

Excerpt of *The Sausage Makers Daughters* by A.G.S. Johnson

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Chapter one

February 14, 1972 — St. Valentine's Day

*How many deaths does it take 'til he sees that too many
people—*

“Fraid it's time.”

—have died?

“Miss Czermanski, it's time.”

Time? Speaking to me through metal bars, a sad-eyed man in uniform interrupted me, singing softly to distract myself. I focused on the jangling keys in his hand.

Oh. Time. I plummeted back to reality—me locked in a jail cell. Mustering my indignation, I responded, “Finally, you've come to your senses. You're letting me out.”

Not that this jail cell scared me—hell no. I've been clubbed, bruised, teargassed, arrested, and jailed too many times to count. And I have the scars to prove it. It's just, well ... so much happened so fast. That must be why I'm a bit rattled.

“Van's awaitin',” the jail guard said, sliding open the cell door. Its crashing against the bars behind it, metal on metal, provoked my reaction. I jumped to my feet, tugging an old mothproofed coat over the other sartorial rejects I had dressed in. I looked as ridiculous as my being locked in this cell had been. How will they justify holding me? It was an outrage, and probably not even legal. Dad's lawyers would get to the bottom of it.

Charging from the cell, I strode the cement corridor in the only direction possible, dead ahead. “I'm more than ready to leave this creepy place,” I told the guard, “for good.”

Our footsteps echoed through the empty jailhouse, the old guard's plodding gait punctuating the rapid-fire determination of mine until we reached a metal door. Once the guard unlocked it, we were blasted by arctic air and blinding sunlight. “Go on ahead now,” he prodded me. With my eyes adjusting, I stumbled toward a police van materializing at the base of a stairway.

Three uniformed men, shifting from foot to foot, waited beside a police van, their breath rising like smoke signals on frigid air. I gulped in the bracing cold to quell a sudden uptick in my pulse. One of my armed escorts offered me a hand into the rear of the van, but I climbed in on my own. He trailed me in and sat opposite, absently fingering his billy club. Doors slammed all around us, four consecutive concussions, both heard

and felt. The van rumbled forward, and my teeth chattered as I fixated on his club.

I attempted conversation as we crunched and slid over rutted snow toward the county courthouse. “So, how long do these things take, Officer, normally?”

“Transfer to the courthouse? No mor’n a few minutes.”

“No, I meant my appearance, the ... arraignment.” He shrugged with disinterest. Straining to see through the chicken-wired windows, I attempted another tack meant to divert me from the impending court appearance. Though clearly not my first, it would be my first all alone. “Looks like we got more snow last night.”

“Couple inches’s all.”

“Right ...” This was getting me nowhere. Besides, I should rehearse. I had only to state my plea, that’s what Dad’s lawyers told me—that, “and no more.” *Not guilty, Your Honor. No way am I guilty. Man, I am so not guilty.* “Positively, unequivocally, not guilty! Get real, Your Honor.”

“What?” The guard eyed me through the slits of his eyes as his grip tightened on his club.

“Sorry. I was just practicing my lines—you know, for court.”

The man shifted away to further discourage small talk, his movement revealing a holstered gun beneath his jacket. Like a billy club to the head, it struck me that all these security measures—from the jail cell to his club and gun to his armed cronies in the front cab—were meant to safeguard greater Wausaukeesha, Wisconsin *from me*. As the significance sank in, I held back debilitating fear the way we did in the old days, with a protest song, this one sung in my head.

*How many times can a man turn his head,
pretending he just doesn’t see?*

My stomach clenched like a fist when the van fishtailed to a halt in another razor-wired courtyard. At least it would all be over soon. My secret mantra cycled through my head as I exited the van. *Bravado, my old friend, don’t fail me now.*

With my security detail, all three of them, I was escorted to a rear entrance of the Wausaukeesha County Courthouse, a building seen throughout my childhood from a distance, but never up close until today. Once inside, my entourage marched me through the ill-lit bowels of the building to a secure waiting area they called “the green room.” Seated amid walls the color of pond scum, I pondered the room’s theatrical name. Was it intentional, this allusion to a backstage area where actors waited to perform? Droll gallows humor?

“Kipe ... Keep ... K-I-P Czermanski,” boomed a voice that filled the green room. Another uniformed official had entered and bumbled over not my last name, which was a handful, but my first. With him, the body count in the holding pen reached five—four official-looking and armed men and me, one childish-looking female.

I rose, ditched the coat, and tartly corrected him. “It’s Kip, like ‘hip.’” The officers gazed in obvious surprise at the now revealed outfit I was literally stuffed into—a

nautical-themed white blouse with a navy blue tie and pleated skirt. Dad's lawyers assured me this mothball-reeking ensemble was the best my sisters could pull together after the lawyers had judged everything in my suitcase at home "unsuitable for the courtroom." I cheered myself, thinking that looking infantile was probably a good defensive ploy. All eyes in the green room traveled downward to my feet and stopped. Oh crap, except for the combat boots. Where did my sisters find them?

In a solemn tone I hadn't heard since I stopped attending Mass, the newly arrived official recounted courtroom protocol for me. I tried to listen but fidgeted with my hair, my clothes, and the damned boots, the protest song still wafting through my head.

"Okay, this way," he said when he'd finished. I prayed I hadn't missed anything important and forced myself in the direction indicated, chastising myself for allowing my habitual free-associating to seize my attention when, more than ever, I needed to be focused and present.

More echoing footsteps, another dead end before a locked door, this one marked Courtroom One, which the guard opened, and herded me inside.