

Unit 18

“Put the sheet around so the hole is at the bottom.”

“What if someone sticks their big toe in it?”

“This is the last clean sheet - we’ll just have to take a chance.”

This was also the last unit we had to clean for the day. I work with Laura at the Seaweed motel. It is just off the highway on the outer edges of San Francisco. Laura and I worked pretty well as maids together except she likes to clean with ammonia and I prefer Pine-Sol. And she likes to tune in to the soap operas on TV, and I like going through people’s closets and drawers— when they are not there of course. Laura cleans the rooms, while I clean the bathrooms. She runs a dust mop over the floor, and after I help her make the beds she sits on them and watches soaps. I slapped a wet towel over the bathroom. Then to make it seem sparkly and clean I slip a strip of paper over the toilet seat that says something about it being sanitary. I then put another large square paper on the shower floor so people won’t slip when they shower.

One very foggy morning, Laura and I pushed carts through the courtyard to unit 18 at the far end of the motel. This caused some light sleepers to curse at us because our carts were so noisy. The people who checked out of 18 had one hell of a time the night before. The bed was in pieces and wine bottles were in every corner— potato chips crunched under our feet. The towels were gone except for one, dripping wet washcloth in the shower, next to the square paper. We both moaned. Laura turned the TV on. I turned it off.

“Gawd Laura, you’re beginning to sound like those damn soaps.”

“I am not! What’s wrong with you anyway?”

“You know what you told me the other day about your sister, who’s having an affair with a married doctor whose wife is going to kill herself because she has a crippled dog?”

“It’s true!” Laura Shouted.

“Laura, you told me you don’t have any sisters.”

“And what about you telling me you met the Queen of Greece when there is no such person?”

“Hey!” A voice behind us said, “the tenants are complaining.” The manager stood at the door with egg stuck in his beard, “I don’t mind you talking, but keep it down a little.” He left, and Laura and I didn’t speak— for the rest of that day we only said what we needed to.

I pouted and wished worked with another lesbian instead of Laura, whose boyfriend could only fix cars and talk about baseball. I never cleaned so thoroughly. I ran my hand into a rubber glove and scrub the living hell out of those bathroom.

We were near the manager's unit. He was banging pots and pans and talking loudly to someone on the phone, "... no I said he do not take cats and a deposit must be paid for the dog-umm . Yeah, yeah--"

"Do you wanna do one more unit and break for lunch?" I asked Laura, but looked at the cart I was pushing. "Tsk okay." She mumbled something else I couldn't hear.

I knocked twice on the door, "maid service!" The door opened slowly. Two women stood, one on either side of the room. One with her fists, pushed into her hips--hips that had a leather belt wrapped around her with a long knife hanging from it. The other woman stood holding the door, an Army jacket on her thick arms. Our eyes darted back and fourth like they were dancing on strobe lights. A radio on the desk was playing a song called *you light up my life*. The strong aroma of fish frying in the manager's unit overwhelmed me. I held the rubber tipped finger of my glove to my mouth and cleared my throat, "would you like us to clean your room?" "It's all right," the woman in the Army jacket said. "We are checking out in a few minutes."

Laura pulled at my arm indicating it was time to eat. So we went and sat in the courtyard with our lunches. Laura babbled on about how she was sorry and she sure hope I was too. Then she talked about what she was going to feed whatsizname name for dinner - I watched the clouds drift by and seagulls dipping through the air while humming *you light up my life*.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Laura asked. "No, you can have it if you want." So she ate my cheese sandwich and Apple. The two women checked out and drove away in a sports car with Texas license plates. For the next few weeks I not only sang the same song over and over, I thought incessantly about the two women, and wondered what they did in Texas. Maybe they were cattle rustlers or teachers. Do they live in the middle of nowhere with each other and prairie dogs and cactus? Why did they come to San Francisco? Maybe they found an apartment and are living here now. So I went to every place I could think of that gay women go. I remembered every feature on their faces and saw a great number of women, who could almost have passed for them.

Laura was really grating on my nerves. She stopped watching the soaps and watched the game shows instead. So every time we'd get our paychecks she'd screech and throw her arms up like she just won a new car.

Then one day the sports car with Texas plates appeared next to unit 18. I rushed Laura up as fast as I could and told her lies to stop her from turning the TV on. "The manager is going to find someone else, if we don't straighten up." We were cleaning the unit next 18 when I heard their voices-- first low and angry and louder and louder, "you can get 20 fuckin years for possession--you fuckin bitch stay off my ass--"

Laura looked disgusted and banged on the door.

“Come back later!” And angry voice shouted.

“Please keep your voices down,” Lara said. Like she was talking to a room of children, “you’re disturbing the other tenants.”

One of the women stomped out and pounded down the street. The other woman said to Laura, “shit then I’m leaving too!” And she tore off in another direction.

“Okay we’ll clean the room now.” Laura sang like nothing happened.

I checked, the knife left on the desk. It could have sliced a piece of hair into four strands. I picked through the open suitcase, four work shirts, two pairs of overalls, a carton of camels, a map of California– “You wanna help me make this bed?” I pulled myself away.

One pillow, lie on the floor. The other had two dents on it, where I’m sure both their heads lie before the fight. I want to help them. They weren’t cattle rustlers at all but big-time dealers. Probably part of the Texas connection. Or... maybe one of them had single joint and the other freaked because they were both elementary school teachers on vacation. I couldn’t bear to leave the motel without letting them know I was after all “concerned” about them. So when I cleaned their bathroom. I wrote on the strip of paper left around the toilet seat, “please see note in shower.” Then on the square paper left in the shower. I wrote “all types of help given–call Lena and maid.” I left not only my phone number, but my address and then rushed back later and wrote careful instructions on how to get to my apartment. Later that night I waited for a phone call from them. Then began to tire and then I slowed down. I started feeling ridiculous. I blushed at the thought of ever facing them again. My God, they must think I’m nuts. I stared down at the phone– if it rang at that moment I would’ve passed out from shock. I took the receiver off the hook. The next morning I called in sick. Everything seemed as usual when I returned the following day.

Lara was back to watching the soap opera. I played hopscotch with two kids from one of the units, and they thought it was very funny watching an overweight, middle-aged woman hopscotching. Laura and I refused to clean a room that had a large growly German Shepherd guarding the door. Laura told me at some point she was leaving. She and her boyfriend were getting married and going to move to God knows where. When we got to unit 18. I went right to the bathroom and cleaned quickly. The two women had moved out, and a new tenant was sitting on the bed watching us clean.

After lunch, the manager introduced me to the person that would take Laura’s place. “This is Sarah.”

“Didn’t I meet you in that little bar on Mission Street?” I asked her excitedly. “Yeah, I thought you looked familiar.” Sarah had two hearings in one ear and nine in the other. She was my size and have very short hair that curled tightly on her head. We checked each other out completely, as we spoke.

Laura decided to leave early. Before she left she said, “oh by the way, you know those people in unit 18? They left a note for you.”

“WHAT!” I was nearly on top of her. “Where is it?”

“Oh, I didn’t keep it I threw it away.”

“Shit, what did it say?”

“Tsk! Oh I don’t know if something like--Thank you and we got our shit together, and what looks like a phone number or address or something.”

“Why didn’t you save it for me?!” She looked at me like I was crazy and left.

Sarah and I have been working together for some time now. She hates TV and loves snooping through people’s things as much as I do. Furthermore, we are both waiting for the two women from Texas to return.