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STONE BUTCH BLUES

A Novel \ Leslie Feinberg



Firebrand
Books

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I'm grateful to each of my thirty friends who served as readers. Now I'll try to be

at the end of each week, and my coworkers were nice to me. It wasn't that they didn't notice I was different, they just didn't seem to care as much as the high school kids did. After school I hurriedly changed out of my skirt and raced to work. My coworkers asked me how my day was and they told me about how it was when they were in high school. A kid could forget sometimes that adults were ever teenagers unless they remind you.

One day a printer from another floor asked Eddie, my foreman, "Who's the butch?" Eddie just laughed, and they walked off talking. The two women who worked on either side of me glanced over to see if I was hurt. I was more confused than anything.

That night, on dinner break, my friend Gloria ate her meal next to me. Out of the blue she told me about her brother—how he's a pansy and wears women's dresses but she loves him anyway and how she hates to see the way people treat him cause after all it's not his fault he's that way. She told me she even went with him once to a bar where he hung out with his friends and all these mannish women were coming on to her. She shuddered when she said that.

I wondered why she was telling me this. "What place was that?" I asked her.

"What?" She looked sorry she had opened up the subject.

"Where's the place where those people are?"

Gloria sighed.

"Please," I asked her. My voice was trembling.

She looked around before she spoke. "It's in Niagara Falls," she dropped her voice.

"Why do you want to know?"

I shrugged. "What's the name of it?" I tried to sound real casual.

Gloria sighed deeply. "Tifka's." That's all she said.

CHAPTER

3

It was almost a year before I got up the nerve to call telephone information for the address of Tifka's. Finally I stood on the street in front of the bar, scared to death. I wondered what made me think this was the place I could fit. And what if I didn't?

I wore my blue-and-red striped shirt, a navy blue jacket to hide my breasts, black pressed chinos, and black Keds high-tops, because I had no dress shoes.

When I stepped inside, it was just a bar. Through the haze of smoke I saw faces glance over and look me up and down. There was no turning back, and I didn't want to. For the first time I might have found my people. I just didn't know how to penetrate this society.

I bellied up to the bar and ordered a Genny.

"How old are you?" the bartender asked.

"Old enough," I countered and put my money down. A round of smirks rolled around the bar. I sipped the beer and tried to act cool. An older drag queen studied me carefully. I picked up my beer and walked toward the smoke-filled backroom.

What I saw there released tears I'd held back for years: strong, burly women, wearing ties and suit coats. Their hair was slicked back in perfect DA's. They were the hand-

somest women I'd ever seen. Some of them were wrapped in slow motion dances with women in tight dresses and high heels who touched them tenderly. Just watching made me ache with need.

This was everything I could have hoped for in life.

"You ever been in a bar like this before?" the drag queen asked me.

"Lots of times," I answered quickly. She smiled.

Then I wanted to ask her something so badly I forgot to keep up my lie. "Can I really buy a woman a drink or ask her to dance?"

"Sure, honey," she said, "but only the femmes." She laughed and told me her name was Mona.

I focused on a woman sitting at a table alone. God, she was beautiful. I wanted to dance with her. The Four Tops were singing, *Baby, I need your loving*. I wasn't sure I knew how to slow dance, but I made a beeline for her before I lost my nerve.

"Would you dance with me?" I asked.

Mona and the bouncer picked me up and practically carried me into the front bar and set me on a stool. Mona put her hand on my shoulder and looked me dead in the eyes. "Kid, there's a few things I should tell you. It's my fault. I told you it was OK to ask a woman to dance. But the first thing you should know is—don't ask Butch Al's woman!"

I was making a mental note of this when Butch Al's shadow fell across me. The bouncer stood between us and the drag queens shooed her into the backroom. It happened in a flash, but a glimpse of this woman had floored me. Butch Al was a glance at power, a memory I was afraid to hang onto and afraid to let go of.

I sat trembling at the bar long after the momentary excitement had died down for everyone else. I felt exiled to the front of the bar, more lonely than before I came in, because now I knew what I wasn't a part of.

A red light flashed over the bar. Mona grabbed my hand and dragged me through the backroom into the women's bathroom. She flipped the toilet seat down and told me to climb up on it. She closed the stall door part way and said to stay there and be quiet. The cops were here. So there I crouched. For a long time. It wasn't until I frightened a femme half to death when she opened the stall door that I discovered the police had left long ago with their payoff from the owner. No one remembered that the kid was hidden in the bathroom.

As I emerged from the john, everyone in the backroom had a good laugh at my expense. I retreated to the front bar again and nursed a beer.

Later I felt a hand on my arm. Here was that beautiful woman I had asked to dance. This was Butch Al's femme.

"C'mon honey, come sit with us," she offered.

"No, I'm OK out here," I said as bravely as I could. But she put her arm around me gently and guided me off the bar stool.

"C'mon, join us. It's OK. Al won't hurt you," she reassured me. "Her bark is worse

than her bite." I doubted that. Especially when Butch Al stood up as I approached their table.

She was a big woman. I don't know how tall she really was. I was only a kid. But she towered over me in height and stature.

I immediately loved the strength in her face. The way her jaw set. The anger in her eyes. The way she carried her body. Her body both emerged from her sports coat and was hidden. Curves and creases. Broad back, wide neck. Large breasts bound tight. Folds of white shirt and tie and jacket. Hips concealed.

She looked me up and down. I widened my stance. She took that in. Her mouth refused to smile, but it seemed her eyes did. She extended a beefy hand. I took it. The solidness of her handshake caught me by surprise. She strengthened her grip, I responded in kind. I was relieved I wasn't wearing a ring. Her clasp tightened, so did mine. Finally she smiled.

"There's hope for you," she said. I flushed at how I gratefully I embraced her words.

I guess you could explain away that handshake by calling it bravado. But it meant more than that to me then, and it still does. It's not just a way of measuring strength. A handshake like that is a challenge. It seeks out power through incremental encouragement. At the point of maximum strength, once equity is established, then you have really met.

I had really met Butch Al. I was so excited. And scared. I needn't have been: no one was ever kinder to me. She was gruff with me alright. But she peppered it with scruffing my hair, hugging my shoulders, and giving my face something more than a pat and less than a slap. It felt good. I liked the affection in her voice when she called me *kid*, which she did frequently. She took me under her wing and taught me all the things she thought were most important for a baby butch like me to know before embarking on such a dangerous and painful journey. In her own way, she was very patient about it.

In those days the bars in the Tenderloin district were gay by percentage. Tifka's was about 25 percent gay. That meant we had a quarter of the tables and dance floor. The other three-quarters were always pushing against our space. She taught me how we held our territory.

I learned to fear the cops as a mortal enemy and to hate the pimps who controlled the lives of so many of the women we loved. And I learned to laugh. That summer, Friday and Saturday nights were full of laughter and mostly gentle teasing.

The drag queens would sit on my lap and we'd pose for Polaroid pictures. We didn't find out till much later that the guy who took them for us was an undercover cop. I could look at the old bulldaggers and see my own future. And I learned what I wanted from another woman by watching Butch Al and her lover Jacqueline.

They let me hang with the two of them all summer long. I had told my parents I was working double shifts on Friday and Saturday nights, "to save up for college," and was staying overnight with a friend from school who lived near my job. They chose

to believe my alibi. All week long I counted the hours till Friday night when I could punch out of work early and head for Niagara Falls.

After the bar closed we'd walk down the street, pretty tipsy, one of us on each of Jacqueline's arms. She'd throw her head up to the heavens and say, "Thank you God for these two good-looking butches." Al and I would lean forward and wink at each other and we'd all laugh for the sheer joy of being who we were, and being it together.

They let me sleep over weekends on their soft old couch. Jacqueline cooked eggs at 4:00 A.M. while Al taught me. It was always the same lesson: toughen up. Al never said exactly what was coming. It was never spelled out. But I got the feeling it was awful. I knew she was worried about my surviving it. I wondered if I was ready. Al's message was: *You're not!*

That was not encouraging. But I knew it was the urgency Al felt to prepare me for such a difficult life that gave her lessons a sharp edge. She never meant to cut me. She nurtured my butch strength the best way she knew how. And, she reminded me frequently, no one had ever done that when she was a baby butch, and she had survived. That was strangely reassuring. I had Butch Al for a mentor.

Al and Jackie groomed me. Literally. Jacqueline gave me haircuts in their kitchen. They took me to get my first sports coat and tie at the secondhand stores. Al combed the racks, pulling out sports coats, one after another. I tried on each one. Jackie would tilt her head, then shake it. Finally, Jackie smoothed my lapels and nodded in approval. Al gave a low whistle of appreciation. I had died and gone to butch heaven!

Then came the tie. Al picked it out for me. A narrow black silk tie. "You can't go wrong with a black tie," she informed me solemnly. And, of course, she was right.

It was fun alright. But the issue of sex was pressing on me from within and without, and Al knew it. One night at the kitchen table Al pulled out a cardboard box and handed it over to me to open. Inside was a rubber dildo. I was shocked.

"You know what that is?" she asked me.

"Sure," I said.

"You know what to do with it?"

"Sure," I lied.

Jacqueline rattled the dishes. "Al, for Christsakes. Give the kid a break, will you?"

"A butch has gotta know these things," Al insisted.

Jackie threw down her dishtowel and left the kitchen in exasperation.

This was to be our butch "father to son" talk. Al talked, I listened. "Do you understand?" she pressed.

"Sure," I said, "sure."

Al was satisfied she had imparted enough information by the time Jackie returned to the kitchen.

"One more thing, kid," Al added, "don't be like those bulldaggers who put this on and strut their stuff. Use a little decorum, you know what I mean?"

"Sure," I said. I didn't.

Al left the room to take a shower before bed. Jacqueline dried the dishes long enough that the blush drained from my face and my temples stopped pounding. She sat down on a kitchen chair next to me. "Did you understand what Al was telling you, honey?"

"Sure," I said, and vowed to never say that again.

"Is there anything you don't understand?"

"Well," I started slowly, "it sounds like it takes a little practice, but I get the general idea. I mean that noon and midnight stuff sounds, well, like you got to practice it to get it right."

Jacqueline looked confused. Then she laughed till tears streamed down her cheeks. "Honey," she'd start, but she was laughing too hard to continue. "Honey. You can't learn to fuck from reading *Popular Mechanics*. That isn't what makes a butch a good lover."

This was exactly what I needed to know! "Well, what does make a butch a good lover?" I asked, trying to sound like the answer didn't mean all that much to me.

Her face softened. "That's kinda hard to explain. I guess being a good lover means respecting a femme. It means listening to her body. And even if the sex gets a little rough, or whatever, that it's what she wants too, and inside you're still coming from a gentle place. Does that make sense?"

It did not. It was less information than I wanted. It turned out, however, to be the information I needed. It just took thinking about it for the rest of my life.

Jacqueline took the rubber cock from my hands. Had I been holding it all this time? She placed it carefully on my thigh. My body temperature rose. She began to touch it gently, like it was something really beautiful.

"You know, you could make a woman feel real good with this thing. Maybe better than she ever felt in her life." She stopped stroking the dildo. "Or you could really hurt her, and remind her of all the ways she's ever been hurt in her life. You got to think about that every time you strap this on. Then you'll be a good lover."

I waited, hoping there was more. There was not. Jackie got up and pattered around the kitchen. I went to bed. I tried to memorize every word that had been said to me before I fell asleep.

When Monique began to flirt with me, everyone at the bar was watching. Monique scared me to death. Jacqueline once said that Monique used sex like a weapon. Did Monique really want me? The butches said it was true, so it must be. Somehow everyone knew at once that I would lose my butch virginity with Monique.

On Friday night the butches punched my shoulders, clapped me on the back, adjusted my tie, and sent me over to her table. As Monique and I left together I noticed none of the other femmes were encouraging me. Why wouldn't Jacqueline look at me? She just tapped her long painted nails on that whiskey glass and stared at it like it was the only thing in the room. Did she sense the impending tragedy before I did?

The next evening I came to the bar late, hoping that Monique and her crowd would not be there waiting. They were. I slunk over to our table and sat down. No one knew

exactly what had or had not happened the night before. But everyone knew something was very wrong.

I sat drowning in my own shame, remembering our date. I was scared by the time I had gotten to Monique's house. It occurred to me that I didn't really know what sex was. When and how did it begin? What was I supposed to do? And Monique frightened the hell out of me. All of a sudden I'd changed my mind. I didn't want to go through with it. I chattered nervously. Monique smirked. As I moved from couch to chair, she followed. "Whatsa matter?" she mocked me. "Don't you like me, honey? Whatsa matter, huh?" I made small talk until Monique finally stood up in exasperation. "Get the hell out of here!" She sounded disgusted with me. I mumbled relieved excuses and ran from her house.

But back at the bar, I couldn't escape the consequences. I sat at a table across from Monique and rubbed my forehead with my hands, as though I could wipe away the memory. I wondered how long this evening could possibly last. A long time. A very long time.

Monique whispered something to a butch sitting near her. The butch crossed the room and approached our table. "Hey," she called to me. I didn't look up. "Hey, femme, you wanna dance with a real butch?"

I twisted in my seat. Al whispered something to this butch I couldn't hear.

"Oh, I'm sorry Al, I didn't know she was your femme."

Al stood up and hit the butch before any of us knew what had happened. Then Al looked at me expectantly. "Well?" she said. She was holding up the butch who was doubled over. Al wanted me to hit the woman, to defend my honor. I couldn't think of anyone in the room I would want to hit, except maybe myself. I had no honor to defend.

The butches nearest Monique stood, ready to cross the room. Al and the other butches in our crowd lined up in front of the table to defend me. Jacqueline put her hand on my thigh to reassure me that I didn't have to fight. She needn't have. Mona came up behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. The femmes were closing ranks with me, too. I sat with my face in my hands, shaking my head, wanting it all to stop. But it wouldn't.

Monique's crowd finally backed down. But none of us could leave the bar until they did, otherwise we'd get jumped. It was going to be a *long* night.

Al was furious with me. "You gonna let that bulldagger talk to you that way?" She thumped the table for emphasis.

"Shut up, Al," Jacqueline snapped. It surprised me enough that I raised my face to look at her. She was glowering at Al. "Just leave the kid alone, will ya please?"

Al stopped yelling at me, but she turned her back to me to watch the couples dancing. Her body language said she was still pretty disgusted with me. Jacqueline just kept tapping her nails on her whiskey glass like the evening before. It took me a long time to learn femme Morse code.

After a while the bar crowd started thinning out. Yvette came in. Jacqueline watched her with obvious concern.

"What's the matter?" I asked, roused from my self-pity.

Jackie studied my face. "You tell me," she said.

I looked at Yvette. Like Jacqueline, she had worked the streets since she had been a teenager. Al made Jackie stop turning tricks. Al could support them both on the money she earned at her union job in the auto plant.

Yvette didn't have a butch who worked in the factories. Yvette didn't have anyone but the other working girls.

"She looks like she had a hard night," I offered.

Jacqueline nodded. "Those are mean streets. We get real hurt out there."

I marveled at the intimacy suggested in this information. Then she seemed to change the subject. "What do you think she wants right now?" Jacqueline asked me.

"To be left alone," I said, thinking of my own need.

She smiled. "Yeah, she wants to be left alone. She doesn't want one more person in this goddamn world to ask anything from her tonight. But she sure could use some comfort, you know what I mean?" Maybe I did. "She might really like it if a butch like you went over and just asked her to dance, you know? Not hit on her."

I thought maybe I could do that. Anything to take the sting out of my own shame.

Jacqueline pulled my sleeve. "Do it gently, understand?"

I nodded and walked slowly across the room to Yvette. She held her head in her hands. I cleared my throat. She looked at me wearily and sipped from her drink. "What do you want?" she asked me.

"Ah, I thought, would you dance with me?"

She shook her head. "Maybe later, baby. OK?"

Maybe it was the way I just stood there. There was no going back across the room in front of Monique's group or mine without having danced. I hadn't thought of that. Had Jackie? Or maybe Jacqueline's eyes connected with Yvette's from across the room. But finally Yvette said, "Yeah, why not," and stood up to dance with me.

I waited for her in the middle of the dance floor. Roy Orbison's voice was smooth and dreamy. I stood still, with her hand in mine until she relaxed and moved toward me. After we'd danced for a few moments, Yvette told me, "It's OK to breathe, you know." We laughed real hard, together.

Then I felt her body move closer and we kind of melted together. I discovered all the sweet surprises a femme can give a butch: her hand on the back of my neck, open on my shoulder, or balled up like a fist. The feel of her belly and thighs against mine. Her lips almost touching my ear.

The music stopped and she started to pull away. I held her hand gently. "Please?" I asked.

"Honey," she laughed, "you just said the magic word."

We danced a few slow songs in a row. Our bodies swung effortlessly in the circle of dance. The slightest shift in the pressure of my hand on her back changed the motion of her body. I never ground my thigh into her pelvis. I knew she had been wounded

there. Even as a young butch that was the place I protected myself. I felt her pain, she knew mine. I felt her desire, she aroused mine.

Finally the music stopped and I let her go. I kissed her on the cheek and thanked her. I crossed the dance floor to my table. I was forever changed.

Jacqueline patted my thigh and flashed me a sweet smile. The other femmes—male and female—looked at me differently. As the world beat the stuffing out of us, they tried in every way to protect and nurture our tenderness. My capacity for tenderness was what they'd seen.

The other butches had to recognize me as sexual now, a competitor. Even Al looked at me differently.

As painful as this whole ritual had been, it was nothing less than a rite of passage. I didn't feel cocky. It taught me that humility was exactly the correct emotion when seeking to unleash the power of a woman's passion.

Strong to my enemies, tender to those I loved and respected. That's what I wanted to be. Soon I would have to put these qualities to the test. But for the moment, I was happy.

The next Friday night at the bar was boisterous. We all laughed and danced. Out of the corner of my eye I looked for Yvette. Jacqueline must have known it because she explained to me that Yvette's pimp wouldn't let her have a steady butch. My stomach tightened in rage. I still kept an eye out for her. After all, a pimp can't know everything that's going on, right?

When the red light flashed over the bar, I took myself to the women's bathroom and assumed my post on the toilet. A long time passed. I heard thumping and several shouts. Then it was quiet.

I peeked outside the bathroom. All the stone butches and drag queens were lined up facing the wall, hands cuffed behind their backs. Several of the femmes who the cops knew were prostitutes were getting roughed up and separated from the rest. I knew by now it would take at least a blow job to get them out of jail tonight.

A cop spotted me and grabbed me by the collar. He handcuffed me and threw me across the room. I looked for Al but they had already started taking people to the police vans outside.

Jacqueline rushed up to me. "Take care of each other," she said. "Be careful, honey," she added. I nodded. My wrists were painfully pinned behind my back. I was scared. I would try to be very careful. I hoped Al and I could take care of each other.

By the time they had nabbed me, the butch van was full. I rode in the police wagon with Mona and the other drag queens. I was glad. Mona kissed my cheek and told me not to be afraid. She said I'd be alright. If that was true though, I wondered why all the drag queens looked as scared as I felt.

At the precinct I saw Yvette and Monique, already arrested on a street sweep. Yvette flashed me a smile for courage, I gave her a wink. A cop shoved me from behind into

the belly of the precinct. I was headed for the bulls' tank. They were taking Al out of the cell as they were bringing me in. I called her name. She didn't seem to hear me.

The cops locked me up. At least now my wrists were free from the handcuffs. I smoked a cigarette. What was going to happen? Through a grated window I saw some Saturday-night butches getting booked. They had taken Butch Al in the opposite direction.

The drag queens were in the large cell next to ours. Mona and I smiled at each other. At that moment three cops ordered her out of the cell. Her body pulled back slightly. She had tears in her eyes. Then she walked forward with them, rather than be dragged out.

I waited. What was happening?

About an hour later the cops brought Mona back. My heart broke when I saw her. Two cops were dragging her; she could barely stand. Her hair was wet and stuck to her face. Her makeup was smeared. There was blood running down the back of her seamless stockings. They threw her into the cell next to mine. She stayed where she fell. I could hardly breathe. I spoke to her in a whisper. "Honey, you want a cigarette? Want to smoke? C'mere, over here by me."

She looked dazed, unwilling to move. Finally she slid over to the bars beside me. I lit a cigarette and handed it to her. As she smoked, I slid my arm through the bars and touched her hair gently, then rested my hand on her shoulder. I spoke to her quietly. She didn't seem to hear me for a long time. Finally, she leaned her forehead against the bars and I put both my arms around her.

"It changes you," she said. "What they do to you in here, the shit you take every day on the streets—it changes you, you know?" I listened. She smiled. "I can't remember if I was ever as sweet as you are when I was your age." Her smile faded. "I don't want to see you change. I don't want to see you after you've hardened up."

I sort of understood. But I was really worried about Al and I didn't know what was going to happen to me. This sounded like a philosophical discussion. I didn't know if I was going to live to an age where experience would change me. I just wanted to live through tonight. I wanted to know where Al was.

The cops told Mona she'd been bailed out. "I must look a mess," she said.

"You look beautiful," I told her, and I meant it. I looked at her face for a last moment, wondering if the men she gave herself to loved her as much as I did.

"You really are a sweet butch," Mona said before she left. That felt good.

The cops dragged Al in just after Mona left. She was in pretty bad shape. Her shirt was partly open and her pants zipper was down. Her binder was gone, leaving her large breasts free. Her hair was wet. There was blood running from her mouth and nose. She looked dazed, like Mona.

The cops pushed her into the cell. Then they approached me. I backed up until I was up against the bars. They stopped and smiled. One cop rubbed his crotch. The other put his hands under my armpits and lifted me up, a couple inches off the floor,

and slammed me against the bars. He pressed his thumbs deep into my breasts and jammed his knee between my legs.

"You should be this tall soon, tall enough your feet would reach the ground. That's when we'll take care of you like we did your pussy friend Allison," he taunted me. Then they left.

Allison.

I grabbed my pack of cigarettes and Zippo lighter and slid over to where Al was slumped on the floor. I was shaking. "Al," I said, extending the pack. She didn't look up. I put my hand on her arm. She sloughed it off. Her head was down. I could just see the expanse of her wide back, the curves of her shoulders. I touched them without thinking twice. She let me.

I smoked with one hand and touched her back with the other. She began to tremble. I put my arms around her. Her body softened against me. She was hurt. The parent had become the child for this moment. I felt strong. There was comfort to be found in my arms.

"Hey, look at this," one cop yelled to another. "Allison found herself a baby butch. They look like two faggots." The cops laughed.

My arms took more of her into my circle to protect her, as though I could ward off their jeers and keep her safe in my embrace. I had always marveled at her strength. Now I felt the muscles in her back and shoulders and arms. I experienced the power of this stone butch, even as she slumped wearily in my arms.

The cops announced Jacqueline had posted our bail. The last words I heard from the cops were, "You'll be back. Remember what we did to your buddy."

What did they do? The questions came back again. Jacqueline looked from Al's face to mine asking the same. I had no answers. Al offered none. In the car Jacqueline held Al in a way that made it look at first glance like Al was comforting her. I sat quietly in the front seat needing comfort, too. I didn't know the gay man who drove us. "Are you OK?" he asked me.

"Sure," I answered without thinking.

He dropped us off at Al and Jackie's house. Al ate her eggs like she couldn't taste them. She didn't speak. Jacqueline looked nervously from Al to me and back again. I ate and then did the dishes. Al went into the bathroom.

"She'll be in there a long time," Jacqueline said.

How did she know? Had this happened many times before? I dried the dishes. Jacqueline turned to focus on me. "Are you OK?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm alright," I lied.

She came closer to me. "Did they hurt you, baby?"

"No," I lied. I was mortaring a brick wall inside myself. The wall didn't protect me, and yet I watched as though it wasn't my hands placing each brick. I turned away from her to signal that I had something important to ask. "Jacqueline, am I strong enough?"

She came up behind me and turned me around by the shoulder. She pulled my face against her cheek. "Who is, honey?" she whispered. "Nobody's strong enough. You just get through it the best you can. Butches like you and Al don't have a choice. It's gonna happen to you. You just gotta try to live through it."

I was already burning with another question. "Al wants me to be tough. You and Mona and the other femmes are always telling me to stay sweet, stay tender. How can I be both?"

Jacqueline touched my cheek. "Al's right, really. It's selfish of us girls, I guess. We want you to be strong enough to survive the shit you take. We love how strong you are. But butches get the shit kicked out of their hearts too. And I guess we just sometimes wish there was a way to protect your hearts and keep you all tender for us, you know?"

I didn't. I really didn't. "Is Al tender?"

Jacqueline's face tightened. The question threatened to reveal something that could pierce Butch Al's armor. Then Jacqueline saw I really needed the answer. "She's been hurt real bad. It's hard for Al to say everything she feels. But, yeah. I don't think I could be with her if she wasn't tender with me."

We both heard Al unlock the bathroom door. Jacqueline looked apologetic. I signaled that I understood. She left the kitchen. I was alone. I had a lot to think about.

I lay down on the couch. After a while, Jackie brought me bedding. She sat down beside me and stroked my face. It felt good. She looked at me for a long time with a pained expression. I didn't know why but it scared me. I guess I figured she could see what was coming and I couldn't.

"Are you really OK, honey?" she asked.

I smiled. "Yeah."

"Do you need anything?"

Yeah. I needed a femme who loved me like she loved Al. I needed Al to tell me exactly what they were going to do to me next time and how to live through it. And I needed Jacqueline's breast. Almost as soon as the thought crossed my mind, she put my hand on her breast. She turned her head in the direction of the bedroom as though she was listening for Al. "Are you sure you're OK?" she asked one last time.

"Yeah, I'm OK," I said.

Her face softened. She touched my cheek and pulled my hand away from her breast. "You're a real butch," she said, shaking her head. I felt proud when she said that.

In the morning I woke up early and left quietly.

Butch Al and Jacqueline weren't at the bar after that. Their phone was disconnected. I heard some stories about what happened to Al. I didn't choose to believe any of them.

The summer passed. It was time for my junior year of high school to begin. As summer turned to fall I stopped going to Niagara Falls on the weekends. Just before Christmas I went back to Tifka's to see the old crowd. Yvette wasn't there. I heard she died alone in an alleyway, her throat slashed from ear to ear. Mona overdosed, pur-

posely. No one had seen Al. Jackie was working the streets again.

I walked against a bitter wind from bar to bar along the Tenderloin strip. I heard her laughter before I saw her. There was Jacqueline in the shadow of an alley, sharing an ironic laugh with other working girls. She saw me.

Jacqueline came to me readily, smiling. I saw the glaze of heroin across her eyes. She was thin, very thin. She faced me. She opened the collar of my overcoat in order to straighten my tie. She turned my collar up against the cold. I stood with my hands buried deep in my pockets. I felt like I did the night I danced with Yvette.

We were asking each other a lot of questions with our eyes and answering them. It all happened real fast. I saw the tears just start spilling from her eyes and then she turned to go.

By the time I found my voice to speak, Jacqueline was gone.

CHAPTER

4

The note sailed across my desk and glided onto the floor. I kept an eye on Mrs. Rotondo while I bent over and picked it up. Luckily, she didn't seem to notice.

DANGER!! My parents want to know why your parents call our house looking for you. I can't cover for you any more. PLEASE FORGIVE ME!! Love until eternity—your enduring friend, Barbara.

I looked up and caught Barbara's eyes. She wrung her hands and made a face that begged forgiveness. I smiled and nodded. I mimed smoking a cigarette. Barbara nodded and smiled. She made me feel warm inside. Barbara—the girl I'd sat next to in home room for two years. Barbara—the girl who told me if I were a guy she'd be in love with me.

We met in the girl's bathroom. Two of the juniors who were smoking had already opened the windows. "Where've you been lately?" Barbara demanded to know.

"Working like crazy. I've got to get out of my parents' house or I'm gonna die. They act like they hate my guts." I took a deep drag on my cigarette. "I think they wish I was never born."

Barbara looked frightened. "Don't say that," she told me, then glanced around as if someone might hear. She took a drag of smoke into her mouth and let it trickle out