

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

“DRAFT LOTTERY TONIGHT!”

Judy folded the paper to cover the headline and threw it on one of the piles scattered across the table. Like the other surfaces in the Tune Room, it was covered with newspapers, sampled and tossed. It used to be only journalism majors who read the papers for class assignments, but for the past month the news had been checked by virtually everyone daily, stories compared to rumors and reports from the TV rooms, everyone adding it up.

“Vietnam is all a numbers game,” Achilles had said during one of the endless dorm—room nights. “Body counts, birthdays.” She thought about it now and realized he was right. Everything was reduced to numbers. Wil had taken over Michael’s weekly tabulation of the body count. They hadn’t released it the previous Thursday, in honor of the holiday, but Friday’s news said there would be another 130 for the week or 39,262 KIA. Fish kept making crude jokes about the fact that it was ’69 after all, so of course everything was upside down. It seemed that everyone was nineteen, but you still couldn’t vote unless you were twenty-one. And now today, on December 1, your birth date was to become your destiny.

She could hear snatches of conversations at other tables. A lot of it was about Canada. Who really knew anything about that? It was cutting yourself off from family, from everything. But you’d be alive. That was the point, right? She tried to think about what to say to David or anyone who got a low number. He wanted to be alone today, which was making her climb the walls. Wil had practically convinced her he would be in the top ten. She couldn’t picture any of them in combat. Achilles would be pissing everyone off with his talk, and Wizard would go berserk with all the chaos.

She felt totally at bay, wondering at the absurdity of why people her own age were expected to work this all out by themselves. She needed answers. She needed Michael. She had even finally gone to see Swanson, catching him before office hours as he was eating lunch at his desk.

“Can I ask you something?” she said, peeking around the ajar door.

“Of course.” He invited her in, and she took one of the chairs facing his desk.

She faltered suddenly, realizing she wasn’t sure she should trust him. She thought he was on their side, but he hadn’t actually been around for a while.

“I was at your session at the Moratorium back in October when you got everyone excited about going to Washington,” she said. “You were going to come with us. And then you didn’t.”

Swanson sighed and sat back. He pushed his food away and wiped his hands on several paper napkins.

“So you heard that I didn’t go because I was afraid I’d lose my job, right?”

Judy nodded.

“Yeah, that story’s out there. I suppose I should have tried to correct it, but . . . truth is, I was never going to go. That was an inaccurate assumption.”

“There are people who say you felt your job was more important than your conscience.” She couldn’t believe she just blurted that out.

He nodded, as if he had been expecting the question. “I did a lot of soul searching, Judy, on just that subject. I looked at who I was in my life, the roles I had, and where I had influence. I’m Tom Swanson, an individual who has made a decision to be against the war. But I’m also a teacher in a position to open the eyes of students so *they* can make better decisions. That’s what I

do best. If I'm not in this job, then there's a gap. I don't mean that I'm irreplaceable, but I considered carefully where I could do the most good."

"Ever feel like a hypocrite?" She couldn't stop herself.

"Sometimes," he said after a long pause. "Don't get me wrong, I'm angry as hell about what's going on, but there's a lot of knee-jerk reactive hot air out there, and I see my job as helping my students see through it all. I certainly hope they agree with me, but that's not the point. It's important we do the right thing in the right way and don't trample what we're trying to protect."

"So, that's why you shot down the attempt to get ROTC off campus last semester?"

"Exactly. If we squash some rights to get others, even if we think it will save lives, it gets very precarious from a legal standpoint. I have to make sure we're all working within the right lines. And I have to be trusted by everyone on all sides."

"Has anyone actually *in* ROTC talked to you?" She was thinking about the military freaks. They had to be conflicted, like she was.

"Lots of people talk to me, Judy, like you're doing now." She didn't know what to believe. It's true, he could be an agent of the administration, working to keep things calm, which was fine unless some of them landed in jail. Or he could really believe there were two sides, like she was trying to do. She couldn't risk it.

Swanson seemed to have that quality Michael did, of knowing what she was thinking without her saying it. But thinking about herself now was not the point.

"But what are you saying to them about the lottery? About what they should do now, go to Canada or take their chances in Vietnam?"

“They want to know what I’d do, and I can’t tell them or they’ll think I’m telling them what *they* should do.”

“What would you—”

“I can’t tell you either, Judy.”

“So what do you say?”

“That it’s the hardest question they’ll ever face.”

Judy left, frustrated. If Swanson didn’t have answers, how could she expect herself to have them? How could anyone else expect her to have them?

They had decided they would all watch the lottery drawing at David’s dorm, since that’s where most of them lived. However, after his outburst about women, Vida suggested the girls stay together, and they all agreed, except Marsha. Howie wanted her to be with him. So Judy, Vida, RoMo, Sheila, and a few other women took places early, along the wall in the back of the north TV room. Judy watched David and the others take over the front row as the rest of the ecumenical crowd gathered, letterman jackets and army-surplus fatigues. Greeks and freaks together, everyone in jeans. Denim and the war, she thought, the great levelers. As the room began to fill, the guys practically walked over the women, pressing them toward the last-row seats, then taking over the standing room.

“What about space in the back?” an irritated voice called out.

“That’s girls,” someone said.

Judy felt a wave of shame and grabbed Vida, pulling her by the sleeve.

A blonde she didn’t even know looked up as they left. Judy jerked her head, motioning her to follow as a look of recognition and guilt came over her.

“I didn’t think,” the blonde said, once they were out of the TV room.

“It’s all right,” Judy said, “me neither.”

“Wait up,” Marsha called. “I told Howie I couldn’t take up a seat. He’s sitting with David. I think he’ll be fine.”

They joined a crowd of women in exile in the adjacent student lounge. They waited.

“Ron’s been a mess,” one girl said, furiously twisting her ring. “He looks at me, and it’s like he wants me to say something, but I don’t know what.”

“Al, too,” another said. “And no matter what I say, it’s not what he wants to hear. He can get real mad.” She bowed her head. “It scares me.”

“I’m going to leave,” Marsha said. “I can’t take this.”

“Stay,” Judy said, holding her by the arm. Marsha sat down as Judy continued in a whisper, “Later won’t be any better.”

“What if—” Marsha began.

“No, don’t,” Judy said, “not yet.”

They waited in silence, prayer, and concentration. Hair was twisted, lips bitten; fingernails wouldn’t make it through the night. They smoked, even if they didn’t. They played with their pieces of paper that had birth dates of brothers and cousins and boyfriends at other schools. Even RoMo knew that Wizard’s birthday was January 30.

“I want to scream,” Marsha said, grabbing her hair with her hands and holding her head between her knees. The smell of fear, something like sulfur, thickened the air.

Sounds filtered through from the TV room like little pockets of pressure, exploding as they called each number. Sometimes hoots of relief. Sometimes the hiss of a loud, disbelieving

expulsion of air. Snap, crackle, pop, dud, silence. They couldn't figure the code for the noises. No one came out.

At one point, Judy could no longer sit still. She went to stand just outside the TV room. The guys had turned off the lights, and she could see the strobe effect over them as the images changed on the television screen. A flicker, and she saw baby faces so tender she wanted to fold them in her arms and take them home to be safe. Another flicker, and she saw hollow eyes prematurely aged with fear. She shrunk down, lost her balance, and backed off.

Suddenly, Fish was running to her. He picked her up and spun her around, as if it were VE Day on the Champs-Élysées, then planted big kisses, wet as hell, all over her face. "I'm 327!" He fell to his knees with a beatific look on his face and a huge smile. "I love you! You know how much I love you?" He stretched his long arms wide. "I love you this much."

Judy laughed nervously as he turned to RoMo and called out, stretching his arms even wider.

"I love you this much," he repeated, "on the map!"

She was confused. If Fish was 327, they must be almost done. Could it mean that everyone she knew had a high number? Could they possibly be that lucky?

Achilles walked out somberly, and she held her breath.

"Ninety-six," he said.

"That's almost a hundred, Achilles. You'll be safe."

"Yeah, great." He walked past her toward the elevators. "I'd rather it was just nine. At least I'd know. Now I'm in no-man's-land." He stepped into the elevator, and she heard his voice die as the doors closed. "Fucking no-man's-land."

She heard Marsha shriek and turned to watch Howie come out, skinny and smiling.

“Take me to McDonald’s,” he said, then engulfed her in a bear hug. “Three forty-three,” he yelled with a clenched fist in the air and his old guitar-playing grin on his face.

David walked out slowly but deliberately, his gaze fixed at a spot on the floor, about three feet ahead of him. Judy could feel her fear rising, her heartbeat so intense it seemed to be coming out of the top of her head. She wasn’t breathing. She would not cry. She could not cry. She touched his arm and he stopped his march.

“Two thirty.”

She burst into tears and moved to hug him, but he pulled back.

“But David, that’s nearly halfway. You’ll be safe.”

“Yeah, lucky me,” he said and headed to the elevator.

“Don’t follow me,” he called back at her.

“But . . .”

“Don’t.”

Judy turned in circles as others walked out of the room, not sure what had just happened with David. She strained her neck looking for Wil, Wizard, Meldrich.

“We have a Number One!” she heard someone say, followed by a chorus of disembodied voices.

“Number One. September fourteenth.”

Judy sat down in the middle of the floor, jelly legs giving up. “My birthday, too,” she said out loud to people who weren’t listening.

The post-lottery pandemonium went on above and around her. Someone just walked over my grave, she thought, and then had the sensation of dropping, like a heavy stone, accelerating.

She tried to steady herself with her hands on the floor. In my family I was supposed to be a boy, she thought. It was to be a boy first and only then a girl.

“September fourteenth is my birthday, too,” she said out loud again to stop her fall.

Judy felt she should find the Number One and tell him that were it not for a flip of the chromosome coin—one extra more or less—she would be in his place, random, just like the lottery. She really could understand.

She tried to picture herself in a uniform, a helmet, but the closest she could get was to see her little brother, the same hair, blue eyes, and freckles. She tried to envision him older, so she would know what a male version of herself would look like. She couldn't make it work. All she could conjure up was the image of a small man in fatigues with the familiar face of a seven-year-old. This face and figure froze in her mind as she felt the digit *1* burning into her forehead like a private scarlet letter. This had to mean something.

She wandered outside. It was December. The cold hurt. She took her hands out of her pockets and forced them down at her sides as the icy air coated them, penetrating in daggers of pain to the bone. It was the least she could do. If only she could talk to Wil.

And then she remembered.

They had the same birthday. Wil was the Number One.

She rushed to find him. Surely, he had been in the TV room, but now she couldn't remember specifically if he had been sitting with the others. The room was empty. He must have slipped past her when she was with David, or when she was having her own breakdown. How could she have been so selfish? How could she not immediately have realized that if it was her, it was also him?



The elevators were crammed with people throwing numbers around. The counting had begun again. People who used to ask each other what was their sign, were now asking who had what number. How many days before induction notices arrive? How much time would they have? How much, how many, which one, who was the Number One? If they only knew.

She maneuvered through the crowded halls on the way to Meldrich's room and entered through a deep, smoky haze to the pounding rhythm of "I Want You": "So . . . HEAVVVVVY."

She froze when she saw Meldrich. He was standing among a mass of bodies sitting and lying everywhere, on bunks, desks, and floor. He had drawn three sixes on his forehead, two in black magic marker, one in red lipstick.

He laughed at her reaction. "I'm sixty-six. Might as well be 666, the devil sign," he said. "Wouldn't that be perfect, sending the devil to Vietnam? I could really screw it up for them."

She imagined him high, going into his goofy act, jumping all around the jungle, drawing enemy attention or stepping on a landmine.

"There's a guy on the tenth floor," Meldrich said to the room. "For a hundred bucks he knows a way to break your arm so they can't fix it enough for you to go." He tried to demonstrate. "It has something to do with the doorjamb, you either put your arm into the edge like this as it opens and then he slams it, or . . ."

Judy looked at Meldrich's beefy arm, picturing what it would take to snap it. RoMo's mouth dropped open.

"Come on, Meldrich," Wizard said, offering him a joint. He had 196 on his forehead. "It's not like you're the Number One."

"Wil is," Judy said in a whisper, not being able to find her voice. She scanned the room desperately looking for him.

Someone grabbed her to stop her turning. It was David. He tapped his watch.

“Soon now.”

What was he doing? What about Wil? Nothing was making sense.

She felt an arm on hers and a pull back out the door into the hallway. It was Vida. She hadn't seen her in the haze.

“Wil?” she said. “I keep trying to get to him. Don't they realize . . .”

“Never mind,” Vida said. “They don't know Wil's number. He wasn't there. He stayed in his room. His mother called the minute they pulled his number. He said he had known it all along.”

“I need to find him.”

“Later. He dropped two Quaaludes. He's out cold, for now. But he'll be fine. I have a plan for Canada, remember? He'll finally listen when he wakes up.”

She leaned against the wall and slid down, sitting on the floor. Judy slid down next to her.

“What did you say to him?”

“I didn't have to say much. I went to his room when I realized he'd never made it to the TV room. I fucked him, gave him his drugs, and stayed with him till he crashed.”

“You slept with him? I thought—”

“What else could I do?”

Judy was in flight toward Wil's room without realizing how she got up, Vida right behind her.

“Wait,” Vida yelled.

Judy dodged over and around the figures that crowded the hallways, down the stairs, and back up to Wil's room. The door was open, and the room was empty.

“Don’t worry,” Vida said. “We’ll get him to Canada. For now, just do what he always says and let him be.”

“Vida!” Judy whipped around in terror. “He’s walking around with Quaaludes *in* him, a death sentence *over* him, and that stupid fatalistic philosophy. And now you’ve slept with him. I know it sounds ridiculous, but it was one of the goals that was keeping him going. You really want to believe he didn’t slip into the lagoon or that he isn’t walking through the highway headlights.”

“Oh, shit,” Vida said.

They raced back to Meldrich’s room.

“Wil’s the Number One,” Judy yelled. David dropped his roach. “He’s on downers, and he’s missing.”

The room sprang into action.

“David and Fish, hit the lagoon,” Wizard called out, on the run. “Achilles, the highway. The rest of you, check the dorm lobbies, outside, whatever you can think of. Meet up in the Tune Room in an hour or when you find him. One hour.”

They scrambled out the door, barking orders at each other, as excited as they were scared, Judy thought, as thankful to be diverted from their own fear as they were worried about Wil.

Judy turned to follow them and tripped, kicking over an ashtray as big as a dinner plate that was left on the floor. Cigarette butts, roaches, and black soot shot through Meldrich’s empty room. She stood in the middle of the rubble, looked out the window at the light high above campus and suddenly knew where Wil was—and knew she had to go to him by herself.