

The Rise of Rachel Stark

The Rachel Stark Series,
Book One



J . A . Y O R K

The Rise of Rachel Stark

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J.A. York Recommends

Chapter One

The Phone Call

"Oh, god ..."

Sheldon Beasley's hand shook as he hung up the kitchen phone. His mouth fell open, and his breathing spoke of the panic rising in his chest.

"Uh," he said, grabbing his head.
"Uh. Oh, god."

Rodney Stark had spoken in a whisper on the phone, a voice low and full of dread, because he said he had to. Sheldon missed much of what Rodney said, but he got the message just the same, right before

Rodney said he had to hang up, and then did.

On the night that Christians around the world celebrated a birth, Rodney said he was afraid his sister, Rachel, was going to die.

Sheldon leaned into the living room, where four families had gathered, 10 people in all, his best friends in the world, talking and laughing, telling stories, nibbling on cookies and cheese balls, the adults drinking nog, the teenagers sipping cola, everyone marveling at the sparkling 15-foot Christmas tree with lights that spiraled into the room's vaulted ceiling.

"Tabby!" Sheldon called. He tried to sound calm, normal. "Guys! Come here a second."

The entire party had just come in from the garage, where Sheldon's dad had parked a brand new, solid red 1965 Ford Galaxie, Sheldon's combination Christmas and high school graduation present, although graduation was a few months away. Everyone had gushed over the car, patting Sheldon on the back, telling him he deserved it, though secretly Bull Evenshot and Jimmy Blaze, and maybe even Tabby Moore, were jealous. Even the grownups were a bit put off, feeling vaguely guilty

that they had not given their kid such an outrageous present. And they had to admit to themselves they were a bit miffed that Charles and Joan Beasley had made such a show of it all, right in front of everybody. Yet, they all were longtime friends, as close as canned sardines, and they really did think Sheldon deserved it. Whatever uneasiness the unwrapping of Sheldon's gift might have caused was quickly forgotten. The festive air returned even stronger than before as soon as they all filed back into the living room.

Then, suddenly, when Sheldon

hurried into the kitchen to answer the phone, everything went wrong.

Tabby knew the second she heard Sheldon call them into the kitchen that something was amiss. Bull and Jimmy followed her into the room.

"Man, that is one cool set of wheels," Bull said, repeating what he had said earlier out in the garage, but really meaning it this time.

"What's wrong, Sheldon?" Tabby asked.

"Something's wrong?" Jimmy said.

"That was Rodney on the

phone," Sheldon said. "Rachel is going to have an abortion tonight."

Tabby gasped. Jimmy and Bull's mouths fell open. The news took their breath away, even though it did not quite seem real to them.

"Abortion?" Jimmy said. "What are you talking about?"

A peal of laughter went up in the living room, grating on the kids' ears in the kitchen.

After Chante High School's final football game of the season a month and a half ago, Rachel Stark had been raped in the town cemetery, not far from where she lived. She was on her way home

when two guys jumped her. A few days later she told Tabby, Jimmy, Sheldon and Bull what had happened. They urged her to report it to the police, but she never did.

But abortion? Rachel had not told them she was pregnant.

Joan Beasley was playing the piano, and the group in the living room was singing Oh Holy Night.

"That's it. An abortion. Rodney wants us to come out there. He wants us to ... to stop the abortion," Sheldon said. "He said somebody – he called him an 'abortionist' – was coming, and Rachel is scared to death. She doesn't want this, but

her parents apparently are forcing her to."

"Oh my god," Tabby said. "You mean this abortion character is coming tonight?"

"Rodney said it could be any minute now," Sheldon said.

"Any minute? You're kidding!" Bull said. "How long has he known about this? Why didn't he tell us?"

"Rodney said he didn't know until a few minutes ago, and that was only because he overheard his parents talking," Sheldon said. "He didn't even know Rachel was pregnant."

"Wow," Jimmy said. "Look guys,

we have to get out there, like, now!"

"Right," Sheldon said. "Listen, I'm going to say Rodney wants to see my new car, and so we all are going out there."

"Perfect," Tabby said. "Let's go."

Sheldon led the way. "Hey, everybody," he said as they passed through the living room. "These guys can't wait. They want to have a little ride in my Christmas present. And that was Rodney Stark on the phone. He wants to see the car, so we're going to go out to his place for a bit. Back soon."

"You're going out to the Stark

place?" Sheldon's dad asked. It was more like a judgment than a question.

Sheldon gave Charles Beasley a look that was just shy of a stare. "Sure," he said. "Why wouldn't we?"

"Well." Charles cleared his throat. "Uh, there aren't any chains in the car yet. It's snowing out there."

"Not that bad. We'll be fine," Sheldon said.

"You kids be careful now," Joan Beasley said. Several adults echoed her, including Jimmy's grandparents. Jimmy's father was killed in the Korean War, and his

mother died in an accident. Bull also lived with Jimmy's grandparents, because his parents died in a house fire.

"We will, Mom," Sheldon said. "Don't worry."

The teens disappeared into the garage.

Sheldon backed his car out and down the driveway. It was snowing harder now, putting a fresh coat on the street and adding to the snowbanks along the roads that the plows had left a few days ago. Chante was getting the white Christmas that everyone always hopes for and then complains

about.

"How far is it out there?" Jimmy asked from the back seat, where he and Bull sat.

"Four, I don't know, maybe five miles," Sheldon said. "I've only driven past the place, never been in there."

"Sure wish I knew what Rodney meant when he said it could be 'any minute now,' " Jimmy said.

"What's their place like?" Bull asked. "We need to talk about that, I think."

"It's the old Davis trailer house," Sheldon said. "You know, about a mile or so past the cemetery."

"That dump?" Bull said. "God, I don't believe it. I didn't think that place was even habitable anymore."

"You could make a pretty good case that it isn't," Tabby said. "But the rent's dirt cheap, so that's where they're living. I was inside once with Rachel."

"My god," Bull said. "Five kids and two adults in that trailer. How many bedrooms?"

"Two," Tabby said. "The baby sleeps with Mom and Dad. I think Rodney sleeps on a couch in the living room, and Rachel sleeps with her two little sisters in the other

bedroom. In one bed."

"What's the layout of the place?" Bull asked.

"Well, like I said, I've been there only once. But the front door, which is right in the middle of the trailer, enters into, like, a little breakfast nook or something," Tabby said. "Except the little table there could seat only two people, so I don't think they ever eat at it. Stuff was piled on it when I was there. So it's more like a little entryway than a breakfast nook, I guess.

"I would think that 'breakfast nook' is way too fancy a term for that place," Sheldon said.

"Well, right," Tabby said. "Anyway, and then that entryway is part of the kitchen, which is actually just a hallway that leads to the girls' bedroom if you turn right, and leads to the living room if you turn left. The parents' bedroom is just beyond the living room. And there also is a tiny bathroom there. The only bathroom in the place."

"The kitchen is a hallway?" Jimmy said.

"Well, yeah," Tabby said. "And a very short one at that. I mean, there's a refrigerator, sink and an electric stove and a few cabinets all along the exterior wall of the

trailer. And that's it. That's the kitchen."

"Where's the phone?" Bull asked.

"Oh, yeah. It's, uh, it's on that little table in the entryway. I forgot about it because there was so much other junk piled there," Tabby said.

"And is there a back door to the trailer?" Bull asked.

"Well, there is," Tabby said, "but I don't think it works. When I was there there was a five-gallon bucket full of, I don't know, junk. Heavy stuff. Rachel said it kept that door from blowing open. So they never use that door. Besides, it leads out onto a little back porch, which is

piled high with more junk. You couldn't even walk through it."

"OK, and so where is that back door?" Bull asked.

"Well, if you turn right just before you go into the parents' bedroom, that back door is right there," Tabby said.

"OK. Think about this. If you had to guess, where do you suppose they would have Rachel tonight?" Bull asked.

"I'm almost positive it would be the parents' bedroom," Tabby said. "It would almost have to be. I think Rodney would be in Rachel's bedroom taking care of the little

kids. And Rachel would be at the other end of the trailer in the parents' bedroom, close to the bathroom."

"So we would enter the front door," Jimmy said, "turn left into the kitchen slash hallway and walk straight back through the living room and – "

"And you would walk right into the parents' bedroom. Correct," Tabby said.

They fell silent. Sheldon headed toward the winding gravel road that led up and out of the Chante Valley, toward the town cemetery that overlooked the valley and then on

past the Stark place.

Finally Bull broke the silence.

"One more question," he said. He paused. "Do you know whether there are any guns in that trailer?"

Suddenly they were like birds flying in formation, soaring, diving and sweeping across the sky in unison as if they were a single bird. The same thought ran through the kids' minds simultaneously:

What are we doing? What. The. Hell. Are. We. Doing?

"Not that I noticed," Tabby, after a long pause, said in response to Bull's question.

"And you know," Sheldon said,

"I've never heard Rodney talk about going hunting or anything. Or his dad. Have you guys?"

No, they said. But they fell silent again, each struggling with their own fears and doubts. They knew that no hunting didn't mean there weren't guns in the house. Finally, Sheldon spoke.

"I sure hope we get there in time," he said. Then, as if responding to his own remark, he pressed down on the accelerator.

The snowfall was getting heavier.

Chapter Two

East Tennessee

Rachel Stark was lying in bed, the very bed she was conceived in all those years ago in East Tennessee.

It seemed like such a faraway place now, East Tennessee. She was at home there. It would always be her home, no matter where else she might live, she thought. She was born in the house she lived in until they moved to Nebraska last August. If she could, she would move back to East Tennessee in a heartbeat. Especially now, this moment as she lay in Mom and

Dad's bed, she longed to go back home.

She tried to count her blessings, knowing that an "abortion doctor" would be arriving soon. Maybe if she thought good thoughts, it would make everything easier. East Tennessee always brought back good feelings.

The people in the Appalachian Mountains where the Stark family lived, the "hill people," or "hillbillies" as some folks called them, liked to say they lived in a different time zone from the rest of the country. It wasn't a reference to the geographic time zones that

everybody knows about. It was a reference to their way of life.

The hill people lived mostly on farms or in very small towns. Because of the mountains they were somewhat isolated. They never seemed to be in a hurry. They didn't know the meaning of the word stress, because they had never experienced it. They were friendly – "Southern hospitality" was not something they put on when relatives from New York or Washington state paid them a visit, it was something they wore on their sleeves every day. They always had time for you, no matter what.

Yes, the summers in East Tennessee were hot and humid, just like their first summer in Chante, for that matter. But the winters back home were mild or cool, not at all like the snow and subzero temperatures in Chante.

And Rachel missed the fiddle, the harmonicas and the banjos of East Tennessee, and the folk music, the hillbilly or country music you could listen to on the radio any time of day or night. It's where she learned to sing, listening to and singing along with the radio. Even when she was 5 years old, her mother told her she was going to

be a great singer someday. It made her feel good when she thought of that now.

The Stark family lived in a small house in the country in East Tennessee. Dad did odd jobs – small carpentry jobs, house painting, handyman work. And like the pioneers of old, he made most of the furniture in their house, even the bed Rachel was lying in now. Mom made quilts and an occasional piece of pottery. They were honest, hard-working people, Rachel believed, and they were doing the best they could.

The Stark family, like most

families in Appalachia, had always been poor, although Rachel didn't realize it until she was in high school and traveled to a music competition in Nashville. The big city opened her eyes to a whole new world.

But at home, things were getting worse. The Stark family was really two families. For years it was Mom and Dad, Rachel and Rodney. But when Rachel was 14 and Rodney was 12, Molly, now 4, joined the family, then Eva, now 3, and finally Johnny, now 2. In three short years, the family suddenly outgrew Benjamin's ability to support it.

So they decided to move. Dad "heard" that Nebraska was a likely good spot for someone with his skills. The state's economy seemed to be doing well in the wake of World War II. And the picturesque little town of Chante, nestled in the hills in northeast Nebraska, was sure to become a tourist destination, he was told.

But things, as things sometimes are wont to do, weren't working out as well as the family had hoped. Dad was only moderately successful in finding jobs, and when winter set in, the jobs disappeared entirely. He managed to get the family on

the welfare rolls, but getting by was a day-to-day struggle.

Rachel did not want it, this abortion. She pleaded with Mom and Dad. When she was alone she cried.

But five kids were enough, more than enough, she was told. They just couldn't afford another one. Besides, you aren't married. You were raped. You don't want this baby. People will talk. It's the worst thing that could happen to you, and we're sorry. We know it wasn't your fault. But it happened. It's a shameful thing. People will blame you. They always blame the

woman. We would have to move again. We can't afford to move again. You can't walk around the school with a big baby bump. They won't allow it. You would have to quit school. You don't want to quit school. You're so smart and everything. And such a beautiful singer. So this is all for the best, she was told.

But she was afraid, she said. Because women die.

They had no answer for that. Just assurances. Denials. False promises. You won't die. We found this doctor. She's a woman. She understands. She knows what she's

doing. She says it's safe. You won't die. Would we do it if we thought you might die? We wouldn't. You know that. Be brave. You have to trust us.

So in the end she said OK. Like she always did.

But she did not trust them.

Because she knew. Women die.

Rachel had read about back alleys and wire hangers. You won't die? The statistics say yes, they do. Too many die. When abortion is banned, women die, she read. It made sense.

She had nightmares. She was lying in a bed, and what she saw, in

more places than she ever could have imagined, was blood. There was blood on the walls. There was blood on the floor and on the ceiling. There was blood on her hands and arms, and on her Mom and Dad's hands and arms.

But there was no blood on the doctor. Her white smock was spotless. She just stood there looking at Rachel. She was holding a bicycle spoke. Then an umbrella spoke. Then a wire hanger.

So women die, she said, and they had no answer for that.

Rachel told her Mom and Dad: To get to the uterus, where the

fetus is, the wire hanger, or the bicycle spoke, or the umbrella spoke, has to pass through a tiny opening in the cervix. A back-alley abortionist is going into that area blind, and if she doesn't find that opening, she could easily puncture the uterus and maybe sever one of the arteries there, arteries that pump a lot of blood.

They told her to stop talking like that.

Women die. They bleed to death.

And even if the abortionist does find that small opening in the cervix, she has to know how to

exert the right amount of force to get the wire hanger into the uterus. Too much force also could puncture the uterus and cause serious, even fatal, bleeding.

They told her to stop talking like that.

Rachel told her parents: Even if the wire hanger manages to get safely into the uterus, she would be at high risk of dying from an infection in a matter of days. Wire hangers are not sterile. They are not even clean.

They told her to stop talking like that.

So she did. Like always.

She wrote a song instead. Wrote it in her head, like she did with many of the songs she wrote. When she was done, she sang it to herself in a soft, whispery voice as she played her guitar. It was a sweet song, she thought. Not at all like life.

Chapter Three

The Best Laid Plans ...

The Galaxie, flexing its young muscles, sprinted up Cemetery Road like a frightened fawn.

"Look," Sheldon said. "We have to make a plan. What we're going to do once we get there. We're going to be there pretty soon."

"Yeah," Bull said. "Any ideas, Jimmy?"

"Well," Jimmy said. "First, we're going to have to park some distance away from their trailer, so they won't see or hear our car coming up the driveway."

"Right," Bull said.

"So then we walk to the trailer. If there's a strange vehicle there – I think that old black Ford pickup and that 1952 Plymouth are the only vehicles the Stark family has, right?"

"Yep, right," Tabby said.

"OK, if there's a strange vehicle there I'll take down the license number, year, make and model, color, etcetera," Sheldon said.

"OK, great," Jimmy said. "Then Bull, you bang on the door as loud as you can and yell 'police!' "

"OK," Bull said. "And if they don't answer right away, we'll break the

door down."

Silence.

"This is so scary, guys," Tabby said. "So scary."

"Yes, it is scary, I'll admit," Sheldon said. "But remember, we have somebody inside, Rodney, who is on our side. He knows we're coming. At least I'm pretty sure he knows. And if he's in the kids' bedroom, which I absolutely think he would be, you know, keeping the little kids quiet and out of the way, if they aren't already asleep. Anyway, he's a lot closer to the front door than the people in the parents' bedroom at the other end

of the trailer. He's going to open that front door for us immediately. Does that sound right, Tabby?"

"Yes, but then what?" Tabby asked.

"Then Rodney tells us what's going on," Sheldon said, "and ... and then we go from there."

He paused.

"We don't know exactly what we're going to run into, it's true. I wish we did, but we don't. That's a fact. I mean, we could run into an entirely different set of conditions. You know, like maybe people aren't going to be where we think they're going to be. Or maybe they told

Rodney to take the little kids and go somewhere. We just don't know. We're just going to have to think on our feet, and we're going to have to think fast."

"But our objective is simple," Jimmy said, "and it is clear. If there is anything going on in the parents' bedroom, or wherever Rachel is, we are going to go in there and put a halt to it. Any. Way. We. Can. If that means physical violence, then so be it. We have three big guys, maybe four if we count Rodney. At most, there will be two guys in that bedroom, Benjamin Stark, who might or might not stand in our

way, and one other guy, the guy doing the abortion, again who might or might not give us trouble. But I'm confident the four of us can handle it. Five of us, Tabby. You'll be taking care of Rachel."

Silence.

"Tell me again," Tabby said, "why we decided to yell 'police' instead of actually calling the police. It's their job. They know how to do these things."

"Two reasons," Sheldon said. "First, the Chante town cop, poor old Harley Jones, doesn't have jurisdiction up here. We're in Neehawk County now. Harley

wouldn't be of any help anyway. He's totally useless.

"Second, the county sheriff's office is in Neehawk, half an hour away. Probably 45 minutes to an hour away on a Christmas Eve when it's snowing like this. We don't have that much time."

"Yes, but do we have the right to do this?" Tabby asked. "Isn't this a private matter? Who do we think we are? We're four teenagers, and we are planning to break into someone's home and ... and what ... take over? Do we have the right to do this?"

"No!" Jimmy shouted from the

back seat. He leaned forward and pounded his right fist into the palm of his left hand as he spoke.

"We don't have the right! We have the duty! For the love of God, we have the duty! Rachel is our friend. We are probably the only friends she has in the world! She has nobody but us ... nobody but us. We're all she has. We're the only ones she has told about getting raped, and she is being forced to have an abortion she does not want! And we cannot let her die. We cannot. We have to do everything we can – "

A large whitetail buck deer

suddenly darted onto the road and into the path of the Galaxie. Sheldon hit the brakes just as the 3,400-pound car slammed into the deer, which weighed 250 pounds at most.

For a moment, the four did not know what had happened. The loud crunch of metal colliding with living flesh surprised them, but they did not know where the sound came from or what it was.

Then time slowed down.

They watched as the deer rolled up and over the hood. They shielded their faces as the animal slid up, but did not break, the

windshield. They heard the buck skid across the top of the car before it fell spinning to the road. They hung on as the car slid sideways and smacked into deep snow in the opposite side ditch and wound up facing downhill. Then the motor stopped running.

For a few moments, silence.

"Is everybody OK?" Sheldon asked. "Tabby, are you OK?"

"Yes, I think so," she said. "Yes."

"We're OK back here," Bull said.

"Right, Jimmy?"

"Yeah, OK."

Sheldon took a deep breath and exhaled loudly.

"Oh, god," he said. "That was close." He and Tabby hugged.

"Let's get out and see what's what," Bull said.

The snow on the passenger side of the car came up to the bottom of the window, so Tabby and Jimmy had to crawl over to the driver's side to get out. Even then, the snow was nearly knee high.

Bull and Jimmy dragged the dead deer off to the side of the road, leaving a trail of blood.

Sheldon looked at the back of the car, buried in snow.

"That's why the engine stopped," he said. "The exhaust

pipe is plugged up." It was too dark to tell the extent of damage to the front of the car, but Sheldon felt the broken glass of the passenger side headlight.

"Where are we, exactly?" Bull asked.

"My guess is about a mile, maybe less, from the cemetery," Sheldon said. "That means we're about two miles from the Stark place."

"Well, we're never going to get this car out of the ditch. Not tonight anyway," Bull said.

"And we're wasting time talking about it," Jimmy said.

"What are you suggesting?" Sheldon asked.

"C'mon, two miles," Jimmy said. "We can walk this, run this. But we have to hurry. Let's go!"

"Tabby? Bull?" Sheldon said.

"Sure, why not?" Tabby said.

"Let's do it!" Bull said.

Sheldon looked at his Christmas present, trapped and sitting cockeyed in deep snow in a ditch, brand new only a few minutes ago, but as useless to the four of them now as an old, dead clunker. He threw up his hands.

"What's Dad going to say?" he said to no one.

Tabby gave him another hug.

"I'm sorry, Sheldon," she said.

The four were dressed for the winter, but as they started walking up the road they knew they had two, maybe three things, working against them: The uphill climb; the headwinds that blew snow into their faces; and the odds.

Chapter Four

Celeste

A dark blue 1960 Chevrolet Bel Air crept down the unplowed driveway leading to the single-wide trailer where Benjamin and Holly Stark and their five children lived. The driver, a 46-year-old woman, was having trouble following the tire tracks that were rapidly being obscured by a heavy snowfall. She cursed in the darkness, but finally arrived at the trailer.

She got out of the car, a medium-sized black leather case in hand, and walked toward the trailer

door, which was illuminated by a bare light bulb protected from the elements by an overhead tin cover Benjamin had fashioned.

Before she could knock, the door opened, and Benjamin said, "Celeste?"

"Benjamin?" she said.

"Yes, come in," Benjamin said.

He held the door open for her as she entered. They did not shake hands.



Did headlights from a car coming down their driveway suddenly flash across the bedroom ceiling? Rachel caught her breath.

Did she hear a car door slam?

Did she hear Dad talking to someone at the other end of the trailer?

She wasn't in East Tennessee anymore. She was back in the real world, where her hands trembled, and her body shook.



"Here, follow me," Benjamin said. He walked through the kitchen and into the living room. He pointed to the closed bedroom door.

"She's in there," he said.

"I'll talk to her later," Celeste said. "Where's your wife?"

"In the bedroom with her,"

Benjamin said.

"Call her out here," Celeste said.
"We need to talk."

Benjamin walked over to the bedroom door, opened it and mumbled something. Holly came out.

"This is Celeste," Benjamin said.
"This is my wife, Holly."

Holly, thin, pale and red-eyed, as if she had not slept for days, nodded.

"You said you had other kids. Where are they?" Celeste asked.

"In the other bedroom, far end of the trailer," Benjamin said, pointing.

"Are they locked in?" Celeste asked.

"Can't lock that door," Benjamin said. "They're with my son, Rodney. He's 16, and he has orders to keep the kids in the room. You can trust him. He's a good kid."

"Let's hope," Celeste said. Benjamin and Holly sat down on the couch, Celeste on a wooden chair facing them.



Rachel could hear the sounds of conversation in the living room, just on the other side of the bedroom door. She had an insane notion to step out into the room and tell

them to stop talking like that.

But she lay quietly in the bed that she was conceived in all those years ago in that wonderful, happy place called East Tennessee.

But now she was frozen with something that went far beyond fear.

She could scarcely breathe. How strange it is, she said to herself, to think that I am alive, that I am here, by mere chance. That I might die in the exact spot that my life began.



"First order of business," Celeste said. "I need my money up front.

One hundred dollars. Cash only, as you know."

Benjamin cleared his throat. "How do I know you won't take it and run?" he said.

"You don't," she said. "But the only way you are going to get this business taken care of is to give me the money now. Your choice."

Benjamin took a deep breath and sniffed. He reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out a wad of bills.

"I had to borrow this," he said. Celeste shrugged. He handed her the money. She counted five \$20 bills and stuck them in her black case.

"OK. Now. This might sound like a strange question, coming from me," Celeste said, "but why are you doing this?"

"This?" Benjamin said.

"Why do you want your daughter to have an abortion?" she said.

Benjamin stared at her for a moment.

"I think that's for us to know and for you to wonder about," he said.

"Fair enough," she said. "Now you do know that abortion is illegal in Nebraska, right? That you're breaking the law?"

"So are you."

"Touché. How old is your

daughter?"

"Eighteen."

"What's her name?"

"Rachel."

"Does Rachel go to school?"

"She's a senior in high school."

"And she's on Christmas vacation right now, right?"

"Right."

"Do you know who the father is?"

"She won't tell us."

"Was she raped?"

"So she says."

"Who raped her?"

"She won't say."

"Why not?"

"You'll have to ask her that."

"Maybe I will. Yes. How far along is she?"

Benjamin turned to his wife.

"Six weeks. About six weeks," Holly said. Her voice, like her body, was thin and pale.

"OK. Now," Celeste said, placing her hands on her knees. "Do you have any questions for me?"

"Yeah," Benjamin said, "why are you asking us all these questions?"

Celeste shrugged.

"Some of it I need to know, to do my job. The rest, well, I'm a student of the human condition," she said. "I'm always curious to

know why people do what they do. It's kind of a hobby of mine. I find it very interesting."

"What's your last name?" Benjamin asked.

"You'll never know. You don't even know what my first name is."

"Your name's not Celeste?"

"Of course not."

"And so you're not going to tell me where you live, are you?"

"Of course not."

"Have you done this before?" Holly asked, her voice quavering.

"Oh, yes, dozens of times."

"And have you, I mean, did the women, the girls ... did any ... die?"

"Holly, no," Celeste said. "No, I have never lost a client. It's true. I know what I'm doing. I have studied my craft. I have been doing this for 14 years now. I am very experienced and skillful. I am very careful. You don't have anything to worry about, I assure you."

"What will you do to her?" Holly asked.

"Well, I'm going to go over the procedure in great detail with Rachel," Celeste said. "In fact, I'm going to talk her through it. Let's wait till then so I don't have to go over it twice."

"I want ... I want to know now,"

Holly said.

Benjamin put his hand on his wife's shoulder.

"It's OK, Holly, we can – "

"I want to know now!" Holly screamed. "That's my daughter in that room!"

"OK, OK." Celeste raised her hands. "Calm down." She could hear Rachel's younger siblings crying for their Mom in the other bedroom.

Benjamin got up and went into the kitchen.

"Rodney, keep the kids quiet," he said through the closed door. "Kids, it's OK. Mom is OK. You have

to be quiet now." He listened for a second, then went back into the living room and sat down.

"Sorry," he said.

"Let's start over," Celeste said. "Holly, I will give you the short version of what the procedure involves. But first you have to understand this: Screaming does nothing but get people, especially kids, very upset. And you probably have gotten Rachel very upset as well. That makes it much harder, maybe even impossible, for me to do the job you've hired me to do. This is your first and last warning. If there is another outburst like the

one we just had, I will take the money you have already given me, and I will leave. And you will get nothing for your money. Understood?"

Holly nodded.

"Good," Celeste said. "Now. This is a very simple procedure. In a nutshell, I am going to insert a very thin device into Rachel's vagina, and very gently advance it until it reaches the uterus. I then will insert the device into the uterus and, to use a layman's term, break her water. It is possible at that point that Rachel will abort immediately, and the tissue, that is, the fetus,

will be discharged. Usually, however, it is two or three days before she loses the fetus. And that's all there is to it. Very simple."

Silence.

"What is the device?" Holly asked.

Celeste took a deep breath.

"Well, it's not a coat hanger," Celeste said, "if that's what you're afraid of. That is barbaric, and I have never used one. I have found through years of practice that the best and safest thing to use is a common, everyday knitting needle. And I always sterilize it just before the procedure begins.

"Now, unless you have any other questions, why don't you introduce me to Rachel?"

Benjamin nodded. He got up and helped Holly to her feet. They walked slowly to the bedroom door and opened it. Benjamin poked his head into the room.

"Honey," he said, "the doctor is here."

Benjamin turned on the overhead light. Celeste walked through the door and set her bag on the floor by the side of the bed.

"Good evening, Rachel," she said. "How are we doing tonight?"

Rachel couldn't bring herself to

say a word. She was visibly shaking.

Celeste sat down on the edge of the bed. "My name is Celeste," she said. "I'm going to take a few minutes and tell you exactly what is going to happen here tonight. OK?" She put her hand on Rachel's arm.

"You're frightened, aren't you?" Celeste said. "That's OK. That's perfectly normal. You'll feel a lot better once you hear what I have to say.

"First, let me tell you a little about myself. I was telling your parents, and I'll tell you. You have nothing to be afraid of. Everything

is going to be just fine. I have been aborting pregnancies for 14 years, and I know what I'm doing. I've never lost a client, and that is the absolute truth.

"I started doing this because I thought I could save lives. That's right, save lives. I lost two very dear friends in close succession many years ago because their pregnancies were aborted by men who had no idea what they were doing. And they charged exorbitant fees for what they did.

"Well, I have had two years of medical school. I think it is important that you know that. I am

not some junkie off the street who thinks she can just pick up a coat hanger and make an easy buck. I had to drop out of medical school for financial reasons, but even so, I did not get into this practice because I thought it would make me rich. I got into it because I thought it would make me useful. As I said, I thought I could provide a service that would save lives. Maybe I could even have saved the lives of my two friends. In any case, I think I have saved lives. In fact, I'm sure of it.

"One other thing. I am not committed to going through with

this procedure. Not at all. That might surprise you. But if you and your parents were to decide right now that you want to change your minds, I will pick up my case and leave, and you will never see me again. Do you understand that, Rachel?"

Rachel opened her mouth as if to speak. She was groping for her voice, but no sound came forth.

Finally, in a faint whisper that seemed almost otherworldly, Rachel said, "Help ... me ... "

Celeste turned to look at Mom and Dad.

"We've ... we've decided to do

this," Benjamin Stark said in a soft voice. "We've been all through this, time and time again. I'm sorry, Rachel."

Holly Stark wept. Her shoulders shook.

Celeste reached into her case and pulled out a little bottle.

"Well," she said. "We can't do anything right now. She's too tense. Her body is rigid. It wouldn't be a good idea to get started now."

Celeste picked up a glass of water on the homemade wooden chair that served as a nightstand by the bed.

"Rachel," she said, "this is a

tranquilizer. It will relax you and make you feel much better, I promise. Dad, will you help me raise her a bit so she can take this?

"Then we'll wait 20 minutes and see where we are."

Chapter Five

Why Rachel?

"It's the cemetery!" Tabby cried, breaking the group's long silence.

"Where?" someone asked.

"At the top of the hill," Tabby said. "I can see that big iron arch."

"Yeah, I think I see it too," Bull said.

"That means we probably have a little more than a mile to go," Sheldon said. "We're almost there."

"Thank god," Jimmy said. "I'm getting cold feet." He paused. "I mean that literally." He paused again. "It was a joke."

They all wanted to laugh, but no one did. What Jimmy said was too close to the truth.

They hunched their shoulders against the wind. From time to time they broke into a slow jog. But mostly they withdrew into their own private worlds. Like the birds in flight, they all wondered in unison how it came about that they were trudging up a snowy road on Christmas Eve to help a girl they hardly knew, and why they were so drawn to her.

Bull Evenshot

Bull remembered how Jimmy

drove him home after an ice skating party on the frozen Missouri River one Saturday night a couple of years ago.

It was a night he thought about every day, and probably would think about it every day for the rest of his life. But tonight the images were clearer, the pain more intense than usual.



"See ya," Jimmy said as Bull got out of the car.

"Later," Bull said.

Bull looked out the front window of his living room and watched until Billy's taillights disappeared down

the street. He ran his finger across the ice that had formed on the windowpane. He squinted to get a look at the thermometer mounted alongside the window outside: 6 degrees below zero. He wondered whether the cherry vodka he drank at the party would keep his breath from freezing on the windowpane. He blew on the glass and watched it fog up and begin to freeze, giving the street light on the corner an odd, fuzzy glow.

Behind him, the wood stove had nearly gone out. He laid his hand on its flat, black surface. Almost cold. He shuddered. His parents

would not be up for several hours. By then, the house would be an icebox.

He opened the door to the stove and jostled the dying embers with a long iron. He decided there was enough fire left to catch some new wood.

He threw in three, then four, then five pieces of wood. He left the door open for a few minutes to give the fire more air, until the wood ignited. The stove was so full of wood he had to force the stove door shut. Then he went to bed.

By the time the smoke that had drifted into Bull's bedroom woke

him up, the living room was ablaze. When he saw it, he screamed for his parents, whose bedroom was at the other end of the house.

Getting no answer, he retreated from the heat and ran back into his room and closed the door. He flipped the light switch, but there was no power. He had gone to bed mostly dressed, and had only to put on his shoes, which he groped for in the dark and finally found. It seemed to take his shaking hands forever to pull them on.

He could feel the heat on his door. He could smell the paint on it starting to blister. There was no

way out except his bedroom window. He tried to open it, but it was frozen shut. He fumbled in his closet for his baseball bat. He could hear the thunderous roar of the fire. Flames licked around the edges of the door, and he choked from the smoke.

Finally he laid his hands on the bat. He crawled to the window and smashed it. The frigid air rolled in. He could feel the jagged glass cut into his arms, his stomach, his thighs as he pulled himself through the opening and fell out into the snow.

By now, the living room roof had

collapsed, and the fire was moving rapidly toward both ends of the house. Bull, dripping blood, ran through the snow to his parents' bedroom and screamed their names. There was no sign of movement inside.

Suddenly the room exploded in flames. Bull backed up, then ran toward the bedroom window and hurled his body through the glass. He flew into the room and landed at his father's bare feet. Fighting to stay conscious, he grabbed his dad's legs and pulled him outside through the window.

They landed in a heap in the

snow, and Bull was able to drag him several yards away from the house. He started to run back for his mother when the entire roof gave way with a monstrous roar, and the house became an inferno.

Bull staggered back, sank to his knees at his father's side and rocked back and forth, unable to speak. He felt a faint tug on his sleeve. His father was still alive and was trying to say something. Bull leaned down to him.

"It's all right," his dad whispered. "You're a good boy."

The house had burned nearly to the ground when the fire truck

pulled up. Bull, smeared with soot and frozen blood, was still rocking back and forth, chanting an ancient Siouan prayer he did not even know he knew, still kneeling beside his father, whose blackened body lay lifeless, steaming in the midnight snow.



That was the connection to Rachel, Bull said to himself as he and his friends walked up Cemetery Road. He knew it all along. He just had to remind himself. Remind himself of his early life on the reservation, watching young Indian men drink themselves to death, or

kill each other with guns and knives, or rip themselves to bloody pieces in car wrecks. He traveled the same road Rachel did. The dirt road of poverty, of having people look down on you because you're poor, of knowing that death is always nearby.

But no one, no white man, no politician, no one ever, could tell Bull his father was not one of the finest men who ever walked this Earth.

"He told me I was a good boy," Bull said aloud. "Death had him in its grasp, and he told me ... I was a good boy."

Tears streamed down his cheeks and fell into the snow.

Jimmy Blaze

Why, Jimmy wondered, was his life so full of tragic figures?

His father was killed in the Korean War. His death was almost more than Jimmy's mother could bear. She sought solace in strong drink and weak men, and for a long time Jimmy worried that she would die too soon as well. And just when everyone thought she had finally conquered her demons, she did.

Die, that is.

And now Rachel Stark. Trailer

trash. Poor. Pregnant and unmarried. An uneducated father with no particular skills. Welfare recipients. A mother who keeps having baby after baby after baby. Children who come to school in threadbare clothes.

Easy targets for scorn and ridicule, the Stark family. All the ingredients for revilement by people who have a need to feel superior to others, who have a need to blame someone, anyone – poor people will do – for all of the country's ills, are there.

Just like it was for Jimmy and his mother.

It can even be a deadly list of ingredients.

Just like it was for Jimmy and his mother.

Jimmy was afraid he would be too late to save Rachel.

Just like he was for his mother.



In the winter of 1963, Penelope Blaze, Jimmy's mother, looked up at the clock. It was 5:30, quitting time. But she had five minutes worth of filing left to do, so she went ahead and did it. Nobody worried about a minute or two, even an hour or two, one way or the other, at Ray's Feed & Seed,

where she had worked for the past two months as a filing clerk.

The job came open when Edna Conkey, who had worked there for almost 32 years, decided to retire. A month later, Edna died. Must have known it was coming, the townsfolk said, and so she went home to get prepared.

When Penelope heard Edna was about to quit, she mustered her courage and went to talk to Ray Howsley. Ray wasn't that far from retirement himself, and maybe he was a little tired and not capable of good judgment anymore. The townsfolk said that, too, when they

heard Ray gave Penelope the job.

But they changed their minds pretty quickly. Penelope showed up for work every day, on time, never missed a day, never late. And she was a hard worker and a quick learner, Ray said, took to the job like hogs to the trough.

Ray did a fair amount of gloating after that, and the townsfolk said, as they usually did with most things they passed judgment on, that they knew it all along.

For her part, Penelope seemed immensely happy. She loved the work, she told everybody, loved the security of it, how it made her feel

about herself.

And she loved the smell of the feed store, the smell of new-mown hay mingled with the sweetness of early-spring earth. She couldn't get enough of it, she said, and every morning when she came into work she would just walk around the place, drawing in deep breaths.

What's more, she hadn't touched a drop since she started work. She was even talking about going to school to learn a trade, or maybe even become a nurse. Ray encouraged her to do that, said he would help her out any way he could. He admired her, he told her,

for the way she had turned her life around.

Penelope pushed the last file drawer shut and straightened up her desk. It was a quarter to six on a Wednesday. She bid Ray good night and walked out the door.

Penelope headed straight for Robbie's Bar, six doors down from the feed store on the same side of the street. She went in and pulled up onto a barstool. The place was empty save for a couple of regulars who had come in to get out of the cold.

The bartender-owner was a beefy, red-faced giant named Rob

Anderson. He once had tattoos on both forearms that he had tried to have removed. It left him with a pair of ugly patches of scar tissue. He was wiping down the bar when Penelope walked in, and he eyed her for a second.

"Penelope," he said. "Haven't seen you in awhile."

"Hey, Rob."

Rob had heard Penelope was on the wagon. Everybody in town knew it. "You want something?" he said.

"Think I'll have a cigarette."

"Good enough." He picked up his rag and started wiping again.

Penelope lit up, took a deep

drag and blew the smoke straight at the huge mirror back of the bar. She wasn't allowed to smoke at the feed store, not that she would have anyway. The smell there. Nothing like here. Stale beer. Smoke. Vomit. Urine.

She had a second cigarette, then a third, a fourth. Meanwhile, a couple of young men had come in and were playing a game of shuffleboard while they drank draft beer, talked loudly and sang along with the jukebox.

"Hey, Rob," Penelope called. She had been sitting on her bar stool for almost an hour. "Gimme a double."

"You sure, Penelope?"

"Damn it, Rob!"

He shrugged, poured the whiskey and set it front of her. She downed it with one gulp. "Another," she said.

A couple of hours later Rob tried to send her home. "I'm not driving," Penelope said. "I'm walking. So I'll stay here long as I want to."

"Well, you're hardly even walking," Rob said.

"Oh, shut the hell up," she said, and let out a long cackle. She slid off her barstool and staggered to a booth, where a housepainter named Clint Hansen, who had been

watching, joined her. They drank and filled the bar with drunken conversation. They danced to the music of the jukebox and pawed each other and kissed until Rob told them to knock it off. They didn't argue. Rob had been known to place one of his burly paws on top of the bar and vault over it to break up a fight or grab a customer and toss him out into the street.

At midnight, Rob came over to their booth. "I'm closing," he said. "Let's all go home."

"Sounds good to me," Clint shouted. "C'mon, honey, let's you and me go home."

"Not tonight, you big dork, I've got a headache." She cackled again.

"C'mon, now, don't be that way."

Penelope staggered out the door as Rob was turning off the lights. Clint was right behind her. Out on the street, he grabbed her by the arm. "C'mon, now, let's go."

Penelope jerked free and almost fell down. "I said not tonight. I'm going home. So leave me alone."

"You been talking shit all night and now you're going home? What the hell is that?"

"Get outta here. I'm going home." She walked away.

"Bitch! Prick tease!" Clint yelled.

He spun her around and threw a drunken punch that missed Penelope but hit the concrete block wall straight on, shattering several bones in his hand. He fell to the sidewalk and lay there twisting and moaning.

Penelope cackled and staggered away, bumping into buildings as she went down the street, but staying on her feet.

Two blocks from home she passed out and fell into a ditch. She lay there for some time before she woke up and tried to get on her feet. She slipped and fell several

times before she managed to crawl out and stand up.

Her bare hands had turned blue with the cold. The snow swirled around her in gusts. Two or three times she fell to her knees and threw up. She sloshed around in her own vomit as she tried to get up again.

Finally she found herself standing on the sidewalk in front of her house, but she seemed unsure how she got there, unsure where she was. She stared at the house for a second, then seemed to recognize it. She put her hands in front of her as she began to stagger

toward it.

When she got to the concrete steps leading up to the front door, she reached for the railing but missed and fell. Her head popped against a step.

When Jimmy walked out the door to go to school the next morning, he found her iced-over body. A stream of frozen blood the color of her hair led nearly to the street.



"I could have saved her," Jimmy said aloud. "When she didn't come home for dinner that night I should have gone out and looked for her."

Why, why, why didn't I? Why? I waited till morning, and by then it was too late."

The snowstorm was getting heavier, and Jimmy broke into a trot.

"Hurry!" he yelled to his friends.

"Hurry!"

Tabby Moore and Sheldon Beasley

Tabby Moore and Sheldon Beasley walked arm in arm up Cemetery Road. They lagged behind Jimmy and Bull, not because their sense of urgency was waning or because they were physically unable to keep up, but because

they wanted to talk.

Privately.

Not as lovers – this was hardly the time for that. They wanted to talk simply because it was what they did. They began talking with each other almost as soon as they were able to talk. And talking is what had kept them together ever since.

"I got what you were doing when you asked whether we had the right to invade the Stark family's privacy," Sheldon said.

"I knew you would," Tabby said. She smiled at him.

"You just wanted to give those

guys the chance to, well, to confirm, I guess, to confirm, maybe in their own minds as much as to us, that what we're doing is really what they want to do," Sheldon said.

"Well," Tabby said, "Jimmy sure didn't leave any doubt where he stood, did he?" She gave a little laugh.

"No, he was rather forceful, huh?" Sheldon said. "And Bull, he's solid. We don't have to worry about Bull."

"And you? How about you? We've had some pretty wild adventures together, but this one

really scares me. So I could ask myself the same question. What about me? How solid am I?" Tabby said.

Sheldon thought about it for a few seconds.

"I guess at least part of the answer to that," Sheldon said, "has to do with what binds one person to another. What is it about Rachel Stark that makes us want to take what you have to admit is a very, very serious step – barging uninvited into someone's house in the dark of night and essentially telling a mother and father that they can't do – that we won't allow

them to do – what they think is best for their daughter."

"I really don't know Benjamin and Holly Stark all that well," Tabby said. "I think they are decent, hard-working, good people. But although I'm sure they do think an abortion is best for Rachel, I wonder whether they're more concerned about themselves than they are about Rachel. I think they have a selfish interest in this."

"You could be right," Sheldon said.

"As for why I like Rachel so much, that's easy," Tabby said.

"Music," Sheldon said.

"Yes," Tabby said. "Rachel Stark is my soul mate. And she was my soul mate the instant she opened her mouth and I heard her sing that very first note, before I ever said one word to her. She is an incredible, incredible talent. For that reason alone she should be allowed to have a long, long life, because she is going to give so many people so much joy. I'm not guessing that is going to happen, I know that is going to happen.

"So I am going to do whatever I have to do to save Rachel's life, to save that beautiful voice. And I do literally fear for her life. I have been

reading about these wire hanger abortions. They are ugly, deadly things. We can't let this happen. We just can't. Invasion of privacy be damned. I'll go to jail or whatever if that's what it takes."

She paused for a moment.

"What about you?" she said. "Why are you doing this for Rachel?"

"Couple of reasons," Sheldon said. "One reason is you. Your soul mate is my soul mate. I don't have to tell you that.

"The other is Rodney. Now I know that football and sports in general don't have the spiritual heft

that something like the art of serious music does, but – "

"Not true," Tabby said. "The display of physical strength and agility is as beautiful an art form as any other. The Greeks taught us that centuries ago, so don't knock it."

"OK, I won't argue," Sheldon said. "But anyway, Rodney, his considerable talent as a football player aside, is a kindred soul to me, just as Bull and Jimmy are. I knew that when Coach O'Connor named Rodney the starting running back last fall, and Danny Jackson and Oscar Olney started giving

Rodney a bad time in the locker room one night after practice, because he beat them out for the starting job. And he's only a sophomore and they are seniors. It was getting pretty ugly, but Rodney handled it like such an adult. Never backing down, never showing that he was afraid. Instead, he complimented those guys for their hard work on the field, and said he looked forward to helping them make the Chante Lions a better team. He totally disarmed them. It was a beautiful thing to see. That's when I knew. Rodney Stark is a brick."

Tabby smiled and gave Sheldon's arm a squeeze.

"I remember the first day I met Rachel," Tabby said. "It also was the first day I met Rodney. Do you remember that?"

"Oh, yeah," Sheldon said. "Oh, yeah."



Tabby and Sheldon walked hand in hand to school on Sept. 6, 1965, their first day as seniors at Chante High. They had been dating since they were freshmen, but they had been "together" ever since they were 2 years old, next-door neighbors playing in each other's

back yard.

The high school, an imposing three-story red brick building, sits on a hill overlooking the town, which is situated in Chante Valley, through which the Missouri River courses its way south.

To reach the school's front entrance, Tabby and Sheldon had to climb a long, wide flight of concrete steps with galvanized pipe railings. Once inside the building, they walked up two flights of well-worn wooden stairs leading to the assembly hall.

Along the way, they greeted fellow students, some of whom they

had not seen since the end of school last spring. Complain though they might that the summer vacation had ended, the kids were always excited that first day of school, none more so than the seniors.

Chante High is a relatively small school, no more than 50 students in the senior class, and Tabby and Sheldon knew everybody in their class, and almost everybody in the entire school. One thing was for sure: Everybody knew Sheldon and Tabby. Sheldon was a star athlete and scholar. Tabby was the runaway favorite to be the senior

class valedictorian, and she was the leading soloist for the Chante Chanteuses, a girls' vocal group. Both were outgoing and friendly, humble despite their status, funny and easy to talk to, and beautiful. They had it all, it seemed.

So it was that as seniors, Tabby and Sheldon were members of the royalty at Chante High, and they were treated with deference by most students, and even some teachers. If you could count Tabby Moore and Sheldon Beasley among your close friends, something most students aspired to, you were part of an elite circle. When Sheldon and

Tabby took their seats in the senior section of the cavernous assembly hall that first day, one almost expected a standing ovation.

In the back row of the senior class that day, sitting alone in a crowd, was a slender girl with straight dark hair that hung down in no particular style. She wore a plain grey knee-length dress, clean but somewhat worn. Her tennis shoes were grey, her socks black. She spoke to no one. No one spoke to her.

Her name was Rachel Stark, but no one except for a few teachers knew that for several days. She was

an invisible presence. She came and went almost unnoticed.

That changed a few days later when she showed up for tryouts for the Chante Chanteuses.

When Mr. Nelson, the music instructor, called her name, Rachel walked onto the gymnasium stage and stood in front of the microphone, her hands folded at her waist. It was the first time most of the students had heard her name.

"Rachel," Mr. Nelson said, "you're new here, am I right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, welcome to Chante High.

We're glad to have you. Where do you come from?"

"Tennessee, sir."

"Tennessee. What brings you to this part of the world?"

Rachel hesitated.

"Well," she said. "My dad is a ... a carpenter. And, uh, he thought ... he thought he could find work here."

There were chuckles from some of the students.

"Well, good luck to him," Mr. Nelson said. "And good luck to you, Rachel. What are you going to sing for us today?"

"I thought I would sing

Unchained Melody," she said.

More giggles, and a mass rolling of eyes.

Mr. Nelson turned to the girls in the audience.

"I'm sorry, ladies," he said, "but you are being very rude, and I might add, very childish. You're not grade schoolers anymore. You are Chante High School students. Moreover, you are in this room because you want to be a Chante Chanteuse. That is a high honor in this school, and you are expected to act accordingly. So if I hear any more laughing I will clear the room, and there will be no more tryouts

today. Is that understood? Good."

He turned back to Rachel.

"My apologies, Rachel," he said. "Don't let a few ill-mannered people upset you. You have a lot of friends here. So relax. And when you're ready, let me know."

Mr. Nelson sat down at the piano. Rachel adjusted the mike and nodded to him.

What happened next still gives Tabby chills to this day whenever she thinks of it.

Out of this slender young girl, who might have been mistaken for a homeless street urchin, came a powerful voice that soared across

the gymnasium with unearthly beauty.

Rachel did not sing Unchained Melody, she lived it. She lived it for anyone who has ever lost a love, anyone who has never had a love, any mother who has lost a child.

And when she was done, no one laughed.

Instead, they sat in silence for several seconds. Then Tabby stood up, tears streaming down her cheeks, and began to applaud.

The rest of the audience followed her lead, and as the standing ovation continued, Tabby walked up onto the stage. Tabby,

who did not know Rachel Stark, knew nothing about her, had never spoken a single word to her, reached out and gave Rachel a hug.

Mr. Nelson, who had joined the applause, took the microphone.

"Rachel, that was remarkable," he said, "and I think the applause pretty much says it for me, and that is, welcome to the Chante Chanteuses."

The applause and cheers started again. When it was quiet, Mr. Nelson spoke.

"I think this is a teachable moment. Some of you, a few of you, for whatever reason, thought it

was OK to laugh when one of your classmates stepped forward to sing.

"Unchained Melody, if it is sung properly, that is, sung with feeling and with soul, and with style, can be a challenge. You can merely sing the lyrics, or you can bring them up from the depths of your soul. You can reach for the high notes, or you can play it safe. You can follow the script, or you can create your own. That is what makes Unchained Melody such a wonderful song.

"Well, let me say that it takes courage to sing that song and do it well. And if you are a brand new student at Chante High, if you don't

know a soul, if you don't know how things work around here, it takes enormous, enormous courage. Could you do it? Could I? Let's ask ourselves.

"Rachel not only sang with great courage, with her heart and soul; she not only hit the high notes and beyond; she not only put her own stamp on the song. She did one other thing.

"She bared her soul. She opened herself up for all to see. She held nothing back. What you saw today was Rachel Stark ... unchained. (¹ See Appendix) Would that we all could do that when we sing."

Later that day, after school let out and after the Chante Chanteuses had an hour-long practice, during which Tabby and Rachel got to know each other a little, they walked together down those same long, wide concrete steps in front of the school.

When they got to the bottom, Tabby said: "Well, here's where I wait for my boyfriend."

"Sheldon Beasley?"

"That's the one."

"Is he at football practice?"

"They're done, unless they're having a chalkboard session. But he'll be here shortly. I guess it's too

late for the bus. How are you getting home?"

"We don't live far enough out to qualify riding on the bus," Rachel said. "But that's OK, I'll walk. It's not that far."

"Where do you live?" Tabby asked.

"Uh, just up the hill, past the cemetery," Rachel said.

"Rachel," Tabby said. "That's four or five miles."

"Doesn't seem that long."

"Hey, Sheldon has a car," Tabby said. "He'll be here in a minute. Wait here with me and we'll give you a ride home."

"Oh, no, that's OK, Tabby, I can walk."

"Did you walk to school this morning?"

"I did."

"Rachel, that's crazy," Tabby said. "Are you going to have to do that every day?"

Rachel shrugged.

Tabby was dumbfounded.

"You can't do that!" she said. "I mean ... I don't mean ... What I'm trying to say is, it's bad enough to walk that far every day now, when the weather is nice, but this ain't Tennessee, Rachel! We get snow here, lots and lots of snow."

Rachel still resisted, but Tabby kept pressing.

"I really wish you'd let us take you home, Rachel. Then you could meet Sheldon. He's a very neat guy. Wink, wink," Tabby said.

"My brother plays football too," Rachel said.

"You have a brother?"

"He's a sophomore. Rodney," Rachel said.

"Oh, wow," Tabby said. "Now you have to let us take you home. We'll all ride together. It'll be fun!"

Rachel looked at the ground. Her silence came like a subtle warning. Maybe, Tabby thought, she had

pushed things too far. She was reminded of Rachel's clothes, something she had completely forgotten when Rachel started singing. Rachel's family obviously was poor. Maybe, Tabby said to herself, Rachel was too embarrassed to show anyone where she lived.

"You could just drop us off at the cemetery," Rachel said. "We could walk the rest of the way, if that's OK."

"Deal!" Tabby said.

A few minutes later, Sheldon, Bull, Jimmy and Rodney came running down the concrete steps.

"Hey!" Sheldon shouted.
"Whassup, girls?"

After all the introductions were made, the six kids piled into Sheldon's 1951 Ford for the ride up to the cemetery.

"I don't think you've ever had this many people in this old beater," Bull said. "Are you sure you can make it up the hill?"

"We're gonna find out," Sheldon said. "I might have to dump you out half way. You know, to lighten the load."

"Or, more likely, to get him to shut up," Jimmy said.

Bull turned around from his seat

in front and engaged Jimmy in a little slappy-slappy play fight.

"Children, children," said Tabby, sitting in the front seat between Sheldon and Bull. "Behave yourselves."

"Yes, Mommie," Bull said.

"I'll tell you one thing about this old car," Jimmy said to his back-seat mates, Rodney and Rachel, "and let this be a warning to you. Do not, I repeat, do not, ride in this car in the winter."

"Amen!" Bull shouted.

"Because this car does not have a heater," Jimmy said.

"Wrong!" Sheldon said. "This car

does have a heater."

"OK, but it doesn't work," Jimmy said.

"Well, yes, there is that," Sheldon said.

"Plus," Bull said. "Plus. The tires on this car are as bald as Mr. Nelson's head. If we get more than an inch of snow, and we always get way more than that, this car is totally useless. It gets stuck before it gets out of the garage."

"I just might have to lighten the load sooner than I thought," Sheldon said. "Quit picking on my car."

"Snow?" Rodney said. "You get

snow here? Nobody told me that."

"Oh, man, do we get snow here? Is the pope a Catholic?" Jimmy said.

"Let me out, Sheldon," Rodney said. "C'mon, Rachel, we're going back to Tennessee."

"Nope," Sheldon said. "You can't leave until after football season. Unless you're as good of a basketball player as you are a football player. Then you can't leave until next spring."

Rodney's face broke into a wide smile.

"You know," Bull said, "as an adherent of the Native American Drum Religion, I've always

wondered: Is the pope a Catholic?"

"Hey, everybody," Sheldon said. "Did you hear that? Bull has learned a new word. Adherent. He's an adherent."

"I hear that he is an adherent," said Jimmy.

"Where did you hear that?" Sheldon asked.

"H-e-r-e, h-e-r-e," Jimmy said.

"You know," Bull said, "as an adherent of the Native American Drum Religion, I've always wondered: When you say 'hear, hear,' is it 'h-e-r-e, h-e-r-e,' or 'h-e-a-r, h-e-a-r'?"

"Depends on where you are,"

Jimmy said.

"Where-where?" Bull said.

"There-there, don't worry, little boy," Jimmy said.

"If you're talking about rabbits, it's 'hare, hare'," Bull said.

"And," said Sheldon, pausing for effect, "if you're talking about ladies of the evening, it's – "

"Sheldon!" Tabby shouted. "All right already, you guys."

"Gee, a guy can't even have any fun," Sheldon said. "You mean you cannot bear-bear to hear-hear this anymore?"

She punched Sheldon in the arm. Hard.

"Hey, be careful. That's my driving arm. Not to mention my throwing arm," said Sheldon, Chante High's all-star quarterback.

"Yes, do not, I repeat, do not, mess with Sheldon Beasley's throwing arm. Driving arm, OK, but lay off the throwing arm," said Jimmy, a wide receiver who already held the Chante Valley Conference record for most receptions in a single season.

"Football," Rachel said. "Are you guys going to have a good team this year?"

The four boys suddenly became all-business. The football team had

been practicing since two weeks before school started.

"Good, no," Bull said. "Great, yes."

"Really?" Rachel said.

"Really," Bull said.

"Last year we were undefeated and won the conference title," Jimmy said. "And we did it with only one good running back – Bull."

"You need five yards, I'll give you five yards," Bull said. "You need 50 yards, I'll give you five yards."

"In other words, I'm a tough between-the-tackles runner. But I'm no speed demon. We didn't have a speed demon. But if we needed a

long yardage play, we had the best pass-catch combo in the whole state – Beasley to Blaze.

"But this year, you know what? We've got that speed demon. And he's sitting in the back seat of this car. We not only have Beasley, Blaze and Evenshot, we have Stark."

Rodney gave a nervous, self-effacing chuckle.

"And so," Bull said, "we're not only going to go undefeated again and win the conference title again this year, we're going to stampede through our schedule like a herd of wild ... well, bulls."

"And that's no bull," Sheldon said.

"I am so sick of that joke, Beasley," Bull said.

"In this case, it's not a joke. Normally it is, but not in this case," Sheldon said. "Your take on how we're going to do this fall was not a bunch of ... bravado. Well, OK, some bravado maybe, but ...

"I don't want to jinx anything, but almost all of the starters from last year's team are back. They have another year of experience under their belts. They are winners – they know how to win. Defensive line, defensive backs offensive line,

the backfield, receivers, special teams, you name it. We are solid at every position. There are always injuries and everything, you never know what's going to happen. But all things being equal, I think we are going to be unstoppable.

"And Rodney, well, I'm serious, we had a missing piece last year, and we almost lost a couple of games because of it. But you, my man, you are like lightning. I would not want to try to tackle you in the open field. We're really glad you're here. Tennessee's loss was our gain."

"Thanks, man," Rodney said.

"I'm glad to be here too."

"And if you think Rodney is a good football player, wait till you hear Rachel sing. She is absolutely incredible," Tabby said.

"Huh? You know, Tabby, I think there was a slight problem ... actually I think there was a major flaw in your logic, or your analogy, or your sentence structure or something. What you just said didn't quite make sense," Sheldon said. "But I've known you for so long that I was able to decode the message. Also, also, I already heard that Rachel has a drop-dead beautiful singing voice. That bit of

news spread through the whole school like a wildfire. I can't wait to hear you sing, Rachel."

Rachel blushed.

"Hear, hear," Tabby said.



Tabby sighed. "I'm getting worried," she said. "Are we ever going to get there?"

"Yes. We. Are," Sheldon said. "C'mon, let's catch up to Jimmy."

They started jogging. The snow on Cemetery Road was getting deeper by the minute.

Chapter Six

Celeste's Bad Night

"Well, let's see how she's doing," Celeste said.

She and Benjamin went into the bedroom, where Holly Stark had been sitting by Rachel's side, stroking her hand, waiting for the tranquillizer to do its work.

"How are you feeling, Rachel?" Celeste asked. "Are you awake?"

"Umm," Rachel said, opening her eyes.

"She's been sleeping," Holly said.

"That's good," Celeste said.

"That's what we want. Well, let's proceed then, shall we?"

Celeste reached into her leather case, which was sitting on the floor next to the bed, and pulled out a long, narrow cloth bag. She laid it on the bed, then reached back into her case and brought out a small bottle, a cotton cloth and a pair of plastic gloves, which she also laid on the bed.

"OK, Rachel, this is what is going to happen. Are you listening?"

"Yes," Rachel whispered.

"Good. In this bag I have a common, ordinary knitting needle. You might have used one just like

it."

Celeste pulled the 12-inch needle out of the cloth bag.

"You can see it is pointed on one end," Celeste said, showing Rachel the needle, "and it has a cap on the other end. OK?"

"In just a minute I am going to put on these plastic gloves and then take this cloth and wipe the needle clean with the alcohol in this bottle.

"Once I have it nice and clean, I then am going to insert the pointed end into your – "

Suddenly the bedroom door flew open, and Rodney burst into the room.

"Stop it!" he screamed.

He grabbed Celeste by the shoulders and yanked her off the bed. The needle clattered onto the tile floor.

She started to reach for her leather case, but Rodney pushed her into the wall. At the same time, Benjamin grabbed Rodney from behind.

"Rodney, stop it! You stop this right now!" he yelled.

By this time, everybody was screaming at everybody to stop. Rachel, now wide awake, was on all fours on the bed screaming. Holly was hopping around the room

screaming. Celeste was screaming every obscenity she could think of.

Rodney broke loose from his father's grip. "Dad," he yelled, his eyes blazing, "don't make me hit you."

The women's screams grew louder. And now the three young children were standing in the doorway, bawling and screaming. Holly and Rachel grabbed them and hustled them back into their bedroom.

"You're gonna hit me?" Benjamin said. "Go ahead, hit your father, Rodney. C'mon, hit me!"

"You can't do this," Rodney said.

Even he was crying now. "Tell her to get out of here!"

"He won't have to," Celeste said. "I'm leaving right now." She picked up the needle and started to gather her stuff.

"Rodney, you either hit me, or you go right back to that bedroom and stay there. You are not the man of the house here. I am. Hit me or leave. Now which is it?"

"Dad ... "

"Which is it?" Benjamin screamed.

Rodney turned and ran out of the room.

Benjamin turned to Celeste. She

was putting on her coat.

"Celeste, no, wait, Celeste," he said.

"No, you wait, mister," she said. "I gave you one warning, and now you've used it up. Your time's up, and we're done. I'm taking your money and getting the hell out of here."

She snapped her case shut and started to leave the room.

"Celeste ... "

"Forget it!" She headed for the front door. He went after her.

"Celeste! I'll give you more money," he said. "Please."

She stopped.

She took a couple of steps toward him.

"How much more money?"

"A hundred dollars," he said. "It's all I have in the world."

"In cash?"

"Yes."

"Let's see it."

Benjamin walked over to the back door, which was held shut by a five-gallon bucket full of his carpentry tools. He had set it up against the door to keep it from blowing open. He dug down into the bucket and pulled out a small paper sack.

He handed it to Celeste. "It's a

lot of little bills, but it's all there. It's actually a hundred and two dollars," he said.

Without a word, she started counting it. When she was finished, she said:

"You're right. Here's your two dollars."

Benjamin shrugged. But he took the money.

"OK," she said. "I'll do this under one condition – that you lock those kids in that room. I don't care how you do it. You can nail it shut. You can put a piano in front of it, I don't care. Just do it! Because this really is your last chance, mister. Do I

make myself clear?"

Benjamin nodded. "Yes."

Celeste put the bag of bills in her case and snapped it shut.

"Now get Rachel and her mother back in here, then do what you have to do to that door," she said. She turned and walked into the bedroom.

Rachel and Holly were dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs when they came back into the bedroom, but they said not a word.

Rachel climbed into bed. Celeste pulled a couple of long straps out of her case.

"I'm going to strap your arms to

the bedposts," Celeste said. "It's standard procedure. It's for your own protection. If you start flailing your arms about during the procedure all sorts of bad things can happen."

Rachel's eyes darted about the room as Celeste strapped her to the bedposts. When Celeste was done, she took the knitting needle out of her case.

Then she took the blanket off the bed and pulled Rachel's nightgown up above her waist.

"Mom, I want you to grab one foot and Dad you grab the other. That's right. Now, pull her legs

apart. Good. Now put your other hand on her hip bone, that's right, and hold her down. It's important that she doesn't start switching her hips and moving around, struggling.

"OK, Rachel, we're going to start now. I'm going to insert the needle in you."

"Aren't you going to sterilize it?" Benjamin asked.

"I've lost all patience with you people," Celeste said. "The needle is clean enough. Now I'm going to talk you through the entire procedure, Rachel, so you'll know exactly what's going on. Everybody else, keep your mouth shut."

"Here we go."

Celeste poked and prodded for an opening.

"She's as dry as a 90-year-old woman," Celeste said. She reached into her case and brought out a small jar of petroleum jelly. "Maybe this will help."

"OK, Rachel," Celeste said a minute later. "You're lubricated now. Here we go."

Celeste leaned down to insert the needle – and was rewarded with a stream of urine in her face.

She jumped back and nearly fell down.

"Shit!" she cried. "Damn!"

Fifteen minutes later, after she cleaned herself up, unstrapped Rachel and gave her two tranquillizer pills, and after Rachel went to the bathroom, then helped her mother change the bed sheets, a sullen Celeste sat in the living room with Benjamin, waiting for the tranquilizer pills to work their magic.

"This is the worst night of my life," Celeste said.

Benjamin wanted to choke her. He wanted to tell her what a hateful witch she was.

But he kept his hands at his side, and his mouth shut.

Chapter Seven

The Bullies

Rachel went through the lunch line at the Chante High cafeteria, then looked for a place to sit down. She didn't see anybody she really knew, but she spotted a table that had room for her.

"Hi," she said to the girls at the table, "mind if I sit with y'all?"

"Y'all?" said a girl named Julia Jackson. "You sound like a Tennessee hillbilly."

There was laughter all around. Rachel went to look for another table.

"Y'all come back sometime, y'heah?" Julia said as Rachel walked away. More giggles. "Trailer trash," someone yelled.



Rachel sat down at her desk in the assembly hall. She had just finished her biology class in Room 14, and now she had an hour to review the homework she had done the night before for her U.S. history class.

She lifted her desk top, which doubled as the lid over a drawer that contained all her school supplies, and sometimes books and other items.

The drawer was full of wadded up toilet paper. She rummaged through the paper. Her pencils, pens, erasers – all her school supplies – were gone.

But worst of all, her history homework was missing.



The PE class that Thursday was over, and most of the girls had already showered and gone home. Rachel stayed late, waiting for everyone to clear out. She ran laps around the gym, did some stretching exercises, ran some more laps. Anything to kill time.

Tabby usually would be in the

class with Rachel, but Tabby had sprained an ankle earlier in the week and was excused from PE that day. Nobody bothered Rachel when she was with Tabby. Without her, Rachel wanted no part of the girls' shower room. It was the prudent thing to do, considering how things had been going lately.

Rachel waited till she was certain she was alone before she headed for the showers. Sure enough, the place was empty. She walked to her locker and opened it.

There were all her clothes, sopping wet in a pile on the floor. They smelled of urine, as if they

had been dumped into the toilet, and the toilet was then used.

She sat down on one of the wooden benches in the locker room and began to cry.

Minutes later she walked down the hall to the janitor's supply room, where she found a large plastic bag. She tossed her wet clothes into the bag, slung the bag over her shoulder and left the building.

It was a warm fall day. The football team was still on the practice field. Their first game of the season was Friday. Ordinarily she might have waited for Rodney

and caught a ride with Sheldon or maybe Jimmy up to the cemetery.

But she was in no mood to talk to anyone. She wanted to wait until she had thought things through. Maybe she would talk with Tabby tomorrow, before the football game. All she knew at that moment was that she needed someone to tell her what to do. She didn't know what that might be, but something. And talking it over with Tabby seemed like a good place to start.

The bag of wet clothes was heavy. But Rachel ran the five miles up Cemetery Road to her place without stopping.



Her mother's mouth fell open when Rachel walked in the door.

"What ... what?"

Rachel told her what happened.

"Oh, that's too bad, honey. I'm sorry. People can be so mean," her mom said.

"Well, I might report this to somebody. I'm not sure what I'll do," Rachel said.

"Now you're just upset, honey, and I don't blame you. But you're new to this school, and to this town. The kids will get used to having you around, you'll see. They'll be fine. I wouldn't stir up no

trouble."

"Mom, it was the first time I might agree with you. But there has been other stuff, and I don't .. it's just not fair."

"What stuff?"

"Just ... stuff. Mean stuff. I don't want to talk about it."

"Honey, let me wash those clothes and hang them on the line for you. You'll feel better tomorrow."

Rachel headed for her room.

"Rachel?"

"What?"

"Sit down a minute, honey, and have a talk with your mother. I can

tell you're upset."

They went into the living room and sat at the table.

"Honey, don't start no trouble. Please. Back in Tennessee, where we lived, it was different. People there were ... were like us. They understood, you know, they understood ... us. There weren't no rich folks there. There wasn't nobody who thought they was better than us. They were just folks, like us.

"But it's different here. People are different here. And it's going to take them awhile to get used to us. And us to them. But we will. And

they will. You'll see. There's good people all over. And there's good people here.

"Why, the way you talk about that Tabby. And the way Rodney talks about that Sheldon, and Bull. And who's that other one?"

"Jimmy," Rachel said.

"Yeah, Jimmy. Especially Jimmy. Why, I never heard you kids talk about other kids the way you do those kids, like they was the best friends you ever had."

"They are, Mom, but – "

"See? There's good people everywhere. You just gotta give 'em a chance."

Rachel rubbed her face with both hands.

"OK, honey? What do you think?"

"I'll sleep on it, Mom."

"That's my girl."

"Right now I have to get out of these gym clothes and take a shower," Rachel said.

"You do look a little sweaty," her Mom said with a smile. "Toss those clothes out the bathroom door and I'll wash them too."



At 2 p.m. the next day, Friday, the Chante Lions took the field for their first football game of the season. The opponent was the

Ashland Tigers, one of the Chante Valley Conference teams that most people thought might be able to challenge Chante for the conference championship.

The Tigers won the coin toss and opted to go on defense.

Standing in the end zone waiting for the kickoff was Rodney Stark. The Tigers had hardly heard of him and knew little about him. All they knew was that he was a sophomore and brand new to the Chante team. So they weren't particularly worried about him. Had they known more, they might not have kicked the ball right to him.

Rodney took the kickoff 2 yards deep in the end zone. He came straight up the middle, broke one tackle, then another, cut to his left, jukeed one defender, leaped over another and streaked untouched down the sideline for a touchdown.

It was a school record 102-yard kickoff return for a touchdown.

On Rodney's very first play as a Chante Lion.

On Chante's second possession, Rodney weaved his way through defenders for a 33-yard touchdown. Later in the first quarter, Bull rammed it home from 8 yards out. In the second quarter, Sheldon

threw two touchdown passes to Jimmy. By halftime the score was Chante, 35, Ashland, 0.

Chante's second- and third-string players, including running backs Danny Jackson and Oscar Olney, played most of the second half. Even so, the final score was 56 to 0.

Coach O'Connor awarded the game ball to Rodney during the coach's post-game talk to the team in the locker room.

The coach referred to Rodney as "102 yards and a cloud of dust Stark," a phrase that quickly spread all over town.

As had become their habit at the

end of most school days, Sheldon, Tabby, Bull and Jimmy escorted Rachel and Jimmy up to the cemetery.

The football game was replayed on the way up, but when Sheldon pulled into the cemetery, Rachel asked him if he would turn off the engine.

"Uh, sure," Sheldon said. He paused. "What's up?"

Tabby was the first to sense something was wrong.

"What's the matter, Rachel? Tell us," she said.

Rachel bit her lower lip, fighting back the tears.

"I told myself I wasn't going to cry," she said. "Now look at me."

Jimmy put his arm around her.

"I'm really sorry, Rache," he said. "But, honestly, we didn't know you were an Ashland fan."

The explosion of laughter blew the tension in the car to smithereens, and Rachel was laughing the loudest.

"Oh, I love you guys – no, I love y'all so much. I can't tell you." She wiped her eyes, but they were tears of laughter.

"All right. I'm OK now," she said. "I'm going to get serious again in a minute, and I'm not going to cry

this time.

"I was going to apologize for being such a downer right after you had such a great game today, but then I realized that with friends like you, apologies aren't necessary."

"Absolutely not," Bull said.

"The thing is, I need your help. I feel like I'm a crybaby and a tattletale, but I need you to tell me what I should do."

Then she told them the whole story. The snubs, the taunts, the giggles, the pointing, the put downs, the angry stares, the thefts, and then yesterday, soaking her clothes in the toilet and throwing

them on the floor of her locker.

"Good lord almighty," Sheldon said. "I can't believe it."

"Me neither," Jimmy said.

"You know, I kind of thought something like that might be going on," Tabby said. "But I didn't know ... I mean, there are some real jerks in this school, but usually if you just ignore them they'll go away. Because all they want is attention."

"And you've had some of this too, haven't you, Rodney?" Bull said.

"Well, with a couple of guys, yeah," Rodney said. "But nothing I can't handle. Most guys have been

really nice."

"But this is serious stuff," Tabby said. "I mean, stealing stuff out of your desk? Throwing your clothes in the toilet? That's criminal. I mean it. Rache, if I were you I wouldn't wait. If I were you I would go the principal's office first thing Monday morning and tell him everything you just told us. And if you want, I'll go with you as your support person. This just makes me as angry as hell."

Rachel nodded. "I think you're right. And I would love it if you came with me. I'm not sure I could do it alone."

"It makes all of us angry, Rache," Bull said. "And if you need character references or something, we are here for you."

"Can someone explain something to me?" Sheldon asked. "From everything I heard, Rachel, you knocked 'em dead at the Chanteuse tryouts. I mean, people were crying, standing ovation, all that. Everybody in school was buzzing about it, for a week or more. I think they would have elected you student body president or something. Then all of a sudden things turned sour. What happened?"

"I'll tell you what happened," Tabby said. "I'll tell you exactly what happened. The girls who got accepted into the Chanteuses, and all of us who already were members, love Rachel. Actually, I think most of the kids at school like Rachel. The problem is that the girls who didn't get accepted into Chanteuses hate her. They're blaming her for their own failures. There's probably what, 10 or 15 people, out of maybe 200 kids in high school, who are causing all the problems for Rachel. I think I could name most of them. Really."

"That's pretty much what

happened to Rodney with Danny Jackson and Oscar Olney," Bull said. "Rodney beat them out for the first-string running back spot. And now they're trying to get revenge. Or at least they were. Which kind of makes me think. I'll probably get into big trouble for saying this, but sometimes I think girls are bigger bullies than boys. You know what I mean?"

"I don't think you'll get into trouble for saying that," Tabby said. "I think you could make a very strong case for that."

"Well, I agree with you, Tabby," Rachel said. "But then I'm not

exactly an unbiased observer."

"You know what it is, don't you? Everybody?" Jimmy asked. "You know what we're dealing with, don't you?"

"The human pecking order."

"Yeah, there are some jerks in this school. But they don't pick on Tabby, because her dad is a banker and has been the mayor of Chante for years. They don't pick on Sheldon, because his dad owns the Ford dealership in town. Heck, they don't pick on anybody who has money, or whose parents have money. They don't pick on me anymore, because I'm 6 foot 4 and

a big football jock. They don't pick on Bull anymore, because he's 6 foot 2 and weighs 240 pounds and is a big football jock. And after what Rodney did on the football field today, I don't think anybody is going to pick on him anymore.

"So who do they pick on? They pick on poor people. How do I know this? Because I see it every day, yes. But also because I've been there. And Bull has been there.

"I had an alcoholic mother. She drank herself to death because she just couldn't face life without my father, who was blown up by a land mine in the Korean War. We never

had any money, because my mother spent it all on booze. So people called me names. And they told me to my face that my mother was a drunk, a slut and a whore. And it got to me so bad that I could hardly talk. Literally. I stuttered for years.

"And Bull committed the sin of being born an Indian. Having brown skin is bad enough, but don't you know that all Indians are drunks and lazy wards of the government, just waiting for their monthly handout so they can drink, get in fights and kill each other? Let's pick on them. Let's kick them while

they're down.

"So why do they pick on the poor? Because they think the poor are lesser beings. Because it makes them feel superior. Because they need somebody to blame for everything, and the poor are easy targets.

"So yeah, Rache, we're with you. We are so with you."



At 8:30 Monday morning, Rachel and Tabby walked into the principal's office.

"Good morning, Mrs. Wright," Rachel said to the principal's secretary, who was seated at her

desk.

Mrs. Wright looked up at them.

"Good morning, girls. Hi, Tabby," she said. Tabby nodded.

"Is Mr. Peterson in?" Rachel asked. "We'd like to talk with him for a minute."

"He's at a faculty meeting," Mrs. Wright said. "But he should be here soon. Have a seat."

"Have you met Rachel Stark, Mrs. Wright?" Tabby asked.

"Oh, no, I haven't," the woman said. "Glad to meet you. Are you related to Rodney Stark by any chance?"

"He's my brother."

"Oh, my. Well, he is some football player."

"Yes, he is. I'm very proud of him."

"As you should be. And Sheldon is some football player too, Tabby."

"Yes, he is. I'm very proud of him."

They all laughed.

"Well, have a seat, girls. Mr. Peterson will be here shortly."

Mrs. Wright went back to her work. Rachel and Tabby sat down on the vinyl couch near the door to the hallway.

"I hate waiting," Rachel whispered. "I get cold feet very

easily."

"Is that why your leg is bouncing up and down?" Tabby asked.

The girls giggled.

"Believe it or not," Tabby said, "this is my first time in the principal's office."

"You're kidding."

"Not kidding."

"You must be a really good girl."

"No, I just never get caught."

The girls giggled.

"Me too," Rachel said.

"You too what?"

"This is my first time in the principal's office." Rachel paused. "How come when you say that, it

almost feels like you're saying, 'This is my first time in detention'?"

"Yeah, or, 'This is my first time in a police lineup'."

The girls giggled.

The next thing they heard was Mr. Peterson's booming voice.

"Good morning! Are you girls waiting to see anyone in particular?"

"Yes sir, you," Rachel said.

He laughed.

"Well, come on in."

The girls followed Mr. Peterson into his office.

"Have a seat," he said. He stood behind his huge walnut desk.

"Now, Tabby I know. But I haven't had the pleasure of meeting this young lady."

"I'm Rachel Stark."

He reached across his desk and shook hands with Rachel.

"Rodney's sister?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wow. Where did that guy learn to play football like that?"

"I don't know," Rachel said. "Guess it just comes naturally."

"Exactly. The moves he makes on that field, you can't coach that. You gotta be born with it."

"Guess so."

"I also understand, Rachel, that

you have a beautiful singing voice."

"Yes, she does, Mr. Peterson," Tabby said. "Unbelievably beautiful."

"That's what Mr. Nelson tells me. That's wonderful." He leaned back in his chair, put his fingertips together and said:

"Well, what can I do for you girls today?"

Rachel took a deep breath, then told him the whole story. He nodded from time to time as she talked, but his face displayed no emotion.

When Rachel finished, he leaned forward and put his hands on his

desk.

"And just what is it you would like me to do?" he asked.

Rachel was floored. It was a question that came right out of the blue, and she had no idea how to respond. But Tabby came to her rescue.

"Mr. Peterson," Tabby said, "I'm with Rachel today because I have personally witnessed some of the things she is talking about. There are girls in this school who are trying to make her life miserable. I know that for a fact. I could give you names, and I will if you want me to. But it seems to me, and we

have talked this over with Sheldon Beasley, Jimmy Blaze and Bull Evenshot, and they agree, that some of the things that have been done to Rachel are criminal.

"Stealing, for example, is a crime. Taking someone's clothes out of their locker and throwing them in a toilet, if it is not a crime, it should be. And the same goes for harassment.

"Frankly, Mr. Peterson, I am shocked that you would ask Rachel what it is she would like you to do. We came here for help. We thought you would tell us what you – "

"Now wait a minute, young

lady," Mr. Peterson said. "Hold on just one minute." He got up and closed his office door, then sat back down.

"Okay. Listen. Rachel, you are new to this school and new to this town. You have a southern accent, a Tennessee accent, and I'm not saying there is anything wrong with that, not at all, but it makes you different from everybody else here.

"So you are new and different. What is not different is what you say you are going through. It's a rite of passage, is what it is. And it happens in every school in the nation, probably in the whole world,

every time there's a new kid on the block.

"It may not be comfortable for you at the time, but it will pass, and you will survive. Trust me. What you have to do is work things out with these kids. I can't do that for you. In fact, these things are pretty much completely out of my control. It's up to you. I wish I could help you, but I can't. If I could, I would.

"I'm sorry you're having a bad time. But it will get better soon. It's just a rite of passage, that's all."

Rachel and Tabby looked at each other. Rachel got up to leave.

"Thanks for your time, Mr.

Peterson," she said.

"You're welcome," he said. "Now have a great day."

The girls started to walk out of the office. Then Tabby turned around and said:

"Mr. Peterson, not to beat a dead horse, but I should give you fair warning. You might be the boss in this school, but my father is the mayor of this town. And he has friends, good friends, on the school board. Keep that in mind, sir."

"Are you threatening me, young lady?"

"My name is Tabby. It is not 'young lady.' Threatening you? No.

I'm just telling you that if you won't deal with the bullies in your school, we are going to take your advice and handle this situation ourselves.

"Now you have a great day, sir."

The girls walked out of Mr. Peterson's office and closed the door behind them.



"Oh my god," Rachel said after she and Tabby were out in the hallway. "I guess maybe I am different from the kids around here. I could never have talked that way to a ... to an authority figure like Mr. Peterson."

"Are you angry with me?" Tabby

asked.

"No, I don't think so. I really don't know what I am. Except in shock."

"Well, I'm kind of used to talking to adults that way," Tabby said, "because there are so many of them who are just plain stupid. I couldn't believe my ears when he asked you what you wanted him to do about it. I mean, is he the principal, or is he not the principal?"

"Yeah. I'm just afraid of what he'll do now," Rachel said. "And I don't even know what that might be. But I can see him calling your dad and telling him you threatened

him. Do you think he might even kick us out of school?"

"On what grounds? Because we called him out for not doing his job? And don't worry about my dad. He's used to me shooting my mouth off. Nothing will come of that."

"Are you sure?"

"Listen, Jimmy called me last night. He came up with this idea. I think it's a terrific idea, a brilliant idea, but I didn't mention it to you because Jimmy asked me to hold off until he had a chance to talk with Bull and Rodney and Sheldon. Maybe he called them last night or is talking to them today. Anyway,

he will tell us the deal when we give you and Rodney a ride up to the cemetery after football practice today."

"Can't you even give me a hint?" Rachel asked.

"Well, all I can say is that we got the power on this one, Rache. We kids do. Not Mr. Peterson, not even the school board. We do. We got the leverage. And if we have to use it, we will."

"What if I don't like the plan?" Rachel said. "It's my butt that's on the line. Do I have veto power?"

Tabby was silent for a moment.

"Actually, no," she said finally.

"Because this problem is bigger than just you. Jimmy made me realize that. You're not the only kid who's getting pushed around in this school. You might be getting pushed harder than most, but you're not the only one. Not by a long shot.

"What Peterson said about you being new and different and that's why kids are picking on you is BS. Total BS. There are kids in this school getting picked on who have lived here their whole lives. Good kids. Good kids who are so beat down now that you hardly notice them anymore. Because they're

hiding most of the time.

"So along comes you, this girl with an incredible, angelic voice. With a voice and a talent like you have, you can't go unnoticed, you can't hide. So you are the perfect poster child for what needs to be done. Jimmy says this is an actionable moment, because the business about kids treating other kids like shit has got to stop. And he's right."

The class bell rang, and the girls went their separate ways.



Later the same day, after Mr. Peterson called Phil Moore, Tabby's

father, and told him of his conversation with Tabby and Rachel; after Phil Moore called Tabby at school; after Mr. Peterson also alerted Ed Reynolds, the president of the Chante School Board, as to what the two girls said; and after football practice, the six kids climbed into Sheldon's old Ford for the ride up to the cemetery.

"OK, you got the floor, Jimmy," Tabby said as Sheldon pulled out of the school parking lot.

"Well, first of all, you should know that Sheldon, Bull, Rodney and I unanimously agreed that we

should put this plan into action. In fact, each one of them separately said yes without me even asking them whether they would go along with the idea.

"Second, it is our thinking, that is, the thinking of the four guys in this car, that you should be left out of this thing altogether, Rache. We don't want this to become known as a plan to rescue Rachel Stark. We want to focus on how to stop the bullies at Chante High, whether they be boys or girls, from picking on kids that they, for whatever reason, don't like. There is no need, Rache, for your name to ever even

be mentioned.

"OK, here's the plan. We four guys, and just us four guys, nobody else, are going to go to the principal's office first thing tomorrow morning and ask to see Mr. Peterson and – and – Coach O'Connor.

"If Mrs. Wright says Peterson is not in, or he's too busy, or for whatever reason he's not able to meet with us, we will wait. We will skip classes and wait there all day if we have to. Sooner or later he has to come out of his hole. And when he does, well, we'll grab him. So to speak.

"And here's what we'll say. We'll ask him first of all to call Coach O'Connor into the office. Then, when the coach is there, we'll tell them we think there is a serious problem with bullies at Chante High. And we, all of us, have some examples of that we can talk about.

"Then we'll ask, in a very non-threatening manner, if he will take action to correct that situation. If he says there is nothing he can do, we'll say yes there is.

"We'll say Mr. Peterson, first of all, you have a bully pulpit. Perfect name for it, huh? What we suggest you do, Mr. Peterson, is call a

special assembly to talk about the bullying problem. Give examples that have been brought to your attention, without using names, of course. And tell the kids that such behavior will no longer be tolerated.

"Then second, announce that a special committee will be formed to deal with the problem. This committee will consist exclusively of students – 8, 10, 12 – however many. And they will be anonymous – no one will know who these committee members are. And their job will be to report directly to Mr. Peterson whenever they witness

incidents of bullying.

"The trick is that this committee will not only be anonymous, it also will be a phantom committee. In other words, it won't really exist. The idea is that if bullies just think there are spies in their midst, and they don't know who those spies are, they might be less inclined to do their stupid stuff.

"And third, Mr. Peterson, you can bring the parents into this. You can ask them to talk with their kids about the problem, tell them how wrong it is, etcetera etcetera.

"OK now, here's the kicker. Are you ready for this? If Peterson won't

go along with the plan, or even if he just dances around the question and says he'll have to think about it, or talk to the school board, or whatever stalling tactic he might come up with, we tell him this:

"If you don't, at the very least, call a special assembly within the next two days – that's tomorrow and Thursday – and talk about the bullying problem and tell the kids that you plan to take action to eliminate that kind of behavior at Chante High, we – Sheldon Beasley, Bull Evenshot, Jimmy Blaze and Rodney Stark – will quit the football team immediately and not return

until you do."

Rachel gasped.

"That's how serious we are about this," Jimmy said. "But let me tell you something. You could threaten to eliminate the music program at Chante High, and nothing would happen. You could threaten to cut out the drama department, and nothing would happen. You could drop math, history, science, art, you name it, and no one would say a word.

"But don't you dare fuck with the football program, or there will be riots in the streets. Don't you fucking dare."

"And if they call our bluff," Sheldon said, "they will find out just how serious we are. Every one of is absolutely committed to quitting the football team if we have to. And everybody knows that without the four of us Chante would not win another game this year. That's not braggadocio, that's a fact. But if we have to hold the football program hostage to get what we want, that's what we will do."

"Because what we want," Rodney said, "is for the school, for the adults, to do the right thing, and for the kids to do the right thing."

Tears welled up in his eyes.

"Football is a game," Rodney said. "It's just a game. Rachel is my sister. Somebody has to stand up for her, and for kids like her. If I don't, if we don't, who will?"

Rachel gave him a hug. They cried on each other's shoulder.



The next morning the four football players met with Mr. Peterson and Coach O'Connor.

"You're kidding," the coach said when the players laid out their ultimatum. "That's crazy. Sheldon, Jimmy ... are you ... are you guys nuts? You can't be serious."

"Does it sound like we're kidding, coach?" Bull said. "Do you really think we would be having this meeting if we were kidding? C'mon, coach."

"Well, it's crazy," the coach said, growing angrier by the second. "It's crazy. Do you know what you're doing? Do you know how upset and angry people in this town would be if you guys quit the team? They'd probably string you guys up. This is unreal. I can't believe this is real."

"It doesn't have to happen, coach," Sheldon said.

"No, it doesn't. Not if you guys pull your heads out of your ass," the

coach said.

"What's important to you, coach?" Jimmy asked.

"What do you mean? What the hell are you talking about?"

"No, really," Jimmy said. "What's important in your life? If someone were to ask you what's important to you in life, what would you say?"

"What's important to me is that you stick to your word. What's important is that you don't let people down. You don't betray their trust. You don't walk out on your teammates, who are counting on you. That's what's important to me. Now you tell me what's important

to you."

"The exact same thing, coach," Jimmy said. "The exact same thing. I look at all the kids in this school who are bullied every day, made to feel awful about themselves, to feel alone and unloved, abused and tossed aside ... I know how they feel, coach, because I used to walk in their shoes. And I made a commitment a long time ago that I would stand with these people against the bullies. And I'm going to stick to my word. I'm on their team. I will not betray them. I will not let them down, because I know they are counting on me. They're

important to me. Football is not. As Rodney said yesterday, football is just a game."

The coach jumped up from his chair.

"Football is not just a game!" he shouted.

"OK, coach, sit down, please sit down," Mr. Peterson said, "before things get out of hand."

The coach sat down. He loosened his tie.

"Well," Mr. Peterson said, "we have listened to you boys this morning, Coach O'Connor and I, and I think we heard your message loud and clear. You stated your case

very eloquently.

"Unfortunately, I think your case also was badly overstated. I don't think what you call bullying is nearly as bad as you make it out to be, and I certainly don't think it is nearly as widespread as you would have us believe."

"Sir, that's just not true," Sheldon said. "We can cite you many incidents of bullying if you want to hear them."

"Actually, I have heard quite enough, Sheldon. I have seen a clique form at Chante High that involves you boys, maybe a few others and a couple of girls. I think

you trying to protect that clique, and nothing more.

"Now, you boys might think that what you are doing is a noble thing. But I'm telling you it is a stupid, selfish thing that you would regret for the rest of your lives. Don't embarrass yourselves, your parents, your classmates, Chante High and this town and its people by trying to pull off this utterly ridiculous stunt!

"Now, Coach O'Connor expects, and I expect, you four to be at football practice today, at football practice tomorrow, and on the field at 2 p.m. Friday for the kickoff against the Rockford Wildcats."

He stood up. His face grew red, and his eyes narrowed. He pounded his desk and shouted.

"Do. I. Make. My. Self. Clear?"

The players looked at him for a moment, and rose from their chairs in unison. Then Rodney spoke for the first time.

"You and coach can expect all you want. But whether we are on the field Friday is completely up to you."

They turned and filed out of the room.



Without a word, the four went to the boys' locker room, removed

their game and practice uniforms, cleats and all, from their lockers and took them to the sports equipment room, where they put them in neat piles on a long wooden table.

There were three methods of communication in Chante in 1965: Telephone, telegram, and tell a student.

"On to the next phase," Sheldon said to Tabby when he met her in the hallway 15 minutes later. "Peterson didn't budge. Neither did we. We have turned in our uniforms. Spread the word."

Jimmy, Bull and Rodney dropped

the same message here and there around the school.

Within minutes, the sports equipment manager, a student, went to the sports equipment room to see whether there was any truth to the rumor.

Sure enough. There the uniforms were. The rumor mill suddenly got hotter, and phones started ringing all over the school.

Steve Peterson, the principal, heard from Ed Reynolds, the school board president.

"What the hell is going on, Steve?"

"There's nothing to it. Coach and

I met with them this morning, and they're full of big talk, but there's no way they're going to quit the team."

"But somebody said they've already turned in their uniforms."

"It's a bluff. It's not going to happen."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

Calls to Mr. Peterson from other members of the board followed in quick succession. He gave them all the same assurances.

Coach O'Connor got calls from the same people, and he stuck to the party line, albeit with

considerably more profanity than Mr. Peterson.

Then the coach heard from Bob Davies, who, as the coach of the Rockford Wildcats, was 45 miles away.

"Ted," Coach Davies said, "I just heard that we're suddenly favored to beat you guys Friday."

"Well," O'Connor said. He heaved a big sigh. "I sure hope that's not the case, Bob, but, you know, at this point I'm not sure of anything."

"Really?"

"Yeah. You know what happened that kind of scared me?"

When Steve Peterson lit into them and told them, ordered them actually, to get ready to play Friday, that he expected them to do that, they just got right up out of their chairs, one of them said you can expect anything you want, and they walked right out of the room. I think they went straight down to the locker room and turned in their uniforms."

"Wow."

More grist for the mill. And it bounced back to Chante with the speed of light.

Meanwhile, Tabby was calling some of her old contacts at the

Neehawk News and the radio and television station in the area. The floodgates now were open.

Reporters and television cameras showed up at Chante's football practice that afternoon, and the first thing they noticed was that Sheldon Beasley, Bull Evenshot, Jimmy Blaze and Rodney Stark, the sophomore phenom from Tennessee, were missing.

Sheldon, Bull, Jimmy and Rodney took Rachel and left school early and drove up to the cemetery to avoid the media. But Tabby stayed behind to be their spokeswoman.

"I can confirm," Tabby told reporter after reporter, on camera and off, "that Sheldon Beasley, Bull Evenshot, Jimmy Blaze and Rodney Stark have left the Chante High football team."

Will they return in time for the game Friday?

"That depends on the school administration," Tabby said.

She tried, with only moderate success, to explain why the players had quit.

"Bullying?" said one reporter. "What's that?"

Others indicated that one student "teasing" another, or

playing a prank, did not seem like a good reason to do what the four Chante players were doing.

She gave some examples of what was going on at Chante High, but most of the reporters just shook their heads.

Moreover, Tabby was battling the administration for the hearts and minds of the news media. Mr. Peterson and Coach O'Connor told reporters they were hopeful that the players would return to the team by Friday.

And the school released this statement to the media:

"Chante High has a proud history

of outstanding academic and athletic achievement. For a few football players, however well-meaning they might be, to suggest that some Chante students are now being 'bullied' by others, is not only misguided, it is patently untrue.

"The administration and football coach Ted O'Connor are hopeful that these players will soon return to the team. They have been urged to do so. If they do, no punishment awaits them. On the contrary, they will be treated with the utmost respect by their teammates, just as the vast majority of Chante students are treated with respect

by their peers.

"The student body at Chante High is a happy family. Despite this temporary 'bump in the road,' it will continue to be so."

The entire statement appeared not only in the local media, but in the Omaha and Lincoln newspapers as well.

Coach O'Connor, complaining that the "defectors" had already hurt the team, ran the reporters off the field and banned them from attending the Thursday practice. Meanwhile, he moved running backs Danny Jackson and Oscar Olney, as well as second-team

replacements for Sheldon and Jimmy, into the first-team lineup. Wednesday's practice did not go well, "to say the least," O'Connor told reporters afterward.

Things were not going so well for the school administration either. An angry school board convened an emergency session, closed to the public, in the principal's office.

Most of the board members blamed Mr. Peterson for "letting things get out of control." But a late-arriving member said she had been listening to a couple of call-in programs on the radio, and that a wide majority of the callers

supported the administration, and that many of the callers referred to the four football players as "spoiled brats."

Based on that news, the board finally decided the best option for the school would be to "stonewall it," and hope that the players would change their minds at the last minute.

And yet, the whole town was on edge.

This, after all, was football.



The four "spoiled brats" plus Rachel had been monitoring the events on Sheldon's car radio as

they sat among the headstones. They alternately laughed, moaned, cursed, shouted and shook their fists at the radio, cheered when they heard Tabby, and booed when they heard Mr. Peterson or Coach O'Connor.

"I think," Sheldon said when it seemed that they had heard enough and probably should go home, "that we should all be sick tomorrow."

There was unanimous – and instant – agreement.

Rachel, who secretly was relieved when she did not hear her name mentioned on the radio, and

Rodney got out of the car and started their walk home.

Sheldon turned his Ford around and drove back to Chante. He dropped Bull and Jimmy off at Jimmy's grandparents' house. After Bull's parents died in a house fire a couple of years ago, he had lived with Jimmy.

When Sheldon got home, there was Tabby, sitting on the front steps of her house, which was next door to his.

"Hi, good lookin'," he said.

"Hi, Shel," she said. He sat down beside her. She gave him a kiss.

"How were things up in the

cemetery?" she asked.

"Oh, very interesting," he said. "It was so great, hearing you talk on the radio. We all cheered." She laughed.

"Well, what do you think?" Tabby said.

"I think," he said, "that we are going to win this thing."

"So do I," she said. "But I'm glad to hear you say it."

"And ... and we all decided we should not go to school tomorrow. And I don't think you should either," he said.

"I'm even more glad to hear you say that."

She paused.

"Do you think they are going to give in tomorrow?" she asked.

"Depends. On how much pressure they get. But I would guess they'll wait till Friday. They're waiting for us to blink, and so they're going to wait until the very last minute. But I can tell you we're not going to blink. Just in case you were wondering."

"Never for a second."

"So I think what happens is that they'll wait until Friday morning, and then they'll call an emergency assembly, make up some lame, cockamamie story that they have

gotten new information and that they're going to investigate how widespread the bullying problem is blah, blah, blah.

"If they do that much, then the four of us will suit up and go out and kick the Rockford Wildcats' asses."

"Yay! Go Lions!" She paused. "I know how much of a sacrifice this is for you, Sheldon. I know how much all of you love to play football."

"Yeah, well. Like Rodney said. It's just a game. And that's how you have to think of it. It really is just a game."

"I know. But yet ... "

"Anyway, even if they do back down, that's not the end of it. They'll have to carry through. They can't just say they're going to do something and then not do it. So we'll have to keep the pressure on. They maybe won't do exactly what we suggested. They might even have some better ideas, who knows? But as long as they do something, maybe life will get easier for Rachel."

"And for a lot of other kids."

"Yeah. For sure. By the way, I've been meaning to ask, what did your Dad say to you about your little talk with Mr. Peterson?"

Tabby laughed.

"Well, he did say that I could have accomplished the same thing without being disrespectful of Mr. Peterson. And he was right, I'll admit. I kind of lost my temper there for a minute. And maybe someday I'll apologize to Mr. Peterson. Dad said I should.

"But then he also said that now that I had started something I should be sure to follow through with it. And I said I would.

"I thought sure he would say I shouldn't use his name to bully someone, but he didn't say a thing about that. And I did name-drop to

Mr. Peterson, saying my Dad was the mayor blah, blah, blah, which was probably not a good idea, and I'm not going to do that again.

"But – and this is the best part – Dad said he told Mr. Peterson that I was 18 years old and therefore almost legally an adult. And he said he lost control of me when I was 12 years old, so he sure as hell couldn't control me now at 18."

Sheldon threw his head back and roared.

"Really?" Sheldon said.

"Really. Mr. Peterson probably didn't think it was funny, but I sure did."

Sheldon laughed again, and Tabby joined him.



But the day wasn't over.

Sometime after dark a pickup with its lights off drove slowly up the street and stopped in front of Sheldon and Tabby's homes. Then two figures in the bed of the truck started throwing raw eggs and lighted firecrackers at the houses.

"You'd better play ball, Beasley," one of them shouted, "or next time we'll set your house on fire!"

The pickup then roared off down the street.

Similar incidents took place

elsewhere. Grandpa Simpson's house, where Jimmy and Bull lived, was egged. Crowds rallied in front of Steve Peterson and Tom O'Connor's homes, chanting "Let's play ball! Let's play ball!"

Demonstrators also showed up at the football field, where they TP-ed the goal posts, and in front of the high school, even though there was no one to demonstrate to in either place.

Oddly enough, no egg-throwers or demonstrators showed up at the Stark residence.

Most of the demonstrators appeared to be adults, and in many

cases alcohol seemed to be fueling the passion for football.

Harley Jones, the town cop, and his three part-time deputies didn't have the resources or the qualifications to deal with rowdy crowds. So the state patrol was called in, and preparations were made to make sure that the peace was maintained on Thursday and especially on Friday, game day.

State police kept an eye on Sheldon's home and the others who drew the attention of the demonstrators.

So when Sheldon woke up Thursday morning, he was surprised

to see a state patrol car sitting on the street in front of his home. He and Tabby spent the day picking up egg shells and other debris on their lawns, and trying to clean the raw egg off their houses.

Thursday passed without incident. But in Steve Peterson's office at Chante High, the air crackled with tension. When the school board convened for another emergency meeting at 9 p.m., there was not a dry brow in the place.

After considerable finger pointing and unrestrained profanity, plus a complete lack of civility, the board decided that if the four

blankety-blank football "traitors" did not change their minds by 10 a.m. Friday – a scant four hours before the scheduled kickoff – Steve Peterson would call a special assembly at the high school and give in to the traitors' demands.

He would do so, of course, in a way that did not seem like he was giving in to the traitors' demands at all, but only that he was responding to "new information" that the administration had uncovered that showed that bullying, indeed, was becoming a severe problem at Chante High.

There was not a single soul in

Chante, or in the state of Nebraska for that matter, who believed a single word Mr. Peterson said. But they didn't care, so long as the four traitors rejoined the team and the game was played.

Which is exactly what happened.

Peace and order were restored.

Football was once again king, and all was right with the world.

And the final score was Chante, 48, Rockford, 3.



And so all was forgiven. As most people predicted, the Chante Lions were runaway conference champions. They were undefeated

and never scored fewer than 40 points in any game. At the beginning of the season they were ranked the No. 1 team in their class in the state, and they were ranked No. 1 when the season ended.

The Lions piled up a number of individual honors as well. Sheldon, Bull, Jimmy and Rodney were first-team All-Conference selections, and were first-team All-State selections as well.

Rodney, even though he was only a sophomore, was named Running Back of the Year in the Chante Valley Conference. He also won the Brogan Trophy, given

annually to the Chante Valley's best football player of the year, as voted by the conference coaches. Rodney beat out Sheldon, who placed second in the voting, for that honor. Sheldon couldn't have been happier for him.

Progress was made on the bullying front as well. The school made plans to hire a psychologist to teach the students how to recognize bullying, what to do about it if they witnessed it, and how to get help if they were victims of it. Every student would be required to take 30 hours of training. And a set of materials also

would be created for students to take home to their parents.

Chante's anti-bullying program was the first of its kind in the state, and in fact was the only such program in Nebraska for decades.

And even though the anti-bullying program was not to get its official start until the beginning of the 1966-67 school year, Steve Peterson organized a group of volunteer ministers, doctors and educators to give weekly lectures on problems that often arise for high school students as they interact with their peers. The lectures began immediately, and

student attendance was mandatory.

Whether it was the lectures, the promise of an anti-bullying program for next year, or Mr. Peterson's bully pulpit, life for Rachel and other kids at Chante High who had been victims of bullies, became easier.

In fact, Rachel got Tabby, Sheldon, Bull, Jimmy and Rodney to go with her to Mr. Peterson's office one morning to thank him for his anti-bullying efforts.

"I'm the one who should thank you, and I do thank you," Mr. Peterson said. "You woke me up to a problem that I didn't want to admit existed. I owe you a huge

debt. All Chante High students, present and future, owe you a huge debt."

It was a feel-good morning. Tabby even apologized for the disrespectful way she talked to Mr. Peterson during their first meeting.

"No need to apologize. I had it coming," he said. "It was part of the wake-up call. Please don't worry about it."

When their meeting ended and the kids were walking out the door, Mr. Peterson called to them.

"Oh, Rachel?"

Rachel turned to him.

"Yes, sir?"

"Thank y'all for coming."

The kids laughed. Mr. Peterson gave them a wide smile.

Later, the kids decided Mr. Peterson was a pretty good guy after all.

Chapter Eight

The Rape

After the final football game of the season in mid-November, the first night game in Chante High's history (lights had been installed at the football field just days earlier), Rachel and Tabby joined Sheldon and the guys for a hamburger and fries at Larry's Diner.

Despite playing under the lights for the first time, and in a light snowfall, it was another blow-out win for Chante – a 63-14 clobbering of Eastview High that sealed a second straight unbeaten season

for Chante.

The restaurant was packed with kids who had been at the game and were celebrating the win and the unbeaten season. It was so festive and noisy that it was hard to hear Little Richard belting out "Tutti-Frutti" on the jukebox.

Before he sat down, Bull went from table to table, booth to booth, shaking hands, slapping backs, hugging the girls, and delivering the same line he had delivered after every game of the season:

"Just another day at the office, folks. Just another day at the office."

When he got back to the table, he said:

"I just realized. That's the last time I'm ever going to say that line. It hasn't sunk in yet, and when it does, I'll no doubt turn into a slobbering, blubbering idiot."

"Wait a minute," Jimmy said, "I thought that's what you already were."

"You're lucky I left my tomahawk at home. But one of these days, paleface. One of these days ... "

Samantha – Sam – the waitress, appeared at their table and took their order.

"OK, is that it?" she said.

"Just one more thing, Sam," Bull said.

"Bull, don't do this," Jimmy said.

"No, it's OK. Sam, answer me this. Have you ever, like, bought a record or got one as a present or something?"

Jimmy put his head in his hands and groaned.

"Well, sure. Hasn't everybody?" Sam said.

"Well, what did you do with it?"

"What did I do with it? What do you mean?"

Jimmy was giggling.

"Shut up, Jimmy. No, Sam, this isn't a trick question or anything.

When you got the record, what did you do with it?"

"Brought it home?"

"No, but after that."

"Unwrapped it?"

"No, after that, after that."

"Well ... I suppose I listened to it."

A triumphant grin spread across Bull's face.

"Well, listen to it again, Sam."

Sam knitted her brow, shook her head and walked away.

"I've always wanted to say that, you know?" Bull said, still grinning.

Jimmy was laughing so hard he almost slipped under the table.

"Bull," Rachel said, "the line is, 'Play it again, Sam.' "

Bull's face fell to the floor.

"Oh my god, it is, isn't it?" he said. He smacked his forehead. "I am an idiot. I am a total idiot. My life has been destroyed."

"That's OK, Bull," Rodney said. "It was close enough for a town this size."



Next up was basketball.

After they had eaten, the six of them climbed into Sheldon's car to take Rachel up to the cemetery. Rodney was going to spend the night at Sheldon's house, because

the four boys had talked Coach O'Connor into opening the gym for them so they could shoot a few hoops Saturday morning.

The quick drive up the hill was spent mostly laughing at Bull's faux pas. They were still laughing when they dropped Rachel off. She waved goodbye and watched Sheldon's car disappear down the hill.

It was a clear night, and the full moon was bright enough to leave shadows. Rachel pulled her coat collar up against the November cold. The snowfall, she noted, was heavier on cemetery hill than it was down in the Chante Valley.

She had taken only a few steps when she was knocked down from behind with such force that she almost lost consciousness.

She tried to understand what was happening as two men dragged her face down to a spot behind a mausoleum, where they were out of sight from the road.

As her vision started to return, she saw that the men were wearing ski masks. Neither spoke.

Scream, she remembered reading somewhere. Screaming is your best defense. But in a cemetery there is no one to hear your screams. Her head was

starting to clear, and suddenly she knew what was happening.

She started to tell them to stop, but one of the men slapped her face. When she tried to scream he slapped her face again and again till she nearly blacked out. The other man pulled up her dress and pulled down her panties. She struggled, but they were like a pack of wolves devouring a lamb.

One of the men knelt, pulled her arms above her head and pinned them to the ground. The other spread her legs apart.

"Hey, you're making snow angels, honey," one of them said.

"Shut up!" said the other.

Rachel lay still, her cheeks burning with pain. Blood from a cut on her forehead rolled down into her left eye. Do not resist, her semiconscious brain told her. They might kill you if you do.

Then the man who spread her legs apart raped her, and she could smell the alcohol on his breath.

They switched positions, and the other man raped her.

Then they stood up.

"Tell that stinking little brother of yours – "

"Shut up!" the other man said. They ran off, and she heard their

car tires spin and spit gravel as they sped off down the hill.

Rachel lay there for some time, watching the moon, wondering whether it looked the same at this moment in Tennessee. Maybe she could go home to Tennessee now. It was better there.

Something bad happened. What was it? She couldn't remember. Minutes ago she was riding in a car with her friends. Yes. They were laughing. They were joyous. They were cherishing each other, happy to be with each other, reveling in their friendship.

And then they disappeared. Just

like that. She wished Tabby and her friends would come back and get her, pick her up in their arms and take her home. Maybe if she waited just a little longer they would come. Maybe if she lay quietly in the snow, among the headstones and the dead, a miracle would happen.

So she closed her eyes and tried to sleep, but the pain kept her awake. And over and over and over she heard the men talking.

"Hey, you're making snow angels, honey."

"Shut up!"

"Tell that stinking little brother of yours – "

"Shut up!"

"Hey, you're making snow angels, honey."

"Shut up!"

"Tell that stinking little brother of yours – "

"Shut up!"

They weren't men. They weren't men at all.

They were boys.

And she recognized their voices.

Danny Jackson and Oscar Olney.



Rachel didn't know how long she had been lying in the cemetery snow when she suddenly realized that she was very cold. Then she

remembered what she had read somewhere years ago: If you are in a situation in which you might freeze to death, do not let yourself go to sleep, like your body might want you to do. Because you won't wake up.

When she tried to get on her feet, she noticed her panties were still dangling from her right leg. She pulled them off and stuck them in her coat pocket. Then she struggled to her feet, but was not quite certain where to go.

She looked around and finally saw the path her body had made in the snow. She followed it to the tire

tracks not far away, then followed the tracks out of the cemetery. When she got to the main road she remembered where she lived and how to get there.

But she couldn't remember what had happened and why she was lying in the snow behind the mausoleum.

The cloudless sky allowed the full moon to light the way for her, but it also allowed whatever warmth there was on earth to escape into space, and the temperature had long since dropped below freezing.

The road at this point had

always seemed so level when she rode home in her Dad's pickup, but she knew she had a long, uphill walk home. She was unaware that blood was still slowly draining down her legs, running into her shoes, soaking into her dress and dripping onto the road, where it quickly froze. Each step was painful, and she stopped often. Sometimes she bent over and placed her hands on her knees, waiting for the pain to subside. Sometimes she kneeled on the frozen gravel until the pain from kneeling was worse than the pain in her groin.

She thought about Jimmy. She

wished he was there to make her laugh, to tell her everything was going to be all right. It kept her going. To think about Jimmy.

Suddenly she heard a high-pitched whine in her ears that seemed to come from the middle of her head. A wave of nausea came over her. The road seemed to buckle, and she felt herself being tossed about.

She crashed onto her knees, and she felt the frozen stones tearing into her flesh. She pitched forward, and she could not find her hands in time to keep her face from smacking into the gravel.

There she lay, in the middle of the road, unconscious.

When she awoke, she saw that she was at the driveway to her home. She crawled across the road and started down the driveway on her hands and knees. She tried several times to get up, but fell each time.

Finally, cold, tired, bleeding and confused, she managed to open the door to the trailer and crawl inside. She shut the door behind her. Everyone was asleep, so she crawled into the living room and huddled in front of the little electric heater there.

She jerked and gave a little scream when the living room light came on.

"I heard you come in, Rache – oh my God! Rachel, what happened?" her mother said.

"Benjamin! Benjamin! Come here!" Holly screamed. She kneeled beside Rachel. "Honey, your face. Your dress. You're bleeding. What happened?"

Benjamin came running. The little kids were crying. "Shut up!" he yelled at them. "Shut up and go back to sleep!"

Shut up.

Rachel remembered.

Hey, you're making snow angels, honey. Shut up!

Tell that stinking little brother of yours – Shut up!

"They raped me," she said softly.

"Who did?" Benjamin demanded.

"Oh no. Oh no. Oh my god," Holly said, sobbing.

"Holly, for god's sakes, get ahold of yourself. Get a washcloth and clean her up. Look at her face." Holly ran into the kitchen.

Benjamin put his arm around Rachel, who was still sitting on the floor in front of the heater.

"Honey, tell me what happened.

Who raped you?"

Rachel tried to get up but couldn't.

"Rachel?"

She turned to him.

"I don't know. They were wearing ski masks."

"They? There was more than one?"

"Two of them."

"They both raped you? Both of them?"

"Yes. I think so."

"Oh my god. Where was this? Where did it happen?"

"In the cemetery. I remember. Jimmy and the rest ... dropped me

off there. Like they always do."

Holly returned with a wet washcloth. She kneeled on the floor beside Rachel.

"You have a cut on your face," Holly said as she wiped the blood.

"I hurt," Rachel said.

"I'll put a bandage on it, sweetheart," Holly said.

"Not my face," Rachel said. "It's not my face."

Holly turned to look at Benjamin. "We have to get her dress off and stop the bleeding," she said.

"Then I'm taking you to the hospital," Benjamin said.



Forty-five minutes later they were in the Neehawk General Hospital emergency room. Rachel slept the entire way, her head on her father's shoulder as he drove.

The ER physician, Dr. Green, carrying a clipboard, came out after he had finished examining and treating Rachel to talk to Benjamin, who was alone in the waiting room. The doctor was tall and grandfatherly, with a shock of silver hair and a benign expression. His appearance immediately put Benjamin at ease. They shook hands, and the doctor sat in the

padded chair next to Benjamin.

"She'll be all right; she'll be fine," the doctor said, looking over the papers attached to his clipboard. "She does have lacerations to the hymen and bleeding consistent with that of a young woman who has been raped. She has lost some blood, but it has been stopped.

"Her pulse was a bit elevated, which is quite understandable. Rape is a very traumatic experience, and from the laceration and scrapes and bruises on her face and the lacerations and abrasions on her hands and knees, it appears her

rape might have been particularly violent. We gave her a very mild sedative, mostly to help her sleep tonight. There is no reason she can't go home now. But first I wanted to talk to you in private for a minute. There are a few things you should know.

"Rachel is considerably calmer than most rape victims I have treated. I noticed that even before we administered the sedative. But that is not abnormal. There is no typical response among rape victims. Many women are agitated, even hysterical. Others, like Rachel, are calm.

"But don't let Rachel's calm demeanor lull you into thinking that everything is OK with her. She may be calm on the outside, and in turmoil on the inside. In other words, she might be hiding her emotions, repressing them. And that is not a particularly good thing by any means. It can lead to severe depression and other serious psychological problems in the long term. So keep a close eye on her and her behavior. Keep in close touch with her, especially in the first few weeks. And make sure she knows that you and her mother and the rest of the family are there for

her, whatever her needs might be. She is going to need all the love and support she can get.

"Tell me, is Rachel in school?"

"She's a senior at Chante High."

"I recommend you keep her out of school for at least a week. Maybe more, depending how she's doing. How you clear that with the school is up to you. I can only tell you, and you didn't hear this from me, that many teenage victims of rape suddenly are stricken with severe cases of the flu that can keep them out of school for up to a week. And if they need more time, they can get mono. You know what I mean?"

He gave Benjamin a smile.
Benjamin smiled back.

"But seriously ..."

Dr. Green lifted the clamp on his clipboard and pulled out a pamphlet.

"We don't get an excessive number of rape victims here," he said, "but we give all of them this pamphlet. It has a lot of information that can help you and the family make sure Rachel recovers from this trauma as quickly and as completely as possible. It can answer a lot of questions you might have in the weeks and months to come.

"I mentioned that you and your wife should keep a close eye on Rachel in the beginning, especially."

He opened the pamphlet and ran his finger down an inside page.

"Here is a list of things you might watch for. Vomiting, nausea, anxiety, trembling, nightmares, crying, disorganized thought, etcetera, etcetera. And if you run into something that you can't handle or need help with, it shows you where you can find professional help."

He handed the pamphlet to Benjamin, who thanked him.

"Any questions?" Dr. Green

asked.

"No, no I don't think so," Benjamin said.

"All right," the doctor said. "Let's go to Rachel's room. I have one more matter I want to talk about with both of you. And then you can take her home." He gave Benjamin a smile, and Benjamin followed him down a long, shiny hallway.

Rachel's eyes were closed when the doctor drew the curtain aside and he and Benjamin entered her room. She was lying on a bed under a white cotton blanket that had been heated before it was placed over her.

Benjamin put his hand on her shoulder. "How do you feel, Rachel?" he asked.

She opened her eyes. "OK. I'm OK." She closed them again.

"We have given her an anti-biotic to help ward off any infection," the doctor said. "If she has any pain, any over-the-counter painkiller she's not allergic to should take of it just fine." He moved closer to Rachel's bed.

"Rachel?" he said. "Are you awake?"

She opened her eyes. "Yes."

"I need your attention for just a minute. And then your Dad is going

to take you home. OK?"

"OK."

"I am going to urge you, Rachel, with the support of your Mom and Dad, to consider reporting the rape to the police. And this is a question for both of you, Benjamin. Have you given any thought to that?"

Benjamin turned to Rachel.

"Honey?"

"I ... maybe in a day or two. I'm a little confused right now," Rachel said. She wanted to talk to her friends. She wanted to talk to Jimmy. They would know what to do.

"Understandable," Dr. Green

said. "But don't wait too long. The legal and law enforcement systems, not to mention juries, tend to look askance at women who wait to report a rape. Even waiting a week is considered a long time. Plus, your memory of the circumstances and the incident itself will fade in time. That's perhaps a good thing for you, but not so good if you want to build a good case against your assailant."

"Will the hospital report the rape?" Benjamin asked.

"Some hospitals do. But it is this hospital's policy only to recommend that you report the rape to the police. We will not report the rape

unless you ask us to.

"Even though it takes courage to report a rape, and even though it can be a tough, painful, scary process to go through, we strongly urge rape victims to do it. Rapists who don't get caught and punished tend to rape again and again. That's why it's so important for rape victims to tell the police what happened.

"It's the only way to stop these monsters."



Rachel slept till noon the next day, Saturday. Benjamin gave the younger kids strict orders not to

wake her and not to run around "making noise like a bunch of hooligans."

When she awoke, her first thought was not about the rape. It was about a dream she had just before waking. In the dream she was walking through their living room in her pajamas when suddenly a border collie puppy came bounding toward her, wagging its tail furiously and wearing a broad smile.

How wonderful, she thought. But where did it come from? They had a dog, a mutt they called Pudge, in Tennessee. But he died of old age

not long before they moved to Nebraska. And how they missed him, old Pudge. And now they had a new dog, it seemed. She kneeled and reached out both arms, waiting for the pup. But before she could touch him, she woke up.

What a nice dream that was, she thought, lying on her back and staring at the ceiling. She only wished she could have petted the dog. She pulled the cover back and swung her feet onto the floor.

Or did that really happen, she asked herself. Do we really have a new dog?

A wave of excitement shot

through her. She stood up, and wondered for a second why her knees hurt. She opened the bedroom door and walked quickly into the living room.

Holly was sitting on the couch, darning a pair of Benjamin's socks.

"Good morning, honey," she said with a smile. "How do you feel this morning?"

"Mom, did we get a new dog?"

Holly knitted her brow. She shook her head slowly. "N ... no. No. What ... why ..."

Suddenly Rachel remembered. The images came flooding in. Riding up the hill with Sheldon and

her friends. The thump to her back that nearly knocked her unconscious. The bright moon over the cemetery as she lay among the headstones. The whiskey breath of Danny Jackson and Oscar Olney. The fall on the road that tore up her knees and knocked her out. The long crawl on her hands and knees down the driveway to the trailer. The kindly silver-haired doctor standing over her, telling her she was going to be all right.

"It was just a dream," Rachel said. "But it seemed so real."

It seemed so very, very real.

She sat down beside her mother

on the couch and laid her head on Holly's shoulder. Why, she wondered, why did this happen to me?

Holly put her arms around Rachel and rocked slowly back and forth.

"My baby. My baby," she said, fighting back the tears.



Monday morning, Benjamin Stark called Chante High School and told Mrs. Wright, the principal's secretary, that Rachel was quite sick with the flu and wouldn't be at school that day, and maybe even for the next several days.

"Just following doctor's orders," he said after he hung up.

Rodney, who did not know about the rape until Sheldon brought him home Saturday afternoon after basketball practice, was given instructions not to mention the rape to anyone.

"Of course I won't," Rodney said, a little offended that Benjamin would even think it was necessary to tell him that.

"Rodney, wait," Rachel said. Rodney was about to leave for school. He stopped by the front door and turned around.

"I need some air," Rachel

shouted into the living room. "I'm going to walk Rodney down to the road."

"OK," Benjamin said.

When they got out onto the driveway, Rachel took Rodney by the arm.

"Rodney," she said, "can you keep a secret?"

"Good grief! You too, Rache?"

"No, no, it's not what you think!"

"Well, then, what?"

"Can you give a message to Jimmy, Tabby, Sheldon and Bull today?"

Rodney noticed that lately, whenever Rachel mentioned their

four friends, Jimmy's name always came first. He wasn't sure what to make of that, if anything.

"Sure. What message?"

Rachel hesitated. "I," she said, "I ... would like them to know."

Rachel, Rodney and their parents had spent the better part of Sunday discussing Dr. Green's recommendation that they report Rachel's rape to the police, and that the sooner they reported it the better.

But there was no debate among the four family members. They unanimously agreed right from the beginning that it was best not to

report the rape. Their discussion was a matter of listing all the reasons the rape should be kept quiet. So Rachel's request that her friends be told came as a surprise to Rodney.

"You can trust them," Rachel quickly added before Rodney had time to object. "You know you can. Right, Rodney?"

"Well, yeah, but ... but I still don't know why you want to bring them into this."

"Because," Rachel said, "I think it would help me if they knew. And it would haunt me if they did not know. I don't think I could bear

being around them if I had this dark secret I had to hide from them."

They continued to walk down the driveway. Here and there, Rachel thought she saw red spots in the snow. She tried to drive the image out of her mind.

"I get that, Rache. I really do," Rodney said finally.

"But let me say this. I think that the more people there are who know about something like this, the better the chances are that the word will get out. Even if you trust someone with your life, sometimes things just ... slip out. You know?" He paused. "But as hard as I've

tried sometimes, I've never been able to say 'no' to you, Rachel. So OK. I'll do it."

Rachel gave her brother a hug.

"But what's the secret?"

"What?"

"You asked if I could keep a secret. What's the secret?"

"Oh. Right. The secret is, please don't tell Mom and Dad that Jimmy, etcetera, know about the rape. I'll tell them later. Just not now. I have too much other stuff to deal with."

"OK. I won't. By the way, how long are you going to stay out of school? They'll want to see you, you know. Jimmy, etcetera." He paused.

"I mean, how are you, Rache? Really."

Rachel's face darkened. She thought about Danny Jackson and Oscar Olney. How would she react the first time she saw them in school? How would they react when they saw her? Could she really go to school each day, knowing they were in the same building? Laughing, perhaps.

Or lurking.

She shook her head.

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "I have my good moments. I have my bad moments. I'm taking it one day at a time."

Tears filled Rodney's eyes. He put his arm around Rachel.

"I'm so sorry, Rache, I'm so sorry. If they ever find that guy, I'll kill the sonofabitch."

Rachel gave him a squeeze.

"I appreciate your devotion to your sister, Rodney. You know how much I love you. But I'm not sure that's the answer. Piling one evil on top of another."

She thought about what she had just said. She did not know she was capable of such a sentiment at this time in her life. It gave her hope that someday she might conquer her devils.

Chapter Nine

Rescued

"OK, that's long enough," Celeste said. "This is your last chance." Benjamin followed her into the bedroom.

"She's asleep," Holly said.

Celeste made no reply. She reached into her case and took out the long, leather straps and tied Rachel's arms to the bedposts, crucifixion style. Rachel moaned but did not appear to wake up.

"All right, you know what to do," Celeste said. She pulled up Rachel's nightgown. Benjamin and Holly

spread Rachel's legs.

Rachel wiped the knitting needle with a soft cloth she had in her bag. She bent down and inserted the needle into Rachel's vagina.

"OK, let's go find the uterus," she said.

Celeste started to push the needle when suddenly there was a violent banging on the front door that seemed to shake the trailer itself.

"Police! Open up!"

Celeste jerked out the knitting needle. Then everyone in the room froze, until Holly pulled Rachel's nightgown down and pulled the

blanket up over her. Rachel opened her eyes.

"This is the police! Open up now!" The banging grew louder.

"What do we do?" Benjamin asked. There was no answer.

Rodney, in the other bedroom, screamed: "Break the door down! Break it down!"

Bull heard. He backed up a few feet. "Time to run between the tackles," he said. He lowered his shoulder and drove his 240-pound body into the metal door, much the same way he blasted through his Dad's bedroom window as his home was collapsing in flames.

It was overkill. The door popped open with hardly a whimper and was nearly blown off its hinges. Bull's momentum threw him headfirst onto the entryway floor, where he slid on his stomach and slammed into a kitchen cabinet door. He jumped up.

By that time, the others had entered the trailer. Jimmy knocked the chair loose that had kept Rodney from opening his bedroom door.

Rodney came out and pointed to the bedroom door, still closed, at the other end of the trailer. "Down there!" he shouted.

Sheldon was the first to reach the door. He yanked it open.

"You?" a wide-eyed Benjamin said.

"You kids get out of my house!" he screamed. "Now!"

Fists clenched, he charged Sheldon, who sidestepped Benjamin as neatly as he would an opposing lineman hell-bent on a sack, then slammed him into the wall, where Jimmy grabbed him and wrestled him to the floor.

"Mr. Stark, Mr. Stark," Jimmy said over and over.

"This is none of your business!" Benjamin shouted. "Who the hell do

you think you are?"

Holly was shouting at everybody ... to stop everything. And Rachel screamed and struggled to get free from the straps. Tabby managed to untie one of them.

Meanwhile, unnoticed, Celeste reached into her case and pulled out a gun.

She fired into the mattress, missing Rachel's head by inches.

And the Earth stood still.

"Thank you for your attention," Celeste said in a calm, even voice. She kept the gun pointed at the intruders.

"Holly, please untie your

daughter. I'm sure that strap must be uncomfortable for her," she said.

Holly, hands shaking, did as she was bidden.

Once Rachel was free, Celeste waved the gun to motion Holly aside. Then she grabbed Rachel, pulled her out of bed, wrapped her arm around Rachel's neck from behind and put the gun to Rachel's temple.

"Now, everybody," Celeste said, "we are all going to take a little walk. I want all of you to go slowly and quietly into the other bedroom where the rest of the kids are and close the door behind you.

"I will be watching all of you very closely. If you try anything ... untoward, shall we say, I'm sure all of you know precisely what the consequences will be. The gunshot you heard earlier was only a warning. The next one will be for real.

"Once you are in that bedroom, you will stay there while Rachel and I go for a little ride in my car. She will not be harmed as long as you do not try to follow me.

"It is now 11 p.m. At 11:15 it will be safe for you to leave the room and go look for Rachel. You will find her in the cemetery. Keep in mind

that it is very snowy and cold outside, and note that Rachel is barefoot and dressed only in a flimsy nightgown. So don't wait too long. We wouldn't want her to freeze to death, now would we?

"Rachel, pick up my coat there and my case. Now, Holly, you go first. Lead the way."

The hostages did exactly as they were told. Jimmy was the last to go in the bedroom. He closed the door.

Almost.

What Celeste did not know, and could not have known, was how bad the doors were in this wreck of a trailer the Stark family lived in.

Some of the doors did not work at all. Those that did usually were badly fitted.

The door to the kids' bedroom was no exception. When Jimmy closed the door, he noticed that a tiny crack in the door allowed him a partial view of the front door.

Squinting through the crack, he slowly turned the doorknob to the open position.

When Celeste and Rachel started to go out the front door, Celeste's back was turned to Jimmy, and he noticed that she had lowered the gun so it pointed at the floor.

That moment, that split second, was all the time he had to act.

In one motion he flew out the bedroom door, dived for Celeste and swatted at the gun like a linebacker trying to force a fumble.

The impact knocked Celeste and Rachel down, and when the gun was torn from Celeste's hand it went off.

The bullet ripped into Jimmy's right thigh. He screamed, but he managed to hold Celeste down and keep her from retrieving her weapon.

A moment later Benjamin, Rodney, Sheldon and Bull were

there to take over.

Chapter Ten

The Aftermath

About the Author

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interest. I'll use myself as an example. Note how I've applied the NoIndent style to this section. I think it looks better this way, but it's totally up to you.

Mark Coker is the founder of Smashwords, the world's largest distributor of indie ebooks. In 2010, The Wall Street Journal named him one of the "Eight Stars of Self-Publishing." His three books about ebook publishing best practices have been downloaded over 500,000 times. When he's not running Smashwords, he's probably hiking, gardening or traveling. Read

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