

Sarah lay on her bed studying a labor case when her brother, Mike, walked in.

"Sis," he said, picking at a scab on his elbow, "I have a learning disability."

"How do you know?" she asked, setting her glasses on top of her head.

"I heard it on television just now."

She got up, laughing, and hugged him. He was a big, unemployed nineteen-year-old who had been sent by their parents to live with her. It was hard to believe he got into so much trouble at home, because now he rarely left the apartment.

"Come on, Sis, let's wrestle." He spun her around and locked her arm behind her back. "This is Tyke Daniels making Masked Mountain eat dirt," he said, and crashed her onto the bed.

"Say, 'Love is a fresh bowl of slugs,'" he said. She tussled with him until the heavy books hit the floor and the thin pink bedspread was mussed.

"Love is a fresh bowl of slugs," she said, her head sore and caught in a leg lock.

"Say, 'I'll buy my gentle brother some wine,'" he said, tightening the vise about her ears.

"I'll buy my gentle brother some wine," she yelled.

He let her up and strutted around the bed, beating his chest. He scowled in front of an imaginary camera and challenged Ape-man Kanochi to a death match, ripping the buttons off his shirt and charging fiercely into the living room.

Sarah slammed the door and locked it.

When the phone rang, she hoped it was Duncan, her boss at

the National Labor Board, where she was a rookie learning the rules of arbitration. She couldn't remember laughing, even at Mike, before she got close to Duncan. The worst part was that she had known he was married from the start. She didn't mind that he was twenty years older than she.

She answered the phone, and Duncan said, "You always sound surprised when you say hello."

"Mike says I sound sexy," she said.

"I want to see you. Meet me in my overcoat at quarter to nine."

She paused before answering. "O.K.," she said slowly. "I can tell Mike I'm going to buy wine."

She met him in the parking lot of the liquor store, and they drove to an alley and parked. It was the first time she confessed that she loved him.

That weekend, she and Mike cleaned up the apartment. He was really not an unpleasant boy, she thought. The two weeks he had been there he did everything she asked. He was anxious about Monday's stag lodge elections back home because he was on the ballot for secretary. Its members were a group of conservative old men who did nothing but get drunk every night. She couldn't understand why Mike wanted to be with them so much. She didn't think he was actually a member. He worked there as a bartender before he left home, and for some reason those old men liked him, which was partly why her parents had gotten him out of town.

While she was cleaning, she kept finding things broken, and Mike couldn't explain how they had gotten that way. She found a cracked vase on the bookshelf and a rip in the carpet by the television. She was dusting the frame holding a picture of their parents when the whole thing fell apart.

"My God, Mike. Do you play football in here when I'm gone? You're so damn lazy and clumsy."

"I'm sorry, Sis," he said, cleaning the television screen. "I didn't do it on purpose."

She remembered how he had broken her hairbrush and her favorite water pitcher, and she grew quietly angry. She jerked around the vacuum cleaner and switched it on. Everywhere she pushed it he seemed to be standing in the way. Once, she jammed it over his feet, and screamed, "Get out of here. Go home to your precious drunks."

He went into the kitchen. Sarah turned off the vacuum. She heard him pouring Froot Loops into a bowl. She went to him and thumped him lightly on the head. He took the cereal to the living room and watched tag team wrestling on the SuperStation.

Sarah traveled out of town on Monday to oversee a union vote. She drove the three hours back to the apartment hoping to get right into bed. Mike was sitting on the floor wearing headphones, with two empty wine bottles beside him, and a half-gallon bottle between his legs. The sofa was pulled crookedly into the middle of the room, and black scuff marks were on the wall.

"Mike, get your low-life butt off that floor," she said, pulling the earphones off his head.

"Aw, you sound just like Mama." His head lolled to the side.

"Why can't you act right? Look at that wall, Mike."

"I lost, Sis."

His drunkenness infuriated her. She kicked a wine bottle, and it smashed against the bookcase before she realized what he had said. He looked up at her as if he was going to cry.

"Was it close?"

"As close as Hitler and Santa Claus."

She sat beside him, stroked his hair, and took a swig from the bottle of Labrusca.

When she came home from work the next day, the scuff marks were gone and the broken glass was cleaned away. Mike was in the kitchen feeding milk to a strange gray cat.

"That guy just called," he said.

"What guy?" She knew it was probably Duncan because he never left his name, though Mike was certainly no threat. Duncan hadn't been at work that day, and she was worried that he was ill. Several times she almost called him, to report on her trip, she would say. But she could never convince herself that was strong enough reason, and she hoped he would call her, instead.

He finally phoned again when she was drinking beer with Mike in the kitchen. Mike had the cat on the table, checking its ears for fleas. She couldn't stand the cat being on the table, but she didn't have the heart to say anything. The cat was dirty—a plain alley cat with dried, white wounds on its haunch. It was

skinny and collarless, and she truly wished Mike wouldn't want to keep it.

Duncan wanted to take Sarah out to dinner, but she was dieting and didn't want to eat. The reason he wasn't at work was that his wife had broken her leg in a fall down their back porch steps. He had driven her to her sister's house, thirty-five miles away, so someone could care for her during the day.

"You're a very bad man," Sarah said.

"I know it," he said. "Why don't you come over here?"

"I'd have to think of something," she said, glancing at Mike, who was looking under the cat's tail.

"Say it's business. Say the president's been fired and you have to go handle the grievance."

"Can I call you back?"

"If you promise to bring me dinner."

She considered telling Mike that a girlfriend needed her, but he knew she didn't have close friends in town. She couldn't think of anything that would keep her out of the house for more than twenty or thirty minutes. It would be better, she thought, to see Duncan tomorrow—to go straight to his house from work.

She called him and told him.

"I'll come over there, then. I'll bring some folders to make it look good."

"That's an idea. Don't wear too much cologne."

"I'll step in dog shit if you want me to."

Duncan arrived wearing a green knit shirt, blue jeans, and Sperry Topsiders. This was the first time she had seen him dressed like that, and she thought he looked cute with his stomach bulging slightly under the shirt. She introduced him to Mike, who seemed unusually quiet.

"Where can we work?" Duncan asked.

She led him to the kitchen, while Mike turned on the TV and lay back petting the cat.

Duncan opened his briefcase on the table and kissed Sarah on the lips.

"Sis," he said. "May I call you Sis? You're great and gorgeous." He held her as she leaned against the counter under the Peanuts calendar.

"How's Barbara?" she asked.

"Ashamed," he said. "And loving all the attention." He wore rectangular, silver-rimmed glasses that made him look like a dentist to Sarah. She brushed the bright gray hair at his temples and kissed his stubbled cheek. He ran his hand under the back of her long-sleeved blouse.

They heard Mike coming and broke away. He carried the cat. He took two beers from the refrigerator and offered one to Duncan.

"Thanks," Duncan said. "Look at the size of those arms. Are you on somebody's team?"

"Nah. Not now. I played football in high school and did some wrestling."

"Yeah? Me too. Let's see what you've got." Duncan took off his glasses, set the beer down, and crouched in a menacing attack stance.

Mike grinned and put the cat on the table. They grabbed each other's arm and tucked their heads onto each other's shoulder. Sarah lifted herself to the counter and cheered for one, then the other. Duncan caught Mike behind the knee and pushed him into the table, scudding it noisily against the oven. The cat jumped onto the stovetop and then leaped out of the room. Mike and Duncan fell to the floor. Their legs locked together, and Mike rolled Duncan over on his stomach. Duncan grimaced as his head was pressed to the linoleum, but he heaved and threw Mike off. He got behind Mike, clinched his legs around his waist, gripped him in a choke hold with one arm, and with the other he bent back his leg. One of Duncan's shoes came off. "Say, 'Chicken knuckles,'" Duncan said.

Mike twisted and bit Duncan's arm, easing Duncan's grip. He spun away and pinned him to the floor, his knee in Duncan's back.

"I give up," Duncan said. "That's enough." He got up. "You're mean, boy. Like wet oak in a thunderstorm."

"You think I'm good, huh?"

Duncan rubbed at the tooth marks on his forearm. "Your brother's a wild one," he said to Sarah. "Get him a helmet."

Mike beat his chest and grinned. Sarah slipped off the counter and handed Duncan his beer. "You're both insane," she said.

"Let's have a look at these folders," Duncan said.

Mike left calling for the cat.

Sarah got up early the next morning and packed an overnight bag. She had told Mike she had business out of town for a few days. At work, Duncan was in meetings all morning, and she kept busy at her desk filling out forms and making calls. Everyone there worked in one large room that was sectioned into eight glassed-in cubicles. Occasionally, she turned around and watched Duncan talking to clients or taking notes with the silver pen she had given him. Whenever she caught his eye, he kept a straight face and went back to whatever he was doing. No raising his eyebrows, no sticking out his tongue, no A-O.K. sign or lip pucker.

He went out to lunch without her, which was normal since both wanted to avoid suspicion. Sarah usually brought something to eat in her purse and ate in the office. She was eating grapes, putting the seeds on a yellow paper towel, when one of her coworkers sat down in the chair in front of her desk. She offered Sarah a slice of chocolate cake. Sarah took it and placed it by her pencil cup, wishing she could eat it.

The woman's name was Doris, and Sarah didn't like her very much. She wore tight skirts and too much jewelry, making clients, Sarah thought, feel uncomfortable. Sarah always wore loose dresses that she considered sensible. She had only five dresses anyway, and Duncan discouraged women from wearing pants at work.

Doris unwrapped her own slice of cake, licking chocolate icing off her fingers. "I guess you heard about Duncan's wife," she said. "I knew she was desperate for attention, but that's ridiculous, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure I understand," Sarah said.

"You know, honey. Duncan's a bit of a maniac."

Sarah took a grape seed from her mouth and tried to sound gossipy. "But I didn't know his marriage was shaky."

"I'm surprised to hear you say that."

Sarah stared at the wheat crackers in her plastic lunch dish. "What are we talking about exactly?"

"We are discussing Duncan, sweetheart."

"Maybe you should talk to yourself," Sarah said.

Doris polished off the cake and balled up the chocolate-stained cellophane it had been in. "I guess I'd better get back to my desk," she said. "You know, I used to think you could use

more makeup. But what the hell, you're young. You need something else entirely."

Sarah watched her leave and threw the cake in the trash can. I don't need this, she thought.

Duncan came in from lunch with his jacket thrown over his shoulder. He called Sarah to his office. She had to walk by Doris on the way, but Doris was on the phone and just looked up at Sarah and smiled. Duncan closed the door and sat down at his desk, twirling the silver ballpoint.

"Is Doris looking this way?" Sarah asked.

He peered over his shoulder and shook his head.

"I've got some bad news," he said. "Barbara's back."

Sarah didn't say anything. There was a sliver of grape peel stuck between her back teeth and she touched it with her tongue.

"She can get around pretty well on her crutches," he said. "And she wanted to come back home."

"That means you can't see me tonight?"

"I'm as disappointed as you are."

"Right." She got up and went back to her desk. She looked at Duncan, who hadn't moved. When she felt she was going to cry, she snatched her purse and left as fast as she could.

Driving home, she got on the causeway and tried to blow up the engine of the Festiva. Then the steering wheel started to shake, and she slowed down. Every few minutes she pounded the dashboard and cursed. She drove dangerously, swerving in and out of the passing lane, even after she exited. She screeched into her apartment complex and stormed into her apartment.

Mike lay on the sofa with his feet on the wall, drinking a beer and watching a soap opera.

"What's the matter, Sis?" he said.

"Get your stinking feet off the wall. And get that ugly cat out here." She went to her bedroom and cried.

Mike followed her. She lay across the bed clutching the spread in her fists. He sat beside her and placed his hand on her back.

"What happened, Sis? You get fired?"

She reached for a tissue and blew her nose.

"They canned you for sounding like a hog?"

"Shut up, Mike," she said, and buried her face in her arms.

"Of course, I'll kill whoever hurt you," he said. "Somebody break your heart?"

She sat up and dried her face on his shirttail. "Am I just spoiled or is the world out to get me?"

"You're spoiled, Sis. Who else has me?"

"Mike, you're as stupid as hell."

"But I discovered I can cook." He went into the kitchen and brought back a lopsided chocolate cake. She started crying again.

"Touching, isn't it?" he said. "I learned how just for you."

"Go away, Mike. I just want to be alone, O.K.?" She lay down again at the opposite end of the bed.

Mike put the cake on the night table. "Sis?" he said.

She didn't answer.

"Can I tie you into a knot?" 🐞