PROLOGUE

Submission for Patricia McNair’s Best Opening contest

**October 1985**

Susan laughed and wrote a lengthy note in the margin of the blue book exam she was grading. Tallying the points, she scrawled a large D on the front cover and dropped her red Bic on the desk. It rolled onto the floor and into the corner behind her. Wishing she could escape grading exams for the class she was student teaching as easily, she bent to retrieve it. Sitting up, she reached for the next blue book in the stack on the corner nearest Becky’s desk. She considered the “B = PhD” banner that Becky, this year’s new graduate student, had posted over her desk. While true, it didn’t seem like the right attitude for a gradstu. Susan had barely managed Bs her first term while she struggled with statistics and reading journal articles. But those were her last.

Looking around, she realized it was so quiet because all five of her officemates had left. Susan rummaged in the pencil drawer of her desk for her grandfather’s pocket watch, relieved to see she still had a few minutes to get to her three o’clock appointment across the street in University Hall.

Susan stood, placed the ungraded exams at the bottom of her bright purple bookbag, and started piling in books and photocopied journal articles from the precarious pile on the opposite corner of her desk on top. She winced as the bookbag settled into the sore spot on her shoulder.

She hurried along the high-ceilinged, windowless corridor to the side door out of the Psychology department. She hated the unpainted concrete columns with drippy seams marking the corners of the rough concrete block walls. The small waterfall in the first-floor staircase every time it rained. The maze-like hexagonal layout that meant she could only find her third-floor statistics class first year if she went by way of the stairs right outside the door she was exiting now. Every time she’d tried another staircase, or the elevators, she’d had to return to her office on the first floor, find this door, and start over.

Waiting in the University Hall elevator lobby, Susan applied more of the sheer wine-colored lip gloss that matched her fitted blouse and smiled at her image in the scratched reflection on the elevator door. Her home-made high-waisted culotte skirt and low-cut blouse fit perfectly. The blouse seemed ‘just right’ until Linguistics class this morning. Dr. Rosenberg had lectured from his yellowing notes while standing practically on top of her for most of the class. Leering down her blouse from behind. She smelled bacon each time his breath ruffled her short brown hair. Waves of Old Spice cologne made her nose twitch every time he turned a page. She’d decided never to take another class with him even though that would mean dropping Development as her second major. Meantime, lavender essential oil on her top lip and a seat against the back wall would have to do.

Susan exited the elevator and found herself in the Counseling Center’s waiting room. Every other row of the bracketed bare fluorescent tubes on the ceiling was off. The reception desk had a small incandescent task lamp with an adjustable neck that looked too functional to have been provided by the University. Tall slits in the opposite wall housed inoperable, dirt-speckled windows. They created dotted lines illuminating the paths that fifteen years of feet had worn into the dingy blue carpet squares. She followed one of the dotted lines to the reception desk under the windows and said, “I’m Susan David. Here to see a therapist.”

The gum-chewing brunette checked the book, found Susan, and put a checkmark by her name before looking up. “Take a seat. Doc’ll get you shortly.”

Susan looked around for a seat and sniffed. Same mildew-y smell as the rest of campus. Someone had tried to cheer up the room by duct-taping motivational posters to the walls but hadn’t bothered to clean the walls first. In some of the dirtier spots, the duct tape hung, sticky side mottled with dark specks at the curled top edge of its poster, hiding the poster’s key word. Susan chose a seat that faced the door leading out of the waiting room and into the Counseling Center offices. She wrapped her arms around the bookbag in her lap and tried to guess the hidden title words on the peeling posters until she read “Self-doubt is the Enemy.” She pulled the bookbag straps onto her shoulder, grimaced, and switched them to her other shoulder.

A short, slight man with a rolling limp and bad toupee opened the door she was facing and entered the waiting room, squinting at the clipboard in his hand with hugely magnified brown eyes. “Susan?”

She raised her hand to shoulder height and, in a voice that could barely be heard, said, “Here.”

“Walk this way.” He turned and rocked down the corridor toward his office. Susan stood and, remembering Nick Charles’ *Thin Man*, momentarily considered imitating him.

He held the door into his office for her and took a seat behind the industrial gray metal desk, gesturing at the overstuffed armchair opposite him. He smiled. “I’m Dr. Bob Angevin, one of the psychologists here in the Counseling Center. You’ve been assigned to me. Can you tell me why you’re here today?”

Susan thumped her overflowing bookbag on the floor. She arranged herself cross-legged on the chair, rubbing her shoulder while looking around the room slowly: Art Institute exhibition posters from the sixties and seventies occupied the limited open space on the walls, a still-in-cellophane, complete set of Freud’s works filled the shelf right behind his head. Susan wondered if the well-used copy of Freud’s *Cocaine Papers* laying on the wide, two-drawer gray metal file cabinet below the bookshelves had a cut-out drug cache in the middle.

Susan smiled and said, “I defended my thesis a couple of weeks ago. I’m really messed up.”

“Did a problem at your defense lead you to think that?”

“Uh… no …This sounds crazy, but that’s not it at all...”