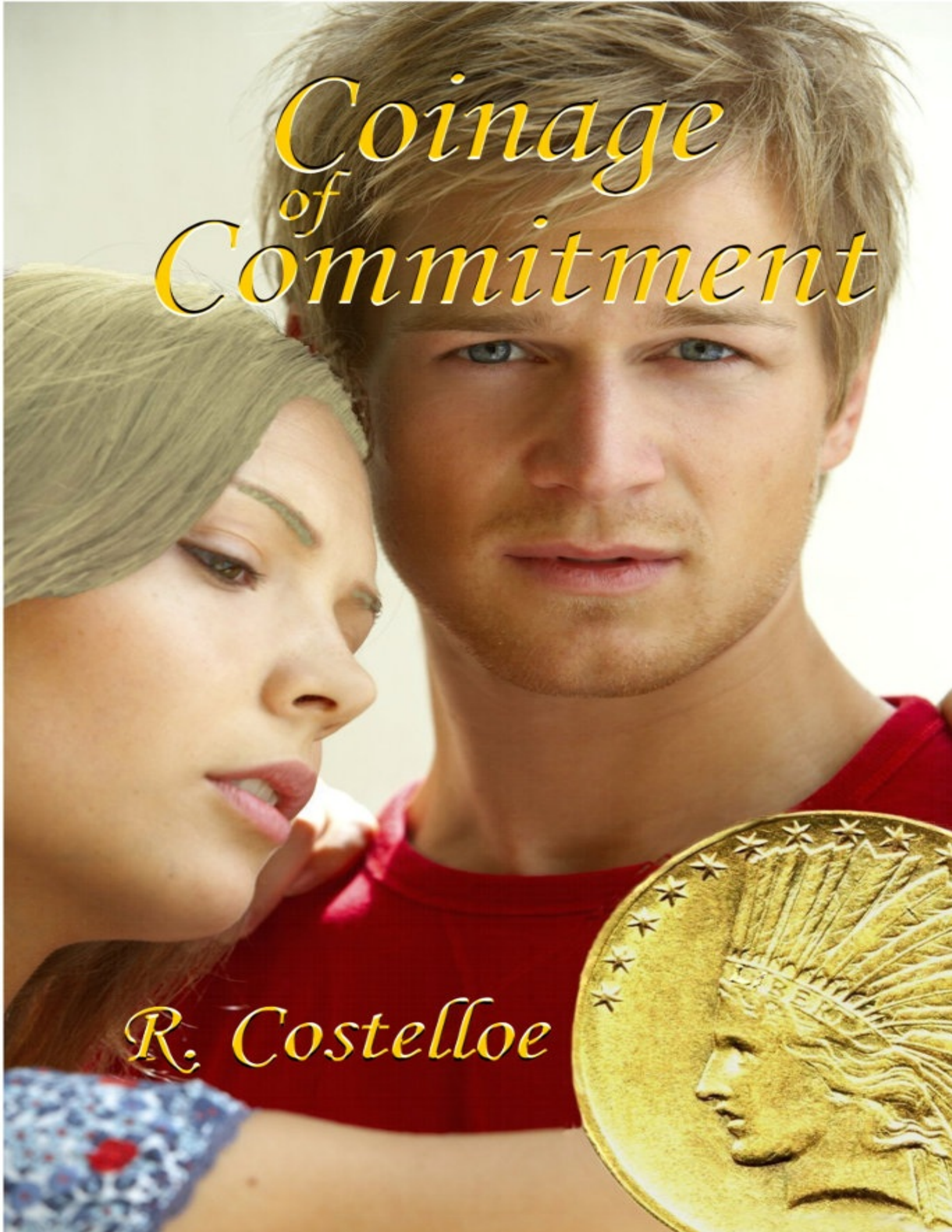


A romantic couple is featured in a close-up portrait. The man, with light brown hair and blue eyes, is looking directly at the camera. The woman, with blonde hair, is looking down at him. A large, detailed gold coin is positioned in the bottom right corner, featuring a profile of a woman with a sunburst headdress. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

Coinage of Commitment

R. Costelloe

Coinage of Commitment

A Revised Second Edition Love Story

By
R Costelloe

rcostelloe.com

Cover design by Robert J Costelloe

EPUB Edition

Copyright © 2013, 2019 Robert J Costelloe

All rights reserved

The characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author. No part of this book may be reproduced without the prior, written consent of the author.

Dedication

To my wife, Caroline, the muse who inspired the journey

Table of Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright Page

Dedication

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

About the Author

Also by R Costelloe

About the Book

Chapter One

SULLIVAN'S PULSED ELECTRIC with a release only Friday night can bring. The merriment had an undulating quality, a rippling volume that drowned out the jukebox. Nestled against Drexel's urban campus, the place also drew Penn students, who could walk over from their Ivy League enclave. The campuses didn't quite adjoin, not in the late nineteen-sixties. The four of them, male, undergraduate sophomores, sat in a line at the bar, whooping it up with the rest, glad to be settled in the rhythm of another fall semester. This was the happy time, before the tests came in earnest.

The lounge's bar was L-shaped and they occupied its short leg, located farthest from the entrance. From there they could track the unattached coeds, particularly abundant that night, and the socializing was so lively her arrival attracted only incidental glances. But when Wayne noticed the girl's entrance, he swiveled from his companions to get a better view. She carried a light jacket, doubtless to shield her sleeveless arms from the evening chill, and she wore a short, plaid skirt. Tall, at about five-nine, she had long blond hair that flared thick and full around her cheeks because of a clasp at the nape of her neck. Her bearing was poised and confident, unhurried, and her half smile told how relaxed she was with the lounge's festive mood. It got better, for she slid onto a stool on the bar's long section, not thirty feet away. Better still, he sat in a dark portion of the room, allowing him to study her without drawing attention.

She had a lovely figure, medium build, and her limbs had muscular definition suggesting athletic vigor or training. Yes, he could see it in her hands, their somewhat wider build, the swell of veins over the tendons. But her attractive figure was eclipsed by the beauty of her face and hair. His gaze stayed on her face, intent, and he wondered at the effect this girl was having on him. The voltage he felt from her was profound, and the why of it took several moments to reach him. Though barely discernible, a wisp of sadness tinged her beauty. Yes, he could see it now in her soft eyes, the tension in the corner of her mouth as she extended a thin-lipped smile to the inquiring bartender. It was the way her beauty was shaped by something vulnerable that caressed his

heartstrings. In a unique mannerism, she gave a small, rightward swirl of her head, apparently to reset her long tresses.

Henk leaned toward him, breaking the spell. “Do you recognize her?” His Dutch accent had changed little since their time in high school.

“Should I?” Wayne asked. “She doesn’t look familiar.”

“Think back to last spring. Remember the drama club production? The medley of scenes and musical numbers? We attended because I got free tickets.”

“Of course!” he exclaimed. “She was in the production. Why, she was practically star of the show. She even sang. I didn’t recognize her because she wore her hair all done-up on stage.” He paused. “So she’s one of your Penn classmates.”

“Ja, that’s right. I’m thinking she’s a junior. I’ve seen her at parties, and we have been introduced. I should remember her name, but it won’t come to me.” He paused, and they both looked back at her. Henk’s news changed how Wayne saw her. On stage she had been different from the girl he saw here. Magnetically convincing, and truly vivacious, she had projected the persona of her roles to riveting effect. And so versatile. She played a Lady Macbeth parody in one short scene, then did a musical number from *Hello Dolly* in the next. He remembered this girl as something special, a cut above the other players, a major talent, probably coasting through Penn on her way to Broadway or Hollywood. The thought made her even more...unapproachable. Not that it could matter worth a hill of beans, he realized, chuckling to himself.

“You seem quite taken with her,” Henk said.

Wayne smiled openly, not minding such scrutiny from Henk. They were like brothers. “You can’t very well blame me for that,” he said. “After all, she absolutely tops the scale for beauty.”

“Tops the scale? You’re joking.”

“I certainly am not. I’d never joke when it comes to a girl this stunning.”

“Then I think it’s official,” Henk said, glancing again in her direction. “You’ve definitely lost your head over this one.”

Wayne, taken aback, just stared at him, though he didn’t let his smile waver.

“We’ve traded notes on a lot of girls,” Henk continued, still beaming, “but this one does not push the scale all the way to beautiful.”

“Talk about hard to please,” Wayne said, his tone bantering. “What makes you say that?”

“Oh, she’s nice looking—if you like ’em serious. But her mouth is too tense and set in a way for her face to be beautiful. And she’s muscular for a girl, at

least to my taste. Gads, I think I better shut up here before I get myself any deeper.”

“Incredible!” Wayne exclaimed, giving him a mock punch. “Well, you just go ahead and cheat yourself, amigo.”

“Since you’re so taken with her,” Henk said, sliding off the stool, “I’ll go and see if I can fetch her for you.”

“No,” Wayne answered, still smiling, but grabbing him firmly by the shoulders.

“Sure?” Henk’s grin was a playful dare.

“It...doesn’t feel right. I think she’s waiting for someone.”

Henk’s motion attracted their other two companions, both Drexel classmates of Wayne’s and house-mates as well. Tom Delmoore leaned toward Wayne. “Hey, Cavanaugh,” he said, “Don’t you think you ought to give your eyes a rest?” And he looked toward the girl.

“What’s a little eyestrain when it comes to scenic wonders?” Wayne answered, but abashed his ogling had been obvious to Tom.

“Yeah,” Tom answered, “can’t argue with you there. But she’s out of your league, good buddy. This one has Ivy League airs you could cut with a knife.”

“Good thing I have you to remind me,” Wayne responded, not agreeing with Tom’s assessment. But he did feel the gravity of his emotions lighten, tilting him back to his normal balance point. After all, what had come over him?

Now Ivan leaned forward to add his two cents.

“Cavanaugh, get a freakin’ hold of yourself, will ya? That poor girl’s going to be sunburned beneath her clothes from that X-ray stare of yours.” His tone had just the wry inflection needed to trigger a floodgate of laughter from them all, reasserting the Friday night spirit of things. Wayne stayed immersed in the bantering, losing himself. Tom and Ivan were trading ethnic jokes: Italian versus Polish. Ivan was of Russian descent, but Tom considered anyone of Slavic origin to be Polish, so they went at it with glee.

Wayne eventually eased out of the conversation when two more Drexel undergrads joined them. He had hardly sipped his beer; he rarely did. But he felt mellow anyhow, especially with his situation. His summer co-op work assignment at the Allied plant had been lucrative and good work experience for an engineering major. So far, he liked his new living arrangements for the school year. Instead of commuting from his grandfather’s house in Darby, as he had as a freshman, he now had the financial means to stay at Omega House, one of the university-sanctioned residences. Although located off-campus, it was within

easy walking distance. And Tom was an okay roommate. Best of all, Wayne already felt inured to the grinding study routine necessary for all those As he needed to launch a good career.

Wayne noticed a man join the blond girl at the bar. A few guys and couples had stopped by her stool but then moved on, seemingly at her skilled deflection. Normally reluctant to judge other men's looks, Wayne thought this guy handsome enough to be outstanding by anyone's appraisal. His hair was fashionably Beatle length, dark brown, and coifed to photogenic perfection. He wore a black shirt and dark trousers whose severity was offset by a small ivory belt buckle and a blue-gray cardigan. She gave him a subdued greeting: a smile, but no kiss or caress. Then they moved to a back table.

"What are your plans?" Henk asked. Their companions had left for a party.

"I've got my bag with me. I'll take the Woodland Avenue trolley to Darby to see my grandfather for the weekend."

"I know you like to keep tabs on him. But that means we'll miss another mixer."

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. How about if we make up for it next weekend?"

"That works for me. I have an away game next Saturday, but it's only at Princeton."

"I'll call you Sunday when I get back. And let's do dinner one night this week."

They talked awhile, then Henk left, needing a full night's sleep for the varsity soccer game he had in the morning. Wayne glanced to the left, toward the girl and her companion. She sat quietly, listening while he spoke and motioned with forceful animation. It looked like a pretty hard sell. Oh well, time to get on his way. He stood and picked up his canvas bag.

Just then, a movement at the girl's table drew his attention. The guy grabbed her long hair at the neck, twisting her head back and slightly to the side. His other hand was palm up, fingers spread, pleading his case. Wayne turned from the bar and headed in their direction. Her response seemed understated. She remained still, her unblinking eyes radiating a commanding, fearless calm. As Wayne approached, the man released his grip, lowering and shaking his head apologetically. The girl smoothed her tresses with one raised hand, never taking her stoic gaze from him.

Wayne arrived at the edge of the table. Surprised, they both looked up at him.

"Is everything all right?" he asked her, his voice calmer than he felt.

Her green eyes bored into his, transfixing him with their crystalline depth. The moment dilated, slowed and came to a frozen stop. Strains of The Mamas and the Papas' "California Dreamin'" carried from the jukebox.

"I'm fine," she said, her voice barely audible. "But thank you," she added, with just a hint of a smile, her gaze lingering one more instant, one more extra moment. Then she looked away, reached out her hand, and took that of her companion, as though to calm him.

Gently done, but certainly dismissal enough, Wayne thought, as he moved off toward the exit.

Once out on Market Street, he looked east toward the subway station steps at Thirty-first Street. He knew he should get on with catching the trolley, but felt a nervous energy from the encounter, almost a tingling. So he decided to walk awhile. Turning west, he went down to Thirty-second, crossed, and headed southeast onto the block comprising the newest addition to the Drexel campus. He wandered along the brick walkway and enjoyed the sight. Stratton Hall, Matheson Hall, the Basic Science Annex: by day, ugly renditions of the International Style, when lit up at night, they became majestic, almost lovely.

He slowed and let thoughts of the encounter dabble in his mind. He would not soon forget the girl's incipient smile, or that extra moment as her eyes searched his. Was he entitled to the intimacy he felt from her gaze? The wondering caused her image to stay there, right in the front of his mind. Finally, the evening chill intruded. He withdrew a light jacket from his bag, donned it, and headed back toward Market Street and the subway station.

Philadelphia's Thirtieth Street Subway Station had two transit systems side by side: the subway train, called the El, and a trolley system. An overhead wire powered the trolley cars. The El had a third rail, off to the side, and it provided high voltage from lateral contact with a slider attached to the bottom of the train. From the trolley platform, he looked across two sets of tracks to the El platform. As he watched absently, the girl from Sullivan's came down the El station steps opposite him. She paused at the foot of the stairs, getting her bearings. Although adequate lighting bathed the platform, most riders took stock of others in the vicinity for safety's sake. It was a natural precaution, instinctive for most, and especially important this late at night. She saw him, signaled recognition by a parting of her lips that was not quite a smile, then she lowered her gaze, turned, and strolled slowly out of sight to the other side of the stairway.

Seeing her again pricked him with an off-kilter joy, uplifting and refreshing, partly because she recognized and acknowledged him, but also because she

seemed so buoyantly out of place down here, her bright beauty undefeated by the dank-smelling gloom of the subway. He smiled, turned away, and sauntered to the south side of the trolley platform. The minutes dragged, but no trolley car arrived. He began mentally composing a theme paper for his International Politics course, the only non-technical one he had that semester. Ideas came to him, prancing, and he thought of getting a notebook from his bag.

“Police! Help! Help me!” A woman’s screaming and it came from the El platform.

Thinking frantically of the girl, he ran to the north edge of the platform and jumped the foot or so that got him down onto the trolley tracks. A steel grate fence separated the two transit systems, but it had seen better days. A section was ajar, just ten feet to his left, and he swung it open enough to squeeze through.

Now things got difficult. The El platform was too high and far to jump to. The train tracks gleamed below him, the electrified rail closest, then the two steel tracks. He saw only one way to get there and didn’t slow down to analyze the risk. He threw his bag onto the opposite platform, then leaped forward, over the electrified rail, and down into the square trench that ran a foot and a half below and between the steel tracks. The platform loomed just above him, and the smell of ozone was stronger this close to the electrified rail—the one he must not fall back against. With his momentum still carrying forward from the jump, he kept moving, aware his footing and balance must be perfect. He reached up and grabbed the El platform edge, stepped up on the rail before him, then used his grip on the edge to lever himself up and onto the platform, landing on his right shoulder and side. Feeling no pain, he got to his feet and sprinted west down the platform toward the woman’s screams.

As he ran, he recalled what he had seen: the girl from Sullivan’s, a nondescript man, and three black youths: teens with their heads wrapped in dark bandannas, signifying...he knew not what. They were what fueled his urgency. Where was she? The commotion was still ahead of him.

He ran at top speed past the central vending area and spotted figures near the far steps. He could see her blond mane, somewhat disheveled now, and she stood with her arm across a shorter girl’s shoulder. The nondescript man ran up and joined them.

“He took my purse,” the other girl wailed. “I can’t believe I was so careless to let him get my purse that easily.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the blond girl said, her arm still across the smaller girl’s shoulder in comfort.

“All my ID. A credit card. And I just got my paycheck cashed today. How stupid can you get?”

Another woman came down the steps and joined the group. As Wayne approached and slowed, a balding, thirtyish-looking man passed him from behind, joined the scene, said he had heard the commotion from above, and that a companion had gone to the toll booths to get help. Then two of the black youths he had seen earlier ran up from the west.

“He high-tailed it onto the tracks,” said the shorter of the youths. “He’s got choice of Thirty-third Street trolley or Thirty-fourth Street El station, so it looks like we kiss that one good-bye. You know what I’m saying? The Fuzz’ll never collar that dude now.”

As though on cue, a police officer, complete with German Shepherd, came down the steps and assumed authority. The third black youth also joined the crowd. Wayne held back, not seeing what he could contribute by his late arrival. The blond girl had seen his running approach. Or had she? Her gaze had flicked briefly in his direction, then back to her charge. The tension eased with collective relief, and the officer started questioning the stricken girl, unpacking a notebook as he spoke.

Wayne thought of how the blond girl continued to be too distracted to notice him, and he felt bemused by the irony of his situation. He had arrived about 7.2 seconds too late to be of any use, even to the wrong damsel in distress. His breathing slowed. Still not seeing anything he could contribute, he turned and walked slowly in the direction he had come. He needed to retrieve his bag from where he had tossed it onto the platform. When he got there, he picked up the bag and looked out over the gleaming tracks toward the trolley station. No way, he thought, realizing with a shiver the danger he had risked. The price of another transit token wasn’t nearly worth the peril. And then, as though to underscore the irony, his trolley arrived and then quickly departed. Oh well, might as well climb the stairs to the mid-level pay booths so he could get back down to the trolley station. He took his sweet time since he probably had at least a twenty-minute wait. He approached the corner of the stairway, trying to remember whether the trolleys discontinued service during the wee hours. Suddenly the blond girl stood in front of him, her eyes wide, her expression anxious.

“It just dawned on me,” she said. “How did you get over here?”

“I...took a shortcut,” he said, mesmerized by the intensity of her gaze.

She looked down at the tracks, then over to the trolley station where she had seen him before.

“How did you get across those tracks without being electrocuted?”

“I...” and he threw caution to the wind, grimacing a Jimmy Cagney pantomime and forming his hands into a mock tommy-gun. “I could tell ya, but then I’d have ta kill ya. And we can’t let that happen to a dame like you.”

She gave a clipped laugh, almost like a disbelieving hiccup, obviously taken aback. She brought the back of her left hand to her open mouth, staring intently into his eyes. Then she laughed again, this time full-throated and relaxed, regaining her composure.

“Well, that sure wins you the comedy award for the evening,” she said breezily. “And hands down. But honestly, now. You’re just being shy about coming across those electrified tracks.”

She laughed again and the way she tossed her head stung him like jagged slate, slicing him with a feeling of foolishness. Worse than that. A kind of shame swept over him that he would try so stupid a joke with a girl like this. He was sure her laugh was pure artifice, a courtesy to disguise how awful she thought his humor. He wilted, lapsing way beyond the end of himself, first merely speechless, then blushing deeply, as he stared into her eyes, feeling helpless and exposed, like a beached whale.

“Oh, look what you’ve done,” she said, her fingertips going to his right shoulder. He looked down to a rent in the jacket seam that ridged its shoulder. It must have opened up when he landed on the platform. He looked back at her, but said nothing.

“Are you hurt?”

“No.” It came out grainy and breathless, as his insides continued to droop.

“That’s twice tonight you’ve tried to rescue me. And we haven’t even been introduced. My name is Nancy,” she said, her tone melodic. “Nancy Hammond.”

“Wayne Cavanaugh. I’m a sophomore, at Drexel.”

“Junior, at Penn.”

There was a long pause as she stared at him expectantly. Finally it hit him that she was giving him an opening. It boosted him out of his lethargy.

“Would you like a cup of coffee or something?”

“Well, I could do with a bite to eat. I haven’t had a thing since lunch.”

“Well, there’s Cavanaugh’s”

“The railroad restaurant? I’ve never been there. Are they open this late?”

“Oh yeah. I don’t know for sure that they ever close. And they’re just above us, on Market.”

“Any relation?”

“Not that I know of.” And they started up the stairs.

Once seated at the restaurant, it dawned on him that he needed to call his grandfather. No way would he make it to Darby tonight. He excused himself to make the call.



SHE TOOK ADVANTAGE of his absence to collect her scattered equilibrium. Or try to. Roiled by the night’s events, her emotions spun like a vortex that wouldn’t stop. She thought back to Sullivan’s. Guys were so comical the way they thought their intentions invisible. Naturally she had noticed his interest, felt stimulation from his good looks, but had been relieved by his discretion, given her mission for being there. His foursome had struck her as odd. Three of them were obviously Drexel undergrads. They had that look: the less refined manners, the cheaper clothes. But the one sitting beside Wayne was a Penn student she vaguely remembered being introduced to somewhere along the line. That was unusual because the two student bodies didn’t mix that much.

She thought about him, testing her feelings, surprised at the excitement thrumming within. Her emotions galloped quicker than the brakes put on by her reasoning. Maybe she was just succumbing to the drama of the night’s events: the encounter at Sullivan’s, so brief yet captivating, that small, arresting flutter she had felt when his blue eyes met hers. She recalled the athletic grace of his running approach on the subway platform, the pulse of gladness she felt, followed by the scalding comprehension of how he must have gotten there so quickly—a bolt of bravery that spoke louder than words, rushing her, steaming up to flush her face. When she looked up, the dismay at finding him gone sent her after him without a thought, only determination. Now, awaiting his return, she savored the anticipation of uncovering who he was inside, of plumbing his emotional depth. The mere fact of wanting this amounted to an awakening, and she felt those armored layers of herself peeling away to a dawning expectancy.



SHE WAS THE middle daughter of a well-to-do Southern California family. Her grandfather had been a successful Hollywood producer, and she could still recall

that one time, as a small child, when they visited him at the studio. Her parents married while attending Stanford. But then her father, Edmund Hammond, went from college to enlist in the war effort. But he barely got through training, including OCS (officer's school), before the Japanese surrender. The Air Force posted him to Okinawa anyway, where he was a junior officer in a maintenance company for B-29s. On early discharge, he settled into a studio staff job secured by his father. But he hated the work. What to do? He and his wife, Karen, already had two children and he felt hemmed in. He had made many friends among the officers while in the service, but the call he received unexpectedly was from one of his sergeants, Herb Willby, who stirred only faint recollection from his old command. What started as a meeting out of curiosity turned into a business proposition of some intrigue. Herb had a proposal for manufacturing key components for those new gizmos called televisions that were finally making a dent in the consumer market, chiefly on the East Coast.

“Even though our plant would start out small,” Herb explained, “we would be the low-cost producer.”

Herb had the technical know-how, had developed detailed plans and specs, but he needed someone to handle the business aspects: legal, taxes, insurance, and so forth. He also needed the financial stake Edmund could bring to the table by borrowing from relatives. Despite the venture's high risks, Edmund and Karen decided to take the plunge. The next few years were hard, especially with the arrival of their third daughter, but the venture eventually turned successful, and financial good fortune followed. Edmund planned to continue growing the business, but Herb's premature death nine years into their partnership gave him the shock of his life. Unwilling to face the firm's future without its technically creative exponent, he sold the business and joined one of his former customers, an electronics firm, as a corporate general manager, reporting to a vice president. Within eight years, he was promoted to vice president.

Edmund had grown up in Beverly Hills, but Karen preferred Brentwood. So they bought a modest home there early on, then struggled with the payments during the lean years. Part of the reason was their decision not to scrimp on their daughters' upbringing and training. Public schooling seemed the only option, but they compensated by providing the girls a generous exposure to the performing arts. This included a wide inventory: music, dance, gymnastics, drama, even lessons in poise and manners. Karen could see to their art training herself, with help from her sister, Edith. The abundant lessons were pared down as the girls showed where their talents and interests lay. After their business success, they

could afford a larger home in Brentwood. But they decided to hold the course regarding schooling for the girls: public education, seasoned with liberal exposure to the arts.

Although the girls developed as intended—refined in temperament and endowed with social graces—Nancy became the most thoughtful of the three. She had a sensitive spirit of rare depth, one that often tilted inward and waxed reflective. Her parents were not surprised, then, that she became the most scholastic of the three, rarely getting less than perfect grades. But they never thought to test the true strength of her intellect, or the extent of her analytical aptitude. For her part, Nancy sought to compensate for her thoughtful tendencies by being the most athletic of the sisters, exuberant in gymnastics, and reveling in the dance.

Chapter Two

THE HOURS THEY spent at Cavanaugh's Railroad Restaurant became a frolic of discovery and sharing. It was that easy time in a budding relationship, with each of them eager for every scrap of information about the other. The mood turned buoyant and they relished the discussion, not wanting their time of mutual discovery to end.

After an hour, she felt relief at not finding any glaring incompatibilities. She did discover he was rightward of her mainstream liberal views. This was unusual enough on a campus like Penn that she was at first incredulous, then fascinated, and couldn't resist an impulse to challenge him politically right on the spot. She would look back on herself as a lamb prancing to her own dialectical slaughter. Even considering how lightly she held to her political beliefs, she marveled how easily he demolished her positions. He seemed practiced at such discussions, whereas her opinions had long been cocooned among associates who took the irrefutability of their views for granted. His intellectual sharpness fascinated her, became part of her attraction to him.

"How did you come by these views?" she asked, smiling broadly,

"I guess partly from my grandparents. And from studying history. I like the Revolutionary War period, and most people don't appreciate how conservative our founding fathers were."

"Do you belong to a campus political club?"

"Why would you ask that?"

"Because you're good at political debate, damn it." And she laughed, dissipating any tension between them.

"Thanks. But no, no clubs that I belong to. My big advantage tonight is that I have this same discussion every few months—with my father. His views are a dead-ringer to yours."

She fished deeper for common political ground, and found it in their mutual opposition to communism. But while hers was intellectual and placid, his was implacable, a cold anger that stemmed from studying the Stalinist purges. At least they both opposed the war. But again the reasons were different. To her, Vietnam was the wrong place to be fighting and dying over a movement that was

really nationalism dressed up as communism. His opposition stemmed from contempt for an effort so stupidly half-hearted it was tearing the country asunder.

She pressed on, looking for other interests in common. They discovered that neither smoked, neither touched alcohol but rarely, and both lived a commitment to physical fitness. He didn't share her interest in poetry, but they did share a list of authors that included Eric Hoffer, George Orwell, and Erich Fromm. Her love of rock music surprised him and the list of groups they both liked included Peter and Gordon (her favorite), The Mamas and the Papas (his), The Beach Boys, The Jefferson Airplane, and some of the Motown groups.

"I have a confession to make," he said, when she started to describe her fine arts major and its curriculum.

"Oh, good, I like confessions."

"I've seen you act," he said, his manner bashful. "It was last year, *The Spring Medley Production*, I think it was called."

"And how'd I do?" she asked, beaming a high wattage smile to mask dismay that acting was a factor in how he saw her.

"You were impressive. I can still remember all three of your performances."

"People tell me I become a different person when I take the stage. Do you think it's true?"

"Yes," he said, lulling her to what would come next. "But you're even more beautiful off the stage."

He had done it again, she thought: sloshing her with emotions she wasn't ready for and couldn't get a handle on. Blushing, she had to re-collect her scattered composure and get the conversation moving again. Eventually she described her upbringing in the performing arts, including her lifelong interest in dancing, and how she loved fine art, especially paintings. She learned he was an engineering major who felt dehumanized by his dense technical studies, and who compensated, when he had time, by reading history and popular fiction. Someday, he told her, he would love to study fine art.

"Actually, I guess I've studied art in small doses," he said. They had eaten and were feeling expansive, their moods high and focused on each other.

"How so?"

"Some of my mother's family are serious coin collectors, especially my grandfather. I took up the hobby to share it with him, but also because many of the older U.S. coins are so beautiful."

"Oh? Which ones do you like?"

“Many of the nineteenth-century coins are very good. Teddy Roosevelt had some designs commissioned that are especially beautiful. You might find them interesting from an artistic standpoint.”

“Ah, the aesthetics of numismatics,” she said.

“I know it sounds hokey, but—”

“I didn’t mean to suggest that,” she interrupted, surprised how thin-skinned he was to her comments. “I think it’s great you find beauty in a hobby you can share with your family. Any other artistic nuggets you’ve come across?”

“Well...there’s the city. It can be beautiful at night. It’s not by intent, but the city lights make up an artwork that doesn’t cost a dime to enjoy.”

“You mean, if we bother to look up and notice?”

“Uh huh. Of course, I can’t see Philly competing with the hills you have in L.A. You must miss it, terribly.”

“When I first came here, yes, I did.”

“What did you miss most about your hometown?”

“Mulholland Drive, the beautiful vistas. And they’re beautiful day or night. My family has some access to a corporate yacht, and there are night views of L.A. from the ocean that are just fabulous.”

“I hear the beaches are a big plus. How about surfing?”

“I’ve never been that high on surfing; it’s fairly dangerous. But the beaches are special, because they’re such a big part of the West Coast culture. They create this mood of leisure, and freedom, and fun. Pacific Park was a favorite of mine. My family struggled some financially when I was a little girl, and we used to go there because it was affordable. I loved it. Then there are things that catch you off guard after you’ve been gone.”

“Like what?”

“Well, I never thought I’d like art deco until I missed driving the Miracle Mile.”

“The Miracle Mile?”

“It’s a section of Wilshire Boulevard. The architecture is mostly art deco, and this strip of road is quintessential L.A., the true heart.”

“I won’t even ask how you like our weather.”

“Now you’ve hit a nerve,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Your winters took some getting used to compared with Southern California.”

“Do I detect a UCLA in your future?”

“No, not any time soon. I’m giving you the wrong impression. The climate here is something I’ve come to like, because of its changing mood. Spring and

fall here, the foliage, are so colorful. And spring is refreshing after the long winter. Even the winter is interesting because of the snow you get that we never see in Southern California.”

“You genuinely like our snow?”

“I do. It’s so pretty when it’s fresh, and I feel like a little girl when I watch it fall.”

“Believe it or not, I like it too. It breaks up the routine in a special way.”

“And the Delaware Valley is special to me because I have family here: my favorite aunt and her husband, and their children, my cousins. And I like Philly as a city. It has unique appeal.”

“What do you like about it?”

“Well, there are the unique foods: scrapple and Tastykakes and butter cakes and cheese steaks, but especially those soft pretzels with mustard. Who would believe that combination? They’re completely off my diet, but sometimes I can’t resist them in the morning when they arrive oven fresh to the handcarts. Oh, that aroma. And then there’s the park. I don’t think any city in the world can match Fairmount Park.”

“Yes, the park is special: all those miles of trees on both sides of the Schuylkill River.”

“You really do love the city, don’t you?”

“Absolutely guilty as charged,” he replied, laughing. “I was born here, and I guess it’s in my blood. After we moved to the suburbs, I realized the city had a certain magic for me. That’s why I came back for college.”

“Describe the magic for me.”

“Well...” and he thought a moment. “It’s being down at Rittenhouse Square, late on a Friday afternoon. And the whole business set is knocking off from work. So there they are: all these well-dressed people that you don’t know, and they’re hustling and bustling along. And there’s a mood to it. You can feel it in how they walk, in how glad they are to be going home for the weekend after the long work week. It’s a lonely thing to watch but it’s also a glad thing at the same time.”

“Go on,” she said.

“Then the scene changes. Twilight comes on, then darkness. The grime and the grunge get put away for the night. And the high-rise lights turn the city into a thing of beauty. Like a beautiful lady all dressed up for something special. She stands out there and you can see her in the distance, her lights shimmering. But

you can't reach out and touch her. She's always remote somehow. Remote and beautiful."

Glimpsing this sensitive side to him touched her heart, and she almost hesitated in her purpose. She would rather just enjoy this interlude, let her emotional current for him run its natural course. But given her emotional past, she blanched at the risk. And his moving discourse gave her the opening she sought.

"Just who exactly is the fine arts major here?" she asked. "I can't believe such eloquence from an engineering major."

"Oh, really?" he said, his tone rising. "You have something against engineering majors? We're human too, you know."

"Of course," she responded to his teasing, smiling at the perfect way he was rising to the bait. "Don't be upset with me. I didn't mean it that way. It's just that few engineering majors would grasp the kind of aesthetics you've just expressed. Don't you agree? Think of your classmates."

"Well..." and he shrugged, grudgingly. "engineering majors do, on average, suffer a burnout factor from all the math we're force-fed."

"Yes. And so it builds up over time to become...like a handicap. It can hold people back in emotional ways, affect their emotional capacity. Don't you think?"

"Yes," he said, "I hadn't thought of it that way, but I agree. It does make perfect sense. People's emotions, their capacity to feel, is probably being affected by various types of stress in their lives. I think a drastic example would be soldiers who become inured to death and mayhem. And they're emotionally damaged in the process."

"Similar, yes," she said. "The war example would be trauma producing the effect, whereas in the engineering example, deprivation is more the culprit, I think."

"But I'm not sure I understand how you see this playing out. How do you see these deprived or traumatized people affected by what we're discussing?"

"I think it's a penalty factor where emotional capacity is lessened or diminished."

"What sort of emotions would be affected?"

"The higher, more aesthetic emotions. And the outcome would be to make those emotions harder to find."

"What are you considering a higher emotion?"

"Love. Isn't love the highest form emotion can ever take?"

“Yes. Absolutely. Except...”

“What? Have I overlooked something?”

“Well, I was just thinking. There are all kinds of love. And I’m not sure maternal love, for instance, would be much affected by this.”

“Yes, you’re bringing up a really good point. Maternal love is probably the most rugged form around, and so it’s universally easy to find.”

“Then what type of love would be affected, you know, where diminished capacity might come into play?”

“Romantic love, between a man and a woman. Do you agree?”

“Yes.” And she could see him react to the intimate texture suddenly swaddling their discussion. “Yes, for whatever reason, romantic love does vary dramatically in strength among people.”

“Well, if we agree to that,” she said, “then I think the case is there that some people can experience love at a higher level than others.”

“Yes, I guess that follows. You’ve laid out a good case. But this kind of love has a certain...quality. It’s a kind of volatility that I don’t see in maternal love. People fall in and out of romantic love in dramatic ways. They even go from love to hate.”

“Yes, I think so too,” she said. “The volatility you describe is an important variable. And I think it does complicate the issue. But it doesn’t keep us from asking a very interesting question.”

“Which is?” he asked, looking rapt.

“Well, if some people can love at a higher level than others, then how strong a union could that special pair experience, and what would they have to do to make it last and stay strong?”

He reacted with some discomfiture, and it broke her train of thought. “Are you all right?”

“Yes,” he said, righting his composure. “It’s just that this is something that I...have thought about, as well. In the past.”

“And what did you come up with in your thinking?”

“Not much,” he said, his smile downcast. “I could never get it to come together, or do much with it. Not the way you have.”

“But the idea obviously interests you,” she said, near the edge of elation.

“Yes, very much.”

“Why?”

“Because of the possibilities the concept opens up. What could be more beautiful than the higher union you’ve proposed as a real possibility?”

“You think so? Tell me how you see it, your vision of it.”

“I don’t see it all that well. It just fumbles around in my head. To me, the intensity of the emotion isn’t so much the issue. Most people can experience love strong enough to sweep them off their feet. The real issue is how to make it last. There are so many down-to-earth challenges as a couple travels through time.”

“What kind of challenges?” she asked.

“Well, if you just look at most married couples, then day-to-day living would have to count as a big stress factor. And growing old together, that would be a big ticket item as well. Then there are special cases like my older cousin. She’s subject to these sudden, explosive bouts of upchucking carsickness. It’s dramatic beyond description and it’s something that can either strengthen a marriage, if you work at it, or weaken it, if you don’t give it the effort. Sorry, I’m not saying this right.”

“No, believe me, I understand your meaning perfectly. Which was it for your cousin?”

“It was a downer, big time. The last time it happened, I was riding with them in a funeral train, of all things, and her husband, he got so upset with her—thought she should have gotten the window down in time—well, she cried, in front of us, couldn’t hide it.”

“What were you thinking, at the time?”

“That it hurt the marriage as much as it hurt her. She was embarrassed beyond belief. And if her husband had just touched her with one kind word...”

“What?”

“Then maybe they wouldn’t have separated a few months later, like they did.”

Her heart swelled as he spoke, and she wanted to pursue this to the conclusion she was excited about achieving. But they were interrupted by the night manager, now come to escort them from the long closed restaurant.

Even though it was past 1 a.m. when they reached the street, they were both wide awake, fatigue-free, and taut with incipient feelings.

“The subway trains have stopped running. So I’ll walk you home.”

“I hate to drag you so far. I’m way over near thirty-ninth and Hansom.”

“I don’t mind.”

As they walked, she wanted to resume their discussion. But the mood had changed. The outdoor ambience didn’t seem conducive, and the urban night was chilly, inducing a brisk walking pace. So they gravitated to lighter topics. Soon

the conversation again bounded along with gusto, sometimes echoing off the nearby brick walls as they laughed.

Upon reaching her apartment, she parted from him, went to her door, and inserted the key. There was a sound of crowd noise farther up the street, something she did not give thought to. But he, perhaps sensitized from the subway incident, stopped on the asphalt, assessing activity out of her line of sight. She glanced back and regretted separating from him; she wasn't sure why. Next she felt a stab from wondering about the true context of what was happening. Did she understand his choice to be apart from her? Was he concerned for her safety? Was he sending a negative message by not coming to her side? The possibility flustered her, and she looked away, upset by her loss of control.

Meanwhile the noise had stopped. He brought his attention back to her and seemed to misinterpret her perplexed, downward glance, her jumbled mental lapse, her hand on the knob, the door already slightly open, as though anxious to get inside. So he called a cheerful goodnight, and turned to go. Feeling panicky dismay, she couldn't keep the tightness out of her voice.

"Will I see you again?"

He turned back.

"I'd like that. Very much."

"What is good for you?" she asked, smiling, feeling relieved.

"Next weekend? Say, Saturday night?"

"Yes. That would be fine. And the venue?" She regretted the charm school word, but couldn't take it back.

"Dinner downtown? Then entertainment, say a movie or play?"

"Yes. Is six all right?"

They also exchanged phone numbers. Then he again turned, walking with long, quick strides beneath the street lamp, then out of its light before turning east on Hansom. She closed the door and leaned back against it, her heart teeming with darting emotions. "I cannot believe this is happening to me so fast," she said out loud, her spirit alive and eagerly anticipating, at last, after four long years.



AS SHE APPROACHED adolescence, Nancy saw herself sandwiched between the affections her parents had for the siblings on either side of her. Her mother

favoring Christine, Nancy's older sister by two years. She could see why. Christine resembled her mother in looks and disposition. She had her mother's commanding presence and strength of will. She also had a sense of when to apply that crucial *oomph* of competitive fire so as to fling herself into the winner's circle. By comparison, Nancy seemed awkward and underachieving. The physical contrasts between the girls distressed Nancy as well because Christine sometimes taunted her over this issue. Nancy knew she was attractive; Aunt Edith told her so. But Christine eclipsed her with her mother's platinum blond beauty, one both classical and radiant. Nancy's medium build seemed thick beside Christine's willowy slenderness. Nancy practiced relentlessly, but she struggled to convert her superior athletic strength into a graceful dance style. With movements nearly as strong as Nancy's, Christine's motions had a delicate, ethereal grace. She would always be considered the better, more promising dancer. Ballet and gymnastics call for hard athletic training. Nancy's gave her an attractive figure, but muscles larger and more sinewy than she preferred. She wanted to be viewed as lithe, but feared coming across as strapping. She grew shy about her hands because they toughened and enlarged slightly in response to long hours on the uneven bars. Christine worked hard too, but her figure remained lissome, her muscles delicate and undefined.

Nancy's feelings for Christine grew complex. In many ways she admired and looked up to her big sister. Except in scholastics and drama, for which the older girl showed little interest, Christine shined superior either by dint of more talent or because of her two year head start. Nancy never hesitated to join her mother in praising Christine, but she rarely reciprocated, viewing Nancy as ungainly and inferior. This disdain, chiefly expressed via neglect and body language, kept them from ever drawing close. Nancy rarely received much caring or consideration from her, and she never felt enough trust to confide in her older sibling.

By contrast, Nancy fawned over Barbara, her younger sister by two and one-half years. Barbara had her father's dirty blond looks, and she had a feminized version of his chunky build. Easy going and personable, she showed nary a trace of the competitive zeal that distinguished both parents. She took to her role as baby of the family, and her father had doted over her, favoring her, right from the cradle. Nancy was glad. Because of Barbara, he took more time from his heavy work schedule and spread it out to all his children.

Nancy's feelings about her parents' skewed affections never became resentful, but she did feel diminished by them. It helped explain the inward slope

of her thoughts, her interest in art appreciation, poetry, and classical music as a supplement to the rock music she loved and shared with friends. When she reached junior high (seventh grade) she developed a renewed interest in acting and asked her mother to restart the drama lessons they had stopped two years earlier.

Chapter Three

THE AUGUST SUN shone brightly, and Wayne had overslept. He came downstairs into the kitchen, groggy from too much sleep. His siblings were already out and about, but his mother greeted him and put out his breakfast cereal. As he ate, he looked up at the 1964 calendar mounted above the kitchen's snack bar. Just a few more weeks until school started, and he could already smell the crushed grass at the first Friday night game. Neshaminy High football was the best spectator sport in the world, and this year's team should be as good as last year's undefeated squad. He never regretted the ninth-grade switch from Catholic to public school. As he carried his empty cereal bowl to the sink, he glanced out the kitchen window to the house across the street.

"Hey, Ma," he called, "someone's finally moving into the Kierchek house."

"That moving van has been there all morning," she said. "I'll go over in a little while and see if they need anything. Welcome them to the neighborhood."

They stood together, watching the parade of boxes and furniture move out of the truck and up the front walk. "I saw a boy about your age," she added. "You should get dressed and go over and introduce yourself." A long pause. "Go ahead."

Sure enough, he did spot a kid about his age as he approached the house. He was a little shorter than Wayne, probably five foot nine or ten, and he was built broad and square, with a barrel chest, muscular limbs, and a waistline that was thick but flat. Surprise—his somewhat jowled, underslung facial expression lifted and widened into a huge, incandescent smile. His blue gray eyes twinkled.

"Henk Van Pijpen," he said, in answer to Wayne's introduction. His handshake was strong.

"Van Pijpen. Is that German?"

"Nah, Dutch. My family emigrated to the U.S. three years ago. We lived in Montclair, New Jersey, and now my father's job has moved us here."

"I would never guess from your accent that you're Dutch."

"My English teacher in Holland was an Englishman."

"Are you going to Neshaminy?"

"Ja, I'll be a junior."

“We’ll be classmates, then. Do you play any sports?”

“My sport is fut—er, soccer. I’m hoping to try out for Neshaminy’s squad.”

“Soccer, huh? Then I’ll connect you with Ernie Leiden. He’s the one varsity player I know who lives in this area.”

“Thank you. Do you play soccer?”

“Not very well. I might be able to give you some kind of practice. But if you have any interest in American football, I can introduce you to a bunch of Catholic school friends of mine who play a lot of sandlot ball.”

They agreed that, in a few days, after Henk finished helping with the move, he would take Wayne up on the offer. They went inside and Henk made introductions to his parents, then to his two younger sisters, Ingrid and Marianne. Ingrid, the older, was a few inches over five feet, as solidly built as her brother, and she was about twenty pounds overweight. Her hair was light brown like her brother’s, but straight rather than wavy like his, and she had it page cut, short and simple. She had a bright, dimply smile that combined with her hair, her build, and her surprisingly light movements to give her a cute, cherubic quality.

“Do you have any sisters?” she asked.

“Loads of them. How old are you?”

“Thirteen. I’ll be in eighth grade.”

“Same age as my sister, Eileen. I’ll bring her over to meet you later today.”

“Oh, that would be nice, meeting somebody before school starts.”

“Ingrid, you don’t have an accent like the rest of your family. In fact, I’d think from your voice that you were from the Midwest.”

She beamed at him, but said nothing.

“Ingrid is gifted in speech and languages,” Henk said. “She can soak up any language just by listening.” He put an arm across her shoulder. “Now if you could just get your math lessons in fine fiddle.”

“Oh, Henk, don’t bring that up now,” she stammered, reddening and pulling away from him. “Besides, you never give me any help with it.”

“That’s because math is my weakest subject too. I work like a miner just to get bleedin’ Bs.”

“But that’s better than my Cs.”

“Well, I’m sort of the schoolmaster for my own family,” Wayne piped up. “I’ve tutored my brothers and sisters for ages. Most of them in math. Maybe I can help out if you get stuck during the year.”

“Oh, thanks,” she said, her smile widening. “I’ll take you up on that.”



WAYNE'S MOTHER CAME from Pennsylvania Dutch (German) stock, and she was a lively girl who resisted a strict upbringing that eschewed drinking, dancing, and attending the cinema on Sunday. Then too, she had a hard time with her parents' view that FDR was the worst danger to the Republic since the Civil War. The turning point came when she was nineteen, at an office party, and she was introduced to Ian Cavanaugh, a Navy sailor recently discharged after the war's end. It was love at first sight, and she was so smitten, she agreed to accept his Roman Catholic faith as part of their betrothal. But her parents were having none of it, and the young couple chose elopement as the only solution.

He had spent the war in surface ships on North Atlantic duty, acquiring sufficient mechanical and machinist skills to get a decent job after the war. Four years into their marriage, with the family reconciled and Wayne a yearling, Ian got a better job at the Budd auto parts complex in Philadelphia. This enabled them to acquire a modest row house in the city's Tioga section, close enough for walking to work. A few years later, after buying a car, he got a better job in GE's turbine division. From there, it took him only six years to win promotion as a shop floor foreman, and eventually he was promoted to a paraprofessional staff position.

They never understood why it took her so long to get pregnant—more than two years. The grateful relief they felt at Wayne's arrival triggered a pressing desire for more. She had glowed during her pregnancy and both discovered they loved parenting. It was a perfect formula for having a large family. Wayne initially took it all in stride, but by the time he reached adolescence, he felt left behind by the outcome of so large a family. Eileen arrived when he was three, followed by Margaret two years later. Three years after that came his brother Ian Patrick, then Colin after two more years. Colleen was born three years after that, with Kathleen, the youngest, arriving after another two-year interval. Each of his siblings bonded with the one of their gender who was separated from them by only two years. The two oldest sisters were especially close. Wayne always felt stranded from their special orbit. Probably because his brothers were so much younger than he—born when he was eight, then ten—he didn't feel close to them, though he did feel protective of all his siblings. Plus, as the oldest, he had many responsibilities for their care. As the years progressed, he developed a knack for tutoring and helping them with their schoolwork.

When he was twelve and in sixth grade, they moved to Levittown, Pennsylvania. The larger house gave them much needed living space, but he missed the city and its hubbub, its social energy ever surging and pulsing to spin out a festival of human interactions. And it was always easy to access—as easy as stepping onto the street. He especially missed the tough, blue-collar crowd of boys with whom he had grown and rollicked through six years of Catholic grade school. By comparison, the suburbs lacked vitality; the middle-class kids at his new parochial school seemed so sedate, and he ended up with many acquaintances but few close friends.

The year following the move saw him drawn to reading he never had time for as a city kid. He became more thoughtful, more inquisitive. With puberty now in full swing and hormones raging through his veins, he felt a profound attraction to the opposite sex. Natural enough, but then he realized that his adolescence had kicked into a higher gear, an overdrive he sensed wasn't ordinary. It crystallized in addition to and on top of his natural sexual awakening, gathering into a romantic ambition so unlike anything experienced by his peers that he felt spooked, as though struck by a secret affliction that must never be revealed. How to describe it? He felt it as this longing for a romantic union which, even at his age, seemed more perfect, more idealized than anything attainable between people with real sweat glands. The disconnect made him a more avid reader, one ravenous for information, anything that would give understanding at any level.



“CAUGHT YOU!”

Startled, he looked up from his reading as he lay on his bed in the boys' upstairs bedroom. It was his sister, Eileen, now nearly eleven as she started fifth grade. It was pointless to try hiding the book, so he remained still, saying nothing.

“I knew it must be you reading that copy of *Pride and Prejudice* that was hidden in the bookcase,” she said, nodding to the shelves he shared with his brothers.

“It's considered a classic,” he responded lamely.

“I'm going to tell Daddy,” she said, and he could feel his composure flying apart as he swung his feet off the bed and sat up.

“Of course I won’t,” she corrected quickly, her eyes shining, her smile tentative. “Is that why you’re reading it in secret, because you don’t want Daddy to see you reading a love story?”

“That’s part of it. I just don’t know how he’d take it. Plus I don’t know any boys my age who are reading Jane Austen love stories.”

“Have you read any others?”

“Yeah—*Persuasion*, and I’ve read *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte.”

“Why?” she asked. When he didn’t answer, she came and sat on the bed beside him, taking his hand. “You can tell me. Your secret is safe. I just want to understand. And maybe I can help.”

He regarded her warily. They were not close as siblings, mainly because their interests rarely intersected. But their natural bickering never got bitter, and he knew she took him for granted as the older brother who would care for her, do for her and, when necessary, protect her. Now she was asking him to share a private part of himself. Was she ready for this?

“I’m trying to learn about love,” he told her. “I’m studying it wherever I can find it: in movies, TV, and especially books like these.”

“Same question as before. Why?”

“Because I want to be good at it when my turn comes around. Someday I want to love a girl in the most perfect way possible and have her love me the same way.”

“No wonder you’ve been moody all summer. By the way, how do you like eighth grade?”

He laughed, squeezed her hand, but didn’t answer except to shrug.

“So what have you learned about love?”

“That it’s hard to find. And it’s even harder to keep going.”

“What else?”

“The news is not that good. Most adults make a mess of love whenever they take a shot at it.”

“Well, aren’t you a fountain of glad tidings,” she commented peevishly, but then couldn’t suppress a smile. “Why the gloomy outlook? You should be glad about getting a jump on something this cool for your future. It’s cute. I’m proud of you.”

“But it’s so hard, what I’m after. How do I find the girl who wants to love me as totally as I want to love her?”

“But you’re sure to find her, if you keep looking. Someday.”

“But think about it. All those older kids and adults, and it’s ultra-rare for any of them to get this right, to get it right the way it ought to be.”

“Wayne, you need to cheer up. You’ve been moody and out of sorts all summer.”

“I know. I need to break out of it.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I think I need something more direct.”

“Like what?”

“Do you remember Tim Saxon?”

“Sure. We met him last winter that one time you took Margaret and me sledding with you. But he attends public school, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. I ran into him when the skating rink reopened after the summer. He asked if I’d like to tag along with him to his junior high dance. It’s coming up this Saturday.”

“And you’re going, right? Say yes.”

“Uh huh. I figured I’d be brave and take the big plunge at getting to know real girls at real dances. That’s better than mooning over some imaginary girl alone in my room.”

“But you sound jittery.”

“Some, yes. I’ve never even been to the school, and Tim is the only one I’ll know.”

But he needn’t have worried. The introductions went well, and he soon found himself with new acquaintances, improved social skills, and a middling ease with the girls. He even had fun. It hadn’t occurred to him that his maturing features and sensitive spirit would make him attractive to the junior high misses.



ANOTHER INTEREST WAS athletics. His childhood had not included sports. His father was a dedicated weightlifter, but for fitness more than strength. Wayne worked out with his dad often, acquiring the same weightlifting habits, but he liked the idea of pumping iron for larger muscles. Except that his didn’t grow much, even as his strength and running speed improved. Eventually he drew close to a group of parochial school classmates who lived in his area and clustered for the daily bike commute. At their urging, he joined them for sandlot games of baseball, basketball, and football, each played in its season.

Of the sports he played, he developed a special passion for football. The games were makeshift, three to ten on each side, played on grassy schoolyards. They could be either touch-tackle or genuine tackle. These were players too amateurish to hurt themselves playing tackle. Plus one or more sweatshirts were worn for cushioning. The games were typically not organized beyond telephone networking to arrange for teams and miscellaneous players to meet up. Wayne was always in demand because he had a sticky-fingered gift for catching the ball in traffic as a wide receiver. The speed he could achieve when the ball was arcing in his direction surprised everyone, and he had a knack for getting clear of defending backs.



ON HEARING WAYNE describe Henk's soccer game, Ernie Leiden decided to see for himself. They arranged a practice session in Henk's backyard. They set up a makeshift goal and started kicking the ball around. Wayne felt completely outclassed by the two superior players. But he kept at it, feeling inept and in the way. Meanwhile Ingrid and Marianne played softball a short distance away, around the corner of the house, on the side.

"You've just got to try out," Ernie said when they finally took a break. "You're a shoo-in for the varsity team. Close as you can get to a sure thing."

As they talked about the start of school, now just a week away, Ingrid sauntered up, carrying bat, glove, and a bucket of softballs.

"Henk, Would you help me with batting practice? Please?"

"Get Marianne to do it," he replied, clearly annoyed.

"She won't. She just went in the house."

"Ingrid, you can see I'm busy here. Maybe later."

"I'll do it," Wayne said. "Hey, I'm just in the way of things when it comes to soccer," he added, responding to their surprised looks.

"Oh, goodie," she exclaimed, dropping the bat as she gave a little hopping skip. "You'll be able to give me some fastball pitches."

"I don't know about that," he replied as they walked back to the side yard where she had been before. He set her up to hit toward the street so as not to interfere with the soccer festivities. After a warm-up, using a glove too small for him, he used an underhand motion to pitch a slow one at her ready batting stance.

“Wow!” he exclaimed, watching the ball sail out of the yard and across the street. “What a terrific hit. That’s a Babe Ruth of a swing you’ve got there, Ingrid.”

“I love to play American softball,” she crooned, giggling.

He pitched her another, this one much faster, and she walloped it even farther.

“Well, with power like that, we’d better get you out of this narrow yard before you break a window. C’mon, Babe, let’s go out to the street where there’s more room.”

They did so, continuing the practice for more than an hour.

“That was so much fun,” she said when they finally quit. “I needed a good workout.”

“Such a shame it’s off-season,” he commented. “I’m sure you’ll have a good chance of making your junior high team, if you try out next spring.”

The bantering continued as they walked back to the house. It surprised him how much he enjoyed her company. Her athletic talent, well beyond her years, gave them common ground, but it was more of an icebreaker. An hour with her had him laughing and in high spirits. She watched television to perfect her already amazing English language skills, and they shared some favorite TV shows, including the nightly news. As she chatted with him about current events, it seemed natural that she defer to him as her older brother’s friend. But she compensated with a bubbling sense of humor that gave her conversation an ebullient, girlish vitality. It would be hard not to like this unusual and gifted girl, he concluded.

“Sorry about you and Eileen not hitting it off,” he said. “You’ll make plenty of friends once school starts. But if you ever get stuck for a batting partner, just give me a holler.”

“You’ll remember your promise, won’t you, about helping me with my math?”

“Of course. It’s a snap. Anytime.”



WAYNE DID NOT expect his friendship with Henk to last beyond start of the school year. Henk possessed a unique but off center charm and wasn’t shy about using it. He had an indirect, laid-back manner, accented by quick-witted, articulate remarks, intoned with a soft voice. He crowned his delivery with a wide, bashful

smile, a beaming that lit up the scene. The outcome was a disarming affability that bloomed paradoxically from this hunk who was built like a lean bodybuilder.

Wayne was no slouch socially, but he had a Darwinian view of social relationships and how people of different talents sought their own level. He could see Henk's ability bloom from the first day of school, right from the start of introducing him in the halls and showing him around. Then, on day three, he got an even better look at Henk's skills. It was during that thirty minute social space before homeroom, with the halls thronged with kids, Henk at his side, coursing along, looking for the next introduction. Then he spotted Peggy Stiles up ahead. She was a pretty girl from his new English class who usually traveled in a pack. But today she was out on her own. Not knowing her that well, except to say hello, he was tempted to give her a pass. But the glance she gave Henk, suggesting interest, made him decide to risk the introduction.

"You have such an interesting accent," she said, after Wayne extended the introduction to include Henk's immediate background.

"Ya," Henk replied with a smile, "Wayne here was thinking of hooking me up to a chain and exhibiting me as a barbarian." And he pantomimed a collar around his neck—tilting his head, dropping his jaw, his hand up as though gripping the chain, his expression a wry grimace, his eyes comically unfocused. And even kids just passing by in the surrounding hall broke into belly-laughter.

Now Wayne could see Peggy warm up to Henk, her eyes sparkling as her fingers brushed her strawberry blond locks over her ear.

"What kind of dances were popular in Montclair?" she asked, her gaze melting into Henk's.

"The Top Forty is the same," Henk replied. "But sometimes the dance version varies by area."

"Really?" she said.

"Ya, the Locomotion they were dancing in Asbury Park this summer was different from how we did it in Montclair."

"Who would have guessed?"

"You do see what is necessary, don't you, to set this right and save the world from nuclear annihilation?"

"Whatever do you have in mind?" she asked invitingly, laughing at his corny humor.

"It will have to be me who takes you to the dance this Saturday night, and then we can compare the dance versions."

“Oh, that is so tempting,” she replied, “but I have my cousin, Courtney, staying with me this weekend.” And her face showed true disappointment.

“How old is she?” Henk asked.

“Oh, she’s my age,” she replied. “She’s only over from Bensalem, but she is a bit of a wallflower. So I was just planning for us to go eat and do a movie to take up Saturday night.”

“Well, I know that Wayne here will want to rescue everyone from that,” Henk said. “We must let him serve as a blind date for your cousin. That way we can make it a double to the dance. And we will have to make it a dinner date so we can get your cousin comfortable about meeting so many new people.”

This time her jaw dropped, taken aback by his audacity. But she responded quickly.

“Wayne, would you mind? I’m sure Courtney would be thrilled, once I explain.”

“I’d be happy to be of service,” Wayne replied, smiling his part, then glancing over at Henk. Talk about fearless. When it comes to social exploits, this guy doesn’t have a nervous bone in his body.



STILL, NOTWITHSTANDING THE bonding implied by the double date, Wayne viewed their friendship as doomed. Henk was a shooting star whose social aplomb would gain him easy access to the higher groups comprising the school’s social structure. It was easy Darwinian logic that Wayne would be left behind, a mere afterthought. He felt no resentment at the prospect. In fact, he sincerely wished his soon-to-be former friend all the best for the future.

But things didn’t turn out as expected. Henk did indeed move to the higher circles, but in about two-thirds of the cases, insisted on Wayne being part of the package. And Henk’s social aspirations were more adventurous than status-driven. He enjoyed the social journey, the sense of achievement, rather than the social altitude attained. Hence he maneuvered from group to group, never becoming a fixture in one setting for long. For his part, Wayne experienced some tension over being drafted upward in his friend’s wake. He often felt extended beyond his social skills. But in the end, he did stretch himself, learning new skills, feeling the strain was worthwhile. The bonus was that Henk had superb taste regarding the girls he lined up for their dates.

As time passed, and it became obvious Henk felt loyalty to their friendship, Wayne reciprocated. They often studied together in one or the other's dining room, and Henk would ply him with questions about English nuance, usage, and grammar. Although they were in different English classes, Wayne read some of Henk's book assignments to help him develop themes for compositions. And when Henk needed more conditioning to put spine into his second half soccer game, Wayne became his training partner, rising early on weekend mornings for two or three mile runs. He even tutored his sisters in math, sparing Henk the dreaded task. They became close friends.



ONE NIGHT, AT the start of the school year's final term, they were studying in the Van Pijpen dining room. The session saw Wayne absorbed in the one subject he detested: German-2. Suddenly Ingrid stood beside him, an impish grin on her face.

"Hey, Babe," he greeted her cheerily, "haven't seen you much tonight."

She giggled, always liking it when he used his nickname for her.

"Wayne, I wanted you to know I got another B in math this term, that's two in a row after that first C. Your lessons really helped me."

"Great news," he said. "But it was all your own doing. I mean, you're the easiest pupil I ever had. Is that your report card? Can I see it?"

"Sure," she said, handing it to him.

"Gosh, you got all A's in history and English. Super-duper. If only you knew Hamlet, then you could give me some help."

She giggled again.

"And all A's in French. Wonderful. I didn't realize you could take French in eighth grade."

"I take it with the ninth graders because I'm in a special language program. And next year I'll take French and German both as part of an elective program."

"Well, you're sure welcome to my share of German," he said, laughing and tousling her hair.

They bantered awhile, Ingrid went off to the TV room, and Wayne went back to his conjugations.

"She has a crush on you, you know," Henk said a few minutes later.

"Who?" Wayne asked, startled by the remark.

"Ingrid, who else?" Henk answered, his tone rising.

“You’re kidding me.”

“I bloody hell am not.”

“Are you sure? She’s only fourteen.”

“Fourteen is plenty old enough for what she’s feeling. And it’s natural enough. It’s just a passing phase; no harm to it. I would warn you if it ever got serious.”

“You would?”

“Sure. You can count on that.”

“In that case, I won’t give it another thought.”



MONTHS LATER, WAYNE and Henk were again in the Van Pijpen dining room, this time studying for finals.

“I need a Coke,” Henk declared. “You want one?”

“Nah, nothing will help me,” Wayne replied.

Henk went off and Wayne returned to his German-2 vocabulary review.

“Hi, Wayne.” It was Ingrid, her voice melodic. But Wayne only looked up briefly, nodded a half-smile, then looked back at his notes. He grimaced at them, feeling annoyed.

“You’re studying so hard,” she continued. “Don’t you have time to say hi? Maybe take a break? I was going to tell you that our batting practices have done wonders for my average. And my RBI—”

“Ingrid,” he said, interrupting, lifting his gaze briefly but hardly looking at her, “you’re right. I don’t have time for this now, or anything. Not tonight, not with tomorrow’s finals staring me in the face.”

The exchange worsened his already foul mood, his dislike of language study so intense it corroded his concentration to produce a premature fatigue, and a sinking malaise. He couldn’t forget his disappointment at getting a C in this subject the previous term, his lowest grade in two years of senior high. Finally he looked up again from his notes, his sense of regret reluctantly peering out from behind his bitter mood. But Ingrid had gone. So his regret collapsed beneath the force of his resolve, and he returned to his work without another thought.

“What happened?” Henk asked, returning, drink in hand, to the dining room table.

“What do you mean?” Wayne asked.

“Ingrid. She’s crying.”

“Oh my God!” Wayne exclaimed. “It was me. I was curt with her, gave her the brush-off.”

“Why?”

“This damned German-2 final. It’s turning me into a monster.”

“Well, you better talk to her, straightaway.”

“Where is she?”

“I think she went up to her room.”

Wayne rushed to the steps and bounded up to the second floor. Sure enough, she lay sprawled on her bed, crying silently into hands over her face.

“Ingrid, I’m sorry,” he sighed, as he sat on the bed and caressed her shoulder. Seeing her like this made him feel totally wretched.

“It’s all right,” she sniffled. “I know you have more important things to do.”

“Don’t say that, Babe, or I’ll never be able to forgive myself. You’re like a sister to me, and I shouldn’t have said what I did. I’m sorry. Would you please let me take it back? Please?”

“I’m all right,” she repeated, sitting up and eking out a half-grin, wiping away her tears.

“I just can’t believe I took it out on you.”

“Took what out on me?”

“Aggravation. I hate studying German. Tomorrow’s final is driving me batty. If there was a full moon, I’d turn into a werewolf, just dreading it.”

She giggled at his joke, then said, “You should have told me. I can help you with it. I’m not fluent in German, but I am pretty good.”

“Where did you learn German?”

“I started studying English and German both before we moved from Holland.”

“I dunno. I think it’s too late for anyone to help me with German.”

“I’m sure I can help you. You don’t need to learn anything new. If we try drills, we can review quicker and it won’t be such a drag for you. Let me do this. You’ve helped me with math all year.”

“I guess it would be worth a try. Are you sure you have the time?”

“Plenty of time. Let’s go down and get kicked off.” And they both stood.

“Are you taking a language next year?” she asked as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

“I have to,” he replied. “But I think I’ll dump German and try Spanish-1.”

“No, you should stay with German. That way, I can help you with it. And we should be able to get you high grades. I only know a little Spanish, and I won’t study it until tenth grade.”

“But this is a pretty big commitment you’d be taking on. You’ll be stuck with me like a millstone around your neck for the whole year.”

“Tell you what,” she said, smiling broadly, the tears all gone. “If you’ll help me with ninth-grade algebra, then I’ll make sure you get As in German-3. It’ll be easy; you’ll see. And we’ll have fun.”

“You got yourself a deal, kid.” And he laughed, relieved she had forgotten his unkind words.

Chapter Four

WAYNE AWOKE THE day after Sullivan's and let the evening's events wash over him. He wanted to lay there awhile and savor the memory of her smile, but then he looked over at the clock radio. Yikes, he had slept past one p.m.! He had much to do before their date and only today to get most of it done. He must decide on entertainment: play versus movie. Ummh, better to call her on that, maybe tomorrow night when she's sure to be home. The biggest challenge was transportation. He couldn't very well escort her to the subway for dinner in the city center. He kicked off the covers, threw on some clothes, and went down to the dining room for lunch.

"There you are." Tom Delmoore, his roommate, greeted him cheerfully as he entered the room. Tom had already eaten and was studying at the table. "Weren't you supposed to be out for the weekend?"

"Slight change of plans."

"You don't get out of the inquisition that easily, Cavanaugh," Tom countered, smiling broadly. "You came in after me, and I didn't hit the sack until 2 a.m. What the hell happened after we left you last night? Did you work up the courage to meet that Penn blonde you were eyeing at Sullivans?"

Tom's inquiry drew a crowd. Wayne tried to be evasive, but within ten minutes, they pried most of story out of him. He abbreviated the facts, particularly the subway details. Many residents were present because Drexel didn't have a home football game that day to draw them away. The majority who had not left for the weekend worked to catch up on schoolwork before turning to Saturday night plans.

"So let's get this framed up right." It was Ivan and he was showing no mercy. It looked to Wayne as if every resident was crammed into the dining room. "Poor Drexel student, son of a Bucks county sharecropper, wins big date with Penn sorority girl, member of the Contemporary Dance Troupe, starring member of the Penn Drama Club, wealthy California family—"

"Wait a minute!" Wayne broke in, "I didn't say anything about her family."

"You think we don't have our own sources?" Tom replied, grinning widely.

"What sources? What are you guys pulling here?"

“Doug.”

“Doug! You mean our Doug—Doug Murser?” Wayne asked incredulously, referring to one of the residents, a senior, who was a math major in Drexel’s elite Fellowes Program. But he was not present in the room.

“He saw you going into Cavanaugh’s last night, and he knows her,” came the chorused response.

“You guys are nuts. It can’t be the same girl.”

“You can check with him. He didn’t say much. You know Doug.” And there rose a chorus of agreement over Doug’s caustic temperament.

“Are you guys finished with the cross-examination?” Wayne asked, smiling.

“One final question.” It was Tom again.

“Anything for my buddies at Omega house,” Wayne responded, hoping they were near the end.

“Seriously,” Tom said, and he lowered the mood a notch. “What are your plans for the date?”

“Well, I don’t know. I haven’t had time to think about it, seeing as how you guys have been grilling me since I woke up.”

“Then think about it,” Ivan said. “You have a peanut gallery here who’s demanding an answer.”

Wayne looked around at the smiling faces, feeling both flattered and embarrassed.

“You guys know there can be only one answer for this outing,” Wayne said. “Everything, I mean, the whole bankroll, gets blown on this one: dinner at Bookbinders, play downtown, late evening cocktails at one of those swanky lounges with the overpriced drinks. All stops are pulled. And the sky’s the limit.”

This elicited a whooping cheer, and the gathering broke up.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Wayne called after them. “Does anyone have a car they can lend me?”

“Ask Doug for his T-Bird,” Ivan said, referring to a beautifully restored and customized version of the original classic coup, the one from the fifties with the portholes. Doug and his twin brother reportedly had done all the work themselves.

“What, do I look like I’m tired of livin’?” Wayne replied. “Nobody even gets to ride in that thing, let alone drive it. He’d kill me for asking.”

“Yeah, and good luck with it,” Ivan said, arching his eyebrows sympathetically as he left the room with the rest.



ON TUESDAY EVENING, as he descended the stairs to dinner, Wayne ran into Doug Murser.

“Cavanaugh, I hear you’re going out with Nancy Hammond.”

Doug was tall and wiry, with a rodent-like visage: thin face, with a large, beak nose, receding chin, all capped by an incredibly out-of-date, crew-cut hairstyle. Wayne had always found him arrogant and condescending, if not downright nasty, and he tried to avoid him. So far, that had been easy to do.

“Yeah, the guys tell me you know her.”

“Yes, I crew for her.”

“Crew?”

“Stage crew. I’m a stagehand for the Penn Dramatics Club.”

“Really? How in the world does a Drexel math major get that lined up?”

“Drexel doesn’t have a drama club, so I borrowed Penn’s. At first I did it as a volunteer. Then the bureaucrats decided there was a liability issue, what with me technically not being a Penn student. So they set me up with a kind of dual registration. Penn was cool with that once it was understood I’ll do my graduate study there under Professor J. Higgins.”

“How did you get interested in stage crew?”

“My brother. He tried it out, then drafted me into it during high school. And damned if it didn’t help me grasp math concepts while I was at it. Yeah, I know it sounds loopy. See, I was starting on Riemannian geometry, and I was struggling with it, especially the concept behind the Nash Embedding Theorems. I was bent out of shape for weeks. Then it all comes to me in a crew session where we were painting and framing sets. A week later I was even able to get my brain wrapped around the Levi-Civita Connection, again while I was crewing, and holy Hannah, that’s when I knew I’d want to stick with this. I thought I’d give it up when I came to Drexel, but I changed my mind when I started on differential equations.” He paused, gave Wayne a studied, appraising look-over. “I had a hard time believing it when I saw you two going into Cavanaugh’s.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I never would have pegged Nancy being drawn to the Clark Kent type.”

The put-down was so perfectly delivered and, to Wayne, so close to the mark, he couldn’t keep from laughing out loud.

“Bull’s-eye,” Wayne said. “You hit the mark and found me out, plain as rain. And not even a phone booth in sight.”

“What the hell did you do to turn her head?”

Wayne gave him a thumbnail sketch of the subway incident.

“Wow, talk about a ballsy move. Makes me want to take back all the terrible things I ever said about you. Tell me about your plans for the date.”

Wayne did so.

“A downtown engagement. Sounds nice. What about wheels?”

“I’ve got flyers up to see if I can rent or borrow something, but no luck so far. I hate to see it come down to riding in one of those grungy taxicabs. And that assumes they even make it on time.”

“No need for all that fuss, Cavanaugh. Just take my T-Bird.”

In his shock, Wayne was sure he had misheard.

“The T-Bird? You’re offering me the sacred chariot?”

“Two conditions, no, three. Treat the vehicle with reverent respect; lock her away in the garage when you’re through for the night; and don’t you ever tell any of these jerk-offs I lost my head.”

“Doug, I—I’m speechless. How could I ever thank you?”

“An asshole like you...going out with Nancy Hammond. Why, you’re even too young for her. Anyway, she’s the closest thing to Hollywood royalty they’ve got over there at Penn. The least you’ll need is a classy set of wheels. And mine are the best in the state.”



WAYNE PLANNED THE week as a lead-up to his date with Nancy. He worked hard to be ahead in his studies by the weekend. But on Wednesday afternoon, after class, he bowed to a whim and headed to the Penn campus for a touch football game. He had a good lead on his study schedule and felt a spark of physical energy both restless and insistent.

The sandlot football tradition was very much alive at Penn and Drexel. The Penn campus had ample green areas for play, and the Drexel players used them because they were the closest available. The fraternities organized some flag league play, but most games were scratch competitions, played for fun, among players who met randomly and chose up sides.

It was one such game that Wayne joined that Wednesday afternoon. The early October day was unusually chilly with the first big cold front of the year.

The north wind gusted, making the football passes harder to gauge. It was not a particularly good game. No one had emerged as a strong captain, and his team's quarterback, mediocre on a good day, was not playing well, with many of his passes wobbly and inaccurate. No surprise, then, that the game lacked competitive zip. But Wayne was not disappointed. He played the wide receiver position he enjoyed and, even though he had few opportunities to land exciting long ball receptions, he enjoyed racing the defenders down and across the field with each scrimmage. He threw himself into the game with zest and hated to see the shadows lengthen as the daylight began to expire.

As he lined up for the next play, he noticed the sky had cleared, bringing out the last of a brittle sunlight. Plus the wind was rising in strength. It roared through the nearby trees, animating their limbs, and a few leaves skittered in the breeze. The center snapped the ball and Wayne dashed off the line as before. Down the left side he raced, covered by a single defensive back. Then, after a good twenty yards, he began his slant to the right, across the center of the playing field. The quarterback, surprising even his own teammates, played a bootleg run to the right side. The defensive line shifted furiously to that side in chase, and both linebackers came forward in hot pursuit. Even the defensive backs became uncertain, and they slowed, wondering whether to reverse direction and play the run. But just as the quarterback approached the legal advance point for doing so, he cocked his upper body and side-armed the ball long, rifling it down the center of the field. It was his best pass of the day: a near perfect spiral with a flat trajectory.

Wayne's slant to the center put him in excellent position to receive the rocketing pigskin. Because of the quarterback's fake running move, the defensive back was well behind on coverage. Wayne needed to slow his sprint speed, allowing defender to narrow the distance. But he would not interfere in time. It was not a difficult pass to catch, but no reception has more than a tiny margin for error. Wayne glued his gaze to the zooming ball and blocked out awareness of the closing defender. Still running, he jumped as high as he could, not because of the ball's height but because of the cutting move he would try on landing. He captured the ball with both hands, just to the left side of his hip, then swiveled his shoulders to the left, capitalizing on a rotation he had imparted to his jump so that, when he landed, he was already ducking back to the left, causing defender to overshoot his attempt to tag-tackle him. Then he burst to a full sprint, racing to the goal line on the left slant established with his cut.

As he flew across the goal line, feeling exultant, he slowed, shifting his attention from defender to the field ahead. As he did, there, ahead of him, on the concrete walk, stood Nancy Hammond, her gaze wide, showing an excited mix of surprise and...something else. Could it be awe? Well, probably not, but at least...admiration. He felt a joyous shiver from the surprise of seeing her, at the pent-up emotion he saw in her eyes. Breathing deeply but smoothly, he let his momentum carry to where she stood, her smile widening in response to his own of greeting.

"Hi," he panted, stopping in front of her and shifting the ball back and forth from one hand to the other.

"That was a beautiful catch," she said. "You made that spin-move look like a ballet step. I can't believe you kept your footing at that speed."

"Thanks," he said, remembering she was a dancer as well as an actress. Then he noticed she was still startled, staring into his eyes, her lips parted, as though seeing him in a new light.

"So, what are you up to?" he continued, deciding to rescue her from her daze.

I just finished classes at Logan Hall," she said, nodding at the building southwest of the Levy Park area where they stood. "I need to go back to my apartment before my dance lessons tonight."

"Can I walk you back?"

"Why, I'd love the company," she responded sweetly.

He went back, checked out of the game, grabbed the coat he had stashed on the sideline, then jogged back to her.

"It's a good thing you dressed warmly," he commented, after they started walking, referring to her slacks, ski sweater, and woolen cap.

"Yes, brrr. I don't remember it getting this cold so early."

"You're right. This is very early for a cold front this strong."

"So, have you chosen us a movie for Saturday night?" she asked.

"Have you been to the Arcadia?"

"No, I don't think so. Tell me about it."

"It's on Chestnut near city hall. It's the only main-line movie theater I know with underground seating. It has an escalator down to the lower level, and this hallway with mirrors, top and sides, and posters on the ceiling, too."

"Sounds interesting."

"But I'm worried about the feature. It may be a little...risqué."

"Oh, what is it?"

“*Camille 2000*? You haven’t seen it, have you?”

“No, what is your worry?”

“It’s foreign—Italian, I think. And it’s probably a bit on the steamy side of the scale.”

“Sounds like an adventure. We could try it, if you like.”

“Tell me more about your artistic pursuits,” he asked after they had walked several more minutes. “You seem a little shy about something that must be a big part of your major. Time to ’fess up.”

“Oh, there’s not much to ’fess up to,” she said, her tone dismissive. “Artistically, apart from my acting, I’m this great, muddled mass of mediocrity.”

“I certainly don’t believe that for a second,” he said.

“You’re just being nice. But it’s true. I can do several things with minimum, boring competence. I can paint, I can sculpt, I can dance, I can even sing, after a fashion.”

“I’ve heard you sing,” he said enthusiastically. “And you were good.”

She laughed aloud, looking pleased. “No, I can’t do any of those things well.”

“But even if it were true, why would it matter when you have your acting, and you can do it so well?”

“Good question. I suppose because dancer is how I think of myself deep down. I’ve been at it since I was six; I’m fairly good at it. It’s just that I’m not nearly as good as I should be for all the years I’ve put into it. Then too, it’s a lifestyle thing. It keeps me fit, keeps my weight down, keeps me on a healthy diet. It’s dance I turn to when I need to get away from worries and pressures.”

“What kind of dance do you do?”

“Ballet. But not much classical. I’m not graceful enough to compete there. So I do modern—contemporary, it’s called. Trouble is, the Penn dance group is a volunteer student organization. It’s fully funded by the student council, so the activities and lessons and things are subsidized. But none of them are accredited. It’s all extracurricular. And that makes it harder to find time to do it seriously.”

“And is that also because of your acting?”

“Yes, good point. The two activities compete for time. I’m doing well acting, have been for a year or so. But my acting is very much a function of this big dollop of talent that tends to come and go, depending on what else is going on in my life. Dancing takes talent, too, but it also takes years and years of practice. Even though I’m doing well acting, and it’s crowding out my dancing, I don’t

want that to happen completely because dancing is what I fall back on if the well for my acting talent suddenly runs dry.”

“I’m sure that won’t happen to you.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve seen you onstage. And I have faith in your talent.”

They had reached her apartment, and she turned, studying his face in response to this flattering statement.

“I know you have things to do,” he said.

“Till Saturday night, then.”



THE CURTAIN DESCENDED and Nancy rushed, along with the entire cast, to her prearranged position on the stage. Having just played Emily in Thornton Wilder’s play, *Our Town*, she positioned herself front and center, as befitting the production’s female lead. She still couldn’t believe she had won the part. As an eighth grader, she hadn’t thought she stood a chance against the junior high’s ninth-grade veterans. Now that the production had ended, she felt a thrill over how well she thought she’d done. Of course, she needed to wait and see what her mother said.

Some clapping was already audible as they took their places, but when the curtain rose again, the applause became thunderous. They bowed, bowed repeatedly as the ovation continued. *How sweet it is*, she thought, quoting Jackie Gleason, the adulation rippling through her as a delicious adrenaline rush. Finally the curtain stayed down and they broke for the dressing area. Fortunately it was off limits to parents, so it wasn’t too crowded as the children rushed to change and remove their makeup, chatting and trading comments as they did. Nancy had a date, of sorts, with Kevin Baxtrim, her older cousin by two years, so she took the time to freshen up and make sure her hair was presentable.

“You were terrific, Nanz!” Barbara exclaimed when Nancy stepped from the dressing area to the school’s front lobby, a kind of two-story glass-and-stainless steel hall that nestled and curved around the school auditorium. Barbara’s onrush knocked Nancy back a step, and she nearly lost her footing. “You’ll be the first Hollywood starlet who can just commute from the home you grew up in.”

Their mother, smiling proudly, put her arms around them both, reinforcing Barbara’s clasp. Christine held back, her typical reaction whenever Nancy came in line for praise. But on this occasion, even she beamed a smile of genuine

tribute, nodding for emphasis. But Nancy, feeling invincible from her newly minted success, wanted more and, when she reached out an anxious hand, Christine's resistance crumbled, and she bounded forward to be happily pulled into the communal hug.

"You did wonderfully well, dear," her mother said. "And your stage presence was so prominent, just superb."

"So you think the drama coaching did the trick?" Nancy asked.

"I'm sure it helped you with this big step," her mother answered. "Tonight shows you have real talent for the stage, something we must go on cultivating."

As usual, her father hadn't made it, and she began to wonder whether Kevin was missing in action as well. Then he emerged from the boy's restroom and advanced, beaming, in her direction. She disengaged and, as she flew into his arms, he gave her an off-center kiss that just tagged the corner of her mouth.

"After a performance like that," he said, swinging her around by outstretched arms, "I'll take you out to eat anywhere you like."

After talking awhile, they rallied toward their separate plans.

"Be back by midnight," her mother said to Kevin, her tone pleasant. "I'll have hot chocolate ready for you both."

Despite his lavish offer, she chose a diner on San Vicente, on the way to the Beach Road. Tonight she would go off her high-nutrition diet and splurge on a cheeseburger and fries, maybe even a milkshake.

"It's a shame my mom didn't get over her laryngitis in time to see you tonight," Kevin said, after their orders were taken.

"Yes, that would have made it picture-perfect," Nancy responded, remembering that moment, just before the production's start, when she'd felt Aunt Edith's absence. "You know, I'm almost as close to your mother as my own."

"I know. Mom says you have a sublime artistic temperament. She goes off on tangents sometimes, talking about your sensitive spirit. Like you were made out of crystal or something."

"Jealous?"

"You know better than that, you little tease. But I think she'd rather you concentrate more on dancing than drama."

"Maybe she'll turn out to be right."

"You can't mean that," he said. "You've got to be high as a kite about your acting after tonight's big triumph."

“Yes, of course I am,” she answered. Then shrugging, she said, “But on the other hand...”

“What?”

“Well, I don’t know where it’s all leading. One reason I took up acting is because I can’t compete with Christine as a dancer. And drama is something she doesn’t bother with, something I can have to myself. But there are other interests pulling at my future in different ways.”

“Other interests? Pulling at your future? Sounds over-the-top serious for a fourteen-year-old.” Then his expression changed, his mouth dropping open. “Oh, no, don’t tell me you got yourself a real boyfriend.”

“No, it’s not that,” she replied, but said nothing more.

“What is it? Tell me.”

“It’s a special...distraction, something I’ve never shared with anyone.”

“Now you’ve really got my interest up. Surely you can tell your favorite cousin, kissing cousin at that, who’s treating you to this gourmet, greasy-spoon meal.”

His words touched her funny bone, and she laughed, then said, “Of course I’ll tell you.”

“So tell me. You keep holding back.”

“It’s hard to put in words,” and she thought a moment. “One way to say it is that I’ve become enchanted with love.”

“But that doesn’t sound so unusual, not for girls.”

“But this is more than daydreaming. I’m studying romantic love. I’m reading about it, thinking about it, writing things in a set of notebooks. I want to understand it and understand how to make it perfect.”

“You’re kidding, right? Nothing is ever perfect. Love is something you see everywhere. And it either is, or it isn’t.”

“No, I don’t believe that. I want to experience love that’s better than what we see around us. Something beyond...the ordinary.”

“But what’s wrong with ordinary? It makes the world go around for most people.”

“No, it doesn’t. I don’t buy that for a second. Most marriages are junkyards of what these people used to feel.”

“Yeah, I see your point,” he conceded. “But it’s natural. There must be a good reason for it.”

“Well, I don’t care. I have to have more, something special. Something that will last and get better instead of worse. It’s pushing at my insides, and I have

this feeling that this is the one way I can be happy as an adult. It's funny. I can't not think about it, and dwell on it."

"What in blue blazes got you started on this?"

"That's easy. Do you remember a year ago when my father had that affair and my parents nearly split up?"

"Worst kept secret in the universe. At least they stayed together. Sure put you through the ringer, though, with worrying about it all those months."

"It made me realize how far their love had fallen. When I was a little girl, they used to kiss and touch each other all the time. But by the time I was twelve, they hardly bothered, and it wasn't like they were happier. Just the opposite. So why did they let that happen? Why did they let their love slip away? It got me thinking."

"It's a wonder that kind of thinking didn't send you to a psychiatrist."

"It might have. But then I got interested in one of the most famous love stories in history."

"Which one?"

"The Brownings."

"The who?"

"The poets, silly. Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. They courted by writing to each other and eloped because of her father's meanness—a real ogre if there ever was one. She wrote him the most beautiful love poem in the history of literature."

"Oh? Which one is that?"

She quoted:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach,...

"Remember it now?"

"Oh, that one. Sure. Don't tell me you have it memorized?"

"I do. But I'll spare you the rest."

"So what did you learn from them, from the Brownings?"

"Not nearly as much as I was hoping for. It's hard to tell from their writings and biographies what made their marriage so successful. You know they had something special because he loved her all those years, and she was practically an invalid. There's nothing to indicate they had any sort of thinking system for

keeping their love fresh. But they definitely show that it can be accomplished, somehow.”

“Can we be sure it was genuine and not just publicity hype?”

“I think so. A lot of people saw them as special. And his actions after her death tell us a lot.”

“How’s that?”

“They met in England, but lived their whole married life in Italy, mainly Florence. In 1861, after fifteen years of marriage, she died. He never remarried. And he took their son back to England to live, the reason being that he couldn’t stand to live in Italy without her. The memories were too painful.”

“I see what you mean. They must have had something special.”

“I need to figure out the formula for success.”

“What have you come up with so far?”

“A lot of things. Being together enough that you don’t grow apart; just wanting the emotion to last; and being willing to work on it so the two of you change through time together. That has to be a big part. And let’s face it: being pretty is important, and staying that way is no accident. Then I’m mulling over this theory that love has to be fed. You have to be willing to give, and work on the other’s needs. I doubt any of this will work unless you’re willing to give more than you receive. Then there are the balance issues.”

“The what?”

“The balance issues. There are a bunch of them. They jump up as questions as you try to work all this out. For instance, how do you hold your beloved to you to satisfy yourself, but still give him enough freedom to be himself, to go on being the person you fell for to begin with?”

“Sizzling sandpipers!” he exclaimed with exaggerated, comic effect. “You’ve spent major league effort on this, haven’t you?”

“I have. And I’ve got it written down—sort of. I have it as a kind of sprawling scribble in my notebooks.”

“But it sounds like you already have it mapped out. You’ve already described bushels more about romance than I could ever dream up. Do you have a name for this...system you’ve put together?”

“Yes. I call it Aesthetic Love.”

“Well, I’m impressed. I’m proud of you, putting this together.”

“Thanks. I’ve made good progress. But a lot of it is still scattered in my head. I need to get it all down and organize it better, clean up my notes. And I can’t help but feel that there’s more, that the system is incomplete.”

“But you’ve shown it’s a complicated thing. Can a system that describes love ever be complete?”

“Probably not. You’re bringing up a good point. I’ll just have to keep working on it and see what I come up with.”

“I think that’s a good plan. But I don’t think you’ll ever be finished with this. Now, let’s go back to where we started. Tell me again how being enchanted with love affects your acting career.”

“It’s the other way around. What I’ve wanted most out of life, since I was twelve, is to be a lover, a wife, and eventually a mother. From everything I’ve seen, a career as an actress or artist would be a big commitment: a ton of work and dedication. And artists tend to be high-strung people with strange quirks. So there’s this conflict. I do want to be an actress; I want to try for it. But I’m afraid all the other things I want won’t fit into my life as an actress without causing big-time problems.”

“But you can’t back away from what life has in store for you, Nanz. You’ll just have to shoot for the stars and see how it all turns out.”



“AND YOU REALLY crossed those subway tracks?” Henk asked. Thursday night saw them at Di Lulu’s: a large Italian restaurant an easy walk from the Penn campus and a good setting for sharing the unabridged version of Friday night’s events.

“I know it was crazy,” Wayne said.

“Would you do it again?” Henk asked.

“I don’t know,” Wayne replied. “The key is that I reacted without thinking. But I’d probably jump at it with eyes wide open if it was my only chance to meet her.”

“Amazing.”

“Sure was exciting. But, of course, it was just a flash in the pan, a high point. It’s all downhill from there. Back to normal before we know it.”

“Negative words. But I wish you could see yourself. You’re so obviously infatuated with her.”

“Conflicted is more like it.”

“Why?”

“Everything about her. Absolutely nothing is a workable fit.”

“Like what, for instance?”

“Like, how could I afford her? This is a girl whose idea of roughing it is having an off-campus apartment of her own *minus* the servants she’s used to at home. In her family, there’s no such thing as keeping a car longer than two years. So naturally, this past summer, her father replaces the Mustang he gave her for high school graduation with a brand new Camaro. And some of the things she’s mentioned are off the charts. For one, her favorite view of L.A. is at night from her father’s corporate yacht. What are the odds, even with high success, I’d ever be able to give her lifestyle items like these, things she was raised on?”

“I see it now. These are class issues you are worried about.”

“The class thing mainly boils down to economics. And there, the math is pretty simple. I can’t provide her the life she takes for granted, the one she deserves. Not on an engineer’s salary.”

“Maybe not when you graduate. But someday you may be able to. Don’t cut yourself short.”

“But that would take time, even if I get the fast-track breaks I’d need. Plus I’m not sure I want that kind of pressure on me—to say nothing of the sixty-hour work weeks it would take.”

“Well, then, just flip the whole thing on its head. Sit back and let her and her family support you.”

“Why, you could just be the next Red Skelton with zany lines like that,” Wayne retorted. “I’d sooner tell my father I’d converted to Zoroastrianism than confess to being supported by a woman, let alone the woman I want my family to accept. If he didn’t disown me, he would at least be ashamed of me. And I would deserve it.”

“I didn’t realize you were so touchy about this. But a compromise would be for the two of you to face things as a two-income couple. It’s becoming more common these days.”

“Yeah, I could live with that. But I’m not sure she could. Besides, there are other compatibility issues.”

“Like what?”

“Like temperament. Nancy is a blue-blooded sorority girl. It’s her lifestyle; it’s what she’s used to, and it’s the type of social life she will always want. Now, you and I...neither of us decided to join a fraternity. It’s not our style, not our preference for how we express ourselves socially.”

“That can be overcome; as long as you both are trying.”

“Sure it could—on day one. But it would take its toll over time. I could see her willing to sacrifice on this now, but resent it later. And with what I feel for

her, I don't want her to be making sacrifices. Why should she have to?"

"But that just begs the question: what are you feeling for her?"

"I don't know. It's kicking up a storm inside me, but with all the compatibility issues in plain view, I'm afraid to give it a name. But whatever it is, it's maxed out. Every fuse is already blown, right on down the line."

"Really? But you only met her a few days ago. You hardly know her after just that dinner at Cavanaugh's."

"Well, yes and no. I did call her Sunday night and we talked for two hours. Then yesterday I ran into her while playing football at Levy Park. And I got to walk her home. But, yeah, even with that, it's not much."

"It's obvious you already love this girl."

"I guess that's a good approximation. And it's more than her beauty. She's smart and talented and...all that."

"This is hard to take in. So unlike you. It's happened so quick."

"I wish I knew better what she's feeling at her end."

"Well, from what you've said, she seems interested in you. There's something there. And don't forget—" Henk's eyes suddenly shifted beyond Wayne's shoulder. "Well, speak of the devil."

Wayne swiveled in his chair to follow Henk's gaze and saw that Nancy had entered the restaurant. A well-dressed man on the far side of the dining room, who looked to be in his mid-twenties, stood from his table and signaled her with a wave. He had long but stylish, dirty blond hair, was slim and handsome, and was about the same height as Nancy. He wore a cream-colored suit over a white dress shirt that was open at the neck. She went to him, they clasped both hands at waist level in greeting, and kissed briefly on the lips. Then they spoke with obvious affection, smiling, still holding hands. After about a minute, they sat down at the small table and continued to converse with animation, obviously enjoying each other's company. They looked like an intimate couple.

Wayne turned back in his chair, his expression bleached with shock.

"Wayne, look, anyone can make a mistake. There's no way you could have seen this coming."

"There must be some other explanation. Did you see it the way I did?"

"I'm just glad you stumbled onto the truth before you got in any deeper. I'm sorry, amigo, I really am."

Wayne sat stunned, unable to speak for several moments. "I just can't believe it...how I misread her situation. I thought she was available, free of the guy we saw at Sullivan's. But she must have already been involved with the guy we see

here. I was sure right to have doubts. I guess what we shared was just a diversion for her.”

“You’re being very charitable—casting her in such a favorable light.”

“But it wasn’t really her fault. She made no promises, no commitments. She showed interest, but why not? That’s her option. I just read more into the possibilities than I should have.”

“You love her more than you realize to say something that forgiving after what we just witnessed. And this after she practically asked you out this weekend.”

“I don’t know anymore, Henk.”

“Don’t worry. This one doesn’t take an ounce of thought. Of course, you’ll need to pull the plug on the Saturday night date. No use putting yourself through any of that.”

“You’re probably right. I need to think it through.”

“Think what through? Hey, I just thought of something. She’s sitting with her back to us. If we go now, we can get away without being seen.”



NANCY SAW KEVIN’S signal upon entering the restaurant. He sat facing the entrance, and she rushed to him, clasping his hands in hers and kissing him briefly on the lips as was their custom.

“Congratulations,” she said, staring affectionately into his eyes. “Now that you’re finally engaged, we’ll probably have to stop kissing like this. We mustn’t make Diane jealous.”

“You’re probably right,” Kevin responded. “Becoming a fiancée will probably make her more possessive.”

“Can’t really blame her. Have you set a date?”

“Just the month: next June.”

“I am so happy for you both. And how is your career as an architect?”

“You mean intern architect. It’s going okay. I’ve had a lot of travel assignments lately: construction site visits. But there are worse things. How about you? How’s your love life?”

“My love life is just bursting at the seams. Here, sit down, and I’ll tell you all about it.” She gave a full accounting of meeting Wayne and how their relationship had developed. “And for once, I did what we always said I should. I conducted a kind of interview. All very rational.”

“And how did it go?”

“So well it’s kind of surreal. He has such emotional depth. What we discuss as Aesthetic Love he has thought about some on his own. He already grasps many of the fundamentals. And he’s special. I’m drawn to him in a way I’m still trying to understand. The only trouble is that I didn’t get to finish the interview.”

“So where does that put you?”

“Someplace I’ve never been before. The signs are ultra-good, but I feel dizzy because I’ve never fallen so hard and so fast before. It’s an overload. It’s exciting and wonderful and frightening—”

“But if the signs are good,” Kevin said, interrupting, “and he’s already something special to you, then why are you feeling uptight?”

“Because I’m so emotionally charged over this guy that it’s like falling out of an airplane. Like, how can I be where I am emotionally after knowing him for only six days? It’s frightening. And you know me; you know I’m impulsive when it comes to romance. I’ve made some bad mistakes. I have to get this right.”

“Don’t worry; you will. Just keep with the plan.”

“I can’t afford for this to be another big blooper of mine that hurts everyone involved, including me. I need to finish the interview, then hopefully I can take the plunge into something serious.”

“But I like the way you look. I see you bubbling over with excitement, more...vital than I’ve seen you in years. What you’re describing: it seems like a nice problem to have.”

“Yes, it’s a wonderful problem to have. I just need to get it right.”



WAYNE’S FRIDAY CLASSES finished before lunchtime, and he returned to Omega House. There he completed the studies that freed him for the rest of the weekend. More than ever, Nancy was in this thoughts as a puzzle to be solved, and he felt that a bike ride through Fairmont Park might provide mental clarity. The house had a racing bike that was more or less community property. He broke it out of the basement, adjusted the seat, and added air to the tires. Ready at last, he headed out at high speed, east on Lancaster Avenue to Spring Garden. He turned left, peddling east across the Schuylkill River to the Museum of Art, itself perched on a hill within the park. Now it was downhill from the museum to the ribbon of pavement that ran for several miles north along the Schuylkill,

paralleling the East River Drive. This was a beautiful, semi-forested lane, made for pedaling or walking, punctuated by Boat House Row, the Tunnel Rock, an open-air sculpture exhibit, and several bridges that arched above, crossing the river at various points.

It was a track that took him all the way to where the Wissahickon Creek empties into the Schuylkill at Ridge Avenue. Two dams cascade in series there, on the Wissahickon, that provide a waterfall effect. He perched himself and the bike against the Ridge Avenue railing and bridge structure so he could sit comfortably and stare down at the large falls, its mesmerizing roar almost drowning out the nearby traffic. The weather was gorgeous, the cold front having blown itself out, leaving still, cool air that was nice because of the clear sunshine.

Here, with the falls as a soothing backdrop, he reviewed those strikes against a relationship with Nancy that he hadn't discussed with Henk. His starting reservations centered on how her acting career must inevitably fill her life. Despite her interest in romantic love as an intellectual concept, acting was sure to dominate her life's capacity for commitment. Even if the other compatibility issues could be surmounted, how much time would be left over for their relationship? Not much, he concluded. It could never work, and past experience told him the breakup would be very painful for him.

And then there was the mystery man from Thursday night. Certainly it was a serious issue in its own right. But it hardly activated him. Rather it seemed an afterthought to the compatibility issues that already doomed them. Seeing Nancy kiss another with affection, one suggesting a sexual relationship, only gave the conclusions already reached a kind of irrefutable confirmation. Another nail in the coffin. The event's cryptic nature allowed a dozen possible explanations, but all the likely ones were untoward. Still, what he had seen did not generate ill will toward her, only the sense of a ruined destiny.

All that was settled; he could come to terms with it. But he could not accept Henk's advice and deprive himself of his date with her. Even at the risk of harsher withdrawal symptoms, he wanted this final time to see her, to be seen with her, to relish her beauty, to sip and savor every moment with her, every glance, before relinquishing the hold she had on him, and going forward.

Upon emerging from his reverie, he realized he had outstayed his daylight. Dusk had fallen and there would be no arriving home before dark. He pushed off, his limbs now stiff, both from the long rest and from the descending chill. He came slowly up to speed, his huffing exertions warming against the needles

of cold air that darted through his clothing to pierce his skin. By the time he hurtled beneath the Strawberry Mansion Bridge, dusk was done and night had fallen. He looked to the right, toward the adjacent river, and saw one of the most beautiful but seldom appreciated sights the city offered. There, on the river's placid surface, shimmered the tailed reflections of the opposite side's street lamps and moving car headlights. It was a sight that haunted with a lonely beckoning. He pedaled along, losing sentience to the flickering, dancing lights on water, some running with him, others moving ahead, racing him home.

Chapter Five

NOT CONTENT WITH theories and notebooks describing the love she sought, Nancy started dating, per parental agreement, when she entered tenth grade. She chose partners from her own high school. She found most of them either decidedly immature or transparently grasping for sexual favors. Although the country was changing, chastity still held the cultural high ground in consensus principle, if not always in practice. She meant to abide by her parents' expectations in that regard. She enjoyed the dating, but it produced little in the way of romantic prospects.

And she wished Kevin were still available to help her screen candidates and to discuss matters of love and romance. After all, only he understood the true nature of her quest. But Aunt Edith and her family had moved to Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, the year before. She and Kevin talked by phone monthly, but the sense that she could confide in him and get advice was diminished.

Jason Pruitt was the senior who emerged from the herd to become the first great love of her life. She started dating him as a junior, and she wondered why she hadn't noticed him sooner. Relaxed and more serious than his peers, he easily impressed as the most mature of her dates who also came equipped with the charm typical of her social class. He was tall, had dark brown hair, was good-looking, and his physical appeal was dominated by his dark blue eyes and their luminosity when he finally smiled. His serious demeanor had a smoldering air of mystery that captured her heart, making her long to discover the true extent of him. She became convinced of his ability to love her as she craved, and she began planning the discussions that would inspire it in him.



FOR HIS PART, Jason too felt disappointed with the Brentwood high dating stock. But his discontent was different from hers, derived from boredom. Far more sexually accomplished than she knew, he had the good judgment never to broadcast the exploits that accounted for his mature spirit. What Nancy saw as a serious intellect of great emotional range was mostly charming manners in

apathetic hibernation. Initially he viewed her as just another date worth trying: a fresh, wholesome blonde with good conversation and a keen intellect. But then he came to see her as something special. Her sharp but tender spirit ticked over something in his heart, something he'd never felt, and he genuinely fell for her. Never mind her ridiculous theories of love that she insisted they discuss at length. He could put up with that.

Her request that their affections not be sexual struck a more serious note. But it was no strain, really, not if you took the long view. Although he might need to get his short-term needs met elsewhere, he wanted their romance to prosper. He wasn't worried she'd find out about the occasional other girls because eventually she would be completely his, and that would happen before trouble overtook him. He would work it out over time, no hurry; he had done similar things before. Having his own car was a crucial advantage, and parking never became a problem so long as you didn't mind the other couples lined up beside you. Their favorite spot was in Crestwood Hills Park, where the police patrolled to protect the kids, rather than disturb them.

Their downfall pivoted on a misjudgment of his. He simply got unaccountably careless about carrying protection. Plus as their affections gradually became heated, she developed a reserve that masked her true response. As a result, he underestimated the pace and extent of her sensual progression.



IT WAS SATURDAY night and they attended the school dance. They stood with friends, but had come alone so they could park later. The chaperones alternated the songs: slow ballad followed by a fast rock tune. They sat out a slow song and now strolled, hand in hand, onto the gym floor in anticipation of the next fast number. As they stood waiting, he swiveled to chat with a friend. She turned her head, looked at him, and felt her love well up to peak into a glorious smile. In that instant, she loved him more than words could say. Over recent weeks, she had let him caress her beneath her bra. It seemed to deepen their intimacy, but it also created a tension afterward she could not define.

Suddenly the opening drumbeat of the next song broke her reverie. It was Martha and the Vandellas' "Heat Wave," a song she loved and, had it been any other tune, it might not have affected her the way it did. The booming Motown cadence shot through her, amplified her emotions as she stared at him, and she let the beat take over her movements. Her feet took up a prancing rock step, one

that gave her wide lateral mobility. Her movement took her away from him, parting their hands, though she tried to hold on and pull him to her. The motion startled him, he looked in her direction, and she saw him come alive to her unusual action. She had never taken the lead like this, bounding off onto the floor without him. As she backed away farther toward the gym center, she motioned with both hands for him to join her. He smiled and moved toward her, his interest piqued.

They made a good dance couple. She knew he thought himself one of the best dancers in the school and, of course, she had years of dance training to draw from. They practiced together, choreographing routines for use in the competitions that occasionally took up part of the school dance agenda. But tonight she didn't signal any of the routines to him. She danced freestyle, and he had never seen her move like this.

No one had seen her move like this. It never occurred to her to use her dance skills to advance her social status among her peers. The prestige had little meaning for her. Moreover, her feminine sensibilities made her averse to outshining a date on the dance floor, doubly averse to outshining her beloved Jason, who, although a fine dancer, was not as good as he thought. But this time was different. This time she danced for him as much as with him. She wanted the next few minutes of movement to express her love for him. She slowed, waiting for him to catch up, then let the expression take over.

She wore a favorite pair of low flats that fit perfectly for rock dancing. She was bare-legged and wore a pleated, knee-length skirt that gave her free movement. She kicked up her heels and swiveled her torso by the motion of her arms in a way typical of rock expression. He served as a relatively stationary focus for her movements: forward and back, circling around him, even as she continued facing him, her dance an outpouring of emotion. These wide, lateral dynamics attracted the crowd, causing the other teens to stop, clear back, and watch. The chaperones took notice, alert, but watching like the rest. Her motions became more vigorous than she had ever driven them. As the beat impelled her on, she brushed her hand below her hips, flouncing her skirt hem up to her waist. Her normal restraint had by now evaporated, and she pushed her movements to the peak of expression her years of dance and drama could produce. She finished up by twirling to him, swooning backward, her arms extended above her head. Fortunately he responded perfectly, catching her in his arms as he bent his knees dramatically to complement her finale.

“I don’t know what came over me,” she said, panting from her exertions as he still held her. “How’d I do?” she asked, laughing, trying to snap back to her normal self. But her eyes queried his.

“I’ve never seen anything to top that,” he said, smiling. “You were great. Just great.”

“It was for you.”

It gladdened her that his smile widened and warmed. He kissed her lightly on the lips, a tender, charming gesture. The next slow tune started and, when they came together, her heart still pounding from the exercise, she was happy to lean against him, to feel their contact. She sensed, but only vaguely, the special dance as a turning point of some sort. The sensations she felt from the clasp of his arms, from his warm, close scent, were now different, but she wasn’t sure how. She put the matter out of her mind, intending to think it out later, tomorrow perhaps. They danced a few more numbers, but both felt restless, and they left early. As they walked toward his car, holding hands, neither realized how profoundly she had changed. They were happy but unsuspecting of what must come next, so that when they parked, and her passion went utterly nova, they were helpless in its trajectory.



REFLECTING ON IT, Nancy had enjoyed their first lovemaking, even though a car seat was a tacky place to accomplish it. Oh well, best to brush that aspect aside. Fortunately, the initial pain was brief, her bleeding light, and the physical pleasure intense. But she felt a nagging unease. She tried dismissing it. After all, she reasoned, it deepened their intimacy. Or had it? Why didn’t she feel glorious fulfillment? Why this hovering disquiet? She sighed, found her notebooks, and started organizing her thoughts.

Her willing free fall to consummate their physical love had been fueled by metaphysical hunger, a need to boost their spiritual union to a higher plane. But it hadn’t worked. The relationship still fell short of the spiritual melding she craved. Close behind came the pangs of her conscience. Well, not exactly conscience. She didn’t feel guilt as such. But she did shrivel at the thought of her parents’ finding out. And there was more. Suddenly the future seemed less certain. But most troubling came the stirrings of something deeper, an unease more vague, a sense of transactions meshing and grinding on beyond her control. For example, she found herself powerless to even ask that their relationship be

restored to its pre-sexual boundary. Subsequent discussions presumed their continuing sexual intimacy, centering instead on the need for protection and his willingness to wear it without fail.

When her period didn't arrive, she polarized into firm denial. She had faith in her destiny, that she couldn't be that unlucky. But when it didn't arrive a second time, she sank into a despondence that pressed her like a wet sheet. The vitality of her relationship with Jason began to flag as well. She saw herself helpless to respond to obvious signs he was growing restless, that the qualities initially attracting him no longer held their original appeal. Unable to get her wits about her, she felt miserably adrift, lost in space. Finally, in desperation, she called Kevin, now a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania.



"NANCY, WHAT'S THE matter?" he asked, shocked by her sobbing breakdown over the phone. He gripped the receiver with frantic helplessness, an entire continent away from her anguished tears.

"Oh, Kevin," she cried, "I think I'm pregnant."

"The guy is Jason, the one you told me about?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid to tell him."

"And you missed your period?"

"Twice. I've been tempted to go to the Women's Clinic—the one in Santa Monica."

"But you're underage. I'm sure they'll do the tests, but I think they'll have to notify your parents."

"Oh, Kevin," she wailed, piercing him to the heart, "if only you were here to hold me. If you had been here to talk me through this, then maybe I wouldn't have gotten into this awful mess."

"Steady, Nancy. We need a game plan. Is Doctor Harbison still your family physician?"

"Yes."

"Then go to him. He's more likely to keep your secret. But remember: secrecy only matters if you're not pregnant."



DAYS LATER, STILL awaiting test results from Doctor Harbison, Nancy arrived home from school and unexpectedly saw her father's Mercedes parked in the

back, near the house, but not in its place in the garage.

“Father, what a surprise,” she said, glad of his unexpected presence, but surprised a second time to see him sitting at the dining room table rather than in his study as he normally preferred. “Why are you home this early?”

“Your mother called me home to discuss important matters,” he said, his expression calm but unsmiling as he looked up from the papers he held, his leather briefcase open and beside him on the table. “And it looks as though I’ll be serving as chauffeur to the airport.”

Before she could ask about these bewildering statements, her mother entered the room.

“Nancy, your pregnancy test was positive,” she said, as though the news were routine. Nancy would always remember how normal and unfazed she looked as she said these words. Then she came and took her hands. “Come upstairs with me to your room, dear. I need to fill you in on plans while we pack.”

After that, events became disjointed for her. There was the packing, her mother needing to make her decisions; then her father driving them to the airport, nothing being said in the car; then the long, cross-country plane ride. Almost from the start, she went down for the count, shrank into herself, and became docile to her mother’s domination. Her emotions energized briefly when Aunt Edith met them at the Philadelphia airport. She felt a flash of shame at Auntie E’s tender greeting, and she bawled within her beloved aunt’s hug for that one and only time.

Then came the long drive to New York State. After that, things became even more of a haze. She remembered the medicinal smell of the clinic, of being prepped, wheeled in, and draped. The sounds of equipment and instruments being readied hardly reached her. Already sedated, she wondered with utter detachment whether she would live through this, caring little about the matter. She stared up at the fluorescent lamps, pondering their icy white light, so impersonal and sterile. Finally came the anesthetic.



BACK IN LOS Angeles, she felt a listlessness edging into melancholy. Rather than face it, she took a day and slept on and off for fourteen hours. Then she pushed toward reengaging some semblance of routine.

She felt no guilt over the abortion. Her liberal upbringing insulated her from that. Moreover, she had not had any say in the matter whatsoever. Her views had never once been consulted. Still, a sense of loss threw a pall over her mood. She wanted to call Kevin, but she flinched from describing what she was going through to a guy. How could even Kevin relate to this? She studied and read a good bit, went shopping with her mother. But she couldn't turn to the physical outlets, dancing, for instance, or gymnastics, that had long been her primary outlets for stress. Her recovery needed weeks before she could exercise in any significant way. She felt trapped and helpless, a prisoner of feelings she refused to ratify.

The dream came on her third night home. She stood apart from herself as she hand-pumped water into a pitcher. She was outside, in brilliant sunshine, wearing a simple blue and white cotton print dress, something a farmer's wife might have worn around the turn of the century. She was in a vineyard setting, Napa Valley, her long, golden hair tied at the back of her neck. Behind her stood a small wood-frame house, hardly more than a one storey shack, raised slightly, as though on foundation blocks.

He came walking up the path that was in front of her and to the right. He was eight years old. He had a thick mop of hair, same golden hue as hers, and he walked, head bowed, hair fallen forward, so she could not see his face. Barefoot and shirtless, he wore dungarees held up by, of all things, suspenders. He walked slowly but with bounce, ticktocking from side to side as she'd seen him do in the past. He approached her, just barely grazing against her dress and, as he passed on, that dirty little boy scent of him rose up into her nostrils, swelling her with maternal joy. She turned and watched him enter the house.

She awoke and sat up, trembling for several seconds. Then she steadied herself, calmed down, and lay back, understanding better the forces that twisted within. The vague warnings about emotional repercussions had not prepared her for this. The dream's vividness hardened the sense of loss she had been trying to reject, and her melancholy soaked deeper into her. Worse yet, the sadness rotated slowly around to depression, like having layers of dark water settle over her. The effect was narcotic and, within a minute or two, she regained a fitful, unsatisfying sleep.

The next night the dream returned exactly as before. Again she awoke, explored its shape in her mind, then returned to unsettled sleep. She did not have the dream on the third night and she awoke refreshed and relieved. But then at dinner, it played out in her mind's eye as she sat with her mother and Barbara.

Christine was away at school, and her father was working late. It didn't seem like a hallucination, yet she could not keep herself from seeing the scene of the mop-haired boy play out within her, this time with emotional force.

"Nancy, what's the matter?" Barbara asked. "You're staring like you've seen a ghost."

"What is it, Nancy?" her mother asked, showing alarm.

"I need to talk with you, Mother," she said, rising from her chair and heading for the privacy of the downstairs guest room. She sat on the bed, her mother joining her, and she told of the recurring dream.

"Oh, baby," her mother whispered, kissing her temple as Nancy clung to her. "I had so hoped you would be spared this kind of...side effect."

"At least we know what I'm up against. It was so real."

"I'll call Doctor Meardin first thing in the morning and get you an emergency appointment." Nancy had seen the psychologist once, but just as a warm-up session.

"But tomorrow's Saturday."

"I promise, he'll see you."

She could not recall her mother ever treating her so tenderly. And it probably spurred her recovery more than the multiple therapy sessions to follow. She also looked forward to sharing all this with Jason. But the thought gave her pause. She felt disappointed he hadn't called, but she didn't let it get her down. From a remote part of herself, she sensed she could not afford to let it sag into worry. Anyway, she could think of a dozen good reasons for his deciding to hold off. Once she was well enough for school, they could reestablish their relationship.

But on the night before her return to classes, her parents suggested she not see him.

"But I have to see him, Mother," she replied. "I need to be with him and talk to him about all that's happened."

"But things have changed, dear," her mother said. "You've been through so much trauma. You both need time to heal. Seeing him is going to slow your recovery."

"No it won't. It's what I need for my recovery. It's been more than two weeks. I need to see him. And he'll want to see me."

"I'm sure he'll be glad to see you," her father said cautiously, "to know that you're well. But you may not find things as you expect, like they were before."

"What do you mean by that, Father?"

“Well, we met with the Pruitts, your mother and I. And we came to an understanding...that each of you needs some breathing room. And Jason... Karen, help me with this, please.”

“What your father means, dear, is that things have changed. The scene has changed. Nancy, I’m sorry; I don’t know how to break this to you gently. Jason has agreed to a complete time-out, to suspend your relationship. Now, please, don’t be upset.”

“He would never agree to such a thing!”

“Nancy, you have to understand that he cannot afford to risk his family’s support for college and a special European vacation after he graduates this June. His family has impressed on him that a lot is at stake. And there’s something else, something you need to know.”

“What? Tell me.”

“I talked to May last night, to get an update. What she said is that Jason...” and her voice trailed off.

“Mother, you must tell me.”

“I’m sorry, dear. Jason is dating other girls. And he has been for weeks.”

The words shattered her insides, but she forced her expression to remain a mask. She tried to disbelieve, but this new reason for his not calling spun her with panicky force. By the next day at school, she had rallied to be halfway hopeful. But it was all downhill from there. Everything she heard confirmed the bad news. A few days later she finally encountered him in the hall during class change. Her spirits rose, tightening as he approached. But he walked briskly and did not slow down.

“Hi, Nancy,” he said, his broad smile bland and unremembering. “Glad to see you back.” Then he moved past her and was swallowed by the crowd of milling students.

Other things added nails to the coffin: seeing him escort other girls, for instance. But it was the hallway encounter that broke her spirit and cemented her defeat. Her sadness welled up like a smothering darkness, provoking a despondence so deep, her parents dropped any thought of ending her therapy. But the therapy did help, and she felt herself healing, if slowly. Some aspects of her fall seemed permanent. She looked back on a freshness of outlook she could not regain. And she lost faith that her theories of Aesthetic Love would conquer the world and line her life’s pathway with bright expectations.

At least things continued well at home. They pulled together as a family and became more caring of one another. She dropped her drama club participation

and lessons, deciding to concentrate on dancing because it seemed more physically satisfying and healing. Her father did his part by making a special effort to attend her spring recital. Phone calls to Kevin helped, as did restoring her friendships at school.

Then in May, Aunt Edith and her husband, Stanley, showed a special kindness by inviting her to join them for a six-week summer tour of European museums and galleries. They had moved to the Delaware Valley when Nancy was in ninth grade so he could become a curator at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Her aunt worked for a gallery in sales and did independent appraisal work. The trip's intent was a mixture of business and pleasure—pure fun for her—and she was touched by the gesture. Although Kevin could not join them, it was the first prospect that truly elevated her spirits.

Edith had long sensed Nancy's special need for affection, suspecting her sensitive nature would thrive on art studies. And she had been glad to help Karen out in that regard. It had been Edith's New York State contacts that prevailed in the decision about Nancy's abortion. Now she wanted to give her favorite niece a special tour of things beautiful. The trip contributed enormously to Nancy's recovery. But it also affected her future. Months later, on reviewing college options, she suddenly knew she wanted to move closer to her aunt and to join Kevin in attending the University of Pennsylvania. She never regretted the decision. In the university setting, its Ivy League ambience unlike anything she'd known, Kevin became her mentor, confidant (once again), and protector: the brother she never had.



HER PARENTS ENCOURAGED her to join a sorority and offered to pay her dues. This in addition to the generous allowance they provided for her other expenses. At first she couldn't decide. But she didn't like her dorm, and she didn't like her roommate. So when formal rush rolled around in January, she was ready to give it a try. She enjoyed the suspense of such a structured tier of meetings and parties. Plus it was a sedate process for the girls. They had only six chapters to interact with, compared to the twenty-odd fraternities the boys had to choose from. To her delight, she was invited back to the invitation-only parties and went on to receive a bid from the sorority she marked highest on her preference card. She took an instant liking to the sorority lifestyle and the social life that went with it.

She didn't elect a return to sexual activity until her sophomore year at Penn. She was in no hurry, what with the healing process almost never ending, and Kevin provided the soothing, nourishing emotional support she needed at that stage. She might have remained celibate longer but for a cluster of circumstances that made it easy to give in to the impulse by stages: a party at her own house, one civilized enough for her to enjoy, yet lively enough to keep everyone distracted; a roommate who was away for the weekend; a potential partner who was good-looking, charming, not a bit inebriated, wanting her enough that it flattered, titillated, but without being too pushy, as others had been over the past year. They kissed for an extended period, blending in with the other couples, and she liked how he held back, not putting his hands on her body.

"I can tell you're in some kind of recovery mode," he whispered to her. "But you couldn't have done a better job of setting me on fire."

Time to decide, she thought, pulling back to look into his face, into eyes imploring but patient, not insistent. It was his constrained want that made her signal him to follow her upstairs.

"Are you okay?" he asked after several minutes of heavy petting in her room. She thought about it, realizing he was giving her another chance to back out, and that he must be sensing her disquiet. She knew she wasn't quite ready, but what sent her forward was the feeling of having traveled far enough that it would be unfair to deprive him now, not after he had given her such consideration, more than she would expect from most boys. She resumed kissing him, with more passion, determined to make the best of it. Soon she was ready, and he turned, reaching for the foil packet containing the condom.

He had prepped her well, made her liquid with physical want, but not well enough to burn through her apprehension. And there was a moment of suspense, just before his entrance, that she felt vulnerable, almost fearful. Then came the pleasure, a torrent of it, spreading across the expanse of her senses, building to sonic velocity, and she reached completion before he did.

Afterward, he tended to things silently, with practiced smoothness, then was quickly asleep. She lay beside him, against him, really, in the small bed, and let her spinning emotions slow down and coalesce. As they did, the sentiment came galloping forward from a remote part of herself that was hard-wired, and it settled in decisively: a feeling of being cheapened and sullied by this escapade. She thought it through, forward and back, wanting to be thorough, wanting to be sure. In the end, she didn't care how liberated the other girls thought they were

entitled to be. For her, this had been wrong. She got up, went down the hall, and took a hot bath.

The good thing about making love in a sorority bedroom is that there can hardly be any question of a fellow overstaying his welcome. She let him sleep for an hour, then woke him to get him on his way.

“You’re turning me out without a second go?” he asked, clearing quickly from sleep, his eyes hopeful and beginning to sparkle again.

“I’m sorry,” she replied, “but it’s not for me. You’ve been charming and nice, but I’d prefer you go now.”

He got up and started dressing, eyeing her appraisingly, his expression as pleasant as before. She faced him, sitting in a straight-backed chair, composed and fully dressed in sweater and slacks.

“You’re behaving like a very uptight girl,” he said as he slipped on his loafers, his pleasant tone sanding the edge off his blunt words.

“I know.”

“Yet you have such potential, such capacity for pleasure. You almost popped out of your skin when you came tonight. You have a gift for it, a talent.”

“I hope so. I’m counting on it down the road.”

“But there’s no need to waste it now. We live in enlightened times like never before. There are frontiers of sexuality being broken on this campus that would blow your mind with pleasure. I have access, and we’d be perfect partners for never wanting to do the drugs.”

“No, thank you. It’s not for me.”

“Sure? Can’t be any harm in trying. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

“It wouldn’t work for me,” she answered. “Tonight has taught me that I’m a very unliberated girl, maybe even old fashioned.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It means that for me, pleasure is not enough. It has to be about love, and love that’s drenched with commitment.”

“Such a waste,” he said, chuckling sardonically, turning to leave.



THE ONE-NIGHT STAND started an inner process that changed her outlook on sorority life. She had been an unusual member from the start. The sister who drank the least, she nevertheless had been successful socially, and living at the house put her in the thick of things at a pace that stimulated and excited her for

nearly a year. But now she began to find it all a bit cloying. True, she had made many friends, still enjoyed much of the social life, but the cliquishness of the girls, the insularity of their interests, their distraction with boys and booze, began to annoy her.

And other interests began to intrude. Her fine arts studies became more serious, more demanding, as did her dancing. But her acting saw the biggest change, and the sexual one-nighter had an indirect part to play in the process, becoming a launchpad for completing the lagging emotional recovery to which her acting fortunes seemed tied. Although the fling had been disappointing, she turned from it wiser, more emotionally settled, and with a sense of resolution. Her ability to act well, severely damaged and slow to recover from her high school trauma, finally rebounded. Now her drama club exercises again became imbued with that transcendent power, a certain stage presence, that she possessed before her pregnancy. The coaches, but especially the club artistic director, Professor Len Tilleson, took notice. He was so impressed with her improvement that he decided to give her a chance to shine in one of the public productions. When the top female lead needed to return home for a funeral, Nancy was asked to fill in. She could hardly believe it when he made the offer. When the production was first cast, she hadn't been acting well enough to qualify as one of the understudies for the leading role. Now she was being offered an opening that put her ahead of two qualified understudies. Nancy didn't understand that, but she knew she couldn't pass up this opportunity. That meant she had to drop everything and scramble to prepare. Such pressure. Fortunately, the play was one of her favorites, one she knew well. She took the stage as Maggie in Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and when she heard the closing ovation, it confirmed she had delivered the best performance of her life.

Afterward, professor Tilleson came backstage to congratulate her. But he was also accompanied by a New York talent agent, one she had no idea was in the audience. The agent invited her to come to his agency during spring break and try out for representation by doing a cold reading audition. She did so and, although the audition did not go as well as she hoped, she was still offered agency representation. By the time she got to play prominent parts in *The Spring Medley Production*, the last of the semester, her agency had enough bit parts and tryouts lined up for her to get summer employment off to a good start.

Nancy wanted to retain aspects of sorority life, but judged the total immersion of living at the chapter house as just too much. She retained her

membership, but moved to an off-campus apartment, deciding against taking on a roommate, even though it strained her budget. She wanted to see whether solitude would focus her acting and help with learning her lines. She became enthusiastic about her progress, and the iridescence of a possible stage career motivated her with suppressed anticipation.

But her rising acting fortunes did not restrain an equally revived interest in romance. She started dating in earnest and, in the spring semester, fell for one of her classmates: a thin, dark-haired boy from Rhode Island: wiry and as intense as the painter he aspired to be. Moody, yes, but with a brooding severity that stirred her with its creative mystery even as it provoked an urge to love and nurture. It flattered to be courted by someone of his talent and high status. She couldn't resist the need he expressed for her. At first, he treated her as though she were this brilliant diamond he had found, her radiance just what he needed to nourish his creative spirit. The dominating manner he assumed after they consummated their affair simply seemed like the next stage in their relationship. She didn't mind that his sexual manners became rough and one-sided, but she did mind that his words sometimes carried beyond irritable to cruel. When he started humiliating her in small ways in front of friends, it stressed their relationship.



"I'VE ENDED IT," she told Kevin when he came down to his dorm lobby at her urgent summons.

"What happened?"

"You won't believe it. I caught him flirting with another girl when I arrived to meet him at Mallory's, in the bar."

"Oh, I believe it," he answered. "How do you feel?"

"Shaky. But angry as all get-up. It all turned sour in an instant, Kevin. Suddenly I saw him as he really is, and everything—I mean everything I ever felt for him—turned to anger. And disgust. I can't believe how little hurt I feel over this. What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing. You finally woke up. Congratulations."

"But I was so dumb in this that it's mind-boggling. All these theories of Aesthetic Love that I've cooked up and treasured like sacred text chiseled in stone, and it doesn't keep me from going delusional over a guy who was a creep from the get-go. You had him pegged all along."

“Nanz, you’re being too hard on yourself. It took years for you to recover from what you went through with Jason. Now your artistic temperament is alive again, and that always increases the pitch of your emotions. You’ve slipped into the habit of living your life by leading with your heart. You’re a smart girl, and we need to get your smarts in charge of that big heart of yours.”

“You’re right. I need to be more careful, and I need to set higher standards. I need to get back to searching for my aesthetic partner, my soul mate. The dream is still alive after all.”



ON RETURNING AS a junior, she tried to follow Kevin’s advice when she met Craig Lawler in her advanced English literature course. He asked her out for coffee the first day of class, and she accepted because of his natural charm, and because he was the handsomest man she had ever met. A failed novelist from an effort that bypassed college in favor of fulltime writing, Craig had an uncle who was financing a catch-up education in creative writing at Penn, the uncle’s alma mater.

“I love you,” he had whispered on their second dinner date.

But she felt uneasy about him. It seemed unreal to be wooed by a slightly older man who was far prettier, in a way, than she, one whose beauty gave him a wide range of romantic choices. But her main reservation was that his feelings emanated from a simple makeup, one incapable of the aesthetic altitude she sought. And he did have shortcomings: a quick, fiery temper, a shallow commitment to his course work, and a thinly disguised vanity about his looks. It was no accident his hair was always better coifed than hers.

Nevertheless, she did find him appealing, felt drawn to his caring and his beauty and his charm. And perhaps his no-frills affection was the formula needed to settle her emotionally for a concerted effort at catapulting her acting to the next plateau. She knew she would be compromising her aesthetic ideal, but the logic of doing it for the sake of her acting was tempting. In the end, she let him sweep her into erotic completion out of hopeful doubt, a kind of trial. As before, sexual immersion brought her to her senses. But the cost was high for them both.

“I’m sorry, but it’s over,” she told him outside her apartment, unwilling to let him up the stairs and into her bed again.

“But I’ve just begun to love you. Why are you locking me out? We’ve gone all the way as lovers, and now to shut us down before we can grow our relationship? I don’t get it; it makes no sense.”

“Craig, I understand how painful this is for you. And if there were a way I could take it all back and save you this pain, believe me, I would. This is a terrible mistake that I let happen. But I do not love you. And we have to end this now, completely, before things get any worse.”

“But you’re not giving us a chance. I can’t accept this.”

Hence her dilemma, and her challenge. How to get free of an intimacy she shouldn’t have started in the first place, while being compassionate to the man she had wronged by her own bad choices? For weeks she refused to see him, trying by phone to talk him out of the relationship and on his emotional way. Finally, he promised to move on with his life if she would agree to see him one more time. She recognized the trap, but also saw an opportunity, if risky, to gain the moral high ground for putting permanent distance between them. Since he was the injured party, she decided to suffer his advances to gain that advantage. Thus, with contrite determination, she agreed to meet him, one last time, at Sullivan’s Bar and Lounge, that Friday night in late September.

Chapter Six

NANCY FELT A luxurious serenity as she stepped from the bath. She had plenty of time before Wayne's arrival and wrapped the large towel around her torso, then a smaller one around her head and hair. The hair would need major attention later, but choice of outfit was more pressing. The selection needed to be well balanced between alluring sexiness and the modest mystery appropriate for their first proper date. She narrowed it down, settled on her long, black crepe maxi, then smiled, happy with the choice. It was flared from mid-calf and had a slit on one side, extending a few inches above the knee. It was off the shoulder but appropriate, had bell sleeves, and fit her perfectly. She knew she would be a bit overdressed when she added her diamond earrings, but that was typical of her approach for social events: a measure overdressed but understated in poise and manners. She thought her hands too athletic, too unfeminine to be attractive, but her hair was her glory, her one true vanity. Tonight she wanted it at its best, and suddenly it hit her how to style it. She would bring it all to one side, secure it with her antique jeweled comb, and let all her tresses tumble past her left breast.

Okay, she thought, that gets me dressed to the nines, but how to steer the evening's discussions? How far to push the interview she planned in light of the week's unexpected developments? She felt less settled than when they had conversed Sunday night, and that was due to how he had affected her on Wednesday. There had been that hitch in her chest at recognizing him among the scramble of players. She watched him sprinting, playing hard, yet his body moved easily, having fun, his face nearly a smile. And then there were his hands. They embodied the contrast that intrigued her most about him as a man: the fluid strength he exuded when in motion versus the emotional extent to him when in repose and with her. They were hands large for his slender build, but the precise, feathery way his fingers had closed on the football, as though made of china rather than leather, suggested the sensitive side of him she had glimpsed. But it was after the ball reached him that her heart skipped a beat. That strange, jump-triggered spinning motion he executed just after the catch: the whirling around of his arms and shoulders, his feet still off the ground, as though defying gravity. Here she had spent her entire life defining feminine grace through dance and, in

a moment of ambush, he executes one of the most dynamic male versions of the sought-after 'elan she had yet seen. And on a football lawn, of all places. The effect on her emotions ballooned when he stopped in front of her. He stood there, his breath steaming slightly in the wind, fondling the ball distractedly as he shifted it back and forth from one hand to the other. She felt liquid, wanting those hands fondling her rather than some leather pigskin.

He saw the effect he was having on her, but struggled to interpret it, and his expression became to one of concern, a kind of courtesy response. He refused to take advantage of her obvious vulnerability, and it touched her heart. Did this tiny, noble gesture mark him as *the one*, a guy whose emotional depth, whose hunger and capacity for love, matched her own? That was what she must find out tonight. She resolved then, to finish the process she started at Cavanaugh's. If his responses could thaw that last region of her fears, she would unlock her heart and fly to him, to try for the long sought aesthetic union that was the pinnacle of her dreams.

But was it? Was it really? What about her other, rival dream? Just weeks ago she had compromised her romantic ideals in an affair intended to lower distractions from boosting her acting potential. Her stage career was already off-the-charts successful compared to original hopes. And just this past week, her agent had secured an acting offer that could change her life. She hadn't begun the process of deciding about that. Instead she had completely deferred thinking of it at all—because...because of tonight, because tonight could change things. She had long known she could not fulfill both her dreams. One would have to be sacrificed. But which would it be?

Now she sat in front of her vanity, needing to finish her makeup. But she felt a taut stillness within her, the suspense of the coming evening making her rapt with contemplation. Just then a commercial airliner passed overhead, unusually low, lavishing the quiet apartment with its ramjet sigh as it neared, then faded in the distance. She had an image, stirring and lonely, of the plane and its crew, who they might be and where they might be going. And she thought of her own life's journey, and whether tonight would affect its course.



THE DOORBELL RANG precisely at six. She checked the intercom, heard his greeting, released the electric lock, and stood in the apartment's small living room, waiting for him to come up the stairs. When he appeared, yellow roses in

hand, he didn't answer her hello. Instead he stared, smiling, frankly admiring her, and she knew the careful preparations had all been worth it. Surely he couldn't know how much his gaze affected her.

"Nancy, you look...gorgeous." He had on a blue blazer over gray slacks and a white turtleneck.

"Thank you," she said, beaming. "Here, let me take those flowers. Thank you for bringing them. I love roses." She went into the kitchen and returned a few minutes later with the flowers arranged in a simple vase.

"Why, that's the David McCallum album," he said, referring to the music playing on her hi-fi. The album was *Music: a Part of Me*, and the song was "The Far Side of the Moon." The album did not have original tunes, but interpretive instrumental arrangements of ones already popular.

"It's one of my favorites," she said.

"But it's not well known. How did you ever come across it?"

"My friend Angela took a chance on it. I happened to hear it, liked it too, and bought it. Do you like it?"

"I do."

"Your turn. How did you find it?"

"My younger sister, Eileen, bought it because she likes him in *Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, the TV series. She didn't like the music, and neither did my sister, Margaret, so I inherited the album."

They smiled, happy the music provided one more thing they had in common. A good omen, she thought.

She "oohed" and "aahed" over the T-Bird, and she saw him beam at her praise.

"It was lent me by a mutual acquaintance: Doug Murser."

They stood a few minutes, discussing Doug and the story of the car's restoration. She brushed her hand against the car's lustrous salmon finish, then glanced up to catch him looking at her. But his expression caught her off guard. His eyes were warm but also uncertain, as though questioning. It was only an instant before his smile returned.



BOOKBINDERS STOOD IN the oldest part of downtown, on Walnut Street near the Delaware River. When he made their reservations, he requested one of the smaller of their many dining rooms. The maitre d did seat them in a small room,

and Wayne was happy with its cozy atmosphere. Now that she sat across from him, he could take in her beauty head on. She was so resplendent in her outfit and her jewels, and her makeup was more elaborate than he had seen it, giving her face a regal demeanor. He thought back to her earlier greeting. A mental calibration issue had nearly knocked him off stride. After Thursday night's kissing episode, he had somehow expected her to look and behave differently. But if anything, her eyes were more inviting, her smile creamier, more reserved for him than ever before.

The waiter fussed deferentially over getting them set up and in taking their drink orders. It broke the rhythm of their conversation and, as he continued looking at her, watching her give her order, he lapsed into a unique contentment: a drifting serenity within the moment, a stillness self-contained, requiring nothing more, asking no future, and forcing his impending banishment from her to become a distant thing, no longer able to trouble him within the floating, drifting, bubble of the instant. Time slowed to tiny euphoric droplets, each sipped with pleasure, and suddenly it didn't matter that she couldn't love him as he needed, didn't matter either her involvement with another man. For now, there was only her beauty to fill his senses, and her attentive gaze, shy and offering, to melt his insides. For now, he could make believe none of it mattered, and dream on, pretending their reality was a thing of his own making.



THE CONVERSATION FLOWED easily as she maneuvered them from topic to topic.

"Do you remember our discussion at Cavanaugh's about types and levels of love?"

"How could I forget?" he replied. "Your ideas make it convincing that something special between two people is possible, not just chasing rainbows."

"Thank you. What a flattering thing to say. When we talked, you had some concerns, but we didn't get to finish our discussion about your views."

"You're giving me a lot more credit than I deserve. My thinking on the subject is low-grade generic compared to yours. I always appreciated the problem of how to make the emotion last, but I never grasped your idea that only a small fraction of people would even want what we're discussing. My thinking had more to do with wondering why partners didn't rise to love's potential, inspired by knowledge, or pheromones, or something. To me, it was about how people would come across the right key to wanting more."

“How does the scarcity concept affect your thinking? What issues do you see?”

“Well, one question is how do you get those lovers connected up, especially if they are only a few among many?”

“Why can’t they just search until they find each other?” she asked, testing him. “They’re bound to have an instinct to seek.”

“Yes, but they won’t stay with it.”

“Why not?”

“Because people have sexual impulses that stampede them toward settling for less—less than the aesthetic you’ve proposed. That way, the impulses get satisfied and the need for procreation is met as well. When you think about it, it’s all very mathematical. It’s the mathematical way the sex drive operates statistically to reproduce the species. That math doesn’t include, at all, the higher emotional union you’ve described. So it’s improbable. The right pair is too distracted to connect up. And if that weren’t bad enough, nature provides a second trapping mechanism to thwart our special pair.”

“How so?” she asked, delighted with the path he was on.

“Nature, or maybe providence, gives most of us a flash dose of the aesthetic we’re talking about. Most couples start out feeling breathtaking love for each other no matter how mismatched they are. But they don’t know what to do with it; they don’t know how to take care of it; and it can’t last in any case because eventually the incompatibilities begin to drag them down and down. So what we end up with is the emotional apathy we see in so many of the married couples all around us. It’s a universal formula for emotionally overcast days.”

“So, is it hopeless?”

“I hope not.”

“There must be a solution. How do we provide some sort of counterweight to the forces you’ve described, so we have time to find our kindred spirit?”

“I wish I knew.”

“Well, there’s pain,” she suggested.

“How do you mean?” he asked, startled by the notion, even as she could see him breathe in the tremor of her meaning.

“Pain, deep emotional pain, from romance that’s crashed and burned: it can provide the counterweight we’re looking for. It can hold back the impulses you’ve described so we keep searching.”

“Why, yes, I think you’re right,” he said. “It’s another one of those mechanisms, out there operating, that I’ve seen, but haven’t connected on.”

Emotional pain does have that effect on people. So maybe there's more hope than I was thinking."

"If we can think it, and want it, then surely there must be hope for it. Hope for a few."

"Yes, of course. I shouldn't be so downbeat. Although...there are other problems that have to be solved."

"Which one do you think is the most serious?"

"Longevity, like we talked about before. Even if they meet and match, how to make it last a lifetime?"

"Should love last a lifetime?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered. "I feel strongly on that score."

"Why so strongly?"

"Because anything else is unfair...to others. Too much heartbreak all around."

"But what about pilot relationships? Why not try out commitments for a year, or maybe two as a good faith test?"

"It's fundamental," he answered. "It's how we're made. A trial relationship is just pretending. It's as doomed as building a house without a foundation. When the love is right, we crave it forever."

"I agree. And I agree with your reasons. Lifetime commitment it is then. So let's come back to the concern you have. Can love be made to last a lifetime?"

"There must be a way to pull it off."

"But how? What would be necessary to make it happen?"

"Hard work and effort. And sacrifice. And planning."

"Such as?"

"Some of it would be pretty mundane, like staying healthy and attractive to your mate through the years."

His words dived into her, energizing her, and she could feel the cup of her love flowing over.

"Actions do speak louder than words, don't they?" she said.

"Yes, always. But Nancy, I can see it in your eyes. You already know all this."

"Yes, some. But you're keying a lot on our mutual interest. And you mustn't stop now. Do you see other things that might affect whether love can last?"

"There are some things I'd mention. People change, so lovers need to grow and change together. That takes sharing, which requires time and space. So one of the things that might need adjusting is career."

“How true,” she said. “A sixty-hour work week doesn’t leave much time for romance. And career is one area where people show by their actions that they are not much interested in the kind of bonding we’re discussing.”

“Agree.”

“Yes, this is not like the other aspect you mentioned. Most people are just not knowledgeable about how to stay attractive, and the sags and pounds creep up on them. But there are so many people who see what career zeal is doing to their relationship. Yet they show by their actions that the love of their life is not worth spending a few less hours at work.”

“I’m afraid I can’t disagree.”

“Wayne, what would you be willing to sacrifice? No, let me say it differently. If you could find that high aesthetic, with a girl you felt special about, what would you be willing to sacrifice to keep it fresh over time?”

“A lot. Staying with the example we’re using, the career would have to be secondary. Not neglected, not that, but second place. The kind of relationship we’re discussing takes time to tend properly. But I also think there’s an upstream aspect to it.”

“I’m not following you.”

“Sorry. It’s just that...well, I suspect just wanting this kind of commitment would affect a person, affect them upstream in time, before the relationship starts. Like, it would affect a person’s ambition profile. And I guess that’s because wanting this kind of sharing must crowd out other ambitions to some extent. Or maybe it’s because wanting it takes up a lot of space in a person’s soul, and that space isn’t available for other things.”

“Yes, I know exactly what you mean,” she replied pensively, thinking of her skyrocketing acting prospects, now seeming less important every minute she spent with him.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t think about how that would sound coming out. I wasn’t trying to skewer you with the issue, not at all.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Obvious isn’t the word I’d use. But you are a special girl, with a special dilemma.”

“Tell me how you see it.”

“Well, on the one hand, you could literally give academic lectures on high romantic love. Do you have a name, by the way, for what you’ve developed?”

“I call it Aesthetic Love.”

“That’s perfect. But the other side of the dilemma is that you have talents you can’t ignore. They force responsibilities on their owners, and they’re bound to generate a magnetic pull as powerful as any emotion.”

“No,” she said, feeling dismay she hadn’t foreseen. “That’s not how it is for me. I work hard at acting, and in a way I love it, and dancing too. But it doesn’t have the hold on me you think. I’m completely free to choose.”

“But can talent like yours ever be a matter of choice?”

She paused, mulling it over. At the beginning of the evening, she had been torn, perhaps even afraid. But now that she had glimpsed his soul, she could feel her emotions tumbling toward him.

“Believe me,” she said, coming to a decision, “my talent is not the force in my life you think it is. I would walk away from it in an instant for the kind of relationship we’ve discussed.”

She watched him blush from her response and was glad her message was clear.

“Wayne, you spoke of Aesthetic Love as needing lot of space in a person’s soul. Does it take up space in your soul?”

“I think so,” he answered. “But only because you’ve brought me along to where I can see it. Before our discussions, it was just a muddle inside me that couldn’t look up or see out.”

“This is a journey we were meant to travel together,” she said, and it took all her acting skill to hold back tears of joy, for her heart was committed now, and it soared in free flight, seeking fulfillment in his response.

“Are you sure it’s what you really want?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Then I would give anything to travel that journey with you.”

“Then we will, you and I,” she said, smiling her heart to him, knowing that their emotional destinies were now locked.

Except that she could sense something—something holding him back.

“What?” she asked, after a pause. “You’re smiling but you look troubled.”

“Are there any other...factors in your life that you need to tell me about?”

“I can’t think of anything,” she responded, puzzled by the question.

He paused a moment, as though wrestling with his thoughts. “Well, there is something...something we should touch on.”

“Okay. Tell me, then.”

“Aren’t you at all concerned about the differences between us?”

“Which do you mean?”

“Well, there is this little list: class, social temperament, wealth, politics, co-op Drexel versus Ivy League Penn. I could go on.”

“But these are hardly of much importance,” she answered, relieved his concerns were this trivial. “And they’re easy to adjust for. The important thing is that our souls are mirror images of each other, only male and female.”

As she spoke, she slid her hand toward him across the table. It was the first time they touched and, even though they anticipated the moment, it still sent streamers through them both. In that instant, she could see the tension break within him, and joy flooded his features. As she returned the affectionate clasp of his hand, she felt exultant, and her own commitment was sealed.

Chapter Seven

ON LEAVING THE restaurant, they drove the short distance to the city hall area, then re-parked in a tended lot. They strolled hand in hand to the theater. As expected, *Camille 2000* was a dubbed, Italian import. During the feature, he squirmed a bit, hoping she was not offended by sex scenes that seemed plunked down into the movie without regard for dramatic continuity. But this was not the only thing about the movie that made him squirm. When the lights came back on, they sat still and silent in the afterglow of the film's denouement. The other patrons filed out in a murmuring bustle, then the theater grew quiet.

"Putting aside the awful music," she said, "it was at least an interesting love story."

"Yes," he replied cautiously.

"And you hadn't seen it before?"

"No. Didn't know anything about it, really."

"Then it's such a strange coincidence," she said. "The theme was so ironic for us, don't you think, considering our conversation at the restaurant?"

"I know."

"She sacrifices her love for him because of their class differences, then she goes on to destroy herself so he would return to his aristocratic family."

He was not tempted to respond. He was still uncomfortable, despite his delight over their incipient romance, with the film's unwelcome reminder of factors arrayed against them. He could sense her feeling it, too, a lull in their blooming joy, like a tiny chill she just noticed. She responded by turning her face to him, her eyes glowing with emotion, smiling invitingly.

The kiss she offered flung him into a quandary. Just her nearness like this began to stir him sexually. He had a keen sense of smell, and he was already bonding to the faint, come-and-go scents of her skin, her shampoo, her makeup, and now her breath. His clothes were tight fitting enough that the voltage from their first intimate kiss was sure to produce symptoms hard to conceal. He craved the taste of her lips, but felt it too soon to risk embarrassing her in so public a place. So after kissing her hand, he stood and led them out, guiding them up the aisle, down the mirrored hall, and onto the escalator.

As they ascended, she leaned, still holding his hand, close against him. Then they were off the escalator and entering the street-level lobby. Suddenly she bounded away toward a group of three who were waiting to see the next show. They looked to be a couple plus an unattached guy. Nancy rushed to the unattached fellow, laughing, accepting his outstretched hands in greeting. Then she greeted the couple—she obviously knew them well—and she talked animatedly to the girl.

“You mean Corey is really going to use Rhonda’s rework of the second composition, with the new finale?” Nancy asked excitedly.

“Yes, can you believe it?” the girl responded. “She’s choreographing it herself and we should be able to try it at this Wednesday’s practice.”

The girls laughed and touched hands encouragingly, obviously gleeful over this development. Meanwhile, Wayne had come up beside Nancy, and she introduced him. All three were Penn students. The girl, May, and unattached guy, Cameron, were fine arts majors who were members of the Penn dance group. Wayne assumed the attached guy, Parish, was a member of the fraternity set (he looked it), since May wore a fraternity pin, presumably his.

“Drexel?” May asked, almost coughing a depreciating laugh. Wayne smiled inwardly at the snub, something that had to be a reflexive lapse.

“Yes,” Nancy responded, giving May such a wide-eyed look of reprimand that it told Wayne the girls were probably sorority sisters as well. “You remember, the school with one of the best engineering programs in the state.”

“And what is your major?” May asked, accepting the penance Nancy was prescribing.

“Engineering,” Wayne responded, so amused he couldn’t keep his smile from widening.

“Does Drexel have fraternities?” Parish asked, not looking happy with how Nancy had salvaged the discussion.

“Yeah,” Wayne answered, “we have fraternities and running water both. And we hope to have electricity hooked up to the campus by the end of the year.”

“Speaking of running water,” Nancy intervened, desperate to redirect the conversation, “how are things on the river, Parish? Are you back on the rowing team this year?”

Wayne let the conversation drift away from him. Basis the bumpy opening, their social compatibility loomed as a larger worry than he had thought. And he shrank inside, knowing he had just become a liability. Sure, he could spar with the best of them. But that’s not what she needed here. Although his sarcasm

could be justified, it only created awkwardness for her. She had rescued the situation adroitly and was now immersed in repartee with her friends, part of her ongoing damage control. It was the first time he had seen her in this setting, and her skill jolted him, highlighting differences between them he hadn't thought of. She was more than the good conversationalist he knew. Despite a relaxed style, her manner was so engaging, and so personable, the others readily deferred to her as social leader. Like a ring closing, with him outside it, she bantered with them about mutual friends, student affairs, and dance issues. He felt a rising disquiet, his stomach slowly sinking away, as it dawned on him that he could not go where she was operating socially. At best he could scramble to keep up, slowing her down, cramping her style, never a fit with these friends of hers, the Penn upper crust. And now, as he stood, watching her shine as the social starlet, he felt marooned from her, and in a way, forsaken, as she gave herself over to a certain gaiety with them she never showed with him.

What in the world had he been thinking?



MEANWHILE, DESPITE APPEARANCES, Nancy struggled with anxieties of her own. After the near disastrous start of this chance gathering, she accelerated to top social form to ensure effective repairs were put in place. And that she stayed in control.

But she faced uncertainty. She wanted to end the meeting. And the best way to do that amicably would be to bring him back into the conversation, ending on a high note. But Wayne hung back in an ominous way, and she hesitated to bring him into the discussion just yet, sensing danger. What to do?

And of all the hard luck things to pop up at exactly the wrong time. Certainly she had known that forging them into a social couple would take planning, and perhaps some experimenting as well. She felt confident of the outcome; she just needed time. This meeting had come too soon, risking the progression of their feelings when they were vulnerable. And now she simmered with worry over how this would affect him, affect them. What was he thinking? If only he would jump in or give her a sign.

“Oh, Nancy,” May exclaimed, “I completely forgot to congratulate you.”

“Sounds great, but what about?”

“Why, the New York acting offer, of course. What a breakthrough for you. It's off Broadway, isn't it?”

“Yes, but how did you hear of it?”

“Angela told me at the house earlier today. Said Professor Tilleson mentioned it in her sophomore drama lab late yesterday.”

“Would you believe news could travel that fast?” Nancy said. Then her heart sank because she realized she hadn’t told Wayne about this. He was hearing of it out of context for the first time. She swung her gaze to him, into hooded eyes that dropped from hers.

“Have you made a decision?” May asked.

“Why, I...I ...” Nancy stammered, her social focus now completely shot. “Of course, I’ll...turn down the offer. Stay in school.” She couldn’t tear her gaze from him, so disturbing was the stony look on his face, and her own heart felt sliced with fear.

Upset and near the edge of panic, she moved to end the encounter.

On leaving the theater, he half-heartedly suggested stopping at a lounge just a few blocks west, on Chestnut. But when she suggested instead they return to her apartment, his instant assent, as though eager to end the evening, sent new shivers through her.

“I’m sorry I forgot to tell you about the acting offer,” she said as they reached the car. “It’s something I blocked out of my mind.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it now?”

She did so, describing her car trip to New York for the audition.

“Sounds like a big milestone in your journey as an actress,” he said.

“Yes, in a way, it is. I worked in New York last summer, and I landed some good parts. But this try-out had the stiffest competition I’ve faced. Some of the girls were accomplished professionals. That’s because the part is a fulltime supporting role in an off Broadway production.”

“But I’m confused. Why would your talent agency arrange an audition for a part you had no intention of accepting?”

“My agent would like to lure me from school into a professional career. And he knew this part, if I won it, would tempt me.”

“Are you tempted?”

“I haven’t gotten that far in letting it affect me. When it arrived Tuesday night, I already had things on my mind. I knew that tonight...could change things, so I just put off thinking about it.”

“How long is the offer good for?”

“It’s good through Wednesday.”

“But if you haven’t thought about it, how do you know you’ll turn it down when you do decide to think it over?”

“Because it’s a trivial issue now that I have you. I have you to consider ahead of acting. Because of...us, and because of school, the answer to the offer is an automatic no. But your tone upsets me. You seem skeptical about what I’m saying. My motives. This is simply something I forgot to tell you about.”

“Is it the only thing you forgot to tell me?”

“Why oh why would you ask me that?” she moaned, her exasperation bringing her to the verge of tears. Meanwhile, their journey brought them to the curb in front of her apartment, and he turned off the ignition. A sudden, piercing silence enveloped them, causing the rustle of fabric and her sigh to sound all the louder in the car’s confined space. “Come upstairs,” she urged. “We need to talk.”

But then her heart stopped beating that full second she feared he might actually decline her offer. Finally he reached for the door handle.

The suspense built as they filed up the narrow stairs to her flat. Still feeling the shock of a reversal so bewildering, she realized she had no real strategy for what to do next.

“Take off your jacket and relax,” she said, smiling wanly, but unable to ease the tension. “What can I get you to drink?”

But at first he didn’t respond. He looked down at the floor, then back up at her as he stood there. “I’m not staying, Nancy. I just didn’t want the good-bye to be in the car.”

“But what about us? You can’t just leave without an explanation. This is all so baffling.”

“Are you sure about that? Doesn’t anything come to mind that perhaps you should tell me?”

“Why do you keep asking me that? Why? Wayne, I haven’t a clue in the world about what’s got you so upset. You have to tell me. All I know is that I love you, and I can’t undo that. You’re my whole world now.”

“Oh, cut the crap, Nancy. We both know that I am not your *whole world*.”

“What? What is it? Tell me!” she screamed, her tone piercing.

“Talk about theatrics! Nancy, the world does not know the half of your acting ability. I know about him, Nancy. I know that you’re involved with another guy. Why is it so hard for you to tell me?”

“Another guy? How could you come up with anything so absurd?”

“Thursday night. Di Lulu’s restaurant. I saw you there with another man.”

“Thursday. But...but that was my cousin, Kevin Baxtrim. You misunderstood. He’s a cousin—a special cousin who’s like a brother to me.”

“Brother? C’mon, Nancy, I’m not that gullible. You kissed him on the lips. And there was no mistaking how you looked into his eyes. Henk and I saw the whole performance.”

Her jaw dropping, she shook her head, recoiling from the words. She even put her hand to her cheek as though slapped. “So that’s it. You think I’ve been sleeping with another man, and stringing you along.”

“No,” he replied. “I know your emotions for me are sincere. It’s just that you are a lot more liberated than anything I’m used to on my side of the tracks.”

“You could think that of me? That I could offer you my heart, and my soul, and do it having come from another man’s bed?”

She could see the words jar him, knock him back, but he didn’t flinch. “I only have the facts as I saw them, with my own eyes.”

“And you couldn’t have faith in me, that there must be another explanation?”

“Nancy, you’re not getting it. What I feel for you is strong enough that I could share you with another man. If that were the only choice, then I could find a way to put up with it. But I can’t put up with the way you haven’t told me about it. I let myself fall for you, thinking you would tell me the whole truth.”

“And I suppose your reaction to my acting offer was the same, another thing you thought I was withholding from you?”

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Maybe it shows how acting is sure to consume your life more than you can admit to yourself. Even if the other men in your life don’t destroy us, your acting career surely will, eventually. It’s a force that can’t be denied.”

“You can’t believe that,” she answered, her shock pivoting toward anger.

“I don’t see very much of yourself left over for the you-and-me we talked about at Bookbinder’s. Think about it. Tonight, all that’s come out, even the meeting with your friends: it all shows we have more strikes against us than we can even keep track of.”

“But I...still don’t get it. Everything I told you tonight, everything I offered of myself, it all implied a certain...fidelity...of commitment. The oneness we discussed, that we agreed to share, it isn’t possible if one of us is sleeping around. If you really and truly thought I was on my back, screwing another man, then why didn’t you at least stop me? Why did you let me go on like that, making a fool of myself?”

“I think I’d better go,” he said, turning summarily toward the stairs. The movement galvanized her to action. She grabbed the vase from the sofa end table and hurled it at the wall ahead of him, just to the left of the stairwell. It phased her not a bit that it was an expensive, ancient black-figure reproduction, one her Aunt Edith had bought her when they visited Athens. The vase hit with an explosive report, smashing to smithereens, and Wayne jumped, whirling around, his face bloodless with shock.

“Don’t you dare leave,” she rasped. “Not until you understand what you’ve done.” She was beyond angry now, and she could tell from his face that her eyes must be shining fury like lightbulbs. “Yes, how dramatic,” she continued, “but you must grant the actress her artistic license.” She paused, crossing her arms and raising her eyes to the ceiling, composing, wanting every word to hurt as they burned into him.

“You humiliated me tonight in a way that no one else ever could. Not ever. Only you have been given the power to take my soul, the one I gave you, and discard it like something you wiped from your shoe. And then somehow... somehow you found a way to make it worse by implying I’m too low to behave any other way except as a whore.”

“This is useless,” he declared, his frustration evident, his expression wounded. “Why don’t we just cut our losses and call it quits?”

“Because I want you to see first-hand how right you are about me,” she said. Then she walked to the snack bar phone, picked it up, and punched in a number.

“Nancy, what are you doing?” he asked, his tone impatient, his eyes worried.

“Aren’t you interested in my recovery, how I’m going to get over you?” Her tone dripped with sarcasm. Then she shifted her attention to the phone. “Hello, Marty, is Craig there?”

A pause, during which her eyes locked vehemently with his.

“Craig? Oh, I’m so glad I caught you in.” A pause. “Actually, I’m not doing very well. In fact, I’m going to take you up on your promise.” Another pause. “Yes, I’m serious. Can you come over now?” Another pause. “Good, I’ll see you in thirty minutes. What? Oh, I’ll explain when you get here. Great. Bye.” She replaced the receiver and came back to face him.

“That was Craig Lawler, the man you saw me with at Sullivan’s last Friday. I don’t love him one iota, but I need consolation after what you’ve put me through. And he is more than willing to be of service. It’s a shame, though, in a way. I hate to stir up his feelings for me again. But, hey, what can you expect

from a slut like me? So aren't you glad? You can leave now, knowing you were right about me all along."

"The glad of it is that I got to see the real you before things went any further."

She looked into his eyes, now devoid of the love that had poured from them earlier. Instead their expression was flint hard with anger and hurt. Then they shifted, becoming soft as her betrayal took hold of him, and he lowered his gaze in defeat.

"Please go now," she said, her eyes shifting with dismissive finality.

He did so, head bowed, stealing silently down the stairs. She listened, but did not hear the door latch close, so silently did he leave.

Then the silence grew, widening, touching her deepest recesses, cold, forming into a lonely void, the reverberation of the life she thought she would have with him. And then she was on her knees, on the floor, her face in her hands, sobbing her heart out. The silence had fled, but the loss that replaced it, suffocating in its vastness, was beyond anything she had ever felt for being irrevocable and self-inflicted. He was so wrong, so utterly and wretchedly wrong. He was so wrong she just wanted to spit. And he had hurt her, excoriating her very soul, the one she had opened wide to him out of love. But it would have been child's play to prove him wrong, to put him on the path of frantically wanting to make it up to her. Instead, she had let her outraged pride out of its cage to rampage through their chances, wrecking ball in tow, destroying any hope of bridging back. All for the fleeting satisfaction of hurting him in return as viciously as she could. Now he was lost to her, thinking she hated him, thinking she was sleeping with another to spite him. How could she ever forget his eyes, the way they told how she'd become a monster to him, a creature he no longer knew and certainly could not love?

Things kept getting worse, and tears continued flowing, as repercussions kept checking in and piling up. She thought of the love he had briefly felt for her, a love so transcendent, so compelling, he would have shared her with another man despite the distaste he obviously felt. Now it was gone, reduced to a pile of glass fragments, just like the vase she could never reassemble. That was the point where her despair become smothering, and there was nothing left but to cry her way to the bottom of it. Then she continued on until she had no more tears to give to the cause.

She moved to the sofa for its comfort, and let her mind go blank for a time, several minutes, feeling relief at having the pain abate, at least temporarily. She

mentally replayed the night's events, analyzing as she went. She got through, then started again. Her mind stuck on the encounter with her friends. That was when their ocean-liner hit the iceberg that sent them to the bottom. Perhaps, but she couldn't help wondering how she would replay it if given a second chance, a chance to pick up quicker on the clues he had given of his mixed feelings. But there would be no second chance, no future for them. Hmmm. She thought about that for long minutes. Her emotions might be crushed flat, and the situation abysmal, but her mind could not accept life without him as inevitable. Her wanting him had survived, and it wasn't going away. That thought became anchor point for the journey back upward, back to some kind of light, and back to...hope. Well, maybe not exactly hope, but, as long as she couldn't accept losing him, she might as well set to work on some kind of plan to get him back. It might prove futile, but what did she have to lose?

Now she could feel her emotions freshening, her vitality recharging with a sense of purpose. The wisp of resolution clotted and strengthened, annealed and toughened into a gritty pluck. She hurt yet from his accusation, and she still felt anger enough to take a switch to him. But that did not obscure the love she felt with every breath. Yes. Yes, she would plot and scheme to possess his affections. She simply must have him as her own. Okay, how about a plan? No answer. There was no mental spark of any brightness to illuminate the way forward. No ideas. But she didn't get discouraged. This meant instead that she needed to get into her *serious* mode of thinking.

She went to the bedroom, dug out her notebooks, got a pen, and, as she came back into the living room, realized she must call her friend, Angela, before it got any later.

"Angela, this is Nancy, again."

"Nancy," Angela answered from the other end of the line, "I've been waiting for you to call back. What in heaven's name was that all about earlier? Why did you ring me, pretending to call Craig Lawler, of all people?"

Nancy gave her a thumbnail sketch of events, arranged to meet her tomorrow to give her a complete explanation, then rang off, relieved Angela would now be able to get some sleep. She came back to the sofa. Opening the first notebook to a fresh page, she thought a moment, deciding any plan would need to start with a set of premises. She thought of two immediately and felt a zip of encouragement at this rapid progress. The first premise was that she must not allow personal pride to limit what might be required to restore him. It was from pride that her avenging spirit had raged, and now she must pay the price, whatever it took. The

second premise was harder to define. It had to do with the certainty that words would not be adequate for achieving her purpose. At least not words from her. For he would surely not believe her. She must speak to him through others, and with her actions.

Now she cleared her mind for creative thinking, letting her thoughts go where they might. But nothing came. She backtracked, went over the night's events once more, including recollections from their previous encounters, then tried again to stretch out her mind for creative brainstorming. This time images began to come. They were fragile, too delicate yet, for putting to paper. But she smiled, knowing this was productive. Slowly, the germ of an idea began to form. Eventually she reached for the notebook, and began scribbling. When she finished, she reflected on what she had. This was stranger, simpler than she might have expected.

She felt a fresh flutter of hope, smiled, and went into the kitchen. She retrieved a goblet and the gin she kept in the back of the pantry. She seldom drank, but decided she must break through her hyper state, get some sleep, and pick it back up when she was rested and fresh. She poured about a two-ounce slug. That should do it, considering how sensitive she was to alcohol. But a hangover shouldn't be a problem, either. Down it went in one draft, several swallows, and she grimaced as it seared its way into her stomach. When she coughed unexpectedly, it burned upward, into her nose and sinuses, bringing fresh tears to her eyes.

She headed for the bedroom, starting to undress. Whenever she woke up tomorrow, she would think some more, test her plan when her mind was fresh and crystal clear. She glanced back into the living room. She had all that glass to clean up tomorrow. She would need to call her agent at home, give him her final no on the acting offer. But most of all, she was glad to be seeing Angela.

She was key to the whole plan.

Chapter Eight

IT WAS THE first Gym Night practice for Neshaminy High seniors, and Wayne sat with classmates per the custom long established for the unattached: boys high up in the bleachers on one side of the gymnasium, girls on the opposite side bleachers in rows one and two. Couples, as they formed, went out on the floor, and everyone waited for the faculty coaches to stop talking and start organizing the students into dance groups. Turnout was light, but it was normal for the momentum of interest to be a session or two in mounting. Wayne decided he would not have missed this. Girls outnumbered boys by nearly fifty percent.

Best described as an annual athletic and social festival, Gym Night split the high school student body alphabetically into two competing groups. These were designated by the school colors, red and blue, and after nine weeks of practice, competed class-wise in a two-night series of team relays, tug-of-wars, dance exhibitions, parades, and displays. The relays consisted of medley races involving gymnastic equipment, basketball dribbling and lay-up shooting, roller skates, unicycles, skateboards, plus anything else produced by the imagination of the teachers in charge of planning. The highlight events were the team dancing competitions. The sophomores did soft-shoe or modern dancing, the juniors executed precision marching to music, and the seniors square-danced. Gym Night might seem an unlikely appeal to adolescents starting to think of themselves as the *Now* generation, but all who participated had such an uproariously good time, their return for the following year was virtually assured, causing the junior and senior class signups to always be heavy.

Wayne laughed, cutting up with friends he had driven to the practice. But he knew time was running out for deciding on a partner. On the floor below, the blue team captains talked to the teachers, probably asking about the delay. And word came up that Miss Stapleton was late with the dance music.

Even with the choice of partners so rich and varied, he was still inclined to ask Kathy Himmter, a girl who sat behind him in their academic English class. When she made a point of asking with a smile whether he'd be attending tonight's practice, it made him see her in a new light. He scanned the floor below and spotted her on the far side, near the door, talking with a group of friends. He

had just resolved to go down and approach her, when Miss Stapleton hurried in, record albums clasped against her chest. Students moved onto the floor as the teachers started making up rosters and organizing practice groups. Wayne and his friends began moving down the bleachers as well.

As he crossed the floor, maneuvering around rushing bodies and partially formed dance squares, Cynthia Bates, a girl he sometimes helped with algebra in homeroom, appeared out of nowhere and nearly collided with him in her hurry to get past. She didn't recognize him, she was so intent.

Cynthia had a reputation of ill repute at a time when such distinctions still carried weight. This had long been the case for her, but at a level indistinguishable from several of her classmates who were likewise handicapped with *loose* reputations. But then had come what was still referred to as the *Olsen Episode*. A township patrolman had come across Daryl Olsen and Cynthia, parked in his father's car, along with a second couple, in a torrid state of undress. Normally, Middletown township cops did not haul parked couples in for sexual activity. But what distinguished this incident were the open cans of beer also found in the car. They were underage, so down to the station house they went. Even then, discretion would normally be the rule for a case like this, with consequences limited to facing their upset parents at the station. But this incident occurred over a year ago, a few weeks before the general election. Olsen's father was a councilman up for reelection. One of the deputies saw an opportunity, called the opposing political machine, who notified the local newspaper. The incident was splashed across the metro section of the *Lower Bucks Sentinel* the next afternoon, triggering a minor scandal. Since then, Cynthia had received the Scarlet Letter treatment from most of her classmates. The other kids in the incident were seniors who graduated the previous June. Cynthia now traveled her senior year under a persistent stigma.

Her isolation was affected by her compelling good looks. She was a girl, not quite pretty, who was attractive by virtue of kinetic qualities that are hard to define. Her face was exceptionally expressive, and there was a sensuous eloquence in the way she shifted between facial displays. This worked in tandem with a way she had of turning and dipping her countenance, a dynamically appealing talent she had for posing herself to advantage. Her hazel eyes had a clear luster that completed her facial appeal. But these attributes were mere prelude to her spectacular figure. It produced a lure to any male eyes beyond puberty. But in a way, her glamour made things worse for her. It gave the girls a reason to be resentful; it encouraged the boys to offer leering or inappropriate

remarks. Fortunately, Cynthia understood the ostracizing forces mustered against her and responded sensibly. She dressed conservatively and behaved with a low profile.

Now, as Wayne watched her churn through the milling students, he assumed she was agitated over being late. She didn't go far, stopping at a square containing Bob Grimley.

"Bob," Wayne heard her call assertively to Grimley's back. He turned, looked surprised, then dismayed. "What's going on?" Cynthia demanded. "We were supposed to be partners, remember?" She looked briefly at Michelle Easton, the girl paired with him. "And I'm sorry I'm late."

Wayne saw Grimley look uncomfortable, and he was silent for several seconds.

"You obviously didn't get my message."

"What message?"

"I left a phone message with one of your cousins."

"I didn't get any message. What's going on?" She said it loudly enough to attract attention, the start of a scene, and the squares around them grew silent and watchful.

"Obviously I had to change my plans," he said, his voice sounding pained. "But I did leave a message for you at your house."

"Change of plans? You mean you won't be my partner after you said you would?"

But his only answer was a nonchalant shrug.

"Why?"

"Cynthia, let it be. I am sorry."

"Why? What kind of game are you playing here?"

"It's not a game," he said, his own irritation rising. "It's just that..."

"What?"

"Are you going to make me say it? My parents found out, and they put the kibosh on it. None of this would have happened if your family could be bothered to deliver a simple message." Then he turned dismissively from her, and faced Michelle, who was looking embarrassed enough for them both.

Her jaw dropping, Cynthia flushed, realizing belatedly that all eyes were on her. She lost composure, turned, and fled from the gymnasium. Dismayed by what he'd witnessed, Wayne watched until she was out of sight, hesitated a few seconds, then started after her.

After a search, he found her, still fuming, pacing along the sidewalk of the covered bus loading area.

“Sounds like a bad mix-up,” he said, as he approached her. “For whatever it’s worth, I’m sorry it had to happen in a crowd like that.”

“You’re sorry! I’m the one who needs to be sorry. For once, I really let them get to me. All of them. They’ve been waiting for this, and they all enjoyed it.”

“Look, you shouldn’t let this get to you. It wasn’t your fault. He’s a complete ass for handling it in public like that.”

“You can just shove the consolation speech. I don’t need your holier-than-thou words of pity—not from you, not from anyone.” She spat the words with such vehemence, he felt stung, rejected, and turned to leave.

“Wayne,” she called after him, “I’m sorry. Don’t go.”

He stopped, uncertain, still burning from her rebuff. She came to him.

“What am I doing?” she said, her tone lower. “For months you’ve been helping me with algebra. You’ve always been nice, and here I am tearing your arms out of their sockets. I’m sorry. It’s just that I’m still upset.”

“I understand. But don’t worry. As long as you’re signed up for the square dancing, the coaches will match you with a partner.”

“Maybe, but that could be awkward. Or embarrassing. Lots of wood for a fire. And you’ve already seen my temper at its worst.”

“Then be my partner,” he said, the words surprising him.

“Why, it’s nice of you to offer,” she said, smiling now. “But aren’t you afraid of what that’ll do to your social standing?” Her tone was half teasing.

“When it comes to social standing, it’s easy for me; I just borrow Henk’s. The guy’s bulletproof, socially, so I just hide behind his armor.”

“That’s right,” she said, “You two are inseparable. But now you’re on opposite teams for the Gym Night competition. Can your friendship survive?”

“Good question. The loser has to shave his head.”

“What? Oh, you’re kidding!” she exclaimed, and she stepped closer to him, her mouth wide open in disbelief. “You are kidding, aren’t you?”

He smiled, happy he had her going, and her mind off the incident. “Yeah, I am kidding. But the offer still stands.”

“You really don’t have a partner?”

“Nope.”

“Well,” she said, her eyes smiling, “if the offer is serious, then I accept. Gladly.”

“Then let’s go back to the gym and get set up.”

“No, not tonight. I can’t face them again this soon. Give me till next practice; then I’ll be ready.”

“Sure, I understand. Would you like me to drive you home?”

As they walked to his parents’ car, he realized how little he knew her. But when he probed during the drive to her house, she showed no reluctance for sharing. Her story was tragic. The only child of a couple in the diplomatic corps, her father had become an alcoholic, and eventually committed suicide. Her mother, long suffering from clinical depression, had become withdrawn, then psychotic, and she’d been institutionalized ever since. Cynthia had been circulated among various relatives, none of whom wanted her, until finally coming to live with her current guardians, who were cousins of her deceased father.

“Do you ever see your mother?”

“We’ve given up on that. She hasn’t recognized me for over a year. It’s become a forbidden topic.”

“How are things with your current guardians?”

“They care about me, and they’ve tried to make me part of their family. But they have a hard time figuring out what to do with me. Their own two children are younger than me. So I’ve never been close to them.”

“Cynthia, I had no idea,” Wayne said. They sat, parked in front of her house. She lived only five streets over from him, but they rode different school buses.

“I’ve only shared it with a few of my closest girlfriends, and none of them are in school any longer.”

“I appreciate the confidence.”

“I wanted to be fair with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Don’t you realize you’re going to take some heat for being my partner? Before that happens, I wanted you to hear my version of who I’ve been.”

“But Cynthia, I don’t see any heat coming down from this. This is just kids dancing for fun. Nobody is going to take it all that serious.”

“Well, they did last year. They kept me out of the marching competition.”

“What?” he asked, surprised. “How?”

“I signed up for the marching, early, just like everyone else. I even went to the first practice. But then I didn’t get the confirmation like everybody else. When I asked about it, they told me they didn’t have a record of my signup. By

then, of course, the rosters were full. They put me on standby, but I never got to compete.”

“Whoa, that is bad news,” he said, thinking it over. “But it could have been an honest foul-up.”

“You’ll never convince me of that.”

“Okay. Well, then, we just take some precautions about making sure they have your signup now. You can do that tomorrow. Just see Mrs. Marino.”

“That’s a good idea, and I’ll do that. But...”

“What?”

“Are you sure you want to do this? You’re bound to get plenty of smirking remarks from the other boys.”

“What matters is that we’ll have a good time,” he said, his voice more confident than he felt. Then he turned in his seat so he could smile into her eyes. “You, Cynthia, are going to have a super-good time. I’ll see to it.”

“You’re being sweet.”

“You’ve been there; Gym Night is such an absolute blast. We’ll make it a date—see the whole exhibition together.”



THEY HAD NOT known each other, except to say hello, until this school year when assigned adjacent seats in homeroom class.

“Is that tutoring you do in the back of the room before class?” Cynthia asked. This was in November, after the first grading period.

“Yeah,” Wayne answered, “my bus schedule gives me about twenty-five minutes to kill. Why, do you need some help?”

“Oh, you can’t imagine,” she replied, obviously glad he had offered. “If I don’t pull up my math grades, I won’t graduate on time.”

“No problem. Most of my requests are either math or science.”

“My major is secretarial,” she explained, “But I have to take one year of advanced math that’s mostly algebra. This course and I don’t get along at all, and it’s algebra that’s winning the argument.”

She became his most challenging case. She got the C she needed for the second term, but it was a close thing, and she kept slipping back on the fundamentals. During third term, after they became Gym Night partners, he suggested they meet off campus for an extended session.

“You keep falling off the basics because you don’t have the big picture,” he explained. “And I haven’t been able to give you that in our short sessions before homeroom. I need a couple of hours to walk you through the complete theory for solving equations, with enough examples to fix it in your mind. Once we get that down pat, then algebra is clear sailing. You just have to keep track of all the parentheses and braces and things. It’s more tedious than difficult.”

“Are you free for the in-service holidays?” she asked, referring to a periodic pair of days, always a Thursday and a Friday, that were holidays for the students because all the teachers were *in-service*, that is, occupied with organized seminars and training sessions designed to update their skills.

“Hey, good idea,” Wayne replied. “And they’re coming up later this week.”

“We can meet at my house. That way you can walk over. I’m open on time.”

“Eight o’clock.”

“Eight o’clock! But it’s supposed to be a day off. Surely you jest.”

“Nope. We need to work this while our minds are fresh. But later is okay, too, if you insist.”

“I think you’re trying to make me feel guilty. How ’bout eight-thirty?”

“Okay.”

“And as long as we’re bringing in the dawn, I’ll make us some breakfast. Would you like that?”

“Sure, thanks. But it needs to be light. We don’t want to bog down the little gray cells.”

“Jeesums, you’re not leaving anything to chance, are you? What would you like for breakfast?”

“Oh, ah, just some oatmeal, and maybe some orange juice, if you have it.”



WAYNE ARRIVED AT her house Thursday, as planned. Her guardians both worked, and her junior high cousins, since the in-service holiday didn’t apply to them, were in school. She had prepared a simple breakfast, but garnished it attractively with leafy greens, grapefruit slices, even black and green olives. He ate without much appetite and felt distracted over the upcoming task at hand. He’d prepared a syllabus with example problems the night before, but still felt tension about getting her over the learning hurdle causing her stress. He began the instruction with maximum focus, attuned to her every response, and her comprehension

seemed adequate, although the session did carry past the time he thought it would take.

“I think I’ve finally got it,” she exclaimed, sounding giddy about her breakthrough progress. “Now, give me a tough problem to test it.” He did so, and she solved it readily. “That’s it, that’s victory with a capital V,” she said, literally bouncing in her seat next to him at the dining area table. “You know, I don’t understand why I didn’t get this sooner. You’ve been telling me all along, but it’s like I haven’t been able to listen. It really is just a matter of doing the same operation, with the same quantity, to both sides of the equation. Then you just use whatever operations are needed, one at a time, until it’s just X on the left side of the equation. And that’s the solution.”

“Yes,” he said, “you’ve got the concept down pat, now. The problem all along has been that you’re confused by the rules-based approach Mr. Chub is teaching out of your textbook. Rules can be memorized, but then you forget them. This basic approach is something you’ll remember. Just keep practicing and doing your homework.”

“Even next week’s test doesn’t seem so scary now. Wayne Cavanaugh, you are my hero,” and she rose from her chair, leaned over, and gave him a brief, loud-smacking kiss on his cheek. “C’mon, we need a break,” and she led him by the hand to the living room sofa.

Although apparently given in merriment, her kiss startled him and made him instantly alive to her femininity. As they sat, chatting on the sofa, he became aware of her makeup, a bit heavy, but her eyes were glamorous, and they lent a bewitching quality to her smile. Her brown hair was styled more elaborately than her usual flip: done up in a way that looked almost formal, with a large lock slanting across her forehead, and curls dangling on the sides, in front of her ears. She was bare-legged and wore a simple, woolen flared skirt that was short enough to show off her legs to dazzling effect as she sat with them curled beneath her on the sofa. Topping the outfit was a pullover sweater that gave a heavenly accent to her bosom. She was lighthearted and animated as they conversed.

Somehow they got on the subject of treasured possessions. He spoke of a special gold coin, more a family heirloom, his grandfather had promised would one day be his. She described a music box, a gift her father had brought her mother from a mission to Austria. It was one of the few of her parents’ things that had come to her through all the turmoil, and time had not diminished the fond memories it evoked.

“But why am I trying to describe it? Here, you can come and see for yourself,” and with that, she took his hand and led him into her downstairs bedroom.

The room was surprisingly neat and spare. The music box held center position on her bureau-top. Larger than he expected, at five-by-ten inches or so, it opened to reveal a glass top, beneath which small, intricately carved and superbly painted figures spun and moved to a waltz tune he didn’t recognize. The top and sides of the box were laminated and carved with beautiful leaf designs, striated artfully to produce a snowy, windblown effect. Some of the leaves stood out because they were inserts made of a different type wood. Others were inlaid with a pearl-like substance. The effect of such beauty, both visual and musical, was mesmerizing, and as they watched the figures slowly wind down, their shoulders touching, he inhaled her perfume, her skin, and something else, perhaps hair spray.

As she turned to him, her gaze rising to his, she put the music box down. It played a few more reluctant notes, then stopped. Her eyes became lustrous, beckoning, and he lost himself in them. She brought her lips up to his. Her kiss started so softly it seemed a dream, a sampling more tender than sensual. As the kiss continued, it grew in energy, their arms came around each other, shyness yielded to hunger and, when her tongue darted past his lips, he felt his head swimming with the heat billowing within. He entered a twilight zone between scrambled emotion and rising passion—with disbelief mixed in—and he sought to express it with his hands. They came up to her cheeks, lingering, exploring, then lowered to her body, finally finding her breasts.

“Yes,” she murmured. Encouraged, his lips went to her neck, to the limit imposed by her sweater. Her response was a deep, sighing laugh. Suddenly she stepped back from him, still smiling and, with a motion so swift and smooth it surprised him, she pulled the sweater over her head and tossed it. Next came the bra.

She could see that he had gone flushed and helpless, and she came back into his arms. They continued kissing, then she pulled him onto the bed.

His passion was so feverish he literally trembled, and she smiled in some amusement because she had to help him with his buttons. She continued to guide him patiently, coaching his entrance, and he climaxed within seconds.

“I’m sorry it was so quick,” he moaned as they still clasped.

“Hush,” she whispered. “Your heartbeat is still racing.

“Don’t be sorry,” she continued after a long silence. “This first time was for you. Something special to get you started. The next time...will be for me. And we’ll go much slower. It’ll be even better; you’ll see.”

“Then there will be a next time?”

“Oh yes,” she said, smiling, and when she shifted beneath him, he disengaged and slipped to the side. “I think it will be...in about an hour, maybe a little longer. By then, you’ll be ready to go again. And,” she said with a drawl as she sat up and applied a small towel she had hidden in the pillowcase, “since we do have that much time, and...since we want to keep your strength at its tippy-top, I’m going to make us some lunch.”



THEY TOOK ADVANTAGE of the next day’s in-service holiday by meeting under identical circumstances. This time, he arrived later, but again they separated bouts of lovemaking by sharing lunch.

“Tell me about us,” he asked. It was later in the afternoon and they held each other beneath the sheets.

“I think we have something nice,” she replied. “We care about each other. We’re lovers, and we can give each other pleasure that’s good. It’s worth the small risks we have to take.”

“Are we in love?”

“What a question.” She sighed audibly. “I’ll tell you what a friend once told me. She said that if you have to ask if you are in love, then you are definitely not in love, not the kind poets write about, anyway. That’s assuming that kind of love really exists.”

“Do you doubt it?”

“Not exactly. I’ve seen it once in a while. But it never lasts. And not everyone can feel it. Not everyone wants to.”

“I can’t imagine not wanting to.”

“Why not? Love always gives back pain for joy that’s here today, gone tomorrow. And there’s bondage attached to it. Anyone in love is not her own woman. Not free to choose her own course. It’s a dangerous risk.”

“I guess I can’t disagree,” he answered, taken aback by the slashing power of her logic. “It’s just that...I can’t see my life ever being complete without the right girl to share it with.”

"I understand. It's a natural thing to want in our lives. But the true price is higher than people think."

"You mean, because of the risk of breakup and pain?"

"It's more than a risk. It's a sure thing. Take yourself as an example. You've been disappointed at love. Last year—you and Darlene Wharton."

"You noticed?"

"Of course I noticed. We rode the same bus last year. Tell me about it; I'm curious."

"Not much to tell, really. Darlene and I got to know each other through Henk. We became a steady number, fell in love, then two months later, she dumped me."

"Were you as devastated as you looked?"

"Worse. Henk had to come and pick up the pieces of me that were left."

"Yet you would risk all that again for a romantic ideal, a storybook ending?"

"I would, but it's more realistic than a storybook ending. Fulfillment through love has to be doable. I can't tell you how to pull it off, but I am determined to figure it out."

"So the pain you experienced last year didn't change your mind at all?"

"It's made me more cautious. I don't want to go through anything like that again, so I'll be more careful in the future."

"I don't envy you the journey."

"What about your journey? How do you feel about us?"

She smiled but did not answer.

"What do you feel about me?" he asked.

"I'm very fond of you. You already have a special place inside me."

She said it so tenderly, he felt unable to challenge her further.

"So what's our future?"

"We need to decide," she replied. "I would like to continue our relationship, although...it can't be as perfect as these last few days. We don't have any more in-service holidays between now and graduation. From now on, we'll be like the other kids: fogging up car windows at the Roosevelt Drive-in."

They both laughed.

"What about our...social relationships?" he asked.

"You mean, like, at school?"

"Yes."

"That needn't change. You can stay with your friends, and I'll stay with mine."

“It doesn’t have to be that way.”

“Yes, it does. Look, Wayne, I know where you’re headed with this, and it’s darling of you. But our lives are too mismatched.”

“But you yourself said we can decide. We have choices.”

“Yes, but they’re limited. There are differences between us you’re not seeing. Let me give you a for-instance. How old are you?”

“I’ll be eighteen in a few months.”

“Well, I’ll be twenty this summer. I was held back in school a couple of times because of what I went through as a child. Your friends are our classmates at school. My closest friends are girls I met at church, girls my own age who have gotten secretarial skills like I’m doing. They’ve all graduated ahead of me and they’re out there, earning their own way. One is in Philly, two are in New York, one’s in Chicago, and one has just married in Indianapolis. I’m already an expert typist, and I have stenographer skills better than my teachers. I’ll be joining some of my friends when I graduate, and that independence is something I can’t wait to have. I need to be free and on my own, to live my own life. No more being someone else’s dirty little orphaned cousin.”

“You feel so strongly about this,” he said meekly. “It’s inspiring how determined you are to see things through.”

“Thanks. But we need to be realistic. Our destinies are pointing us in different directions. You’ll go to college, and I’ll go to work. We can go on being special to each other, but that doesn’t mean our social relationships should change. Socially, at school, I would always be baggage for you. And I don’t want to risk what we have over what they’d put you through.”

He stared at her, wanting to object, wanting their relationship to be closer to what he truly felt. But her preferences blocked the way.



WEEKS AFTER THE in-service holidays, Wayne realized Cynthia had discernment out of all proportion to her low aptitude in math. She was right about one thing: a car backseat at a drive-in was a huge letdown from lovemaking in her own bed, in the morning sunshine, then relaxing over home-cooked meals afterward. The availability of his parents’ car was the limiting factor in their relationship, and they couldn’t be together every weekend.



GYM NIGHT FULFILLED everything they hoped for. They danced in competition on the second night, then watched and cheered as part of the standing-room-only throng of students. Parents packed the bleachers. At one point, he glanced at her beside him while she watched the action. The cheering during the relays was deafening. She was beside herself with delight, laughing, clapping, and jumping up and down. Then she turned to him and they both smiled. He had to read her lips to understand what she said.

“This is wonderful! I just love it!”



BUT GYM NIGHT marked the pinnacle of their relationship. They continued their intimacy, but met less frequently, and the momentum of their relationship started running down. By May, an undiscussed distance had opened between them. Graduation was less than a month off, and she eagerly anticipated traveling to New York. There she would live with girlfriends prepared to help her get a job and get set up in the Big City. He, on the other hand, was feeling morose about the impending end of their relationship in its current form.

In early June, just days before graduation, they spent an entire day at Washington’s Crossing State Park. They discovered a secluded, wooded spot that was all their own. They spread a blanket and made love repeatedly into the afternoon, spending more energy than usual to sate each other.

“So when do you leave for the Big Apple?” he asked, his tone sunnier than he felt.

“Big change of plans,” she announced. “It’s going to be the Windy City, and I’m leaving earlier than planned: two days after graduation.”

So there it was, the end in sight, and it hung like a fog between them, obscuring the path ahead.

“Chicago?” he asked. What happened to bring this on?”

“Groovy news, really. I have a confirmed opportunity to interview for a legal secretarial position. It’s with my friend Jennifer’s company, and she thinks I’m a shoo-in at this stage. The hard part was getting through the screening and acing a short phone interview to make it this far.”

“You sound excited.”

“I am. If I land this job, I’ll bypass having to take a clerical position, shuffling files all day long.”



THE NIGHT BEFORE her departure, he pulled out all stops, begged once more for the family car, and took her to dinner at Flannery's, in Pennel. It was the most formal of their evenings together. The mood was somber and heavy with their parting, but he could also sense her excitement for the new life awaiting her in Chicago.

"This is so nice; it's such a nice atmosphere," she said, mellowing as the dinner dishes were taken up. He smiled agreement.

"Thank you for tonight," she went on. "And thank you for all we've had."

"I hope it's been as special for you as it has for me."

"Yes. You've given me things I wouldn't have had at all: Gym Night—such pure fun; a B in math that I still can't believe; and, you've been true to the relationship I wanted."

"Have I? Then that makes it even more special. But I...never understood why you wanted us together in the first place."

"It came...a step at a time. But what started it is something that's hard to put in words." And she paused a moment. "I suppose I'd call it a kind of... separation you have...from the crowd."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you and Henk are a lot like brothers, and the two of you socialize with a lot of different groups. But there's a way you stand apart from them, in your own private space. I only mention it because it made me think it might be safe to get closer to you."

"Safe? You make it sound like a security issue."

"In a way it was. I had to make sure that you weren't like the other boys."

"How do you mean?"

"Let's see...how to explain this to a guy?" And she thought a moment. "The girls at school...they mainly left me alone as long as I didn't get uppity. But the boys have caused me some slow hell with their cracks and their leering innuendoes. It's tiring and it wears you down. But you coached me in math all those months and never so much as looked down my blouse." She smiled at his reaction. "Believe me, I would have noticed. You were the one boy in that whole freakin' school who treated me the same nice way you treated the other girls. Later on, I realized there was nothing they could offer you that would make you betray anything I said. That's why taking a chance on our relationship was the right choice."

Now was the moment: the perfect opportunity to tell her how he felt, how strong yet confused his emotions for her were. But as he looked into her eyes, grateful though they were, he knew she would not want to hear.

After dinner, it was only a few minutes back to her house. He parked and turned off the ignition.

“I have to get in,” she said. “Early start tomorrow.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll only be out of touch for a little while, a few weeks, at most. I’ll write when I can.”

“Good reminder,” he replied, and he reached to the glove compartment for a notepad used to record gas mileage. “Here’s my address. Now,” he said, handing her another sheet, “give me your girlfriend’s address so I can write to you first.”

“I can’t. I don’t have her new address, only her work number. We’ve arranged for her to meet me at the bus station.”

“Okay. Then I’ll wait for you to get settled and write to me.”

“Walk me to the door and let me kiss you good-bye.”

But it wasn’t what he expected. Unlocking the door, she turned, put her hands on his cheeks, and drew him down to her. She gave him a long but gentle kiss on his left cheek.

“Thank you for everything,” she whispered. And before he could recover from the weight of the moment, the door closed behind her.

He drove home and parked the car for the night. He knew he would not be sleepy soon, so he stayed outside, enjoying the cooler night air and thinking about the evening. Their date had been memorable, but aspects of it bothered him. Her agreeing to write had been such an afterthought, an incidental detail, rather than a vital lifeline for what they shared. And he couldn’t shake the suspicion that she had lied about not knowing her friend’s address. The logic of his qualms was strong enough to activate larger concerns he had long had about her commitment. She had always been able to compartmentalize their closeness, to stand apart from it. But he could not. True, he was perplexed about what he felt for her, and she was right about their social compatibility being low. But over time, their intimacy had dislodged a part of his heart that belonged to her now. He reflected over the months of their relationship: the tender moments, the pleasures, the things shared, especially the two days when they’d had an entire house to themselves, an enclave in time for her to teach him the secrets of sensual love. Could he have predicted, should he have anticipated, the painful outcome he now faced?

As he paced the dark sidewalk, the months fast-forwarded in his mind: the suspense of awaiting her letter, the pain of missing her, the passion reserved for her now dammed up and dissipating. Finally he stopped and looked at his watch. It was just before midnight: time to join his father in front of the TV to watch the *Have Gun Will Travel* reruns, starring Richard Boone. He turned up the walk and entered the house.

She never wrote.

Chapter Nine

IT CAME TO Wayne in his sleep: contrails and streaks of images, a churning mass of scenes and faces. There was her blond hair, seen from behind, now twenty luxurious feet in length and floating, as though underwater; there was the remembered scent of her skin and makeup, vivid enough to drive him to fitful, useless arousal; there were tears being shed, his cheeks scalded with salty remorse; there was Craig Lawler, grimacing disdainfully even though his skin was pockmarked and white as a sheet; there was Henk shaking him, shouting that Wayne had dropped the ball. And by the time he emerged to consciousness that morning after the date, he knew he had misjudged her, that she had been truthful about the guy who was merely her cousin. He thought about it, pondering, while his mind was yet serene. And then he had a secret thought. Although he regretted his error, and would apologize if possible, it did make things clear-cut, with no second thoughts or ever going back. After all, she was irretrievably back in the sack with Craig Lawler, and he had to dodge the images that conjured. His thoughts wandered some, then settled, getting complaisant with accepting that this was over and done with, a shrinking memory, the embarrassed regret making it recede quicker. A kind of fatalism stole through him, congealing to resignation. Finally, he slipped from the covers, ready to push on with his life. Or so he thought.



“SO WHAT’S GOING on?” Henk asked, his question code-speak for wondering why Wayne had gotten them together. It was the following Thursday night and they were downtown, eating Chinese.

“It’s something unexpected,” Wayne said.

“Right. Then go ahead and tell me about it.”

“It’s...Nancy.”

“But that’s old news. You were chipper on Sunday and feeling fine about everything.”

“I know. This has come up since then.”

“Tell me more. What’s happened since Sunday?”

“Nothing I can point to. But I...can’t stop thinking about her.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. But it’s getting worse every day. I just can’t get her out of my thoughts. It’s starting to get to me.”

“But that makes no sense, not after what you two did to each other. And from what you’ve told me, she’s sure to be involved with another guy. We have at least two candidates.”

“I know. Even ignoring all the damage we’ve done to each other, we’re incompatible in a dozen different ways. I mean, no way could it ever work out for long.”

“There you go. You’ve just won your own argument. Case dismissed.”

“Yes. Except that talking it over like this makes me realize that I can’t put the brakes on what I’m feeling for her.”

“Then let’s get this out in the open. What exactly are you feeling for her?”

“I love her.”

“But that’s insane! Aren’t you angry and just a little disgusted? She slept with a guy she summoned in your presence just to put a bullet through your ego. It gives viciousness a new meaning. I mean, what am I missing here?”

“I know it’s crazy. I know the damage is beyond undoing. And believe me, this is no fun. When I think of her, it’s like a cheese grate against my stomach lining. Look, I’ll just have to ride it out until it dies down.”

“No, Don’t do that. I have the perfect solution.”

“What?”

“Another girl, of course. Substitution—to get your mind off her once and for all.”

Wayne laughed nervously.

“Look,” Henk continued, “I’ll get you matched with a blind date for this Saturday. You can take her on a walk-to dinner engagement, then meet Joyce and me at the Penn mixer. I’ve got the perfect girl in mind to sink this relapse for good. She’s an English major I met at the cafeteria last month. She’s not real pretty, but she is super nice. And she has the kind of sad eyes you’re a sucker for.”

“No.”

“But you have to take action. Kill this now, before it gets worse.”

“I can’t. Not with another girl. I have to deal with it some other way.”

“But why? I’m sure this will work for you.”

“Henk, I just can’t. Don’t make me date another girl.”

“But she doesn’t deserve that. Not after what she did to you. And the only other way out for you is time. That leaves the door wide open to a whole slew of pain and complications.”

Wayne could only lower his eyes, knowing it was true.



“WAYNE, WHAT’S GOING on with you and Nancy?”

It was Doug Murser. Wayne swiveled around from his tiny bedroom desk to face him.

“Nothing, Doug. Nothing at all. I haven’t seen her in almost two weeks.”

“Well, that’s strange,” he said, looking perplexed. “She stopped by this week’s stage-crew workshop to see me. She thanked me again for lending you the T-Bird. Said it helped make the evening special.”

“Yes, it was great,” Wayne said limply, knowing Doug had more to say.

“She quit the drama club and came to wish me good-bye.”

“What?! She’s quitting?” Wayne exclaimed, standing, his lungs dropping into his stomach. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. She was emphatic. Said she was throwing in the towel. It’s a huge loss to the program. Nancy has improved by leaps and bounds over the past year. And then this semester, she’d already won a lead role in the club production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Then on top of that, she lands a full-fledged off Broadway role offer—although she did turn it down, I guess to stay in school.”

“But why would she quit? Did she say?”

“She said she couldn’t do it anymore because the fire inside had gone out. She said it was an emotional thing. And I thought of you, right off.”

“Why?”

“Because you dated her recently. And then there’s the way she wrapped up the conversation.”

“How’s that?”

“She thanked me for always being nice. Can you believe it, somebody thanking me for being nice? Anyway, we exchanged good-byes. Then she asked if I’d do her a favor. And, of course, I said I would. How could I refuse? So she asked me to be sure to give you her regards.”

Doug stared at him intently for several seconds.

“Anything else?” Wayne asked, beginning to wilt under his gaze.

“Well, there was the way she said it. She seemed so...sad.” Another pause, then he said, “Cavanaugh, I don’t know how a prick like you could pull it off, but I think she’s really stuck on you. Big time. And let’s face it. You haven’t exactly been yourself since you dated her.”



DOUG’S BIZARRE VISIT broke open the forces that had built within him since his date with Nancy. Every point of reference seemed ripped from its moorings, producing a whiplash of uncertainty that slashed through him, churning his insides into an emotional froth. Could there be any explanation for her quitting the drama club other than sending a message to him? But what exactly was the message? And what was Craig Lawler’s place in the equation? And why the communication link running tenuously through Doug, of all people? And why a message pertaining to her acting without mentioning how he had falsely accused her? It didn’t make sense, and that multiplied his turmoil.

He sought to cope by plunging into strenuous physical exercise. It was a double help because it also settled him for long hours of focused study, another way to get his mind off his predicament. But nothing solved the underlying riddle. A pattern emerged: long class hours, hard study, harder exercise, the enigma of her actions hounding him by day and then haunting his consciousness at night, especially during that slow-motion smear into sleep—sleep usually brought on by physical exhaustion. Here he had been reasonably settled in what he knew about Nancy, who she was, how they would be traveling separate roads to recovery, and now, since Doug’s visit, everything was chaos. Instead of the recovery he expected to endure stoically, the pain he now felt from day to day was worse than anything he had ever known. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was working out with any kind of logic.

He especially relied on football to provide a physical release. He avoided the Levy Park area, where he had met her while playing, what, was it only a few weeks ago? It seemed like years. He learned that Levy Park was surrounded by buildings used by the College of Arts and Sciences, Nancy’s division. So he restricted his games to areas like Hill Field, located near the campus’s north edge, closer to Drexel, thus actually more convenient, and surrounded mainly by buildings for administration and parking. Not as much chance of meeting her up there.

Wayne went to Hill Field the Friday after Doug's visit. He felt elated to find not only a game in progress, but one that needed him to complete seven-man sides. Better yet, his team captain, Greg Marsh, welcomed him by name. It was unusually cold for October, and the air had that transparency it gets when it's still and cool and dry. The sunlight was bleak and receding toward the tall sycamores to the west. He figured they had well over an hour of sunlight left for play. He went in immediately on defense and it served as a good warm-up.

The opposing team was one of the best he could remember seeing in scratch play, so he wasn't surprised by the score. His team lagged behind three touchdowns to one. He didn't care much about the score, but when teams were down too far, they often lost heart, and the competition went stale. On the other hand, Greg was a fine passing quarterback, and Wayne was anxious to see how they would do on offense. Their opponents played well, and slowly but steadily drove down the field for another score. Now it was four to one.

It finally became their turn on offense. Greg gave him the wide-receiver position on the left side, and Wayne felt happy, as usual, with the assignment. He was anxious to use the high speed running this position required to burn off some of the torment he felt over Nancy. But that didn't happen right away. Greg had him run short crossing routes into the middle. On third down, he caught a short pass in heavy traffic that he ran for a first down, keeping the drive alive. A few plays later, they tried a trick running reverse that, amazingly, got them good yardage close to midfield. As they huddled, Greg sensed their opponents were a bit off balance.

"Wayne, what's the situation on your side?"

"They're not paying me much attention. I can break free down the left side long whenever you want to try it."

"Good. Do a cross and I'll catch you long as you break back left. We'll give them a lightning strike while they're a bit spooked. Hike on four."

Wayne lined up on the left, paused, and felt a tremor of anticipation. He breathed in the cool air. A breeze rose from a dry cold front just arriving, but the air was still faint with that evening blend of bus fumes and cooking that was sometimes unique to this part of the city. And there was always the sound of traffic, its cacophonous prattle giving way to the rising north wind, now beginning to rustle through the tall trees, their leaves laden with autumn.

The play turned into an embarrassment of riches. The opposing team blitzed, but the offensive linemen held them back perfectly. The blitz stripped opponents of most of their pass coverage, and Wayne broke completely into the clear, as did

the receiver on his opposite side. Greg would have free choice of whom to throw to. Wayne saw the ball rise in his direction. He noted the perfect spiral. And the distance. Wow, Greg was really on his game today. At first he thought he had covered plenty of ground, so he could take the ball as an easier catch against his turned chest. But then he realized the ball was being wind-blown long. He would have to take the reception over his head or shoulder, a much more difficult catch. Assuming he could reach it. Now he ran flat-out, every sinew straining, red-lining for speed, his head swiveled back over his right shoulder, his gaze locking on the descending spiral. He brought sight of the ball to an incandescent dot of concentration. Time stretched with intensity. By honed reflex, he adjusted his outstretched hands slightly, and the ball drilled into them perfectly.

In his exhilaration, he surged over the goal line, ran beyond the end zone, curved around to come upfield, and continued sprinting until he felt the exhausting release he sought. In those panting few seconds, his chest burning for breath, he vented his emotions for her, letting them pounce through his veins to smash against the adrenaline that fired his exertions. Most of all, in those mere, dilating moments, his lungs bursting, in his mind's eye, as soft as candlelight, he could see her face, her eyes lifting to his, the shy bloom of her smile, its promise lost to him, forever beyond his reach, and feel no pain. He slowed to a walk, catching his breath at last, things closing back in, the football under his arm, the sycamore leaves falling in earnest now, a blizzard of autumn color, gusting in the wind, the higher leaves seeming to lift out of sight, the lower ones settling as they tumbled along, one of them impacting briefly to caress his chest, and he looked upfield, his jubilant teammates now running toward him.

The touchdown fired up the game's competitive tension. Both teams came to an effervescent high pitch. Play was hard, and spirited, and fun. They would have played longer, but darkness shut them down after another exchange of touchdown drives. By the time the after-game chitchat was done, dusk had deepened to darkness and the city lights were on. The players dispersed now, singly and in groups, many to preparations for Friday night socializing. But not Wayne. He would hit the books awhile, then turn in.

Although his step was slowed by fatigue, its effect on his emotions was narcotic. But that also made him less guarded, more nostalgic, so that when he crossed Market Street, the distant sight of downtown reminded him of how he had described the city-center lights and their shimmering beauty for her. He paused, looking again at the remote skyline, its appeal alluring but forlorn. And he couldn't help wondering what she was doing that very instant.

He went back to the house, up to his room, set himself up to study, but for once he was too exhausted to concentrate for long.

When his head hit the pillow, he fell into the deepest of dreamless slumber.



“THERE’S A GIRL here to see you,” Tom Delmoore announced, coming into the room they shared. Wayne looked up from sitting on his bedspread. Various notes from a chemistry lab experiment were scattered around him. And he had pen in hand, composing the conclusions that would go into the written report. His concentration provided an emotional shield to the improbable news, and he gave Tom, sometimes a prankster, a doubting look.

“I’m not putting you on,” Tom said, reading his expression. “She’s in the parlor.”

“Is it Nancy?”

“You mean the blond girl from Sullivan’s? No, this one’s a brunette. But she is a looker, well worth the trip downstairs. Best of all, you lucky dog, I think she’s Italian.”

Wayne put on his shoes, didn’t think to check that he might otherwise be presentable, then hesitated, wondering who it could be.

“Wayne, how the hell do you come up with these dynamite chicks?”

Wayne just stared at him, distracted, deep in thought.

“Go on,” Tom urged, “and ask her if she has a sister.”

The girl who rose from the sofa triggered memories from the few dances he attended at Bishop Eagan Catholic High School, the one he would have gone to had he stayed in the parochial school system. Obviously Italian-American, she had finely chiseled Mediterranean features and light, olive skin that was flawless, like fine porcelain. Her black hair evoked memories as well. Teased and smoothed to perfection, tapered up from her neck and stacked in back, it was a swirl that helmeted her head attractively, relying on hair spray to keep it all up above her neck and perfectly in place. Slim and small figured, she wore a woolen, knee-length skirt, a high necked blouse, a cardigan sweater, and knee-length boots. She was quite beautiful.

“You must be Wayne,” she said warmly, reaching out her hand. “You are just as Nancy described you.” Her smile was tight lipped, but her eyes were so radiant the effect was disarming. And he couldn’t help smiling in return as he took her hand. “I’m Angela, Angela Diondi. And I am a friend of Nancy’s.”

“We can sit over here,” Wayne mumbled, and he gestured, leading them to the sofa and the overstuffed chair that right-angled it. They had the room to themselves, which was unusual, since it often doubled as a study lounge for residents. Wayne wondered whether Tom had cleared the place out. They sat, leaning forward, expectant and upright on the cushions.

“Nancy sends greetings and would like to know how you are doing.”

“How I am doing?” he erupted, breaking through a feeling of the absurd. “I would think her priority concern would be for Mister Lawler. After all, we wouldn’t want him to expire from his strenuous efforts. I trust she is feeding him well.”

“Wayne, you are perfectly entitled to take that shot,” she said, smiling elfishly, her brown eyes sparkling. “But you don’t have to worry on that account. I was the one she made that call to, not Craig. She may have been angry enough to choke you on the spot, but nothing, and I mean nothing, could force her to really be unfaithful to you. Not after what you two pledged to each other earlier that evening.”

“Are you serious?”

“Absolutely. It’s true.”

“But it was very convincing.”

“But think of who you’re dealing with. Nancy can be a very convincing actress. And she’s given cold reads to New York agents: ones where you have to improvise with a script you’ve never seen.”

That scattered his thoughts, rendering him speechless.

“I swear it’s true. I can even quote the words she pretended to say to Marty, then Craig.”

“Okay.” And he hesitated a moment, taking it all in, feeling relieved, except that other issues certainly remained. “In that case...ask her to accept my apology for the way I falsely accused her.”

“You believe her now?”

“Completely. What I saw at Di Lulu’s could not be what it seemed.”

“Then there’s really nothing standing between you two. You must go to her. She’s waiting for you.”

“But what about her acting?”

“I thought Doug Murser talked to you. Nancy has resigned from the drama club.”

“Is that what she told you?”

“Yes, of course. It’s completely out in the open, now.”

“But it’s not true.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I talked with the club’s artistic director.”

“Professor Tilleson?”

“Yes. He told me Nancy has only taken a short leave of absence.”

“He was willing to talk to you about Nancy?”

“Yes, he was. I had a hard time reaching him by phone, but when I got hold of him, and I told him I was a concerned friend of hers, he talked freely about her situation. He said there was no doubt about her future as a stage actress. Said she simply needed a breather to get herself together and get past some emotional stress. He’s expecting her back within a month.”

“Wayne, that isn’t right. Maybe he misinterpreted what Nancy said to him. I suspect what you heard was wishful thinking on his part.”

“He also had some other interesting information. He talked with Nancy’s agent, and this is since she started her leave. It turns out the agent is still working on proposals for her. He’s trying for summer assignments, but especially work she may be able to get during the semester break period at the end of the year.”

“Wayne, she hasn’t discussed any of that with me. But I’m sure she’s just putting placeholders down against an uncertain future.”

“But quitting is not the same as a leave of absence. And how does quitting the drama club translate into arranging acting work and auditions during semester break?”

“So you think she’s deceiving you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe acting is so deeply embedded in who Nancy is that the two can’t be separated.”

“Then I take it the only way Nancy can prove herself is by giving up acting completely and forever?”

If only it were that simple. As simple as dreaming and wanting it. Suddenly, in a mental aside, he could see her in the future: a dancer, or perhaps a Hollywood starlet who was also a dancer. Or the wife of...maybe an ambassador or political celebrity. And she would have children, of course. And she would have other duties and responsibilities, perhaps as an important socialite. He saw her dressed up, in formal evening gown. And above all, she would be happy, especially happy, when she turned to the side, just briefly while entertaining aboard their yacht, to enjoy that special night view of L.A., the one he could never give her, the one he would never see.

“No, Angela,” he answered, “I don’t want Nancy to give up acting. I want her to go back to acting and fulfill her special destiny. She has to respond to her higher calling and not let it go to waste. But the career she’s headed for is not compatible with what I need. It’s a shame, really, but we have to find happiness along different paths. It’s just not practical that those paths cross again.”

“But why do you say that when Nancy loves you so? She gave up acting to show you that, and to show you that acting can never compete with what she feels for you.”

“Wrong. Nancy is infatuated with me because of some reckless stunt I pulled at the Thirtieth Street Subway Station. And that makes me a novelty item for her. But once that novelty wears off, I’ll be history. And frankly, I can’t face that kind of pain, not coming from her. I need a girl who will make me that one thing in her life she can’t live without. Nancy is so special, so unique. She’s way too talented and self-sufficient to need what I have to offer. It wouldn’t work for me, and it would never last for her. And she’s already shown how cruel she would be in ending it.”

“But you are way off base. Nancy’s special talents make her fragile, not self-sufficient. She needs your love more than you know. I’ve seen the state she’s in, and I doubt she’ll ever act again without your love to hold her up. You need to face up to the facts. She already needs you, and she’s suffering without the love you promised to give her.”

“Angela, is that how you really see this?”

“Absolutely. I’ve seen it with my own eyes.”

“All right, then. Let’s look at it from a different angle.” And he paused, gathering his thoughts. “It’s not that I doubt her intentions. Those are good for today, maybe a week, maybe even a month. But it cannot last. On the one hand, it’s bound to fade as her acting destiny asserts itself. On the other, it’s sure to flame out once my novelty value in her life wears off. But the important thing is that I know what the end looks like.”

“You are so underestimating yourself.”

“Like I said, I know what the end looks like. I’ve been through it with her once. And I’m not going through that again. Never, ever again.”

“But you are not telling me what I need to know, the one thing that would make a big difference.”

“Name it.”

“You insist that Nancy go on without you. Nancy insists she will not go back to acting, or find happiness, unless you return her love in person. But there is a

surefire way to force Nancy's hand, to get her to go on without you. You alone have the power to make it happen."

"How?"

She smiled, dulcet eyes sparkling anew, then said, "All you have to do...is tell me here and now...that you don't love Nancy Hammond."

This was the moment she had maneuvered for, the object of her mission. Everything, Nancy's entire plan, hinged on his response.

He dropped his gaze uncomfortably, and she waited for him to raise it. When he did, she peered within him. He blushed, speechless, and his eyes showed the expanse of his emotion, as wide as any river, and all the pain that flowed with it. She couldn't keep a smile from upturning her lips. She felt a victorious surge, knowing now, for certain, there was hope for her friend. Part B of their plan was now in the bag, done and successful, something to load his thoughts. The way was now paved for Part C.



ON MONDAY OF the following week, Wayne arrived back from classes to a special delivery envelope. The house monitor had to sign for it, and she gave it to him as soon as he came in. He took it to his room, which was unoccupied, Tom still being at class. The envelope was a standard, white, nine-by-twelve-inch type, with no return address. It couldn't be an advertising gimmick; the postage was too high for that. The postmark showed it sent that morning and from inside the city of Philadelphia. What could it be? He slit it open gingerly and dumped the contents, which consisted of two more envelopes. One was small, the kind used for wedding invitations. And it was of yellowish parchment, also like an invitation. The flap was not tucked in. The card inside was made of thick, cream-colored stock, very fine, and it was embossed with a fancy blue script. It was, of all things, an invitation after all.

*Nancy Allison Hammond
requests the honor of your presence
at a candlelit dinner for two.
Saturday, November 2nd, 6 p.m.
Formal attire is requested.*

The invitation also listed her address. His surprise was so complete, and her gesture so touching, that he felt a rapt sense of drama, absorbing and profound. But wait, there was the second envelope. It measured about five by six inches, white, and it looked like the type to contain a standard greeting card. The flap was tucked in, but unglued. It did contain a card, the standard kind that's folded in two. The outside of the card, the glossy side, was a full color reproduction of a painting that struck with its tranquil beauty. It featured a woman, European, of some bygone century, in a room by herself, standing over a small table. She gazed, her face dreamily thoughtful, at a pair of scales she held with her right hand over the table. He stared at it for several seconds, mesmerized by its serenity. He turned the card over. The caption read:

Johannes Vermeer: *Woman Holding a Balance*

ca. 1664

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Widener Collection

He opened the card. The light-blue ink strokes had the translucent quality that only a fountain pen can produce. The script had to be her writing, produced by her hand, and it read, simply:

I love you

Please come to me

The words hit him like a broad, flat wave, enveloping, like tepid water suddenly covering every inch of skin. There was a momentary sting of emotion as he pictured her, seated, writing those ink strokes. He thought wearily that the weeks of stress must be getting to him, really and truly getting to him, especially since Angela's visit, for he felt this surreal sensation, as though a part of him had split off and stood beside him. It was the part of him that had already succumbed to her summons. It had no voice, but he could see it like a reflected glare just coming into side view. And he could feel it touching him, nudging him toward her. His will held firm, but this second part of him started growing.

A decision point came that Thursday, October thirty-first. Almost involuntarily, he picked up the phone and made the call to Hutton's.

"Can you help me with a tux for Saturday night?"

"Do you have an account with us?" the voice asked.

"Yes, I think I still do." And he gave his name.

“Ah, here’s your card,” said the voice after a short wait. “Yes, we will have your size in stock. You can pick this up Saturday, any time after 10 a.m. The deposit will be fifteen dollars.”

He rang off. This didn’t mean he was going, but the thought rang hollow and echoed back.

That night he dreamed of her. He could not recall the vision, only a sense of gratitude, experienced in that layer of consciousness that’s just beneath being awake. This semi-crystalline state shifted, and he felt a hovering gladness. He worked backward from there, along a trail of thought pulses racing to discover that his second self had filled him with the decision to go to her dinner. Now he understood the gladness a part of him had already been feeling. This felt weird, even this deep inside himself, and he pushed upward, all the way to groggy consciousness. He sat up in bed and let his sensibilities right themselves.

In the past week, since Angela’s visit, he had begun to question his emotional stability. But what he felt now was the accelerating rush of knowing he’d see her again. He smiled, let his love out of confinement, and felt it expand, gush through his veins, and fill every one of his cells. The war within was over, and he was jubilant. On Saturday he would seek her love on any terms he could get. It was that simple.

There was gravity as well as joy. His freedom floated away from him, untethered, rising up and out of sight, like a dissipating smoke ring. He was not unhappy about that, but he did feel its passing. And then there was the size of the commitment, its irreversibility. No matter what it took, or how it bent his course, his life belonged to her now, or at least was entwined with hers. His happiness, his future—all putty in her hands. Uncertainty intruded over how thoroughly she could forgive. What was he dealing with in terms of her love’s quality, its staying power, its personality? There could be no answer for some time, and his emotions drifted, equilibrating to a cautious joy. He lay back, his delight expanding, lifting him drowsily. It flickered and glimmered in his mind’s eye, a receding reflection, until sleep reclaimed him.

Chapter Ten

“**W**HAT IF HE doesn’t show?” Angela asked.

“Don’t worry,” Nancy replied, “we still have five minutes until six.”

They sat, relaxed but expectant, Angela in the end chair, Nancy on an arm of the sofa. She was resplendent in a strapless evening gown of dark blue silk whose fabric hugged her every curve. Her hairdo was one she had thought of herself when she purchased the gown. Most of her hair was worn up and in back, but a part on the left side sent a single wave of layered locks sweeping over her right forehead, eyebrow, ear, then it continued to the back to form a tapering, twisting wave that hung a few inches down her back. The style had a simple, billowing elegance, but it had taken Angela and her thirty minutes to get it up and done right. She was delighted with the outcome and how she looked overall, satisfied she had never looked prettier. If he showed, he would not get away from her this time.

Angela was costumed for the cooking and serving role they had scripted her to play, complete with black-hemmed and striped, white cotton dress, and a white, ruffled, bib-type apron. The table, elegantly set with the best sterling, china, and linen her Aunt Edith’s inventory could supply, beckoned for guests. Auntie E had insisted she take the sterling candlesticks as well. Their candles burned with an optimistic glow.

“But what if he just doesn’t show?” Angela repeated.

“If he doesn’t show, then we’ll need another plan.”

“Like what, for instance?”

“Like...maybe it’s time for me to camp on his doorstep.”

“Oh, Nancy, would you, really?”

“I would have done it weeks ago if I thought it would work.”

“Can you really be that sure?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, smiling nervously. “He’s the one. And he’ll be here. For our date, he was punctual to the second. He still has about another minute.”

The tension mounted as they looked at each other, smiling, one with faith and the other with hope, the seconds ticking down.

The doorbell buzzed.

“All right! It’s showtime!” Angela exclaimed, her tone exultant as she started for the kitchen to complete her meal preparations.

“Angela?”

She stopped, turned.

“Thank you. Without your meeting with him and clearing things up in both directions, tonight would not have been possible.”

“Nancy, this has been the role of a lifetime: a real-life drama that I’ll never forget. I am so happy for you.” Then she turned again toward the kitchen.

Nancy went to the front security panel near the stairs and electronically released the front door lock. When he entered the room from the stairwell, she saw his eyes widen as he took her in, and smiled. The emotion on his face was loving, tinged with caution, his eyes bashful with contrition. His reddish brown hair had grown longer, almost over his ears. She hadn’t expected he’d look so striking in formal wear—as handsome as she had ever seen a man in a tuxedo.



WAYNE FELT REASSURED by her expression: warmth tipping to shyness and delighted to see him. He had not been sure what to expect. He carefully kept his eyes on her face, because her cleavage was so breathtaking that dropping his gaze would surely lead to something premature and rash. This scene that contained them, it was obviously something she had planned with care. He felt distilled joy, a kind of pride, that she loved him enough to plan all this, to risk failure over it. He wanted to play his part well, to meet her expectations.

“Nancy, you’re beautiful beyond anything I could put in words.”

She bloomed a smile, her joy utterly fulsome. It had all been worth it to have him say that. She knew now it would not be complicated getting him into her arms.

“Thank you, kind sir, for the compliment. And there’s only one way to describe how you look, and that’s scrumptious.”

They went on standing apart, their eyes feasting on each other, then he held out the corsage he had brought her. It was packaged in one of those clear plastic containers florists provided.

“Thank you; it’s beautiful,” she said, taking it and admiring it for several seconds. “Do you mind if we use it for the table? It would make a perfect centerpiece.”

“Good idea.”

“Come,” she said, gesturing to the other side of the living area, to the table in its tiny space in front of the kitchen. “Angela has done the cooking, and she’ll be serving us.”

She placed the corsage, and he got her seated, being careful not to touch her, since that did not yet seem appropriate to the drama she had planned.

Angela came in, carrying a pitcher of ice water. “Don’t pay me any attention, Wayne,” she commanded cheerfully. “I’ll be serving and helping out. You two must have a good time. And that’s an order. Just relax, enjoy, and concentrate on who’s across from you. But if you do need something, just sing out; I’ll be in the kitchen.”

The dinner experience had the suede texture of a fantasy unbound by time. The entrée was Chicken Kiev, but neither would recall tasting it. Instead, they were captivated: each basking in the glow they received from the other. But the ritual of dining did serve a useful purpose. It provided structure, and it was calming. They would eat awhile, then look at each other, communicating wordlessly, then perhaps a bit of conversation, then the cycle would repeat. This continued, and neither wanted it to end. They felt wary of words at this point, sensing that with words, they might abrade each other’s scar tissue. Eventually though, the meal ran out, the cycle ended, and their small talk began to grow. She kept the tone as light as a feather, waiting for the right time. Eventually, a little past dessert, Angela appeared, dressed in her outer coat.

“You just would not believe how happy I am to leave you two to your own devices,” Angela said, heading toward the stairwell. “Everything’s put away, Nanz, no problems.”

Nancy thanked her warmly, as did Wayne. The girls exchanged knowing smiles, then Angela left. Now the mood shifted, became more expectant. He waited for her to set pace and direction.

“Tell me that you love me,” she said, jumping way out in front. “Please say the words.”

“I do love you, Nancy, but with the way we’ve hurt each other, forgiveness is something I feel we need to deal with and clear away.”

“I’ve thought about that a lot,” she said. “And I have a proposal.”

“All right.”

“I think we need to give each other more than forgiveness.”

“How so?”

“I think we need to forget the hurting we’ve done. Let’s just forget, wipe the slate clean, and try to make it up to each other. What do you think?”

“I think it’s a great idea: a great start.”

There was a pause.

“How would you like to proceed?” she asked.

“Your show.”

“Yes, it has been, hasn’t it? It’s been stagecraft. And it was designed to bring you back to me. It’s all right, isn’t it, now that you know?”

“I love you for doing it. For what it tells me.”

“The stagecraft,” she said, “has worked perfectly to get us to where we are. But the time has come for you to take over as stage director.”

“I like the sound of it, but why? Why, when you already have us on a roll?”

“Well...I want you to make love to me. And I want our physical intimacy to bind you to me.”

“We both want that. It’s natural.”

“Tell me how I can make it perfect for you.”

“Well,” he answered softly, “I would like you to help me out of this tux. It’s all studs and no buttons. Takes me forever to do it myself. And then, I would like to undress you with my own hands, and then taste your lips for the first time. And then make love to you so that you are in ecstasy. If I can see that on your face from what I’ve given you, then tonight will be perfect.”

She smiled, mellowing from his caring intent. “Shall we go in,” she said, glancing toward the bedroom.

“There’s just one thing more,” he said. She had already stood, and now he stood as well. “I love you beyond anything words could amount to. But there is one more word I need for us to share.”

“Tell me, then.”

“That word is forever. It’s the only word that describes my commitment to you. Please tell me you feel the same.”

“I promise,” she said. “Forever is how I love you.”

She led him into her bedroom, and he stood facing her, suddenly inhibited by the feminine intimacy of her boudoir, and by its scents of cosmetics and perfume. He simply could not move. She sensed it, came to him and began unbuttoning his jacket. The gesture freed him and he took it off, letting her hang it in the closet. She came back to him, deliberate and smiling shyly, took his arm, extended it toward her, and began undoing the pair of stud-fastened cufflinks that adorned each sleeve.

“I can see why this gives you trouble,” she said, bending to the task, first one sleeve, then the other, a minute or so for each, then she started on his shirt front.

He went utterly rapt, watching her, drinking in the beauty of her face in the context of this simple but poignant domestic task, her eyes lowered yet so aware of him, her lips closed and pressed, almost with a quiver at their corners as she focused on her work, calm and serene, unhurried, but the concentration also exuding love for him and the fact that she was entirely his. The emotion rose and crept through him, the wonder of this simple interlude, overpowering in the symbolic, loving message she was telegraphing him, as lyrical as any poem and, as it rose to overflowing, he took her face in his hands, his eyes feasting on hers, then he lowered his lips to hers, the kiss as gentle as a wish.

“You’re not following the script,” she whispered. “You’re supposed to undress me before you kiss me.”

They paused, parted slightly by a kind of savoring amazement, the touch sensation, the taste and aroma of their first intimate kiss, each seeing the dam breaking in the other’s widening eyes—the hunger let loose at last—then they rushed into each other’s arms with such urgency that they toppled, grasping, kissing, onto the bed.



LATER THAT NIGHT they lay together, she on her back, he on one elbow, assisted by a pillow. He kissed her hands, and she studied him as he did, entranced by the gesture. They both understood he was loving her hands because she was so self-conscious about them. When he finished, he pulled her to him, pressing his face between her breasts, kissing her, tasting her skin, inhaling her chemistry into the deepest vault of himself, continuing the primal bonding begun with their lovemaking.

“What are you feeling?” she asked, when he finally lay back, his eyes looking up at the ceiling.

“Heaven’s own bliss,” he responded dreamily, his smile sailing out to infinity.

“Bliss,” she echoed, stretching the tone of it through her lips, loving the heft of the word on her tongue. “Does that mean I can’t get your happiness any higher?”

“No, it doesn’t mean that. Not quite.”

“It doesn’t? Then what does it take to make you happier?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Marry me.”

“Of course I’ll marry you. Oh, you mean, now?”

“It’s a thought. I’d like us to consider it.”

“Is this a must-have for you?”

“No, nothing like that. But it’s more...secure. And our love is already forever.”

“Yes,” she replied, “but I don’t want to break the tension of it by tying the knot too soon. I like the idea of proving my love to you every single day. I want to know that you are bound to me by love that’s always new, not some license that’s part of our past.”

“I’m okay with that. As long as we agree that it’s part of our future.”

“Oh, yes,” she laughed. “You’re taken. Consider yourself engaged to marry.” She looked at him, studying his reaction, wondering how deeply he felt about this. “Besides,” she continued, “marrying now would be so complicated. I doubt our families would be happy if we sprang it on them. I know mine wouldn’t be. And if my parents disapproved, that could terrifically foul up our financial situation.”

“Our financial situation?”

“Yes, I come equipped with a money arrangement that’s fairly complicated. May I tell you about it?”

He nodded and she described the elements of her wealth: an annuity that currently paid a few hundred dollars per month; two trusts she received through inheritance which could be liquidated when she turned twenty-five; a car (current model Camaro) that her father had given her the past summer; her tuition and university fees paid by her parents; an allowance (its amount reset each year), that she received monthly so long as she remained in school; equity assets amounting to \$35,000 (from various gifts and bequests); plus her jewelry, valued at about \$12,000. She kept some of the jewelry in a safe deposit box; the rest was in the apartment.

“So you can see,” she concluded, “we definitely want to stay in my parents’ good graces. They’ll tolerate us playing house, but they will not want you actually in the family, within striking distance of the trusts, until they know you better, and I finish my education.”

“I understand. What is the combined value of the trusts?”

“Oh, let me do the math here in my head,” and she paused, thinking, “a little over two hundred, call it \$220,000. But they are well managed. And they’re growing faster than the rate of inflation.”

“Wow,” he sighed. “It seems like so much.”

“No,” she answered. “It’s not nearly enough to give us a good life. But it is enough to be a big help. It can save us from hardships that other couples have to suffer through. As a for-instance, we won’t have to wait to own our own home. My parents’ estate will probably be larger, but hopefully that will be far down the road. Wayne, we mustn’t hesitate about using some of the money for things we need. It can help make things easier for us.”

“Nancy, I haven’t thought about it. And I’m not sure I’m following your meaning. Can you give me an example of how we would use it?”

“Uh-huh, this apartment is a good example. It’s more than my parents’ allowances cover. You will move in with me, won’t you? You won’t make me sleep without you?”

He nodded, but wondered how he would ever explain any of this to his father.

“Good,” she responded. “We can start moving you in tomorrow. Oh, and now that we’re engaged, I want us to exchange rings. They can be symbols of how we belong to each other. I know it’s unconventional, but I want you to wear a ring as well, a symbol.”

But he did not respond.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

“Can’t we just skip the rings?”

“But why? I want to wear your ring.”

“Nancy, I can’t afford to buy you a ring that’s fitting.”

“But of course you can. It can be anything, even a ten-dollar friendship ring. As long as it comes from you to seal our engagement.”

“No,” he said emphatically. “I’ve seen your jewelry, at least your earrings. You won’t wear less as a symbol of how you belong to me.”

“Then, you pick it out and we’ll finance it out of my savings.”

“No, Nancy, no way. I’m okay with your money helping us with some things. But this is something seen by the world that I have to provide for you, just from me.”

“Then what are we going to do?”

“I don’t know,” he said with a sigh. “I’ll think of something. Let me work on it.”



THEIR FIRST LOVEMAKING left them so charged-up and energized that sleep seemed out of the question. Instead they donned robes and started chatting. They discovered that sex had broken the ice by shattering their initial apprehensions, giving them an emotional intimacy both deep and relaxed. Suddenly all barriers to sharing were gone. That made them even more excited, and they became eager to probe those secret recesses of themselves, not yet explored. These discussions were engaging, but eventually aroused them anew. So they came together again, not so much with urgency as a sense of grateful discovery, a search for fresh physical perspectives, new ways to enthrall each other. Then the cycle would repeat in a kind of honeymoon marathon fashion.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered with a shy smile when he asked tenderly about her sexual needs. His nervous, almost fretful inquiry flamed her love to a higher level. And she couldn’t resist the temptation to preserve his affection for her in this anxious form for just this one special night. Tomorrow she would tell him, explain that the peak pleasure was not as important as the more fulfilling buildup of their longer joining, of having his passion rise in urgency then explode, outpouring fervor all for her. And then, when he was spent, to have his kisses and his eyes still yearning for their emotional union, and to have him kiss her in a special spot he had already established: where her nose flattened to cheek, just below her eyes. That was bliss for her.

Eventually he crashed from his exertions and it happened with comic suddenness. They lay side by side, waiting as before, for the cycle to repeat. And as she spoke, explaining the intricacies of her sibling relationship with Christine, his lids suddenly got heavy, his eyes glazed over, and he dropped off to dreamland, his mouth slightly ajar. She blinked, feeling her own fatigue, but not so keenly she didn’t smile with luxurious contentment, with loving who he had turned out to be, all hers now, and with her own accomplishment, of bringing him finally, securely, into her bed. She leaned over and kissed his lips, but he didn’t stir. He was out for the duration. She sat back, watching him, now flaccid with sleep, and she just loved him awhile with her gaze.

For all their sharing, she had forgotten to tell him how beautiful his body was to her: slender but muscular, sleek in a way she had admired in only a few male dancers. There was more, of course. His eyes: that searching, wanting gaze that had started it all at Sullivan’s. Then later, the sharp focus, the cool residual of his courage, still converged and glittering in his pupils when she ambushed him on the subway platform, his surprise unable to conceal his bravery, done just for her,

and she would always love him for it in a special, golden way, no matter how loudly he protested.

She brought herself back to the present, her eyes still caressing his sleeping face, but fatigue now boring in on her, gaining the upper hand. She got up, made a quick stop, doused the lamp, and joined him in bed, wrapping herself around him, settling for sleep. She noted the glow of her night-light, wondering whether she would need it now that he was here. She started tallying the details of moving him in, hopefully starting tomorrow, then it all went fuzzy with slumber.

Chapter Eleven

“**A**T SOME POINT, we need to discuss your acting, and when you’ll return,” he said, finally broaching the subject.

“I know,” she sighed, cuddling closer against him in the bed they had shared each night of their first week together. They dedicated a good part of their first full weekend to moving the last of his belongings into her apartment. It was now Sunday night. They had made love after returning from a quiet dinner out, and were contentedly sated with each other: tired but not wanting to give up the weekend quite yet to the sleep that would bring Monday morning and a fresh week of classes—and tests.

“I have a tough week coming up,” she said. “But I can’t wait to meet your grandfather next Sunday.”

“You’re changing the subject.”

“I know.”

“Are you as afraid of this topic as I am?”

“Probably more so. But it chiefly comes down to one question, and how you answer it.”

“Nancy, don’t turn this around on me.”

“The question is: do you want me to return to acting?”

“Look at you. You’re punishing me for bringing this up.”

“I have a high priority need to know.”

“It can’t be a surprise that I’m torn over this,” he answered. Her eyes pressed him for more. “You know I’m afraid of your acting, that it will take you away from me. Call it jealousy, pure and simple. But on the other hand, I’ve seen you on stage, and you are something extra special. And we know you’re even better this year because of how you won that role offer, by audition, against professionals. How can we go forward without seeing what acting could be for you? Your talent is too priceless not to find out.”

“It’s noble what you’re doing, and I love you for it. But I would give up acting in an instant if you asked me.”

“And I’ll treasure forever that you’d give me that. But I’d always feel guilty that I took something away from you that’s special, that’s part of who you are. In

the end, it has to be your decision. You make the choice, free and clear, and I'll support whatever you decide."

"In that case, I'll probably try going back to it. But not for another month or so. I don't want it now. And once I'm back, you mustn't put pressure on me to meet some kind of standard you've set in your mind."

"I won't. But why are you even worried about that?"

"Because if I return, I don't know where things will go. You have to remember that loving you has landed me in a different region of myself. My talent has never been stable, and I'm not sure I have the hunger to act at the level I reached during my audition. I need your support to be unconditional, no matter what I choose or what direction my talent goes."

"I promise. I'll support you, and all the decisions will be yours."

"Good. I'll be leaning on you," she said, looking relieved. "But let me ask you a tough question, and you don't have to answer this now."

"Sure."

"If it came down to it, would you be willing to interrupt your education or maybe a co-op work assignment to support my acting? You see, I don't know what my agent might come up with from the prospects he's working for me. Lightning could even strike twice, and I might be tempted to take the plunge into a fulltime professional role. If that happens, there's no way I could even try it without you at my side. I know it's a lot to ask, and I want you to take time to think it over carefully."

"There's nothing to think over."

"You mean you'd do it?"

"Of course. If you're there for me, then I can always make up a semester. And if you give me enough notice, I should be able to get a co-op assignment in New York. Just remember that the next assignment is six months long: from June all the way to December. That's a lot of long train rides from Thirtieth Street station if some play you're in closes and you return to Penn."

"Oh, you're wonderful," she exclaimed, coiling her arms around him. "It's a dream come true to have you love me this much."

"Nancy, my love wouldn't be worth much if I couldn't make a sacrifice for you when the chips are down."



THEY CHARGED HEADLONG into the adjustments that came with their live-in relationship. Coming from a large family, then bunking with a roommate at Omega House, he was accustomed to a minimum of personal living space. His possessions had to be well organized and arranged, neat as a pin, or chaos reigned. Or worse yet, things just disappeared. But Nancy had grown up with a room of her own, and in the later years had domestic help to pick up after her. Now, in an apartment situation, without servants, she couldn't get the knack of keeping things tidy. Neatness was something she tended to every other month or so, or on special occasions, as for their candlelit dinner. Within two weeks of his moving in, the apartment looked scattered and unkempt. And it made him edgy. He tried straightening up after her for a while, but gave up after a few weeks. Unwilling to request she mend her ways in the apartment she paid for, he put the issue aside and resolved to live with it. The exception was the bathroom. With his sharp sense of smell, the toilet distracted him long before it bothered her. So he was the one who broke out johnny-brush and disinfectant and got down to it. Once the bowl was fresh as a daisy, he decided he might as well do the rest of the bathroom, even if it meant finding a home for her cosmetics. So the bathroom became his domestic responsibility, drudgery to be sure, but a way he could share the workload. It wasn't enough to make him comfortable with being supported by his fiancée, but it helped some.

The kitchen was more Nancy's specialty, and she kept it in good order. She had learned good cooking skills because of a diet she developed that gave her energy and helped her mental acuity. It consisted of no red meat (chicken and fish instead), no refined sugar, whole grain foods (in place of processed ones), raw, uncooked fruits and vegetables, and a variety of supplements. Wayne had agreed to the diet to humor her, hadn't much listened to her explanation of what the supplements were, but was surprised a month later when he felt and thought better, enough to notice a difference.

"So how did you come up with this diet?"

"I'm so glad it's working for you. It started out as advice from friends who were gymnasts. Then I did a lot of reading. There are a lot more health-food stores, with literature and people interested in this sort of culture, in Southern California, than here in the East. But mostly, I experimented with how effective different things were by how much they helped me as an athlete. That's a good, strenuous test if you plan carefully and give it time."

"It's also scientific," he said. "I'm proud of you. Walk me through these supplements again. First off, I don't see any vitamin pills."

“No,” she answered, “vitamin tablets are unbalanced and aren’t of much value. Most of the vitamins we need we get from the fruits and vegetables we eat, just as nature intended.”

“And I know this one is lecithin.”

“Yes, it helps in a lot of ways. Call it a general tonic. The little, white, chalky pill is chromium. It helps with sugar metabolism and insulin regulation. It’s the energy pill among the group. The brown pill is ginkgo biloba. It enhances mental ability, probably by increasing blood flow to the brain; no one knows. The lozenge with the clear, goldish fluid is vitamin E. It has only been approved for consumer use in the past few years. I take it for my skin and hair.”

“Isn’t it also called the sex vitamin?”

“Uh-huh. That’s why I have you on a four-hundred-unit dose. You’re making love to me every day without fail. I’ve done some checking, and that’s unusual, even for married men your age. This dosage will help you be the lover you were born to be, and it will help prevent our love life from depleting you for other things, like studying.”

“You’re amazing. I would never have believed any of this without living it firsthand.”

“Now that you’re mine, I intend to take good care of you.”



THEIR FIRST MONTH together was a weltering tumult of emotions that seemed to expand without bound or limit. It was the flood tide of their relationship, when every shared thought glowed sacred, when every caress seemed better than the last, when each day allowed them to see each other as sexier, more beautiful than the day before. They simply could not keep their eyes or their hands off each other. They kept exploring, pushing the boundaries of their swelling emotions toward some saturation that reason told them must be there in this cold, cruel world. But in that first month, they encountered nothing to hold back their union. It rocketed to the stratosphere she had written of in her notebooks, an ineffable sharing so rarefied, only tears came close to expressing what they had been given.

They slept nude, wrapped in each other’s embrace, not minding the sheen of perspiration that formed where their skin surfaces joined for hours on end. And even though it was like yanking off a bandage when those skin surfaces finally parted, they reveled in it, tolerating it gratefully as part of their fever for each

other. The insecurity of not knowing how long such intensity could last fueled some of the urgency. But this was just surface manifestation of the deeper insecurities that gave their relationship its special vibrance. For their love would always be shaped and haunted by the ghosts of their separation. A residual insecurity would always be there, affecting them, worrying them, motivating them. And it imparted a stamina to what they felt and gave. The meteoric flux of their first months would recede a notch or two, but their life together would always have a vitality unrivaled by any other couple they would meet, know of, or read about.

Critical to Wayne was that he be the primary emotional provider for her, that she need him. She understood this, and moved to reassure him, making sure her affections were public as well as private. She thought it ironic that he fretted over her sexual needs. For he became a consummate lover, always seeing to her fulfillment before his own, always looking past physical completion to provide the affection she craved afterward.

Nancy's fears centered on what fate might conjure to warp his affections. She didn't want to lose him again to misplaced altruism: some off-centered love that compelled him to give her up. Her plan was simple: love him fiercely, need him the way he craved, and use sexual fetters to bind him to her. She felt success from their first intimacy.

A turning point came during their first December. They were still shifting and experimenting with how to sleep together. She was exceptionally restless when she slept. He started as an active sleeper as well, but in a few weeks he trained himself to settle down and be the pivot around which her fitful night energy could rotate. His adjustment helped them both, and with time, the amplitude of her acrobatics would subside. But that was still in the future. On this December night, she flung herself from him with a murmured start, and the ripped-off-bandage effect of their parted flesh woke him. This was routine now, and usually the sleep interruption was minor. But tonight their bedroom was bathed with moonlight, and he came to full consciousness. After they separated, she turned back to face him, her head on the pillow. Because of her maneuvers, they used a total of six pillows to meet her needs and to keep her from falling out of bed. She slept quietly for now, the moonlight streaming through the back window to render her softly in its pale rays.

As he watched her sleep, his thoughts turned pensive. Deep inside, he had long had a vague faith that somehow he would find this special girl, that they would meet and match, love deeply, share something special. But it still shocked

him, as he looked at her now, that she was so beautiful. And there was more. Six weeks had given him time to know her as a person. Amidst the strengths and weaknesses that defined her was a pivotal trait that seemed to defy human nature. Nancy was popular and personable, attractive and plenty talented. Yet her true self seemed detached from these outer parts of her makeup, immune to the conceit and arrogance such qualities often engender. Instead, beneath her charm, beneath the talent, lay an inward gradient toward solitude and reflection, a sensitive inner stillness that shrank down and down to an empty longing that, so far, he filled for her. And it thrilled him. He knew now that part of her empty longing had to do with her troubled past, something she had shared more fully with him. It explained the wisp of melancholy he had seen on the edge of her features that night at Sullivan's. And it explained some of the things he saw now: her restless, fitful sleep, her ongoing need for a night-light. He looked at her again, hoping but not fully trusting it would always be him she turned to for filling those voids from her past.

As he continued watching, the impulse grew irresistible and, since her head was perfectly positioned, he leaned over and kissed her lightly on that special spot where her nose smoothed into her cheek, just below her eyes. Suddenly her eyes came lazily open.

"Do you want to make love?" she croaked, but her eyes were unfocused.

He laughed softly, knowing she was not asleep, but that she would never remember, either. "Not unless you want to," he whispered. "I just wanted to kiss you, and taste your cheek."

"Hmmmh," she murmured, and then she was out again, snoring lightly for the next few minutes. Then her lips smacked empty air noisily, and she sensed their separation, for she shifted toward him, left hand leading, finding him, and she huddled tightly against his side and shoulder. She continued to cuddle, mewling like a little kitten, until she reestablished herself securely in his arms. She lay still, and there was only the rhythmic sound of her breathing, as she slept on, quite peacefully at last.

Suddenly it hit him what she was telling him with her subconscious actions. There could be no artifice or pretense in the way she sought him in her sleep, the way she pressed herself against him, mewling her affection. So why should he worry? If he could fill a need deep enough that she expressed it in her sleep, then surely it was rooted firm enough to defy time and its erosive effects. A dawning happiness trickled through him. And on any given day, he could know what she truly felt simply by how she had loved him in her sleep the night before. He

smiled, easing back toward slumber, knowing this discovery would give them hours of fascinating discussion.



ANOTHER CONCERN WAS how to bring him into Nancy's social life. The chance meeting with her friends at the Arcadia told how he dreaded the prospect even while valiantly insisting she have the social life predating their union. She knew it was a complex issue. There was a gap between them in temperament, he being less socially inclined than she. The trick then, was making the experience enjoyable for him, or at least satisfying at some level. To do that, she wanted to bring him along carefully, a step at a time. She was good at socializing and she enjoyed the life: the glittering sorority functions, the swank parties, the display and promenade of interfraternity formals. They had their proper time and place. She also wanted to fulfill a dream she had nurtured since junior high: to have that one special love squire her through the social life at its best. She especially wanted to show him off to her friends and acquaintances. Great glimmering horn toads! Didn't she deserve it after all the years of searching and dreaming, of making mistakes, of wondering who he would be and when the time would come that he would finally escort her with love and pride? But she would just as soon give up the dream if she couldn't find a way to have him enjoy it. The stakes were high, and she must proceed with care, not neglecting any factor that could affect their success. Phase one of her plan focused on getting him into better clothes.

"I'd like to buy you an early Christmas present," she said, interrupting his studies at the apartment.

"Yeah, it is kind of early. Do you have a surprise up your sleeve?"

"A new wardrobe."

"Okay. I guess I could use a few more dress shirts, if that's what you have in mind."

"No," she said, pulling up a chair beside him, "I mean a completely new wardrobe."

That got his attention, and she realized she would need to be careful.

"Nancy, don't tell me you're ashamed of my clothes."

"No," she replied, bending the truth. "But you are not a very clothes-conscious person. The trousers you have are old. They weren't chosen well for you. And they're factory finished, which means they're not a good fit for

someone with your slender build. The shirts fit you fine; in fact, you could model them, but they're worn and nearly frayed. Apart from the turtleneck you bought for our date, you don't have anything that isn't years old and just about worn out."

"You want me to have fitted pants?" he asked, his tone incredulous.

"Yes. We need to at least get you up to Jamar slacks. Your build is very attractive, but it's also unusual. Fitting you to your trousers is the only way we can show you off to full advantage. I want to see you that way, just like you enjoy seeing me in nice dresses. Let me give you this as a Christmas present."

"But the money. You're talking about mucho dinero here."

"But it's not that much. And we can afford it. Don't be afraid of the money part, not when you need it to look as good as you deserve. The money is not in quarantine. It's there to help us when we need it, like now."

"But I don't even know how to shop for clothes like that. What shop did you have in mind?"

"Ernesto's. It's downtown on Fifth, and I'll come with you, of course."

"Ernesto's!" he exclaimed. "That's a custom fit shop, and it's way more expensive than I would even dream of. I mean, I was thinking, maybe, of Gimbel's finer men's shop, tops."

"No way. Not for you. Not when I can afford to give you better, and Christmas is right around the corner. But tell me, what if the shoe were on the other foot? I belong to you, I'm your fiancée, you have some extra cash for early Christmas. You decide to give me some new gowns so you can take me out and show me off. Would you want me to buy them at Gimbels?"

The spark leaped between their gazes and he answered without a pause.

"No way. Not for you. Not when I can afford to give you better."

Now they laughed together at his echoed response, the tension broken, the victory all hers. She decided to push it further.

"Will you let me select some of your clothes for you?"

He thought a moment, reflecting on the implication of her request, then said, "Sure, within reason." And he reached over and kissed her cheek. "Nancy, relax, I'm okay with where we've come out on this. I am."

"Which is?"

"From now on, I'll be dressing for you."

"We'll be dressing for each other."

"One more question. Is there another reason you want new clothes for me?"

“Yes, and I was going to mention it, really. It has to do with our agreement about rejoining the interfraternity social scene. You’ll fit in better, and you’ll enjoy it more, with these new clothes helping you look as good as you should.”



THEY STARTED FAMILY introductions as soon as they could be scheduled. First came a nice Sunday visit to his grandfather, located a short drive in Darby. Then they spent Thanksgiving with Nancy’s Aunt Edith, her husband, and their children and grandchildren, in Bryn Mawr. Wayne enjoyed the visit, felt acceptance, Kevin included, and now understood Nancy’s closeness to this part of her family.

But the premier challenge was the following Sunday, when they drove into Bucks County to meet his family. Rehearsing his siblings’ names and interests did not relieve her anxiety, although the visit itself got off to a good start. His two oldest sisters, often inseparable, were waiting to greet them at the door, then stepped outside. Once the introductions and hugs were traded, they fired questions about the Camaro. Yes, it was Nancy’s car, he told them, thinking how the information would be ricocheting through the gathering.

“Are you two really engaged to be married?” Eileen asked.

“Yes, we are,” Wayne replied. “But we haven’t set a date.”

The girls turned and chit-chatted with Nancy. They are sizing her up, he thought, proud of how protective they were being on his behalf. Nancy responded avidly and beamed her brightest smile, pouring on the charm. She had her hair styled similarly to when he had first seen her at Sullivan’s: long and plain, except for an antique comb, plus a pin or two that flared her tresses slightly around her ears. Suddenly the sisters turned back to him.

“Wayne,” Margaret said, her voice low, “Daddy knows you are not living at the campus housing. They’ve already figured out you two must be living together.”

“Well, thanks for the warning,” he sighed. “We appreciate it.”

Eileen came and hugged him with her arm across his back. “She’s so radiant,” she said, looking directly at Nancy, who smiled back at her. “And you’ve never looked happier. She’s the one, isn’t she? the one you told me you would find someday.”

“Yes,” he responded, “she’s the one.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Eileen said. “Good luck. And remember, you can’t really divorce your own family, no matter what they put you through.”

With that, the sisters led them inside, down the entryway hall, and into the living room, where they stepped into a scene of utter tumult. His mother’s younger brother, his wife, and their four children were visiting and staying for the afternoon dinner, so the room was thronged with people: children playing, adults either watching televised pro football or helping with table preparations in the adjoining dining area. The table wasn’t large enough, so card tables were being set up for the younger kids.

Wayne thought the introductions went well. His parents greeted Nancy with some reserve, but they did crack smiles, so he gauged the progress as net positive. After a while, he began loosening up. It was hard to be nervous amid such familiar pandemonium. It was almost like a comforting shield. There were a total of seven children, ranging in ages from three to ten, tearing through the house, playing with toys scattered everywhere, getting underfoot and demanding both periodic attention and occasional correction. Nancy seemed to be loving it, though he kept her within sight and frequently came close enough to touch and trade comments. When she wasn’t conversing, she sat on the floor, playing with the younger kids, acting somewhat maternal. So far, so good. He relaxed even more, coming to the verge of enjoying himself. But then his ten-year-old brother announced their mother wanted him in the kitchen.

“Wayne,” she said, “your uncle Gerald didn’t call until last night about coming today, so I’m short of ingredients for the dinner. Would you walk up to the Pantry Pride and get me some things?”

“Ma, you want me to go to the supermarket for you?” Wayne asked, his tone disbelieving.

“Yes, here’s the list and a twenty. And take Ian Patrick with you. He’s been looking forward to seeing you, and you haven’t paid him any attention.”

He assented, took the list and money, collected twelve year old Ian Patrick, but then parked him at the front entryway while he went to Nancy, still on the floor with the kids. He knelt beside her so as not to be overheard.

“They’re separating us by sending me on a shopping trip. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing fine. You can go.”

“Are you sure? I don’t like leaving you.”

“It’s all right; don’t worry. Whatever they’re planning, it’s because they care, and we need to get through it.”

He kissed her on the lips, a gesture that did not go unnoticed, he realized, as he stood and turned to go, re-collecting Ian Patrick. Seven-year-old Colleen decided she wanted to come as well, running after them as they reached the other side of the street. She sprinted into his arms and he swung her up onto his shoulders, just as he'd often done when she was a toddler.

"You're getting a little big for this," he chuckled, and they set out on the short walk to the nearby shopping center.

On returning, Wayne saw Nancy and his father sitting together at the dining room table, conversing quietly. Seems friendly enough, Wayne thought, not yet seeing the pattern. His father ended the discussion with, yes, it was a smile, then he got up and came toward Wayne. Nancy's smile faded as she raised her eyes, her expression tilting toward worry.

"I need a word with you," his father said. Wayne tried to decipher his father's shuttered look, couldn't, and merely nodded. "Upstairs boys' bedroom," his father added. "We can go up now, before dinner." He turned, went to the front door, which was next to the staircase, and ascended. Wayne followed. As he reached the top of the stairs, he turned and saw Nancy coming up too. Now the worry on her face was close to alarm.

"What's going on?" she whispered.

"He wants to talk, one-on-one. I can't take you with me."

She nodded somberly, sighed, and asked, "Is there a bathroom up here?"

"Down the hall," he said, nodding, then he went into the bedroom, closed the door, and sat on the bed opposite his already seated father.

"So tell me about you and this girl."

"It's like I told Ma over the phone. We're engaged to be married."

"But you're not formally engaged."

"No. I won't meet her parents until later on, probably this summer."

"Well, they may not be thrilled about the idea. Do you have any idea who this girl is?"

Wayne waited, bracing for what was to come.

"She's the daughter of Edmund Hammond, one of five top executive VPs featured in a *Fortune* article last year. This guy is next in line to be CEO at Amber Electronics. Do you think he's going to want his daughter marrying a boy who hails from Levittown, Pennsylvania, the son of a machinist?"

"Daddy, I was proud of you when you were a machinist, and I'm proud of you now that you're working with the engineers. Our blood lines are nothing to be ashamed of."

“Yes, but I talked to this girl. She comes from a high-class family, a prosperous California family. The class difference between our clans is huge. It’s going to cause you big headaches when she misses the social status you can’t give her on an engineer’s pay. The only way you can make this work is for them to adopt you into their tribe, then put you in fast-track jobs to the upper echelons. You mark my words on this.”

“Believe me, I actually do agree with you on this. But Nancy loves me despite the family differences. We’ll just have to work through those issues, whatever it takes.”

“You’re mighty damn slick with these comebacks, Wayne. But answer me this: are you living with this girl?”

“Yes. She has her own apartment.”

“Why, you know that’s wrong. It’s a sin before God. Why don’t you marry her and be done with it?”

“I asked her to marry me, but she won’t until she graduates. You already have some idea how negatively her family might react. There’s nothing more to be done at this point.”

“But that doesn’t make it any less wrong. You need to back away from this girl before you get her pregnant. Back off, take a deep breath, go to her family, and work out a betrothal. That’s the right thing, it’s the honorable thing to do. It’s how you were raised.”

“Daddy, I’ll meet her parents eventually. But I don’t know what we’ll be facing. I’ll have to play it by ear.”

“Well, that’s not good enough. And besides, there are other issues here. You admit to living with her in her apartment, so you are being supported by her. Is that correct?”

“Yes, correct.”

“And look at your clothes. Those trousers look like they came from a Bond Brothers shop. You did not buy those trousers with your own money.”

“Also correct. They were an early Christmas present from Nancy.”

““An early Christmas present from Nancy,”” he mimicked in a mocking tone. “Do you think calling it a present hides the fact that you’ve become a jellyfish of a man being kept by a woman? What kind a man are you, being kept by a woman you can’t support?”

“What kind of man? You really want to know? I’m man enough to be loved by the girl of my dreams. That’s how man enough I am. I love her. And I cannot live without her. I tried it; I left her for a lot of the reasons you’re talking about.

But it just about put us both under, and I'll tell you the truth: I don't intend to give her up again. Yeah, she supports us, and yeah, it doesn't feel that great to my ego. But there you go. She just happens to have more money and much wealthier parents than I do."

"That's a disgusting excuse. Yeah, that's right. Disgusting. Your mother and I faced plenty of tough problems, and opposition too, when we fell in love. But what we didn't do is sit around the way you are, throwing up existentialist bullshit all over the place as an excuse for doing the wrong thing. We had problems, but we didn't shack up and duck the tough choices. We got married, even though it meant eloping and risking never having grandparents for you and your brothers and sisters."

"But Ma was willing to marry you. Nancy does not want us to marry at this time. Besides, it's just a legal detail. Our commitment to each other is already a lifetime lock. Of that, you can be sure."

"Legal detail! That legal detail, as you call it, is the only thing that makes it right before God. Who the hell do you think you're kidding? Do you think you can pretend your way through this? It isn't as if you don't know any better. You are deliberately ducking the choices that have to be made here. But why am I surprised? This is what happens when you become an atheist and leave The Church."

"Daddy, I've told you before. Don't insult me by calling me that. I may have left The Church over Pope Paul's birth-control decision, but I don't deserve to be called an atheist by my own father."

His dad jumped to his feet and pointed his index finger within inches of Wayne's face. "Don't you use that tone of voice with me. You are in my house, under my authority, and I can still whip your ass."

Now it was Wayne's turn to jump up, confronting his father, who now had his fists clenched at his side. "Whip my ass? Is that what this comes down to? Well, let me tell you something. If it gives you a big rise, go right ahead. You can kick my butt around this house all you want. I would never raise my hand to you, not even if you killed me."

His father turned, walked to the door, then turned back. "You were always your mother's favorite. Now you're breaking her heart, acting like a goddamned gigolo." And with that, he opened the door, stormed down the stairs and out the front door, returning later, after having cooled off.

Wayne sat down on the bed, flushed and shaking. He heard the bathroom door open, but it didn't register. Then Nancy entered, her face drained of color.

“I was in the bathroom,” she said, “and I heard everything, through the wall.” She sat beside him and took his hand. “I cannot believe the things he said to you. Your own father. My God, you’re trembling from this.” And she put an arm across his back, hugging him.

“I can’t relate to my father. He’s been through things we can’t comprehend: going hungry during The Depression, fighting World War II below the waterline in navy ships. He sees things differently.”

“Do you want to leave, leave now?”

He mulled it over. “No. It’s a close call, but we should stay. Leaving now would stress everyone and make things worse. But we’ll leave if you’d rather.”

“I’ll support whatever you decide. I...just didn’t comprehend.”

“What?”

“The things that drove you to distraction over our differences. I heard the words, but I didn’t understand what was really in your head until now. I should have been more frightened.”

“Yeah. It’s hard to get your arms around this class thing until you see my father in action.”

“But we don’t know that my parents will behave any better,” she said.

“Don’t remind me. And there’s so much more at stake in terms of their support.”

“You mustn’t think of it that way, not as something to worry over.” Then she slipped off the bed and knelt in front of him, between his legs, pressing her arms against his, looking up into his eyes. “I won’t give you up,” she whispered. “I know you’re afraid of how finances and lifestyle could affect my feelings for you. But you are wrong. In the worst case, I would quit school and become a waitress to keep us together.”

He looked into her face and knew, not only that she meant it, but that she didn’t dread the prospect in the least.

“You can’t imagine what it means to have you love me that much,” he said.

She smiled and he could see the victory she felt. It was a milestone moment for them, and he couldn’t take his eyes from what he saw in her heart.

“And if marriage is the answer,” she said, “then I would give you my vows tonight.”

“I know. But your instincts on this are probably our best bet. It would be foolish to ambush your parents. Let’s stick with your plan, at least for now.”

“We need to go down,” she said, rising, and pulling him to his feet. “We’ll be missed, and appearances can’t be ignored.”

“We have time before dinner,” he said. “I’ll take you across the street and introduce you to Henk’s family. I always stop in.”

Chapter Twelve

“**W**HAT’S THIS?” SHE asked, eyeing the small, gift-wrapped box Wayne placed on her lap.

“From my heart to yours, to seal our engagement.”

“Oh, wonderful!” she shrieked gleefully. “Let me get yours first.”

It was an 18-karat pinky ring, engraved in elaborate script, with his initials on top, and rose and sycamore leaf patterns on the side.

“I designed it and had it made for you,” she said, clearly pleased. “The roses are the ones you gave me the evening we did Bookbinders—fortunately not handy enough for me to throw at you later that night. And the leaves are sycamores, because you told me they are your favorite, and because Philly has so many of them. Look at the engraving, inside.”

It was done in script, reproducing the handwritten phrases she had written on the Vermeer card accompanying her candlelit dinner invitation.

“Did I do the right thing? Do the words bring you good memories when you read them? If not, I can have them ground out.”

“No, the words are priceless,” he responded. He praised her design, put on the ring, and then she opened what he had brought her.

“It’s a coin,” she said, surprised, examining it in its square, clear plastic case. “It’s beautiful. And it’s so shiny, like a mirror.”

“That’s because it’s what’s called a proof. It’s specially minted to have mirror surfaces and deep-cut, brilliant features. The coin is a ten-dollar gold piece, of the Indian-head type. But that label is misleading. The figure on the heads side is actually a Caucasian woman, representing Liberty, wearing an Indian headdress. Proofs of this coin are rare, and this one is a family heirloom with a special story.”

“Well then tell me.”

“My grandfather that you met, his father, my great-grandfather, was given two of these coins for rescuing two brothers, one of them having fallen through ice on Darby Creek. This was the winter of 1908 while he was gathering firewood. The boys’ father was a manager at the Philadelphia mint, hence the unusual tokens of gratitude when he learned my great grandfather was a coin

collector. One of the proofs was sold during The Great Depression to save the family home. But my grandfather refused to sell this one. He said he would save it for one of his grandchildren. Since I'm the oldest and the only one to show an interest in coin collecting, it's long been understood that it would come to me. I asked him if I could have it now, and he gave it to me because he understands what you mean to me. And now it's yours." He held it up to her throat. "I was thinking we could mount it in a pendant, and you could wear it as a necklace. What do you think?"

"Wayne, it's out of the question. I couldn't possibly accept this."

"Why? What's the hang-up?"

"Well, for starters, I suspect it's priceless. What is its monetary value?"

"Roughly...five thousand dollars."

"Why, that's certainly priceless in money terms, but it's also priceless as a piece of your family heritage. It wouldn't be right for it to leave your family limits."

"But you are a part of that family."

"I will be. But this is not appropriate for an engagement."

"Nancy, I can't take no for an answer on this. This is the one thing I can offer you that's special enough to bridge the differences between our families."

"But won't mounting it as jewelry ruin its value?"

"It'll decrease its value some. It will see some wear. But a proof coin never stops being a proof. And we can take precautions: velvet-lined mount that's recessed against dents and fingerprints. And I'll teach you how to handle it by wearing gloves so the coin itself is never touched or bumped."

"All right," she assented, but her reluctance was still evident. "But not to own. I could accept it as a special trust, but not a permanent possession. Never that. This is so uniquely a part of you and your family that I could only accept it as a special loan that would have to be returned if anything happens to us."

"But I don't see why we have to worry about remote negatives. And it sounds legalistic. Our love is too deep for that."

"Don't think of it that way. It won't be legal as in written down. But I feel I need to give you a special pledge if this is what you want me to wear. Will you let me do that?"

"You know I'm helpless when you ask me anything in that tone of voice. What did you have in mind?"

She thought a spell, then said, "I know what I want to say, but it's not ready to come out yet. Let's talk about how to mount the coin."

“Okay. What do you think of a pendant? I don’t think there are too many choices.”

“Not good enough,” she declared. “For something this unique in all the world, a special necklace is called for. Let me see,” and she held the coin up as though seeing it in space would inspire ideas. Then she went to the mirror and held it to her chest. She pondered a few moments, then went and retrieved her sketch pad and pencils. She went to work, drawing, but discarded her first effort. “That’s not it,” she said. “We’ll try a sycamore leaf motif that harmonizes with what I did for your ring.” Then she worked for several minutes, adjusting the necklace size relative to the coin’s until she was satisfied. “Here it is,” she said, showing him the sketch. “Basically, it’s a gold medallion in the shape of a sycamore leaf, with the coin mounted in the center. We’ll recess the coin enough that it’s protected. The medallion will be textured and veined just like the real leaf, and we’ll have a gold rope chain attached to these lobes on either side of the leaf stem. What do you think? Do you like it?”

“Yes, very much. It’s distinctive. A sycamore leaf—so Philadelphian.”

“Uh-huh,” she responded, still eyeing the sketch. “We’ll need a trip downtown to Jeweler’s Row. The same jeweler who made your ring is a good candidate for this commission as well. Are you sure you like this?”

“Absolutely.”

“Good. And now my pledge to you. I’m ready to tell you the words.” She took both his hands in hers, then paused, letting the suspense of the moment rise.

“I promise you, by every strength of my will, that I will treasure this heirloom as a symbol of my love for you and my intent to be your wife. This commitment is regardless of your affection for me. But if it should happen, that my love for you, or desire to be your wife, should ever die, then I promise to return this coin to you. This way, you will know. By this coin, I swear, you will always know where my true heart is.”



NOW THAT WAYNE’S wardrobe was in good order, Nancy moved to the next phase of her plan for bringing them into the upper stratum of Penn social life. As she saw it, there were roughly three levels. First were the university mixers: dances available to the entire student body, functions that Wayne was already familiar with through his friendship with Henk. Then came the parties, sponsored by the various fraternities and sororities, typically for their members and dates, and

sometimes as a joint function with another sorority or fraternity. At the top level were the interfraternity social functions, some of them formal affairs. This was the destination she wanted for them, to share him with her friends, and to see him enjoy the social experience, something to be part of their memory book. Her strategy called for rising through the levels, one step at a time.

But the preliminary to any of this was a foursome outing with Henk and his date, a chance to see how Wayne interacted socially with his best friend. The occasion's success caused her to ease up some on her concerns. The guys were spontaneous and humorous, spending an uproarious session lampooning the Eagles, Philly's pro football franchise. And they had a hilarious time trading stories about the head coach's laughably incompetent leadership decisions and miscues.

Next step was a mixer, this time tripling with Henk and Angela and their dates. This gave her a chance to introduce him to some of her friends and to vary her tactical approach, a low-risk venture since Henk and Angela were both present to lend support. Things went so well she moved to the next level, a sorority party, the following weekend. She had now decided on the best tactical approach for them. She was simply more adept and outgoing than he, so she would act as social leader. But he thrived on her public displays of affection, so she would just keep lavishing her true feelings in his direction. What could be easier? And, at least for now, she would not let him off her arm, not while either was conversing.

The party was at a fraternity that had invited her sorority. Although riskier than a party at her own sorority house, she was not too worried. They arrived and started working their way through the downstairs rooms, densely packed with groups and ribbons of people. Things went well, and she began to feel upbeat about their progress. Then she noticed that one of the men in the group they were approaching, the one whose back was to them, was familiar in a way that set off alarm bells in her brain. As the group parted at their approach, and the fellow turned, stepping aside, she froze, recognizing Craig Lawler, who could only be here as someone's guest. It was already too late to avoid the encounter, so she went to red alert and tightened her grip on Wayne's arm using the prearranged signal they had agreed on, hoping the next few seconds would not blow their carefully troweled progress up through the ceiling. Oh, hells bells, she thought, her insides prickling with alarm. Craig's expression was hardening into a scowl. How would Wayne react?

But Wayne was already stepping forward, extending his hand to Craig.

“I’m Wayne Cavanaugh, and I’m so glad to finally get to meet you,” he said, his tone so smooth that butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. “No, really,” he continued when Craig seemed uncertain about extending his hand, “I’ve been wanting to meet you so I could apologize and thank you, all in the same breath.”

The words affected Craig, quelled the rise of his resentful expression, and he gave his name as he took the proffered handshake. But he was not smiling.

“If I hadn’t misinterpreted the situation at your table that night at Sullivan’s, then I wouldn’t have come over and disturbed you both. And for that I apologize. But if I hadn’t come over, then I would not have met Nancy and ended up engaged to the girl of my dreams. So thanks a lot for setting all that in motion.”

“You were brilliant,” she whispered as they strolled away from the group containing Craig. “You could have melted the polar icecap with that line you used to get his handshake.”

“It took two lines,” he reminded her. “And it almost exploded in my face. Talk about having to think fast. It must be all those brain supplements you’ve been feeding me.”

“Supplements or no, if you keep this up, you’ll be giving the frat brothers lessons on how to be peachy suave.”

He laughed, tickled by her praise.

“In fact,” she continued. “We’ve done so well tonight that I think we can move up the schedule.”

“How so?”

“I was putting off thought of attending one of the big interfraternity functions until the winter formal they give in February or so. But I don’t see why we can’t do the big, pre-Christmas gala, it’s a formal too, and it’s coming up in a few weeks. I think we’re ready. Are you game?”

“As long as I have you to inspire my lines, and feed me brain supplements.”



“WAYNE, I DON’T mean to pry,” she said, walking into the living room with the day’s mail, “but you have a letter with a return address that says ‘Van Pijpen,’ from Levittown. Could there be some sort of problem that Henk’s parents would need to write to you?”

“Oh, this is just a letter from Ingrid,” he said. “I can tell from the handwriting.”

“Ingrid?” she asked, her inflection rising.

“Yeah, you remember; I told you about Henk’s two little sisters. You met Marianne when we visited my parents and I took you across the street to meet the Van Pijpen family. Only Ingrid, she’s the older girl, same age as Eileen, she wasn’t there, and you didn’t get to meet her.”

“Why is she writing to you?”

“Oh, it’s just a pen pal kind of thing, something we started when I left for college. Ingrid and I have always been good buddies, like brother and sister. In fact, she’s probably closer to me in a sister sort of way than I am to Eileen.”

“Why?”

“We just hit it off from the start. I tutored her in math when she was in junior high. And she tutored me in German. I would hang out at Henk’s because it was quieter at his house and good for studying. That way I could help him with his English and Ingrid with her math. I tutored Marianne some, but she never needed much help.”

“Did you help her with her English?”

“Nah, Ingrid’s a whiz with languages, and she has superb diction. And she’s an athlete: soccer, of course, as a goalie, but also softball. I used to help her with batting practice for hours on end. She’s a terrific power hitter and made the varsity team as a sophomore.”

“I don’t know whether to be jealous or not. Is she pretty?”

“I don’t know. I never thought about it. She is overweight—the best girl athlete with extra pounds I’ve ever seen. But a lot of it is muscle. She’s the first girl I ever knew who was interesting in weight training.”

“Do you have her picture?”

“Yeah, she sent me her class picture. She’s a junior this year. Here, let me pull it from the folder where I keep her letters.” He retrieved the picture and brought it to her.

“She’s good looking,” Nancy commented. “Always hard to tell for sure from school pictures. But I see what you mean. She is a bit overweight, full in the face.”

“I’ll introduce you the next time we stop in at the Van Pijpens. Or we may see her at one of the Penn soccer matches. Now that she drives, sometimes she comes down to see Henk play.”

“I can’t wait to meet her.”



THE INTERFRATERNITY PRE-CHRISTMAS Gala took place a week before the holiday break. Per Wayne's request, Nancy came in the dress she wore at their candlelit dinner, and she wore her hair all swept to the left side, same as on their first date. They came as a couple, then joined a group of her sorority sisters and their dates. For the first hour, things went well, and Wayne could sense Nancy relax and brighten, hopefully all set to declare victory over higher Greek social life as a challenge factor in their relationship. He was pleased as well, but mainly from keying on her social dexterity. She really was at her social best in this kind of formal setting, he thought. So poised and charming, her smile radiant, and she was always ready with the right remark or question. She had briefed him on topics she would touch on, coaching him on how to complement her efforts. Easy. She made it easy for him. And he was glad to see her shine at something this demanding that she enjoyed finessing with virtuoso skill. As usual, she controlled the social reins between them. But tonight that was even more disguised because of the affectionate way she deferred to him, clung to him, and kept him in the conversational loop. No, he probably wouldn't pick this as a pastime if he had a free drop. But yes, it was nice to have the woman you adore make you feel like a king before impressive strangers.

Happy, they broke away from their group and were headed toward the refreshment area when she gasped and stopped, her face slack with consternation. Her grip on his hand tightened, and she leaned into him, bringing her other hand to his arm. He followed her gaze to a tall, dark-haired guy who was slowly approaching.

"Wayne, I made a terrible mistake," she said, her eyes frantic. "Please forgive me for anything you hear in the next few minutes."

He was too startled to respond, and it wouldn't have mattered, for she had already turned her attention to the stranger. Several moments passed, during which the three of them stood there, expectant looks passing between Nancy and the stranger. Wayne felt flatfooted, caught in a flare of suspense.

"Nancy, pardon the unconventional approach, but I've been trying to contact you since our dinner date in October. We left the door open for getting together again, but then I couldn't reach you because your phone number was changed."

"I told you then that I didn't want to see you again," she said, her tone harsh. "What are you doing at this function?"

"A friend invited me. He's on the planning committee and confirmed you were on tonight's attendance list. Look, I know I came up short on our date, but

if you'll just give me a few minutes, I'll shed better light on why I had to wait so long to contact you."

"Wayne, it wasn't intended to be a real date," she said, turning her gaze from the stranger to him, her eyes pleading. "And it was during our separation. I was feeling a little depressed about things, and I...I was curious. And then I...just couldn't tell you."

"Nancy," Wayne murmured, "who the hell is this guy?"

The question shot through her, electrified her focus, and she composed herself, turning back to face the stranger. "Wayne Cavanaugh," she said, her tone melodically formal, "meet Jason Pruitt, formerly of Brentwood's Warren G. Harding High School, and now an immanent graduate from Princeton University. Jason, meet Wayne Cavanaugh, Drexel undergraduate, and please note him well. He is my fiancé."

"So my arrival is later than I counted on," Jason said, his tone a mellow counterpoint to his disappointed features. "Things have progressed just as you hoped they would."

"You are years and years too late," she said.

There was a long, tense pause.

"So you are the guy who broke Nancy's heart," Wayne said, deciding to shake things up and see where the pieces landed.

"In a way," Jason said. "But it was a matter of coercion. And both families had a part in it. Neither of us had any say in the matter."

"Please don't start on that again," she said evenly. "It's so tiring. Your explanation doesn't tally any better now than it did in October. Four years without a single word? It just isn't credible to say that it had to be that way, that your mommy and your daddy made you do it."

"You're right, it was my mistake," Jason said. "A big mistake. "But I didn't see it that way until late in the game. And the silence never meant there weren't things going on behind the scenes."

"But none of it matters," she said, her tone annoyed. "This is beyond being over and done with. It's pointless."

"Perhaps. But what I wanted to tell you tonight is that my real mistake was being deceived I'd get over you just like everyone said I would. Girls would come and go, but it wasn't the same. I don't know how you did it, but you coached us both to feel something...sharper. It took a while, but that's what kept coming back after the others crashed and burned."

“Frankly,” she said, her tone flat, “I couldn’t give a rain check on when I’d ever be able to give a damn.

“Wayne, forgive me,” she continued, turning again toward him. “I’m sorry for what you heard here without the explanation I should have given you. I’m going to the ladies’ room, and then I need for you to take me home and love me in a special way. I’ll meet you in the lounge near the restrooms.” She turned and headed briskly off, leaving Wayne and Jason facing each other.

“So what are your plans?” Wayne asked, deciding to probe a bit and not feeling vindictive.

A sentiment rippled in Jason’s visage, something as hard as brass knuckles, while he pondered whether to answer.

“I graduate from Princeton after New Year’s. Then I start my MBA work here at the Wharton Business School.”

“You’re going to be here, at Penn?” Wayne asked, surprised and not hiding his dismay.

“I’ve got housing all lined up. But you don’t have to worry. I won’t be trying to make any contact. None at all. Not unless you drop the ball somewhere down the line. Nancy said engagement. Does that mean you two are living together?”

“Yes, it most assuredly does.”

“On her dime?”

“What?” Wayne asked, unable to believe his ears.

“I was just wondering if you were living at her apartment.”

“Yes, we are,” Wayne said, reddening.

“Well, that’s a lesson in timing things better than I did. I should have found a way to follow up sooner from our dinner date.”

“You actually think you had a chance?” Wayne asked, no longer caring whether the question came out as a sneer.

Again there was that hooded look, deciding whether to answer. “It’s always hard to say. Women are weak to persistent attention if they feel any attraction at all. And you’re forgetting, she went out with me in the past two months. There’s still heat from those old embers. So, yes, with time and a clear field, it would come together.”

There was a pause, during which they eyed each other appraisingly. Jason struck first.

“I’m surprised she felt our dinner date was important enough to hide it from you.”

“It’s understandable,” Wayne said, feeling loathing unlike any he’d ever known. “We were separated at the time. And when you really get down to it... it’s a trivial issue.”

“Only time will tell,” he responded, and that’s when Wayne saw his true intent: a looming background presence, watchful, predatory, malevolent if given a chance. It made him see Jason’s bizarre approach tonight in a new light.

“We all have to move on,” Wayne said, serving him notice, “from mistakes we make that blow our chances forever.”

Jason seemed taken aback by the statement. He parted his lips as though to respond, but Wayne didn’t give him the chance.

“How about Nancy’s masterpiece?” Wayne asked. “Did she share that with you back then?”

“Her masterpiece?”

“Her concept of Aesthetic Love: the real reason her love is absolutely one of a kind. And unforgettable.”

Checkmate. And Wayne watched the words strike home, savoring the sight of his drooping reaction.

“Yes,” he answered somberly, looking deflated. “Yes, she did. And it was... one of a kind.”

“But I’m still puzzled why you didn’t contact her sooner?”

“In the beginning, there was no choice in the matter. You had families with purse strings ready to hold us under till we drowned. After that it gets complicated. Of course, I kept tabs on things. Everyone was quick to tell me—”

“Jason,” came the soft call from a sophomore-looking, chestnut-haired girl, quite petite, in a fuchsia gown. Jason turned in mid-sentence and strode the ten feet to the girl’s side, where he conversed with a warm smile.

Wayne was glad for the abrupt ending, and he found Nancy seated in the lounge area, looking agitated and out of sorts.

“I shouldn’t let this get to me,” she said, rising to him, sullen and unsmiling, “but I was upset when I came out and you weren’t here.”

“It was you who lost your cool and stomped off without me,” he said, his anger ionizing to splash against the moment. “Here I am, with every reason to be major league angry, and it’s you who acts insulted.”

Her eyes went wide, a look of terror he would never forget, then her countenance fell like a collapsing circus tent. She bawled loudly into hands she brought to her lowered face. Wayne’s anger flipped to panic, a siren of regret

screaming within, and he quickly, desperately flung his arms around her, oblivious to the dozen heads turned in their direction.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, That was a stupid thing to say."

"What have I done?" she sobbed. "How can I undo this in your mind?"

Suddenly it hit him how dangerously outside of themselves this episode had flung them. Plus it occurred to him that this spat may be part of what Jason intended.

"Nancy, we're overreacting here. Look, this is a victory for us. We should be happy instead of upset with each other."

"What do you mean?"

"Think of it. This incident hasn't scratched the surface of what I feel for you. It doesn't matter. A month or two ago, it might have. But today, at this moment...I know how much you love me. I know there's nothing about Jason Pruitt that I need worry about."

She looked at him for long moments. The tears had ruined her mascara.

"Then that's a load off my mind," she said. "But I should have known this would eventually come out in the end. I guess I got my signals crossed because of guilt."

"How do we deal with that?"

"We deal with it now," and she took both his hands. "Know for certain that I'm sorry. I should have told you before. But it's hard to admit doing something that dumb. And it was unpleasant enough that I just wanted to forget it. After meeting you, seeing Jason was like reliving an old toothache."

"Is there anything more you need to tell me about this, you know, before we put it behind us forever?"

"Yes," she answered. "You need to know I hated every disagreeable moment I spent with him, listening to his lies."

"Nancy, are you all right?" one of her sorority sisters asked, having approached and touched her arm. Her date held the girl's other hand, but away from him, as though maximizing his distance from this messy scene.

"I'm all better now, Michelle," Nancy replied. "I just got scorched from flying too close to the wrong flame."

"You're talking in riddles, Nanz. But I guess that's a good sign?"

"Very good. I'll call you, tomorrow, and we can talk. And thanks for asking."

Michelle withdrew, and Nancy turned her face up to his.

"Will you let me make it up to you?" she asked, her eyes contrite, her smile mostly restored.

“Wonderful idea. But I insist on payment tonight, before the stroke of midnight.”

“Then we’d better get home right away.”

Chapter Thirteen

WAYNE CAME OUT of the bathroom and saw her sitting on the bed, robe on, head bowed, crying serenely and happily in that way she sometimes did. This usually occurred when they had leisure time, free of tension, and the chance to reflect. It was April of their first year together, and they were in a Washington, D.C., hotel room. They had come to see the art museums and galleries, but especially the National Gallery of Art. She had asked that they take weekend car trips to various eastern and Midwestern cities to visit art museums, thus augmenting her studies. The first trip was to the National Gallery so Wayne could see the original painting from which the Vermeer card Nancy had sent him was made. Seeing the seventeenth-century painting of *Woman Holding a Balance*, her face glowing with an otherworldly calm, the splay of light on her so perfectly done, marked a turning point, because it decided him on studying art as a hobby he could share with Nancy. An added bonus was that upon returning to their hotel room, they made love with a special fury. Now it was later that night, after a relaxing and enjoyable dinner, and after returning to their room for some restful time together, and eventually, sleep.

“Happy tears?” he asked as he stood her up, peeled off her robe, then drew her down, beneath the sheets.

“The usual,” she responded, smiling now. “I still get these pangs of wonder over what we have. I can’t put it in words. So it comes out in tears. You get them too.”

“I get them because I still can’t get my mind around how much you love me.”

“Yes, ditto,” she said. “But I also feel this awe about what we’ve achieved as a love match. Just think. We set out to accomplish, and actually pulled off, this emotional fusion that’s so deep...it’s mind-boggling. And it’s unique. I mean, we have nothing to compare ourselves to. There’s nothing like us described in any library on the planet.”

“You’ve got me convinced. But I’ve been thinking lately that maybe our feelings for each other, and the way they won’t cool down, are fueled by the oneness we can’t achieve.”

“Yes,” she said, “I know what you mean. It’s this...hunger for each other that we can’t satisfy.”

“And it has this spiritual texture to it. We’re so different from the rest, it’s almost...spooky.”

“And that isn’t the only thing about us that’s a little spooky.”

“Oh?” he asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well, there’s how you see me. No, really, at first I thought you were flattering me because you love me, but after five months, I realize that you really do see me as beautiful.”

“But of course you’re beautiful. When I saw you at Sullivan’s, I told Henk that you defined the top of the scale.”

“That’s sweet of you to say, but I’m not beautiful to others the way you see me. If I were, then an acting career would have been an easier climb for me. But because you saw me as especially beautiful, you picked me out and came to my table that night at Sullivan’s. And once our eyes met, something passed between us so that our fates were connected in some strange way.”

“I know what you mean. It’s like it can’t be a coincidence. It has to be a gift.”

“From where?” she asked.

“God, perhaps? The God I believe in, but can’t quite find? Or maybe the one you don’t quite believe in?”

“I’m not sure. But I do feel gratitude. I just don’t know where to mail it to.”

“But the other side of the coin is that if you hadn’t met me, you’d still be acting. Maybe you’d already be a professional stage actress.”

“Where did that come from?” she asked, looking disturbed. “You convinced me when I quit for good that you were glad.”

“I am glad. And you know all the reasons why. But I guess I’ll always wonder...you know, what it might have been for you. Do you ever have second thoughts?”

“Never,” she answered. “We did what we agreed to. I went back to acting near the end of the year and gave it a shot. I was all pumped up and knew you’d support me no matter what. But from the first audition you drove me to, I knew the spark was gone. And this time I was sure it wasn’t coming back.”

“Never?”

“Never. And It’s not surprising, really. My acting ability has always been come-and-go erratic. But the real issue is that loving at the level we’ve achieved cancels out my hunger for acting. That hunger is simply gone. So quitting was

the right decision. No use putting in all that time and effort to produce at the hack level. So artistically, I'm back to being the dancer I've always been."

"And we have more time for trips like this."

"Yes. It's a dream come true."



BY QUIRK OF circumstance, Nancy did not meet Ingrid Van Pijpen until Ingrid's high school graduation. And even then, the occasion did not make much impression, owing to the crowded conditions marking the after-ceremony party they briefly attended at the Van Pijpen residence. They didn't go to the graduation ceremony itself because it conflicted with Eileen's, held the same day. The two girls did not meet under relaxed circumstances until Ingrid arrived at Drexel as a freshman. Wayne and Nancy visited Ingrid at her dorm, then they walked together to see Henk play in a varsity soccer game. There they joined other friends, and afterward, after waiting for Henk to shower, the group went out for dinner. On the surface, everything went well. But when they arrived back at the apartment, Wayne turned to find Nancy confronting him with a tight-lipped smile and arms crossed.

"What is it?" he asked. "Whenever you stand stock-still, with your arms crossed, I know we're in for a serious talk."

"That's true," she replied, but then said nothing more, letting suspense grow between them.

"What's the matter?" he asked, bewildered by the long silence, by Nancy's steady scrutiny of him, her smile like that of a Cheshire Cat.

"I just wanted to see if you had any inkling."

"Inkling about what? Nancy, this is a total mystery."

"I know that now for sure. And that's good. I was just checking. The subject is Ingrid."

"Ingrid? Well, what did you think of her now that you've had a chance to know her better?"

"She's nice, I like her, in a way. But there is a problem."

"A problem?"

"Yes, I think she loves you. In fact, I'm sure of it."

"Loves—why, that's nuts! There's never been anything like that between Ingrid and me. Never."

“Oh, I believe you. I know you’re being honest about what you think. But you’re dead wrong.”

“But she’s never been anything other than a sister to me. I’ve never noticed anything like what you’re saying.”

“Oh, she disguises it well—from you, particularly. But there were too many times today, when you weren’t looking, that she had eyes only for you. I actually caught her at it once and gave her *the glare*. She blushed to high heaven. Believe me, she wouldn’t be surprised I’m having this chat with you.”

“Nancy, really, I’m tickled you’d flatter me with a lover’s jealousy. But it just doesn’t compute. I would have seen it if it were there. She dates plenty enough guys her own age that she can’t be pining for me. There was a time, ages ago, that Henk thought she had a crush in my direction. But nothing came of it, and he’s never mentioned it since—something he promised he’d do if he ever saw it get serious.”

“Then I dare you to ask him. From what I saw today, I’m sure he’s aware of what she feels for you.”

“No, can’t be. If this were going on with his sister, he would tell me. He told me once before, and he’d tell me now.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Why not? What would be different?”

“What’s different is that he must have changed his mind and now he’s on her side, probably has been for some time. At least tacitly. That is to say, he’s not interfering. There’s a whole dynamic to this that you’re not seeing.”

“But this still doesn’t add up. Ingrid does not have the guile to pull something like this off. She’s so cheerfully innocuous, naïve, even.”

“She’s a nice girl; no argument there. But you are confusing naïveté for immaturity. She’s not a mature girl. If she were, she’d upgrade her makeup, lose a few pounds, and do something, anything with her hair.”

“So you admit, she’s unattractive.”

“No, the opposite. She’s quite attractive. Even with the tomboy neglect and the extra pounds, she’s a pretty girl. It’s no surprise she has plenty of dates. But now that she’s out on her own, she’s got some fast growing up to do. In no time at all, she’ll be thinking about what she wants—which I already know is going to be you. And now, if nothing is done, she has the opportunity to be near you again. God, even if all she did was lose some weight, she’d be gorgeous, a grade A stunner. After that, if you ever dumped me, I’d know exactly where to come look for you.”

“Nancy, that hurts. And it’s so uncalled for.”

“I know. And I’m sorry—a little. But this is not a negotiable matter.”

He had never seen her so resolute about anything. “But I still think you—”

“Look, do you really want to fight over this?” she challenged, her tone unconditional.

“No, not even a little bit. Let’s call a truce. What do you want to do on this?”

“I realize we’re going to see her sometimes, and as long as it’s incidental, that’s okay. But I do not, repeat, do not, and will not have her included in anything we deliberately plan. I won’t have her stealing glances at you, and I won’t have her...hovering around us.”

“But Henk may want to include her in some things.”

“That’s why you need to talk to him and make sure he doesn’t.”

“Are you serious?”

“Very serious. In fact, I think it would be better if I called him and handled this.”

“Why?”

“Frankly, I want to make sure this is done right the first time, with no misunderstandings, and no hard feelings. And I don’t want to risk this affecting your friendship with Henk.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. I’ll handle it. And we won’t discuss this again.”

“In that case, I won’t give it another thought.”

Chapter Fourteen

“WILL YOU MISS me?”

“I already miss you,” Wayne responded as he drove her to the airport.

“I’m such a nervous wreck.”

“Don’t worry. Your dad should be beyond the crisis point. It’s really encouraging that he survived the heart attack and got whisked to the hospital.”

“Yes, Father is a big weight on my mind. But not the only one.”

“What, then?”

“Us. In the two years we’ve been together, we’ve never been apart more than a single night except for the week I went home without you that first Christmas. And that was dreadful beyond description.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“But this could be worse. There’s no telling how long I’ll need to be in L.A.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather I go with you?”

“That would be my preference, of course. But let’s stick with what we discussed. It’s not worth disrupting your co-op work assignment for something this unpredictable. And besides, my family has never made up for how they treated you that first summer I brought you home.”

How well he remembered. It had been an excruciating several days, her parents treating him with condescending politeness. Nancy had been quietly exasperated. Angry and hurt, yet unwilling to risk a break with her parents and their financial support, she had swallowed her pride and endured their patronizing treatment, even acceding to their insistence that they sleep in separate bedrooms. It was a put-down particularly galling because it contrasted with how Christine and her fiancé had been treated before their marriage.

“At least things were better at your graduation,” he said, remembering the previous June.

“Oh, I think graduation was a victory and a turning point. It was on our home ground; they couldn’t avoid seeing how happy your love has made me, and how you and I have stood the test of time.”

“But do you think they’ll ever stop blaming me for the end of your acting career?”

“That’s all my mother, and I think she’s mostly over it. That’s why graduating with honors was so important. When I told them I intended to get my Ph.D. in art history, they were impressed. Not only did they treat you with something resembling dignity, they ratified our relationship, in a way, by giving me that cash gift and offering to continue their subsidies through my master’s degree studies.”

“Yes, it was generous. You know, I’ve never held a grudge, I suppose because, in a way, I can’t blame them. And I guess that’s why I feel a little guilty about not going with you now.”

“No, my instincts tell me we shouldn’t expose you to them any more than absolutely necessary. Not yet. But I will miss you terribly.”

“I dread it too. At least work will keep me occupied. But my body doesn’t know how to sleep without you cuddled against me. The nights will be agony without you.”

“Such a precious thing to say. But is it really that way for you? Is our love still as fresh for you as our first weeks together?”

“I haven’t begun to get enough of you.”

“My ambition is that you never will.”

“Then let me take advantage and lay on a special request.”

“Anything,” she said.

“Don’t be mad at me. But I’d like to set a date.”

Her silence broadcast a clear reprimand. “I’ve always said that we’d wed when you needed us to. So if you need us to, then we will. But you know how afraid of marriage I am. Right now, what we feel for each other is compelling. It’s vivid. With marriage, I’m afraid everything will fall flat on its face.”

“Then we don’t have to go there. I just thought it was time to set some sort of date, however far in the future we decide it should be. I do want you as my wife, bound to me by vows before God, and family, and friends.”

“In that case, I’ll talk to my mother about a definite date.”

“You don’t have to do that. I don’t want you to take any risks that could set us back with your parents. And it’s obvious you’re not ready for this. I just want you to think about it. Then maybe we can set a date on your return. But only if you get comfortable with it.”

“No, that won’t work. I need to talk to my mother in person about this. And this means much more to you than I thought. If Father gets out of intensive care, then we can probably have the ceremony this May or June. That’s still a year short of your graduation.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

“No, it’s time to move on this. And now that it’s settled, I feel a little excited. I’m sure I’d feel more so, if only we didn’t have Father’s health hanging in the balance.”

“Nancy, this rain has really slowed up traffic. I’ll need to drop you off at the departures area, and even then, you’ll have to run to catch the flight.”

As the airport came into view, she clung to him on the seat, savoring the last minutes before their parting. But soon they arrived. He got out and put her bag on the sidewalk. It was too late for the skycap to process it; she would need to check it at the gate. They stood in the chilly October morning, oblivious to the drizzle wetting their hair and clothes, kissing with passionate force, not knowing how long it would need to last.

“Be careful,” he said.

“I will. And remember: things are going to be chaos in L.A. It may be days before I get to call you, but don’t worry.”

There were the last good-byes. She made for the terminal door, reached it, but then turned back to face him. Their eyes locked from thirty feet away, and all he could think of was the love he saw on her face, love enough that she would risk missing the plane to give him this gesture. She brought her free hand to her engagement necklace, what she called their coinage of commitment. Still she stood, smiling, unwilling to turn away, their gazes still locked, and then it came—that tick of hers, that little rightward swirl of her head, resettling her tresses on her back and shoulders. Then she was through the door.

On the drive back, he grew thoughtful, reflecting on their relationship and how it had evolved over two years. One irony was that many things had developed as he had feared, but without the effects he dreaded. She dominated their relationship: her money, her travel wants, her art interests, her social aspirations, her diet, even her selection of his wardrobe. Notwithstanding the stinging lash he still felt from his father’s reproach, he didn’t mind, not at all. He wanted to please her with these things, and she rewarded him with grateful happiness, an effulgent joy that thrilled him. Once in a while, he couldn’t resist testing her, usually by canceling one of her lesser Greek social outings, and she always acceded to his wishes, to the implied precedence of his male authority. That was enough to assuage his masculine ego, and he needed that assurance only rarely.

Nancy was right about her graduation being a turning point. Before that, it had been a source of amazement to him that her parents’ cold treatment of him,

with its implied threat of withdrawn financial support, did not make Nancy more frugal in their lifestyle choices. But she refused to fear the danger. She ignored his hints that they should live leaner, in anticipation that financial support could be lost at any time. Instead she kicked the pace of her spending up a level for the weekend car trips they took to tour art museums. When he asked why she was spending above her own means and eating into her savings, she answered that she had to celebrate what they had been given. She would not let their happiness be dampened by thrift, not while their emotions were so sharp.

He did have to admit, the museum trips, with their overnight stays into Sunday, were a delight. They discovered that touring and studying art together triggered their libidos in a special way. First came the slow buildup of energy as they toured the museum, discussing, studying the paintings, she taking notes, but also lifting her eyes to him, tracking the romantic charge-up between them. Then, upon returning to their hotel room, they came together in a blaze that rivaled their first night together. It gave him a special incentive to study art as a serious hobby. When he attended university, he had little time. But when he was working on co-op assignment, he studied avidly, mostly books, some of them hers, some from the library.

"It's another dream come true that you're studying art just to please me," she had told him. "Art appreciation is an emotional experience for me. When you're touring with me, at my side, it intensifies my feelings for you."

"You think I haven't noticed?" he said, laughing out loud. "There's no way I'd pass up the opportunity to share this with you. It's like getting a look inside a special part of you, the closest thing to glimpsing your inner mystique."

"No wonder I love you so much," she said happily.

"You've had a big head start when it comes to knowing art. I have a lot of catching up to do. But don't worry, I enjoy the study."

"Are you being attracted to any particular genre or type?"

"Yes, I think so. I like Dutch art the best, that is, so far."

"Which period?"

"I like it all, but especially the seventeenth century, you know, the Dutch Golden Age."

"Why, that's great, because that's Baroque, and it's my favorite, too, as a period. I like the Dutch art, but I think I still have a special fondness for the Italian painters: the Carracci, Caravaggio, artists like that. But then, who can resist the Renaissance? There's so much to enjoy."

"I like Vermeer a lot, but this guy, Rembrandt, his work literally blows me away."

"Believe me, you're not alone. Rembrandt is one of the masters, one of the greatest ever."

"Gosh, look at these self-portraits," he said, flipping through the oversized book of reproductions. "They're unbelievable."

"Yes, his self-portraits are without peer. Truly works of genius."

"This one's my favorite," he said, turning the book so she could see. "It's called *Self Portrait at an Early Age*. He's what, about twenty-two in this one?"

"Yes, I think that's about right."

"Just look at the way he painted his eyes and part of his face in shadow the way he did. It's so haunting."

"Yesiree," she chuckled, "I do think we have you hooked on art."

"Now, here's one I don't understand," he said, turning the book again so she could see.

"Why, that's *The Jewish Bride*," she said. "It's one of his most famous pieces."

But he could not figure out why. In the painting, an elegantly dressed couple stand in a darkened interior. The man has his arm around the woman's shoulder and his other hand caresses her breast. The gesture is not even remotely erotic. The woman tenderly touches his hand with her fingertips. Both stare straight ahead, not at each other, looking somber, perhaps deep in thought. The painting, although tinged with mystery, reminded him more of a wake than a wedding.

"I know it's famous," he said. "It's featured in all the Rembrandt books. I just don't see what all the fuss is about. It doesn't look that good to me."

"That's because it's one of those paintings you have to see in person to appreciate. It's the way he built the paint up on the canvas. And you have to view it from the right distance for it to come alive to best effect."

"Have you seen it?"

"Yes, I've seen it with Auntie E. It's at the Rijksmuseum."

"I've seen that name in here. It must be in Holland, right?"

"In The Netherlands, yes. In Amsterdam. It's the Dutch national museum of art."

"Sounds like a good place to find great Dutch art."

"Yes, Wayne, it is," she said, her tone rising with excitement. "And you simply must see it. Why, they have a whole room full of Rembrandts. Someday, you and I will see it all, together. We must find a way to make it happen."

“And *The Jewish Bride*?”

“Especially *The Jewish Bride*. It’s such a great painting. We’ll make it a special pact that, someday, we’ll see it in person.”

“A special pact? Promise?”

“Yes, I promise. Someday, we’ll see it together.”



NANCY WAS NORMALLY given to easy napping while traveling, but slept fitfully on the flight to L.A. Worry over her father pressed in on her, but she also found herself swimming through layers of romantic concerns: images of their love’s vibrance turning to gray mush in the months after their honeymoon. Goodness, how she loved this man of hers. For two years, he had let her call the tune of their life together, catering to her every wish, not because he had to, but because he loved her that much. True, there were those few occasions when he insisted they stay home, but he always made it up to her, loving her with tortured slowness, making her feel like a pampered goddess.

And today, after two years of spoiling her, he finally asked for something outside her wishes, something he had nursed and saved, something that obviously meant the world to him, and something that, damn it, only showed he loved her even more than she realized. What was the matter with her? Of course she could conjure a way to keep their love fresh, despite marriage. Their love was a paragon of her devising before matrimony, and it could be the same after. She would work on it, make it so. He certainly showed no intention of loving her less. That was clear. She had been wrong to dread this. Marriage did not have to be the shot of Novocain that numbed and deadened their love’s vitality within the fossilized security of wedded life.

And look at the combative way she had responded to his proposal. She had assented, but punished him for daring to ask again after two years of waiting. Well, she would make it up to him. She would call him as soon as she was settled in L.A., tonight, and she would accept his proposal all over again. She would broadcast loud and clear that she was wanting—make that jumping jack eager—to be his wife, and that he could count on a June wedding come hell or high water.

She shook off the blanket, put sleep from her mind, and brought the seat to its upright position. She studied awhile, long enough to be both productive and guilt-dissipating. Then she got out her notebook so she could start planning the

wedding. She would have to work hard if she wanted to stay ahead of her mother's domineering ways.

It felt refreshing to emerge from the on-time flight into radiant L.A. sunshine. She could have had Barbara pick her up, but preferred the flexibility of renting a car. Getting the vehicle without incident, she got on I-405, the Long Beach freeway, heading north toward Brentwood. She intended to check in, unpack, and freshen up at in her parents' house before going to the hospital. At least the traffic was benign, the arrival having gotten her on the road before the afternoon rush hour. Traffic was heavier than expected, but flowed smoothly.

Suddenly a distracting glint up ahead in the oncoming lanes of traffic, and a dissonant movement, out of character with normal vehicular flow. Now she saw debris flying, and became alarmed, wanting to get past the commotion and, oh yes, better get out of this left-hand lane. She darted her eyes to the right, and then to her mirror, to see if she could change lanes. But no, she was boxed in by a station wagon to her right and a panel truck behind her that was a bit close, nearly up to tailgating distance. More movement up ahead drew her attention, nearer now, as she closed the distance, and suddenly a pickup truck with a trailer hit the guard rail, then a car broke through the damaged guard rail from the left onto the roadway ahead of her.

Brakes! And she stood on the pedal, relieved she would stop in plenty of time. But now her head shot back, realizing the truck behind her had rear-ended her, shoving her forward with a turning, skidding, screaming motion. Meanwhile, the car that had crashed the guard rail moved to the right, out of the lane ahead of her. But the station wagon beside her couldn't stop in time, hit the crossing car and careened to the left into Nancy's car with a hard, glancing nudge that destabilized her skid even more. Around she went, afraid she would turn over, glad for the pressure she felt from the seatbelt buckled around her waist.

Finally she came to a stop, crosswise in the road, facing the guardrail, the ongoing sound of crashing, grinding metal terrorizing in its nearness. No time to think about the pain in her temple. She had to get the car out of this vulnerable position. All the dashboard lights were on, telling her she was stalled. She reached for the key and turned it. "Thanks heavens!" she cried aloud as the car restarted. She put the transmission in drive and glanced to the left, seeing the car hurtling toward her not twenty yards away, its front looming larger. Her breath froze, surprise having no time to become terror before the crash—itsself heard rather than felt as a shock within her skull—then darkness.



WAYNE HAD LONG gone ballistic with worry. Despite her warning, he was sure she would call the first night she was in L.A. Now a whole, agonizing week had passed without hearing from her. Not a word. On day three, he called her parents' number, but no answer. He tried each day, yesterday calling four times, but still no answer. He called Auntie E as well, but no answer there, either, despite multiple tries. He toyed with the idea of driving out to see her in Bryn Mawr, but maybe she was in L.A. as well. He didn't know what to do next. He was in his office at the Regis plant in north Philadelphia where he worked his co-op assignment. He jumped at every incoming call, hoping for some word, and the next call was no exception.

"Wayne, this is Mom."

"Hi, Ma, what's up? Can you believe I still haven't heard from Nancy?"

"Wayne, there's something I need to tell you, and show you. You need to come home right away."

"Is this about Nancy? Has something happened?"

"I can't discuss it over the phone. Come home now, and we'll talk."

"But you have to tell me something. What's going on? Tell me."

"I can't. You must come home. The sooner the better."



HE RACED NORTH into Bucks county, oblivious to anything except the anxiety he felt as a clench of suspense. When he stepped into his mother's kitchen, his spirits plunged, for she was solemn and ashen, her eyes doleful. She handed him a newspaper clipping. There was another on the counter behind her, on top of a large brown envelope.

"Wayne, I'm afraid I have bad news. You have to be strong now, and brace yourself. Do you know an Edith Baxtrim?"

"Nancy's Auntie E. What's happened? What's happened to Nancy?"

"Nancy's aunt called. Now, look at the clipping. It came by Special Delivery this morning."

He scanned the newsprint, but his eyes were too frantic to comprehend.

"That's from the *Los Angeles Times*, and it describes a terrible car accident that Nancy was in the day she flew to California. It was that big pileup that made national news last week."

"Tell me she's all right. You have to tell me."

She took the clipping from him and then picked up the second one. “I don’t know what kind of family would do something this callous, but no, Wayne, she’s not all right. She died of her injuries the day of the accident. This clipping is her obituary. She’s already been cremated, and her ashes will be scattered onto the Pacific Ocean, tonight, within sight of Los Angeles.”

The awful truth of why she hadn’t called pierced his shock and the rupture within him began. A switch within his mind closed, sealing finality, bypassing the cushioning effect of denial, and the world he had known, the person he had been, atomized into a thousand inner fragments, each of them tumbling, glinting, vibrating with pain.

What was that sound? He heard it as a distant thing, but then realized it was he, a guttural keening that rose up from his chest and out his wide-opened mouth, as though bypassing his vocal cords. There was physical pain too. Startled, he realized he had collapsed to his knees, smacking them on the hard tile floor, his head thrown back, tears gushing, his arms clasped across his chest, as though clutching for a different outcome.

His mother, long in denial over what had captured her eldest son regarding this girl, now saw clearly, regret only adding strength to her maternal resolve to comfort. She knelt beside him, put her arms around him, pressing his face to her bosom so that his wails turned to sobs, her tears now mingling with his.

“Oh, my boy,” she lamented. “My poor, poor boy. What a blow the Lord God has dealt you.”



HE RETURNED TO the apartment, but it was a torture chamber of memories. The bedroom was so redolent with her essence that he couldn’t stay longer than a few minutes. The bathroom was hardly any better, laden as it was with her cosmetics, her shower cap, things that had been comforting earlier in the day. Convinced he couldn’t possibly stay, he packed as many of his belongings as he could into the bags he had on hand, threw them into the Camaro, and drove back to his parents’ house in Levittown, where his mother had anticipated him by setting up a cot for his use in the boys’ bedroom.

He unpacked and tried to stay ahead of grief by working on things that needed to be done. He made several phone calls: arranging time off from work, leaving a message for Henk, trying Edith Baxtrim’s number for the umpteenth time. When he ran out of tasks, he felt a kind of panic rising with smothering

impetus. His siblings started arriving home and, although they were solicitous, and tenderly, if awkwardly supportive, he felt the need for solitude, something he couldn't find inside the house.

He slipped out onto the back patio and dragged one of the folding recliners—the big one with the redwood slats—onto the grassy yard and opened it into upright position. He sat facing southwest, his legs stretched out on the slats, and he watched the setting sun paint the clouds into fiery red and gold streaks on the horizon. Relaxing at last, his spirit floating upward, he found he could empty himself of all grief, of all sense of loss, by watching the distant clouds. They gradually lost their brilliance, fading to pink and grayish blue, then to just gray before he lost them to nightfall. He became one with the chair, never intending to move again, never wanting to have a thought beyond the memory of those glowing clouds. Now he was sure he was invisible, his existence reduced to an afterglow, transparent as the horizontal line, deep as the night that cloaked him, seamless as the dawn he would wait for.

But hearing the patio door slide open, brought him back to reality. His father stepped out and stood, watching him for several minutes, probably giving his eyes time to adjust for the darkness. Finally he came and sat beside him on the chair's edge.

"Son," he said, his voice the gentlest he had heard it since he was a child, "we've had some differences, but I know you loved her more than anything."

"Oh, Daddy," he sighed, returning his father's hug, "how can I go on without her?"

"How about if we just take it one minute at a time?"

"I don't know. I can't imagine ever getting up from this chair."

"Wayne, I know it seems pointless, but the rituals they give us for when we've lost loved ones are useful. They come down to us through time for good reasons. Closure is what they call it, and it helps the living go on. I never understood this until I buried my own mother, the grandmother you never knew. Afterwards, I saw that the ritual and the funeral helped me come to grips."

"I suppose."

"Do you remember Father Rafferty?"

"Sure. Is he still at Saint Michael's?"

"He is. And he still remembers you as an altar boy. Said you had the best voice for Latin responses he ever heard."

"That's nice to know. He never mentioned it."

“Well, I talked to him tonight. He’s going to conduct tomorrow’s seven a.m. service as a funeral Mass for Nancy Hammond. Of course, it will have to be in the new liturgy. But he will break out the black vestments and incense. We’ll all be there: your mom, your brothers and sisters. They’ll go in your mother’s car. If you’d like to attend, I can get you up in the morning, and we can drive over in my car.”

“Of course I’ll attend,” Wayne said.

“You know, it is getting late, and it’s already downright cold out here. It might be a good idea for you to come in, and maybe...just take a stab at having something to eat. What do you say?”

“Okay.”

They both stood and Wayne was surprised how stiff his muscles were. His father gave him a sidewise hug across the shoulders and guided him toward the door.



WAYNE WANTED TO reach Edith because he knew she had her niece’s power of attorney, and he assumed she would be the one to tidy up Nancy’s affairs and estate matters on this side of the country. Nancy had not changed her will to include Wayne, so her wealth would go to a variety of relatives. He numbly wanted to get these painful details sorted out, including shedding the apartment and the car. But when he finally reached Edith by phone, she urged him to keep both the apartment and the Camaro, the car being titled in her name for insurance purposes, hence not part of the estate, and the apartment rent being prepaid till the end of the year.

“With your permission,” she said, “I’ll go to the apartment with my key the day after tomorrow and have a cleaning agency crew meet me there. I’ll remove all of Nancy’s things, everything except the pictures and such, and we’ll clean the place from top to bottom. After that, you can give it a try and see if it meets your needs.”

“But the bed.”

“The bed is one of the basic furniture items I’m leaving for you because it has virtually no value from an estate standpoint.”

When he didn’t respond, she discerned the likely problem. “Wayne, I think I understand, but you’d better tell me.”

“Well, it’s...her scent. It’s in the bed and the pillows. I suppose we could—”

“I should have thought of that,” she interrupted. We’ll treat and turn the mattress, change the linens, and replace the pillows altogether with a set I can bring with me. Is there anything else?”

“Yes. Nancy had a gold coin embedded in her engagement necklace. It’s a family heirloom.”

“I remember the coin well from your visits. But the necklace disappeared by the time she reached intensive care. I’m sorry; we tried on this one, but it’s gone.”

It was another piece of her that was lost to him. He let it settle within him a few seconds, then said, “Thank you for the car. It’s amazing how little she drove it once we were together. And I guess the apartment is worth a try. You’re going to so much extra trouble. Your kindness is touching, and I’ll always appreciate it.”

“In that case, there’s one small thing I would ask in return.”

“Anything.”

“Please stay in touch, no matter what.”

“I will, you can count on it. You were Nancy’s favorite aunt. And you’re mine as well.”

“You were the best thing that ever happened to her. But she would want you to rebuild your life.”



HENK HAD CALLED nightly, and when they next talked, they agreed to meet at the apartment once he was ready to move back in. When Wayne arrived, he marveled at its altered appearance. The place was austere because so much from before was gone, and it smelled of touchup paint, disinfectant and cleaner. As a final gesture, Edith had rearranged the remaining furniture to disrupt familiarity. Henk arrived toward evening, accompanied by Ingrid. Wayne hadn’t seen her in over a month, and she was cordial but restrained, sad and uncertain. Tears welled in her eyes after the hug of their greeting. She stood there, taking him in, and he looked away, regretting his unkempt and unshaven appearance.

“What’s with the duffel bag?” Wayne asked.

“I thought I would bunk in with you for a while,” Henk said. “Keep you company for...a few weeks.”

Their gazes locked, and an unspoken current flowed between them.

“You take the bedroom,” Wayne said. “I’m better off on the living room converter-bed.”

Wayne returned to his co-op job. He was in year four of the five-year Drexel co-op program for engineering. Henk was a senior in the four-year Penn undergraduate program for business majors, with plans for graduate study. They settled into a routine that usually included Ingrid. Rotating the cooking duties, the three would meet at the apartment for an early evening meal, then study, followed by exercise, usually running for Wayne and Henk, floor exercises and weightlifting for Ingrid. Then a shower before turning in, except that one of them walked Ingrid to her dorm each night. Depending on Henk’s schedule, sometimes Wayne accompanied him to his soccer practice. Wayne ran the track while Henk practiced, then they would hit the weights afterwards before showering at the field house. Wayne did well under the Van Pijpens’ care, well enough that Henk moved back to his own dorm after two weeks. At that point, caregiver duties shifted more to Ingrid. She still came over each night, took dinner with him, studied awhile, exercised when he was out running, then he walked her back to her dorm. Everything seemed to be going reasonably well.



HENK STRODE ACROSS campus near Levy Park, heading for lunch. Even though it was mid-November, it was unseasonably mild, temperature in the low fifties, but it was wet, alternating between light rain and heavy drizzle. He happened to glance north, toward one of the benches along the park walkways, and thought he saw a familiar figure. Can’t be, he thought; must a trick of the distance. He almost didn’t check it out, but knew it would bother him if he didn’t make sure. When he saw that it was indeed Wayne, he couldn’t believe his eyes. And as he approached, he half expected this apparition to polarize into someone else. Wayne was slumped back on the bench, wearing a light jacket and dress slacks, and he gazed vacantly across the grassy park to the southwest, toward Logan Hall.

“What are you doing here?” Henk asked, his tone astonished. “You’re supposed to be at work.”

“I’m just taking it easy,” Wayne replied languidly, still looking at the same spot in the distance.

”But how did you get here?”

“I was just walking around. No place in particular. But then when I got here, I remembered that this is where she saw me.”

“Saw you?”

“Yeah, over there,” he said, nodding. “I caught a touchdown pass, and I came across the goal line feeling like a million bucks. And there she was. She had stood there and watched me through the whole play. And it was one of those moments of a lifetime. Because I could see in her eyes that she had fallen for me. I knew it wouldn’t last, but I could’ve cashed in all my chips, right then and there, knowing the most beautiful girl in the world couldn’t hide what she felt for me.”

Dismayed, Henk realized Wayne had relapsed, and then some, to the worst state he had seen him in. But then his concern bolted to alarm when he saw that his hair was soaked and plastered against his skull. Panic rising, he bent and touched Wayne’s jacket, then the shirt beneath his jacket.

“My God!” he exclaimed, “you’re soaked to the skin. How long have you been here?”

“I dunno. Hour or two? I forgot my watch.”

“We’ve got to get you home,” Henk said, yanking him to his feet as though he were a rag doll.

“Henk,” Wayne protested as Henk pulled him on his way, “I’m okay. I’ve been real comfortable just sitting here.”

“You’re not okay!” Henk bellowed, “You’re bloody hell out of it! Look at your hands; you’re shivering.”

“It’s no big deal; it just started.”

“Don’t you know what you’ve done? Don’t you realize you’re going to catch the fucking pneumonia? Ingrid is going to kill me. She’s going to kill both of us.”

“C’mon, Henk. The Babe may be the slugger at home plate, but she’s a cream-puff with us, with family. Why would she be mad?”

“Because she didn’t think you were ready when I moved out! And she was bloody hell right!”

“Look, I can get home on my own. Scout’s honor. I’ll go back and change into dry clothes.”

“You are going under a hot shower,” Henk declared, noticing that chills had started slurring his speech. “And then you’re going to bed. What the hell happened to you? Did Ingrid come last night?”

“Yes, she’s been a brick. Both of you have.”

“Then what happened this morning? You got up all right?”

“Sure.”

“Did something upset you?”

“Well....”

“What was it?”

“Her pictures.”

“Pictures? But I took them all for safekeeping.”

“Yeah, but I forgot I had a couple in my used art history book. When I moved it to get my thermo text for work, it fell and the pictures came out.”

So that was it. And it explained how he got as far as dressing for work. During the walk back, Henk thought of his friend as a bird with a broken wing, stooped, and hopping along only where led, his will vacant and displaced by violent shivering. True to his word, Henk got him back to the apartment, into a hot shower, then into bed. The chills were gone, but his spirit remained dazed and depressed. Within a few minutes, he was asleep.

When Ingrid arrived, she prepared food, then woke Wayne. This was after she excoriated her brother for not getting food into him sooner.

“He probably hasn’t eaten all day,” she said. “We have to get him to eat. Otherwise he won’t regain any of the weight he’s lost. I’m worried about his health. And you damn well need to move back in here with him. We can’t trust him living al—”

“Save it,” he said, cutting her off. “I’ll move back in this weekend.”

The meal helped, and that, coupled with Ingrid’s cheerful presence, brought color back to Wayne’s cheeks. She cut up with him and even managed to evoke a laugh, the first in weeks.

How could he ever thank her for the momentary relief of that laugh? He looked at her, loving and appreciating the sisterly way she cared for him. She was a dumpling with dimples: adorably sweet-natured, never self-conscious, occasionally moody—enough to be interesting—but usually refreshingly upbeat, and always interesting to be with. As she gathered up the dishes, he continued looking at her. And that’s when he knew he had to get through this. Until that moment, he hadn’t thought he would. Not really. But now, he knew he must get through this, somehow, as a way of thanking Henk and Ingrid for the care they had invested in him. Yes, now he had a reason, however feeble, to go on.

The next morning, Wayne got to work without incident and put in a normal day. He would always remember the moment it hit him: the onset of symptoms, the malaise and body aches, just starting, as he strolled the parking lot toward the

Camaro. By the time he got home, he was miserable with aches and knew he had a fever. Ingrid's arrival saw him wracked with chills, more aches, and a higher fever.

"Stay away," he growled, through chattering teeth. "I got flu. You mustn't catch this."

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, feeding him the thermometer and feeling his cheek and forehead.

His symptoms were so severe she decided to spend the night. When it looked as though his fever had stabilized at 102 degrees, she stretched out on the sofa, exhausted. Upon awakening, she felt mortified because of having slept through to daylight. But regret turned to horror when she checked Wayne to find him delirious with a fever that would be pointless now to measure. Time to call an ambulance, she realized, panicked that his grief and weight loss may have dangerously weakened his immune system.

After that, events passed out of her control. He was admitted to the university hospital, his family notified, and they all held vigil. Treatment was straightforward: cooling blanket plus fever-suppressing drugs, and danger was soon averted. His fever broke within a day, and he finished his recovery back at the apartment after a two-day hospital stay. The ordeal cost him nearly a week from his job, but he returned and finished out his work term, which ended with the holiday break in December. There was suddenly no question about renewing the apartment lease. The Van Pijpens feared a possible relapse. And so, Henk's sharing of the apartment, however cramped an arrangement, was extended another semester.



THE FLU EPISODE marked a watershed for Ingrid. A part of her had always loved him—and not at all like a brother. But the rest of her hardly bothered, because he seemed utterly out of reach. Through adolescence and high school, she had been content to dream and to enjoy both his brotherly affection and the time they spent together. Nancy had extinguished the dream, seemingly forever, and her emotions slipped into a rudderless, doldrums state. Dating others helped, but she fluctuated between halfhearted romances and indolence. Then Nancy's death left Ingrid torn: at once saddened and guiltily hopeful, her aspirations suddenly revived with confused vigor. His anguished bereavement increased her emotion for him. But it did not activate her scattered feelings, and the hope she felt

remained below any threshold for prompting action. But when she had seen his delirium, and been stricken by the fear that the flu might carry off his life, then her heart had plunged after him, sure of a love that wanted him for her own.

But what to do about it? The spring semester saw him regain a modicum of emotional stability: a kind of listless equilibrium, his spirit hollowed out, but at least beyond danger. He was clearly unequipped for anything but grief, and before she knew it, the summer arrived and he was on his final co-op assignment. Finally, on returning to school for his senior year, he started regaining a semblance of his former self. He showed no interest in girls, or dating, or even in the mixers, but this acted in her favor. She and Henk were the ones he spent time with. By the Christmas break, now more than a year beyond Nancy's death, she thought him sufficiently recovered to begin covert efforts to draw his affections to her.

But he seemed oblivious to anything she tried. His feelings for her did not change in the least, remaining affably stuck in brotherly first gear. As the spring semester progressed, and Wayne's graduation neared, she felt a rising panic. Finally she decided to discuss it with Henk. This wasn't a new topic for them, but they hadn't discussed her feelings since Nancy had banished her from their social circle.

"Are you sure you want to get romantically involved with him?" he asked. "He's my friend, you know that, but he is damaged goods. He's dragging a lot of dead weight memories, and they are bound to get in the way of anything you plan."

"I thought about it before, but it's too late for that now. I love him, and I want to spend my life with him."

"But you may never be free of Nancy's memory. A part of him will always belong to that memory. Think about it."

"You don't understand. I have thought about it. Memories and all, I'd give anything to have him love me."

"Would you be willing to change how you look?"

"I suppose. But I'm not sure what you're getting at?"

"One surefire way for you to reach him—something for you to consider—would be for you to lose some weight."

"Henk, that's not fair. I want him to love me as I am. I deserve that consideration. He likes me as I am, and he loves me as a sister. I just need a way to goose up his feelings so he wants me as his girl."

“But that won’t happen on its own. He doesn’t see you that way, never has, not at all.”

“I know, and it’s driving me crazy. He...doesn’t really see me. Not as I am. Instead, he still sees the girl I was when he left for college. I can’t get him to look inside and see the real me.”

“Ingrid, you have to give him something new to look at, something he hasn’t seen before. Something that will jolt him into seeing you in a new light. It’s your only chance, I’m thinking.”

“Then what do you suggest?”

“You want to take your best shot at this?”

“Very best, yes. Ceiling unlimited.”

“And are you willing to make this a serious effort?”

“Whatever it takes. Henk, I’ve got to break through this. Once he graduates in June, he could move to the other side of the planet without me. Tell me what you have in mind.”

“Well, the key, as I see it, will be losing enough weight to startle him with your looks. But that’s just the opening hook.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wayne is skeptical about what he reads or hears. It’s actions that convince him. When he sees that you’ve lost weight because of what you feel for him, that will affect him in a big way. It will impress him more than your changed appearance. But the key is that we don’t want him to see you losing the pounds gradually. That would rob us of the punch-blow we want. Have you made a decision about that summer job, the language lab offer in Washington D.C.?”

“Almost. I don’t want to spend the summer in D.C. But I can’t very well pass up this kind of opportunity.”

“I understand. But it would also suit our purposes.”

“I think I see your plan. But talk me through it.”

“I don’t have it all worked out, yet. Let me think on it awhile and then we’ll talk more. Meanwhile, plan on being in D.C. And don’t let Wayne see you once you go, and once you start losing the pounds.”

“Oh, how I dread this.”

“Then you need to make up your mind, once and for all, about what you really want, and what you’re willing to pay for it. This is a big, big decision. And a big commitment. Because if you lose the pounds, and if you get the chance we plan for, and if you beat the odds and get him to react the way you want, then

you can never go back to where you are now. You'll have to keep those pounds off."

"I know."

"Look, maybe you should take some time and think this over. Sleep on it for a few days."

She looked at him, then looked away for long moments.

"No, she said, finally looking back to him with her mind made up. "I'll lose the weight. In fact, I'm going to lose enough weight to surprise even you. And I'm going to do it with exercise as much as dieting. No more mister nice-guy when it comes to my figure."

"But don't go overboard. You must not lose the weight too quickly, or you could get sick in a strange city."

"Don't worry, I won't. It'll take me all summer. But I'll need to change my life around to make it happen. Everything changes, starting today."

"And this is not a sure thing. This is just for a shot at the prize."

"I know; it does have a bitter taste. But I guess a lot of life is like that. And you've done me a real service, big brother. You've made me see how wishy-washy I've been about trying for what I want. I've been kidding myself, thinking I had all the time in the world, and that wishing would be enough."

Henk reached and squeezed her hand. "Chin up, now. This plan gives you something you can do, a way to take action. Good luck, sis, and good hunting."

Chapter Fifteen

WAYNE THOUGHT IT odd when, in August, Henk suggested they spend a weekend at their parents' homes. Then he said that Lyle Bodeen, a mutual acquaintance and high school classmate, was throwing a party at his parents' Langhorne home that was open to anyone of their graduating class who was in the area and got the word in time. There had been similar parties, mini class reunions, originally timed to coincide with returning to school for the fall semester. Many of the high school alumni were now past their university careers, but the parties continued on a smaller scale as a kind of annual tradition.

"We can stay late," Henk said, "catch up on things with the Neshaminy grads, then stay overnight at our parents. That way we won't have to make the long drive back to campus until Sunday."

Wayne concurred. These were fun parties where the conversation flowed easily, and he felt no pressure to pair off romantically, still a firm prerequisite for him. The daily bouts of pain from his bereavement had ended, but dating held no appeal for him. He had tried it a few weeks back, but felt it had turned out badly. Ingrid was the only girl he felt safe and comfortable with, but that comfort factor inverted with her surprise departure for the summer. Her leaving so suddenly and with hardly an explanation had felt like a rebuke, one he did not understand. It made him realize how his feelings for her had changed to something he felt confused and conflicted about. All he knew for certain was that he missed her, and more than he thought he would.

"It will also give you a chance to welcome Ingrid home from Washington," Henk added. "Did she tell you about the military ball she's attending with Duane Pollis? It's the same night as the party."

"Yes, she mentioned it in one of her letters. But I didn't know she'd be at your parents' house."

"It's a formal and she doesn't want to get ready at the dorm. The ball itself is at a VFW hall in Northeast Philadelphia, so that makes the house a well-placed base. Then too, Duane is a Neshaminy grad as well, class ahead of hers, and he lives not far away, in Trevoise. Do you know him?"

“Only from Ingrid mentioning him once or twice. I think she’s dated him before.”

“She has. You may recognize him if he’s there at the house Saturday night. He’s a Drexel undergrad on an ROTC scholarship. The ball is in honor of the cadets who are returning from their mandatory summer camp training.”

“Does he have any serious intentions toward Ingrid?”

“Not sure. But as far as I can see, she has never let it carry beyond friendship.”

Wayne was surprised how strongly relief flooded him. “Have you seen her at all during the summer?”

“She’s due home this week But I did see her a few weeks ago. She’s lost some weight. She’ll probably be miffed if you don’t compliment her on it.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Wayne replied, realizing again how much he wanted to see her.



SATURDAY NIGHT, AT the appointed time, Wayne strolled across the street from his parents’ to the Van Pijpens’ home. Duane was there, splendidly appointed in his army uniform, and once the introductions were squared away, they sat in the living room, waiting for Ingrid to come down from her upstairs bedroom.

The delay gave Wayne a chance to reflect on his new career situation. His job of nearly three months was going well. The sixty hour work weeks were tiring, but the immersion the position demanded was what he wanted at this stage of his recovery. It still surprised him that he’d chosen this position over the several other job offers he’d received. The one from Esso, just renamed to Exxon, had been more lucrative, and it held better long-term prospects for advancement. Instead he accepted an offer for the South Philadelphia plant of a small chemical company. His surface reason was that the position offered excellent professional experience for a graduating engineer. It gave him a chance to get a wider range of technical assignments and a higher level of decision-making authority quicker than he would with a larger, more bureaucratic firm like Exxon. But another, more subliminal reason had recently occurred to him. The job with Exxon would have required a move to North Jersey. The one he accepted gave him a comfortable commute from the apartment he rented in the University City area. Therefore, it did not disturb the system of support and friendship he received from the Van Pijpens.

Wayne thought about the party they would attend once he said hello to Ingrid. He had taken Nancy to the same party, or one similar, three years ago. They had doubled with Henk and his date, and Wayne had a terrific time showing Nancy off to his former schoolmates. Other than with family, it was the closest he ever came to boasting that he possessed her love and her beauty. Had he really been that person, so happy, so fearless of the future? The memory seemed displaced, depersonalized by time, belonging to another life. He lapsed into reflections that glided frictionless along the past, and he had just started pondering, too, how he had finally come to touching such memories without pain, when Ingrid made her entrance.

Duane and Henk rose, but Wayne sat dumbstruck at the sight of her. And what a sight! She had lost more than thirty pounds, enough that the texture of her face was now tight and sleek, a visage with new angularity, one that went beyond pretty—especially with the beauty parlor makeup she wore—to strikingly, yes, glamorously beautiful. He had never seen her hair done up anything like this: large waves, uneven on each side, dipped around her ears before being swept to the back and then up upon her head. And there was so much to her hair that he knew she must be wearing a fall. Her form-fitting gown was off the shoulder, turquoise, and made of a silk-like material he couldn't identify. And the gown seemed to transform her movements: from the tomboy gait he knew her by, to a high-heeled step that was distilled femininity. He finally recovered enough to get to his feet and approach. But she didn't seem to notice, busy as she was attaching the corsage Duane had brought her.

"Hello, Wayne," she said, finally turning her exquisitely made-up eyes in his direction. "Thanks for coming early, to say hello, and see me off."

Those eyes, he thought. So different from the Ingrid he had known in May. But he couldn't read them, and he felt a lonely estrangement from their hidden intents, the deeper feelings hooded rather than revealed by her shy smile.

Suddenly he realized everyone was waiting for him to respond.

"You look lovely," he said, nearly sputtering. "Out of this world."

She gave him dismayingly little back for the compliment, merely the same, small, tight-lipped smile, still unreadable, and she turned without a word, nodded to Duane, who took her arm and led her toward the door. Good-byes floated to his ears, but they were broadcast generally, then the door closed behind them.



ONE LOOK AT Wayne by Henk told him they would not be going to any parties that evening. He waxed euphoric with the success of their plan. Ingrid had played her part to perfection, disinterested to the point of seductive mystery, the only time the words *Ingrid* and *demure* combined perfectly. And now it was time to see how the staggering punch to Wayne would play itself out. Wayne stood there, dumbfounded, and Henk left him briefly, pretending to take care of last-minute details so as to give his friend time to recover. They went through the motions of going to the Camaro. As expected, Wayne suggested that, instead of the party, they stop at a nearby diner, The Blue Fountain, located a few miles north on Route 1.



“WHAT HAPPENED BACK there?” Wayne asked. “Why do I have the feeling that what happened tonight was not an accident? Am I wrong?”

“No, you are not wrong. It was planned, with you in mind.”

“Then tell me what’s going on. I’m confused. The way I read this, it comes out too fantastic to be true.”

“Well, it’s pretty straightforward, I’m thinking. It’s about a girl who wanted you to see her in a different way.”

“Why?”

“How can a guy as smart as you be so dense? Isn’t it plain to see? It’s love. Ingrid wanted you to see her as pretty because she loves you.”

“Can that be so? After being friends since she was in junior high?”

“The actions say it all, don’t they? She spent the whole summer losing weight because of what she feels for you. The Ingrid you saw—the shape she’s in, the hair, the new makeup—they all tell you what she’s feeling.”

“But what happened to our agreement? The one from high school? I’ve been laid back, knowing you’d tell me if something serious ever developed. I never for a second believed Nancy’s suspicions because I had you as watchdog.”

“Then I owe you a big apology,” Henk said. “I didn’t come and level with you when Nancy had her suspicions. And I should have. I’ve been torn between the two of you. Ingrid has loved you a long time. I don’t even know when it started.”

“But I never suspected anything because she dated other guys. That’s what I told Nancy when she banished Ingrid from our social circle.”

“She dated because her feelings for you were jumbled, like alphabet soup. And she didn’t think anything could come of it. It wasn’t until she put you in hospital with high fever that her feelings started moving to what you saw tonight. After that, she had only a few friendship dates. And you may have not seen them for what they were.”

“I feel overwhelmed by this.”

“Blame me. It was my plan. I do have a request, though, as you decide what to do.”

But Wayne didn’t answer, his wits still a puddle at his feet.

“Be gentle with her. And be kind, by not stringing this out. Make up your mind quickly, and make it a clear-cut decision.”

“It’s easy. There’s really no decision to make,” Wayne said absently, his expression far off.

“How so?”

“She really made herself over for me? Just for me?”

“It took all summer long.”

“Then this is like a dream come true. It shows the opposite of what I thought she felt for me.”

“The opposite? Why?”

“Because of her actions. She seemed happy to spend the whole summer away from me, without even a single visit back. My emotions kept being drawn to her, but she didn’t seem interested.”

“But now you know.”

“Yes. She’s beyond anything I could let myself hope for. I still can’t believe it.”

“Good. That’s good.”

“And you’re okay with this? You don’t mind if I court your sister?”

“Not at all,” Henk said, laughing out loud. “Have at it.”

But Henk’s humor was lost on Wayne, who still seemed to be taking it all in.

“You will need to move carefully, though,” Henk added. “She’s going to be sensitive about taking Nancy’s place.”

“Plus we need to see if it holds together. Sometimes people have a change of heart when they get what they want.”



DESPITE HENK'S SUCCESS as intermediary, he sensed both were nervous about kicking off their new relationship. The suspense was high leading up to their first contact the day after the ball. When Wayne came to the Van Pijpens' to pick Ingrid up for an afternoon dinner date, on the way back to campus, both blushed with the emotions being activated. Henk was there, and he could see it in their tongue-tied speech, in their shyness with each other. He chuckled to himself, sure that if the power failed, they'd all be able to see just fine by the light arcing between these two. They were so distracted with each other he had to shoo them out of the house to get them on their way.



IT WAS INGRID who came back down to earth first, realizing that what they were experiencing was too good to be true. It was based on a love that was wishful, not yet tested as real. It masked the dangers up ahead, waiting for them like landmines. She must get their aspiring emotions aligned and strengthened before the risks caught up with them. By the time they reached the restaurant, she had formulated a tentative plan, but she still felt uneasy. Just how tentative were his feelings?

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" she asked, after they ordered their entrees.

"Definitely. There are plenty of real-life examples, including my parents. Why do you ask?"

"Because it's what I experienced for you. I loved you from the moment Henk brought you into the house, that day we moved to Pennsylvania."

"I didn't see it."

"No one did."

"Not even Henk?"

"Not even him. It was my secret. But think back. Didn't you ever wonder about all the times I was in the room with you when you came over to our house?"

He smiled at her, and she knew his memories of her would never be the same.

"I worried some that you would catch on to me. I was always studying with you and Henk a lot more than Marianne ever did. Later on, it wasn't a worry because tutoring you in German 3 was a godsend." She paused, trying to read how he returned her smile. "It's funny," she continued, "how life is always

forking out in new directions from chance events. That day in our backyard, when you offered to pitch me softballs, that was planned. It wasn't planned exactly, but when I walked up to the group of you, I was praying it would come to something like that. Anything that would put us together in some way."

"It makes you wonder what could have been. All this time...you had the sweetest heart. And I never had an inkling."

His response went beyond what she had hoped for.

"I still cannot believe how conniving I was at age thirteen just to be near you. And the crush I had on you literally kept me awake at night. Anyone who witnessed it would have thought I'd gone completely bonkers."

"I don't think so. It just shows how sweet a girl you are. And it traces a line from then to now."

"But the line was broken in many places. I knew nothing could come of it. So what I felt for you was very mixed up for long stretches. Many times I thought I'd put another boy in your place. But it never worked out in the end."

"Then I guess I'm luckier than I thought."

"Forgive me for asking. But I have to know what's left of your feelings for Nancy."

"I don't have a simple answer. The pain is gone, has been for months. But I didn't feel any space for happiness until you brought it with you."

"I'm still afraid of her, of the hold her memory has on you."

"You needn't be. The irony is that she was afraid of you. That's why she wouldn't let you into our social circle."

"Yes, I understand why she did it. But I never understood why she thought it was necessary."

"Because she saw your true beauty. She once said that if you made yourself over, you would be drop dead gorgeous. And, of course, she was right."

"But what if I gain the weight back?" she asked, testing him, glad that the question upset him.

"Ingrid, I can't turn off what I already feel for you. It's a living thing. It will always be racing ahead and trying to grow stronger. And it's not fickle about your weight. I promise you: I'll never mention your weight no matter what you decide to do about it. I really do love you more than that."

"I'm glad," she said, her emotions rising to the next higher level. "But I won't let you make that promise. Naturally, I want to stay attractive for you. I can't stay at this weight. But I won't be gaining more than about five pounds of it back."

“You need to know that I started to love you before last night. Sorrow blocked the way for a long time. But over the summer, I was resisting feelings for you that had been building for months.”

“But why? Why resisting?”

“It’s like I told Henk. You went off for the whole summer with hardly a good-bye, and not so much as a single visit back. I looked forward to your letters; in fact, I got fixated on receiving them and writing back to you almost every day. But they were the same sisterly epistles that always lifted my spirits when I got them in college. It didn’t look like things could change on your end.”

“Then why didn’t you date other girls? Why didn’t you try it if you were ready?”

“I did. I dated exactly one girl over the summer.”

“Who was she?”

“A girl from work: a nice girl.”

“And how did it go?”

“It was a bust. Almost the whole time, I felt guilty.”

“Why?”

“Because I was so boring. I felt bad for her.”

“But I still don’t understand.”

“I couldn’t muster any interest, any spark. And I’m sure it showed. Afterward, in the car, I sat there alone, thinking of you. I thought of how your sisterly letters told me how you didn’t share what a part of me wanted to feel for you.”

“But let’s look at your feelings. You were wounded, and I was there. I was always there for you. Gratitude is nice, but not enough for a lifetime. The question is...when you are really, fully healed, will I be enough for you?”

“I don’t understand how you can ask that. What you’ve given me by your actions is more love than I thought I would ever have again. All that...and to have you as beautiful as you were meant to be. I don’t think I’ll ever get over it. It’s just overwhelming. How could I be so lucky to have you love me?”

Of the things he had said, this was the one to pierce her with convincing force. She stared at him, realizing he didn’t know how important these words were to her, signaling decisively the intensity of his own commitment, stronger than she’d dare hope for. And because he loved her more, it created room for her to love him with a strength she had planned to keep to herself, if nothing else for her own emotional protection, a final reserve. She stood on the threshold a moment, deciding, her heart ticking over from what she saw in his eyes. Then

she turned the emotions loose. In an instant, the rippling course of her life changed, rearranging to align with all the different decisions she would be making. She couldn't see the future, but the dynamics of those altered choices was like watching lightning flash and dance on the horizon.

"You know, sometimes you need to be careful what you wish for," she said, deciding to warn him.

"Oh?" he asked, smiling broadly, but letting it fade as she stared at him intently, letting a pregnant pause build between them.

"I love you," she said, with such conviction that she could see her own gravity take hold of him.

"I'm glad," he answered.

"I hope you will be."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because of how tightly I'll be pressed against you. I hope you won't feel smothered."

"I don't see myself ever getting enough of you," he said, his response breaking her concentration so that she smiled, then laughed happily.

"I belong to you now," she said.

"We belong to each other."

"True. But our relationship will never be...equal."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I will always love you more than you love me."

"Hey, Babe, you're not giving me much credit here," he said with a laugh.

"I'm just being levelheaded about our different temperaments. I know you, and I know what my own emotions are growing into. Is it true what Henk told me, that you and Nancy had this intellectual system that made your love stronger?"

"Yes, but—

"No," she interrupted, "let me get this out." And she paused, making sure of his undivided attention. "That won't be part of what I feel for you, because it won't be necessary."

"Okay," Wayne said, but his eyes were uncertain.

She took his hand in both of hers, sure now he would never forget this moment.

"Wayne, listen to me, and never forget what I am about to tell you. No one, and no woman who ever lived, could love you half as much as I do. Always remember that. Remember, too, that I would do anything to hold your love. And

I meant what I said. I belong to you now. That means that my happiness is in your hands.”

“No, Ingrid, our love is a circle: two people becoming one. You don’t belong to me more than I belong to you. Every circuit of my happiness runs through you now.”

“Wonderful, because it means we have twin plans for our relationship. But just to be clear, I’m giving you carte blanche over my happiness. Not that I won’t have a mind of my own. And you’ll get plenty of flak and feedback from me, believe me. But in the end, I’m giving you this power because I know how you will respond. You will love me more, and take better care of my needs, because of what I have placed in your hands.”

He kissed her fingertips, but the gesture became distracted from trying to comprehend the consequences of what she was describing. Try as he might, he could not discern the long-term outcome of such loving vulnerability.



THE MOMENT OVERTOOK them when they left the restaurant and climbed into the car. He put the key in the ignition and turned toward her, drawn by another of her expressions that gave him pause.

“Take me somewhere,” she whispered, her meaning unmistakable.

“You’re sure it’s not too soon?”

Her eyes gave him the answer, then she lowered them.

He checked them into The Lincoln, a motel on the Roosevelt Boulevard near the Philadelphia city line. He was delighted she wanted physical lovemaking, but her demeanor puzzled him. She looked happy, but more nervous than expected.

“I don’t know how you want me to be,” she said as she stood in the middle of the room. “You have much more...experience.”

He turned down crisp sheets and stood facing her, holding both her hands. “I’m going to start loving you and undressing us both, but I’ll be moving real slow. This won’t work for me unless it’s wonderful for you. I’m all pent up for you, but don’t let me move too fast. Okay?”

She nodded shyly, blushing, and it struck him again how nervous she was. He took her face in his hands and kissed her lips for the first time. Then her neck. It sent a shiver through him. Oh, yes, she was delicious. She responded, but her nervousness persisted, so he advanced things even slower. As he undressed her, she began to relax. He got off her outer garments, then brought

her onto the bed. Finally, her inhibition seemed to melt with the last of her clothes, and she started responding with some passion. Suddenly she broke gently free, got up, and went to the bathroom, returning with two large towels, one of which she spread on the bed.

"I guess it's nerves. I forgot to take care of this," she said, lying back down beside him on the towel.

"What am I missing here? Why the extra towel?"

"For the mess." But she could see that he still didn't get it. "Wayne, you do understand, don't you? This is my first time. You are my first."

At first he felt embarrassed for being dimwitted, then the impact hit him like a bucket of ice water. He rolled away from her and sat up.

"What's the matter?" she asked, her eyes showing alarm.

"You're a virgin?"

"Why, yes. Did you think I could be anything else?"

"I...that is, I assumed—"

"I thought you would be pleased. Is there a problem?" And she brought the sheet up to cover herself.

"A problem? Ingrid, you're the virgin kid sister of the best friend I'll ever have. I can't just...pick your flower. How could I look your brother in the eye?"

"But he knows what I feel for you. Why is this a problem?"

"Because it's so special. Because you are so special. For you, it has to be perfect."

"And how would you make it perfect?" she asked, smiling relief, knowing how this would end.

"I...I don't know. This is such an ambush. We could wait until our betrothal. I mean, I'd have to ask your father for your hand. Our families are too close for anything else."

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

"Do I need to? I couldn't make love to you without marriage being a fact for our future. Am I presuming too much? Are you having doubts?"

"Of course I'll marry you," she said, laughing, feeling the moment flood her with joy. "And we can go back tonight, if you like, so you can talk to my father. I can't wait to see his face when he learns that an American boy would really ask for my hand." And she laughed again.

"Ingrid, don't make fun of me. I'm wrung out beyond belief from...our disconnect."

“Yes, I’m sorry; I can see what you’re going through. I just feel giddy that you would put yourself through this for me. I love it. I love what you’re telling me.”

“Believe me, I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy.”

“Would you really marry me, today?”

“Of course. For me, it could only be you. There’s no love or happiness for me without you.”

“Come to me,” she said, happy and smiling, and extending her arms from the covering sheet.

“Ingrid, baby, it’s too frustrating to get all revved up again from your touch.”

“You must come to me,” she commanded gently, but with an insistence he couldn’t refuse. When he did so, she took hold of his wrists. “Listen to me,” she said softly. “Next weekend we can talk to my family and set a wedding date, make plans. But tonight, what I feel for you is this towering thing. I don’t know if it’s wrong, what we’re doing. But it’s a small thing next to the lifetime commitment we’ve made today before God. I’ve waited a long time for you to put your hands on me.” She pushed away the sheet, her eyes lowered, her limbs shyly offering, her unpracticed sensuality enflaming him beyond recall.

Afterward, holding her beneath the covers, his mind subsiding into sleep, he couldn’t help but marvel, in an absentminded way, at the ties that bind, the complex tendrils of human intimacy and commitment that now entwined them. He wasn’t sure who belonged most to whom in this relationship, but he looked forward to the years it would take to sort it all out.

Chapter Sixteen

THEY PRESSED THEIR families for as soon a wedding as possible. Ingrid had strong religious convictions and she wanted their lovemaking to be in wedlock. The Cavanaughs gave their blessing, but the Van Pijpens pressured them toward a conventional engagement to culminate the following June. But they relented when Ingrid threatened to move in with Wayne and get on with starting their family. They later determined she conceived a few weeks before their November wedding.

Meanwhile, Wayne jumped companies to Exxon and started work at their Bayway refinery in Linden, New Jersey. They took up residence in Plainfield. Ingrid transferred to the Rutgers New Brunswick campus and managed to complete her junior year, still as a language major, before delivering her first-born. She decided on fulltime motherhood. They also chose to have their children as closely spaced as practical. Ingrid eventually earned her degree, but long before, she started a home-based career as a genealogical researcher, offering specialized correspondence in European languages.

Once the children started coming, all of them girls, all three of them one year apart, it seemed as though they streaked through the years. Exxon transferred him to their Baton Rouge, Louisiana, refinery complex after four years of service. There, his career prospered, promotions came, but the workload became crushing and, at Ingrid's urging, he changed companies to Schoal, going to work for them at their St. Gabriel, Louisiana, chemical plant.



WITH THE BABYSITTER finally in place, they came out of their Baton Rouge home, quickstepping it to the car.

"Happy Birthday, Babe," Wayne said, when he sat next to her.

"Thank you," Ingrid responded. "I can't believe we finally got out of the house."

"Things sure have been hectic these past few weeks."

“Tell me about it. The girls are priceless and I love them. But they run me ragged even in the best of times. And with this test run you’re involved in at the plant, I’ve hardly seen you the past two weeks.

“The test run is over now, and tonight, for me, it’s all about making it up to you.”

“Well, you could give me a little sample of what it’s like to be married, help me remember what it’s like.” And she broadcast a seductive look. Happy to oblige, he reached over and kissed her warmly on the lips. He slid his hand along her leg for good measure.

“Goodness,” she murmured, “if I’d known you’d be this frisky, I wouldn’t have worn pantyhose.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll behave. But only because I intend to torture your carnal nerve centers when we get home.”

“Please do,” she said. “It would be especially nice to have you love me tonight.”

“What’s the matter? Don’t tell me the birthday’s got you down?”

“Do I have time to go into it? We have dinner reservations, and we don’t want to be rushing afterward to the show.”

“We have plenty of time. Tell me what you’re down about.”

“You’re right; it’s just the birthday. Life is going by so fast. It seems like yesterday I was twenty-one and walking down the aisle to you. Then there was this blur after the girls started coming, and I blinked, and now I’m in my thirties.”

“That’s a strange reaction to turning thirty-one. You didn’t miss a beat last year when you hit the big three-oh.”

“Thirty is just brushing against it. But at thirty-one, there’s no denying you’ve landed smack-dab in your thirties.”

“Ingrid, is it too much, the life I’m asking of you? Would you do it over again?”

“Of course, silly. I’m living my dream-come-true with the only boy I ever wanted to marry. It just frightens me that our life is racing by so quickly. And I wish we had more time like this: time to ourselves.”

“But things could have been worse.”

“How?”

“Well, there’s a benefit I didn’t think of in having the girls so close together.”

“Clue me in.”

“They do everything as a threesome. And that compacts the work for us. One trip and they all get their ballet lessons together.”

“But that’ll change now that Lauren is ready for the ten-to-twelve soccer bracket. Plus they’re beginning to show different interests. Things are going to get more hectic trying to juggle all that.”

“Then I’ll just have to pick up a larger share of the load. Don’t worry, I will.”

“I know you will. But it means we’ll have even less time to ourselves.”

“Maybe, for a while,” he said. “But we’re more than halfway through the girls’ upbringing. In a few years, they’ll be teenagers. We’ll worry about them more, but we’ll see them less, because they’ll want time away from us to spend with their friends.”

“Yes, they’ll be grown before we know it.”

“And isn’t this what we wanted, that we still can’t get enough of each other?”

“Yes, and it makes us unique. At church, only the newlyweds have anything like what we share. As we get older, we stand out more and more.”

“But you wouldn’t trade it, would you?”

“Perish the thought. But we are different from the rest. The other day at the Women’s Club luncheon, I looked around at my circle of friends and realized I’m the only wife among them who loves her husband more than her children.”

“But you can’t really say that. I mean, we’re talking about two different kinds of love. They don’t compare.”

“Yes, well...it’s still true. I just hope the girls don’t sense it. I worry about it.”

“The girls are fine,” he said buoyantly. “Better than that. They’re doing great. And they certainly can’t read your mind.”

“I guess not.”

“Besides, everyone knows you’re a wonderful mother.”

“Keep telling me that.”

“Just look at them. Look at how close they are, how they’ve bonded. They’re more like triplets than regular sisters. That was always your special wish for them, and it was you who made it happen.”

“Yes, it’s sweet of you to say it. But don’t forget how special you are to them. The truth is that they’re all daddy’s girls, every one of them. They live for the weekends when you take them and their friends to Showbiz Pizza after Saturday soccer. Then they can’t wait for you to take them all to the Denham Springs waterslide on Sunday afternoons.”

He took her hand and kissed it, then he kissed her wrist. This always aroused her and she would know he was tantalizing her for their lovemaking later that night. Watching her coy smile blossom reminded him of the secret anxiety he had developed after their wedding. It had no rational basis, but he feared her Evangelical Protestant faith would make her prudish once she became a mother. It hadn't, not a bit. But he couldn't resist the urge anyway to make love to her under bizarre circumstances, a way of verifying his irresistibility to her. But the episodes, however infrequent, had another benefit. Amid the hectic hubbub of their busy lives, they granted a carnal renewal—erotic spikes punctuating the white-noise stress of their fast-paced routines.

“Do you remember the time we made love in the elevator?”

“Of course,” she answered. “How could I forget anything that exciting?”

“Why was it exciting?”

“Well...the danger; your...ardor, of course; but most of all...it was the elation you obviously felt that I was so willing.”

“Was I that obvious?”

“Yes, you were. You were testing me. And passing the test revved up both our libidos in an instant. It was like being shot from a cannon.”

“Why would I test you?”

“I don't know,” she said, her tone smiling. “But I know it had to be important to you.”

“Does it bother you? Do you need an explanation now after, what, five years?”

“No.”

“How can you not be curious?”

“Wayne, you poor baby, you've never really understood. It's like I told you ages ago, the first day we became lovers. I have faith in how you love me. I know you'll always take care of me and my happiness.”

“But that's a big responsibility. Everyone makes mistakes. I certainly do.”

“Yes, it's guaranteed. But that doesn't matter. These are mistakes we go through together. Sure, we may argue and bicker over tactical issues, like schooling options for the girls. But when it comes to the big picture, it's simple, really. My happiness belongs to you, just so long as what you decide has us joined as one. That's why the elevator adventure caused me no qualms. Even if those security people who were squawking over the intercom had gotten the doors open before we finished, so what? We would have gone through it together.”

“What if I got transferred to Greenland and couldn’t take you?”

“That would be a crisis. For me. I could be happy shivering beside you in Greenland, but I’d shrivel back home without you. I could do anything for your love except give you up.”

“Don’t worry; I’d never stay in a job that separated us.”

“I know. The reason I’m a little sulky on my birthday is that life is blowing by, and none of us knows how aging will affect us. Life is so full of unexpected turns.”

“Well, at least you’ll always have me, and Ingrid?”

“Yes, darling?”

“More than anything in the world, I love how you love me.”

Her smile glittered with victory, and he knew it was the best birthday present we could give her.



FIVE YEARS AFTER going to work for Schoal, the company moved them to Houston, Texas, where the corporation had its U.S. divisional offices and research facilities, as well as a large petrochemical complex in nearby Pasadena. Wayne saw assignments in all three locations. Schoal was a Dutch company, and for Wayne, at this stage of his career, that meant occasional trips to the firm’s worldwide head office and technology centers in Amsterdam. During such travel assignments, he indulged the one pastime he derived from knowing Nancy: enjoying art, but especially Dutch canvases of the seventeenth century. Appreciating art was a hobby he shared with Ingrid, and it helped forge ties with each of his daughters.

So when his first business trip to Amsterdam came in 1986, he squeezed in time to tour the Rijksmuseum. He had hoped to bring Ingrid on this trip, perhaps extend their stay into a short vacation, but the needs of their adolescent daughters, and budget constraints, overruled it. And he didn’t have much time, only an hour or so to tour the main building before catching a train to Schiphol airport. So he was feeling a bit rushed, surveying the place quickly, and only able to seriously view twenty or so of the museum’s top pieces. Naturally, the Rembrandts were on his list. But it was actually the Vermeers he was looking for, consulting his floor plan, when he entered a room, turned, and there before him was Rembrandt’s *The Jewish Bride*.

Seeing the famous painting with its two somber figures provoked a reaction that rocked him. For memories of Nancy engulfed him like a flood. Out of the built-up layers of paint, just as she described them, came her promise that one day they would see this work together. From there, the memories mushroomed, unfurling into a panoramic, streaming remembrance of their time together. He couldn't believe what he was experiencing, transfixed as he was, the memories playing out of their own accord, his insides a churn of bittersweet sorrow, so poignant his breath seemed trapped in his chest. What could this be? Was it because he never had her body to mourn over, only her loss? He had experienced nothing like this since the day before his marriage, when he sifted through Nancy's pictures, reflecting dolefully over each, before sealing them, along with his engagement ring, in an envelope he had not opened, nor thought of opening, since. Now, here he was, sixteen years after her loss, spellbound by the searing intensity of what they had shared.

Eventually the panorama of memories, of emotions revived, ran themselves down, and moved away from him, as though returning to the layers of paint. The experience left him with a strange stillness.

As he turned from the painting, he thought of Ingrid and his girls, and yes, his love for them flared brightly, as though gratefully polished by the remembrance of his prior love, the one lost to him. And he retained a sense of perspective. He could ache over what might have been; there was no harm. But he was grateful for three precious daughters, adolescents now, and for Ingrid, his baby doll wife, who loved him as fervently now as that first night he had kissed her with passion.

It was owing to the episode's sense of well-being that he didn't fear returning to the painting under identical circumstances. And so it became an observance, whenever in Amsterdam alone, that he would come to the painting, and let it evoke memories of Nancy. He kept the ritual a secret, fearing Ingrid's likely demand that he stop it forever. He felt pinpricks of guilt over this, especially when they viewed the painting together. But he never changed his mind. And the ritual was not frequent, since he barely got to Amsterdam once or twice a year. Plus, as the years passed, and they moved into their forties, Ingrid accompanied him more often. Their income kept improving and, as the girls grew self-sufficient, moving on to lives and marriages of their own, the restraints to her traveling with him became fewer. They vacationed more often in The Netherlands, visiting her many relatives.

But in 1995, a business trip came up which, owing to her father's failing health, Ingrid felt she must decline. Therefore he went alone, dispatching meetings lasting two days, then planning his visit to the Rijksmuseum, as he often did, rising early the day of his departure, walking to the museum, and stowing his bag in a locker.

As he came within sight of the ticket booths, he lapsed into reflecting on his life's path. He was forty-six now, as much a fitness addict as ever, hence his body was as hard and as strong as in his youth. He had gained around ten pounds, but that was muscle the weight training had added over the years. He had extended the diet Nancy introduced him to, and he credited it with the health and vitality he enjoyed, better than most men his age. And it supplied a competitive edge to his professional life which, by any measure, was successful. Gray had just started to dust his hair and, despite playing singles tennis, he was well below the foot-speed that had once allowed him to outrun a football pass. But hey, wasn't that what aging gracefully was all about? knowing when to join the forty-five and over leagues?

There were his daughters, so priceless to him, now beautifully grown, two of them married, and don't forget, he reminded himself, you already, amazingly, have a grandchild. The girls were his special pride and joy: each privately or home schooled, each imbued with Ingrid's Evangelical value system, the same one he himself had adopted after a long odyssey of endless reading, and countless discussions. Only a few issues remained for his faith journey to be resolved.

But most of all, he felt gratitude for Ingrid. Through thick and thin, through time and trouble, she had loved him and clung to him with a devotion that defied gravity. The stratospheric love he and Nancy had needed an intellectual boost to attain was something Ingrid surpassed by sheer instinct, a natural talent that awed and humbled him, a fire for loving that the years had hardly abated. He remembered her pledge, given the day of their first lovemaking, the day they had started their lifetime commitment.

"No one, and no woman who ever lived, could love you half as much as I do."

Having bought his ticket, he came up the central stairway to the second floor and turned left into the galleries containing paintings of the Dutch Golden Age. He knew how to proceed, needing to shift another gallery to the left in order to bear down on the one containing *The Jewish Bride*. He did so and reached the adjoining room, able to see through the far doorway to the familiar bench placed

about twenty feet in front of the painting. Darn, he thought, a small crowd was already in front of the canvas. He just started shifting his gaze to the gallery he was already in, when he saw a movement of blond hair, and something about its motion pulsed him, as though tweaking a long dormant reflex. Looking ahead intently now, he did indeed see a blond woman standing in front of the painting. She was in profile to him, but a tall man stood between them so he could not see her face, only the tresses that fell down her back.

Finally the man stepped aside, revealing her fully, and recognition shot through him, snatching his breath, staggering his walk. The resemblance was great, it twisted and strangled him, but his eyes were disbelieving. Finally it came, ending all doubt: the unmistakable tick of her head, that signature rightward swirling motion that gently resettled her tresses.

Now his heart leaped to his throat, and his entire consciousness became the sight of her, enlarging in detail as he slowly approached. Coming closer, he saw her face suffused with emotion, a sadness from viewing the painting with rapt concentration. Then he realized she was experiencing a mirror ritual to the one he had come for. He stopped a few feet from her, but at first she didn't notice. His eyes feasted on her, drinking in every feature of her side-turned face, and of her hair, as long, and as full, and as beautiful as ever, but its gold dimmed slightly by gray. She was thinner now, maybe ten pounds lighter, flatter, more angular of figure, and he felt a pang that her face, although still beautiful, showed every one of her forty-seven years.

Finally she turned and saw him. Her eyes widened with surprised recognition, then uncertainty. There was a pause; their gazes locked; time froze, crystallized, then she stepped to him and kissed his cheek, her left hand caressing his face.

"Hello, Wayne," she whispered, "I can see that shock doesn't begin to describe what you're feeling."

It was her scent, familiar after all this time, that teetered him. And when he saw the sycamore leaf necklace, its embedded gold coin glowing with reflected light, the reality of twenty-five years, years she had been on this earth, but apart from him, drenched his heart with sadness, dissolving his composure, and the tears flooded his cheeks.

"Nancy?" he rasped.

"Yes, my love."

Her response told him all he needed to know, to confirm, but the words could find no purchase in his muddled brain, so he continued, asking, "The promise

you made...over the coin? Is it still—?”

“The coin? You mean our coinage of commitment?” And she touched the necklace. “I don’t wear it that much anymore, but always when I come here. And the promise? The promise is still in force. If it weren’t, then I would have found a way to return it to you, just as I pledged.”

What could he say? Where were the children they could have had? And those lines on her forehead? Why had he been cheated of all the mornings he could have kissed those lines as they formed over the years? The thought was crushing, as though losing her all over again.

“My sweet darling,” she said, touching the tears that streamed his cheek. “It was meant for you to be shielded from the truth. And now you must suffer even more cruelly than you already have. I am so, so sorry. Forgive me for bungling everything: the whole lifetime we could have had.”

“Bungling how? And what is the truth? How can any of this be real?”

“Don’t be upset. I promise to tell you everything. But it is complicated. All I can say now is that what we have gone through is the epitome of good intentions gone awry. But I can’t tell you here. And I can’t tell you now. I know it sounds insufferably trite, but I have to go to a business meeting. It’s the reason I’m here in Amsterdam. What are your plans?”

“I was stopping here to see the painting on my way to the airport.”

“Can you stay an extra day?”

“I...yes, of course, I’ll make it happen.”

“Shall we meet first thing tomorrow?”

“No. How could I sleep after this? Can we meet later today, or tonight?”

“Of course. Where are you staying?”

“The Krasnapolsky.”

“Goodness, So am I. Well, let’s meet at the hotel’s Winter Garden restaurant. It’s open all hours.”

“What time?”

“Five o’clock.”



“WAYNE, WHAT’S HAPPENED? Why are you calling in the middle of the night?”

Once clear of the museum, he called Ingrid by cell phone, completely forgetting the time difference.

“Ingrid, I have incredible news. Make sure you’re sitting down with your seatbelt fastened.”

“Sweetheart, I’m in bed and just barely awake. Go ahead and tell me. What is it?”

“It’s Nancy. Nancy Hammond is alive, and she’s here in Amsterdam.”

“But that can’t be,” she said, her voice frantic. “How can that possibly be true?”

“I don’t know yet. But she is here. We met by chance in the Rijksmuseum.”

There was a long silence.

“Ingrid, are you there?”

“Yes. Yes, I’m here. But I’m afraid. No, I’m terrified. All these years I’ve competed with her ghost. How can I hold a candle to the real her?”

“Ingrid, don’t say that. You’re my wife. I love you. You know that.”

“I know you did when you left. But you forget. I was there. I remember like yesterday the hold she had over you.”

“But Babe, it’s you who are my life. How can you doubt it when I called you right away about this?”

“Yes, well...what do you want to do?”

“I’ve arranged to meet her at a restaurant tonight to get the full truth of what’s really happened. I don’t understand any of this, and I can only guess at the true story. It’s because I love you that I’m sharing this with you now, before I take another step. Nothing goes any further without your consent. It’s all in your hands. I can still catch today’s flight.”

But suddenly he knew it wasn’t true. In his heart, he knew he must see Nancy, no matter what.

“You really won’t see her if I forbid it?”

“Absolutely,” he lied, feeling the hitch of falsehood hammer a wedge between them.

“No,” she replied, after another long pause, “that won’t work. You could never be at peace. And you can never really be mine again unless you work through this. I’ll have to take my chances.”

“I love you. I’ll fly out tomorrow. I just have to know the truth.”

“But you must promise me—promise me you won’t touch her.”

“I promise,” he responded, wincing, because his voice was sure, but he was not.

“Has she kissed you?”

“No,” he snapped, and now he could feel the lies accumulating, like sheets of floating ice, piling up to topple a bridge in its path.

“I’ll meet you at the airport,” she said. “And I’ll check us in at the Airport Marriott. You must make love to me, tomorrow night, right off that plane.”

“I’ll meet you at the international terminal concourse, just beyond the customs exit.”



WHEN HE ENTERED the restaurant, Nancy sat about thirty feet away at the first table on the left, facing his entrance. The hotel’s Winter Garden restaurant was a Dutch historic landmark owing to its nineteenth-century glass and iron architecture. But as a restaurant, it was only open for breakfast and Sunday brunch, so they mostly had the place to themselves, except for stray tourists, plus occasional hotel staff who wandered in and out on their way to various tasks.

“Do you remember how we used to talk about God?” she asked as he came down the three broad entrance steps and sat across from her.

“Sure. You could never bring yourself to believe in Him. And I could never quite not believe.”

“For exactly eleven years, up until a year ago, I prayed every single day, at bedtime. I prayed to the God I couldn’t believe in, to bring you back into my life. So now it’s really happened, and instantly my life becomes a scrambled egg. I cannot accept this as coincidence, but I can’t make sense of it, either. I just can’t get the dots to connect. In fact, I’m so unsettled, I thought of leaving you a message, asking that we delay our rendezvous so I can think this out.”

“I’m glad you didn’t, because for me it’s more straightforward. I had to see you today. I even lied to my wife about how important it was that we meet.”

“I know about your wife. I know that you love Ingrid.”

“How do you know Ingrid is my wife?”

“From Auntie E, and the letters you two exchange. Because of her, I know all about you, and your career, and your three girls. I’ve watched them grow up from the snapshots you’ve sent her.”

“So she’s a part of this?”

“Yes, and I’ll tell you how, but first tell me about Ingrid. Do you love her as much as you love me?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been walking the city all afternoon trying to sort it out. With you, I always felt that my emotions had a certain anxiety—something that

gave them...a kind of hunger. I was always grasping for a lock against ever losing you."

"And with Ingrid?"

"I...worried some about our relationship when she became a mother, but other than that, I've always felt secure. Does that mean I love her less? I can't really say. It's too much like comparing apples and oranges."

"Let me ask it a different way. I still have your Christmas card photo from 1977. Do you remember it, how you and Ingrid are holding the three toddlers? The two oldest are on your lap? You are smiling into the camera, the proud papa. But Ingrid's eyes are fixed on you. Does she still love you as much as she did in that photo?"

"Nancy, what's the point of this?"

"It may be important for what we discuss later."

"Ingrid's love," he answered, "has never changed. It's always been single-minded, and so trusting that it's...hard to believe. I've never gotten used to how anyone can give themselves that way. She's everything I could hope for in a woman...who is not you."

She closed her eyes for a moment, absorbing an answer that left tracks of dread.

"So you have a cruel dilemma," she said. "Worse than mine."

"How so? Don't you think it's time to explain?"

"Yes, it is. Let me take you back to the beginning, back to my flight to L.A."

"The news clipping they sent said there was an accident."

"That part was true. The clipping about the accident was genuine. I was in a terrible traffic pileup, and I was injured. But I was categorized as serious for only a few hours. One of the injuries was to my shoulder, my collarbone, actually. So they took X-rays. And they found something strange in my lungs."

"What?"

"It was cancer. What they called pulmonary nodules, in both lungs. When they did a biopsy, they determined they were metastases. That means they were caused by another tumor, called the primary, spreading cancer throughout my body. Well, the primary turned out to be a melanoma."

"Melanoma? Isn't that skin cancer?"

"Yes, and you'd think we would have noticed something. But it turned out that the tumor—it was a mole—was in my scalp. So we missed it. The only symptoms I had were that my appetite was off, and I was losing some weight."

"But couldn't it be treated?"

“They did remove the mole. But the cancer had spread throughout my body in a way that was non-operable, and terminal. They didn’t even try chemotherapy; they just sent me home to die in hospice care. And what a death they tried to prepare me for: emaciating weight loss, pain beyond endurance, bodily dysfunction, and finally, probably, a coma I’d be glad I never came out of. So do you begin to get the picture?”

“Yes.”

“These were things I couldn’t put you through. I couldn’t endure the thought that you would watch me waste away and die like that. I couldn’t.”

“So you faked your own death.”

“Yes, but only on the East Coast. It was easy; although there were a lot of details to take care of and keep track of for years. The obituary was faked, but in L.A., faked newspaper editions are as easy as a phone call. My family was never happy with you, not really, so they were glad to help. All except Auntie E. She loved you, and wanted me to tell you the truth. But in the end, she agreed to take care of all the details in Pennsylvania: a whole boatload of work.”

“What about Kevin?”

“Same. He opposed the plan. He went so far as to come to L.A. in person to convince me to call you. That was six weeks after the accident, and I was just starting to feel sick. He stayed a few days—until I sent him home.”

“What happened after that?”

I just kept getting sicker. I suffered all the things they said I would, all the way down to seventy pounds of skin and bone. Except I didn’t die. I kept hanging on, and my mind stayed clear. I took only the minimum of pain medication, and the most important thing, physical thing, I think, was that I forced myself to eat. And only whole, fresh foods. So many times I would force the food down, a little at a time, and I would throw it back up. But I just kept trying, over and over, a morsel at a time. It’s the only physical thing I can point to that explains why I’m still here. No matter how bad the nausea, I never gave up on eating. It was the only way I could act on the hope I had of someday returning to you.”

“How long did you go through all this?”

“The recovery took well over two years from when I came down with full symptoms. I stabilized for several months. Then there was the day I officially gained a pound. That was when I first let myself think I might live to see you again. And the thought gave me a new kind of strength. A new...fortitude. So I did with even less pain medication. It took a long time, but I gradually started

gaining weight and feeling...only a little bit better, but definitely stronger. I reached a point where I knew I would make it. And I knew the cancer was in remission before the doctors diagnosed it for sure. But it got easier after that because thoughts of returning to you boosted my recovery. I would spend hours, poking through my pain and nausea, and I would play through our wedding. I would picture the gown I would wear, how you would look at me, how I would lift my veil and you would kiss me so that my family would blush. I worked it out a dozen different ways how I would surprise you by coming back into your life.

“But then...just when my recovery was in full swing, and I was off the medication, and I was getting back to myself, Auntie E came to visit. She came all the way from Pennsylvania, and I was so happy, thinking she must have good news about you. But then I noticed how my family was waiting for her arrival like it was a funeral. And she came, and she hugged me, and she sat with me, and I got worried because she never really smiled. Finally, she told me how she attended your wedding the previous November. And she told me that Ingrid was pregnant with your first child.

“Wayne, don’t feel sad,” she said, in response to the way he lowered his eyes. “I don’t deserve the sympathy. In a way, this has all been my own fault.”

“Why, because you tried to spare me?”

“It goes back further than that, to a decision I made. Do you remember the night we had the candlelight dinner and we made love for the first time?”

“Of course.”

“You asked me to marry you that night. And you were serious. If I had accepted your proposal, when you first made it, then none of this would have happened the way it did. We would have faced my illness as a married couple. You can’t imagine how often I’ve regretted that decision.”

“But it’s not that simple. I could have insisted. And I almost did, several times. If I had, you would have married me. You know you would have.”

“Yes. I would. I should have known you’d find a way to make me feel better about this. But let me get back to the story, what happened after Auntie E’s visit. I was torn, of course, about forcing my way back into your life and disrupting your marriage. But my appearance made it a nonstarter. I was still thin as a rail. All the curves you thought so beautiful were gone. To this day, I’ve never recovered my weight and my figure. And my appetite has just never gotten fixed. My face was even worse. I came out of the illness looking years older. I was afraid you’d reject me, so it was an easy choice.”

“What did you do?”

“Mainly, I got depressed. It was bad enough to slow down my final recovery. My family, who were very supportive through the whole ordeal, became very concerned. I was in a downward spiral.”

“So what happened?”

“I was saved from the spiral, and my emotional recovery was put over-the-top, by the most bizarre development, something you would never guess.”

“What?”

“Jason Pruitt came back into my life.”

“Jason Pruitt? How did he find out?”

“It was easy once he graduated and moved back to L.A. He turned up at a political function my mother was attending. He got suspicious when she acted nervous. He asked around, figured the whole thing out, then just showed up at the house, wanting to see me.”

“And what came of it?”

“Something that will shock you. He courted me, swept me off my feet, and married me, all in a few months.”

“You married Jason? Of all the men in the world, it had to be him?”

“Don’t be angry with me. You have to put yourself in my place. You were lost to me. And I was more desperate than I knew. I don’t know what he saw in me. I was still ugly. But I was so flattered that he wanted me as a woman, as his wife, that I didn’t hesitate. No, I didn’t love him the way I love you. But what I did feel was real. Call it gratitude. And it was just what I needed at the time. I got pregnant quicker than I dreamed, and I had a son about a year and a half after our marriage.”

“A son.”

“Yes. His name is Mark. He’s at UCLA grad school.”

“I remember how you wanted to be a mother some day. I’m glad that dream came true for you.”

“Yes. More than you know. He’s been my special joy. No matter what else has happened, he’s been an anchor in my life.”

“So your name is Nancy Pruitt?”

“No. The marriage lasted three years. As near as I could determine, he was faithful for two of them. I couldn’t forgive him for ruining our one chance for something like happiness. I took my son and never looked back, just called my lawyer.”

“So you divorced. Did you remarry?”

“Yes, I am married. But in order to understand that, I need to tell you about my career. You see, once I was healthy enough, I returned to school, to USC, to get my master’s degree, the one I’d started at Penn. I did well with it, and I decided to push on to get my doctorate.”

“This was in art history?”

“Yes. The doctorate gave me the credentials I needed to get museum positions. Do you remember Stanley, Auntie E’s husband?”

“Of course.”

“Well, my career has been similar to his, except that mine had a big dose of art restoration work on the front end. But eventually I worked my way up to curator work, just like Uncle Stanley did. I’m at the Norton Simon Museum, in L.A.”

“Do you like the work?”

“Yes. I haven’t always been able to do it fulltime, but I always enjoyed it, and I’ve always kept my hand in it. Anyway, social functions are part of the job. And that’s how I met my second husband. Wayne, what is it?”

“Can you believe I’m feeling jealous, of all things? So useless it’s comical.”

“Don’t worry, you have nothing to fear from Carlo. He’s Italian, works West Coast art sales for a variety of Italian concerns, and we live in L.A. His family is from Milan and he’s nineteen years older than I am. My married name is Nancy Lucerno.”

“Do you love him?”

“Not the way you mean. I didn’t marry him for love. He came into my life early in my career, a few years after the divorce. It’s stressful being in the L.A. art scene as a single mother. Carlo offered me security, affection, status as a married woman, a permanent residence in L.A., and all without too many demands or too high a price to pay. It’s never bothered him that I only love him a little. He’s never demanded much of my affection, especially in recent years.”

“So there were no children?”

“There was one, my daughter, Celeste, conceived during our honeymoon. She was attending USC, but she’s touring Europe right now and spending time with her Italian relatives. She has strong ties to her father’s family.”

“Is she as beautiful as her mother?”

“She does resemble me, but she has her father’s temperament, and even though Carlo and I are both blond, she has auburn hair, just like my grandmother did.”

“So you’re happily married and the mother of two, mostly grown children?”

“Yes. That’s the situation for me. Sometimes I thought of crashing into your life. But I never did because of your children.”

“So now we face a quandary. How do we resolve it?”

“Well, for me, it’s easy. I’ve loved others; I’ve tried it. But no one could replace you. And now, today, I finally know what you feel for me, even after all the years, even after knowing what I did to our future. Your eyes still show me that special something. You still see me as beautiful in a way that no one else does. Isn’t that a sign that our time has come at last? Don’t we deserve to finally share life as a married couple? And it’s not too late. We can still have children.”

“But, Nancy, we both have commitments. We both took marriage vows before God and witnesses. I love you, but I can’t undo those commitments.”

“But it was God, or something like God, who brought us together. It had to be. You’re not refusing me.”

“No. In the end, my future...it’s in your hands.”

“Then if I asked you to come to my room and make love to me, what would you do? Look me in the eye and tell me.”

“I could never refuse you. But please let me make a request.”

“Of course.”

“Please...please, don’t destroy those who depend on us: our children, our spouses. Think of what our actions would do to them.”

“What if we became lovers?”

“Nancy, one taste of you would burn every bridge back to my family in Houston.”

“But you would if I insisted.”

“You know the answer. There’s that empty part of me that only you can fill. That will never change.”

She sat for long moments with eyes closed, tears leaking from shut lids.

“Then you need to go,” she said. “I can live with what you ask, for now. But only because what’s happened today is mind-boggling, and we both need time to think things through. I just cannot believe the right answer is for us to remain apart. But you must go now...before being together like this overrules everything else.”

“Look at me,” he said. “I can’t kiss you good-bye, because of...what it would do. But I want to remember your beauty, and the love I see in your eyes.”

That brought a smile to her tear stained face, and she returned his gaze, drinking in the sight of him, feeling herself weakening every second.

Finally, he stood, and began to turn away. But she couldn’t bear it.

“One more thing,” she said.

He turned, but said nothing, looking stricken. It was clear both were near the end of their willpower.

“I can go on without you,” she continued. “I can do it, for now. But one thing I ask. You must promise that if I ever call for you, you’ll come to me, no matter what.”

“Yes. I’ll come. Your aunt has my number. And will you make me the same promise?”

“Yes, gladly. Auntie E has my number, as well.

“Please don’t say good-bye,” she said.

He walked to the door and turned. Their gazes locked again, both knowing the course was finally set, then the door closed behind him.



SHE SAT THERE, staring after him, letting the tears dry. What had come over her? Why had she let him go? Why this feeling of detachment, as though an observer rather than a participant of the day’s events? It felt surreal: a strange stillness. But then the stillness rippled and dissolved, like a wrapping swirling aside to reveal what it contained. Now she could see that what lay beneath was shock, pure and simple. She was shell-shocked: stampeded by surprise events, impossible to comprehend, cryptic signals from a higher source, call it God, call it fate, that scrambled and jumbled outcomes just out of reach. There was more, another layer, an engulfing feeling of being conflicted. This came from the pang of his leaving versus the thrill of knowing, finally, after so many years, that he not only still loved her, he had given her power over his future, and without the slightest hesitation. More shifting, and the next thought struck her like a blow: the belated realization that the decisions she faced were fraught with danger. Now she could see hazards looming up in her mind’s eye: outcomes to claiming his commitment too hastily that could turn out badly—chances that could be botched, if not handled carefully, and lost forever.

She reached down into the bag at her feet and withdrew her trusty notebook. She opened it to a fresh page and took out a pen, determined to work on this here and now. She would have to think this whole thing through, she decided, regaining a familiar equilibrium. She would need more information—she made a note of it—and she would need to do some traveling to obtain it. She could win,

she decided, after slowly thinking it through, but she would need to plan with the utmost care.



HE USED THE return flight to decompress from his encounter with Nancy. Or at least try to. He felt heady from the experience, as though still saturated with the scent and sight of her. However narcotic that joy, especially on a long flight, it distracted from the immediate issue at hand, which was returning to Ingrid. He felt disoriented, and lapsed into mild panic when he realized how complex were the issues he now faced. Perhaps he should have done this soul searching the night before. Instead he had rushed from Nancy and the hotel, and ducked into a nearby restaurant for dinner alone. There he imbibed a couple of Dutch beers, a rarity for him, but enough alcohol for getting him a good night's sleep.

Now, halfway across the Atlantic, he struggled with questions that wouldn't calm down. He loved two women, each to the full extent of himself, but in divergent ways. Was such an status rational, given his prior commitment to Nancy? Or was he deceiving himself, blind to forces converging to ruin his life? Who would believe it? As of yesterday, he was pledged to two women in vastly different, mutually exclusive ways. His love for Nancy burned bright as before, but touching her would convulse his current life and everyone in it. Yet he had empowered her to summon him to destruction he knew was certain. To Ingrid, he was bound through the union of two into one flesh, solemnized by vows, strengthened by years of bonding, and by their children; but most of all by the love she gave whose strength he still couldn't quite...fathom. It created a wild card factor in predicting the reception he would receive. And what of his own strategy? How should he play it? What should he tell her, and what should he not? There were no precedents to guide him, and the uncertainties fed out into wildly unpredictable outcomes.

By the time the plane touched down in Houston, he was no closer to a real plan, except that he resolved to hide nothing from his wife. There was a quality akin to throwing himself on Ingrid's mercy that drove his decision to tell her everything, truthfully, and to face the consequences. Ingrid deserved the truth, and he must take back the lies. He felt relieved then, when he got free of passport control and started working his way through customs.

More than any other airport, Houston Intercontinental's customs facilities reminded him of a labyrinth. There seemed to be more steps, more inspections

for incoming fruits and plants. Plus he could never decide which of the doorways in series was finally the exit to the IAB (international flights) terminal concourse. Sure enough, suddenly he was out onto the concourse, and there she was, standing, waiting, looking somber, fifty feet away. Her eyes were haunted, her expression drawn as he approached. He couldn't read her, and he suddenly ached with a chilly sense of isolation, of being separated from her.

"Have you been with her?" she asked, her eyes sad and uncertain. The sexual implication of her question upset him, and he felt a stabbing anguish that she hadn't kissed him in greeting.

"We met at a restaurant, and we talked it out. It was the Winter Garden, you remember, at the hotel. But I didn't touch her. And I haven't made love to her in twenty-five years. But I lied to you over the phone when you asked if she had kissed me. She did kiss my cheek, when we first met."

"I already knew that you lied," she said, her eyes dreary. "I could hear it in your voice, like a bell tone that wouldn't die down."

"But I'm not lying to you now," he said.

"Can you stand there and deny that you love her?"

"No, I can't. But it's...like some strange echo."

"What's that supposed to tell me?"

"It's this thing bouncing back from...something I can't change about my past. Ingrid, I can't change the life I had before I loved you. And I can't stop how that affects my emotions now. But that doesn't mean it controls me, or our future. The important thing for our future is that I love you."

"I know that you want to love me. But I also know that even in death you always loved her more. Do you think I don't remember what it was like? How you adored her? How you worshipped the sight of her."

"Ingrid, that's not fair."

"Wayne, I'm not doubting your good intentions. I know that you'd try to stick it out, and stay with me. But how can I ever be secure? How can I expect you to make due with what I have to give when you'd always be haunted by that girl from the past that your heart never really let go of? And it's just a question of time before she arrives on the scene to claim what's hers."

"What are you saying? Are you being facetious? Is this some cruel way that you're punishing me?"

"No, never. But I have come to a final decision."

"Then tell me," he said, inwardly cringing. "I'm so confused."

"I'm going to give you up. Set you free."

“What?”

“I’m serious. I’m giving you up, so you can be with her. You can even leave tonight.”

It was like falling weightless in space as her decision hit home, and he lowered his eyes in shock. Like a slingshot, her words flung him to thoughts of Nancy, to the sight of her beauty, to the scent and taste of her, all suddenly his for the choosing. For the price of an airline ticket, he could regain her, make her his. He lifted his gaze, and he could see his thoughts reflected in Ingrid’s eyes. Yes, she could read his longing, his wistful weighing of real possibilities, suddenly irresistibly tempting. The dam burst from what she saw and her tears gushed, a torrent of defeat.

“Ingrid, I have to know why you’re doing this.”

“Because,” she said, the tears breaking her voice. “It’s the only chance I have.”

“How?”

“If I give you up now, I may get you back later. If I cling to you now, I’ll lose you later, and never get you back.”

“Are you saying you would actually take me back?”

“Of course. I’ve never had a shred of pride when it comes to you.”

He moved to her, his mind made up.

“Never. Never would I let you do this. Your love has always amazed me, but until now, I never understood how strong it really is.”

“But what good is it? It’s never really been enough for you. Just look at what one appearance by Nancy Hammond has done to our lives. If I were the girl of your dreams, you would have run from her and let her mail you her story.”

“Then that’s something I’ll have to make up to you. Did you get us that room at the Marriott?”

“Of course not. How could I—”

But he stopped her by kissing her lips. “I am going to seduce you tonight, make you mine again. And when you wake up in the morning, all this will be behind us.”

“But look ahead. Nancy has always known what she wants, and she won’t sit still for long. What will I do when she comes for you? You know that someday she will.”

“I’m not spending my life with anyone but you. And that’s final. You’ve kept your promise about how you would love me, and now I can’t live without it, or you.”

“Wayne, don’t do this. It’s so unfair to get my hopes up like this. Not unless you’re really, really sure.”

His response, as he looked into her eyes, was to pull out his cell phone and flip it on. “Information operator? Houston? Connect me, please, to the Airport Marriott. I need a room right away.”

About the Author

Rob Costelloe's contemporary love stories explore the height that love can reach. These are characters certain they must have love better than what others will settle for. Something deeper, something richer, something worth holding out for. And something that will last through time. These aspirations invariably give plot directions a unique twist. Rob designs his own covers, and they give a glimpse of the plot tension within. Rob and his wife live in Houston, Texas.

www.rcostelloe.com

Also by R Costelloe

[Pocket Piece Cameo](#)

A Revised Second Edition Love Story

Coinage of Commitment

A second Edition Love Story

Wayne and Nancy grow up on opposite sides of the country, each certain they must have love better than what others will settle for. Something stronger, something richer, something worth searching for. During the turbulent nineteen-sixties, they meet while he is attending blue-collar Drexel, and she is at neighboring, Ivy League Penn. Although irresistibly drawn to each other, they must overcome obstacles posed by the class and social differences that separate them, as well as opposition from both families, and later, a twist of fate that will be the cruelest test of all. Can they reach the emotional heights they seek? Can they overcome time's downward pulling inertia? ***Coinage of Commitment*** is dedicated to all who ever had wistful wonderings about the altitude love can soar to.

*Coinage
of
Commitment*

R. Costelloe