

Chapter Seven

“I told you to be back by 9:00. Do you have any idea what time it is?”

My voice was shaking, as much with relief as with anger.

Lisa shook her head. “Haven’t a clue, since I don’t own a watch. I bet you’re going to tell me, though.”

I slapped her, the first time I’d ever raised my hand to her. “Don’t get smart with me. It’s two in the morning. Where were you?”

She acted as if I hadn’t touched her. “Oh, just around. I met this new guy named Keith. I got tired of all the other people I was having sex with.”

She was obviously stoned; most of the time she would never have admitted what she was doing. I had suspected it for a long time, but before this she had always denied doing anything wrong.

“You best be glad your mother’s not here. She’d beat you until you were bloody.”

“Well, she’s not here, and she’s not going to beat me anymore. Good riddance as far as I’m concerned.”

Ellen had died of lung cancer just the month before. She had refused treatment, saying we couldn’t afford it, and the disease took her quickly. The six months she was an invalid at home were the worst of my life. Throughout the time of her mother’s illness, Lisa seemed totally indifferent. She only went to the funeral because I made her go. The only other person related to me who attended was Carol. My brother Clint, who as now in Beckley, said he just couldn’t get away from work.

At nineteen, she was past the age where we had much control over her, as she never tired of telling us. She still lived with us, though, and to me that was enough reason to expect some sort of cooperation. Lisa didn’t see it that way.

I had long since lapsed back into drinking alcohol. Since Ellen had died, I spent most of my time in a drunken stupor. The night I confronted Lisa was one of my few moments of sobriety, and I decided I was better off drunk.

Nothing more came of the big showdown. Lisa went to bed, ignoring my call to come back and talk about it. I had an emergency stash of whiskey hidden in my bedroom; within an hour, I was drunk again.

Pop had died the year before. I still told everyone who asked that he was an old drunk, and I had picked up my bad habits from him. By now, I was convinced it was true. I found about his death a week after the funeral; Mama and Miriam didn't want me around, I guess. Mama was very sick herself, with heart problems. She followed Pop home to glory six months later; I suspect I caused some of the problems with her heart. I broke it years before. Again, I wasn't invited. That hurt much more than missing Pop's funeral.

Clara died before Carol finished high school, and she moved in with one of Clara's brothers, Harold Dalton, until she finished school. After high school, she attended college in Beckley, at MSU, with a degree in nursing. After years of being single, she married one of her patients, Stan Lee, who was confined to a wheelchair. I never could understand what she saw in the man; he was a total jerk. I heard she stopped going to church after that, which gave me a perverse kind of satisfaction. After making such a show of being holier-than-thou, she was on the same side of the fence as me.

Miriam stopped coming to see Carol when she got married, so I didn't see her either. I know Carol still went over to Fayette County from time to time to visit, but Miriam couldn't get along with Stan any more than I could. It made me feel kind of smug that such a fine upstanding Christian couldn't get along with us heathens. Carol herself was less judgmental than Miriam. She was always nice to me when she saw me in town, even after she stopped going to church.

My brother got married not long after he came to Beckley. For a while, he came to see me, but, evidently, his new wife didn't think I was good company. He began making excuses for not coming by very often, and eventually stopped altogether. I lost track of him, finally, just as I had with so many people over the years.

I lost my job during the last months of Ellen's illness, since I thought my place was with her instead of on the golf course. The manger was looking for an excuse to get rid of me, anyway. I made a

few bucks here and there doing odd jobs, but nobody wanted to hire an old geezer of fifty-eight with little education and no skills. Our rent was several months past due, and we had already received notice to vacate the premises.

I managed to hang around the shack until a Sheriff's deputy, calling himself Security Police, came and chased me out. Things were bad all over, and they were about to get a lot worse. First, Lisa told me she was pregnant, and the father, Keith, had deserted her. Days later, she told me she had aborted the fetus. Awful visions of another Bernice flooded my mind, but Lisa lacked one thing that Bernice had: a conscience. She went on as if nothing at all had happened.

I decided our best bet was to move back to Beckley, where I would have a better chance of finding work. My luck didn't change, though, and I found myself bouncing around from one flophouse to the next. I barely made enough to buy cheap booze, much less buy food and pay rent. Lisa stayed gone more and more, and I didn't see her for weeks at a time.

The mean streets of the east side of town became even meaner. People started coming in from countryside. Like me, they couldn't find work, and thought there would be some in the city. Like me, most were disappointed. The crime rate, already high, skyrocketed. Fights, murders, and robberies were commonplace. Our so-called Security Police provided very little security, except for those with the money and power to afford it.

I was beaten several times myself, usually around some bar or another, but I was used to it. That was part of life for me, and I had lived with it for almost forty years. Seeing others beaten or killed didn't even bother me that much; I wasn't beyond taking cash off of a body. Few things shocked me, and I had no sense of right or wrong.

Several months after we moved to Beckley, while I was staying in a homeless shelter, the world literally fell to pieces. I awoke from a drunken stupor in the middle of the night, dimly aware of being violently shaken. When I fell out of bed, or more accurately, when I was thrown out of bed, I came fully awake. I had never experienced an earthquake, and until that moment had no real concept of what one was.

The room was pitch black. I heard people screaming, and I was vaguely aware that I was one of them. I remembered I was near a window; when I felt for it, I cut my hand. Ignoring the pain, I managed somehow to squeeze through the hole where the window had once been. I cut myself again on the way through, but I could think of nothing but getting out. I landed on my hands and knees, tried to get up, and immediately fell down. I crawled away, desperately trying to get as far from the building as possible. The pavement near the building was buckled and cracked, but at least there was no roof to fall on my head.

I don't know how long the quake lasted; it seemed like hours to me. Once it stopped, it was as if a veil was lowered in the sky. The moon shone down brightly, showing me much more than I wanted to see. All around me, buildings had collapsed or partially collapsed. The shelter was a pile of broken bricks, glass, and mortar. If I had been there a few seconds more, I'd be dead. A horrible thought came to me.

"Lisa! Lisa! Where are you?"

I called for her over and over. There was no answer. She hadn't been with me in days. Please, Lord, let her be safe somewhere. It was the first prayer I'd uttered since I was a kid.

No ambulances came that night; no police or firefighters came to the neighborhood to see if they could help. I figured that east Beckley just wasn't important enough. Later I found out that many areas of town were inaccessible, and some of the police and fire stations had collapsed, too. The city police station on Fayette Street was wiped out.

Aftershocks continued through the rest of the night, and for days afterward, but none was as intense as the original quake. National Guard troops showed up after a few days, and the cleanup work began. The people in the neighborhood were rounded up for a meeting, and were told a tent city was being set up outside of town. We would all have to go there unless we had relatives to stay with. Most areas were as hard-hit as ours, or worse, so there was no hope of finding other housing. A soup kitchen was set up temporarily. There would also be one at the tent city.

They dug out the dead with bulldozers, and dumped the bodies in trucks like so much garbage. There was no question of identifying loved ones. I was convinced I had lost Lisa as well as Ellen, and I

didn't see much use to continue living. I bummed liquor off everyone who would let me have any, and spent most of my time either passed out or on my way to passing out.

The time came when we were all loaded onto National Guard trucks, and hauled off to what had once been the Raleigh County Airport. The terminal had ceased to exist, and the runways were just so many slabs of concrete. Heavy equipment was still clearing away rubble, to make way for still more tents. I had no possessions left, beyond the clothes on my back, so moving was no big deal for me.

We had just moved into our new digs when the sky fell. The hailstones were massive, some the size of basketballs. Hundreds of people who had survived the earthquake were killed by chunks of ice. The storm wasn't just throwing ice at us; vivid streaks of blue lightning struck repeatedly. Many of the tents were ablaze, and an orange glow lit the sky from the direction of Beckley.

I was passed out under a piece of heavy equipment when it all started, which probably saved my life. The tent I was given, I found out later, was pounded to the ground, but escaped the fire. The drumbeat of ice on metal woke me up, but it didn't take me long to figure I needed to stay where I was. Once more, the night was punctuated with screams, but they were all but drowned out by the roar of hail and thunder.

They called it the night of fire and ice. Three hundred people died in the tent city that night, and hundreds more were seriously injured. I was one of the few who escaped without as much as a bruise. I managed to set my tent up again, though it was somewhat the worse for wear. My furniture consisted of a rickety chair and a sleeping bag, with a smoky kerosene lantern for light. I had a broom, too, but rarely used it.

The sun started to die after that, or so it seemed to me. It dimmed noticeably, even though there were no clouds in the sky. In the dim corners of my mind, I could remember some long-forgotten teachings about the signs of the end of time, but I pushed them away. The world was just a crazy place, and whatever happened was pure coincidence.

People continued to flood into the camp, many from out in the country. The destruction was general, and thousands now had no homes and no prospects of getting any more. Businesses were as

hard-hit as homes; even the big shopping centers had suffered major damage. West Virginia had never been an earthquake zone, and buildings just weren't built to survive one.

I often wandered aimlessly among the tents, looking for a handout or a shot of booze. It was a forlorn quest, because most people were worse off than I was. As always, crime was rampant; beatings, robberies, and murders were a daily occurrence. A gang of thugs, led by a worthless creep named Rafferty, took over, in the semblance of restoring order. They were in tight with the Security Police, as the local authorities now called themselves. They restored order all right; now no one got beat up or robbed without Rafferty's approval.

One evening, several weeks later, I noticed a crowd gathered around one of tents. I managed to work my way in close enough to see a crude sign painted on a board in front of it: *Madame Sophie knows all, sees all. Palms read, Fortunes told. \$10.00.*

Now I'd seen just about everything. The world really was going crazy. Who would possibly pay good money, scarce as it was, to see a scam artist perform some sort of hocus-pocus? From what I could see, the world was full of such fools. Whoever said one was born every second was a little short of the truth.

I had nothing resembling ten dollars, but there was no charge for standing. For hours, I just stood there and watched as people approached the tent, paid one of the goons outside, and went in. They never stayed more than a few minutes, but many came out with a look of having discovered something important. Some were smiling, others weeping; most just looked solemn.

I stopped one of the customers as he passed by.

"What's all of that about? Is she for real?"

The fellow was unusually talkative. "She's great! She told me everything I ever did, and everything that's going to happen to me. She said I would soon come into a lot of money, and my life would never be the same."

That turned out to be the right, as far as it went. The man won big at a poker game a couple of days later. Unfortunately, his buddies accused him of cheating. He was killed before he left the tent.

I was fascinated, thinking there might be something to all of this. The man didn't exactly get what he expected, but it was close enough. I went back to the tent, and spoke to others. The results were the same, though almost always the final outcome was bad. One night I decided to stay around after the show, and try to get a glimpse of the fortuneteller.

When the show was over, and the guards shooed the remaining guests away, telling them to come back tomorrow. A little while later, a young woman stepped out of the tent. She was veiled, and she had dyed her hair, but I had no doubt who it was.

Madame Sophie was none other than Lisa Camp. Whatever else she was, she definitely wasn't dead.