

## Chapter 1

### Three's Company

Keeping an eye on the car inches in front, Sandy Henderson advances her radio for updates on the convergence of massive weather systems. Despite the warnings, she is determined to catch the last day of The Mart to secure supplies for her design and decorating business. Crawling along, she hopes the weather will hold for the twenty-five-mile trip home to Marietta. Unconsciously she nibbles at a cuticle that has begun to bleed. Her concerns heighten as ice pellets crackle against the windshield. Barely out of downtown Atlanta, she finds her two-wheel drive Ford Explorer unsuitable for the conditions.

Stalled behind a line of vehicles, she clutches her phone against the steering wheel and texts updates on her worsening plight. Newscasters offer a possible haven six miles north. With the rear tires having no traction, she abandons her vehicle at roadside. Having decided to hike to the refuge, she zips up her nylon parka, dons the hood, and straps on her shoulder bag. She curses herself for choosing form over function as her leather soled booties splash into the semi-frozen slush.

After ten minutes of stumbling past idling cars and trucks, a SUV pulls alongside. The window rolls down and a young girl hollers out, "Hey, want a lift? I've got four-wheel drive."

Inside the warm cabin introductions are made. "Hi, I'm Sandy. I really appreciate this."

"No problem. I'm Abby. Don't know how far we can get. We'll be fine if this single lane stays open. How far you going?"

"They've got a refuge set-up at the CEPAC. With the sound of things, nobody's getting anywhere they want to tonight. How about you?"

"I was trying to make it to Nashville but I'm afraid that's not going to happen."

The SUV moves through the narrow lane for a short time before coming to a halt. Looking around the sloping bend, Abby sees hundreds of tail lights stretching to the horizon. "Sandy, there's hardly any movement for miles and I only have several gallons left in my tank. I don't want to stall out in the middle of I-75."

"Let's hoof it to the refuge." Sandy suggests.

"Okay, I'll get off the bridge and find a place to ditch."

As Abby nudges forward, Sandy makes a call. "David. So glad I got through to you. Are we going to have the meeting tomorrow?"

"Of course not. The weather's shutting down everything. I've had HQ send out a notice. Where are you? Hope you're not caught up in all this crap."

"I'm right in the middle of it. I abandoned my car at Northside and hitched a ride. But now we're over the Chattahoochee, barely moving and running out of gas. So we're taking off on foot."

"You're leaving the car?"

"They've got a shelter set up at the Cobb Energy Performing Arts Center just a ways up the highway. We'll be fine. Have to go. The battery's about gone. Take care."

"Wait! The Chattahoochee? I'm at The Waverly about a block or so past the CEPAC. Come here instead. They're taking in travelers too."

"The Waverly? Are they going to let us crash in their lobby?" Sandy looks to Abby for approval.

"Yes. There's plenty of room. It's a lot nicer than the performing arts center."

"Are you sure, David?" Abby shrugs and nods approval to Sandy.

"Yes. Get off on Cumberland Boulevard and go west to Cobb Galleria and I'll meet you at the intersection and we'll come back here."

Sandy stuffs the dead cell in her bag and pushes open the passenger door. Freezing rain slashes her face as she steps onto the trodden path. Abby is bracing against the left front fender as Sandy calls, "Abby, follow me."

After a torturous forty-five minutes, they reach David at the top of a long incline. He gives Sandy a brief hug and wraps a blanket around her shoulders. "Are you guys all right? Thought you'd never show."

Sandy pulls the blanket around her and chatters, "Other than not being able to feel my feet, I guess so. This is Abby. She picked me up a while back when my SUV got stuck."

David points up the incline and says, "Nice to meet you. We need to get moving."

Their shoes are no match for the slippery conditions as gusting winds blow rain and snow mix. With stinging faces and numbed extremities, they trudge toward the Waverly.

Outside the grand entrance, the scene is chaotic as horns honk and exhausts steam in the frigid air. David forces through the stragglers into the flooded lobby and pulls Sandy aside. "They're all sold out here but I have a room. You are more than welcome to stay."

Sandy exclaims, "What? You didn't say anything about us staying in *your* room." She takes off her knit cap and shakes the droplets of melting snow. "Thanks, but Abby and I'll just bed down in the lobby."

Sandy's mind races at the prospect of being in a room with David Stark--a recently retired NFL tight end. Of mixed parentage, the blending of Italian, African, and Euro Asian had produced an Adonis of good looks. She was instantly attracted to him while working on a children's car seat campaign. As Vice President of Secure America, David is coordinating efforts with her as a local volunteer. A big event was scheduled the next day in Marietta to kick off the state campaign.

Catching Abby's eye, David laughs, "That's crazy. You guys can't sleep in the lobby when I have a suite with plenty of room. And who's going to say anything? Safety in numbers, right?"

He whispers in Sandy's ear, "She was driving a car? Looks like she's thirteen."

Sandy shakes out the stinky blanket David has given her. "Just tiny, I reckon." She cocks her head. With a suspicious tone, she says, "So how big is your room, David?"

"Big, really big. The Presidential suite. Our Chicago office got it for me. The last one available. And, sorry about the smelly blanket. Smokey wasn't expecting to loan it out today."

"Smokey? Ugh. It does reek, but it worked for the moment." She looks at Abby. "You okay with this arrangement?"

"Are you kidding me? The Presidential Suite? Where's the key?"

"All right David. I guess we'll take you up on your offer. Glad Abby's with me."

Abby high fives her new friend. "Hell, yeah! That's what I'm talking about."

With two fingers, Sandy removes the blanket. Mocking her disdain, David rings it around his neck and points to the elevators. Reaching the top, he uses his security key to gain access to the penthouse level. After inserting the key card into room #1825, the green light blinks and they enter.

David draws back the expansive drapes, revealing the winter storm that is wreaking havoc on north Georgia. The sprawling suite is elegantly appointed and detailed to perfection. A gas fire warms the sunken living room. Large sectional sofas face the flat screen TV stretching across the mantel top. Adorned with flowers and fresh fruit, the dining room flows to a stocked bar and fridge. The over-sized master with king bed adjoins an en suite with a four person Jacuzzi and walk-in shower. A second room is fitted with a queen and full bath. The corner penthouse has panoramic views of the epic arctic storm system as it invades the Southeast from Arkansas to the Carolinas.

Abby spins around. "Shit, this is fuckin' on fleek! And to think only three hours ago, I thought we were screwed. Thank you so much Mr. Stark."

David flinches at Abby's profane inflections. "You're most welcome, and please call me David. None of us expected to be in this predicament when we woke up this morning. Just happy I can help. Maybe we need to change out of these clothes." Returning from the master bath, he tosses two plush bathrobes to his guests.

Abby wraps her arms around David, barely reaching above his waist. "You guys are so sweet to help me out. I don't want to spoil your evening. Hope I can get to my car tomorrow and be on my way."

David releases the grip of Abby's lingering hug. "Sandy and I are business associates, that's all. Let's see how the storm plays out. It looks like it's going to be pretty bad though."

Abby arches on her toes and kisses Sandy on the cheek. "I'm so glad we met. Are you sure it's okay?"

Sandy marvels at her beauty. As if she were a Pixar princess, Abby is crafted and proportioned to near perfection. Barely weighing ninety pounds, she strains every stitch of her wet skinny jeans. Strands of her pixy cut auburn hair frame her grey green eyes and freckled nose. Weather-flushed cheeks splotch her porcelain smooth complexion.

Sandy stutters with an uneasy response, "Of course it's okay, David and I are just friends. Let's settle down, have a drink and warm up. I'll check out the minibar and the menu."

David suggests, "I have some booze in the back of my car leftover from my move. Sandy, while I'm gone you might try room service to see what comes with the suite. Maybe some snacks at least."

As she goes to call, Sandy asks, "May I please have a drink now? A Jack and Diet Coke would be great. I'll pay you back."

David apologizes, "Of course Sandy. Sorry. No problem. I just didn't want to wipe out the minibar. We could be stuck here for a while." He retrieves her drink.

"Thanks. I understand." Sandy changes the subject as she stares into the phone. "Some concierge service this is. Just getting a busy signal."

As if sensing the awkward exchange, Abby says to David, "Look. I can take care of all this. I've got Daddy's Amex and he doesn't care what I do with it. The last time we talked, I was stranded on the interstate. He's totally worried about the storm."

"Wow. You sure about that? This was just about the last room in Atlanta, and it's very expensive. I'd feel a lot better if you talked with him first."

"It's no big deal, trust me. He owns a big-ass recording studio in Nashville. You've more than done your part. The rest is on me, or rather Daddy and his Country music pals."

Sandy takes a sip of her drink. "Well, that's awfully kind but if they won't answer the phone, we just may have to dine on whiskey and nuts."

Abby peels her imbedded iPhone from her jeans pocket. "Okay, if it makes y'all feel better, I'll clear it with him. But I know he won't mind."

"I'll drink to that." David says, opening the mini bar. He empties a Chivas Regal into a crystal tumbler and splashes in two ice cubes. Relaxing in the French Script Wingback, he stares at the vast steel grey and silver horizon. "Ladies, why don't you help yourself to a shower."

"That'd be super. I need to check on the boys and Buddy. If you guys get through to room service, order me a hamburger or something. Anything will taste good about now. And oh, if they have a special on lobster, I'll have that." Laughing, she disappears into the master suite with her drink.

Abby places another call. "I'm right behind you as soon as I can get Daddy."

Sandy lingers as the hot water from the giant sunflower head streams on her head and shoulders. Finally warmed, she retrieves a towel from the heated rack. After a brief blow, she wraps her damp hair and slips into the Luxe doeskin robe and slippers.

Pausing at the suite window, she looks down at the wintry grey and white pallet of street scenes. Dialing her family, she finds her boys are safe at a friend's house. They're instructed to check on the pets. Unable to reach Buddy, she is concerned that he too has been caught in the storm.

Calls complete, she enters the living room and sits on the sectional across from David. Discomforted by the small robe, she pulls down the hem, crosses her legs and modestly seats herself. Crunching on the ice of her emptied drink, she gets briefed by David.

"Looks like we're in for a real mess with more to come right on the heels, sometime late tomorrow. Could be a buildup of eight to ten inches in the metro area. The storm of the century they're claiming."

Catching David's eyes drop to her exposed thigh, Sandy drags a pillow onto her lap.

David turns away and points the controls to the TV. "Let's finish this update and I'll fill you in on Abby's call to her dad."

Sandy takes in the darkened horizon, retreating into a reflective calmness. The boys are fine and her husband is likely holed up somewhere safe. She senses warmth and security with David. Now in an elegant suite overlooking the world, there's a beautiful young girl who wants to pay for it all.

Jack Daniels and the soothing shower help suppress her feelings of guilt and conflict, while circumstances spawn moral relativism.

Bursting from her daydreaming, she yanks again at her rising hem and nervously rambles. "Man, that's a killer shower. Big sunflower head and all. It took some time to take the chill out of my bones. So, what's the deal with Abby's dad?"

"She got through to him. Looks like he's got big time connections with the Marriott folks who own this place. He told her to sit tight and he'd make some calls." As the Westminster door chimes gently bong David approaches. Sandy slides behind a column as David swings open the large carved door.

A suited gentleman greets him, "Mr. Stark? My name is Charles Higginbotham, General Manager. I understand you have as a guest a Miss Abigail Collingsworth?"

"Abby? Uh yes. She and a friend of mine got stranded on the Interstate and I'm letting them crash here only until the storm passes."

"Very well. Her father, Mr. Yancy Collingsworth is much relieved that her safety is assured. We have been instructed to offer our vast array of goods and services to your party. Anything you wish, at no charge. Your comfort and well being will be our priority. Is there anything that we may do for you at the moment, sir?"

"All charges? No shit?"

Sandy spins from behind the column. "We've been having trouble getting through to room service. We'd like to order some food, please."

"Yes, ma'am. We can accommodate. James here, will be your personal valet. He has our restaurant menu with him, a broader selection than room service. The kitchen is backing up with the crush but we can ensure you are serviced expediently."

As Sandy studies the menu, James takes a pen from his pocket and asks David, "Mr. Stark. May I have your autograph? My little brother Kirk is a big fan of yours. Uh... me too."

Having retired three years earlier as an Atlanta Falcon, #68 is still flattered to be remembered. Proudly stiffening his impressive physic, he reaches into his pocket and retrieves a fold of cash. Mr. Higginbotham gives a scornful glance at James.

Sandy places her order, "Seafood, some sushi I guess and some appetizers. A bottle of Chardonnay would be nice. Whatever you suggest. We're all starving, so the sooner the better, please." She looks to David who is signing a \$20 bill against the wall. "Anything special for you?"

Handing the autograph to James, he says, "Maybe some beer and Tabasco. And, another robe...a His, please."

The Manager gives a deferential bow and backs away. "Of course. Expect your order within the next thirty minutes. We hope that you enjoy your stay. Have a delightful evening."

Turning to Sandy, David delivers his best highbrow British accent, "Madam. If dinner arrives while I'm showering, would you please leave my robe outside the door?" She laughs as he exits the room.

Moments later, Sandy is on the large sectional when Abby arrives from her shower. Spotting a dish of mixed jelly beans on the counter, Abby fishes out a mango flavor. Rolling the bean around her mouth, she strips off her larger robe and tosses it into Sandy's lap. "Here, Sweetie. It'll fit you much better!"

Impulsively, Sandy turns her head away from the totally nude Abby.

"Give me yours. It seems to be riding up your ass," Abby nonchalantly directs as she fluffs her damp hair.

Embarrassed at the awkward moment, Sandy slowly stands, shields a frontal view and reluctantly removes her robe.

Abby strolls around to get a better look and says, "What a body! You're really hot."

With her eyes to the ground and fumbling to get covered, Sandy hands her "Hers" robe to Abby and stammers, "Uh, thanks. You're not so bad yourself."

Abby cups her breasts and twirls. "Ya think so?"

Unable to avert her eyes, Sandy exclaims, "Abby! Put my robe on. David'll be back any minute."

Calmly slipping her arm into a sleeve, Abby complies, "Okay, okay. It's no big deal. I'm sure it's nothing that he hasn't seen many times before."

Sandy ties her robe and retreats to the sofa. "I don't know anything about that. You wouldn't want him to walk in on you."

"So? Who cares? Let's just chill a bit." Abby goes for her clutch hanging on a chair. "Got some wicked shit here. You cool?" She digs around and produces a colorful Murano glass pipe and a small zipper bag. She stuffs the bowl and takes a light.

"It's been a while. Thanks, but I don't think so." Sandy says half-heartedly.

Abby squares with Sandy on the sofa. Crossing her legs immodestly, she takes a puff and offers, "Here you go. It'll do you good."

After an unavoidable glance into the parted robe, Sandy takes the pipe. "I really shouldn't be doing this." As the draw penetrates, she coughs. After another deep hit, she returns the smoking glass bowl to Abby.

"Abby, just how old are you? You look like you're still in high school, or junior high maybe. I mean you're beautiful, but..."

"So funny! Been hearing that for years. I'm actually twenty-two and a senior at Georgia Tech. I graduate next term and start a job in Palo Alto this summer. Meanwhile, I'm having all the fun I can before shit gets real."

Abby leans in and places her hand on Sandy's exposed knee and looks her in the eyes. "So what's up with that hunky friend of yours? He's sure cute. I bet he's hung."

"Abby! Are you crazy? Sure he's cute, really cute, I guess, but I have no idea about his endowment. We've never dated or anything. I told you that we are..." Reflecting, she thinks of her suppressed feelings about David.

As Sandy drifts off, Abby presses, "Well, you have to want to fuck him. Right?"

"Abby!" Her face flushes as she reaches for the pipe.

"Ever thought about sharing? What if we both took him on?"

After taking another deep hit, Sandy holds her breath and strains to ask, "Share? How would we split him up?"

"We could flip a coin. Heads I win, tails you win."

Waiting until the last moment to release the smoke, Sandy manages another response, "Or, heads I win, tails you win."

Springing next to her and perching on her knees, Abby gently strings out her blonde ringlets. With her head beginning to swim, Sandy closes her eyes and exhales. Embracing her face, Abby places her lips to Sandy's and shotguns the cool smoke deep into her lungs. Sandy remains stolid as she tastes the lingering mango on Abby's tongue.

She returns the kiss before pushing Abby away, "You better save that in case you get 'tails'!"

Their squealing is halted as the front door chimes play. Abby stuffs the smoldering pipe under the sofa seat before they cautiously approach the door. Staring through the peephole, Sandy sees James and two other attendants standing at order.

"It's not the NARCS, Abby. They've got our food!" Fighting to appear in control, Sandy gives a chirpy welcome as they wheel in three stainless steel food service carts and a clothes dolly. "Come on in, fellows."

As the attendants fixate on Abby's untied robe, she asks, "You guys have a coin? My friend and I have a bet going." As her eyes meet Sandy's, the women burst out in laughter sending Abby sprinting down the hallway to the bathroom. The funny moment ends abruptly when Sandy sees the thin stream of smoke curling from the seat cushion. A douse of ice cubes does the trick.

The valets feverishly work to complete their delivery. Spread upon the dining room table is a feast of sumptuous offerings. A mixed seafood tower reaches two feet high, surrounded by multiple trays of sushi, canapés, and desserts. French Champagne, chardonnays, and Belgium beer fill out four ice buckets. After uncorking a bottle, the attendants scurry away.

A bottle of Tabasco sits on the bar. Placed on the buffet are two Coach shoulder bags filled with necessities from feminine hygiene and beauty aids, to lotions and prophylactics. Several Hugo Boss boxes are stuffed with cashmere sweaters and jumpsuits ranging in size from XS to L. David's requested bathrobe sits folded beside.

Abby returns wrapped in a towel. As she and Sandy begin to pick from the buffet, David calls from the bathroom, "Ladies, have they delivered my robe yet?"



