

## *Chapter 22*

**W**HEN I returned to the Indian school for the third year, I was the only one left of the original group. Ten had quit school and one was boarding with a family in another town while she completed her final year. I also learned from the vice-principal that I was being considered for a scholarship. All I had to do was keep up my "A" average. I was very proud of myself, prouder than I would have been if I had made the same marks in an all-Indian class.

My problems at the Indian school, however, were growing.

I could not think or make a move without someone breathing down my neck. Every act, no matter how innocent, was questioned; every word, no matter how truthful, doubted. I could not blame the others for quitting; there were times when I was on the verge of it myself. I knew that I could not spend another year in the suffocating, dehumanizing, prison-like atmosphere of the school, but it took an insignificant incident to bring matters to a head.

I came home from school one day to find three letters from Russ at the foot of my bed. All of them, of course, had been opened already. When I read them, however, I could not believe my eyes. Every sentence that mentioned any tender emotion had been crossed out with a heavy felt-tip marker. They were not passionate love letters by any stretch of the imagination—I had told Russ about our letters being read and censored—but you would think they were pornographic literature judging by the number of passages that were inked over. Across the bottom of one letter, Mr. Stewart had scribbled, “Keep your mind off boys if you know what is good for you. Concentrate on your studies; they are more important.”

I yanked my suitcases down from the top of my locker and started packing furiously. Miss Brady was not around and I wanted to have everything packed and ready to go before she got back. Only my friend Marianne was in the dorm with me.

When she noticed that I was packing, she bolted out of bed and grabbed my arm. “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked.

“Look at this!” I yelled, waving my letters under her nose. “I’ve put up with having my letters read, but this is going too far. I’m leaving right now.”

“Where are you going to get the money?” she asked calmly and logically.

I had not given it a thought. Miss Brady had whatever little money I had saved up and it would take a miracle for her to give it to me. I did not have enough on me to get far. I could not go anywhere where the Highway Patrol, who were always called in on such cases, could not find me. And once I was caught, reform school would be next. However, from what I had heard—from an Indian girl who had spent two

years in one for striking back at a supervisor who was beating her—reform school was no worse than any Indian boarding school.

I put my suitcases back, still packed. “I’ll leave at Christmas,” I said. “That’ll give me time to save up some money, and I’ll have plenty of time during the holidays to disappear.”

Marianne went back to reading the latest Elvis Presley article. I knew she did not believe I was serious.

I wrote a letter to my mother and informed her of my decision. I asked her if I could stay in town and find a job. I had no desire to return to the island just yet.

I decided that in the meantime I would change my way of life; I would become a hedonist. I would give up trying to do the impossible—trying to please the ever-critical staff; trying to prove to white people that Indians were not savages, alcoholics, heathens, or stupid; trying to be nonchalant when some cruel, ignorant little brat came up to me with a war-whoop, yelling, “How! Shoot-um big arrow,” or “How squaw, where’s your papoose?” I decided that since I was constantly accused of sinning, I might as well enjoy life by wallowing in it. Trying to do all the right things had never brought me anything but problems anyway.

I decided that the evening of our next AYPA (Anglican Young People’s Association) meeting was a good time to start my new lifestyle. Mr. Stewart had decreed the year before that we needed to be socially integrated and had forced all the high school students to join the AYPA. We contributed nothing to these meetings, nor were we ever asked to. So, after the first few weeks, most of the Indian children had started attending the movies instead. Only Marianne and I had been too scared, and we had attended all the meetings religiously. That night, however, I talked her into seeing a movie.

We enjoyed every moment of the movie. It seemed exceptionally long, but I attributed that to my guilty conscience. According to my watch, it was nine-thirty and we had half an hour before curfew.

But as we came out of the theatre into the lobby, the thea-

the clock said eleven-thirty. "We can't go back to the school," wailed Marianne. "We'll get expelled or we'll end up in reform school."

"I don't think so," I said. "They'll murder us first. We can always hitch a ride out of town and disappear."

"The police will find us. Oh God! I wish I had never listened to you!" muttered Marianne.

"Look," I told her, "while we're standing around here arguing, we're losing more time. The last bus will be leaving in a few minutes, so we'd better decide what we're going to do."

We decided to face the consequences. We arrived at the depot just before the last bus pulled away. When we walked up the long driveway to the school, we knew immediately we had been missed. The front porch, normally dark and unlit after ten, was ablaze with lights. Sitting on the porch steps was Miss Daniels, the matron. She was an old, old woman, extremely wrinkled and gray, but she was as strict and as frightening as everyone else at the school.

"Well!" she said. "Where have you two been? Don't tell me you went to the meeting because the other girls came home two hours ago. I was about to call the police. Where have you been all this time?"

"The movies," we answered simultaneously.

"The movies!" she screeched. "What gives you the right to go to the movies while the others are attending the meeting. I suppose you were out with your boyfriends, weren't you?"

"No, we weren't." Both of us were in between boyfriends at the moment.

"Don't you lie to me! You know what happens to Indian girls who run around with boys—they end up with papooses on their backs!"

Marianne and I had heard it all a thousand times before, and we walked away from her. "How dare you walk away from me when I'm speaking to you!" she screamed. "Have you no respect?"

We kept on walking, up the stairs, into our dormitory. We undressed, washed, brushed our teeth, and climbed into bed

while she continued her diatribe. “Men are all right before midnight, but after that they turn into animals. Don’t you ever forget that!” There was no way of knowing whether that information was true or not since I had never been out past midnight with any boy. I could only assume that as a spinster nearing her seventies she was speaking from past experience.

The next morning we were called into Mr. Stewart’s office and we listened to him for an hour. He figured correctly that I had been the instigator and he directed all his insults and warnings at me. Our privileges—going into town on Saturdays—were suspended for three weeks.

However, I decided to continue my wicked ways. One dark night I tried to sneak out into the woods for a cigarette—smoking was a sophisticated habit I was trying unsuccessfully to cultivate. After I had squeezed through the small window, I crawled through the snow on my bare hands and knees until I rounded the corner to the dark side of the school. Then I jumped up and started running close to the wall. I slipped on the ice which had formed under the dripping eaves, groaning loudly as I went down and my knee hit a sharp-edged block of ice. When I tried to get up, my right leg collapsed under me.

“I think I broke my leg,” I whispered to the other girls who were waiting for me.

“For Pete’s sake!” they muttered, dragging me back and pushing me through the window. I lay on the floor trying to block out the excruciating pain in my leg.

My leg was not broken, however, and I was able to hobble around by the time Miss Brady called us to bed. I was never able to kneel on my right knee again without a stab of pain knifing through me reminding me of my sin. Taking this as a warning from above, I decided to forsake my evil ways and return to the straight and narrow path. My watch started running again.

I attended all the AYPA meetings. The others continued to go to the movies without ever being caught. In November, when the club planned a luncheon and a dance, I decided not to go. It was to be semi-formal. I had no idea what one wore to a semi-formal do, but it sounded expensive. Since the

luncheon started at four and I worked until five, I thought I had a good excuse for not going.

On the day before the luncheon, I was called into Mr. Stewart's office. "What is this I hear about you refusing to attend the AYPAs luncheon?" he demanded. "And why did you talk the other girls out of going?"

It was the first I had heard of that. "I did not talk them out of going," I told him. "I only said I couldn't go because I have to work until five."

He slammed his fist down on his desk and yelled, "Work! You and I both know you're not going to work. You're going to meet some boy downtown, aren't you?"

Holding back tears of anger, I answered as calmly as I could, "Mr. Stewart, I *do not* have a boyfriend. I haven't had a date since last summer. I am working for Mrs. Hunt tomorrow afternoon. I have been working for her for two years now. If you don't believe me, ask her."

"Don't you lie to me!" he insisted. "I know you have a boyfriend. I know you are going to meet that boy who wrote you when you first came back this fall. That's it, isn't it? You're going to meet him!"

"He's over a thousand miles away! I am not going to meet any boy. I am working. No matter what you think I am, I am *not* a liar."

He jumped out of his chair, his eyes bulging. "How dare you sass me back? I will not stand for any backtalk from you or anyone else. Do you know what happens to children who sass back? They get expelled or sent to reform school."

Years of bottled-up resentment and frustration boiled over and I could not stop myself. "I did not sass you back," I screamed, tears streaming down my face. "I was merely trying to tell you the truth, but that's not what you want to hear, is it?"

"Enough! Enough!" he yelled. "How dare you talk to me like that! I've met some troublesome Indians in my life, but you are undoubtedly the worst. I have never met anyone as disrespectful as you."

"You talk about disrespect! The only time I've ever had any respect around here was when I brought home my report

card. I've had nothing but disrespect since I came here. I've been accused of being immoral, of being a liar and a thief. Sometimes I feel like giving up and doing all those things, but that would only make you happy because you'd finally be proven right. Well, I won't give you that satisfaction!"

"That's enough, Janie! You are expelled! Do you hear me? Expelled! It will take me a week to make the necessary arrangements but I want you out of here by next weekend. I don't want your kind around here."

"I don't care whether you expel me or not," I sobbed. I never could fight anyone without bursting into tears. "I wrote my mother over a month ago and asked her if I could quit school. I was going to quit at Christmastime. I even have all my bags packed. Ask the girls."

He slumped into his seat. "Quitting? What do you mean you're quitting school?" he asked, looking at me with a puzzled frown.

"I'm leaving. I've had enough. I can't take it any more."

"You can't quit!" he said, suddenly alarmed. "Think of the other children in this school. You can't let them down. You've done more than anyone else to give this school and Indians a good name. You're much too intelligent to quit. You'll be throwing away your life."

Finally realizing that *I* had the upper hand in the argument, I calmed down. "I don't really want to quit school," I confessed, "but I cannot stand this kind of treatment any more."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, but I don't see why you should," he said, still wearing a puzzled frown. "We've always tried to make this school a happy place for everybody. I'll see to it that your stay here is happier from now on."

"I thought you expelled me," I said quietly, unable to resist the impulse.

"Oh well, we both said things in anger that should never have been said. I'm quite willing to forgive and forget what you said if you will forget what I said. Now dry your tears. I'll tell the girls that you are going to the luncheon and the dance, and I'll call Mrs. Hunt and tell her you can't work for her this week. I'll tell her why." He got up, walked around

his desk, and placed his arm around my shoulder. "And let's have no more talk of quitting, all right?" he said softly.

I felt like pounding my head against his desk. He had won again; however, I did not feel like starting the fight all over again.

The only thing I had that looked semi-formal enough was a blue knit dress that a white woman for whom I used to launder had given me. I looked as if I had been poured into it. With the fur-trimmed scarlet coat I borrowed from one of the other girls, I looked like a prostitute, but I went anyway.

As soon as all the tables had been cleared after the luncheon, Marianne and I prepared ourselves for a boring evening as wallflowers while the other Indian girls and boys disappeared to see a show. And Mr. Stewart was so worried about them missing out on this big event of their lives, I thought bitterly.

One of the boys asked me to dance, but as soon as he discovered I was an Indian, he suddenly remembered he had made other plans. I was not surprised.

"What happened to your boyfriend?" Marianne asked, "He took off so suddenly. . . . What did you do to him?"

"I contaminated him. I told him I was an Indian. I guess he was afraid of catching some disease. You know how it is," I said bitterly.

"Yeah. Well, you got one more dance than I did," she shrugged.

After the dance, we met the others at the bus stop and we all went back to the school together. Mr. Stewart had waited up for us. "Well, did you enjoy yourselves at the dance?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," we lied.

"I knew you would," he smiled.

A few days later, I was ordered to the homework classroom to see Mrs. Mueller, our homework teacher. She greeted me with a scowl. "What have you got to say about this?" she asked, waving a letter at me. "Read it."

I took it from her and opened it up. It was a letter to me from my mother. I was furious! Now it seemed as if the *whole*



*school* had read my letters before I did. I read it through quickly. My mother had given her permission for me to quit school on one condition, that I return to the island. She did not want me living alone and working in the city.

“You should be ashamed of yourself. A girl with your brains wanting to quit. I thought that you at least would make something of your life,” Mrs. Mueller said. “How can you think of quitting?”

“This is one of the reasons why I’m quitting,” I said, waving my letter in her face. “Everyone gets to read my letters before I do, and if Mr. Stewart doesn’t agree with something in the letter, he tacks on little notes at the bottom.”

“Well, if that’s all that’s bothering you, I will demand that Mr. Stewart not read your mail any more. I’ll see to it that your mail is delivered to you intact. All right?”

“It isn’t just the mail,” I said wearily. “It’s a lot of other things.”

“What are they? Janie, I’m your friend. You can tell me.”

“Boys, for one thing. Do you know how many boys I’ve dated in the two and a half years I’ve been here?” I asked, holding up four fingers. “And yet I’m always being accused of running around and sleeping with boys. I don’t know how we’re expected to carry on all these imaginary affairs when we’re hardly ever out of sight.”

“Now, now, Janie,” she said, embarrassed. “We’re not talking about s-e-x.”

“That’s all I’ve heard about since I’ve been here.”

“That’s enough, Janie. I’ll see to it that your mail is not opened any more. I’ve also arranged for you to take music lessons every Wednesday. There’s a piano in the auditorium that you can practice on. Please believe that we’re only trying to help you.”

My mail was unopened from then on and I took my piano lessons. I knew they were a bribe to keep me in school, but since I had always wanted to play the piano, I did not mind.

Two weeks before Christmas, two men and a woman from the Education Department of Indian Affairs came to see me. They demanded to know why I wanted to quit school.

“I just don’t like school anymore,” I mumbled. I did not think for one moment they would believe anything I had to tell them.

“You cannot tell us you don’t like school with the marks you get,” the woman said. “Tell us what is bothering you and we’ll try to correct it. We want to help.”

“Let me see if I can talk some sense into this foolish girl,” one of the men interrupted. Turning to me, he said, “We know you are not stupid. We know you like school, so what’s all this foolish talk about quitting? We’re not going to sit by while you throw your life down the drain. Can’t you get it through that head of yours that we’re trying to help. Why didn’t you quit at the end of June? What happened between now and then? You aren’t in trouble, are you?”

“No sir!” I answered indignantly. “I just don’t want to go to school any more.”

He threw up his hands in disgust. “Indians! Try and figure them out!”

“I have an idea I want to discuss with you, Janie,” the woman said. “You don’t have to give me an answer tonight. We’ll be here until tomorrow. We’ve been carrying on a little experiment to see if we can come up with a solution to this dropout problem we have. We’ve taken a few Indian children and placed them in private homes instead of these institutions. Most of them have shown a marked improvement. If we could find a home for you in another town, would you be willing to stay in school?”

“Oh, yes!”

“It might be difficult finding someone to take you in at this time of year,” she continued, “but we’ll try. If we can’t, we’ll definitely find one next year. Please don’t do anything until you hear from us.”

Knowing Indian Affairs as I did, I did not think they would find a solution in a few weeks. Years maybe, but not weeks. I kept my bags packed, so I’d be ready to leave at Christmas, one way or the other. Three days after this official visit, I received word that a home had been found and that I could leave the school during the Christmas holidays. I could not believe it had actually happened.

Mr. Stewart drove me to the train station. I waved goodbye to my friends before turning my back on the detestable school forever without feeling even the slightest tinge of sadness. I could only hope that the future would be somewhat brighter.

Twice before I had started out with such hopes—once in 1948 when I had entered the first Indian school, and again in 1956 when I had entered the second one—only to end up bitterly disillusioned with life and people. I figured that during those years the accumulated time I had spent with my family was less than a year and a half. It was the end of 1958 and I had just turned eighteen. I had spent ten and a half of those years in Indian boarding schools—ten and a half years of boot camp.

It was one o'clock in the morning when the train, an hour behind schedule, jerked and ground screechingly to a halt in front of the station at North Bay, and it was almost two o'clock when I knocked uncertainly on a door marked "D" at the end of a long dark hallway in a brick apartment-building on Worthington Street. I was greeted with sleepy mutterings and shuffling feet.

The door swung open, and, intuitively, I sensed that my new life with the stern-faced old woman before me was going to be no improvement over the last ten and a half years. Gray hair in pincurls, wrinkles dripping with face cream, massive body wrapped in a boldly flowered robe, upper lip curled disdainfully, she stood glowering at me.