

Donna Decker

Sirens at Soul Gardens

Sirens blast so loudly I can't hear myself. *Hold on*, I tell my handyman. We're on the phone, talking about plumbing leaks in one of the nine cottages I own in a complex named Soul Gardens. The noise stops. Then another group of sounds bursts from the courtyard— a clamor of men's voices. This is unusual since I have a cowbell at the front entrance and can hear its loud clanking whenever the gate opens.

I've got to go, I say, hang up, and run to the porch in my sweatpants and tank-top pajamas. A team of uniformed men, five EMT's and a fireman, are racing through the courtyard. One yells, *Where's 518?*

Which 518? I shout back.

A, several answer.

Of course. Cassie's house.

I had awakened to a peace so profound I couldn't remember ever feeling that way upon waking. Now peace starts to wave *bye-bye*, and I have a feeling I won't be able to tempt it back this morning.

I inherited Cassie from my previous partner, when he asked her to run the place while he was off at Bible school in Tampa, having been saved by a televangelist last summer. And Cassie inherited his dogs. I lived forty-five miles away and didn't know the extent of their arrangement until a roof started leaking and she called me.

A mid-fiftyish short fireplug of a woman, Cassie lives in one of the cottages with her older sister. In the last six months, I have seen her fall over steps and off stairs, give herself black eyes by walking into ledges, cut her hands with knives, trip over dogs, and just all around get hurt more than any one else I know. I have asked, then told her not to climb onto stepstools and ladders when she's working because she just doesn't know how not to fall off.

She tries hard to please. But something takes over and makes her eyes into wild whirlwinds; she becomes some sort of deep-South Tasmanian devil who stops thinking. For instance last week, she got nervous that she wasn't doing enough. So without asking, or having the ability to pencil a straight line, she used fluorescent orange spray paint to draw parking lot spaces on the small concrete driveway. She sprayed each apartment's house number at the top of each space. Needless to say, the cars, two of which are an SUV and a four-by-four, can't squeeze into the narrow spots.

What happened to your parking lot, my neighbor across the street, asked me in Home Depot the other day.

She didn't use a tape, I answered.

It's a mess, he said. The lot faces his yard, so he sees a playground jumble of squiggly day-glo orange squiggly lines every time he comes out of his house.

That's how Cassie does things. She's off and speeding without looking to the side or back, no reverse, no peripheral vision. Boom. She's on—like a short-circuited Energizer bunny and so messes up that I want to scream. If she had told me she was going to paint the lines without counting feet of space and car widths, I would have begged her to wait. But, she's got the confidence of the madly driven, and will frantically do, even when she doesn't know how.

Last month, she said she could paint the interior of a cottage. She didn't tell me she had never painted before. I found out too late that she didn't know floors need to be covered, especially floors with new carpet. Now that cottage's new Aztec blue wall-to-wall is splotted with antique white latex Rorschach spots—not to mention laced with rubbed-out sections from the steel wool she used to try to get the paint out.

This makes sense in a primally, psychological way. When Cassie was sixteen her father stabbed her mother to death in front of her in a South Carolina IGA parking lot.

He was a jealous man; afraid my mama was going to run off. She was about twenty years younger than him; pretty. Took me a rock of ages to forgive him.

As if you ever could, I think, looking at her face and seeing the trauma still alive there. Her small brown eyes squeeze askew sometimes—like she's not actually here trying to help me run the place like a strange major-domo—but living in some kind of twisted Oz.

So when I hear the uniformed men tell me they're searching for 518 A, I imagine Cassie sprawled on the floor after falling off a stepladder or having dropped a hairdryer into a sink of water.

The rescue team has run to Cassie's house and is crowded onto her tiny porch.

I manage this place, I holler to the men.

They pay me no attention. Four of the younger men wear red Emergency Management Technician T-shirts; a dark-haired middle-aged man wears a gray Fire Rescue shirt.

I yell again across the courtyard, *I can help.*

From inside the house, Cassie's dogs are making a din. Two of the EMT's are at the door and look like they can't open it. I throw on a shirt over my flimsy tank, grab my keys, and run over.

I told you I can get you in, I say as I run up the four low steps.

We couldn't hear you over the dogs, one replies.

What happened? I ask when I get to the door.

Someone fell, a blond one answers. He's holding a first aid kit.

Once again I envision Cassie, or this time maybe her sister, on the floor as I fumble with the bunch of keys on the ring looking for the master. A tech says, *It's unlocked. The dogs are stopping us.*

I know the dogs, I say, and open the door a few inches. Sal, the brindle pit, teeth bared, is the first line of defense.

It's OK honey, I tell her. Usually, she does not bite people to whom she's been introduced. I'm more like family since my former partner rescued her four years ago when she was starving and chained to a tree. And since I trained her to sit by feeding her too many Milkbones, I do not believe she would hurt me.

At times though, she can't see well and has once bitten someone when he was wearing unfamiliar sunglasses and entered the room quickly. So I am daunted, moving through the door while that mechanical pit bull jaw snaps. I get an arm and a leg in; she backs up as I edge into the living room. Her eyes are wide, but she's not lunging.

Hurricane, a white pit mix, crowds the door, trying to be the alpha. Her teeth glint and she's making the loudest racket as she does her series of triple barks which I know are more of a welcome party, *hey, how ya doing*, than a warning. However, the reverberations could make it hard to know the difference. The men outside might have no idea this big barking pit would not hurt them if she came hurtling out of the house, which she would do given half the chance. And I don't know if these guys are armed.

I push past, keeping the door close to my body when the heavy sour smell of dirty dogs and stale tobacco hits me. Curtains darken the small house even though the Indian summer sun shines brightly outside. The two window air conditioners blast, and although the cottage is messy with piles of papers, clothes and dishes, and covered with dog hair, it's cool. Cassie's dogs that she saved from the pound—Blue, the collie and Max, the black lab—bark rhythmically from the couch. Their bodies are rigid but they don't jump down.

I squeeze the rest of my body through. Sal's barks become yelps; Hurricane's yaps turn into high-pitched squealy vowels, almost words. Now that I know the dogs know me, I start to search.

No Cassie or sister on the floor in the living room or master bedroom. I call to Sal who follows me into the bathroom where I shut her in. Then I herd Hurricane onto the small patio and run back into the dim kitchen; still I see no one.

Finally, when I walk into the tiny second bedroom, I see a man wedged on the floor between the bed and the wall.

He is fully conscious and unhurt as far as I can see. His head is bald and pale, and his wide eyes stare into mine. He reminds me of a baby bird although he looks fortyish. I can't tell how big he is, scooshed up against the wall, but he looks like he's perfectly comfortable and that he expects to lie on the floor until some giant mama bird or angel arrives to scoop him up and drop him back into bed.

Who are you, my voice barks out. I'm thinking, *this is the big emergency?*

Milt Powers, he respectfully answers, his soft voice high and Georgia accented, his eyes blinking. He's fully dressed although the bedclothes are rumpled and the room has the air of a hospital. *Another rescue of Cassie's*, I think.

One of the EMT's yells from the porch, *Is the patient critical?*

This one isn't but wait around, I hear the pissed-off former New York City cab driver that I once was, in my head silently say. I can't believe that Cassie has left this little man that is so helpless and pitiful he has to call 9-1-1- to get into bed.

She has not only created a crisis by leaving for who knows where. She has also put the dogs at risk. Not to mention cramming three adults and five dogs in a six hundred square foot bungalow.

No, he's not critical, I holler to the EMT and run out of the room, leaving Milt Powers lying on the floor for the rescue squad. Back in the living room, I touch Blue slowly. He is old and sick and has recently, uncharacteristically, bitten a neighbor, so I sit tentatively on the couch next to him. He stops barking. I reach over to pet Sam, who then also goes quiet.

I yell to the rescue team, *The dogs are constrained*.

One of the EMT's cracks the door and peers inside. *I thought you secured the dogs*, he says.

The biters are contained, and I've got these two, I tell him. Cassie's fifth dog, Doll—a bulldog mix, and the Soul Gardens mascot since she lives outside most of the time—pushes her way into the house in front of the EMT tech. She runs to the couch and sits panting at my feet.

Who is the patient? the tech's voice clips out, his body frozen at the door.

His name is Milt Powers but I don't know him, I answer from the couch.

You don't know him, he says incredulously, and I shake my head no. How can I explain Cassie to him in ten seconds? That she has secretly brought this helpless mystery man into the complex and sequestered him in the back bedroom.

The tech enters, eyeing the dogs. I point the way to the patient. The next rescue worker swings the door and steps in with a bag of equipment. Two others follow.

Through the open door, I can see the uniforms of two police officers standing off the porch talking with the fireman and the last tech left outside. *Great*, I think. So much for attracting renters today. Then with relief, I hear them laugh. From the little bedroom, I hear murmurs and sounds of furniture being moved. I pet the dogs and every so often call out to Sal. Then one tech leaves the bedroom and strides through the living room; I ask, *How is he?*

Disabled Gulf vet, got M.S. Fell, couldn't get up, the worker says affably, as he leaves the house, all signs of emergency abated. The other three techs start to walk through the kitchen on their way out, too.

The fireman pokes his head into the living room. *Sorry for the miscommunication*, he says with a small smile.

It's OK, I say, still sitting on the couch in my pajamas, waiting while this team of men leaves. The adrenaline rush begins to subside, and when I stand and give the dogs a couple of pats, my legs shake. I make my way to the back door and call Hurricane to come, while knowing she won't. She's happiest in mud and lies somewhere underneath the house in cool dirt. I wouldn't mind crawling under the floorboards with her right now.

When I open the bathroom door, Sal runs out, eyes alarmed, hunched up as much as her eighty pounds will let her, tail between her legs. *Good girl*, I say, as, head down, she rushes toward the living room.

I have no need or desire to talk with Milt Powers, the disabled veteran who, by falling, created the havoc this morning. I think, *not his fault*. *Cassie*. I shake my head, knowing that's another scene after she gets back from baby sitting, cleaning, driving to the store for shut-ins—any way she can pick up a few bucks without having to work at a structured job.

I am reluctant to leave the dogs, but grateful to be getting out of the musty house for the golden Indian summer day. Doll, her tail wagging, follows me out. When I get into the yard, I am relieved the police are gone and that they didn't grill me about the dogs. The workers are slowly moving back to their trucks and mumble their appreciation. *Glad to help*, I say, thankful that the crisis is over.

The sun is almost directly overhead; Doll runs to the border of a cottage and digs herself a hole behind a bush. I breathe in the scent of ripe overflowing jasmine. I had thought this would be a grounding day before I start teaching new classes at a new university tomorrow. Instead, I'll be dealing with Cassie's crazy choices and figuring out how to encourage her to move from Soul Gardens when she needs the money and I need help. I know I was lucky that there was no true emergency this time.

I walk on unsteady legs to my own small place to get ready for the day, remembering an old teacher-poet who wrote that peace is only a breath away. Having known contentment early this morning, I hope I can call it back. Even with Cassies in the world.

Breathe, the poet says, *nirvana is on the other side of breathing*, as I walk past orange shaky lines like sun streaks across the parking lot.