

HOME COMING

by

Nell Stark



2008

CHAPTER ONE

Late July

Sarah Storm drove around the block twice before parking a few yards away from Corrie’s driveway. The windows of the ocean-side bungalow winked cheerfully at her as they reflected the light of the setting sun. Next to the mailbox, a yard sign encouraged passersby to “Vote No” on the upcoming referendum to define marriage in Rhode Island as between one man and one woman.

She wanted to find the sight comforting, but pride refused to let her. Had it been a mistake to come here? Corrie Marsten had been her sailing instructor for a few weeks during the summer, two years ago. *And then there was the time in the bathroom when I...* Sarah shook her head in an effort to dispel that particular memory. The point was, she and Corrie were barely even acquaintances. And yet here she was on Corrie’s doorstep, begging for shelter like a stray cat. *She’s the only person older than me who’s also a lesbian that I know. She’s all I’ve got.*

“Dammit,” she muttered when she was still clutching the steering wheel five minutes later. “Just do this. Get it over with.” For about the billionth time that day, Sarah wished that she could hear Dar’s voice. Of course, she was probably busy having dinner right now with her family—all four of them sitting around the table, eating their mashed potatoes and making small talk like the Cleavers.

Sarah slammed the car door harder than she needed to and winced. *It’s not her fault. You’re the one who was stupid enough to*

get caught. She marched up the path to Corrie's porch and rang the doorbell without any more hesitation. Feet planted widely on the welcome mat, she threw back her shoulders and waited.

When the door opened, a large gray dog immediately lunged forward to push its nose against Sarah's hip, its whiplike tail wagging furiously.

"Frog!" Corrie said, reaching for the dog's collar to drag him back. "Jeez. Take a chill pill." She smiled apologetically. "Hey, Storm. Sorry about that."

"Oh, it's all right," Sarah said, smiling at Frog's antics. "He's fine." It felt good to have someone be unequivocally excited to see her—even if that someone was a dog.

"Come on in."

Sarah followed Corrie down the short hallway, suppressing a sigh of relief. Corrie was still ridiculously attractive, of course—tall and blond, lithe and tan. In fact, she looked much the same as she had on that fateful night at the yacht club when she had seduced Sarah out of the closet. But Sarah no longer felt the same sense of compulsion as she had then, and she was glad.

"Have a seat," Corrie said as they emerged into a small living room. "Want something to drink?"

"A glass of water would be great. Thanks."

But before Corrie could make a move toward the kitchen, a woman stepped through the sliding door leading out to the deck. She was a few inches shorter than Corrie, with shoulder-length brown hair and a gentle smile. *She has a good face.*

"You must be Sarah. I'm Quinn."

"My girlfriend," Corrie said. The note of pride in her voice was unmistakable. Sarah couldn't help but think of Dar, and felt her stomach flip-flop. How nice would it be to share a house with her? All by themselves, where no one could interfere.

"Nice to meet you," she said, shaking hands. "Thanks for putting me up for the night."

"You're welcome to stay as long as you'd like," Quinn said.

For one awful second, Sarah thought she might cry. Instead, she managed to blink, swallow, and attempt a smile. Fortunately,

Corrie held out a glass of water to her in that moment, and she took a long sip.

“So,” Corrie said as she sat down on the love seat, Quinn beside her, and looked at Sarah. “We’ll have plenty of time for pleasantries over dinner. Why don’t you tell us what happened, Storm?”

Sarah nodded, putting the glass down and resting her hands on her knees. Unconsciously, she hunched her shoulders.

“It all started yesterday morning, I guess, while I was out for a jog and my mom came into my room to drop off some laundry. I had left a chat window open on my computer—I’d been talking to my girlfriend, Darla, the night before.” Sarah flushed and reached for the glass. “It was pretty...um, obvious from the chat that Dar and I are together. Mom waited until Dad got home and I guess they talked things over. I was out to dinner with friends, but when I got home, all hell broke loose.”

She sat back against the soft fabric of the couch and took several long gulps from the glass. The memory of what had come next made her hands tremble.

“Just take your time,” Quinn said softly.

Sarah tried to smile at her, but she wasn’t sure her face muscles were working properly. “They sat me down at the kitchen table, and I think I sort of knew right away, you know? That they had found out. Mom was furious. She didn’t even ask any questions, just started in on the accusations. And then the threats...”

“We’ve already called a counselor. You have an appointment for tomorrow morning.”

“A counselor?” Sarah could feel her heart pounding against her rib cage, as though it were trying to escape. Just like she wanted to, from this moment, this room, this house in which she’d grown up. “But there’s nothing wrong with me!”

“And you will not be returning to Yale this fall. Your father and I will not be paying for you to learn how to disgrace us.”

“Disgrace you?” Sarah felt the fear temporarily melt away as a white-hot tide of anger rose inside her. “How exactly am I disgracing you?”

“You are shaming this family!”

“So that’s what this is all about? You’re worrying about what other people will think of the fact that I’m a lesbian?” It felt so good to finally say the word out loud—to finally come out, metaphorical guns blazing. “This is the twenty-first century, Mom! Lesbians are everywhere.”

Her mother stood up so quickly that her chair fell backward, clattering against the kitchen tile. “Not in my house, they’re not.”

When Sarah paused to drain the rest of her glass, Corrie got up abruptly and headed for the kitchen. She returned a moment later with an open beer, which she put down on the table. Sarah wanted to crack a joke about serving to minors, but she was too tired to make the effort.

“I couldn’t stay there,” she said quietly. “I couldn’t make myself. So late last night, I packed up a bunch of clothes and stuff, and just...drove away.” She rolled the beer bottle between her palms and watched the golden liquid foam up into the neck. “Got on the highway and just drove for a few exits, until I felt...safer. And then I pulled over into a rest stop and called Dar.”

“Hey, sweetheart. Been missing you—what’s up?”

Sarah closed her eyes and took a deep breath, willing herself to keep it together. Dar’s voice sounded so damn good. A lifeline. She remembered how incredible it felt to hold Dar as they fell asleep in her narrow dorm bed—how right it felt to kiss her, touch her, be inside her. Sarah’s breath stuttered in her throat. They said they wouldn’t let me go back to Yale. Back to her. God, what am I going to do?

“Sarah? Are you there?”

“Hey. Hi. Sorry.” Sarah suddenly felt an overwhelming urge to remind Dar of just how essential she was—how central their relationship was to her life. “Do you...do you know how much I need you? How much I love you?”

“Of course I do,” Dar said. “You tell me every day. And I love you, too.”

Sarah swallowed hard and squeezed her eyes shut to rein in the tears. "That's good. That's really good."

"Are you okay?"

"No. Not exactly." She paused. "Dar...something's happened."

"What?" Darla's voice was suddenly edgy, apprehensive.

"They found out. My parents. About us."

"What? How?"

Sarah cringed as the memory replayed in her head. "I left a chat window open by mistake on my computer, and my mom saw it when she came into my room."

"Oh my God, do they know who I am?"

Sarah blinked at the unexpected question. "Um, I don't think so."

The line was silent for a moment. Sarah shifted uncomfortably in the seat, unconsciously drumming her fingers against the steering wheel. Dar sounded upset. I've let her down. Her heart thumped painfully and she pressed her free hand to the aching spot between her breasts.

"I asked you to be careful," Dar said. Her tone was distinctly accusatory. "To protect us. And you—"

"I know," Sarah interrupted. Her voice shook. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for being such an idiot. But they said they wouldn't let me go back to school and they're going to send me to a counselor and I couldn't stay there, I just couldn't."

"Where are you?"

Sarah sniffled and realized she was crying. She scrubbed at her eyes angrily. "At a rest stop off the highway."

Darla didn't reply right away. When the silence grew, Sarah realized that she was going to have to ask. The epiphany made her stomach hurt.

"Can I...could I stay the night at your place? I don't have anywhere else I can go."

"No!" Darla sighed noisily. "You know I wish you could, but... you're an open book, honey. My family would know about us just from looking at you."

“What am I going to do?” Sarah whispered, unaware that she’d asked the question aloud. Disappointment knifed through her, sharp and bitter. What am I going to do? Where am I going to stay? In that instant, she realized what she had been hoping—that Dar would take this chance to come out to her own family. That she would stand up next to Sarah, proud and defiant, and together they would—

“Check into a motel for the night,” Dar said. “Oh shit, hang on a sec.”

Sarah heard distant voices through the phone—probably Dar’s parents. She rubbed at her grainy eyes. It was hard to think. Her head felt fuzzy. What am I going to do now?

“I’m sorry,” Dar said finally. “But I have to go. Family stuff. Call me tomorrow, okay? Promise?”

“Sure, okay.” Sarah stared numbly out the windshield at the passing headlights—everyone traveling to or from somewhere. Except her. “Love you. G’night.”

“I ended up just sleeping in my car,” she told Corrie and Quinn. “It’s big, fortunately—a big boat. It was my grandmother’s. The back seat’s pretty comfy.” When she realized that she was babbling, she drank from her beer.

“I’m so glad you came here,” Quinn said.

Sarah looked up and couldn’t help but smile at the kind expression on Quinn’s face. Corrie, she noticed, was pacing the length of the room like some kind of caged animal.

“I can’t thank you both enough.”

Quinn brushed the sentiment aside with a wave of her hand. “Have your parents called?”

“Yeah.” Sarah took a longer sip and shifted her gaze back to the coffee table. “Dad called my cell in the morning. He asked where I was, and I wouldn’t tell him. Then he said that if I didn’t come home today, they were going to...to cut me off. Disown me.”

“What?” Corrie exclaimed.

Sarah shrugged. “I told them I didn’t care what they did. If they don’t want me the way I am, then I’m not going back.” She wanted

her voice to stay steady, but it cracked a little on the last word, and she cleared her throat. “At that point, I drove around until I found a coffeehouse with ’Net access, and looked up your number.”

“This is bullshit,” Corrie muttered, her voice low and agitated. “Total fucking ridiculous *bullshit*. I’ll call my parents right away and have them talk to yours. What the hell are they thinking?”

“No,” Sarah said quickly. “Please don’t do that. That’s not what I want.”

Corrie stopped in her tracks and frowned. “But why not? They need to see reason. My family has lived with my sexual orientation since I was in college. They’re pros. And your parents will listen to mine. Sponsors at that damn club have clout.”

Sarah rubbed her face with her hands and looked up at Corrie. “Look. I appreciate it—more than I can say. But they’re kicking me out. They made that choice. I’m not going to beg. If they don’t want me, fine. I don’t need them. I don’t.” *Do I?*

“Why don’t we examine your options, here?” Quinn said. “I’ll even make a to-do list, okay? So we’re organized.”

She hopped up to get a pad of paper and a pen, and Corrie looked after her fondly. “Believe it or not,” she told Sarah, “I’ve really come to appreciate to-do lists over the past year.”

Sarah laughed. It felt good that she could still laugh, even in the middle of all this. At the beginning of it, even. Had it really only been twenty-four hours since the confrontation? It felt like a lifetime.

“The first thing I should do, I guess,” she said, “is to call Yale and see whether there’s any—anything. Any money they can give me, any advice. Any way that I can stay there.” Her voice trembled a little at that last bit, but she kept her gaze firmly focused on the coffee table.

“Good idea,” Quinn said. “Talk to a dean, definitely. More than one.”

“I don’t know what comes next, though.” Even to her own ears, Sarah’s voice sounded forlorn. “Everything else depends on that, really. On whether I can manage to stay.”

Quinn nodded. “But even so, we may as well write a few things down. Like applying for loans. And finding a job, right?”

“And scholarships, too,” Corrie put in. “There are tons of scholarships out there from large and small organizations. Every little bit will help.”

Sarah nodded and took another long drink. The to-do list already felt overwhelming, and she was deathly afraid that she’d burst into tears at any moment. She could feel them burning behind her eyes and clogging her throat. *One step at a time. Just one at a time. And take deep breaths.*

“You should stay here with us for the time being,” Quinn said. “Until you decide what to do next.”

“Oh no, no,” Sarah protested. “I really couldn’t. You’re—”

“For fuck’s sake, Storm!” Corrie cut her off. “Stay. We have a guest room. It’s no trouble.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “I think she’s trying to tell you that we’d really like to help.”

At that moment, a black cat trotted briskly into the room, paused to inspect Frog’s tail, sneezed, and proceeded to jump into Sarah’s lap. The feline meowed once before curling up on her thighs and beginning to purr.

“Why, hello there,” Sarah said, trailing one finger along the line of white that ran from the cat’s left ear, down past her neck. “You’re a friendly one.”

“See?” said Corrie. “Rogue clearly wants you to stick around. No more objections, ’kay?”

Rogue squinted up at her happily when Sarah scratched under her chin. “Okay,” she said. A sudden sense of peace washed over her—unexpected and so very welcome. “All right. Thank you.”



Sarah looked down at the silver cell phone lying in her palm, its cover scratched and battered from being accidentally dropped, kicked, and occasionally even drop-kicked. It had survived all

that abuse for years. Now, it was suddenly useless—canceled by her parents. They had worked fast. When she'd tried to call Yale at precisely nine o'clock in the morning, she'd heard instead a mechanical voice informing her that her phone was no longer in service. *Disconnected.*

Corrie had sworn like the sailor she was before handing Sarah the portable, and she'd refused to hear a word about being paid back for the long-distance call. After over an hour of conversation, all Sarah was certain about was that she wasn't going back to Yale next year. They'd been very kind, of course. The two deans with whom she'd spoken had talked to her in soft, compassionate, patient tones. They'd expressed their regret and their desire to help...and they had all given her the same advice. *Take a year off. Work. Apply for loans and scholarships. Write a letter to the financial aid office. Get your feet back under you. And then come back.*

"You'll still have a place here," one had said. "But there's nothing that financial aid can do on such short notice, with less than a month until the semester begins."

She pressed down with her right foot to open Corrie's trash can and turned her hand over, letting her useless cell slide off her palm and into the garbage.

"What's the word?" Corrie asked from behind her. Sarah turned toward the voice and smiled faintly at the sight of her benefactress, poking her head through her own kitchen window as though she weren't sure she was welcome inside her own house.

"Not so good," she managed.

"Hang on." Corrie let herself in through the sliding door and sat down on the love seat. Sarah took her by-now customary place on the couch. "Tell me."

"There's not much to tell. Nothing they can do for me financially. I should take a year off, they said." She looked over at Corrie and shook her head vehemently. "But that just feels so...so *wrong* to me. What if I take a year off and never manage to go back? And what am I going to do for a year anyway, without a degree?"

Corrie frowned. "Well...what if you keep taking classes

somewhere else, just to stay in the game? You'd only have to pay in-state tuition here at URI. And at least some of the credits will transfer, I bet, though you'd have to check."

"In-state tuition." Sarah leaned forward, suddenly hopeful despite her best judgment. "How much would that be, do you think?"

Corrie grabbed her laptop from the kitchen counter. "Dunno the exact number, but let's find out."

A few minutes later, Sarah was regarding the computer screen dubiously. "I know it's much, much less, but...it's still a lot." She turned to Corrie. "Besides, look—the transfer application had to be turned in months ago."

"Fuck that." Corrie got to her feet and started pacing again. "I can't guarantee anything, but this is *my* university, and I know people. If you want to do this, I'll see what I can manage about getting your app considered."

Sarah looked up at her in awe. It was suddenly hard to swallow. "Corrie. Why are you doing all of this for me?"

Instead of meeting her gaze, Corrie turned toward her deck and the view of the ocean beyond. "No matter what, I'd want to lend you a hand. But, Storm..." She turned back just enough for Sarah to be able to see her profile. "I can't help but feel responsible."

Sarah blinked, struggling to keep her jaw from dropping. She never would have expected Corrie to invoke the memory of their one, brief encounter. "It would have happened without you, though," she said. "I am...I am what I am."

"You're family, is what you are," Corrie said firmly. "Let me do what I can."

Sarah leaned back into the couch cushions and closed her burning eyes. Tears were threatening in earnest now, and she didn't want to break down in front of Corrie. *Tired. So damn tired.* She rested one hand on the slight swell of her stomach, wishing that it would settle down. *Am I going to feel this way forever?*

"Okay," she whispered, battling the tightness in her throat. "If you really don't mind. Thank you."