



ZEBRA TOWN

THE TRUE STORY OF A BLACK EX-CON AND A
WHITE SINGLE MOTHER IN SMALL-TOWN AMERICA

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JUDY CLARK

One morning, Karen is staring out the one pane in her window not covered by the sheet. Her back aches and she is faintly nauseous. She watches a stray cat lurk near the corner of a nearby building, then bound through the morning sun to a pool of shadow. "Looks just like my Mom's cat Oliver that we lost when we moved from Brand Street," she writes in her journal. "We really miss him, he was Twister's brother."

Karen slumps and groans. It is not that she is any weaker than Kevin, who thrived on prison life. As a woman, she doesn't have ready access to the kind of mythology Kevin used to bolster himself. Kevin never felt abandoned because he was always the protagonist of his own never-ending movie in which he starred as one man against the world. There are no such reels in Karen's head. All she has is the truth. Julia is abandoned, Betsy half mad, and Kevin feckless. Sick and pregnant, she is simply locked up and helpless. It is all too much again. To stop herself from shrieking to the heavens, Karen hugs herself and rocks back and forth holding her breath.

"Can I come in?"

An inmate lingers in the doorway of Karen's broad nursery room. The woman wears a short-sleeve white blouse with her faded green prison pants. Her graying hair is chopped short. Karen can see that the white woman is an old con, in her late fifties, but with an odd air about her.

Karen inhales and moves to the edge of her bed as the woman sweeps a chair from beside the empty crib and sits facing her.

"My name is Judy—Judy Clark."

"I'm Karen Tanski. I just got here . . . on the nursery. About two weeks."

"I've been here, not on the nursery, for a lot longer than that," Clark smiles. Her teeth are white and perfectly even. She has a pockmark on her forehead and deep lines from the edges of her nostrils down to the sides of her mouth but her skin radiates good health. Clark stares into Karen's eyes, tilts her head, brown eyes narrowed in concern. To Judy Clark, Karen looks bedraggled, beaten.

"I'm sort of an elder around here," Clark continues, the *r*'s of her words so light they sound almost like *w*'s, "and I mentor young mothers. I was just wandering through and it looked like you could use someone to talk with."

Karen is mute, afraid if she speaks she will cry.

Clark does not break the long silence. She knows all about the sadness here, about the women haunted by their crimes, tortured by their bad luck and missing lives. She even knows who Karen is, has heard about her troublesome boyfriend, and understands well that it is best to wait, to listen right now.

Judy Clark has been in Bedford Hills for twenty-six years. A sixties radical, she drove a getaway car during the infamous 1981 Brinks armored car robbery by Black Liberation Army members that left a guard and two police officers shot dead. After her capture, Clark refused counsel, harangued the court with anti-racist and anti-imperialist monologues, and, while some codefendants accepted deals, was sentenced to seventy-five years to life in prison.

After years of solitary confinement and bitter self-imposed withdrawal, Clark began the transformation from revolutionary to humanist, eventually renouncing violence. She earned a bachelor's degree at Bedford Hills and a master's degree in psychology and began to spend her time counseling and nurturing her sister inmates. She launched the prenatal program here and wrote the curriculum for the parenting class. Clark's lifetime of good works behind bars is recognized state- and countrywide. Here at Bedford Hills, as she moves through the prison, sometimes leading a dog she is training as part of Puppies Behind Bars, a program in which prisoners train guide dogs for the blind, she draws approving looks from inmates and guards alike.

Clark sits waiting for several more moments. "Tell me your story," she says finally, sliding her chair a few inches closer.

"I'm here on a drug charge. I never used no drugs but I had some on me anyway." Karen hesitates and draws a breath that comes in shuddering stages. Then she exhales the same way. "They . . . won't let my boyfriend in for visits 'cause they're trying to get at him through me. So they delayed my move to the nursery. Dint put me in CASAT when I was supposed to be. So instead of the six months which I was supposed to do, I'm doing two years. I should be in Taconic. And—and . . . I'm sorry . . . just feel so low today."

Clark nods as Karen speaks. Still, she doubts that the system is punishing Karen because of her boyfriend. She understands that as one of the few pregnant women here in a maximum-security facility Karen probably just fell into a computer dead spot.

But Clark doesn't say anything at all, not a word of correction about the system or warning about troublemaking boyfriends. Instead, she gestures toward the grimy windowpane and indicates that she understands.

Fifteen years earlier, when Clark first conducted her parenting classes, she would often be counseling a dozen African-Americans and Latinas from Brooklyn and the Bronx. As the years passed, she noticed the demographic changing. More and more white girls from central New York towns like Rochester and Elmira were landing here in Bedford Hills. Most had been convicted of drug charges, and many of their boyfriends, partners in the drug trade, and fathers of their children, were black men. She had even had another white Karen here a year ago, when she conducted a class made up of only white girls, all from small Rust Belt cities. "My group of blondes," she called them.

"If I could just see him . . ."—Karen's voice trails off—"I think I'd be okay."

"What's he like?"

"A lot of people think that he's trouble. But they don't understand. He's black and he has been the victim of prejudice all his life. He is a good man and a good father." Karen stops and looks away for a moment, then turns back, adding with a touch of defiance, "Well, that's what he's like and I love him."

"And does he love you?"

"People don't understand, but he does. We have plans."

Clark knows too well that relationships with hardened convicts and drug

dealers have been the downfall of many women in Bedford Hills. Karen probably would stand a better chance if she were to strike out on her own when she gets out of prison. Many of the city girls who are released from Bedford Hills go back to New York City, where they get jobs and an apartment through a church-run program and move on to better things. The upstate girls who leave here are not so lucky. They often go back to the same living situation, the same man, with the same result.

"Karen," says Clark, "I've looked at your record and I see you have a good work ethic and you are so smart. So smart."

"We don't need fancy things. We just want to work and raise our family together."

"You can make that happen," Clark says. "But you have to set your priorities. Your children have to come first. If he wants to follow the program you set, then that will be wonderful. But you have to set the path. You."

Clark knows all about women who try to impress men with how much heart they have, who try to save men. Knows all about twisted priorities. Twenty-four years ago, while she sat in an idling getaway car, trying to prove herself to a team of stickup men calling themselves a liberation army, her one-year-old daughter was in the care of acquaintances.

"Kevin, what's his name?"

"Kevin."

"You have so much going for you. You say you want a simple life, that you don't need a lot of things, and that is so smart—so important. It can work. It can work with you and Kevin but you have to put your daughter first."

As Karen peers into Clark's brown eyes, she knows nothing of the woman's background, only that there is a lovely peace there and throughout the room, and that the weight of prison has somehow lightened. Here is the teacher who might have spotted her gifts, the mother she might have turned to. Suddenly the path ahead shines clear.

The children come first and Kevin can follow if he is able. She wants to hug the woman in front of her but both Karen and Judy Clark know that is strictly against the rules.

Karen will reflect on her brief meeting with Clark many times in the coming months. And she will remember the plan. The children come first. Set the path and Kevin will have to follow.

In prenatal class, the assignment is to write a letter to your baby. Halfway through the letter, Karen lays down her pen. Then she remembers the shining road. *Set the path and let Kevin follow.* Later that day, at the last session in prenatal class, there is a baby shower, with the room decorated, pink balloons bobbing against the ceiling, and crepe banners on the window frame.

At last, Superintendent Ada Perez appears at the door of the Phase I class and Karen rises quickly to ask her about the transfer to Taconic and Kevin's problems getting into the facility. The Taconic move is held up because there are not enough nurses for the facility, Perez explains, and she promises to check the whereabouts and status of Kevin's application.

Today was good. My Mom and Jewel came and visited all day. I seen Kevin out the back window. Well, I seen his car and he backed up into a parking space.

Betsy and Julia describe to Karen how Kevin was walking up to the visiting area with them when Officer Stanley emerged and ordered him off the property.

Finally, the Prisoner Assistance Center gets through to Bedford Hills, complaining that what Bedford Hills is doing to Kevin Davis is illegal. A few days later, as Perez leads a tour of outside visitors through the nursery, the warden takes a moment to tell Karen that she has approved Kevin's visitation.

On December 9, Karen scrawls in her notebook, "I am now going on six days overdue. Tired all the time."