

NECESSARY ILL

BY

DEB TABER



SEATTLE

Aqueduct Press, PO Box 95787
Seattle, WA 98145-2787
www.aqueductpress.com

This book is fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2013 Deb Taber
All rights reserved.
First printing, March 2013

ISBN: 978-1-61976-022-6
Library of Congress Control Number: 2012951738

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover Design by Lynne Jenson Lampe

Cover Acknowledgments:

Back cover:

Cloudscape over Desolate Road, Utah, Western, USA: Jay Lazarin/
iStockphoto.com

Front cover:

Back-lit Ocotillo Blossoms at Big Bend National Park: Dave Hughes/
iStockphoto.com

Cave 2: Alexandre Caron/iStockphoto.com

Foetus: Valerie Loiseleux/iStockphoto.com

Book Design by Kathryn Wilham

Printed in the USA by Thomson-Shore Inc.

PART I

SPREADER

CHAPTER 2



The entire barn of chickens screeched in varying levels of annoyance and terror, yet even above that Sandy could hear her mother's screams. She wouldn't look, Sandy decided. If she couldn't help she shouldn't watch; yet she found herself pulling forward on her elbows to peer through the chicken wire at the floor below.

Four men surrounded her mother. Sandy recognized them from her trips into the city, delivering eggs and chicken meat to the local processing house. Now that she was old enough to drive, her mother had begun letting her do the runs on her own, and these men had openly stared at her, hungry for something that left her chilled.

They took turns at her mother as Sandy looked down from her hiding place in the third tier of chicken cages that lined every wall in the barn. Only the shadows and chaos hid her, and she tried to move as little as possible.

If I'm still, they won't see me she told herself over and over again. She'd been foolish to hide in a cage instead of running when the men had come through the door, calling her mother's name in tones that she hadn't heard since the last long fight before her father took Ronnie and left them to manage the Montana poultry farm on their own. As if the two of them could care for two hundred chickens and the small corn-and-squash farm that fed both the livestock and themselves on their own. She should have run, but she had been up on a ladder at the seventh tier and hadn't had time to climb down any farther before the chickens started screeching and drawing attention to her end of the barn.

Necessary III

Her mother's screams stopped, or fell beneath the volume of the chicken noise, and Sandy slowly drew as far back as she could in the cage. It wasn't meant to hold a teenage girl, and there was little she could do other than hope that the men would leave soon enough that she could somehow load her mother into the delivery van and get her to the clinic. She couldn't remember right now where the local clinic was.

"Let's get out of here. This is driving me crazy," said one of the men, his hands to his ears.

Two of the others started to leave, but the last one, the one who had been on her mother when she quieted at last, turned casually to face Sandy and smiled.

"Not yet," he said. "I like the looks of that chicken."

Sandy spun as best she could in the cage so that her boot heels greeted the men when they arrived. There was nowhere to run, but she could fight dirty. She was a country girl, after all, and had fought off the advances of a ranch hand or two over the years since puberty had filled out her body in a way that made men notice her as they never had before.

She was also hardly over a hundred fifteen pounds. After a couple of bruising, one of the men caught her ankle and pulled, and she dropped to the barn's aluminum floor with a sound that hurt worse than the impact itself. She barely had time to feel satisfied that she had at least knocked him off the ladder in her fall, when the four of them were on her, tearing at her clothes and skin and hair. They had no weapons other than their own muscle, so she tore right back and screeched in the ear of the one who had complained earlier of the noise.

"Don't think she likes you," said a voice from behind the men.

They parted enough for Sandy to see beyond them to a serious-looking boy, about her age, who stood only a few feet away. Two of the men reached out for the newcomer, and Sandy used the distraction to fasten up as much of her undone clothing as she could. She silently thanked the unpredictable Montana weather that she had put on three layers that morning before coming out to feed the chickens. The men hadn't made it through the last of

the fabric, taking time as they did to joke between themselves about “plucking the chicken.”

The boy dodged their grip and landed a kick on one of the attackers. Sandy couldn't quite follow all of his moves, but he seemed to be landing more punches than he took until the two men who held her joined the battle. With one man down and the second limping, the new fighters descended on the boy with fierce determination and managed to pin him to the ground, facedown.

“I guess you like us better than she does then, don't you?” said one of the men.

He flipped the boy like he was no more than a pillow, and the limping one leered and brought over the bolt cutters that had been leaning against the wall. Sandy wished she had put them away when her mother had asked. She wished she hadn't been so sullen about any of her chores. She would have to tell her mother that, as soon as this was done.

“You're not quite girlish enough for my tastes, but with a little work, you could be pretty,” said the man.

Sandy's view of the boy was obscured, but whatever they saw when they opened his jeans caused all of the men to step back in unison. Completely unaware of her own pain, Sandy launched herself at the back of the most aggressive man's knees, taking him down. The bolt cutters fell from his hand, and she took them in both of hers and swung wildly. She felt them impact something hard yet giving. Several times. But her mind refused to sort out the scene. All she knew was that hands were on her, and then they weren't, and there were sounds of other violence nearby, violence she wasn't causing herself so it didn't mean anything to her.

Then a soft voice said, “Stop. Over now.”

Sandy looked at the boy, and then at the bruised and bleeding men sprawled at her feet. She jerked her eyes away from the boy's still-bared groin, then looked back again when nothing made sense. There was nothing there.

The boy let her look with a cold expression on his face, which turned to confusion when she smiled. She couldn't help it. He

couldn't rape her if he tried, and that made him a friend, at least for the moment.

"I'm Sandy," she said.

"Tei."

Her smile faded as her heart began to slow.

"Mom?" she whispered, turning slowly only because so much of her didn't want to go in that direction at all.

Her mother lay quiet on the cold floor, and Sandy knelt beside her, feeling the bite of the aluminum through the thermal layers and her jeans. She checked for a pulse, knowing there was none, knowing little else beyond that.

"Do I call an ambulance?" she asked.

Tei shrugged. "Wouldn't do much good."

One of the men began to twitch and grunt.

"Want to leave?" said Tei.

Sandy glanced back at the chickens and shook her head, knowing there was nothing else to do but get back to work. Someone had to manage the farm. Someone had to do the feeding and the slaughter and the deliveries, and the few paid workers they were able to afford knew nothing about the business end of things. Her mother had always taken care of all of that.

Tei shrugged and began dragging the men outside, one at a time and with visible effort. Sandy looked from the men to her mother. They shouldn't be near her, so she went to help the boy—she couldn't help thinking of him as a boy, even with the evidence she'd clearly seen—and they got the men out to the roadside and left them there to live or die. Sandy hoped they chose the latter. A truck rattled past them without slowing, then another.

"What about her?" said Tei when they returned to the barn.

Sandy sat back down next to her mother. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. Call the police? The morgue? She knew how to handle dead birds, not people. The torn body in front of her hardly seemed to be her mother anymore.

Tei lifted her gently by the arm, then released her as soon as she stood.

"Called shock. Get you warm, maybe some water, then think."

He led her back to the house and gestured her toward the couch. She heard the sound of fabric rustling from the bedrooms, and a moment later he was wrapping her in blankets from her mother's bed. She wondered if he knew it was her mother's, or if he had just gone into the first bedroom he could find. It didn't matter. The blankets smelled like her mother, like soap and sweat and boiled corn, and feeling them surround her, she tried to tell herself it was like her mother's embrace, Mom telling her she was going to be all right.

She didn't feel all right, though, and her mother hadn't held her like this since she was eleven years old. Sandy hadn't wanted her to. Teenage snits, her mom had called it.

Tei handed her a wad of rough toilet paper for her runny nose and sat looking out the window as she cried. A motor started up in the distance, then faded.

"They're gone," said Tei. "Three drove, one died."

At the word "died," a fresh set of tears broke through Sandy. Not for the man, but for the finality of the word and what it meant for her and the body that used to be her mother. When her eyes drained dry, she looked at Tei.

"Will you help me burn her?" said Sandy.

"Private pyre?"

"I don't think we could afford a real cremation, and Mom always hated those anyway. She said bodies were supposed to return to the earth, not get packed into urns. I don't want to talk with anyone at the morgue, or the police. I think the man who died was a policeman's son."

"You saw which one died?" said Tei. Sandy wondered at his spark of interest.

"The blond one. I hit him with the bolt cutters so many times. He wasn't breathing when we carried him outside."

"Didn't know you noticed."

"I didn't either until now. So will you help?"

"If you want," said Tei.

She did. They sat in silence for a while, then Tei got up and came back with bandages and ointments from the bathroom. San-

dy wondered if he was a thief of some kind. He seemed utterly comfortable rummaging around in someone else's home. The thought unsettled her a little, but not as much as it might have on another day. For now, she was grateful for his presence and the way he silently cleaned her wounds.

When he finished, she did the same for him, then she rose to go back to the barn.

“Wait. Take care of her tomorrow,” said Tei.

“We will. But the chickens still need to be fed,” said Sandy.

It was something to do, something that needed to be done, and nothing was worse than sitting in the living room feeling like her mother was about to walk in the door and tell her to get back to her chores.

She brought one of the blankets to the barn and draped it over the sickening sight of her mother's body. She tried to remember a childhood prayer, but could only come up with the *sh'ma*, and she saw no reason to “Bless the Lord's name forever and ever.” She covered her eyes and sang it anyway, hearing the wobble in her voice, not knowing if her mother had kept up the practice of her religion in private after the synagogue in town had burnt down, or if the words would mean anything to her silent body even if she had.

Tei watched her curiously but asked no questions. When he saw where the feed was kept and how much she doled out to each cage, he took a bucket with him to the far wall and began to work on the chickens over there.

Squawks of hunger and anticipation vibrated the room in a familiar way. Sandy fed and cleaned and collected eggs and tried not to think about the cold, silent lump on the floor. She tried not to think of the strange boy who worked not so far away, who had frightened and beaten up rapists, yet who washed her cuts without a word and agreed to help her take care of her mother in the only way she could. She tried not to wonder what had happened to him, what gave him the inhuman body she'd seen. Her mind numbed by the day's events, avoiding such thoughts came easily.