

Excerpt from [RUNNER](#), by [Tracy Clark](#)

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Barb shouted frantically from the bus. “Cass! Leave him! What are you doing?”

Scot ran flat-out, slipping some on the ice and snow, but not stopping or slowing. He was a kid, nimble, surefooted. If he took a tumble, he’d likely spring back up and keep on going. I was of a certain age, four years from the big 4-0, if I hit the ice, I was going to break something and end up in the emergency room.

He checked for me, and found me there, my arms pumping, my legs too, me praying the whole time I didn’t catch a bad patch of ice and ruin the next six months of my life.

“Stop!” I yelled.

Scot ignored the command. He gave up the sidewalk and darted out into the street between cars in oncoming traffic. I skidded to a stop before leaving the curb, waiting for cars to pass, then stepped off again, having lost ground. Getting hit by a car was also not in my plan. That meant broken bones, maybe traction, months of PT, and that’s if the darn thing didn’t kill me right from the jump.

I ran across the street, brushing the back of a car's bumper as I passed it. "Scoot!" I plastered my eyes to his back, using it as my focal point. How long was he going to hold onto the box of doughnuts? You would think it would slow him down. Just then I remembered I had left my bag on the bus. I had no cellphone, no ID, nothing. I should stop running. I should let the kid go, find him another way. I had no idea where he was leading me. A sane person would break off and go back. I dug in and sped up.

Up ahead, well ahead, Scoot suddenly stopped and turned, breathing hard, his eyes cutting, angry. "What is your problem, bitch?"

I pulled up to a much-needed stop, too. I was winded, sweating under my fleece and outer jacket, my vision blurred from the run. I hadn't been on my bike since the weather turned months ago, and I was now feeling the effects of too little exercise. That and the mid-thirties thing.

I leaned over, my hands on my knees, trying not to pass out. It took a few seconds. I straightened, pointed at him. "First, don't call me bitch. Second, what's *your* problem? Where *is* she? I swear, kid, if there's one hair out of place on her head..." I gulped in cold air, needing more of it, even though it hit

my lungs like nail spikes shot out of a gun. "I'm going to beat the living crap out of you."

He smirked at me. "Doesn't look like you're so much." He hoisted the box of doughnuts higher under his arm. "Plus, I get nothing for helping you. I can't spend nothing. I can't eat nothing. Nothing gets me no place warm." He turned, flicked me a look, then took off again. "*Bitch!*"

I wasn't ready, not by half, but I started up again, digging in the best I could the word bitch still ringing in my ears. When I caught Scoot, we were going to have a conversation about respect, and by conversation, I meant something else entirely.

We ran for blocks, Scoot never once in danger of being caught. The only thing I could hope for was not to lose sight of him. Maybe he was leading me to Ramona, maybe he was luring me into an ambush. Again, all I had to do was slow down and stop, but something in me just would not let me do it.

We were heading back toward Garfield Parkway, toward where Marian had parked the bus the night before. I saw Scoot zip into the alley behind the old Sunshine Bread Company. The tall yellow building, standing monster-like in the dark, had been shuttered and boarded up for years, since Sunshine rolled the

last loaf of white bread off the conveyor belt. The pleasant smell of fresh-baked bread used to scent the whole neighborhood and jobs were plentiful, then people started watching their carbs, wrapping their sandwiches in lettuce leaves, and Sunshine went bust. I stumbled up to the building winded in time to see Scoot peel a plywood sheet away from the back door and slip inside.

It was a big building, maybe a dozen floors. An entire company ran out of it for decades, plant workers and office personnel, working their entire careers sometimes right here, putting in the hours, manning the ovens, keeping the personnel files straight, some big pooh-bah at the top hiring and firing. I studied the layout. Dark out here, dark in there. Ramona missing, Scoot with the bitch and the box of doughnuts, and information I needed.

I'm taking good care of her, that's what he said. Maybe he was just messing with me? I eyed the ground-floor windows, the door Scoot had gone through. The board-up company hadn't bothered to go beyond the first floor, the tall windows above were intact, uncovered. I looked for movement behind them, maybe a flicker of light, but saw nothing. What would I be walking into?

"Leave it, Cass. Turn around. Leave it. Come at it another way. Only a fool would go into that building."

I looked up to the roof at the battered Sunshine Bread Company sign, then back at the back door, the darkened windows. *He's taking care of her. There ain't no babies out here ... at least not for long.* I slipped through the pried away board and slipped through the back door into a blanket of near darkness and an overwhelming stench of rotting garbage, must and decay, like something living crawled in here to keep warm, and then died. I blinked, held my spot for a time, waiting for my eyes to adjust, as slowly a short flight of stairs leading up materialized. There was something else mixed in with the smell of the must and decay and emptiness. I could have sworn I smelled bread. It was impossible, of course, or could the smell have gotten baked into the walls all those many years ago?

At the top of the stairs, through a glass door, I found myself in a long, wide room with crusted, decaying, paint-peeled pillars running down both sides. Everything else was gone. The Sunshine people had made a thorough job of clearing out.

Except for the sound my feet made on the concrete floor as I crept along, there was just the faint clicking sound of rat feet along the walls. I cringed and stayed well away. I got a whiff of charred wood, then. Squatters, maybe, or maybe Scoot and his crew? Glass cracked under my feet as I made my way

through what looked like a back lobby, the floor black-and-white tiles dusted over by years of grime, dirt and rodent feces.

I moved fast, then, my eyes and ears open, figuring a fast target would be more difficult to get a bead on. Quickly, through the lobby, through the ground floor to the front of the building where there was trash strewn everywhere—balled up McDonald's bags, beer cans, whiskey bottles, old clothes, broken chairs and upturned buckets, which explained the rats. Squatters. I'd walked through hundreds of places like this while on the job. I knew it would take weeks before I stopped itching and got the smell of must and urine, the sound of rat feet, out of my nose and head.

I found a staircase leading up to the second floor, wide, with an ornate wooden railing that must have been impressive back in the day. *Welcome to Sunshine Bread Company. This way, please.*

I kept my back to the wall as I made my way up, my eyes on alert, hands up, ready to deflect anything that might come at me. Still no sign of Scoot. The stairs ended at a long hallway with heavy wooden doors with numbers on them—201, 202, 203. Offices. Mr. So-and-So in packaging, Ms. So-and-So in human resources. All gone now.

The smell of burning wood was stronger up here, and it seemed to be coming from somewhere way down the hall. Halfway there, hands still up, hyperalert, scanning, I heard a scraping sound, and stopped. Metal on metal, or something like that? I followed it to a set of wide double doors, above them, Meeting Room A stenciled in flaked gold. I pressed my ear to the wood, hearing nothing at first, then the scraping again. It was coming from inside. I eased the doors open and went in, high windows to the left, the moon offering some light, a wide space, empty, dusty. The edges of the room were cloaked in darkness and shadow, the moon's glow not reaching that far in. In the center of the room, sat a fifty-gallon drum, a glow emanating from it. The source of the wood smell, someone's heat source. No clue to the scraping noise, though; I didn't hear it now, anyway.

Halfway to the drum, I felt a subtle shift in the air, an energy that wasn't mine. I wasn't alone. Startled, flat-footed, I reeled just in time to see a kid rush toward me, a baseball bat raised high, aiming for my head.