

Chapter 7

The Fight

Dufy woke up when she heard a car door slam. The dark-yellow light in her room suggested it was late afternoon. Her head ached from too much sleep, she was sweaty, and her mouth tasted like burnt onions. She looked at her clock; it was 4:42. She'd been sleeping all day. The car door must have been her parents returning from Anaheim. She would like to have stayed exactly where she was—prostrate and sweating in her snarled sheets. This time yesterday she was arriving at the Danceterium, heady from knowing she would be a part of something exuberant and fresh, and that Stefan would be impressed by her love affair with the music and would want her because of it. This time yesterday she'd been anticipating their night out at the new bistro he kept talking about. This time yesterday she'd not yet been his lover, so she couldn't have known that her joy would be squashed by Cassie and Miro.

“Dufy? You home?” her mother called. She heard her father head out the back door to his beloved garden.

“Yup, just reading.” Dufy sat up and swung her legs over the edge of the bunk and jumped down. She tugged her cut-offs up over her hips and pulled a T-shirt over her head. She adroitly coiled her hair into a neat ball at the base of her skull and stuck her favorite chopstick through it. She took a deep breath and left her room.

Her mother was pulling salad stuff from the fridge. “You hungry yet?”

Dufy realized she was starving. She dropped into her chair at the table, and stretched her legs out to the opposite one. “I am.”

“Good, because I'm in the mood to cook.” This was nothing new. Her mother seemed always to be in the mood to cook. She stroked Dufy's head as she passed by to the sink to wash

lettuce. Dufy felt calm. She often did when she and her mother organized their time around preparing meals, but she hadn't expected to feel calm around her mother, given what had happened last night. Of course, there was no reason she'd ever have to know, and as long as Dufy didn't blow it by acting strange, they could slip into this cozy place of food together.

"How was the book convention?" Dufy asked.

"Oh, my God! I can't believe I forgot to ask you how the recital was." Her mother stopped running the water and turned to her.

"It was great! It seemed like the audience really loved it." Dufy had, in fact, wondered if her mother was going to ask about the recital.

"I'm sure they did. And I really am sorry I couldn't come. We had those reservations months ago..."

Dufy had already heard this story and didn't need to hear it again. The annual antiquarian book convention was something her parents always did together, and they would go the day before and spend the night. It was really the only thing they did together. Dufy would have liked for her mother to cancel, or join her father later, but in the end it hadn't really bugged her as much as she'd thought it would. And mostly it had created an evening for her to be with Stefan.

"Mom, it's not a problem. Really. Did Dad sell any books?" She took the radishes from the cupboard and began chopping.

"He did! He made \$800.00. We can send you off to B.U. with some change in your pocket."

Before Dufy had a chance to respond, the phone rang. Her mother plucked it from the cradle, abandoning her celery. Dufy kept at the radishes, but was distracted by thinking about

seeing Stefan later. She wondered how she'd get through the next few hours, and was bummed that the peacock scarf he liked so much was in the laundry.

“Miro! Hi, honey! So nice to hear from you. What's up?”

Dufy's hands started to shake. Miro rarely called—holidays and birthdays, maybe. Dufy understood immediately what this call was about. She wasn't sure what to do. She laid down the knife—her hands were trembling too much, and her knees were wobbly. She needed to sit or move, but she couldn't just stand still.

“Pardon?” her mother said, pulling a chair over to the phone and slowly sitting down.

Dufy decided her best bet was to head into the bathroom. She needed a shower—she hadn't showered since yesterday morning. And water pounding against her head would save her from hearing any more of the conversation that would bring about her ruin. The only way to the bathroom was directly past her mother, and the chair she sat in filled up the narrow passageway between Dufy and the sanctuary of the shower.

“Are you sure?” Her mother dropped her head into her free hand.

Just as Dufy was almost clear, the same hand wrapped itself around the top of her thigh. A place where a thin white flaky residue still remained from last night.

“I don't know, Miro. I've got to go now.”

Dufy watched, unable to move, as her mother slowly placed the receiver in its cradle, and just as slowly drew herself up to her full 5'11" height, two inches taller than Dufy. She then pulled back the same hand that had held the phone and slapped Dufy full-force across her left cheek.

“You whore!” she screamed, less than an inch from Dufy's face. “What's wrong with you? Are you sick?”

Dufy felt dizzy and leaned against the wall next to the phone. She accidentally knocked against it, and the receiver fell from the cradle and dangled from its cord, thumping rhythmically into the wall.

“Answer me! Are you sick?”

Before Dufy could think of the right answer, her father appeared from the garden wearing his stupid straw hat to keep the sun off his ugly freckled face. She almost wanted to laugh. She reached down and twisted the skin on the tops of her legs just a bit.

“What the hell is going on in here?”

Neither woman answered him.

“Kat! What’s going on?”

“Ask your daughter,” her mother whispered—and made the word *daughter* sound like filth in her mouth. Then she turned and walked out of the house. Dufy knew immediately that her mother was heading to Stefan’s. She couldn’t, under any circumstances, let this happen. She hoped he was still in San Diego. As she ran for the front door, her father grabbed her arm.

“Dufy! Tell me what’s going on,” he yelled.

“Fuck you!” she replied, wrenching her arm from his grasp and conjuring all her dancer’s speed and power to overcome her crazed mother, who could sabotage any chance at love and happiness she might ever have. Please, please let him not be home yet, she thought.

Her mother had taken the car, and Dufy was barefoot. The asphalt was so hot she had to run along the shoulder, which was gravelly and cutting up the bottoms of her feet. It seemed unlikely that she’d make it to Stefan’s first. To make it worse, she heard her father calling to her from behind. Her hatred for Miro—for all of them, in fact—at that moment could have crushed the planet. If her entire family dropped dead, she would fall to the ground and thrash like the

born-again she had seen at revival meetings in Arkansas when she'd visited her murdering grandmother as a kid. But she wouldn't be that lucky. Good things didn't usually happen to her, except for last night.

She kept running, despite the pain, and finally couldn't hear her father. She hoped he'd given up, at least for now. Once she made it to Stefan's, everything would be fine. If he was back from San Diego, he'd take her in and send her mother away. It was his home, and she was of legal age. If necessary, he'd call the police to make sure that her mother couldn't harass them. They'd laugh about this, sooner rather than later. She was sure. That's the kind of relationship they had.

When she reached the bend in the road, his house came into view. Her mother's rusty Rabbit was parked sloppily in the driveway behind his Jeep. So he was home. Probably for the better, to get the whole stupid, nasty scene behind them. She slowed down to catch her breath. Her feet were a disaster—she was leaving little spots of blood on the crushed white shells in his driveway. Oddly, she felt great. Exhilarated and confident. Maybe a bit self-righteous, but she'd earned it. Even her bleeding feet seemed just right. A little like Mary, who'd been the only character from her misbegotten and short-lived Catholic education that she ever gave two shits about.

As she approached the screen door, she heard her mother's voice. It caught her off guard that she wasn't yelling. She stood quietly outside, just slightly out of view, straining to hear.

“I just don't know what you were thinking, Stefan. I mean, Jesus Christ, she's eighteen years old. She's my daughter—my baby. You watched her grow up. You were there when Andy and I came home from the hospital with her. Did you look at her then and think to yourself, ‘Hmm. I'm going to fuck her one day?’”

Dufy felt lightheaded. She rarely heard her mother use language like this. In fact, she didn't think she'd ever heard her use the f-word.

“No, Kat, I didn't.” Stefan sounded tired.

“So when did it occur to you—when she was nine? Fourteen? Last night when you realized she was leaving for school and you might not get another chance to ruin her life? Did you even protect her?”

“Kat, with all due respect, I don't feel it's appropriate to answer these questions.”

Dufy heard a chair scrape the slate floor.

“Oh, really? Is that so?” Her mother's voice was rising. “Well, I don't think it's appropriate to fuck your best friend's eighteen-year-old daughter, Stefan. I don't think that's at all appropriate.”

Dufy heard another scrape, and hoped that it was her mother getting up to leave. She ducked behind the house just in case, and then heard the crunch of heavy shoes on the crushed shells. It was her father.

“What do you want me to say, Kat? What should I tell you?”

Dufy was surprised that Stefan was yelling. She'd never heard him yell. “If you're afraid that I'm in love with her and will take her away from you, or from her crack at college, don't worry about that. In fact, I don't plan to have anything to do with her. Ever again.”

Dufy knew he was saying that to appease her mother. It was brilliant. Of course, her mother would figure it out soon enough, but by then maybe she'd come around to accept them as a couple. Her father stood silently at the door—a look of intense concentration on his face—a look she'd seen as he pored over his book collection at the kitchen table, cataloguing each one.

“Of course, you don’t love her. You can’t love her. You’re too fucked up to love anyone. You use people.”

Duffy had to hold onto the side of the house to keep herself from flying to her lover’s defense. Her mother was so wrong!

“Yes, Kat. I’m a son-of-a-bitch womanizer. What do you want from me?”

Duffy felt a rush of air as her father lunged for the screen door. She grabbed the back of his shirt.

“Daddy! No!” She was afraid that he’d kill Stefan now that he’d figured out what had happened.

She ran in behind him and placed herself between her lover and her parents. The small kitchen seemed to be pulsating. Everything was garish. The purple of her mother’s sundress was lurid, the green of her father’s T-shirt, ghastly. She felt like she was floating above it all looking down. She wanted to be back inside her skin—wrapped up tightly and feeling her heart beat. She circled her arms around herself to collect the loose particles floating around her, trying to rejoin their body. She knew this feeling. It had happened before, mostly when her father was on a rampage. It usually went away.

Her father’s hand passed by her face as though in slow motion. His freckled stubby fingers grabbed Stefan by his collar. She tried to pull him off, but her mother yanked her away instead.

“Let him! It’ll be the only useful thing he’s ever done for us. If we’re really lucky they’ll kill each other and my work will be done here.”

Duffy stared at her mother, stunned by her viciousness, especially about her own husband, who Duffy had never known her mother to oppose.

“Yes, I know, Dufy,” her mother said. “You thought I was a sniveling martyr.”

Right then, her father pushed Stefan against the refrigerator. In the instant he struggled to regain his footing, her father grabbed a kitchen chair and lifted it in the air. Dufy screamed, but it sounded weak and distant.

“Andrew!” Stefan cried, making a shield of his arms as her father crashed it over his head. One of the spindles flew across the room and smacked into Stefan’s glass-front hutch, the one where he kept her favorite teacup, spraying prisms of light at her mother’s feet.

“I thought you were my best friend!” her father yelled, pulling Stefan up from the floor, where he lay with a bloodied head. With his full force, he slammed Stefan into the fridge again.

“Daddy! Please stop!” She tried to loosen herself from her mother, but couldn’t wrangle free—amazed by her mother’s strength. She could do nothing except watch her lover be beaten.

Her father brought his boot down on Stefan’s neck and ground his foot from side to side, as though putting out a cigarette in the dirt. Dufy had to hold onto her mother to steady herself. Her mouth filled with saliva the way it did when she needed to vomit.

“Andrew,” her mother said, “stop! *Now*, Andrew.” And when he didn’t—when he kept grinding his boot into Stefan’s neck—Dufy watched her mother pull him off. Until that moment, she hadn’t been sure that her parents wouldn’t kill him.

“Andrew! Enough. He’s scum. He’ll get his someday.”

“Get outta here, Kat! Take Dufy with you,” he yelled.

“No, Andrew. I’m not leaving,” her mother said. “Stop fucking telling me what to do. *You’re* leaving. I’ll bring Dufy home with me in the car. Her feet are all cut up.”

Dufy ran to Stefan and kneeled at his side. She held her hand on his head where the bleeding was most profuse. The blood seeped through her fingers, making a fleur-de-lis design

on her wrist. She glared at her father. His eyes were narrowed to vivid green slits. He appeared to be sizing up her mother. Then, to her amazement, he walked out, and her mother just stood there, looking from her to Stefan. In control.

Her mother shook her head and said, “I will never, ever understand this. As long as I live.”

“No. You won’t,” Dufy answered. “You can’t because you don’t understand love.”

“Dufy, he doesn’t love you,” her mother said. Her voice sounded sad, low and soft.

“He does, and I’m staying right here.”

This time it was Stefan who spoke, although she could barely hear him. “Don’t be a nitwit for once, Dufy. Go with your mother. Go. Get the hell out of here.”

“You don’t mean that. You’re just saying that for her.” She nodded in the direction of her mother, who seemed to get taller by the second as Dufy pressed herself closer to Stefan.

“Jesus, Duf, get the fuck out of here.” This time his voice was stronger.

Her mother extended her hand. Dufy would not take it. She stood, slipped a bit—the floor was slick with blood. She looked at Stefan, hoping for something in his eyes that said stay. She didn’t find it. She grabbed her favorite teacup through the hole in the glass door of the hutch and smashed it against the wall on her way out.