you do with that store?" she asked.

I thought about that. "Well, I guess first I'd change the traffic flow, move the Nikes to the window, get the slippers in the back by the purses. It doesn't matter if purses and slippers are together, Mrs. Gladstone—most customers don't head for the back of the store first. I'd get the good, fast-moving stuff up front, retrain the salespeople so they understand what the shoes can do, and if they couldn't be retrained, well . . . "

"You'd hire new ones."

I coughed. "Yes, I would."

Mrs. Gladstone adjusted her pillow under her thigh. "My son hired Miles."

Good one, Boller.

"I didn't mean anything by that, ma'am. Mr. Gladstone knows a lot more about the shoe business than me."

Mrs. Gladstone grunted.

I got in the front seat, strapped on my seat belt. "I don't know what came over me in the store, Mrs. Gladstone. I've got this weird way of doing things. I guess I was being deceitful. It won't happen again."

"It better happen again!" She cracked her cane on the back door. *"Drive!"*

CHAPTER 8

I rammed it.

We were on the 474 connector heading toward 155 South, which would intersect with 55 South and take us to Springfield, Illinois, land of Abraham Lincoln.

Mrs. Gladstone shifted uncomfortably in the back. "That store makes me want to lose my lunch." Her cane whacked the door. "How long do you think it's going to take before our customers figure out our quality is slipping?"

"I . . . I don't know, Mrs. Gladstone."

"Not too long, I can assure you!"

Another whack.

"My son is pushing me out."

I shifted. "I didn't know that, ma'am."

"Now you do."

It didn't surprise me, though. Murray called Elden the vice president in charge of tack at Gladstone's Shoes. He said Elden didn't have a shoe person's heart. All he cared about was money, not sole.

"He's decided I'm too old and he's taking over the business."

I looked at Mrs. Gladstone in the rearview mirror. Elden might be a bum, but he was right about one thing. She was old.

"He says I should relax, enjoy life, get a condo in Florida." She winced.

"You don't want to retire?"

"Somewhere long ago in this country it was determined that after sixty-five a person's brain is no longer capable of making business decisions. I think that is rot. I have more business ability at seventy-three than I had at sixty-three, and I resent the implication that I am over the hill and can no longer oversee the company my husband and I built from scratch."

I was about to say "Oh," but didn't get the chance.

A speeding truck was tailgating me, coming up close and personal to the back fender, getting so close I could see the fire of delight in the truck driver's eyes as he blared his horn at me and inched closer, closer.

"For heaven's sake, let that bully by!" Mrs. Gladstone shouted.

I swerved to the far right lane, screeched onto the shoulder as the truck rumbled by shaking the pavement.

"Stop the car!"

I did. Mrs. Gladstone was quiet for a long time.

"Take off your shoe," she said finally.

"What?"

"Hand me your shoe."

This was distinctly weird. I took off my right shoe, handed it to her, hoping it didn't stink.

She examined the stacked heel, pulled gently at the sides, felt the cushioning inside.

"This," she declared, "is a well-made shoe. Not too much pull on the leather, fine stitching, good sole."

"No plastic," I said.

"Ah, yes, plastic." Mrs. Gladstone's ancient face got tight. "My son is quite taken with that."

I looked down at my bare foot. "I've noticed."

"Do you know what built Gladstone's Shoes, Jenna?"

I gripped the steering wheel. There were several ways to go here. Sweat. Honesty. Good old American know-how.

She raised my shoe in the air. "An unmovable insistence on quality and fair pricing. An insistence on the finest, most shoe-educated salesforce in the business."

I nodded, remembering my one-week training course where I had to remember everything that could possibly go wrong with a shoe fitting. I learned how many bones there were in the human foot (twenty-six) including nineteen muscles, thirty-three joints, and one hundred seven ligaments. I learned that bones of the feet make up approximately one fourth of all the bones in the body, that the feet are one of the most frequently injured parts of the body. I understood that the average individual will walk about 115,000 miles in their lifetime, which is more than four times the earth's circumference, and came to the rapid conclusion that selling well-made comfortable shoes is a noble profession, providing immeasur-

able benefit for people the world over. Then I got my own personal shoehorn, and after my one-year anniversary, I got a shoehorn with my initials.

"Elden has cancelled the training courses for new employees," she said. "He just fired two of my top store managers who refused to sell his shoddy merchandise. One of them ran the Peoria store." Her lips went tight.

I got nervous for Murray. "Can he do that?"

"He has done it."

"But why?"

Mrs. Gladstone was staring at my shoe like it was a dead pet. "I don't think I want to be around to witness what Elden will do to my business."

"Boy, Mrs. Gladstone, that's pretty rough."

"It's a sad day, Jenna, when profits and greed alone influence quality. It's an even sadder day when honor in business is close to becoming a thing of the past."

The Cadillac purred across the highway, which is what you expect from a 32-valve, 300-horsepower V8 engine. Mrs. Gladstone was stirring around in the back, rattling papers, keeping busy to manage the hurt. She seemed to trust I'd get her to Springfield, and I would. Good, loyal Jenna. Loyal like a dog. A person you can count on. Just give her a Milk Bone and she'll go out of her way to help. I turned south onto 55. In an hour we'd be in Springfield.

I was getting the hang of maneuvering this big white moose after 184 miles. There's something about holding onto

a steering wheel and feeling the miles drift away from you as you push farther and farther away from what you once knew.

One of the last things Mom said to me before we left the house was that even though I'd be driving a long way from home, I wouldn't be driving away from my problems. I knew this was true the way I knew that clouds weren't made of cotton, but sometimes those white clumpy clouds hanging in a gray blue sky made me wonder if God hadn't stuck some cotton balls up there when the scientists weren't looking.

I knew one thing for sure: I was glad to be away from the mess with Dad.

I didn't miss it one bit.

I let a hot red Mustang convertible pass me, catching the license plate as the car whizzed by: ITSORED.

I sighed.

Someday.

There was good news and bad news in Springfield, Illinois.

The good news was that we got there.

The bad news was that the hotel was overbooked with the Markoy Electronics annual sales meeting and we had to share a room.

"This," said Mrs. Gladstone to the bellman, "is not a room, it is a closet."

The bellman, who was old and deaf, said he was glad we liked it and hoped we had a nice stay. He tottered out, waving happily. I checked out the room. One twin bed; one rollaway

bed approximately five feet in length for all five feet eleven inches of me.

Mrs. Gladstone lowered herself slowly onto the real bed.

"Gee, Mrs. Gladstone, it isn't so bad. You should have seen the room my mother and sister and I shared last summer in the Dells. Bugs in the mattress, seedy furniture. We're talking *Les Miserables.* But you know, we had an okay time."

Mrs. Gladstone glared at the Springfield, Illinois, Visitor's Guide: *The City Lincoln Loved,* and said absolutely nothing.

The hotel restaurant, El Pollo Loco, was packed with electronics salespeople who were discussing their products loudly while pouring margaritas from pitchers into huge glasses that were big enough to raise goldfish in. There could have been goldfish in them, actually, but I don't think the Markoy Electronics salesforce would have noticed. I knew about margaritas because my father went through a Latin American drinking phase and made margaritas at home. He did this while singing "La Bamba." He'd sing the "la la la la la la la bamba" part extra high and squeeze the lime around the glass and sprinkle on plenty of salt and pour the liquor combination into the blender. Dad was very exact when he made drinks, even when he was bombed. He always reminded me of a pharmacist, measuring just the right amount of cough syrup into the bottle. Of course, unlike a pharmacist, toward the end of the evening, Dad would be measuring his concoctions on the floor.

Mrs. Gladstone chewed her jalapeños without breaking a sweat. For an old person, she has grit. Three Markoy employ-

ees began an enchilada eating contest (not a pretty sight), but she wasn't paying attention. Her eyes got far away.

"I grew up along the Guadalope River," Mrs. Gladstone said quietly, gazing out the window. "I just lived to be in water when I was a girl, couldn't stand wearing shoes. I'd kick them off every chance I'd get and stick my feet in the water, summer and winter. And now I own one hundred and seventy-six shoe stores." She laughed. "The good Lord knows how my father would have split his spleen laughing at that. He was always barking at me to put on my shoes. 'Madeline Jean,' he'd say, 'you put on your shoes of peace, girl.' Daddy was a Baptist minister and turned everything into a sermon. 'Those aren't just shoes you're putting on,' he'd shout, 'those are the sandals of *God Almighty.*' "

I looked at her from the corner of my eye. Some people are hard to imagine as children.

Mrs. Gladstone leaned back in the wooden chair, lost in thought. "Daddy always said that shoes take us along life's pathways, they get all muddied up, all scratched from wear. We've got to clean them up, take care of them. He said God was like a master cobbler, stretching a piece of leather over a wooden last, fastening it down with nails, carefully stitching it together to form something special. That man had three sermons about shoes."

"I never thought about shoes that way."

"PKs gets their share of sermonizing."

"PKs?"

"Preacher's kids."

I smiled. "He didn't know about your business?"

"He died right before Floyd and I opened the first store in Dallas. He would have baptized that whole place if he'd had the chance."

"That would have been something, Mrs. Gladstone."

The man who won the enchilada eating contest lunged toward the bathroom door marked HOMBRES. The bill came; Mrs. Gladstone got out her wallet. "I still feel like he's with me in every store Floyd and I opened. When I was a child, I'd wonder why in the world did I have a father so all-fired fixated on shoes?" She opened her hands, grinning. "Sure made me think about selling them a little different."

I looked down. I always wondered why I had a father who was a drunk.

I haven't figured that one out yet.

Curling up on the rollaway bed made me think about laying my father out on the living room couch when he was drunk. The couch wasn't long enough for Dad (he was six four), so I'd bend his knees to get him to fit. Faith never had to do it. Dad always said there was a price to pay for being the oldest. You're the one who gets practiced on. His dad would beat him to a pulp over something small while his younger brother Billy got the world handed to him on a Wedgewood plate.

Billy was never as good a salesman as Dad, though.

My best memories of my dad were when he'd take me out to study salespeople. Dad said you can learn anything by

watching other people do it, and if they do it badly, you learn what not to do. The worst salesperson we ever saw sold washers and dryers. He'd sweat and slap the machines and yell that he was giving people a price so low his manager was going to hang him. One customer stormed off grumbling, "I'll get the rope." The best salesperson sold Singer sewing machines. She liked people, liked her product, and didn't need to push anyone into buying anything they didn't want. Dad said she knew the secret. When we got home I'd practice selling to Dad whatever we saw that day, and except when I was pitching swamp land in Florida, he always bought. Afterwards he'd celebrate what a good little salesperson I was by having a few drinks, but before the booze got hold of him, he was a real father.

Mrs. Gladstone's snoring was sounding like an approaching Amtrak train rumbling into Union Station. She was tossing, kicking off her sheets.

"No!" she shouted in her sleep, then bolted up with a cry.

I turned on the light. She was shaking.

"Mrs. Gladstone, you were dreaming."

She nodded and covered her face with her hands.

"Do you want to talk about it? My mom says talking about bad dreams can make them better."

She shook her old head.

"I know about nightmares," I assured her.

She looked straight at me. "Yes, I suppose you do."

I sat down on the side of her bed. "I used to have one where I was taking a shower and instead of water coming out, it was bourbon, which is my dad's favorite drink, and I kept trying to

turn off the flow, but the bourbon was washing over me and getting in my hair and eyes and mouth. I kept trying to spit it out, but I couldn't and it tasted awful and I was so afraid I was going to get drunk. It wasn't going down the drain, either, just filling up the tub, rising higher in the room until it was over my shoulders and I was sure I was going to drown in it. I woke up screaming."

Mrs. Gladstone nodded a little. "And did I wake up . . . screaming?"

"Kind of. Well, actually, yes."

She looked down, rubbed her sad eyes, and looked for her glasses. I took them off the nightstand, handed them to her. She put them on fast to cover the tears that were starting.

"My son," she began, clenching her mouth to keep control, "has been buying up Gladstone stock to gain control of the business because he was afraid I would not go quietly."

I didn't know much about stocks. My grandma had given Faith and me both three shares of stock in her boyfriend Earl's fire alarm company so we could learn the lessons of big business. In thirteen months we watched the stock go from $15 a share to nada and Earl go from CEO to the unemployment line, so the stock market didn't hold much magic for me.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Gladstone—I don't understand."

She grabbed a pad and pencil by the bedside table. "You understand what a share of stock is?"

"It's like buying a tiny fraction of a company."

"That's right. A share of stock is like a deed to a small piece of a company. Now in the case of Gladstone's Shoes, there are

four million public shares available, out of a possible twelve million. Those who own the most shares, own the most of the company. The problem arises when an individual or group of investors decide they want more say in a company."

"So they start buying more stock to get control."

"Precisely."

"And they can do that?"

"They can."

"You mean anyone could take over any company they wanted if they had enough money?" I shuddered.

"Theoretically. The system has many checks and balances built in to safeguard certain practices, but companies are taken over regularly."

"But what if the owners don't want to give them up?"

"Well, that's the rub. It doesn't much matter."

"But that's not fair! That's like stealing!"

"Yes, it is. Elden and Ken Woldman, the president of the Shoe Warehouse, are buying up Gladstone stock to gain control."

The Shoe Warehouse was a big chain of budget-priced shoe stores. "But the Shoe Warehouse can't own Gladstone's! They'd change it!"

"That seems to be their plan," she said heavily.

I put my hand on Mrs. Gladstone's bony shoulder. She tensed. I decided not to say that Elden was an all-time stinking shoe louse. I didn't know what to say, so I just sat next to her like I did with my grandmother, letting her know I was there.

"Quality first, I always told him." Mrs. Gladstone said this softly, shifting the weight from her bad hip. "From the time he was a little boy, I would say, 'Elden, there is no substitute for quality in business. When you cut corners, you lose, the customer loses. Offer the best quality and services at the best price and the result will be profits.' " She stabbed her finger in the air, holding back tears. "That is what Gladstone's has been built on. I keep hoping he'll see the light." She shook her old head. "I keep telling myself this isn't happening."

She shifted her hip and looked out the window. For a minute she seemed like my grandmother. I understood about being rejected by someone you love—the carelessness of it, the pain. Elden was careless, so was my dad. You want so much to believe they'll change and love you like you need them to. You'll lie to yourself about them, make them more than they are.

"Mrs. Gladstone, there's got to be something you can do."

"It's a young person's game now."

"You're giving up?"

She looked down. "I'm moving aside."

"But what about quality, what about the Gladstone name?"

"Floyd took care of those things, Jenna. I kept the books, oversaw the store expansion . . . "

I put my face close to hers so she had to look at me. "Mrs. Gladstone, I can't believe you're not going to do anything."

Her gray eyes burned with hurt and anger. She lay back down, covered herself with a blanket, and that was that.

CHAPTER 9

We passed on El Pollo Loco for breakfast and hit the Honest Abe Pancake House down the street that had a tin of real maple syrup at every table and paintings depicting Abraham Lincoln's life of truth on the walls. A waitress was pouring Mrs. Butterworth's syrup into a real maple syrup tin, which would have made Honest Abe split a gut.

Deception was everywhere.

Mrs. Gladstone had coffee, poached eggs, and dry wheat toast. I had the Presidential platter of pigs in a blanket with a large orange juice to keep up my strength. Mrs. Gladstone looked like warmed-over oatmeal and she wasn't talking much either, which is always weird when you've connected with a person one day and the next day they want to take it all back. My dad used to tell me about his big dreams to go into business for himself, even showed me the business plan he'd written once. But by the next day, he'd given up the whole thing, he didn't want to talk about it.

Inconsistency is a royal pain, but I've learned to live with it.

Mrs. Gladstone and I headed toward the car in silence. Finally she said, "I'll be having several meetings with the Springfield staff these next two days. Margaret Lundstrom, the manager, is an old friend."

"What do you want me to do?"

"There is a Shoe Warehouse store a few blocks away. Perhaps you could use your unique talents there."

"You want me to snoop around?"

"I didn't say that."

I smiled, got her in the backseat, pulled the Cadillac onto the street, turned left by a statue of Abraham Lincoln that was covered with pigeons. "You want me to be a shoe spy, Mrs. Gladstone?"

"I want you to tell me everything you see, hear, and feel from the moment you walk into that store. Left here."

"Got it." I signaled left. "Anything you're looking for in particular?"

"I'm looking for your insight, Jenna. Turn here."

I did, nice and easy, the Cadillac turned perfectly under my steely control. I pulled in front of Gladstone's Shoes, Springfield, Illinois. The windows were sparkling, the sale signs promised bargains. The Nike display was up front.

"Nice store," I said, helping Mrs. Gladstone out.

"Margaret knows how to keep a store."

She handed me a piece of paper that had the Shoe Warehouse's address. "Come back in three hours, and for heaven's sake, don't be obvious." She leaned heavily on her cane, walked

to the glass-etched G on the door, pushed it open, and limped inside.

It's tricky not being obvious when you're a five-foot-eleven-inch female. Whenever I walk in anywhere, people usually strain their necks to look up at me. I'd trade four inches of height for beauty any day, but no one would swap. I threw back my shoulders and stood extra tall like my grandma taught me. Grandma always said there is nothing more commanding than a tall woman who uses her height. Grandma was six feet even and wore three-inch heels to make the point. I walked into the Shoe Warehouse like I owned the place.

I was glad I didn't.

First off, it was built like a factory with storage bins and steel shelving to make you think you were getting rock-bottom prices. There were sale signs and twenty-percent-off signs and a big bell that went *bong* whenever someone bought over four pairs of shoes at once. There was green astro turf on the floor and big mirrors on the wall. The merchandise was second-rate.

I ran my finger over a large yellow display cube (dusty). A small round man wearing a green "Shoe Warehouse" shirt sat behind the cash register drinking noisily from a can of Dr. Pepper. I walked on past the low-end children's section thinking my spy thoughts.

No continuity among styles.

Bad displays.

Shoes not fully lined.

I stopped to watch an exhausted woman with five children—all five of them were trying on shoes. The woman tied red sneakers on her little daughter.

"Mommy, they hurt."

"They're on sale, baby." The mother felt the girl's shoes. The small, round man walked by. "Could you help me?" she asked. "She says they hurt."

The man sighed like she was asking to borrow money, got on one knee, felt the girl's shoes. "They just need to break in," he said.

"But they hurt!"

"New shoes are supposed to hurt," the man said and walked away.

Lies.

Manipulation.

Child abuse.

I grabbed a foot sizer and walked up to the woman. "I can help you, ma'am." I knelt down in front of the little girl. "What's your name?"

"Belinda."

"Let's see if we can find you some shoes that don't hurt, Belinda."

I measured her feet—made sure she stood straight, positioned her foot flat on the sizer—quick scanned the children's shoe displays. Not much. "What are you going to do in the shoes?" I asked. "Do you need them for all-around or something specific?"

"I'm going to run and jump," Belinda said.

"Running and jumping."

I found two size 4s in a decent sneaker with passable padding. I put them on her, laced them up. She bounded around the store. "These are good!"

I fitted her older son with high tops, which wasn't easy, got her two teenage daughters out of spiked heels when I showed them that they were both developing hammer toe—a condition that causes the little toe to become curled up and sore from too-tight shoes—got them both into a lower cushioning heel, and found Rodney, age eight, a decent super-human, all-black laser-zooming sneaker at twenty percent off that wouldn't give him shin splints on the basketball court if he double-laced them tight over the ankle like I showed him.

I taught the mother how to check the shoe's fit. "You want some room between the big toe and the tip, but not too much. See?"

The mother checked all her children's shoes herself. She shook my hand. "I've never had anyone help me in here. You must be new."

"I . . . don't exactly work here."

She looked at me strangely.

"I just like to help."

"You sure did that. Thank you." She took out a twenty-percent-off coupon, gathered her brood, and headed for the cash register. I put the shoes that didn't fit back in the boxes, put the boxes back on the shelves.

"You trying to rip me off?"

It was the mother, shouting at the small round Shoe Warehouse man who was now behind the counter.

"You saying my coupon's no good?"

The man didn't look up. "Only two pairs of shoes per coupon," he said flatly, turning the pages of a car magazine.

I walked to the woman's side, looked at the coupon: "Twenty percent off—the Shoe Warehouse."

"It doesn't say anything about a two-pair limit," I said to the man.

"It was a misprint," he said, still reading.

I glared at the small round man who had guilty eyes. "Is that an official store policy?"

"Yeah."

"Do you have it in writing?"

He shrugged.

I said, "If you don't have it in writing, sir, you have to honor this coupon."

"I don't have to do nothing," the man said.

The woman was shaking, looking in her wallet. "But I can't get all my kids shoes without that twenty percent," she said.

"Store policy," said the man.

My insides were steaming. I looked out the window. A large policeman walked by twirling his nightstick. "Stay there," I said to the woman and ran out the door.

"Officer, we need some help."

He put his hand on his gun—a nice touch—and stormed inside. The Law.

I showed him the coupon as the round man grew pale.

The officer walked toward him.

"Made a mistake," the small man said, reaching for the coupon. "It's good. We'll take it. *Sure.*"

The policeman waited until the woman paid for and got her merchandise; he held the door for her as she walked out buried in shoe boxes and children. He held the door for me, then went back in the store, said something to the small round man who nodded wildly. The policeman walked out the door whistling, tipped his hat to us, and walked off.

Another evil retail plot foiled.

The woman looked at me over her packages. "Who are you, anyway, miss?"

I smiled mysteriously. I wished I was wearing one of those trench coats with the big collars that stand up around the neck. I put on my extra-cool driver sunglasses, touched my forehead in a tough-guy salute, and walked down the street whistling, just missing a mound of dog poop.

We stayed in Springfield for three days. I mostly poked around, took stealth walks, and wrote postcards home.

I sent Faith a completely black postcard with the words "Springfield at night," which should give her a real yuck. I got Mom a postcard of Abraham Lincoln looking presidential and wrote "Thinking great thoughts. Keeping two-and-a-half car lengths on all major thoroughfares. How's by you?" I mailed Grandma a postcard of a field of daisies and told her to pin it on her memory board. I found a card for Opal with an old-fashioned jail and wrote "Counting the days till you'll be free."

Mrs. Gladstone said I could call home whenever I wanted, but I'm not much of a phone person. I think it's because my dad used to make me answer the phone when I was small, tell people he wasn't home when he was standing right there. I didn't know at the time that he owed those people money. Dad owed more money than he could ever pay back. I don't use a phone unless I absolutely have to.

I liked being on my own. Springfield is a good town to do that in because it's easy to get around and there's so much history to see. I visited Lincoln's Tomb twice, stood there on the perfect green grass and thought about all the greatness and courage of that man. I touched the white-gray wall, wondering if some of it could rub off on me.

I love travelling and meeting new people. I met a retired couple from Canada who said that talking to me made them feel good about American teenagers. I said talking to them made me feel good about Canada, although I'd never had a reason not to. New people just take you how you come. They don't know about all the free-throws you missed in the regional basketball tournament, don't know how you looked seventeen and a half pounds thinner.

I unwrapped an Almond Joy and told Mrs. Gladstone what I'd seen at the Shoe Warehouse. She said my "insights" were illuminating and wrote down everything I said in her blue leather book.

She was writing down other insights as well, mostly about Elden, heard mostly from Margaret Lundstrom, who had learned big and terrible things from Harry Bender, the world's

greatest shoe salesman and manager of Gladstone's flagship store in Dallas, Texas, that was famous for its immense size (everything is bigger in Texas) and the fact that it contained the world's largest plastic foot. Harry Bender found out that Elden, the rat, was ready to sell Gladstone's to the Shoe Warehouse the day after Mrs. Gladstone retired; all the meetings had taken place, the board of directors had okayed the deal without letting Mrs. Gladstone know. The Shoe Warehouse wanted to use the Gladstone's name in all their tacky prefab stores so that people would think they were better than they were.

Mrs. Gladstone kept talking on her portable phone to Harry Bender about it all the way back to the hotel, saying, "Harry Bender, are you *sure?*" There'd be a pause and she'd say, *"Well!* You'd think blood would count for something."

I didn't think customers were that dumb and I said this to Mrs. Gladstone after she hung up.

"It's called perception," she answered softly. "Gladstone's has built such good will over the years. People trust us to sell quality merchandise. It's going to take the public a little while to catch on that just because there's a Gladstone's sign on the door doesn't mean there's Gladstone's quality inside. By then the Shoe Warehouse and Elden will be rich."

I mentioned that it didn't seem like the Peoria store was making money with all that junky merchandise.

"That was Elden's early experiment," she said. "He's gotten smarter since then."

We got to the hotel; I let the attendant park the car. Mrs.

Gladstone was really dragging that bad leg of hers. I could see by her face that she'd about reached her limit. I tried to mention this to her gently, but coming at her that way just got her frosted.

"I need a new hip if you must know!"

A new one? I thought you had to stay with the original.

"I'm having the operation when I return to Chicago, and I don't want to discuss it again."

"Does it hurt bad?"

Mrs. Gladstone leaned on her cane and looked at me, trying to be tough. "This leg will make it to Texas."

"That doesn't mean it doesn't hurt," I said and helped her into the lobby.

Mrs. Gladstone and I were turning in for the night. I was wondering how to add a foot to the rollaway bed so I wouldn't have to scrunch up like a contortionist to get some rest. I was trying to put the pillow as high up on the cot as possible to gain inches in leg room.

"Harry Bender . . . " she said. "That man is one of a kind."

I fiddled with the pillow, quick lay down to see if it helped. The pillow fell off. I said, "I've heard."

Mostly I'd heard about Harry Bender from Murray Castlebaum, who said that Harry could sell sandals to Eskimos if he felt like it. The man was a shoe legend. He sold more shoes each year than the number two, three, four, and five ranking salespeople combined.

"The great Mahatma," Murray called him. Mahatma is a title of respect that people called Gandhi, the spiritual leader of India. It means Great Soul if you're in India. If you're in the shoe business, it means Great *Sole.*

"Mahatma Bender," Murray would say, putting his hands together and bowing down, "once he got them in the store, he wouldn't let them out without a sale. The man was like a magnet. People couldn't say no. If you ever meet him, all you gotta do is stand there in his presence. Believe me, kid, you'll learn something."

Mrs. Gladstone's shoulders dropped like the wind got knocked out of her.

"Is everything okay, Mrs. Gladstone?"

Mrs. Gladstone looked small and wrinkled propped up like she was in the bed. "No," she said softly. "No, it's not."

My mind raced back to when I was seven years old. Mom was in the kitchen pouring bourbon down the sink so there wouldn't be any for Dad to drink when he came home—if he came home. Whenever he left, even if it was just to buy cigarettes down the street, I always wondered if I'd see him again.

But this night was worse than the others. I was getting peanut butter from the pantry when Dad staggered home loaded. Mom called him an alcoholic; said he needed to get help. I'd never heard him get so angry, shouting that no one had faith in him; what's the big deal about a few drinks; couldn't a man unwind after a long day at work? He kept

yelling and Mom kept saying she wasn't going to be a co-dependent anymore, wasn't going to cover up for him. He kicked a big dent in the refrigerator and stormed out.

I went out to Mom. She was crying on the kitchen stool, bent over.

"Is everything okay?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "No, it's not."

From that day on I knew Dad would go permanently.

When Mom and Dad got divorced, Mom gathered me and Faith on her lap. "We're not going to pretend like this hasn't been hard," she said, "because it's been very hard. We're not going to pretend that everything's okay, because right now it's not. What we're going to do is talk to each other and let our feelings out and trust that in the process we will find a better life. Deal?"

Faith said, "Deal," and held out her hand. She was smiling.

I said, "Deal," and held out my hand. I was crying.

Mom took both our hands and put them between hers. I felt strength zooming from her hands into mine, right up to my heart.

I thought about taking Mrs. Gladstone's hand, but she turned off the light before I got a chance. This is what Faith does when she doesn't want to talk anymore. You could be bursting with questions and Faith yanks the light chain and leaves you sitting there in darkness, real and otherwise. Lately, with Faith, I've been yanking the light back on and glaring at her, but that sure wouldn't work tonight.

I tucked my knees up in a way that wouldn't permanently

cripple my back and said, "Sleep tight, Mrs. Gladstone. Tomorrow is another day." My grandmother used to say that to me and Faith when she tucked us in bed. It always made me hopeful.

Mrs. Gladstone snorted through her ancient nose. "Thank you, Jenna," she said softly. "I appreciate that."

I waited for her heavy breathing which meant she was asleep, but it didn't come.

CHAPTER 10

When I woke up the next morning, Mrs. Gladstone couldn't get out of bed.

"This blasted leg," she said, struggling against the pain.

I tried to help her up, but she cried out. It hurt too much.

"I'm going to get a doctor, ma'am."

"No you're not." She tried to get up again and flopped back down.

"Mrs. Gladstone, you need medical help and I'm going to get it for you."

I threw on jeans, Reeboks, my yellow Barcelona T-shirt, and ran out the door.

The elevator took forever to come. When it got to my floor it was packed with bleary-eyed Markoy Electronics people who looked like they'd spent the night hanging upside down in a meat locker. I jammed in anyway, rode to the lobby, found Chuck, the assistant hotel manager, who made a few calls and finally found an orthopedist who would come to the hotel. I

went back up to the room to tell Mrs. Gladstone the doctor was coming.

She wasn't happy to see me.

"You defied me," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, I did."

I looked down. I had practice defying adults. My father was always telling me he was fine when he was drunk, always telling me he didn't need my help when the plain truth was he needed my help sometimes to just sit down. Some adults don't always know how to take care of themselves.

She lay there looking old and miserable.

"Both Harry and Margaret feel I should attempt to stop the sale to the Shoe Warehouse," she said quietly.

"Can you do that?"

"I don't know. Harry Bender has begun to call investors and other store managers to get their feedback."

Mrs. Gladstone pulled at the lace fringe of her nightgown and shivered in the warm room. She didn't look like she could stop a paper airplane.

"I want you to call the doctor and tell him to not come," she ordered.

I took a big breath. "Mrs. Gladstone, you can keep being the tough person you are and still have a bad hip and need some help."

She looked away.

"Because if you don't get some help it's going to eventually affect your strength, and something tells me if you and Mr.

Bender are going to try to save this company, you're going to need all the strength you can get, and I'm not just talking legs here."

She sniffed.

"I don't know beans about saving companies, but I know how it works in families, and believe me, you've got to pull everybody you trust together in one place and talk real clear and plain and let everyone else do the same because there's power in truth. See, for too long at my house we just let Dad's drinking go by without anyone saying anything much about it, calling it a little problem, things like that. You've got to call a thing by its full name and that's what lets the truth out where it can get some fresh air."

Mrs. Gladstone studied my face. "You have learned a great deal in your sixteen years."

"Not really."

There was a knock on the door.

She folded her arms tight. "I don't want to see a doctor."

I walked to the door. "I know you don't. But you've got to."

"And what gives you the right to order me around?"

I took a deep breath, fished around in my pocket. "I have the car keys, ma'am." I held them up. "No disrespect intended."

Mrs. Gladstone grunted.

I looked through the peephole at the doctor standing in the hall, opened the door, and let her in.

Dr. MacMillan wasn't taking any of Mrs. Gladstone's guff, which I was glad to see. It gets lonely being the only reason-

able person in the room. She told Mrs. Gladstone her hip was in bad shape and got to hear her speech about how that leg was going to make it to Texas. Dr. MacMillan said she needed to get X-rays, which made her split an atom, especially when the two ambulance men came to carry her off to the hospital, and she declared she wasn't going to be "hoisted from bed by strangers" and rapped one of the attendants on the shoulder with her cane.

"*Jenna* will help me," she declared.

"Is she always like this?" the attendant asked, rubbing his shoulder.

"Pretty much."

I leaned over the bed so Mrs. Gladstone could put her arms around my neck and I could lift her up. This seemed dumb with two strong men in the room who did these things regularly. Of course, I was taller than both of them.

Pain flashed across her face, but I got her up. And eventually, after a few false starts, into the ambulance where she would not lie down on the cot. She sat there staring straight ahead, bony arms crossed tightly against her chest, informing the attendant she did not need her blood pressure checked, the problem was her *hip*.

I said, "They're going to take it eventually, Mrs. Gladstone. Here or at the hospital. My mom's a nurse and you can't come in with a hang nail and get out without someone checking your blood pressure."

I looked at her face, how hard and determined it was. I thought about what she and her husband had to do to build

their company from the ground floor up, store by store, all 176 of them, for all those years. Women weren't in business much back then. I bet she knocked their socks off.

I took a real chance with my future, leaned close to her ear and said, "Save it, Mrs. Gladstone, for the real fight. You know?"

She sniffed hard. Then gradually her face relaxed. She nodded slightly.

"Well, for mercy's sweet sake," she barked at the attendant. "Are you going to take my blood pressure or not?"

CHAPTER 11

Dr. MacMillan had Mrs. Gladstone stay overnight in the hospital for observation and told her what she already knew. She needed a new hip.

"Sooner rather than later," the doctor said.

"I am scheduled for an operation in September."

"I wouldn't recommend waiting that long," said the doctor, writing out a prescription and suggesting she not take stairs.

Then she said it wouldn't be a bad idea to have a wheelchair in the car just in case, and Mrs. Gladstone said a wheelchair was out of the question. The doctor handed me a pad with scrawled instructions that looked like hieroglyphics on what kind of wheelchair to buy. "Just in case I'm right," she whispered.

I packed up our suitcases, checked us out of the hotel, got the car, and asked Mrs. Gladstone if we should take a run over to the medical supply store to look at wheelchairs. This went over like a pop chemistry quiz the day before spring vacation

when you had to wonder for a whole week if you'd destroyed your grade point average.

"You are to keep those infernal things away from me, do you hear?"

"Just trying to cover all the bases, Mrs. Gladstone. I know it's the last thing you want. I'm worried about you is all and—"

"Don't be."

This whole trip was beginning to be a whole lot more than I'd bargained for.

"Mrs. Gladstone, I'm not a nurse and if anything happened that I couldn't handle—"

"If I need a nurse, I'll hire one. Now I suggest, young woman, that you do what I've hired you to do."

I gave the Cadillac extra gas to let her know I was mad.

We were heading to 55 South which would take us to St. Louis, the Gateway to the West. From school, I remembered that the explorers Lewis and Clark started their expedition in St. Louis. From Dad, I knew about the city's number-one product, Budweiser beer.

Mrs. Gladstone had me turn on a radio station that played the big band music of World War II, which, trust me, you either like or you don't. My grandmother would have liked it, but for a sophisticated teenager it was like Chinese water torture. I focused on something else to avoid screaming—eavesdropped, actually, as Mrs. Gladstone talked to Harry Bender on the phone again, saying that she didn't see what could be done and wasn't it too late to win back the company? An old school bus painted baby blue from the Anointed Saints of the Evangelical Free Gospel Church of Jesus Christ, Vernon, Illi-

nois, screeched in front of me. I rammed on the brakes to avoid hitting the back of the bus with the sign that said HEAVEN IS OUR REAL HOME.

"Mercy," said Mrs. Gladstone, jolting forward.

"I'm sorry."

I slowed down, keeping two bus lengths between me and heaven, and pulled onto 55 South. I focused on the road; I had to be sharp. This always energized me. I didn't think too much, just clicked into the driving rhythm as the rows of highway lights curved over the pavement. I drove slowly around a blinking warning sign set up around a construction site; checked my mirrors for approaching cars when I saw a merge arrow; moved to the right lane when the driver behind me flashed his headlights. It seemed to me that the people who made the rules of the road had figured out everything that would help a person drive safely right down to having a sign that tells you you're passing through a place where deer cross. Somebody should stick up some signs on the highway of life.

CAUTION: JERKS CROSSING.

Blinking yellow lights when you're about to do something stupid.

Stop signs in front of people who could hurt you.

Green lights shining when you're doing the right thing.

It would make the whole experience easier.

Life was too hard sometimes. I let out a lonely sigh and realized how much I missed my mother.

I missed Chicago, too. And Opal.

I even missed Faith.

I missed being with people under seventy years of age.

I missed selling shoes and listening to real music.

I missed tacos and refried beans and all-night Chinese take-out places and buses and teenage conversation.

I missed my grandmother and the fun we used to have. The loss of that was like a giant crater in my heart.

I wondered how she was getting along; wondered if she remembered enough to miss me.

What if Grandma slipped too far away while I was gone?

What if Murray hired someone who could sell shoes even better than me?

What if Dad bothered Faith?

What if he never came back?

I started crying—never appropriate for a professional driver. I looked for the next place to pull off because the pain of my grandmother and my father and my homesickness and my worry were bursting out at the same time.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. I hoped Mrs. Gladstone was looking out the window because I didn't think she'd appreciate this behavior. I steered off the exit ramp, not asking permission. Mrs. Gladstone didn't say anything, she just let me pull into the parking lot of Pru's Pie Palace, and run inside.

I stood by the sink in the bathroom and washed my face with cold water to get the red splotches off from all the crying and despair. No paper towels. I stuck my face under the hand blower which made my eyes tear, praying no one would walk in. If Opal was here she would have told me that tears

weren't anything to be ashamed of, that crying in front of people just makes you closer. That's how Opal and I met. She was crying at the bus stop after school. Her new wallet had been stolen and she didn't have enough money to get home. I paid her fare and we rode home together. By the time we'd passed North Avenue, I'd told her my dad was an alcoholic, she'd told me her aunt believed in alien abduction, and we'd become best friends right there on the 22 North. Like my grandma always said, you never know the blessings that can come from suffering.

I dried my eyes on my sleeve and walked out to where Mrs. Gladstone was sipping coffee. There were two pieces of coconut cream pie on the table, my absolute favorite dessert. I sat down reverently in front of all those calories.

She leaned forward, studying me. "You want to talk about it?"

I shook my head. I figured she'd make me spill my guts, but she didn't.

"Some things go too deep for words," is all she said.

And we sat there eating our pie.

CHAPTER 12

We made it to St. Louis by nightfall—drove past the Gateway Arch on the Mississippi riverfront with all those city lights gleaming like stars. The arch represented the gateway to the west where the pioneers began their journey to the new land. Mrs. Gladstone said it was 630 feet high. Seeing it made me feel like I'd just done something important. I thought of all those pioneer teenagers pushing westward in the covered wagons—hot, sweaty, wondering what the new land would bring, trying to convince their parents to let them drive.

I was getting very good at finding hotels. I came to a perfect stop with no lurching in front of the St. Louis Beauregard and really impressed the doorman, who was dressed like the Nutcracker from the ballet, except he wasn't wearing tights. He helped Mrs. Gladstone out as a teenage boy drove by; his father was screaming instructions at him from the passenger seat: *Slow down! Watch the light! Brake!* I smiled maturely. Those days were over for me.

Mrs. Gladstone and I checked in (separate rooms) and headed upstairs. She was limping bad and said she was going to have dinner in her room and that I should do the same.

Room service.

Freedom.

I went to my room—it had a huge TV and a queen-size bed with a painting over it that looked like the artist put ink in his mouth and spat it back on the canvas. I flopped on the bed and felt at least nineteen. It would have been great to have Opal here. She's the first friend I've ever had who I could tell everything to. With the others, I always held back about Dad and our problems, afraid that if people knew how weird things were, they wouldn't like me. With Opal, the more I tell her, the closer we get.

I looked at the room service menu: steak, lamb chops, pork medallions, turkey club, chocolate mousse cake. My stomach growled. Opal and I could make fast work of that menu. We once ate two large double cheese pizzas in one night with a six-pack of Mountain Dew and two quarts of toffee almond ice cream.

Bingeing alone is not as meaningful.

The phone rang. I waited three rings, picked it up.

"Young woman!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I need your help after all."

So much for freedom.

I hung up and headed down the hall to Mrs. Gladstone's room, knocked on the door. After a long time, she opened it.

She looked pale and shaken. I walked in. She pointed to a note on the bed.

"Apparently Elden will be joining us tomorrow," she said heavily.

"You mean here?"

"He has a business opportunity he must discuss with me immediately."

"What kind of opportunity?"

"The message didn't say. I need you to get in touch with Harry Bender."

"Me?"

She sighed. "You. I have already taken my pain medication. It's making me very groggy." Her old eyes looked cloudy. "Tell him that Elden is coming to St. Louis. Write down everything Harry says and we'll talk in the morning." Mrs. Gladstone moved slowly to the bed. "I need to lie down."

"Well, shoot, how's the old girl doing?"

I was sitting on my queen-size bed with the phone tucked under my chin and a legal pad in my lap, having just told Harry Bender that Elden was coming to St. Louis and Mrs. Gladstone asked me to call.

"Not too great, Mr. Bender."

"Blast, that's a shame. That spurless son of hers isn't going to make the situation any sweeter."

I wrote down "spurless son—not sweeter."

"Here's what you got to do," said Harry Bender in a booming Texas voice, " 'cause Maddy's got to be in bad shape if

she's not calling herself. You've got to diffuse the situation because that boy's coming to town with bad news for sure."

I wrote down "diffuse situation—bad news for sure" and said, "Me?"

"That's right."

"How do I do that?"

"You tell him Maddy's hurting too bad to see anyone and you'll take the message."

"But he's not going to tell me anything."

"That's right. And in this situation, ignorance is golden."

I wrote down "ignorance is golden" and waited.

" 'Cause, you see, old Elden's trying to slink between two camps. You can't trust what he's going to say and Maddy needs to be surrounded by the truth before the lies start breaking in around her."

"What if I goof up?"

"You're not going to do that," Harry Bender insisted. "You're going to reject that thought. You're going to tell yourself you've got more than enough on the ball to pull this off. All you've got to do, no matter what old Elden says, is to smile and tell him that you absolutely understand, but his mother can't see anyone today."

"But what if he gets mad at me?"

Harry Bender laughed. "You just remember, never go punching a man who's chewing tobacco."

"Well . . ."

"Don't think it to death. Just approach him nice and friendly. You got any questions, call old Harry. Nighty night."

Click.

I wrote "never punch a man who's chewing tobacco."

I think at the very least this should be a bumper sticker, but I'm not sure what any of this has to do with selling shoes.

The next morning I told Mrs. Gladstone everything Harry Bender said right down to the never punch a man who's chewing tobacco part, which made her laugh out loud, even though she was hurting.

I was sitting at a table by the front of the Fichus Tree Restaurant, telling myself I had more than enough on the ball to pull this off, looking for Elden Gladstone. He was fifteen minutes late, which made me mad because for all he knew he was keeping his own mother waiting even though she was upstairs and I was her designated eater. The Fichus Tree had one of those breakfast buffets that's so loaded with food it almost makes you forget how many people go to bed hungry. I was wearing my khaki suit that made me look older and my stacked leather shoes. Shoes are an important statement when you're meeting another shoe person, since shoe people always look at someone from the ground up.

There was a jerk of movement and Elden Gladstone sped off the elevator, pushing through the lobby like he owned it, talking angrily on a cell phone. He gave the hostess a sneer.

"I'm meeting my mother." He looked impatiently at the tables. Seeing him made me feel tired. "Because I *can't,*" he barked into the phone. "It's not going to fly!"

I stood up. "Uh, Mr. Gladstone. Your mother asked me to meet you."

He said, "Later," into the phone and snapped it shut. He looked at my shoes.

"I'm Jenna Boller, her . . . assistant." Assistant sounded better than driver.

Elden reached for a handful of butter mints by the cash register and ate them all at once. He was wearing a beige floppy suit with the sleeves pushed up and a gold watch.

I steeled myself.

Smiled nice and friendly. "She's not feeling too well, sir. She won't be coming down for breakfast."

He glared at me, unsure. "What's the matter with her?"

"Her hip."

"Again?"

I didn't know this was an on-going problem. I nodded.

I took a deep breath for the next part. "She said you could give me any message and—"

"I don't think so."

I didn't either.

"I don't know who you are, *miss,* but I'd like to see my mother."

"I appreciate that, sir. She just can't see anyone today. I understand how you feel."

Elden was six inches shorter than me and he didn't like it. "Sit down," he barked.

I sat. He kept standing, telling me that he'd flown in from

Dallas to see his mother and he wasn't leaving until that happened. I smiled, explained again and again.

"It's such a shame," I said. "You coming all this way. She just can't see anyone today."

He looked at me like I was garbage. "I'm not going to let some overgrown *teenager* tell me I can't see my mother."

Smile.

Never kill in public.

I wanted to so bad. I looked at Elden, who was gunning for a showdown, waiting for me to lose it right there. Never punch a man who's chewing tobacco, that's what Harry Bender said. I knew why now. They spit it out all over you. I killed him with kindness.

"Boy, I'm sure sorry about this, sir. You're mother's just not able to—"

"That's clear!" Elden turned on his tasseled Italian loafer. "You tell my mother we've got to talk. No, tell her we're *going* to talk."

I smiled. "I'll tell her, sir." I felt that adding "you ungrateful slimeball" would have been pushing it.

And with that Elden Gladstone stomped off in a stinking cloud of deceit.

Evil Retreats in the Presence of Goodness.

What a snake.