

THIRD & FOREVER

L O W E N C L A U S E N

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Chapter 1

He walked across the gravel parking lot toward the borrowed car, disguised outwardly from others and inwardly from himself. He carried a paper sack in his left hand. Upon reaching the car he stood motionless for a moment and listened. It was long past midnight and the night was quiet. Lake water lapped against the pilings of the boat dock.

He didn't like to feel confined and once inside the car moved the driver's seat as far back as it would go. He stuffed the paper sack beneath the seat. From the breast pocket of his sports coat he removed a pair of glasses, opened them, and put them on. The glasses did not change his vision. He started the engine and drove out of the parking lot along the one-lane drive. After turning on the headlights he dimmed the green dashboard lights so that his reflection disappeared from the windows.

He drove cautiously, checking the speedometer often and stopping after several blocks for a traffic light at the first hint of yellow but not because he cared what a traffic light directed. In the night he took no directions from anything or anyone. As he waited for the light to change, he watched two people walking on the sidewalk—a young woman and a man, talking, a couple. The woman was attractive, probably a student, nineteen or twenty, her painted lips opening and closing in conversation. She wasn't looking beyond her partner, but she would. Someday she would.

While the others slept, he was free. Their rules didn't apply to him. Possessed by desire at times resisted but overpowering, he felt compelled to search without knowing where, to act without knowing why, to find relief without knowing who.

The university campus reminded him of the island where he grew up—perfect houses with perfect yards tended by the Filipinos and Mexicans who crossed the bridge in the morning and left before dark. On their way to work in downtown skyscrapers, his father and the other island fathers passed the Mexicans and the Filipinos on the bridge and skirted the section of the city that they warned their sons to avoid. Stay away from there, their fathers said. In the evening shadows of the skyscrapers, those prohibited and uncontrolled streets were so far from their island that they seemed to be in a different country. Yet they were so close that the sons had a primal awareness of them—could almost smell them, touch them, taste them.

He remembered the first night a carload of his friends crossed the bridge to the prohibited streets. The boldest of the boys, it wasn't he, rolled down a window and beckoned the black girl to come closer—close enough for them to see her teasing smile as she bent down to look in the car window, so close that they could smell her perfume, hear her breathing. They were not buyers, these boys. The whore could tell at once and turned away in disgust at the pimply white faces in the car. But they returned, this carload or another from their perfect island streets, and once in a while a whore would negotiate, and the boys would become thrilled by talk of the pleasure each would receive. It was only talk. The whores never entered their cars, and the boys howled with unfulfilled desire as they sped back over their bridge to the quiet curving streets of their perfect island.

The island girls held no mystery for him. He had no interest in them or in the expectations they formed if he smiled back. From his mother he knew all about expectations. He disliked their voices, their smiles, even the way they walked beside him with their arms hugging books to their breasts and eager to begin their demands.

One night he crossed the bridge alone, trembling with virgin fear as he turned toward the streets where the women walked in shadows. He rolled down the car window beside him and the window on the other side. He had money in his pocket. He believed it sufficient. Beyond that he knew nothing.

He pulled to the curb for the first whore he saw, a tall girl no older than he with boots so heavy that he heard them on the sidewalk as she walked to the car. The girl looked in the window, looked right through him.

“Your daddy give you enough money to have a good time?”

He followed her directions into an alley behind a burned-out house where garbage lay scattered on the ground. He gave her the money and unzipped his pants himself when she demanded to see it. His erection failed as she pulled on him in disinterested silence. This was not what he had imagined. He had followed all her directions for nothing.

“What’s the matter with you? You queer?” she asked. “You better not be fooling with me.”

“I’m not queer,” he said.

“You need more money if you want me to keep doing it. I ain’t doing all this work for nothing.”

“I don’t have any more money.”

“Then you come back another time when you’re ready.”

She was no older than he, but she treated him like a child. He wasn’t a child. He looked past her silhouette. A streetlight from the next block shone through the trees, but darkness surrounded them. He reached over and found her arm.

“What are you doing? You keep your hands off of me.”

His fingers encircled her skinny forearm and closed upon themselves. No longer indifferent, no longer dismissive, her demands became more forceful and fearful as he tightened his grip. When she tried to open the door, he jerked her back. Her fist was nothing to him, and he struck her face with the back of his hand. He found her

throat, closed his fingers tightly around it, and hit her again. She stopped fighting. Her fingers clung to his arm, but they were no longer trying to pull his hand away. Her strangled voice begged him to let her go, begged him to stop, to start, whatever he wanted. He pushed her down onto the car seat, and her body molded into any place he pushed it. Rising above her, he released the pressure around her throat and ripped away her clothing to expose her. He crushed her breasts and groped between her legs until his fingers penetrated the dry shell of her sex. Although he couldn't see her face, he heard her open mouth gasping for air, and there he released his rage and dominance.

He left her on her hands and knees in the alley gagging. He could have taken his money back, but he didn't. He wanted to pay. He had come to her streets a trembling boy, but he was trembling no more. If he had brought more money, he would have dropped it on the ground beside her when he pushed her out of the car. She deserved it.

When he woke the next morning, the night was a distant dangerous dream where desire, hunger, and anger had been beyond his control. For days, for weeks after, he had feared the loss of control. He vowed to himself that it wouldn't happen again. Gradually the fear left him, and he remembered the whore beckoning him, her debauched smile, her final desperate repetition of the word—yes.

That night had been years earlier, and now another night had come. He drove away from the bright streets in the University District and entered a district of darker streets. He saw a face in the shadows. Was her smile derisive or inviting? Did it matter? He turned the car around at the next intersection and drove into the shadow.

Chapter 2

When she was a child playing hopscotch on the rectangular blocks of concrete that formed the sidewalk on Ballard Avenue, she would not mark the blocks with chalk as other girls did in other places. She drew the pattern in her mind, a secret for herself. Uncountable times her footsteps laid their invisible impression over other footsteps, upon the concrete hard as rock that showed no sign of her or anyone else. After she jumped and skipped her way to the end of the sidewalk, to the tip of the triangle formed by two streets that marked the divide of where she could and could not go, she pirouetted on one foot, sometimes the right and sometimes the left, and retraced her invisible steps back to where she had begun in front of Rigmor's store: hours spent in a game with carefully constructed rules that only she understood.

When Grace thought about the little girl on the sidewalk, there was always an ache in her heart for the child, as if the little girl was somebody else, not her, as if the rules the little girl followed were not rules for her. The child had been careful not to step on any of the cracks in the sidewalk. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.* It was a silly, cruel, unthoughtful rhyme, but the little girl had not wanted to take a chance. It was difficult enough to skip on the uneven sidewalk where the loose, unfirm, irregular blocks of concrete tilted precariously beneath her feet without placing her mother's well-being into

the game, but it wasn't her choice to make. The rhyme had been chanted long before she could make any rules to counter it.

Grace Stevens walked the same sidewalk now, looking for the trouble she had never wanted to find as a child. Beside Grace was her beat partner of five months, Katherine Murphy. Grace's long stride had shortened over those months to accommodate her partner, and Katherine's had lengthened. Grace could now sense Katherine's presence without seeing her. Wes Mickelsen, Grace's previous and only other partner in the police department, was so big that there had never been any difficulty knowing where he was. But Katherine was different—smaller, not as assuming; quieter, yet more persistent.

When Wes Mickelsen had told her that he was planning to retire, Grace had considered quitting rather than trying to find a new partner. He had been her partner since she left the police academy; her mentor, the man she had known on Ballard Avenue since childhood. For her it was always difficult to begin with someone new. Wes understood her and she understood him. She could tolerate his habits and practices even when she disagreed with them. If he lifted a drunk roughly from the sidewalk, she knew it was because there had been too many drunks. If his anger flared in the middle of a bar dispute, she remembered the kindness he had shown her as the little girl he met in Rigmor's store on Ballard Avenue. She still carried the police whistle he had given her; she still remembered the day he had taken her hand, walked up and down Ballard Avenue with her, and introduced her to every business owner on the street although most of them already knew her, or knew about her. "This is Grace," he had told them, looking each merchant straight in the eye and holding her small hand in his huge one. "She's with me."

In addition to his kindness, Wes Mickelsen was a devious man. "Call Murphy," he had said after he told her he was retiring. "I hear she's pretty good."

He had smiled his devious smile. Women had never been partners before in the police department: Men had been partners since the

beginning of police partnerships, and then came the forced pairing of men and women, but never two women. Wes was gone, and Katherine had taken his place. No, not his place. Katherine had taken her own place, just as she had.

With summer at an end, a few early leaves had fallen to the street. Their dry brittle skeletons crunched beneath her dusty black shoes. Above her the mercury vapor lights came on one by one as sensors on the poles reacted to the fading light. The lighter blue of the vapor lights stood out against the background of darkening sky, the time of twilight, of light without shadow.

"It's Wes's birthday today," Grace said.

"How old is he?" Katherine asked.

"Fifty-eight, I think. After he reached fifty, he didn't want to keep track."

"So it's not just women who feel that way?"

"Don't tell me that you're worried about getting older?" Grace asked.

A car passed slowly with its headlights on, and Katherine turned away from Grace to watch it. It was the only car moving for several blocks. Headlights weren't necessary yet.

"I'll be thirty pretty soon," Katherine said. "I'm not so happy about that. You're still a baby, so you wouldn't understand."

"You don't look thirty," Grace said. "Anyway, my mother says that her fifties have been the best time of her life. Finally, she doesn't have to take care of anybody. My father has even learned how to do his own laundry. It took some prodding, but he finally learned. And she said that sex is better at fifty than when she was twenty-five."

"Your mother said that?" Katherine asked. "My mother would never say anything like that."

"Does your father know how to do his own laundry?"

"Probably not."

"Well, there you have it."

"I'll keep that in mind."

“Mom volunteers every Tuesday and Thursday for Planned Parenthood. I think she’s getting used to talking about sex. But something happened when she turned fifty. Mom said it was because she was healthy enough and ornery enough to finally enjoy what it took those fifty years to learn.”

“Something to look forward to,” Katherine said.

Grace looked for a piece of wood on which to knock to ward off envious spirits as her mother always did when she said something to tempt them. There was no wood at hand, only a brick building beside them. At the corner was a light pole, and she would knock on that when they reached it.

Katherine pointed across the street toward the front door of the Shev Shoon Gallery. The door was slightly ajar. Grace recognized the owner’s blue and white station wagon parked on the street. The tailgate of the station wagon was open, and there were several cardboard boxes stacked behind the rear seat. It was late for Linda to still be at the gallery.

They crossed the street together, and Grace pushed the door open a little more. The front of the gallery had only the dim light of twilight coming through the large windows, but there was an electric light on in the backroom. Oscar, the owner’s Labrador, raised his head from where he lay close to the front door. He recognized Grace and stretched back comfortably on the cement floor. Grace heard a shuffling noise in the backroom.

It was a strange job, Grace thought, always to look for the worst, and never, almost never, to completely believe what she saw. There was or could be something hidden just beyond what seemed evident. It had changed her—this job. Grace knew that she had to change to do her job well, but she didn’t like it. At home, with friends, on a simple trip to the grocery store, there was some part of her that remained alert for trouble. She resisted the change whenever she was conscious of it, resisted it as much as she could, but the change came anyway, slowly and inexorably tiptoeing into her conscious thoughts and finally into the unconscious.

Linda came out of the backroom carrying a broom and waved to Grace without alarm. Grace waved back.

“You’re here a little late tonight,” Grace said.

“I’m trying to clean up,” Linda said. “I hate to throw any of this stuff away, but if I don’t, I won’t have any room to work. Do you want any pottery? I’ve got boxes of the stuff here that students have left behind.”

“No thanks,” Grace said. “I’m not so big on pottery.”

Grace looked at Katherine, whose subtle expression was clear enough. Katherine was no bigger on pottery than she.

“Do you think Rigmor would like any?”

“Probably,” Grace said, “but she’s got so much stuff in her apartment I don’t know where she would put anything else.”

“Well, tell her she can come down and look if she wants any.”

“I’ll tell her,” Grace said.

Grace closed the door, and she and Katherine resumed walking. It wasn’t until they came to the next light pole that Grace remembered that she hadn’t yet knocked on wood. Surely it was too late for such nonsense. Nevertheless, she placed her hand on the rough splintered pole and tapped her fingers twice.

When working with Wes Mickelsen, she had followed his zigzag course on the beat without question. Irregularity was the only regular pattern to follow, he had said, and he determined what that irregular pattern would be. As she recrossed Ballard Avenue with Katherine, Grace realized that they had made the decision without discussion or without one following and the other leading. And yet they zigzagged as frequently and irregularly as Wes, even on one of his best days.

They arrived at the hardware store, which had closed for the day and would remain closed through Sunday. On the glass panel of the worn front door a cardboard sign announced the extension of Saturday hours from noon to 4:00 P.M. The cardboard had been there so long that it had faded from prominence, just as had the Milwaukee tool sign in the plate glass window and the taped crack that ran the length of the glass.

Shiny new cars—German, Swedish, and Japanese models—filled the parking spaces on the street in front of the hardware store. When the hardware store was open, beat-up pickup trucks and delivery vehicles occupied the spaces. The owners of the shiny foreign cars were not customers of the hardware store. Weekends and early evenings were the busy times for the athletic club across the street. Seekers of health from the affluent neighborhoods to the north and from downtown offices flocked to the gym on their way home or on their days off, while the ship workers, plumbers, and carpenters who bought hardware sat on bar stools in Hattie's Hat or the Smoke Shop farther up the street—at least some of them did. It was possible, she supposed, that a few of the workers were over in the athletic club becoming fit. She had never checked to know for certain.

In the next block beside the secondhand store, which was next to Rigmor's Grocery, Grace saw a shopping cart heaped with plastic bags. It was not uncommon to find a bag lady or a bag man north of Ballard Avenue on Market Street, or even one in the park behind the Bell Tower, but she had known only one who had ever ventured down Ballard Avenue as far south as Rigmor's Grocery.

The cart was at the bottom of a wide stairway that led up to the apartments above the secondhand store. A woman in her fifties, approximately the age of Grace's mother, sat halfway up the wooden stairs, looking over their heads through the tunnel created by the walls and ceiling of the enclosure. She had a spiral notebook propped on her knees and a pencil in her hand.

"What are you doing up there, Edith?" Grace asked.

The woman looked up from her notebook. Her eyes widened with alarm.

"We're down here," Grace said, "on the sidewalk."

The portable police radio, which Katherine carried in a case buckled to her holster, squawked with static as the dispatcher sent a University District car to a disturbance call on Brooklyn Avenue.

“Did you hear that?” Edith whispered. “Listen. That one. Did you hear him?”

Edith looked up at the ceiling of the stairway to locate the voice. Grace slowly ascended the creaking steps.

“Edith, do you remember me? I’m Grace. Do you remember?”

Grace continued to repeat her questions, keeping her voice soft and even so that she would not startle the woman. Slowly, reluctantly, Edith looked down at Grace.

“Of course I remember. Why do you ask such stupid questions?”

Grace stopped on the step below Edith’s feet, but off to the side so that she wasn’t directly in front of the woman. Katherine had followed her and took a position below Grace and on the opposite side of the stairway. Katherine turned the volume down on the police radio.

“You went away to get well,” Grace said. “What happened?”

“They tortured me,” Edith said, “but I wouldn’t tell them. Did they send you to find me?”

“No,” Grace said. “I’m on your side. Don’t you remember?”

Edith stared at Grace. The older woman wore a green knitted hat and heavy winter clothes although winter was still months away.

“You’re lying. They sent you.”

Edith had penetrating blue eyes.

“I’m telling you the truth,” Grace said.

“Swear it, then.”

“Edith, did they give you medicine to take?”

“I thought so,” Edith said. “You black ones are the worst. You tie me down, and you know what happens after that.”

“I’ve never done that to you, Edith. Does your daughter know where you are?”

“I don’t have a daughter.”

“Yes, you do. Her name is Elizabeth.”

“Not any more. I changed her name. You don’t know what her name is now.”

“Edith, do you have medicine that you’re supposed to take?” Grace asked again.

“I have to go now,” Edith said.

Edith stood abruptly and closed her notebook. Grace didn’t move, although the large woman stood menacingly above her. Katherine moved one step closer, but Grace cautioned with her hand not to take another. Edith was harmless unless she felt trapped. At least she had been harmless before she went away to get well.

The stairway was narrow, and there wasn’t room for Edith to pass unless Grace and Katherine moved out of the way. Grace thought back to the long ordeal she and Wes had gone through with Edith and the daughter, Elizabeth—all for nothing. Grace slowly backed down the stairs. Katherine did the same, a step behind her, all the way down to the sidewalk. Edith didn’t move until the two police officers were off the stairs; then she walked straight down to her cart without looking at either one of them.

Edith talked to herself and to the voices above as she hid her notebook beneath the plastic bags. Ignoring the silent police officers, she pushed her shopping cart down the sidewalk across the irregular concrete blocks. A few of the loose blocks tilted with the weight of the wheels. At the first intersection Edith turned in the direction of Shilshole Avenue and the railroad tracks.

“What was that about?” Katherine asked.

“It’s a long story,” Grace said. “I guess she doesn’t have much use for black people.”

“I’m sorry she said that.”

“Why are you sorry? Edith is the one who said it, and she’s crazy.”

“She probably doesn’t like the Irish either.”

“You can ask her next time,” Grace said.

“What happened before? Where is her daughter?”

“San Francisco, the last I knew. That was a year ago—maybe it’s more than a year. God, I hate to tell Elizabeth that her mother is back on the streets. Edith used to have an apartment close to Ballard

Hospital, but she lost it when she started hearing those voices. She sort of lost touch with this world. When the toilet plugged up in her apartment, she used five-gallon buckets instead. The apartment was full of them when the landlord finally evicted her. Her daughter, Elizabeth, flew up from San Francisco. She had been trying to get her mother help for months, but I don't think she knew how bad Edith was. Elizabeth found her mother here on the streets, and it's where she found Wes and me, too.

"Edith wouldn't commit herself or allow her daughter to do it, and if you can't prove that she's a danger to anybody..."

"Then nothing happens," Katherine said.

"That's right."

"With the daughter, Wes and I chased Edith all around Ballard. We tried to convince Edith to ride along with us to Harborview where we could get her evaluated, but she wouldn't go. She might be crazy, but she isn't stupid. So the daughter and Wes and I tried to talk to her and keep her in one place long enough for a mental health worker to meet us and evaluate her on the street. Sometimes we felt like tying her to a tree.

"Edith said her daughter was dead, or if she wasn't dead, she was part of the group who wanted to torture her. She said terrible things about her daughter, things you would never say to your child. It nearly killed Elizabeth. She spent a week in a rental car following her mother around day and night.

"Then one day Edith agreed to get treatment. I don't know what happened. Maybe Edith had a flash of lucidity, or maybe she finally felt sorry for her daughter who was about to go crazy herself. I don't know. Wes and I took Edith and Elizabeth to Harborview Hospital, and Edith signed herself in.

"Elizabeth was so grateful. She showed Wes and me the notebooks her mother kept. Edith has beautiful handwriting, and there were wonderful sentences scattered among the pages. They didn't make any sense when you tried to read the whole page, but some of the

sentences, when you read them separately, were clear and beautiful. I was going to remember a few of them. Elizabeth cried and cried over those notebooks. I don't know how I'm going to tell her that her mother is back. I don't know if I will."

"It's not fair," Katherine said. "Some process goes wrong in the brain. Who knows why? Just one little thing goes wrong, and you're living out of a grocery cart."

Grace looked down to the concrete blocks of the sidewalk; she remembered but could not see the invisible steps of her childhood that always led her back to Rigmor's store. Before coming upon Edith, they had been working their way there. It was the place where they began most shifts and ended them all. Rigmor's Grocery, beyond the secondhand store, was one reason Grace had backed down the steps and let Edith walk away. Their shift was almost over, and Rigmor was waiting.

The bell above Rigmor's door jingled when Grace opened the door. Grace smelled freshly cooked *frikadeller*. Although she had eaten thousands of Rigmor's meatballs, her mouth still watered.

"Hello, *skat*," Rigmor called to her from the back counter, the accent and words of Denmark still marking her speech forty years after leaving the old country. "Is it that time already?"

Every night except Saturday, the last chore of the walking beat was to close Rigmor's store, to bring in the fruit and vegetable tables from the sidewalk, to make sure that Rigmor was fine—she wasn't so young anymore, she said. Every night they stopped last at Rigmor's store to receive her benediction before leaving the street and going home. On Saturday nights the poker players, a group of current and retired police officers who had worked the Ballard Avenue beat in the years before Grace and Katherine, carried in the fruit and vegetable tables and closed the store, but Grace and Katherine stopped anyway.

Grace walked up the center aisle between shelves stacked full of Scandinavian grocery items and walked behind the cash register and

refrigerated display to the work counter where Rigmor made the *frikadeller* and everything else that was good. On the counter were two rows of thinly sliced Danish rye bread, buttered and waiting to be completed into open-face sandwiches for the poker players. Katherine remained on the other side of the cash register, still not sure what she could do to be helpful. It took a long time to know what to do in Rigmor's store.

"And how are you, Katrin?" Rigmor asked. "Ready to go home, I'll bet, and then with two days off. You'd better take some of these *frikadeller* with you so that you will have something good to eat over your weekend."

"You made them for your party tonight," Katherine said. "I wouldn't want any of the poker players to go hungry."

"There's no danger of that. I've made enough for an army."

Grace opened the oven door and lifted the lid from Rigmor's largest roasting pan. It was full of meatballs, hours of work.

"How many are you expecting in this army?" Grace asked.

"Six, seven, eight, who knows? Put some in a carton for Katrin and some for you."

Grace knew better than to resist Rigmor's commands. She reached under the counter for two Styrofoam containers.

"Bigger ones than that," Rigmor said.

Grace put the containers back and brought out two that were larger.

"Is Wes coming tonight? It's his birthday, you know."

"Is it? Well, he'd better come, then. But I'm sure he will. He comes every time, and he always wonders how you and Katrin are doing. Of course, he doesn't think anybody could do as good a job as he did when he worked here, but I told him that nobody even misses him now. We don't want him to have a big head, even though he taught most of these men, including the chief, how to be police officers just like he taught you. But he could have stayed here if he wanted. He wasn't so old that he had to go off and retire. What if I did that? What

if I retired and collected my pension? Then where would these men go? *Hvad?*”

“Where would all of us go, Rigmor?”

“No *ja*,” Rigmor said, combining the English no and the Danish yes, as she did whenever she resigned herself to the unknowable. “Someday you’ll come to the poker party, too, when you become a big shot like the chief and leave us here.”

“What if I don’t leave?” Grace asked.

“That sounds good to me, but then you don’t come to the poker party. But I think you will. That’s why you’re going back to school, *hvad?*”

“Maybe I just want to learn to something new.”

“That’s always a good idea.”

“I’ll help you with these sandwiches. Then Katherine and I can carry them upstairs for you.”

“Oh, that would be nice. What shall you do? Do you want to spread the *pâté* or put on the garnish, or shall we do both together?”

“Let’s do it together.”

“*Leverpostej*, a little slice of bacon, gherkin fanned just so, sautéed *champignon*, and there we have it. You remember how to do that, I suppose.”

“I remember,” Grace said. Nevertheless, she watched Rigmor’s skilled hands just as she had watched when she could barely see over the counter.

“Yes, of course you would.”

“I helped you make these sandwiches before Wes ever came here.”

“That’s right, but you don’t do it so often anymore.”

Grace placed her hand gently on top of Rigmor’s hand, which had settled beside one of her finished sandwiches.

“It’s not something I’ll forget.”

“No *ja*,” Rigmor said again. “I should know that. My sons forgot how to do this as soon as they could, but not you. Now, your sister,

she was something different. I almost had to tie her down to make her learn anything.”

“We must have been a pain in the neck for you, two little girls running around here while you were trying to run a business.”

“No. You were a joy. Always a joy.”

“You’re lying, Rigmor.”

Rigmor laughed to herself the way she always laughed when she alone knew the joke and didn’t intend to share it.