

XX

A Novel

By William Bowles

Copyright © 2004, William Bowles. All rights reserved.

With a nod to Steve Jones who, in part, inspired this story

Installment 12

‘Oh God no!’

‘What is it?’ Judy!’

Valentina stopped playing immediately she heard the alarm in my voice and listened intently. I called out again and not hearing a reply I got out of the bath, put on a robe wrapped Valentina in a towel and headed for the stairs.

Judy was at the top of the stairs.

‘What is Judy? For Christ’s sake tell me.’

‘It’s Janet and Julie.’

I knew immediately.

‘They’re dead aren’t they?’

Judy nodded. ‘Murdered.’

The ground dropped out from under me.

‘I have to sit down.’ I felt sick.

Judy took Valentina out of my hands and held her close. I just sat down where I was.

Valentina looked from me to Judy as if searching for an answer.

‘Was that Victoria?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh god. If she hadn’t come to see us...’

‘They broke into her flat late last night or early this morning. Coming here had nothing to do with it.’

‘What about her security?’

‘I don’t know. Victoria didn’t say.’

‘The baby too. I can’t believe it. How could they? Do they know who did it? Have they caught anyone?’

‘Apparently it’s some kind of organisation, I don’t know the name. Nobody’s been arrested yet as far as Victoria knows. Whoever they are, they phoned up the media and left a message. She wants you to phone her back.’

We went downstairs and I phoned Victoria.

‘Hi, it’s me.’ ‘Yes.’ ‘What now?’ ‘Okay, see you soon.’

‘She coming here right now.’

Victoria arrived about two hours later followed by another car with two women in it. They stayed outside when Victoria came to the door.

I was sitting in the living room feeding Valentina, still numb from the news and operating on automatic. When Victoria entered, Valentina stopped feeding and smiled at her but the smile disappeared when she saw Victoria's expression and she huddled close to me. Did she know somehow?

'Nova, you're going to have to move.'

'Move?'

I could feel fear and panic rising in my gut.

'Move? Where to? What now?'

'Yes now. I've made arrangements. We think they know where you live and we don't want to take any chances.'

'Oh god. This is it isn't it. How did they find out?'

'We think from Janet's address book, or maybe her mobile.'

I pressed Valentina to me and she started to cry.

'Oh baby don't cry, please don't cry. God, she knows too.'

I rocked her in my arms. Now I was crying.

Judy was in tears, and looking panic stricken. 'This can't be happening.'

Victoria went to the door and called one of the women in.

'This is Constable Stevens. She's your protection along with Constable Shakespeare. Constable do you think you could help them pack please?'

'Of course, just tell me where everything is.'

Judy pulled herself together and told her to come with her.

'Will Judy come with us?'

'It's up to her, but I'd advise her to. If they do come here and find only Judy here, then they might, well you know.'

We were packed within thirty minutes and out of the door and into Victoria's car, followed by the other one. I didn't take any notice of where we were heading or how long we drove for. Valentina was silent most of the drive. She fed twice and slept on and off but even though I couldn't see her face in the dark of the car, I could tell she was still frightened by the way she clung to me. Eventually, we turned off the main road and onto a narrow country lane and up to some wrought iron gates that swung open as the car in front approached, and up a gravel drive for maybe half a mile. I could just make out the silhouette of a house. As the cars approached, floodlights came, illuminating the area in front of the house. The two police women got out and went into the house and a light in the hall came on.

'I want to put the car in the garage, so why don't you get out.'

Wearily, we entered the house. Valentina's nappy needed changing. I didn't really take anything in. Somehow I cleaned and changed her and then one of the police women led me to a bedroom, where I undressed and collapsed into bed with Valentina next to me, still holding on.

It was the light flooding through the large windows that woke me and for a moment I was completely disoriented. Valentina was awake and looking at me. She must have been looking at me as I slept, I thought.

'Hello darling.' I leaned over and kissed her. Normally she would greet me but she said nothing.

'You must be hungry.' I was still wearing my bra so I took it off so that Valentina could feed. I propped myself up against the headboard and tried to take in my surroundings. The room was quite large and airy with a high ceiling. There were two doors aside from the one I'd entered through. A Victorian dressing table with triple mirrors; a tall, matching chest of drawers; a writing table and chair; two armchairs and a large marble fireplace. The cream coloured walls had country prints hanging on them and there was a small chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The floor had a fitted carpet and what looked like Persian rugs on either side of the bed and another one in front of the fireplace.

I lay there while Valentina sucked away hungrily. 'You are hungry aren't you.' She raised her eyes to acknowledge me but continued to feed as if her life depended on it, which I suppose it did. I needed a pee badly but didn't have the energy to move. Eventually, she finished feeding, burped some and cuddled up to me. 'I gotta take pee sweetheart.' As I swung out of bed, she was there next to me waiting, so I took her hand and walked over to the first door. It was an enormous, empty walk-in closet. The other was a very well appointed bathroom with a shower, jacuzzi and bidet plus the usual sink and toilet of course. Valentina stood in front of me holding one hand as I managed to pull my knickers down with other and sit. There was no way she was letting go of me.

'Shall we explore little one?'

I managed to get her let go of my hand long enough so I could throw some clothes on but only by coaxing her. 'It's alright darling, I'm not going anywhere, I'm not going to leave you, you're safe with me,' and by kissing her all over as I got dressed. The poor thing was petrified.

'Okay, I'm ready, shall we go?' I picked her up, opened the door and we entered a long corridor with a number of doors off it and at the end, came to a large curved staircase

that took us down into a spacious lobby area with a ceiling that was capped off by a circular skylight. The smell of coffee was coming from the rear of the house.

‘Hello?’ I called out.

A door opened and Judy’s head appeared.

‘You’re up.’

Everyone was in the kitchen sitting around an enormous wooden table.

One of the two cops said, ‘Good morning Ms. Babrovsky. Sleep okay?’

‘Please, call me Nova and I’m sorry but I’ve forgotten your names.’

‘I’m PC Stevens and this is PC Shakespeare.’

‘Don’t you have first names?’

‘Yes I’m sorry,’ said Stevens, ‘I’m Carol and this is Naomi.’

‘Are you hungry,’ said Judy.

‘Not really but maybe some coffee?’

‘It’s not expresso but it’s real.’

Victoria was on her mobile deep in conversation. Then the events of yesterday came flooding back and I gasped, startling Valentina who was busy checking out Carol and Naomi who were making faces at her.

‘I’m sorry little one,’ and I stroked her face and cuddled her to me.

‘Janet and Julie. I can’t believe it. What kind of animals could...’

‘Men Nova. That kind of animal.’ Judy looked like she was about to explode.

‘Yes. It seems like we’re at war.’

Eventually, Naomi asked me if she could hold Valentina.

‘Sure, if she wants to.’ I held her out to Naomi who stood up and put her hands out.

‘This is Naomi Valentina. Say hello.’

At first, Valentina checked with me and I nodded, ‘It’s okay, Naomi is our friend.’

She allowed herself to be picked up but never let sight of me. Naomi cradled her in her arms.

‘How old is she?’

‘Six weeks just over.’

‘Six weeks? She’s the same size as mine and she’s nine months. Hello Valentina, my name’s Naomi. Oh the poor thing is trembling, I think you should take her back.’

She all but jumped into my arms.

‘Mama?’

‘What sweetheart?’

‘Where are we?’

‘Good question. Where are we?’

‘On the Welsh border, near Abergavenny.’

‘There you are Valentina, we’re in a place called Wales and we’re safe here. These are our friends. See, there’s Victoria.’

‘We need to get her toys and books and things otherwise she’ll get bored in about twenty seconds.’

‘If you make a list of what you need, I’ll collect it from your house tomorrow.’

‘Thank you.’

‘I’m sorry it was such a frightening experience for your child but we thought it best that we got you away from there as soon as possible. We screwed up badly with Janet and her baby, we’re not going to allow that to happen again.’

Judy looked as if she hadn’t slept all night.

‘How are you feeling Judy? I’m so sorry.’

‘Sorry? Why are you sorry?’

‘Well for putting you through all this.’

‘Oh Nova.’ She got up and came over to us and hugged and kissed us both. ‘We’re in this together.’ Valentina kissed her back.

Judy went to the counter running along one wall and picked up a glass pot of coffee, some mugs and poured cups for all of us. I downed mine in one go and asked for a refill.

‘Are you sure we’re safe here?’

‘Only one other person knows where we are and she’s my boss,’ said Carol. ‘She arranged to rent this place in another person’s name, not connected in any way with the authorities. We’ll be on guard, in and outside the house, around the clock. The house has a sophisticated alarm system, video cameras and a satellite link. And although these, *men* are fanatics, they’re not professionals either. We believe that it was combination of bad luck and the fact that Janet didn’t listen to our advice that they found her, she thought we were being paranoid. Short of locking her up, we did the best we could under the circumstances.’

‘So how long will we have to stay here?’

‘As long as is necessary I’m afraid. That’s why we got you as comfortable a place as possible. Plenty of room, there are six bedrooms and the place is well equipped with a completely enclosed garden. There’s even a swimming pool.’

‘So who’s paying for all this?’

‘The government. I think the Home Office.’

‘So are we prisoners here?’

‘We can’t stop you going out but for now at least, we advise against it. In a way you’re lucky, for as far as we know, nobody knows what you look like. Janet’s mum sold photos of her to the papers.’

‘So that’s what that was all about.’

‘Yes. Somebody must have seen her entering or leaving the apartment.’

‘Did they pick you two deliberately?’

‘What do you mean? What because we’re women and we both have babies?’

‘Oh, you’re both mothers? Who’s looking after your kids?’

‘Our mums, who else? We both volunteered to do this job you know.’

‘Really? Why?’

‘Do you know how many women have been murdered so far? It seems men have declared war on us.’

‘No, and I’m not sure I want to know either.’

‘Well it’s a lot then. And how you got to be women and mothers makes no difference to us, you’re just women who need protecting as far as we’re concerned.’

‘I’m sorry if I sound cynical.’

‘That’s okay, I can’t begin to imagine what you’ve been through but I know it can’t have been very pleasant.’

Victoria finished her long phone call.

‘Sorry about that. It was the hospital, another birth.’

She came over to Valentina and gave her big kiss and a hug.

Naomi’s phone rang. ‘Hello.’ She got up and moved out into the hall. A couple of minutes later she came back into the kitchen.

‘They’ve caught them.’

Half-jokingly, I said, ‘Does that mean we can go home?’

The two police women looked at each other but said nothing.

I was at a loss as to what to do next. Part of me wanted to know who the murderers were, and another just to run away with Valentina somewhere, anywhere other than here and the rest of what was left of my divided self, wanted to try and dig in here. But instead, my mind in a turmoil, I just sat at the table hugging Valentina to me, doing nothing, saying nothing. I suppose I was still in shock, trying to adjust to my new reality. I kept thinking about Judy’s cozy cottage, which I had come to think of as home. We need to get all our stuff especially Valentina’s. Poor Valentina, she hadn’t said a word since we’d gotten up. All she

did was stare at everyone, moving from face to face as if looking for some kind of clue that would tell her what was going on. But how did one tell with Valentina? I had nothing to go on that could guide me in trying to assess what she was thinking or how she reacted to events other than the fact that she was obviously frightened. I suppose I could simply ask what she felt? Then Judy broke into my thoughts.

‘I think we need to assess our situation don’t you?’

‘How so?’

‘Well, obviously for the moment at least, we’re stuck here but we need to think about making a long-term plan. For example, how long are these crazy men going to be a threat? Are we going to have to do a Salmon Rushdie and go underground almost permanently? And what about Valentina? At the rate at which she’s developing, we’re going to need to think about her education. We can’t keep her isolated indefinitely. Nova, I like your idea of creating a community somewhere.’

‘Doesn’t that make you more vulnerable though?’ It’ll be very difficult to keep such a place secret much less protect it and don’t you run the risk of building a ghetto for yourselves?’ interjected Victoria.

‘And how’s it going to be funded?’

‘I think that’s the least of our problems right now. Somehow I think the issue is going to be determined for us. I don’t think we have much of a choice.’

‘Perhaps in time, they’ll forget about us and we’ll be able to get on with living something approaching a normal life?’

‘You don’t really believe that do you?’ I said.

‘Look, let’s get practical. Victoria, how soon can we get what we need from the cottage?’

‘Put a list together now and I’ll go as soon as it’s ready.’

‘Okay, Judy shall we do that now? I need to do something, just sitting here my mind flitting this way and that is driving me crazy.’

Carol got up and said that she wanted to take a walk and check out the property.

Half an hour later, we’d made a list for Victoria and she was ready to go.

‘Are you sure it’s safe to go there by yourself? Please phone us when you get there.’

‘I’m sure it’s going to be okay but I’ll phone when I arrive and when I’m ready to leave, okay?’

The house is under observation Ms. Grayson. I’ll phone and tell them you’re coming.’

‘Come on Nova, we can’t sit around like this indefinitely. Why don’t you two take a bath and then we’ll explore the place.’

Reluctantly I stood up. ‘Okay...come on Valentina, let’s sort ourselves out shall we.’

We went back up to our bedroom and I started sorting through clothes and toiletries and then I ran a bath for both of us. Valentina was fascinated by the jacuzzi and for the first time since we’d fled the cottage, she seemed to be getting back to something approaching normal. We played with the jets and lay back in the water with bubbles going everywhere and generally made a total mess of the place. Dressed and feeling a little more human, we joined Judy and went out into the garden with Naomi trailing discreetly behind.

I could see why they’d chosen this house. What few trees there were offered little in the way of cover and the continuous high stone wall was topped with an electric fence. A narrow border of flowers and low shrubs framed the well-manicured lawn and followed the contour of the outer wall. The rear of the house had one of those retractable, striped canvas awnings over a patio area with white, cast iron garden furniture bordering a kidney shaped swimming pool covered with childproof netting.

The interior of the house was rather unspectacular given the grand exterior, aside that is from the entrance hall. There was a large living room with comfortable armchairs and two large sofas and a massive home entertainment unit dominating one wall but otherwise rather bare. A dining room equipped with an ugly dining room suite complete with sideboard and a small bar. A room which could be used as a study cum work area with a desk and empty storage unit and two smaller rooms also furnished as living areas, plus the kitchen area, an old fashioned pantry and a laundry room. Finally, a very large space designed as a boardroom for presentations complete with overhead projector, a PC and other electronic equipment. Upstairs consisted of six bedrooms of various sizes, four of them en suite, a small bathroom and a large closet for cleaning stuff, storage for sheets, towels and so forth. But a house completely devoid of any personality and one that I was anxious to leave from the second we moved in.

You might think I’ve spent an inordinate amount of space describing this place but it was effectively, our prison following Janet and her baby’s murder and we had no idea for how long. Most importantly, what of Valentina’s future? Will she grow up virtually a prisoner and what effect would this have on her once she realised? Not only was I frightened by this turn of events, I was also getting angry. Angry that through no fault of my own, I had been turned into an outcast and all but powerless to do anything about it. And as more time passed, my thoughts moved more and more toward the idea of taking some kind of action. What kind of

action I had no idea but I was damned if Valentina or I were going to live the rest of our lives as victims and prisoners. Increasingly, I began to see men, their institutions and their power over our lives as the real enemy. Yet at the same time, I also saw that many women lived under regimes of fear and violence created by men and had for many generations, so how was my life any different, except for the unique circumstances that had brought me to this situation? I was reminded of the fact that in places like China, female babies were often murdered at birth and that in India unwanted wives burnt alive. This became the central topic of our conversations over the next few weeks and surprisingly for me anyway, included the two police officers who had their own experiences to relate of working in a male dominated police force.

* * * *

Victoria returned late in the afternoon, her car loaded with our stuff although she had not been able to bring everything and would need to make a return journey. We also needed to get in provisions and the nearest place was almost ten miles away. The freezer was loaded but we still needed fresh vegetables and other consumables. Then I had my next shock. I had my first period.

Judy was amused. 'Welcome Nova.' It was her only comment on my final journey into the world of women.

Victoria was a little more helpful in that she gave me a rundown on how to deal with it. Whether to use a tampon or a pad and what possible effect menstruation would have on my moods and health. Carol and Naomi treated me more like a mother would treat her teenage daughter entering puberty and were generally more sympathetic to my embarrassment and told me to keep track of dates and duration. Victoria also wanted to examine me, as she wanted to know if my period differed in any way, given all the other alterations in my reproductive system. She was also concerned about my health given that it had almost killed me during my transition. But in spite of this added complication, we did settle down into some kind of normalcy in what Judy now called, 'Our house of women.'

Valentina, who was now over six months old recovered her usual state of high energy and insatiable curiosity about everything and her intellectual development if anything, speeded up, although her rate of physical growth slowed down somewhat. She could now carry on a conversation of that of a normal five-year old and inevitably, she was bound to start asking questions that I had no answers to. Judy felt that we should tell her the truth. The problem was of course, would she understand? Did she already know she was different? My feeling was that the answer was no, as she had nobody to compare herself with. She'd never

met a normal child and the way things were going it was unlikely she would at least for some time. But before we had time to resolve these issues, Valentina asked the one question I was dreading.

We were sitting in the garden, enjoying the summer sun. Valentina was engaged in some obscure game of her own invention, that involved the creation of complex patterns made with an assortment of building blocks and other bits and pieces she'd collected, when she stopped and looked at me.

'Mama, why did we have to leave our house?' And before I could summon an answer, she said, 'What happened to Julie and why hasn't she visited us again? Doesn't she know where we live now?'

Part of me wanted to deal with her almost as an adult, yet to look at she was still just a small girl.

'Do you remember when you were born?'

'Of course I do Mama. And I can remember from before I was born, when I was still in your tummy and you sang to me and told me how much you loved me and I told you how much I loved you.'

'Most babies can't do that you know.'

'Do what Mama?'

'Remember back to before they were born, or even when they were born.'

'What's wrong with them Mama?'

'Nothing darling, it's just that you're different.'

'Different? Does that mean there's something wrong with me? Is that why we had to move?'

God, did she know? Had she somehow figured it out all by herself?

'No there's nothing wrong with you sweetheart.'

'Then why did we have to move? Are there people who don't like me being different? Is that why we moved?'

'Yes there are some stupid people who are afraid of people who are different.'

'Is it men who don't like us?'

This floored me completely. How did she figure that out?

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, we never see men do we. Don't you and Judy like men Mama?'

'Do you know the difference between men and women?'

'Well they look different don't they.'

‘Is that all?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps if I met a man I would know but I’ve only seen them in books and on television. I’d like to meet a man.’

‘Well one day you will.’

‘When?’

‘Soon.’

‘Are you different too Mama?’

‘Why do you say that?’

She paused before answering, as if figuring out how best to answer me.

‘Well Judy, Naomi and Carol think you’re different don’t they, even though they don’t say anything.’

This conversation was getting out of hand. ‘Yes, I’m different too sweetheart.’

‘Was Julie different like us as well?’

‘Yes, she was.’

‘Was?’

This was it. ‘Do you know what it means to die?’

‘I think it means you don’t exist anymore. Is that right?’

‘Yes it does.’

‘So Julie’s dead then?’

‘Yes darling.’

‘And Janet too?’

I nodded.

‘Was it men who did it?’

‘Yes it was. Bad men. Stupid men. But not all men are like this Valentina.’

‘Is that why we moved, so we wouldn’t be dead too?’

I nodded and although I felt depressed by our conversation, I also felt relieved. The depth of Valentina’s understanding staggered me and accepting that she actually comprehended what had happened was probably the most difficult for me to do.

‘Don’t cry Mama, it’s alright.’ Was I crying? I didn’t even realise it. She hugged me to her and smiled that smile. But I realised that we couldn’t go on this way for much longer. Something had to change.

* * * *