

ONE

Del sat on the mattress in the dark, his once-photogenic teeth exposed, their enamel pitted, evidence of the drug's toxicity. He concentrated intently on tightening a rubber band around his left bicep. I watched – curious, a bit fearful, amazed – as he slid the tip of the syringe into the greenish-blue track of vein that bulged from his pallid skin. Del's right hand cradled the syringe as if it were a rare artifact. His thumb pressed firmly against the syringe's plunger. My boyfriend (for that's what I considered Delmont Benson) closed his eyes as fluid surged into his arm. Ecstasy swept over Del's face. His thin eyebrows furrowed. Release was clear in the quiver of his eyelids, in the pursing of his mouth, in the exhalations of breath through his lovely, full lips.

And then it was my turn, my opportunity, my first time to do meth.

Later, after the erotic rush of the drug had coursed through me, removing with it every constraint, every taboo and every hesitation, Del and I made love on the mattress in the basement apartment we shared in the Uptown neighborhood of Minneapolis. Our bodies moved and pulsed with frenetic energy. My peak was astounding. The meth seemed to direct energy along new and previously undiscovered pathways that lead to my epicenter. They say that you can become addicted to the stuff the first time you try it. That's not just a load of crap dished up by the DEA. I know it's true. It happened to me.

We stayed high most of the day. Del easily tolerated the long-lasting excitement meth infuses into its disciples. He'd used the drug routinely before I ever came along. I, on the other hand, found being high that first time akin to running a marathon. Oh sure, I'd drunk my share of beer and hard liquor when I partied as a kid. I'd smoked a little weed with friends in Bayfield, Wisconsin, where I went to high school, and in Marquette, Michigan where I went to nursing school. My experimentation with pot ended the moment I became a registered nurse. When I graduated and was pinned at twenty-one, I stopped smoking weed and dedicated myself to my profession, completely content to follow my father's example.

My father. Dr. Orville Theodore Xavier DuMont. There's a complex piece of humanity for you. On the outside, as striking a black man as you've ever seen, with chiseled cheekbones, finely detailed eyebrows, and the world's easiest-going smile. Tall, thin and fit even into late middle age (he's fifty-eight), Dad commands attention from folks – especially from women – even before they learn he's an orthopedic surgeon.

My twin sister Lilly, born fifteen minutes behind me, looks like a DuMont. She's slender, has an enigmatic mouth, and brown eyes – large, omnipresent discs of color set deep in her head, reminiscent of our father. Me, I take after our mother, Samantha Witta DuMont. She's half Irish and half Finnish, square of stature with thick hips, a significant bust, piercing blue eyes, and skin the color of clean straw. I didn't inherit her fair skin, blond hair or blue eyes, but I am an exact replica of my mother when it comes to physique, though I do share Dad's African heritage when it comes to abundantly nappy hair.

Using a needle wasn't a problem for me. As a nurse, I'd given plenty of hypos. Even in nursing school, we were always drawing blood on each other, inserting IV lines, and the like, so that part of the methamphetamine ritual didn't bother me at all. But the crash – now *that* was something that caught me off guard.

The problem with any good buzz, whether it's bourbon or meth, is that no matter how long the ride, it eventually ends. With meth, that first time, the end was cruel. Del hadn't prepared me for it; maybe, not knowing how my body would take to the stuff, there wasn't any way he could protect me from the abrupt crash that followed.

"Somethin' wrong?"

We were lying next to each other beneath a scratchy wool blanket on a clean white sheet in the cool dankness of the basement apartment we shared on Lake Street.

The floor of the bakery located above the apartment groaned from the weight of the “after work” trade: men and women on their way home from downtown Minneapolis stopping in to pick up a loaf of bread, dinner rolls or their kid’s birthday cake. We’d spent the better part of a winter day exploring each other’s bodies under the hazy, constant high of methamphetamine. I don’t remember now all the twisted and unnatural things we did. I do remember I didn’t want us to stop. But we did. The downhill slide began right around the time I first noticed customers stomping on the hardwood floor of the bakery.

“I think so.”

Del wrapped his long arms around my shoulders and pressed his wet crotch into the small of my back. Inexplicably, my mind turned from the light, airy energy of the drug’s high to something darker. It wasn’t as if a massive cloud of depression descended over me. It was more like uncertainty had crept into my spirit, taking me down mental paths and trails I’d normally avoid.

“I’ve got another hit or two left,” Del offered.

I shivered. The electric baseboard heaters were set on low to save money. Del hadn’t worked much since I met him that one morning, six months earlier, in an all-night diner on University Avenue. My night shift at the University of Minnesota Hospital was over when I stumbled into Denny’s for a cup of coffee and a ham and cheese omelet before heading back to my place, the apartment below the bakery, to sleep. Del was already at the lunch counter when I sat down heavily on a stool a few spaces away. His eyes engaged mine. I was instantly intrigued. His lips piqued my interest. And then there was his long blond hair. I’ve always been a sucker for blonds.

I’d been in the city for a year, and I’d given up dating. The bar scene wasn’t for me. Creeps and married guys pretending that they’re not – that’s what you get in Twin Cities’ singles bars. Madison, Wisconsin, where I first worked after graduating from nursing school, was different; it was friendlier, more laid back. In Madison, I had a few dates, almost all of them with white guys. You know, the curiosity factor: *What’s a black girl smell like? Taste like? Make love like?* I didn’t mind the attention. It was something I was used to, being the odd woman out, being a conversation piece, having grown up where I did. Anyway, some of my relationships in Madison looked serious at first blush, but nothing took. Not that I was in a hurry to marry, mind you. I wasn’t. Back then, I didn’t even think of myself as marriageable. The guys in Madison I dated were alright. We’d have a few drinks, go to a few shows, maybe catch dinner. But intimacy...well, because of the scars, that always posed a problem.

The scarring isn’t *that* noticeable. I do a good job of concealing my defects. I mean, other than when I visit my doctor, disrobe in a locker room, shower at home or spend time in a bathing suit, who’s going to know that my left side, from my hip bone to the hollow between my breasts and including my left armpit, is a ragged mess of scar tissue? Sure, I’ve lived with the scars for eleven of my twenty-eight years and I have, over time, come to accommodate my distressed skin and the fact that my left nipple is numb. Dead, in reality: dead to the touch – mine or anyone else’s. The skin under my left arm (the armpit unnaturally hairless) is webbed, like that of a bat’s wing. Over the years, I’ve learned to protect my scars during the cold of winter or when I’m out in the sun.

It’s during those first awkward moves towards intimacy, when a potential lover slips his fingers beneath my blouse or sweater in search of my bosom, that I tense, as if forced to watch an inevitable tragedy unfold. It’s during those moments – moments in the mating ritual when the man attempts to explore my body based upon some time-honored instruction manual that requires hand-to-breast interaction before venturing into more “serious” territory – that I fall apart.

By the time Del came along, it’d been years since I slept with anyone. Actually, I’d only slept with one other person before Del. Kind of sad, isn’t it? I mean, it wasn’t like I didn’t enjoy the experience. I’m not frigid or anything. Not in the least. But, like I said, I had a deep-seated phobia against intimacy.

Please understand: Delmont Benson was a lot of things. Some of Del’s constitution I figured out right away; other parts took a while to percolate to the surface. But one attribute that showed itself right off the bat that first tentative evening in the front seat of his Dodge Dakota pick-up truck was Del’s ability to suppress surprise when his fingers touched granulated skin. Most guys react, as I probably would if I were in their shoes, by withdrawing. It’s human nature to recoil from the imperfect. I don’t fault guys who respond this way. But, in my case, that’s the crossing where the intimacy train always

derailed. Before Del, my resolve, my declination, held firm and I abruptly ended every romantic encounter of my adulthood before consummation. Embarrassment had always manifested itself during intimacy. Not with Del. His fingers never wavered, never faltered in their attention to detail. I guess I must have instinctively picked up on the fact that he treated my left breast with the same respect, admiration and interest he gave my right. How he did it, I can't say. He just did. And that was all it took, thank goodness, for me to let him press on.

See, outside of the scarring, I'm fairly well put together. I'm not thin and angular like Lilly. Like I said, that's more my father's genetics. I'm built solid, with natural curves in all the right places and an attractive enough face. But despite making a positive first impression, nearly every man before Del had a problem with my scars. Granted, under the harsh light of the lavatory or in broad daylight, they are a wicked sight. But, God's honest truth, Del never once, in all our time together, made my scars an issue. Oh, he asked about them, and I filled him in to a limited extent. The difference was that once I stopped talking, Del didn't pry. Given the levels of intimacy Del and I negotiated for the better part of a year, that's pretty amazing.

"It'll cut the edge off the depression," Del whispered as darkness invaded my head. "Everyone tweaks a little now and then. It's like adjusting a carburetor," Del explained as he handed me a syringe loaded with another hit of meth mixed with bottled water.

"Thanks."

I closed my eyes and waited as my lover tied off a vein and reacquainted me with a world I had only once imagined.

