

Chapter 4

South Liberty Street from the southern tip of Freedom up past Dragonhead Cove where it junctions with Freedom Loop is a two-lane road with a dirt shoulder so narrow that pedestrians and bikers and the few joggers brave enough to chance it are in constant danger from speeding cars. Not that runners and bikers are a common sight in Freedom. Freedomites who are old enough to drive do not like to have to work at transportation, not for fun and not for exercise. On the rare occasions when some health-minded souls do take a notion to go jogging along South Liberty it is not uncommon for a good ol' boy in a souped-up pickup to swerve close to them and give them a scare. They do it on purpose, get their jollies that way. None of them would purposely try to hit anyone, although Murabbi did arrest someone for it once. The culprit was a teenage boy who had been driving legally for less than four months. He was directly in front of Murabbi when he swerved close to a bicyclist. Murabbi could not ignore someone doing something so dangerous right in front of a sheriff's patrol car. He arrested him and charged him with attempted vehicular homicide. The kid was well connected and got himself a good lawyer. The case was settled with the kid's parents paying a hefty fine, and Murabbi hoped that at the very least it would send a strong message to other would-be offenders.

North of the Lawrence store there's a field of tall grasses off to the right. The grass leans sharply away from Little Bay as if the stalks are afraid of the water, and rightly so because these grasses have endured lifetimes of wind off the bay.

It's eight o'clock in the morning. The sun is already beating down on the pavement and sparkling on the dew-wet grass. It's going to be another scorcher. Marcia Blunt pedals her unicycle northward on South Liberty sitting high

in the saddle with her huge mop of orange hair blowing out behind her. She spent the previous night camping out in her old VW bus in a field on the shores of Walker Cove. She doesn't timidly hug the edge of the drainage ditch when vehicles come close the way other cyclists do but rather pedals in the middle of the right-hand lane as if she has just as much right to the road as cars—which she does, but she'd be hard pressed to convince anyone else in Freedom of that. Her bright red shirt and harlequin pants signal drivers to give her a wide berth, and they do. She speeds past the Lawrence store and the new Booker condo and waves at Jamie Lew, who is walking to the nearby bus stop. She passes the marker indicating where Pop Lawrence had been buried. The plaque reads: *Earl Ray Lawrence was killed and buried here during the hurricane of 2008. In 2010 his body was dug up and reburied in the Freedom cemetery.*

Marcia darts through the intersection at Liberty and past the schools that face one another on either side of the Street, Booker T. Washington Elementary and Junior High on the west side and Lawrence High on the east. Prior to the storm those had been rival high schools. Fights, stealing each other's mascots and similar shenanigans had been as common as was dating students from the rival schools. Having two high schools in such a small town was a remnant from the days of segregation, so when they rebuilt after the storm they converted one of them into a school for the lower grades, replacing the old and dangerously dilapidated elementary school and renamed the remaining high school in honor of Pop Lawrence. The school year hasn't yet started but there are bunches of kids gathered on the lawn with rakes and shovels and lawn mowers. It's a volunteer work party. They all wave at Marcia as she speeds past. It isn't every day, or never in fact, that a clown on a unicycle rides by.

A quarter mile farther north she passes Saint Michael's. Bad memories of the short time she had attended first communion classes. Another quarter mile north Beulah is serving coffee in Little Don's when Marcia wheels into the parking lot and hops off her unicycle. Everyone in the diner looks up to watch her entrance. A stranger in Little Don's is unusual enough. Freedom is not on the way to anyplace else, so travelers stopping by are rare. Plus, with her brightly colored and outlandish clothes—not to mention her radiant if somewhat unorthodox beauty and that shock of orange hair like a pompom perched on top of her head—Marcia is quite a sight for the retired fishermen and shrimpers and loggers who are Beulah's usual breakfast customers. She strides in with long and heavy steps like she owns the joint. She's almost six feet tall and sturdily built. She stops and stands with big hands on hips, feet spread apart. Her face is pale and as smooth as marble. She shouts, "Hey, ya'll. What's cooking?"

"Whatcha want?" Beulah asks, a huge smile lighting up her face.

"I dunno. Whatcha got?" She grabs a seat in a booth by the window.

"We got eggs with sausage or bacon. With either one you get your choice of grits or pancakes. The usual."

"There you go. I guess I'll have me some of those eggs. Three of 'em over easy. Are the sausages link or patty?"

"Patty."

"Good. That's perfect. Give me about four sausages and a cup of coffee, strong and black, and some V8 if you got it."

"We got it," Beulah said. "Coming right up." She slaps the sausage patties on the griddle and breaks three eggs.

When Beulah places her breakfast in front of her, Marcia says, “Thanks, sweetie,” and flashes her a toothy smile. Beulah notices that her pale face is flushed pink, probably from her brisk morning ride, and her cheeks are puffy. Beulah thinks it’s funny that she’s dressed like a clown. With her rosy cheeks and big eyes she even looks like she’s wearing clown makeup, which she’s not. She is, however, wearing cherry red lipstick. Beulah can’t stop looking at her. She can’t figure out what it is she finds so attractive about this new person. Is it just her audacious manner? Her wild outfit? Or is there something about her that looks familiar? Has she seen her before or known someone who could pass for her twin? It’s got to be something like that, she knows, she just can’t imagine what it is. And then it hits her. She says, “Oh my God, you’re Marcia Blunt.”

“There you go. And You’re Beulah Booker. I’d know you anywhere.”

“It’s been like forever. Are you living here now? What brings you here?”

“I had to get away from the city,” Marcia says. “It was closing in on me. I had to breathe fresh air. Missed the smell of crawdads and muck.”

“So you just up and moved here?”

The other customers, all men at the moment, are listening in on their conversation. Marcia says, “Yep. Just took the plunge.”

“From where?”

“New Orleans. A little birdy whispered in my ear that Beulah Booker was running her daddy’s diner and that I should stop by and say hello.”

“Well hello then. Did this little birdy have a name?”

“Yes he did. Abdul Taylor.”

“He’s my ex. He’s the father of my son. But I guess you knew that.”

“There you go. Ain’t life grand?”

Beulah laughs. “Of course you knew. He would have told you. Were you like dating him or something?”

“Lord no. I don’t date guys.”

“Oh.”