

LEO'S REAL LIFE

A novel by R. A. Conti

Leo's Real Life
by R. A. Conti
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Author's Note Please Read

This novel contains sexual and other possibly offensive content and is for adults only.

The Child is father of the Man
-William Wordsworth, *My Heart Leaps Up*

Table of Contents

- [Chapter 1](#)
- [Chapter 2](#)
- [Chapter 3](#)
- [Chapter 4](#)
- [Chapter 5](#)
- [Chapter 6](#)
- [Chapter 7](#)
- [Chapter 8](#)
- [Chapter 9](#)
- [Chapter 10](#)
- [Chapter 11](#)
- [Chapter 12](#)
- [Chapter 13](#)
- [Chapter 14](#)
- [Chapter 15](#)
- [Chapter 16](#)
- [Chapter 17](#)
- [Chapter 18](#)
- [Chapter 19](#)
- [Chapter 20](#)
- [Chapter 21](#)
- [Chapter 22](#)
- [Chapter 23](#)
- [Chapter 24](#)
- [Chapter 25](#)
- [Chapter 26](#)
- [Chapter 27](#)

PART 1

Chapter 1

In the late Fall of two thousand and twenty-one, Nathan Cummins unlocked the heavy front door and walked in to his parents' house. He flipped the light switch and looked at the living room. Nothing had changed since the last time he was there, except that his father Leo was now gone. Nathan sighed. He missed his mother, too.

This living room, and the entire house, belonged to Nathan and his wife Marilyn now. She felt eager to move in but refused to live with all Leo's junk. For most of his life, Nathan thought it was junk, too. Now that both his parents were gone, what seemed like junk before had become more like family heirlooms. *Getting rid of stuff is gonna be hard*, he thought.

Nathan flopped into Leo's favorite chair and sighed again. *Where do I begin?* He looked around the room. The shelves were crammed with books and a vinyl record collection. Leo had an old stereo that he told everyone had 'the best sound ever made.'

His eyes fell on photos that covered one whole wall. Nathan's mother Alexandra had made them over many years. Nathan got up from the chair and walked to the wall of pictures. *The photos are treasures, obviously.* Many were of him at various times in his childhood, from bare-assed infant (Marilyn loved that one and teased him about it occasionally) to his college graduation in the cap and gown.

In the photos, Leo always seemed unnaturally tall, but it was only because Nathan was a child and Alexandra was a small woman. By the time he grew up, Nathan didn't resemble either parent. He was taller than his mother was but shorter than his father. His face was neither as long as Leo's nor round like Alexandra's.

I'm never getting rid of them, Nathan thought. *But, maybe I should pack them in the attic for a while just to get them out of the way.* His thought of the attic gave him a new idea. *I should start there. That stuff's probably been up there for decades. Mom and dad forgot about it long ago, so none of it is probably important. If I clean it out, I could make space for things I want to keep but need to get out of the way so I can make Marilyn happy.*

Feeling proud of his idea, Nathan headed upstairs. Only a few minutes into this daunting project he'd already devised a plan for how to proceed. *I'm making progress!* His feeling of achievement helped mask his grief.

Nathan was an only child. When he was still only a boy, he and Leo had taken to referring to each other as 'my favorite son,' and 'my favorite dad.' Those words were the last they said to each other before Leo slipped into the coma that preceded his death. The memory of all the times they said their little joke still haunted Nathan. He missed Leo more than he ever dreamed possible.

Nathan felt grateful that Leo managed a weak smile when he spoke the words for the last time. Now he held on to the precious memory of his father's final smile. It was but one of his countless great memories, but more special than all the others because it came at the end. He believed Leo knew it was the end and was signing off with the joke they shared for most of their lives. *That's the kind of guy he was*, Nathan thought. *He was always thinking about other people and making them feel good.*

Nathan suddenly recalled a long story told by an impromptu speaker at his father's memorial service two weeks earlier. As he was winding up the service, a petite white-haired older woman stood up and interrupted him. "He saved my life," the woman said. People turned to look at her. Her face was worn and tired but her voice was clear and she spoke loud

enough for everyone to hear. Embarrassed at suddenly being the center of attention, she paused and looked around. Then she worked up the courage to continue.

“Well, I felt like everyone including God had turned against me. I was panhandling in front of a Wawa convenience store and getting chased all the time. Then a tall man in a long coat walked toward me. I thought he was going to chase me, but his face lit up and he smiled. I noticed his kind eyes. ‘It’s nice to see you’ he said in a friendly voice. No one had spoken to me for several days and I assumed I had become invisible. ‘How are you doing today?’ he asked.

“I felt like shit but he was so kind I didn’t tell him that. ‘Hungry?’ he asked. I nodded. ‘Let’s see what they have inside.’ He put his arm around me and we walked through the doors. The staff looked at me. One of them started to say something but then backed off.

“Leo took me to the hot food bar. ‘Does anything look good to you? I hear the chicken is really special. Would you like some?’ I nodded and he handed me the chicken tongs. ‘Take all you want.’ I filled up a large Styrofoam container. He watched me, smiling the whole time. I wondered if this was a huge joke and if I would be hearing the punchline soon. ‘You’re sure that’s enough?’ he asked. I nodded. ‘Let’s find something to go with it. How about some bread? Would you like coffee or tea? How about dessert? I love their little pies. Have you tried the peach pie? It’s delicious.’

“I just nodded. He handed me a pie and steered me to the coffee bar. I poured the largest cup they had and grabbed some creamer and sugar. ‘That looks like a great meal’ he said. ‘I haven’t eaten lunch yet. Do you mind if we share it?’ I was stunned. I couldn’t remember the last time anyone had eaten with me. I mostly foraged for food in dumpsters and thought I would never share a meal with another human being for the rest of my life, which I assumed might not be very long.

“He grabbed a coffee for himself and then paid for everything. The cashier started throwing my food in a plastic bag but Leo glared at her. The woman slowed down and packed everything carefully. She mumbled ‘Have a nice day’ as we left. ‘Thanks. I’m having a wonderful day. I hope yours is just as good,’ Leo replied cheerfully.

“We went back outside. It was a cool but sunny day. There was a picnic table behind the store. ‘I reserved a table just for us,’ he said, smiling. We sat down. I took out the chicken. Leo sipped his hot coffee. I opened the box of chicken and reached for a piece. Leo took a piece for himself. He waited for me to start, and then he ate, too.

“We talked for almost two hours. Then he looked at his watch and apologized that he was due in class. He stood up and thanked me for a delightful afternoon. ‘Enjoy the rest of your chicken,’ he said as he left. After he was gone, I wondered if I had imagined the entire experience. Maybe my low blood sugar from lack of food was getting to me. The truth was *he* got to me and I never forgot him.

“I found out later on who he was. It turned out he went back inside the Wawa and told them to give me whatever I wanted and just bill him whenever he came in. I tried to only go in when I was really desperate, but his generosity lasted long enough for me to get back on my feet.” Self-conscious about her long story, the woman sat down. Nathan heard people sniffling in the audience. The woman’s story had gotten to them. It had gotten to him, too.

Nathan brushed away a tear and headed to the huge attic. It was an old house and he’d grown up there. His parents lived there ‘almost from before it was built,’ as Leo used to joke. That wasn’t true. Leo and Alexandra were the third owners but had occupied the house longer than all the previous owners combined. It was theirs, and they knew it the moment they first

saw it. 'It's as if it had been built especially for us,' the young couple agreed when they took their first tour. It was not only everything they thought they wanted but much more. There were characteristics and features they never dreamed of looking for but fell in love with as they discovered them. They were so enthralled the realtor felt obligated to warn them that it was an old house and prone to the problems most old houses had. Leo and Alexandra didn't care. They rented it immediately and later bought it.

It had been theirs for nearly sixty years, and now it belonged to Nathan and his wife. He felt grateful Marilyn wanted it. He didn't know what he would have done if she told him to get rid of it. It occurred to him he might have to get rid of her instead but never told her. Nathan knew it was best to keep some musings private.

The attic was cool but bearable. Nathan turned the ancient rotary light switch and looked at the packed space. The cleanout he thought would be easy suddenly looked daunting. *Maybe I should hire someone to cart this stuff away without looking at it*, he thought. He rejected that idea a moment later. *There's a reason this stuff is up here. They kept it all these years. I should at least look at it before I trash it.*

It was time to begin. Nathan sighed for the third time since he walked in the front door and hoped the ordeal wouldn't be too difficult. He reminded himself that he needed space for the stuff downstairs that he wanted to clear out but not get rid of. It had to go somewhere. But, where to start?

Nathan walked wherever he could find clear floor space. There wasn't much. He surveyed the objects he found as he moved through the attic. It seemed bigger and more crowded now than he recalled noticing before.

Some stuff was old furniture Nathan assumed was outdated, unusable, or broken. For some reason, his parents refused to part with these pieces even though they would likely never use them again. *Maybe they thought furniture pixies would repair and refinish this old junk so they could sell it someday*, he thought. *Looks like those pixies never got the message.*

That old, broken stuff would be easy to let go of. All he needed was a couple of guys to help him carry everything to the curb on trash day. Nathan felt good about making some progress, even if it was only coming to an easy decision about stuff that had no value whatever.

He started looking around to see what else his parents had squirreled away and spotted an ancient steamer trunk. Its brass corners, hinges, and clasp were once shiny but years of attic dust and neglect had made them look shabby. The trunk looked sturdy, however, and Nathan wondered if anything was inside. He moved some old cushions his mother had stored in plastic bags and swung the hefty lid upwards to reveal a pile of books and several worn cardboard boxes. *It figures I would find books up here*, he thought. *My father never had enough room for all his books. But, what's in those boxes?*

Nathan lifted the top box and sat it on the floor. He opened the flaps and found typewritten pages. *Probably drafts of some of my father's old papers*, he thought. *Not worth keeping. This stuff's all outdated, anyway.* He pushed the box to the side and took out another.

The box had been tied carefully and he wondered why. *What could be so important?* He hoped for old prints or newspaper clippings that might have some nostalgic value. *That would be fun. Marilyn might like it if I framed a few of the best ones. She likes old stuff.*

He untied the twine and pulled open the flaps. The box contained old black marble composition notebooks. They might be from when his parents were children and Nathan

thought they could make entertaining reading sometime. He took out one book, opened it, and read 'Leo Cummins' printed neatly on the first page. Below the name, Nathan read the year- 1959. Nathan assumed it was his father's old schoolbook. *Let's see- that would have been when he was in junior high school, I think.*

Nathan became excited. He turned the page to discover what subject Leo used the book for. There was a date at the top of the page and raggedy but legible handwriting filled the space. *Must be English class*, Nathan guessed. He read the first few lines.

'Those damn niggers were at it again. They packed the school bus and wouldn't shut up. You can't say anything to them because they're looking for an excuse to beat us white kids up. I wish they would all go back where they came from- all the way back to Africa if that's possible.'

Nathan couldn't believe what he read. He examined the handwriting more closely. *Maybe it's not dad's*, he thought. *Maybe it belonged to some other kid*. Then he remembered his father's name was on the first page. *Maybe somebody was messing with my dad. He would never have written something like this. He got along great with everyone. I heard him gently chastise people who expressed prejudice or bias many times. He had a Black Lives Matter sign on his front lawn from the day the movement began.*

More writing filled the next page: 'That Jew-boy talked to me again. I don't know what his problem is. Why would he think I'm interested in anything he does? I don't know why we can't just send all the Jews and niggers back where they came from.'

This entry startled Nathan more than the first one. His mother Alexandra had been Jewish. Leo often praised Jewish culture and the long history of devotion and scholarship that marked Jews' commitment to their religious and cultural roots. Nathan thought he recalled his father saying at least one time that he wished he had been born a Jew.

What is this book? he wondered. *Who did it really belong to? If it's not dad's, why did he save it all these years?* Nathan had no idea. He had stumbled on a mystery he didn't want to explore, but felt compelled to. The boy who wrote these horrible journal entries was not the father Nathan knew and loved. Who was that boy? Nathan knew he would have to read more of the journal. He flipped ahead several pages and stopped two months later. The date was July 4, 1959.

'I finally got that cunt alone. She didn't like what I did to her, but I didn't care. She deserved it. She was nothing but a prick-teaser. Well, I showed her what being a prick-teaser gets you- a good fucking. And, I did fuck her good. I used a rubber so there wouldn't be any evidence. I left her crying and told her if she told anyone I would kill her. I think she believed me. I also think maybe I'm gonna get all the pussy I want now that she's afraid of me. Girls are so weak and stupid. They're only good for one thing.'

This was too much for Nathan. He slammed the notebook closed. How could anyone have written such horrible words? He didn't want to believe they described something his father actually did. Perhaps it was just a teenage boy's turgid fantasy, but it was still ugly and disgusting. He had thought of perhaps publishing excerpts from his father's teenage journals but now wondered if there was anything worthwhile the world could learn from them. There was much Nathan could learn, however, and he decided to read them through before he decided what to do with them.

After putting the notebook back in the box, he turned to continue inventorying the attic clutter. Nathan could not stop thinking about what he read, however, and went back to

the box. He took out the journal and held it unopened in his hand. *Maybe I should just get rid of them*, he thought. *Burn them in the backyard before anyone else sees them.*

However, he couldn't do it. He had to read more. He had to find out. Had Leo written these? Were they true?

Nathan recalled another impromptu speaker at the memorial service. "He always had a couple of dollars for me. I don't know how he knew when I was down, but he somehow found me and made a point of handing something to me. Then he wished me luck and went away. I wondered if he was some kind of apparition, but he showed up enough that I knew he was real. Later, I found out who he was, but I was too embarrassed to find him and thank him. When I heard he died, I came to thank him today. He saved me."

How could that Leo and the Leo in these awful journals have been the same person? Nathan needed to figure it all out. He wasn't sure why, since Leo was dead and the world would move on without him. Nathan realized he couldn't move on. What if the father he knew had been fake and these pages revealed the real Leo Cummins? *Maybe that's why he kept them*, Nathan thought, *to remind him of who he had been.*

Nathan thought more about the journals after he went home but didn't tell Marilyn. Mainly, he tried to figure out what he ought to do with them. He went back the next day with a red pen, took out the first journal, and opened it to the first entry. He wanted to read it again and then note his reaction.

Under the first entry, he wrote, 'I was stunned by this. I can't believe Leo wrote it. It's so unlike him.' Nathan couldn't think of anything else to add. He read the note and thought it sounded insipid. *What difference will my reactions make?* he thought. *This is the ancient past and dad is gone, anyway.* He closed the journal, put it back in the box, and spent the rest of his time planning how he would go about clearing out the house.

He couldn't stop wondering about his father's journals, however. *Are they all like that?* Nathan understood that as distasteful as the reading could be, he had to find out more. He stopped working, took out the first journal again, and opened it. As he flipped past the first entry, he noticed more writing beneath his comment in red ink. *What the hell?* he thought. *Did I miss something?* He stopped at the page and read the new entry.

'Who the fuck is writing in my journal? You better keep out or when I find you I'll kill you. It better not be you, Daisy. I'll do more than kill you, sister, I'll screw you senseless before I do it.'

Nathan's new shock nearly overwhelmed him. *I must be hallucinating*, he thought. *Maybe dad's death and my grief have taken more of a toll on me than I thought. Maybe it's too soon to clear out the house. Maybe Marilyn and I should take a cruise with some of that money dad left us.* Nathan considered closing the journal and putting it away, possibly for a long, long time.

He couldn't do it. He decided, instead, to read on.

'This nigger kid took my Oreos in the lunchroom today. When I challenged him, he laughed and handed them back to me. I told him I didn't want them now that he had touched them. I wanted to call him a nigger to his face but he was with a couple other jigaboos. He laughed, popped the cookies in his mouth, and walked away. I was so pissed. I wished I'd brought my switchblade to school. I would have cut him right there and then.'

Nathan took out his red pen. 'Niggers, jigaboos, switchblade?' he wrote. "I never in all my life heard Leo use such words. He loved Black people. And he hated violence."

Nathan closed the journal and put it back in the box. He wanted to see if something new appeared inside. He went to the bathroom, came back, and reopened the notebook. ‘I’d kill all the niggers if I could. They’re worse than dog shit. If I find out who’s writing in my journal I’ll kill you, too. You better stay out.’

Nathan didn’t understand how it was happening, but he had started a dialogue with someone. He still didn’t believe it was his father, or that it was with someone in the distant past, but what if it was both? He had to know more.

He forgot about working in the house and considered ways of interacting with the person communicating with him. The first question he thought of was finding out who was doing the writing. He went back to the recent page and wrote, ‘Who’s writing this stuff? It can’t be Leo. He would never say things like this. Is his house haunted? My parents never told me anything about a ghost. Who are you, ghost, and why are you here? What do you want?’

Nathan left the journal open and went to get a beer from the refrigerator. He rarely drank beer. Marilyn liked it more than he did. His father had kept beers around for her, mostly.

Leo had adored Marilyn and praised her whenever he could. She used to tease Leo that he had a crush on her. Leo would laugh and deny it, but Marilyn saw the twinkle in his eye.

“It would never work because of the age difference,” Marilyn told him. “I’m too old for you, Dad.” Leo always nodded, laughed, and walked away happy. *He must have been a real charmer when he was young*, Marilyn often thought. *He’s still got something, although I don’t know what it is. Why hasn’t he met someone his age? Alexandra’s been gone for years.*

Leo didn’t want someone his age because, to him, Alexandra wasn’t gone. Her presence in his life had transformed from physical to spiritual, but she was still with him. He felt her enfolding love and devotion throughout the house. That was why he never changed anything. He didn’t move furniture, change photos or paintings on the walls, or remove any of her books. It was why he kept her old vinyl LPs.

Marilyn was a passionate jazz devotee and loved the (now-classic) albums that came out in the fifties and sixties. Leo rarely played them anymore, but he liked seeing them where they lived for the decades Alexandra treasured them. She had been his treasure, and he would never let go of her.

‘I ain’t no ghost. Who the fuck are you and why are you fucking with me? You got no business in my journal. I know Daisy’s handwriting and it’s not her. Are you that nigger bitch maid that works for my parents? You’re always nice to me but I know how fake niggers can be. If you are, I’ll find a way to get back at you. My mom likes you but I don’t. STAY OUT!!!’

Nathan couldn’t resist. ‘I’m your son,’ he wrote. *Let’s see what he does with that bombshell*, Nathan thought. He walked away and came back a half-hour later. Nothing new had appeared on the page.

Chapter 2

Nathan didn't want to believe he was communicating with someone in the past yet there seemed no other explanation. He also assumed whoever it was wouldn't want to believe they were communicating with someone in the future. He thought he ought to find a convincing way to persuade them that their correspondence wasn't happening in their time but through time.

He read ahead in the journal and found an entry that disturbed him even more than those that contained bigotry, misogyny, and hate. Dated September 19, 1959, it mentioned Leo's sister. Leo had never told Nathan much about his Aunt Daisy. There were photos around the house but Leo never talked about them. His mother Alexandra had told him what little she knew but it wasn't much.

'Those fucking doctors aren't telling us anything. And one of them is a fucking nigger. I know he's just happy to have white people to torture. All we know is that something happened to Daisy at school and now she's in a coma. They won't tell us when she'll come out, or what they're doing for her. She just lays there, barely breathing.

'I'm going to find out who did this to her. The school is lying, I just know it. Somebody hurt her. I'll kill them when I find out. I made a promise to my sister when she was lying there unconscious and my parents were outside talking to the nigger doctor. I'll kill everyone who fails to bring her back, and burn down that fucking school and that hospital, too. I'm serious!'

Nathan thought he should warn Leo about what was going to happen on September 19. *Maybe that will convince him I'm in the future*, Nathan thought. *But, how will he react to what I have to tell him?*

He decided to hold off revealing Leo's future and instead interact with him by commenting in the journal. There was plenty to comment on. The girl Leo raped on July 4 was mentioned several more times, although Leo never revealed her name. He referred to her as 'that cunt,' and followed through on his threat to take her whenever he wanted. He described manipulating her and fucking her senseless with glee. Nathan couldn't decide what Leo liked more- screwing her or controlling her. He could have forgiven Leo for manipulating the girl if he mentioned how pleasurable the sex was, but he never did. Leo seemed to relish cruelty.

Nathan recalled his parents' sex life. They never discussed it. From when he was old enough to understand what was going on behind their closed bedroom door on lazy weekend afternoons, he knew they had a healthy sexual relationship. They always glowed when they came out of that bedroom after a few hours alone. He assumed it was because of more than lovemaking; they glowed because they were so much in love.

How could Leo the adult relish love so much when teenage Leo relished controlling the girls he used for sex? Young Leo's disgusting pleasure seemed to come from hate while mature Leo's joy was grounded in love. Where had that love come from? Did Alexandra change Leo somehow? Nathan wondered if he would ever know.

He didn't know how far his father's journal went. There were several notebooks, but he didn't want to look ahead to the last one and check the year it was written. There was a story here and Nathan wanted to follow along step by step. Maybe he could learn something valuable.

First, Nathan had to prove to Leo that he was who he said he was.

‘I really am your future son. I know your future, and I can prove it, but you won’t like it. Something serious is going to happen to your sister on September 19. You can’t do anything to change what’s going to happen, and I don’t know what the outcome is. But, it’s big.’

‘If you hurt my sister I’ll kill you.’

‘I can’t do anything to hurt her,’ Nathan wrote. ‘You can’t do anything to protect her. I just wanted to warn you. It’s the best I can do.’

‘What’s going to happen? You have to tell me that, at least.’

‘I don’t know any of the details, but she ends up in the hospital in a coma.’

‘You are a sick motherfucker’ Leo wrote. ‘I’ll find out who you are and punish you for hurting my sister.’

‘You can’t hurt me. I’m not in your time. And I had nothing to do with what happened.’

‘You must think I’m a complete dope.’

‘I knew you as the smartest man I ever met,’ Nathan wrote.

‘Knew me...?’

‘My father just died.’

‘You’re crazy.’

‘No, I’m perfectly sane, and I want to help you.’

There was no reply. *Maybe I told him too much.* Nathan wondered if he would ever hear from Leo again. It occurred to him to flip to September 19 in the journal. Sure enough, there was a new comment on the page.

‘How the fuck did you know about this? Was it because you hurt her? Who the fuck are you? You can’t hide from me. I’ll find you somehow.’

Nathan felt he had to be honest. ‘I found your journals in a box in your house after you died. I’ve been reading them. That’s how I know. But, I only know as much as you’ve written. And, now that you know about me, I expect you will change what you write.’

‘That’s bullshit. Do you think I’m stupid? How can you be reading stuff I’ve never written yet? No, something else is going on. I’ll find out who you really are and when I do, you are dead.’

A couple of pages later, after some trivial entries about what happened at school, or what Leo’s parents said, Nathan read a message directed to him. ‘My sister’s still in the coma. Please, I beg of you, if you know what happens to her, tell me. It’s driving me and my parents crazy. The doctors aren’t doing anything. Please.’

Nathan read every page to the end of the first volume. It went well into early 1960 but there was no mention of Daisy. He feared the worst and didn’t know what to tell Leo.

It wasn’t until he opened the second volume that he found out. The first entry made him cry for someone he never even met. ‘Those fucking useless doctors let her die. I can’t believe how stupid they were. They did NOTHING to save her.’

Nathan wrote on the diary page. ‘I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you. I know it’s hard, but there was nothing you or anyone else— even the doctors— could have done. Even in my time comas are difficult to treat.’

‘There might not be much doctors can do, but there is something I can do. I can make them pay for killing my sister.’

‘They didn’t kill her, Leo. She just died. It happens sometimes. There’s nothing anyone can do.’

‘I can punish them, and I will, starting with that nigger doctor. First, I’ll cut his balls off. Then I’ll keep slicing off pieces of his skin until there’s no black left and he’s just all red blood. Then I’ll wait and watch him die. Maybe he’ll understand how it felt for me and my parents to watch Daisy die.’

‘Please, I beg of you, don’t do anything. What happened was not the doctor’s fault. Nothing you can do will bring her back.’

‘I know. But, somebody has to pay,’ Leo wrote.

‘I know how you feel, but there’s nothing you can do. She’s gone.’

‘I hate you.’

Leo didn’t write about Daisy’s funeral or the aftermath. It was likely too painful. Nathan read on into the second volume. There were scattered rambling entries. Some were mere disassociated fiery words. Leo’s rage didn’t subside, nor did his intense sorrow. He chose not to write in detail about either one. Nathan understood. He read on, hoping Leo would become more articulate again. There were several journal volumes and they must contain more than short incomprehensible entries. The writing must have meant something to Leo, or why would he have kept the journals?

Then it occurred to Nathan to intervene. Maybe he could help Leo recover from his grief. He found an entry three months after Daisy’s death. It contained few words. ‘Couldn’t sleep again. Those fucking dreams. Can’t take much more of this.’

‘Talk to me,’ Nathan wrote. ‘I’m here for you. Let me help. Please.’

‘What do you want? Can’t you leave me alone?’

‘I just want to help you.’

‘What can you do?’ Leo asked.

‘You can write to me and I can write back. Tell me how you feel. I have feelings, too. I know what life is like.’

‘Life sucks. I’m not sure I want to hang around to see any more of it.’

Nathan panicked. Was Leo thinking of killing himself? Nathan knew he hadn’t, but he worried meddling in Leo’s life was changing it somehow. Should he continue their dialogue? Was he messing where he shouldn’t be?

He decided it was time to share the journals with Marilyn.

Chapter 3

Nathan's wife Marilyn was a petite, perky blonde, the exact opposite of Nathan's fantasy ideal woman. As they got to know each other after they met, he realized she fit his life better than any woman he could have imagined. Marilyn never told him if he was her ideal man. He didn't care. Their life together had been happy so far, and they had no reason to suspect it wouldn't continue that way.

"What you're telling me is impossible," Marilyn declared.

"I'm telling you it is happening. It's real. My father and I are communicating through his journals."

"Your father..., from the past?" she mocked. Nathan nodded. "Are you sure you're not drinking when you're over at his house working?"

"I haven't touched his liquor cabinet. I swear."

"But this can't be happening, Nathan. There must be some rational explanation."

"There is. I just told you what it was."

"But, what you told me makes no sense."

They argued for a few more minutes until they realized they were getting nowhere. Marilyn walked out of the room. Nathan tried to think of a way to convince her he was right. He grabbed his car keys and hurried out the door. At Leo's house, he grabbed the first two journal volumes and brought them back. Marilyn never knew he was gone.

"What are these?" she asked later.

"These are the journals. I can show you what I'm talking about. You'll see for yourself."

"See *what*, exactly?"

"Our exchange." Nathan showed her the first page of dialogue. She read it carefully. 'Those damn niggers were at it again. They packed the school bus and wouldn't shut up. You can't say anything to them because they're looking for an excuse to beat us white kids up. I wish they would all go back where they came from- all the way back to Africa if that's possible.'

Marilyn felt shaken. She had trouble deciding what to say. "That doesn't sound like your dad," she commented.

"I know. Read what I wrote below." Marilyn read Nathan's comment. 'I was stunned by this. I can't believe my father wrote it. It's so unlike him.'

"Okay, well, I agree with you, Nathan. So?"

"Read what he wrote back." Marilyn read Leo's response. 'Who the fuck is writing in my journal? You better keep out or when I find you I'll kill you. It better not be Daisy. I'll do more than kill you, sister, I'll screw you senseless before I do it.'

"I still don't believe you," Marilyn scoffed. "Anyone could have written this."

"But it's *his* handwriting! Don't you recognize it?" Marilyn nodded, reluctantly. "And there, that's *my* handwriting." Marilyn nodded again but couldn't believe what her husband was telling her. She wanted to dismiss the journals and leave the room. Instead, she challenged Nathan. "So why are you defacing Leo's journals?" she asked. "Don't you have anything better to do?"

"I started reading because I was thinking of telling the story of how my father became the man he was. I thought his early life might show his development. But, he was a

completely different person back then, an awful person. It's almost as if he started out as someone else and then acquired a new personality as he matured."

"We all change as we mature."

"Judging by what I've read here, he should not have become the adult he was. He should have been a gangster or a criminal. Maybe a politician, but not a humanitarian."

"So why did that change happen?" Marilyn asked. She was starting to become interested.

"I don't know. But it did."

Marilyn fell silent. She looked at the open journal, had a thought, but immediately didn't like it. "I think I know one possible way," she whispered.

"Good. Explain it to me."

"I think his son had something to do with it."

"His son?" Nathan asked. "You mean *me*?"

Marilyn looked at Nathan and grinned. "Do you have any brothers?"

"Not that I know of."

"Then it's you," Marilyn explained. "The one writing in his journal." It seemed perfectly logical to her.

"You mean *I* changed him?"

"You must have. You know how he turned out. He was a wonderful man. I loved him as if he was my own dad. It wasn't just because of you. He was a great guy."

"Yes. But reading these journals makes me wonder how he *became* a great guy."

"Outside influence," Marilyn stated. Nathan waited for more. "Maybe from his future... maybe from his *son*," she repeated. Nathan remained silent. Marilyn gazed at the journal page in front of them.

"And from his daughter-in-law," Nathan added.

"Don't bring me into this! He's your father, not mine!"

"Let me show you the latest entry I read." Nathan opened the second volume and turned to a page early in 1960. 'Life sucks. I'm not sure I want to hang around to see any more of it.'

"He was thinking of killing himself?" Marilyn asked, shocked. Nathan nodded.

"Thank God he didn't do it."

"But, what made him *not* do it?"

"Maybe someone convinced him not to."

"Who? Parents, friends, a sympathetic teacher?" Nathan paused as if he knew what Marilyn was going to say.

"Or..., his son?"

"And daughter-in-law..."

"You really think we could...?" Marilyn asked. Their weird conversation was starting to make her wonder if they were both going crazy.

"I think we have to."

"But, we know he didn't do it."

"Yes, but that was before," Nathan pointed out.

"Before?"

"Before I found his journals, before I started writing in them, before we started communicating. Now, I don't know what's happening. As you've argued, my communication could be altering his timeline."

“You mean you’re interference could be changing things?” Marilyn asked. Nathan nodded. “But, you’re here. So, he didn’t kill himself. Maybe if you don’t mess with anything else in these fucking journals nothing bad will happen after all.”

“And, maybe if I don’t mess with them, the worst possible thing for me *will* happen.” Marilyn understood what Nathan implied. “You mean?”

Nathan nodded. “More things will change. And, maybe I will never have been born.”

Marilyn’s mind flooded with images of life without Nathan, Leo, Alexandra, and all the other people she knew because of them. She realized she had to help Nathan save his life. It was the only way she knew to save her own.

“How many of these are there?” Marilyn asked. Nathan wondered why.

“I found a whole cardboard box full of them.”

“When’s the last time you looked?”

“Today when I went to get these.”

“And the box is still full?” Nathan nodded. “You’re sure?” Puzzled by her question, he nodded again.

“So we can assume your messages might have altered his timeline, but he kept on living. That’s a start. But, you’ve just become responsible for your father’s future, Nathan. It’s up to you to keep him alive..., and change him..., and make him become the man we knew and loved.” Marilyn paused to gather her racing thoughts.

“If you had left those journals alone things would have worked out okay. We knew they *had* worked out. He was a wonderful man. You were here. Everything was normal. Now it’s not gonna be that way and it’s *your* fault. You have to be the one that makes it all work out. His life depends on it. So does yours.” *So does mine*, Marilyn reminded herself, but didn’t say it aloud.

Nathan knew what he had to do but couldn’t say it. Marilyn had to do it for him. “So instead of Leo being your parent, you’re gonna have to be his.” She walked out of the room. Nathan was left alone with merciless cosmic mysteries he did not like and would never understand. *How is this even possible?* There was no answer. He didn’t expect one.

Nathan and Marilyn had chosen not to have children, but they lied and told their parents Marilyn was infertile. The lie didn’t embarrass her. She liked kids but only the ones she knew casually. “I don’t want to own one of my own,” she jokingly told friends. “Let somebody else do the parenting.” Nathan had agreed. He liked children and would have happily become a father, but he loved Marilyn, respected her decision, and never argued against it.

Now it seemed he was going to have become a parent after all. However, he had no experience and he saw their decision to forgo parenting as a problem. Neither Nathan nor Marilyn knew what to do with an unruly adolescent. They were going to have to learn. They were also going to have to get it right. More than just that adolescent’s future depended on it. Nathan’s life did, too. He couldn’t do what so many parents did, however unintentionally. He couldn’t screw it up.

Nathan began by fetching the box of journals from Leo’s closet and taking them to his study at home. He planned to read them as quickly as possible. He hoped Marilyn would help. “I don’t know if I want to read what I’m likely to see in his journals,” she protested. “It might change my opinion of him.”

“But, this is too important to leave to one person. You might spot something I miss.”

“Oh, all right. I’ll do it for you, but reluctantly.” Marilyn didn’t want to admit that she wasn’t doing it just for Nathan, or for Leo, but for herself. She didn’t want to lose the life she had with Nathan. Any other life was unimaginable. “Where should we start?” she asked.

“Let’s start with that entry I showed you where he seems to be thinking of suicide.” Nathan paused. “But, before we dive in, I have a suggestion. So far, I’ve been writing in the original journals. We have no idea if anything that’s been written so far has changed anything that he wrote that we haven’t read yet.”

“Yeah, so?”

“What if we copy them first before we write anything else? That way, we’ll have the original versions and we can compare them to the altered journals if we need to.”

“That’s a good idea. Does that old copier still work?”

“Yeah, it’s fine. I just bought a new ream of paper.”

The hours they spend making copies of the journal pages allowed Nathan and Marilyn to think about what they had taken on. They had to change a life, and they had to do it in a way no one ever tried before. Was that even possible, or was their copying merely a delaying tactic? They wouldn’t know if it was useful until they tried their first intervention.

When they finished copying all the journals, they carefully labeled and bound the copies so they could refer to them later and then set them aside.

“Okay.” Nathan opened the second volume. He found the suicide page and laid the notebook on the desk so they could both read the entry. ‘Life sucks. I’m not sure I want to hang around to see any more of it.’

“We know he hung around. Let’s read on and see if we can find out why,” Marilyn suggested. “Was this just a one-time entry, or did he repeat the thought later on?”

It didn’t take them long to find an answer. Two weeks after the first mention of suicide, they found a more disturbing entry. ‘I’m gonna do it. My parents won’t even miss me. They don’t seem to know I’m still here. They walk around in a fog. I can’t talk to them. I can’t talk to anyone.’

Nathan knew he had to reply. His message was simple. ‘You can talk to me, Leo. I’m here for you. Let me help.’ He closed the volume and walked away from his desk. Marilyn followed him with her eyes but couldn’t wait for him to come back. She opened the notebook.

‘What can you do? You don’t even exist. You must be a figment of my imagination. I think I’m going crazy and writing in my own damn journal and don’t even know it.’

“Nathan, he’s replied,” she said.

Nathan came back, read the reply, and wrote, ‘But you know I’m real. I warned you about Daisy.’ He shut the journal again. Marilyn opened it a second later.

‘So who are you, really? And how are you doing this?’

Nathan looked at Marilyn. “Keep going,” she urged. “You got him hooked.”

‘Like I told you, I’m your son. I’m in the future.’

The reply formed in front of their eyes. ‘I don’t have a son. I’m never gonna have a son. I’m gonna fuck as many girls as I can, but if any of them get pregnant, I’ll deny I’m the father.’

Nathan scribbled angrily. ‘Fucking like that doesn’t solve anything,’

‘Like hell it doesn’t. It’s the only thing that makes sense to me. When I’m down, I sneak out and find some stupid cunt. If she won’t do it for free I give her money. They’ll

always do it if you pay them. All cunts are like that.' Nathan read the obscene remark and looked at Marilyn. He knew what she was waiting for him to write.

'No, they're not. Many wonderful women want to share the lives of decent loving men.' Satisfied with Nathan's reply, Marilyn nodded. Before she could comment, Leo's reply appeared on the page.

'Love? What is love? You're lying. There is no such thing.'

Marilyn read the reply and burst into tears. "He was the warmest most loving man I ever met," she said, sobbing. "He knew what love was. He was one of the only men I ever met who did." Nathan put his arm around his wife and hoped she also saw him as a man who knew what love was.

"Now we know," Marilyn said.

"Know what?"

"What he needs..., what we have to do. We have to convince him he's loved, maybe even teach him what love is."

"How can we do that? We're years apart."

"There has to be a way." Her calm conviction strengthened Nathan's resolve.

Chapter 4

“I think our problem can be stated simply,” Marilyn said, later.

“Okay, explain it.”

“How do you teach someone to love? I guess most parents, normal ones anyway, somehow convey what love is.”

“But, there are many people around whose psychological problems can be traced back to a lack of love.”

“Right,” Marilyn agreed. “But, the Leo in the journals doesn’t need psychological analysis. He needs love. We’re the ones who are going to have to give it to him.”

“How? All we can do is write to him.”

“True. It’s *what* we write that will matter.”

Nathan smirked. “So what should we write? ‘We love you, Leo, signed your son and future daughter-in-law?’” Marilyn frowned. She wondered if he was taking this seriously enough.

“No, you’re right. We’ll have to do better than that. Let’s read some more and see if we can figure out where to intervene.”

It was time to perform their first experiment. What should their first message be?

“It seems he can’t get over losing Daisy, so he must have loved her very much, without even knowing it,” Marilyn observed. “Let’s investigate that possibility further.”

“Not a bad idea, but what should we say?”

“We can’t go at it directly. We have to be indirect and gain his trust.”

“How about, ‘Your sister’s death really hit you hard. Do you want to talk about it?’ Is that too direct?”

“I think it’s worth a try,” Marilyn said. Nathan opened the journal to the page that contained the entry that ended with, ‘All cunts are like that.’ He recalled the earlier entry provoked by his first response. ‘Who the fuck is writing in my journal? You better keep out or when I find you I’ll kill you. It better not be Daisy. I’ll do more than kill you, sister, I’ll screw you senseless before I do it.’ Perhaps the harsh language cloaked his real feelings about Daisy.

‘Your sister’s death really hit you hard’, Nathan wrote. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’ He closed the journal and waited for Marilyn to reopen it. She hesitated.

“Go ahead,” Nathan urged.

“*You* open it. I’m not sure I want to know what’s there.” Nathan shrugged and opened the notebook. There was a reply scrawled beneath his comment.

‘Matilda, you nigger cunt! If you don’t stay out of my journal I’m gonna hurt you bad. I’m not afraid of niggers.’

Marilyn frowned. “He thinks it’s the maid! I guess we’ll have to start all over again.”

“Maybe we should let him think it’s her. Maybe if she’s sympathetic, and he believes her, he’ll reach out to her. He always spoke fondly about her. I thought he liked Matilda.”

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. Let’s try something else.”

“Like what?” Nathan asked.

“How about this: ‘I’m not Matilda. As I told you before, I’m your son. You never told me much about Daisy. There were only a few photos of her in the house when I was growing up. Tell me about your sister.’”

“That’s *good*, Marilyn! I’ll write it. Let’s see what happens.” Nathan carefully penned the short message and closed the notebook.

A moment later, Marilyn reached for the journal and opened it to the page where Nathan had just written. The ink looked blotted. It took Marilyn a moment to realize the blots were from tears. Leo had been crying when he replied.

‘She was only a kid. I couldn’t save her. It wasn’t fair that she had to die and so many bad people get to go on living.’

“Ooh, that’s a tough one,” Marilyn said. “We have to be real careful. He’s in touch with his grief but his rage hasn’t let up. It may have gotten worse.”

‘Don’t think about other people. Think about her. Why do you miss her?’ Nathan wrote.

“That’s good,” Marilyn commented. “Maybe he’ll open up a bit more.”

‘She never hurt anyone. She never said a bad word or did a bad thing. God took her from us. I hate God, and all the people God doesn’t take. Maybe I can fix that.’

“Shit, he’s getting worse, not better,” Nathan said. “Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. What if he goes out and hurts someone?”

“He’s a teenage boy, Nathan. They’re often filled with rage.” Nathan couldn’t recall ever being enraged when he was a teenager. Leo’s love and compassion kept him on a stable emotional path. “Sometimes hormonal excesses manipulate them. We need to help him to find the love inside him, the love he had for his sister. I don’t think he knows what love is, yet.”

“As usual, Marilyn, you’re right.”

“But, how? You just can’t keep asking him about Daisy.”

“So why don’t I talk to him about love?”

“That might work.”

‘You loved Daisy very much, didn’t you?’ Nathan wrote.

“That’s good,” Marilyn commented. “Get him to say it. Might be the first time he’s admitted to loving anyone.” Nathan nodded. They waited.

‘Love? What is love? Only weak, pathetic people love. I don’t want any part of love. I want power. Love doesn’t give me power. Hate does.’

Marilyn gasped. “Oh, shit! We just made it worse.”

“I don’t think so. I think if we stick to a love theme, we might break through eventually.”

“Okay, so what do you want to write next?”

“It’s simple. You know how committed my father was to nonviolence. Remember his favorite quotation? He sometimes used it as a signature on his emails.”

“Oh, yeah. How did that go?”

“When the power of love overcomes the love of power, there will be peace,” Nathan quoted.

“Right! Do you think teenage Leo will even understand what that means?”

“It’s all I can think of trying.” Nathan wrote the phrase on the page and closed the notebook. “I need a break. This is too intense. You want a beer?” Marilyn nodded. Nathan left the study.

When he came back with two beers, he found Marilyn staring at the open journal. She looked visibly shaken. “Read this,” she said. Nathan handed her a beer and then read the page.

‘I’m not looking for peace. I’m looking for power. I don’t have much yet but there’s time. When I get it, people are going to get hurt.’

“Fuck! We’re making it worse.” Nathan exclaimed.

“Yeah. I think this dialogue is a failure.”

“Let’s read on and see what we find.”

What they found startled them. Several months later, after vague entries about guys he hung out with or places his parents made him go with them, Marilyn and Nathan found a remarkable entry. ‘A new girl showed up in homeroom today. She just transferred from somewhere else, but I don’t know where. I couldn’t stop looking at her. If I didn’t know better I would have thought she was Daisy, only not Daisy as a 10-year-old, Daisy as old as me. I’ve got to get to know her.’

“Amazing. This is the first hopeful thing I’ve read,” Marilyn said.

“Let’s hope it’s the start of something that changes him.”

Chapter 5

‘I don’t think she knows I exist,’ Leo’s entry began. ‘She talks to other guys but seems to look right through me.’ Two months had gone by with nothing significant written. Marilyn and Nathan couldn’t see a place they could intervene. It wasn’t clear from Leo’s vague entries what was happening in his life, but there were no threats of violence, or signs of hate, racism, or cruelty. The new girl didn’t have a name yet. If Leo knew what it was, he didn’t write it down.

‘Does the new girl have a name?’ Nathan wrote.

‘Candace Rockman. The guys joke that her dad’s a musician, but nobody knows for sure.’

‘Do you talk to her?’

‘She talks to lots of people but not me. I don’t know why.’

‘I think I might know why,’ Marilyn remarked.

‘Oh?’

‘Maybe his behavior turns her off or even scares her.’

‘We don’t know how he behaves at school or around his friends,’ Nathan reminded her.

‘If he displays any of his anger or hostility openly, it could alienate other kids.’

‘Somehow, I can’t imagine my dad as a teenage hoodlum.’

‘But, maybe he was, Nathan. Maybe that’s what Candace saw.’

‘Or, maybe he ran with a crowd of bad boys. Maybe he wasn’t bad himself.’

‘I know this is hard for you, but we already know he was different then from the man you and I knew. You’ve got to accept that. We’re still learning about who he was-is- really. And, it’s important that we completely understand. A lot is at stake.’

Nathan nodded. ‘So what do we do?’

‘I think we urge him to be more assertive and see what happens. Maybe you could suggest ways he could get her attention, or talk to her. You’re a guy. What worked for you back when you were his age?’

Nathan shrugged. ‘Pretty much nothing. Girls didn’t notice me. I gave up wanting them to. I knew I had nothing to offer them, anyway.’

Marilyn grinned. ‘So you wimped out.’

‘Don’t say it like that.’

‘You wimped out,’ she repeated, still grinning. ‘You gave up. You were lucky I came along.’

‘You were different,’ Nathan reminded her.

‘Why?’

‘Because, if you recall, we had several classes together. And, you were articulate in each of them. Very articulate- to the point that the teachers often wouldn’t call on you because you argued with them.’

‘I was only trying to learn. I learn best by asking questions. I wanted to get my money’s worth. That tuition was costing my parents plenty!’

Nathan taunted her back. ‘I don’t think that was why you asked. I think you wanted to stump them. You enjoyed doing that, didn’t you?’ They both grinned.

‘Well, yeah. But, I wasn’t trying to be mean. And look what it got me.’

‘What?’

“*You*. If you hadn’t followed up on a question I asked in English class that one time we never would have spoken.”

“What was that question? Do you remember?”

“Uh, no. Does it matter?” Marilyn asked.

“I guess it really doesn’t,” Nathan replied. “But, you’ve given me an idea.”

Nathan opened the journal to the last page they read. “What are you gonna do?” Marilyn asked.

“Give him some advice.”

“Do you have any classes with Candace?” Nathan wrote and then closed the journal. He reopened it a moment later. ‘Two, why?’

‘Does she talk in class?’ Nathan asked.

‘Sometimes, why?’

‘Do you?’

‘Never.’

‘Maybe you should. Listen to what she says and then follow up on it. Maybe agree with her, or disagree, but do it carefully. Get her to notice you.’

‘Will it work?’

‘It has before.’

“You’re smarter than you look,” Marilyn joked. “That’s a *good* suggestion.”

“Thanks. Let’s read on and see if it worked.”

‘We met under the bleachers I didn’t know if Candace was going to blow me off or blow my mind. I had taken other girls to the bleachers. Some of them wanted to be there, some didn’t. Some wanted to be with me, some didn’t. Some knew what we were there for, some didn’t. They soon learned. For a few, it was a new experience. Some liked it, and some didn’t. I didn’t care. I always got what I came for.

‘I couldn’t tell what Candace wanted, but I didn’t care. She was with me, and she was unlike any other girl I ever took there. I wanted to be with her more than with anyone else.

‘Candace looked and acted older than she said she was. I didn’t believe her when she told me she was only 14. I’m 15, and I have lots of self-confidence. Some of my friends tell me I come on too strong. Candace didn’t come on strong, but I could tell she was strong. All the other girls I know are weak. Some of them play on their weakness and use it to attract boys, tease them, and then blow them off. I never let them blow me off. I make them follow through whether they want to or not.

‘I didn’t know what Candace wanted, but I wanted to find out. I did.’

“Wow!” Marilyn remarked. “Are you as turned on as I am right now?”

“I don’t know. This is my dad writing this. Do I even want to know what he’s talking about? Do I want to read what he says on the next page about her?”

Nathan’s hesitation surprised Marilyn. “This happened *decades* ago, Nathan. Maybe he changed. Maybe Candace changed him.”

“You might be right. But how?”

“Let’s find out. Turn the page.”

‘I thought I’d fucked enough pussy to know what it was supposed to feel like. I was wrong. I’d only taken pussy before. I had no idea what it would be like when a girl gave me her pussy. But, that’s what Candace did.’

“Maybe we should stop reading for a while,” Nathan said.

Marilyn smirked. "Too much for you to handle? I'm right here if you'd like to take a break." She batted her eyelashes at her husband.

"Down, girl! This is serious. I'm worried about where this is going. Could he be falling in love with her?"

"Wouldn't that be a good thing?"

"Well, she wasn't my mother. So, they must have broken up at some point. It could be okay if *he* caused their eventual breakup, but how would he feel if she caused it?"

Marilyn frowned. "Like he felt when he lost his sister?"

Nathan nodded. "Devastated. Unless he somehow got in touch with his feelings and came to understand himself better."

"I want to read on."

Nathan started walking away. "You can if you want to. I don't." Marilyn watched him leave the room, looked down at the journal, and then closed the notebook. She understood Nathan's reluctance and would wait to read more.

Nathan and Marilyn thought they could deal with Leo's teenage angst, rage, and extreme actions when they started with the journal. Now Marilyn feared they had been wrong. She wasn't sure they could do anything. It was one thing to deal with hardness. It was quite another to deal with softening. That required parenting skills they lacked.

What if Leo fell in love with Candace and began to change? How would the changes she put him through change what Nathan and Marilyn had to help him deal with? Marilyn didn't know. Neither she nor Nathan had any experience helping a teenager navigate volatile emotions.

Nathan shared a thought with Marilyn the next time they opened the journal. She liked his suggestion. On the page under the entry about Candace and the bleachers, Nathan wrote. 'What did you like about her?'

Leo wrote back, 'I didn't fuck her. She fucked me.'

"Every male's fantasy," Marilyn mumbled. Nathan didn't respond. "So, do you think Leo has fallen in love with her?" she asked.

"I don't think he knew that word back then, judging by these journals."

"Strange. The first time I met him I remember him exuding lovingkindness."

"His warmth, kindness, and compassion were the things people mentioned most at his memorial service, remember?"

"Yes, Nathan. Maybe he didn't know what love was when he was fourteen, but he learned about love later on, so much so that for many people he became the embodiment of love."

"Maybe this was where it started," Nathan speculated.

"You don't think it began with his parents?"

"If it did, he never mentioned it. He told stories about my grandparents but never used the word love in those stories. He mentioned discipline, obedience, loyalty, stuff like that."

"Maybe they were hard on him."

"We'll never know, unless he writes about them in the journal."

"Maybe the journal exists *because* of them," Marilyn suggested.

"How do you mean?"

"What if he wrote everything down because they wouldn't listen to him? Maybe as he changed from a child into a teenager he felt unacknowledged, misunderstood, or even ignored?"

“We’ll have to wait and read what he writes about Candace. Maybe he pours out his soul to her.”

“Somehow, I don’t get the impression he wants a soul-mate,” Marilyn commented.

“I don’t know if he knows, at this point, what he wants, or what she is, but he might learn as they go along.”

“*If* they go along. We don’t yet know how long this lasts.”

“You’re right. This might be over before it started.”

“I hope not.”

“So do I. I kind of like Candace. She reminds me of you.”

“Nathan! I never had sex with anyone under the bleachers.”

“I bet you wanted to,” Nathan teased.

Marilyn rolled her eyes to tease him. “Well, there was this *one* guy in middle school.”

“A junior stud?”

“No, he was a sweet, quiet, almost nerdy sort of guy. He was my lab partner, good in science, but also a poet. He had a soul and a sense of isolation and loneliness I never felt in anyone else. I felt sorry for him. I guess I wanted to mother him, but I confused nurturing with sex, just like everything else got confused with sex back then, and I never approached him. I used to fantasize about being alone with him where I knew the other girls went in secret with their boyfriends. They talked about what they did when they were under the bleachers. I wanted to find out what it was like, but he was the only guy I was interested in finding out *with*.”

Her nostalgic confession surprised Nathan. She was sharing something she’d never told him before. He knew about other boyfriends she had before they met, and guys she went out with after they met, but weren’t in love, yet. “Did you?” he asked, gently.

“I spent an entire spring term thinking about him. As the weather got warmer, I kept thinking we ought to get together. Nothing happened. School ended. He was gone in the fall.”

“I’m sorry. Did he have a name?”

“Yes, but I’m not gonna tell you. I’ve never told anyone else.”

“Not even your diary?”

“I didn’t keep a diary back then. That started later.”

“Too bad, I would have liked to read it.”

“It would have been all self-absorbed teenage bullshit.”

“Maybe, but I would have loved to know more about you back then.”

Marilyn looked away from Nathan. He wondered if she was recalling something uncomfortable, perhaps a hurtful memory. “No, sweetie, you wouldn’t.” Nathan sensed hints of regret and secrecy. He thought he knew Marilyn as well as any husband and lover can know his spouse and life-partner. They had always been proud of their open and honest relationship. They were equals and still in love after more than two decades of marriage.

Nathan returned to wondering if Leo had fallen or was about to fall in love with Candace. He knew they would have to read on to find out. He turned the page.

Chapter 6

Leo and Candace were naked in her bedroom one afternoon after school ended early. Her parents were still at work. She had invited Leo to her house for lunch. Thrilled, he accepted. They didn't eat lunch. He never even saw the kitchen.

"You know, you acted like such a tough guy," Candace said. "But, I could see right through you the first time I noticed you."

They stayed in her bedroom the entire afternoon. As far as Leo was concerned, it was the best place not just in her house, on her street, in their city, but in the whole world. He felt so happy naked with Candace that he would have been willing to die there. She wouldn't have let that happen, however. Candace would have done everything in her power to keep him alive so she could be with him.

Candace felt a special high when she and Leo were together, and so did he. They shared their highs as they anticipated seeing each other, when they were together, and after they separated. The highs waxed and waned, but never went away.

"I like you, Leo," Candace whispered. "Because you're different."

"What do you mean?"

"You're not like the other boys I've known. They wanted to fuck me so they could own me."

"Well, I like being with you and I like fucking you, too."

"But, being with me is different than owning me. I'll never let anyone own me. I'll always be independent. I like you because you're independent too."

Leo thought about what she said and didn't answer right away. "I don't know what that means. I've never been any other way but the way I am."

Candace smiled. "You know, neither have I. I guess that's why we fit so well together."

"Um, speaking of fitting so well together..., are you ready to do it again?"

Candace sighed. "I thought you'd never ask."

They did it again. Afterwards, Candace looked at the clock radio on her nightstand. "You have to leave now. My dad will be home soon and I'll get in trouble if they catch me with another boy."

"You've done this before?"

"Well..., yeah. Did you think you were the first? I've been a precocious child all my life. I move fast."

"I can keep up." Leo's confident statement was the sweetest thing any boy had ever said to her. Other boys wanted to slow her down, control her, or own her outright. No one before Leo had accepted Candace as she was.

She felt obliged to obey her parents because they gave her food, clothing, and shelter. However, she submitted to one else. Boys were just boys. She was never fickle or cruel with anyone but moved on when she had gotten all she could from a boy. Candace never looked back. If the boys didn't understand why she left them, it wasn't her problem.

Leo seemed to understand her, and he was better than anything she could have imagined. One day, she asked him why he seemed so different.

"I think it might have something to do with my sister." Leo wasn't certain he was right, but he suspected losing Daisy had somehow changed him.

"You have a sister?"

“Had. She died last year.”

Candace’s face fell. “I’m so sorry, Leo. That must have been awful for you.”

“It was worse than anyone- even you- can imagine, but I got through it.”

“But, what has she got to do with me?”

“Well, the first time I saw you I noticed you looked a little like her, but that’s not why I wanted to get to know you.”

“I look like a lot of girls my age. It’s no big deal.”

It was a big deal for Leo, but he didn’t know why Candace stirred feelings he never knew he had. Leo had no understanding of feelings. If anyone had asked him what he felt he would have replied with a blank expression. Nor did he have the words to explain his attraction to Candace. He liked his new feelings, although he could not name them. The feelings were not hurt and anger, but kindness and trust. He wanted to be with Candace because she made him feel special. It was obvious from what she said that he made her feel the same way.

He did not realize that his little sister had made him feel special. He might have blown up at Daisy, but never resented or hated her. He liked being her big brother, although he didn’t know it. When the accident took her, his role ended and he no longer felt special in a good way but in a bad way. He felt singled out by God for punishment because he had failed to protect his little sister from harm.

Because of Candace, Leo no longer felt like a failure or someone God chose to punish. He felt special again, but differently. Candace didn’t need or want his protection; she made that crystal clear. She wanted to be with him, and that made Leo feel he was no longer alone in the world. That was how he felt after Daisy died. Even though he didn’t know what caring meant, or what he had lost, he had someone new to care for. Furthermore, Candace cared about him.

At first, Leo’s friends teased him about seeing Candace. Then, when he spent more time with her than with them, they nagged him. “You never hang out anymore,” Al whined

“What’s she got that the other bimbos don’t have?” Jack asked.

Leo knew they were trying to provoke him and refused to take the bait. He looked at Jack and said, “The others *were* bimbos. She’s not.” Leo walked away and left Jack and Al feeling bewildered.

They didn’t like that their friend had changed because of a girl. Leo always seemed like the bad boy in their crowd that would never change. He would always be brash, outrageous, extreme, and sometimes nasty. He provoked the others to emulate him. Some did, with some success. The girls they got, however, knew they were settling for second best. They really wanted Leo. A few had Leo but he dropped them. The boys knew how the girls felt, but didn’t care, as long as they got what they wanted from them. They did.

Now Leo was staying with one girl longer than he ever had before and no one could figure out why. Leo didn’t care whether his friends understood him. Candace did, and that was all that mattered.

When Leo awoke that morning, he had no inkling it was going to be one of the worst days of his young life. More shocking than the day Daisy went to the hospital; darker and more devastating than the day she died.

“Can you meet me under the bleachers after homeroom?” Candace asked when she hurried to his locker before the start of the school day. Leo assumed she woke up horny and needed early sex. He felt delighted. They just did it yesterday, but he wasn’t about to complain.

“I need to talk to you. It’s urgent,” Candace added. That changed Leo’s anticipation from excitement to apprehension. Maybe she didn’t need sex, maybe she had to tell him something that happened because of sex. *Oh, shit*, he thought. *Is she pregnant? We were always careful. Well, except for that one time, but that was a couple of months ago.*

Leo felt distracted during homeroom and didn’t greet his friends as they arrived. They wondered what was going on. Al wondered if Leo and Candace fought, maybe even broke up. He hoped they had and that would mean Leo would go back to being the way he used to be. Al missed Leo and wanted his old friend back. Leo didn’t say a word.

He avoided his friends in the hall and snuck out the back door. After making his way to the bleachers, he saw Candace waiting. She didn’t look happy.

“Is something wrong?” Leo asked, trying not to seem alarmed. “Did something happen?”

“Yes,” Candace snapped. She didn’t say anything more.

“Well, what?”

She looked at him, a pained look on her face. “You’re not gonna like it, Leo.”

“Just tell me, please.”

“My mother got a job in California. We’re moving next month.” Candace blurted out the words and then began sobbing. Suddenly, she threw herself into Leo’s arms with such force that he almost fell over backward.

Leo’s face tightened. “No! You will *not* go with them. You’ll stay here or we’ll run away together.” Candace kept sobbing and clutching him tightly. She shook her head. Leo couldn’t believe it. “Wait. You *want* to go?” he asked, shocked and hurt.

Candace shook her head again. “No, *no!* Of course not! But, I have no choice. We have another month together. That’s all.” Leo heard the tone of finality in her voice but couldn’t accept what she was saying.

“I’m serious about running away,” he protested.

“Where would we go? We’re high school kids. The world is way bigger than high school. We both know that. We’d never survive.”

“I’ll get a job. You’ll get a job. We’ll find a place to live. We can do it!”

“No, we can’t! We won’t. I won’t let you ruin your life for me.”

“But, I *won’t* be ruining it! I’ll be saving you, and us.”

Candace looked at him. She wanted to believe they could do it even though she knew they couldn’t, not in a million years. “How long do you think we would be an *us*, Leo, before we realized we had done an awfully stupid thing?”

“Please, Candace. I can’t lose you. You’re all I have in the world.”

“Our world is changing, Leo. I wish it wasn’t, just like you. But, we can’t do anything about it. We have a month, that’s all. Let’s make the best of it.”

Leo nodded. He knew she was right but refused to accept what was happening. He had lost his little sister because he hadn’t fought to save her. If there were a way to stay with Candace, he would fight to do it.

It was not a happy month. Leo and Candace were alternately morose and passionate. They made love whenever they could and then clung to each other afterward as if trying to

impress each other's body shape permanently in their brains. Leo ignored his friends, his schoolwork, and his parents. He was sullen at home but never let on what was happening.

When he and Candace were apart, he tried to figure out ways they could remain together permanently. Leo was smart, smarter than he knew, but he couldn't figure out how to stop the onrushing train that would separate them forever. *Being a teenager sucks! Why couldn't we have met when we were older and had more power over our own lives?* Leo assumed his parents wouldn't understand or would dismiss his anguish as puppy love and try to convince him it would pass.

He knew Candace would go away, but felt certain his feelings would never change. That was when Leo realized he had feelings. Soon after, Candace was gone and he was alone again. He refused to write his feelings down. That would make losing her too real. Leo didn't know if he would survive the loss, nor if he wanted to.

Chapter 7

Nathan turned the page.

He read the short entry and then shook his head. It was ugly.

“Look at the date,” Marilyn said. Nathan looked. “It’s almost a year later.”

“What do you suppose happened?”

Nathan didn’t reply. Instead, he reread the entry. ‘The guys told me no one could get into Valerie’s panties, but I did. And, I kept her panties to prove it. Getting her drunk was the key. She pretended to be shy, but I knew she wanted it. They all want it, only some don’t know it. She wasn’t bad, but I’ve had better.’

“Where’s Candace?” Marilyn asked.

“I guess it didn’t work out.”

“Poor guy. I’d hoped she would be different, maybe change him.”

Nathan turned the page again. “Looks like he hasn’t changed at all. I guess it’s up to us.”

‘Al was right about joyriding. It was almost as much fun as screwing. I don’t know what excited me more- stealing the car or driving around looking for pussy.’

Marilyn frowned. “So now he’s become a criminal? Shit! This is getting worse.”

“He never told me any of this.”

“He wouldn’t have mentioned it when you were a teenager,” Marilyn reminded him.

“But, he might have *later*, when we had those occasional father-son chats. Usually when we’d had too many beers and the football game sucked.”

“I didn’t know you guys did that.”

“Yeah. I liked it when he told me stories about growing up.”

“Anything juicy?”

“Maybe, but I can’t remember.” Marilyn looked at her husband and thought about how learning details about her father-in-law’s past provided an opening to learn new things about Nathan. She had been unaware that he hadn’t told her everything about himself. They talked easily enough and had heart-to-heart talks from time-to-time. She wondered if he deliberately held things back or merely forgot to mention them. *But, he’s not the immediate problem*, she reminded herself. *Leo is, and he’s going to get in serious trouble unless we do something.*

“I think we should challenge him about doing illegal stuff. Maybe we can make him change,” Marilyn suggested.

“Good idea. What should I write?”

“How about, ‘Stealing cars can get you serious jail time and a record that will haunt you for the rest of your life.’”

Nathan wrote the warning and closed the journal. They waited. Neither knew how long it would take Leo to respond. It seemed different every time. It could happen instantaneously or take a few minutes. Did their messages travel back through time somehow and then appear in Leo’s journal? Did Leo’s replies travel forward in time and appear on the pages of the journal they were reading? Nathan and Marilyn didn’t want to think about how it worked; it just did.

‘That’s what makes it fun,’ Leo replied. ‘But, I can get out of trouble. I’ve done it before. It’s easy if you know how.’

‘But what about the other boys? They might not be so lucky.’

‘They’re either in or out. It’s their choice. Rick’s already dropped out. I still talk to him, but we don’t tell him what we’re doing anymore. His loss. We’re having fun. Stealing is a high better than sex. Rick doesn’t want that high, but I do.’

“I don’t like this talk of highs. You don’t think he’s into drugs, do you?” Marilyn asked.

“Probably cigarettes, at least. Other recreational drugs didn’t become popular until he was in college. But, there was always alcohol. It was pretty common back then.”

“Damn. I don’t like this. It’s getting harder to see how we can help him.”

“I don’t know what will happen to him if we just stop.”

“You’re right, Nathan, but he might need more help than either of us knows how to give.”

“C’mon, we’re still way ahead of him. We know how he turned out.”

“Yeah, but we don’t know *why* he turned out that way.” Marilyn paused. A sudden thought struck her. Her brow creased in the charming way Nathan first noticed years ago. He waited for her to share her thought. “What if he’s not writing down everything that’s happening in his life? What if it’s only the rebellious stuff?”

“You mean he’s bragging?”

Marilyn nodded. “Yeah.”

“To whom?”

“To *us*. Before we came along, his journal was only for him, remember? Now he knows someone’s reading it.”

“I don’t like being a voyeur.”

“Too late, lover. We’re part of his life now.”

Nathan didn’t like that her comment made him feel scared. “Let’s quit. I need a beer.” Marilyn knew Nathan felt uneasy. This business with the journal was unsettling him.

‘Reggie Wilkerson talked to me again today. There’s something about that kid that bothers me. He’s a nigger but he’s smart, probably the smartest kid in 12th grade. And, he’s nice, too. The teachers all like him, and he’s respectful to them. Also, he picks up on stuff in class. It’s like he’s there not because he has to be but because he wants to be. I don’t get it. Nobody else- white or nigger- wants to be at school all day. Maybe that’s the one thing we all have in common.

‘He seems to like me. He tries to talk to me after class, or if he sees me in the hall, or the lunchroom. I don’t know why. I don’t say much in class. I get everything the teachers tell us, but I don’t let on, and I don’t get excited about stuff. Reggie does.

‘What scares me is that he seems to want to be my friend and I don’t know why. I’m just a white kid. Why doesn’t he stick to his own kind?’

“This is good,” Marilyn commented.

“Yeah. Think we can encourage him?”

“We should try. This could be an opportunity for him to break out of his prejudices and maybe start to grow up.”

Nathan nodded. “Or not. But I’m encouraged. This Reggie kid seems interesting.”

“Leo’s pretty bigoted. Do you think he could ever change enough to be friends with a Black kid?”

“I think we have to assume that he did. We know how he was later. Maybe this is where he changed.”

“But, what should we do? Should we push him?” Marilyn asked.

“Let’s not give him any advice or tell him anything. Let’s just ask him about Reggie. Questions like where he’s from, what classes he’s in with Leo, etc.”

“Good idea. Maybe giving advice or encouragement isn’t the best way to go here.”

Nathan nodded. “That’s what I’m thinking. We thought it would work with Candace but it didn’t.”

“But, we still don’t know why,” Marilyn reminded Nathan.

“Still, let’s not do it again.”

‘Is Reggie new in your school?’ Nathan wrote.

‘I don’t know. I didn’t see him until this year, but he could have been here all along.

All niggers look alike, so I probably just didn’t pay attention.’

“Ouch!” Marilyn said.

‘Maybe you could ask him where he’s from,’ Nathan wrote.

‘He lives a few streets away from where I live. We take the same bus, but we don’t get off at the same bus stop.’

‘Do you talk to him on the bus?’

‘Nobody talks on the bus. It’s noisier than the lunchroom ever gets.’

‘Maybe you could get off at his stop and chat with him and then walk home.’

‘I’ll think about it. But, what would we chat about? I’m not a nigger.’

‘And he’s not a white kid, but you’re both students at the same high school. And you’re both guys. You could find out what guy stuff he likes to do.’

‘You’re not gonna believe this. He likes Broadway musicals, and he wants to be a dancer. I think he might be a faggot.’

“Dear Lord!” Marilyn exclaimed. “Here we go again.”

“Take it easy. We can work with this.”

‘He’s not a faggot. I met his girlfriend. God, she’s gorgeous! Too bad she’s a nigger or I’d try to fuck her.’

‘What’s her name?’

‘Cindy.’

‘Does she go to your school?’

‘No. Girls High. She’s even smarter than Reggie is.’

‘How did you meet her?’

‘I got off the bus at his stop and pretended I just wanted to walk a few extra blocks. He noticed me. She was waiting for him at the bus stop. He introduced me as his friend. She smiled at me and was charming. What a girl!’

“Is this progress?” Marilyn asked.

“Definitely!”

‘How long have they known each other?’ Nathan wrote.

‘Since they were kids. They used to be neighbors until her family moved out of state. Then her family moved back two years ago and they reconnected.’

‘You found out a lot about him.’

‘It was easy. All I had to do was ask.’

‘Did he ask you anything?’

‘Yeah. He asked me if I wanted to come to his house after school one day.’

‘When?’

‘I don’t know if I want to. What will the other guys think?’

‘Do you care what they think?’

‘I don’t want them to think I’m a nigger-lover.’

‘It’s okay to have Black friends.’

‘Black?’

‘Negro.’

‘I don’t know how I feel about it. I guess I’d go if Cindy was there.’

‘Well, ask him.’

‘I can’t ask him. I don’t want him to think I’m more interested in her than him.’

‘You’re afraid of hurting his feelings?’

Marilyn gasped when she read his reply. ‘I guess I am.’

Nathan wrote a new statement, hoping something good was beginning to happen to Leo, finally. ‘Go to his house anyway. You don’t have to tell anyone else.’

‘Yeah.’

“Do you think he’ll do it?” Marilyn asked.

“Yeah. I guess I’m optimistic because I know how he turned out.”

Marilyn frowned. “May I remind you that we still don’t know *why* he turned out that way?”

“I know. But, he did. Something made it happen. Maybe the change begins here.”

Nathan’s optimism turned out to be correct. Leo began to change because of his awkward friendship with Reggie and Cindy. He found out Cindy went to Reggie’s house every day after school because her parents both worked and didn’t want Cindy home alone.

He also discovered that Negro boys treated their girlfriends differently from white boys. Leo would have never thought of being respectful and deferential to any of his girls. They were only good for one thing, and the quickest way for him to get what he wanted was the way he always chose. He rarely talked to these girls, or asked them about themselves, their schools, their friends, or their families. Leo didn’t care about anything except sex.

It seemed Cindy’s sex was the last think Reggie cared about. Leo started to wonder if Reggie even knew she was a knockout. Leo knew, and he found it difficult to stop thinking about her. She was the first girl he thought obsessively about since Candace, who was long gone. However, he didn’t want Cindy the way he had wanted Candace.

Candace and Leo shared a mutual understanding and passion. Leo felt certain Cindy couldn’t desire him. He wouldn’t allow himself to desire her. It wasn’t because she was Black, however. It was because she belonged to Reggie, and he found that he genuinely liked Reggie. Although their skin color was different, Leo felt a kinship with Reggie that baffled him. Despite Leo’s reservations and prejudice, he and Reggie became good friends.

Reggie and Cindy planted the idea of college in Leo’s mind. They never mentioned it specifically to him, but they chatted about school choices, applications, tests, and costs. Leo learned a lot about possibilities he never knew existed. He never thought about what he was going to do when he graduated from high school. He never thought about the future at all, as was obvious in the risks he took when he went joyriding with his hoodlum buddies, risking arrest, criminal records, and perhaps jail time.

Why would any boy in his right mind want more school after he graduated? Leo wondered. *Wouldn’t he just want to be free?* Leo wasn’t sure. He looked at Cindy and Reggie and they seemed freer than he ever dreamed of being. Maybe that was because they dreamed

about having futures. They weren't dreaming about people they were going to seduce, or whose car they were going to steal. They talked about whether they should choose to be doctors, lawyers, business professionals, teachers, or what seemed to Leo to be a myriad of other jobs. Even more surprising, was they didn't talk about these job possibilities as if they were forced to do them. They weren't planning just to get by. They wanted to contribute to society.

Leo found himself challenged by ideas he never encountered before. He began to understand he was part of something bigger than he knew. He recalled the time he wanted to run away with Candace. "The world is way bigger than high school," she had told him. Leo didn't know how she knew that, but she had been right. He began worrying about what would happen to him after high school ended.

One day he mentioned his concern to Reggie. "You know, Leo, it's easier for you."

"What's easier?"

"To get into college."

"Why is that?"

"You're white."

"But, that's not fair!"

"You're right. It isn't. But, it's true. It's even harder for Cindy."

"Why?"

"She's not just Negro, she's a girl."

"But she's so smart- *you're* so smart. I'm just a dummy. I realize that now. You guys deserve the best colleges you can find."

"Well, the schools don't look at it that way. And, you're no dummy, Leo. I'll admit that some of the clowns you hang with are worthless. They won't amount to anything and I feel sorry for them. But, you're smart. You could go places and could be somebody. The sky's the limit."

Thanks to Reggie, Leo was seeing the sky for the first time in his life. He still felt he had limits; his own recklessness and selfishness were at the top of the list. He wanted to argue with Reggie but thought it would be a waste of time. Somehow, Leo knew Reggie was right. He didn't know how he could thank Reggie and Cindy enough for helping him wake up.

Chapter 8

‘I mentioned college at dinner tonight,’ Leo’s journal entry read. ‘My dad laughed. I didn’t know why. Luckily, my mom stepped in and asked me if I was thinking about college. I sort of grunted a yes. My dad looked at me. “No kid of mine is going to waste his time and my money going to college,” he said. “You’re getting a job like I did when I finished high school. You’ll have your own money and can do whatever you want. There’s nothing like the freedom a job gives you. You’ll see.”

‘My mom spoke again. “Dear, it was different back then. Nowadays lots of kids go to college, and they make a lot more money when they go to work.” “No, it’s a waste of money. None of my friends went to college and they’re all doing just fine.” “But it’s a different world for kids today,” mom said. “No, it’s the same world. People only try to make it seem different, but it’s not.” I didn’t want them to argue so I asked to be excused. I’d lost my appetite, anyway.’

‘This is bad but good,’ Marilyn said. ‘He’s starting to think for himself, think about his future, and think about who he is and who he wants to be.’

Nathan grimaced. ‘But, my grandfather is standing in his way.’

‘Do you think he wrote this because he wants our advice?’

‘Maybe, but I don’t know what to tell him. I do see, however, the possible reason he never told me much about my grandfather.’

‘Maybe Leo hated him?’

‘Maybe he did. But, Leo’s more important than my grandfather.’

‘Then we have to think of a way to help him.’

It was the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Leo’s father John was putting in extra time to catch up on work at his office. His mother Lucy was putting around in the kitchen preparing for her big Thanksgiving dinner. In prior years, Matilda the maid would have helped her, but she quit after Daisy died. Matilda never said why and Lucy never looked for a replacement. She’d invited all her family members again this year and wanted to go all out with lavish food and a warm and welcoming house.

Lucy was a short, energetic woman. She had never been a doting mother, but after what happened with Daisy, worried constantly about her son and husband. John was only slightly taller than Lucy was. Although Daisy had been short, Leo had grown taller than both his parents were. They had no idea why.

Lucy finished most of the cleaning and now concentrated on completing the menu and planning her grocery shopping for Monday’s trip to the supermarket. She would need Leo’s help unloading the car. She reminded herself to tell him to come home straight from school.

The doorbell rang. *Who can that be?* Lucy wondered. She was not expecting anyone. Leo was upstairs in his room. His friends rarely dropped by unannounced. She hoped it wasn’t someone with bad news. Lucy tended to assume unexpected visitors were all of the darker rather than pleasanter kind. This time she was right, but not in the way she would have anticipated.

She peeked out of the small window in the heavy front door and saw a Negro girl. *What does she want?* Lucy wondered. *Some charity? I don’t give money to people who just come to the front door, especially colored people.*

“What do you want?” Lucy yelled through the door.

“Mrs. Cummins? Is Leo home?”

“Yes he’s here. Why?”

“I’m his friend. I have something for him.” *Leo is friends with a nigger girl? I had no idea. I didn’t know he was friendly with any girls.*

“Um, what is it?”

“Some papers.”

“Something for school?”

Cindy thought for a moment and then replied. “Yes, sort of. Can I talk to him?”

“Okay. Wait here.”

“Couldn’t I come in, please? It’s chilly out here and I didn’t wear my winter coat.”

Not my problem, Lucy thought. “Wait a minute.” She walked away from the door, went to the bottom of the row house steps, and called Leo’s name. He heard her call through his closed bedroom door. He got up from his bed, opened the door, and asked what she wanted. “Some girl wants to talk to you. She’s outside.”

“Oh, thanks, Mom. Could you let her in?”

“I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?”

“She’s a nigger,” Lucy whispered loudly.

Must be Cindy, Leo thought. I wonder what she wants. He hadn’t seen Cindy for two weeks, although he saw Reggie at school almost every day. *Maybe Cindy missed me,* he thought, and suddenly felt pleased. *Wouldn’t that be something?*

Leo hurried down the steps, opened the front door and smiled. “Sorry to keep you waiting. Come on in.” Cindy walked in carrying a fat manila envelope. Lucy stood in the doorway between the living room and dining room and watched the girl enter her just-cleaned white house. She was not feeling receptive.

“Oh, Mom. This is my friend Cindy. She’s Reggie’s girlfriend.” *Who’s Reggie?* Lucy wondered. She nodded at Cindy, who greeted her with an enthusiastic hello.

“Nice house,” Cindy commented. “Cozy on a brisk fall day like this.”

Lucy watched her son and the Negro girl. *What’s he gonna do now?* she wondered. *I hope he doesn’t ask her to sit down. I just cleaned this place for Thanksgiving.*

“Sit down, Cindy. Let me take your coat, first.” *No!* Lucy thought. *Don’t keep her here any longer than necessary. Get rid of her!* Leo noticed the brown envelope. “So what brings you here? Everything okay with Reggie?”

“Yeah. He’s fine. I missed seeing you these past two weeks. I was wondering how you’re doing.”

They’ve been seeing each other? I don’t think I like this.

“I’ve been busy after school. Didn’t Reggie tell you? It’s a project I’m working on in science class.”

“He mentioned you were busy but he didn’t give me any details. I hope you’ll be finished soon. I miss seeing you at Reggie’s.”

“It’ll be done this week. What’s in the envelope?”

“Oh, these are for you. A bunch of college applications. Reggie and I collected them over the past year. We thought you might find them useful. They’ll give you some idea what applications look like and explain the process for applying.”

“I haven’t decided where to apply yet,” Leo said. He glanced at his mother to see if she reacted to his statement. Her face remained stony.

“Well, you might not want any of *these* schools, but they’ll give you some ideas, anyway. Reggie and I can help, too, of course.”

“That’s really great. Thanks, Cindy.”

Get rid of her! Lucy seethed.

“Would you like a soda or some lemonade? Have you had lunch?”

NOOOOO!!!!

“A glass of water would be great,” Cindy replied. Leo waited for his mother to turn and go to the kitchen to get the water. She didn’t move.

“Let me get it for you,” Leo said and then hurried past his mother. He felt her hardness as he walked by.

“Thanks,” Cindy said as Leo handed her the tall glass of cool refrigerator water. Lucy watched Cindy raise the glass to her mouth and cringed when her lips touched the rim. She knew she could never use that glass again.

“So what did you two do all day?” John asked at dinner.

“I worked on Thanksgiving,” Lucy replied.

“How’s it going?”

“It’s going to be the best one yet.”

John smiled. “You say that every year and you’re right every year. What about you, Leo?”

“I did homework, mostly. Twelfth grade is a lot harder than I expected.”

“Are you keeping up?”

“Yeah. I just need to put in more time.”

John nodded. “I’m glad you realize that. Some kids your age are out causing trouble instead of doing their schoolwork.”

They ate in silence for a few moments.

“Leo had a visitor today,” Lucy said.

“Oh?” John replied. “Who was it?”

“A girl.”

“Really? She a friend of yours?” Leo nodded guardedly. He thought he knew what was coming next and offered no details.

Lucy put down her fork. “Tell your father about the girl, Leo.”

“Her name is Cindy. She’s my friend Reggie’s girlfriend. He goes to school with me, but Cindy goes to Girls High.”

“Buncha snob kids go there,” John sniped. Leo ignored his comment.

“She’s a nice person. Really smart, like Reggie is.” Leo didn’t add anything else.

“Tell your father what *else* she is,” Lucy prompted.

“What do you mean?” John asked. Leo said nothing.

“She’s a nigger,” Lucy said.

“A *what*?” John asked.

Leo felt he had to apologize. “I didn’t know she was coming by.”

“She came to give him an envelope of college applications.”

“Oh? I thought we settled that.” Leo kept eating silently. “Didn’t we?” Leo didn’t reply. “I thought about what you might do after high school and came up with a much better idea than college. It’s something that won’t cost me a dime and will do you a world of good.”

“Did you line up a job for Leo?” Lucy asked, cheerfully.

John shook his head. He waited for one of them to ask him what he meant. Leo and Lucy remained silent. John put down his fork and looked at his son. That was what he did whenever they discussed something important at dinner. He wanted his wife and son to acknowledge his superior knowledge and authority. Father knew what was best, always. John waited for Leo to look at him but Leo didn’t want to hear what was coming next. Lucy didn’t want an argument to erupt at their dinner table and perhaps carry over into Thanksgiving, only days away.

Lucy finally asked, in a sweet voice, “What do you mean, dear?”

“The Army.”

Leo tried not to look shocked. John took advantage of Leo’s stoic demeanor to continue. “I thought about it after you mentioned college. It’s a much better choice for you. There’s lots of things you can learn in the army. You might even like it and want to stay in. I didn’t stay in because I was exhausted at the end of World War Two, but I’m sorry I didn’t. It could have been a good career.”

To Leo, military service wasn’t a career. It was not much different from a death sentence. He wasn’t fatalistic. He didn’t feel that he was likely be killed. However, he felt his life would end if he surrendered his freedom. The army was a living death and he wanted no part of it.

John waited for his son to respond. Leo kept chewing slowly. Any answer other than yes was the wrong answer for John and Leo knew it. He also knew his father awaited a reply. The easiest choice was to lie. “I’ll look into it,” Leo said.

“See that you do. And report back to me,” John ordered. Leo knew he would do neither. He also knew this wasn’t over.

He went to his room after dinner and opened the large envelope. The college applications didn’t look difficult to fill out. Cindy and Reggie had included some information on different colleges they had looked at. Some mentioned general facts about the schools and others described the programs they offered. Leo realized he knew almost nothing about how colleges worked, what classes they gave, and how students experienced them. They weren’t the same as high school. That seemed clear. But, what were they like?

Leo wondered if any of his friends had older siblings that went to college. Maybe he could ask around. He could pretend he was asking for a friend so none of his buddies would think he was interested.

His friends knew Leo was clever. He often led their little group. They assumed he was savvy enough to realize all schooling was worthless and not want to do anything after he graduated except celebrate his freedom.

Nobody looked ahead to life after high school. They had started kindergarten as innocent babes. Their desire to escape the confined life they had led for thirteen years blinded them. None of them understood they were still babes unprepared for entrance into the adult world looming in their near future. There was no way to escape it. They thought of school as a prison. They had no clue that adulthood was even more confining than high school ever was. They were freer now than they might ever be again.

Maybe they don't see it, Leo thought, but I do. Leo felt scared for the first time in his teenage life. It wasn't merely because he was considering college while his father was pushing him to go into the army. He would fight that battle later. He was going to have to grow up, and had no idea how to do it. Leo didn't like feeling as if he didn't know what to do.

Chapter 9

Leo's journal entry stunned Marilyn and Nathan. 'I need your help,' it read. 'Anything,' Nathan wrote back.

'It's my father. He's got this bug up his ass that I have to go in the army after graduation. That's the last thing I want to do.'

'What's the first?'

'College. But he won't pay.'

'I'd send you money if I could, but that's impossible.'

'I can get the money. Robbery isn't so difficult if you plan it carefully.'

'NO! Don't take the risk. There must be another way to get money.'

'Okay, tell me what it is.'

'Get a job.'

'I'm a high-school kid. Nobody hires high school kids.'

'You're wrong. High school kids get jobs all the time.'

'Where?'

'Let me look into it.'

"We need to do some serious research," Nathan said. "We need to find out what kinds of jobs kids Leo's age got after high school. He got a decent education and graduated before the public schools started to decline."

"And he's smart. Really smart, although he doesn't believe it yet," Marilyn commented.

"Right. But intelligence by itself won't get anyone a job."

Marilyn nodded. "Speaking of intelligence. We're not using ours."

"What do you mean?"

"Leo's journal might tell us what job he got. We just need to keep reading."

That's what they did. Leo didn't mention his father again in entries from the winter or early spring. Nor did he mention joyriding with his friends or having sex with vulnerable girls. Marilyn commented that the girls might be getting smarter. "Maybe it's Leo who's getting smarter," Nathan replied. He didn't explain what he meant.

Leo's journal mentioned Reggie and Cindy a few times. 'Cindy got into a school called Howard, and Reggie's going to a college called Cheney. He'll only be an hour from home. I'm happy for them, but sad too. They won't be together anymore. I know what it's like to lose someone close. I don't know how it will affect them. And, I won't be seeing either of them regularly. They've somehow become my closest friends. I still hang out with Al, Dave, Rick, Steve, and the others. But, it's different now. Everybody knows it all will end soon and nobody knows what will happen next. We don't talk about it, but we should, I think. Maybe we can help each other get through it.'

"That's the Leo *I* knew," Marilyn commented. "He always wanted to help people."

"This must be where it began. But, there's still no mention of a job."

"Read on. He hasn't graduated yet."

Leo didn't want to go to the graduation ceremony. He felt it would be a waste of time. "Just hand me the diploma and let me out of this fuckin' place," he told his friends. Everyone laughed and agreed.

His parents wouldn't hear of it. Graduation was a big deal. "You'll regret not going," his mother told him. The only thing Leo regretted about high school was that he had to spend four years there. The sooner it was over, the better.

Reggie received one of the top academic awards. The principal also announced he'd received a full scholarship to Cheney. Leo and his friends didn't even know what a scholarship was. Leo congratulated Reggie anyway.

Leo was not feeling happy for himself or his other friends, however. He knew the struggle to control his future was about to begin in earnest. His father hadn't mentioned the army since Thanksgiving but Leo didn't think John had changed his mind. Leo wasn't eighteen yet. The military couldn't draft him, but he could volunteer with his parents' permission.

Nathan and Marilyn read the journal carefully. Leo's harshness was gone. Worry and apprehension dominated his entries. They were mostly about small stuff- beers with the boys, visiting Cindy and Reggie occasionally, a couple of girls he knew but didn't brag about having sex with. "Do you suppose he actually *talked* to them?" Marilyn asked. "Wouldn't that be a switch?"

Nathan bristled at her implied criticism of Leo. "He's still just a kid, Marilyn. Think where he was when we started reading and how far he's come. Give him a break!"

"Sorry..., I didn't mean to criticize your dad."

Nathan nodded. "I know. I just feel he's become vulnerable now and I don't know what's gonna happen to him."

"You preferred him when he was that obnoxious kid?"

"*Prefer*? No. But, I thought he had some kind of strength. I see him getting weaker now."

"Your father was never weak. Even when his illness took him past the point when he knew he wasn't going to recover and was facing death, he *still* didn't seem weak. And, he didn't become afraid either. He maintained an inner strength."

"Yeah, inner strength. I guess that's better than outer strength, isn't it?"

Marilyn's face took on that determined expression Nathan admired. "It's our job to help him through this, Nathan. He has *us*. We're his strength now."

Nathan nodded. "But, we've found nothing. We're reading into the summer after he graduated and there's no mention of a job, or the army, or his father. Just his friends, some music he listens to, and a couple movies he's seen."

"So what does he do all day?" Marilyn asked. Nathan shrugged.

"Reggie and I are going to the movies tonight. We don't have much time left before we head off to our colleges, so it's really important," Cindy explained on the telephone. "But, my cousin Savannah is staying with me while her parents are away. I don't want to leave her alone. Would you consider going out with us? Sort of a double date?"

Leo didn't hesitate. "Of course. Anything for you guys."

"Great. My dad's letting us use the car. We'll pick you up at seven."

"Um, don't pick me up. I'll walk over to Reggie's house."

"Okay. See you at seven. Thanks, Leo. You're a real friend for doing this."

Leo didn't think he would have a problem being with a Black girl. His friendship with Cindy and Reggie was worth the sacrifice. There were Negro girls in high school. Leo didn't notice most of them. Cindy was the most beautiful one he'd ever seen. Compared to her, he expected her cousin to be bland, homely, and dull. He was wrong about all three assumptions.

"This is my cousin, Savannah," Cindy said. Leo looked at Savannah and his heart thumped louder. She was even lovelier than Cindy was. Leo immediately assumed she must have many boyfriends. The colored kids in high school always seemed more open about sex than the white kids were. Leo wondered why Savannah couldn't get a date for tonight but felt glad she hadn't.

The girls chose a movie theater. Reggie and Leo agreed eagerly. Reggie drove Cindy's father's car. Savannah sat in the back with Leo. They left a large space in the middle of the seat and looked out the windows as they rode. Leo didn't think anything of it. It seemed obvious he and Savannah were there only as a favor to Reggie and Cindy. They both felt okay with that.

Leo assumed Reggie looked forward to being alone in the dark theater with Cindy. Leo also assumed he and Savannah would watch the movie, eat popcorn, maybe share a soda, and that would be all that happened.

That wasn't all that happened.

Leo's life changed.

They watched a short travelogue about a trip to the Far East. Savannah sighed at the end and muttered something about how beautiful everything was. "I'd love to go there," she whispered, but not to anyone in particular.

"Keep dreamin' girl," Cindy whispered back.

They laughed through several cartoons. Leo felt pleased that he and Savannah laughed at the same gags and started to feel more comfortable with her. Then he settled in to watch as the studio logo and theme started playing as the first feature began.

Leo stopped paying attention to the movie the second he felt Savannah's hand on his leg. Keeping his eyes on the screen, he reached down and covered her hand with his. She squeezed his leg. He squeezed her hand. Leo wondered what was going to happen next. Savannah already knew, but she was in no hurry to reveal it.

They returned to the car when the show let out. Savannah and Leo sat in the back again. He sat behind Cindy in the front passenger seat. Savannah started by the driver's side but then eased over toward Leo as Reggie drove.

"You guys want some ice cream?" Reggie asked, interrupting Leo's anticipation of what Cindy might be about to do.

"Sure," Cindy replied. She turned to ask Savannah if it was okay with her and noticed where she was on the seat.

"Um, yeah. That would be nice," Savannah said, sliding back toward her door.

They stopped at the Howard Johnson's Reggie's father liked. After locking the car, they went inside the ice cream store. Cindy and Reggie stood next to each other in the short line. Leo and Savannah waited behind them.

An older white man leaving with his wife noticed where Leo stood. He sneered as he passed them. "Some white kids got no sense." Leo ignored him. Soon, it was their turn and they ordered. The girl behind the counter didn't seem to notice Savannah was Negro and Leo was white. It probably made no difference to her. All she cared about was what flavors they wanted and how many scoops.

Back in the car, Cindy cautioned them to be careful of her father's upholstery. She had taken extra napkins and insisted everyone have several ready in case of an accident. No one did. They enjoyed their cones and chatted about the movies. Savannah asked Leo several times if he'd like to sample the flavor she ordered. She called it rum raisin. He'd never heard of it and didn't want to try it, but also didn't want to appear unfriendly.

"Maybe later," Savannah said. Leo wondered when later would come.

It came sooner than he expected. Reggie finished first and started the car. After he carefully backed out of the parking spot, they headed home. Cindy finished her cone and turned on the radio. A familiar rock'n'roll song was playing. Cindy turned up the volume and the song filled the car.

Savannah edged closer to Leo as the car moved. She wanted him to watch her lick the last of her ice cream. It was dark in the back seat but he was close enough to see her tongue and lips. "Oh, my," she whispered. "I finished it and you never got a chance to try it. I'm *so* sorry."

"It's okay. I've still got mine."

"But, mine was *special*," Savannah murmured.

"I'm glad you liked it."

"I'd really like you to taste a little."

"But..., it's all gone."

"There's just a tiny bit left... here." Savannah leaned toward Leo and mashed her ice-cream-coated lips on his. "How's that taste? Great, right?" Leo tasted the sweetness and felt the softness of her lips. She pulled back. "You can lick it *all*, if you want." He pulled her mouth toward his again. She knew Reggie and Cindy wouldn't hear them over the loud song playing on the radio.

Leo licked and Rum raisin became his new favorite ice cream flavor. Savannah wiped his mouth with a napkin when he finished licking her, and then kissed him hard again. Leo kissed her back. He knew something had happened between them, but felt unsure what it was. Normally, once girl kissed him, Leo's next move would be to reach under her dress. He didn't want to reach under Savannah's dress and took her hand instead. They rode the rest of the way to Reggie's house listening to the radio.

"Cindy told me you're looking for a college," Savannah said on the phone. She had Reggie call Leo and then got on after Lucy called Leo from his bedroom.

"Not *looking*, exactly. It seems out of the question. They all seem too expensive."

"Have you considered community college?"

"What's that?"

"It's downtown. I've been there full-time for a year. It might be just what you're looking for. It's cheap, too."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, at most schools, the student's family pays for all or most of the tuition. It's not that way in community college. I only pay one-third. It's only a few hundred dollars a semester. And, you can get financial aid. Sometimes they'll even give you a job there so you can earn money, too. That's what I'm doing."

"I probably don't have the grades to get in."

“That’s the other thing. You don’t need special grades to get in. You just need a high school diploma. You have *that*, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you should check it out. Why don’t you meet me there one day this week and I’ll show you around.”

Leo would have gone anywhere to see Savannah again. “Where is it?” She gave him the address. He knew how to ride the subway downtown and thought he could easily find the college building. They agreed on a time. Leo felt thrilled he would have the opportunity to be alone with Savannah again.

He walked in the front door and saw Savannah waiting near the information desk. She wasn’t alone. Five other people stood near her. She smiled when she saw Leo. “You made it! I’m glad to see you again.” Leo smiled but didn’t reply.

“Okay people, we can begin the tour. If you’ll follow me, we’ll start at the Admissions Office.” As they crossed the huge lobby, Savannah explained what the Admissions Office was. “When you apply here these are the first people you’ll have contact with. They’re very nice and they’ll bend over backward to help you, so don’t fail to ask for whatever you need.”

The tour group went through a small gate next to a counter. A row of offices opened off the space behind the counter. “That’s the Director of Admission’s office. Next is the Financial Aid Office. Many students get financial aid. Those other desks are for their staff. They’re all cool people. They helped me a lot when I applied.” She walked down a corridor past a couple of office doorways, up a short flight of steps, and into another large space lined with desks.

“These here are people who work for the Registrar. You’ll deal with the Admissions Office only once when you’re trying to get in, but you’ll deal with the Registrar’s Office the entire time you’re here. They do everything from making the schedule of classes to keeping your permanent record. I’ll show you the Records Office in a moment. You can say hello if you want to. They don’t bite.”

Savannah moved on. She turned a corner and another office door stood open. Beyond the doorway were desks and huge filing cabinets. “This is the Records Office. Every class you take is recorded on your permanent record and this is where they’re kept. Those huge filing cabinets are fireproof. Once you graduate, this is likely to be the office you’ll deal with the most because you’ll want your transcript for other colleges, or jobs. Now, follow me.”

Savannah turned a corner and paused in front of an office door. “This is where the Dean of Students works. Usually, he comes out and says hello but he’s somewhere else today.” Savannah continued down a short corridor into another open space filled with desks. “These good people are the ones who do the grunt work. They get you your classes, keep track of everything that happens during the semester, and collect your grades at the end so they can go on your permanent record.”

Savannah conducted the small group out a back door to the large lobby. She stopped and turned. “Any questions so far?” she asked. No one spoke. “How about you, Leo? Any questions?” The only question Leo had was when he was going to be alone with Savannah. He hadn’t come expecting to be part of a campus tour group.

Leo shook his head.

“No? Okay, let’s head to the Counseling Center.” They passed an elevator bank, went through a doorway, and ascended one floor to the mezzanine. Savannah explained what the

Counseling Center did. "They're here to help you... with *anything*. Don't hesitate to talk to them."

The balance of the tour featured classrooms, labs, and the massive mainframe computer on the third floor that served the entire college. Most people on the little tour didn't know what a computer was and didn't care. Savannah didn't try to explain. She didn't know what it was, either.

The tour ended back in the lobby outside the library. Its walls were glass. People saw the shelves of books, microfilm machines, the circulation desk, and the card catalog. Everyone seemed impressed.

"Any questions?" Savannah asked. "Okay. I suggest you go over to the counter outside Admissions and ask for an application right now before you forget. You can fill it out here or take it home and send it in, but do it soon. Classes fill up fast. This is a popular college. It may look like a high school, but it's not. It will challenge you in ways high school never did. Believe me." Savannah said no more. She looked at Leo. The other tour-goers drifted toward the Admissions desk. Savannah sighed.

"You're good," Leo said.

"Thanks. I've done this a bunch of times. It's my work-study job."

Leo grinned. "So, where do *I* start?" Savannah heard a playful tone in his voice.

"Weren't you listening?" she asked, smiling. "Over there." She pointed to the Admissions Office.

"I know where that office is. Where's *yours*?"

"Oh, you mean my *private* office?" Leo nodded. "I have several. We have to take the elevator." They rode up seven floors. Passing several classrooms, Savannah led Leo to a corner study lounge. It was empty. "This is one of them," she said. Savannah directed Leo behind a partition that blocked the view from the corridor. When they were out of sight, she pulled him close. "I haven't been eating ice cream today," she whispered.

"That's okay. I wasn't hungry for ice cream, anyway." Leo kissed her. She kissed him back for a moment and then pushed him away.

"So, are you interested?" Savannah asked Leo.

"In college or you?"

"Both."

"Yeah."

That was the start of Leo's fascination with higher education and his infatuation with Savannah. Both worked out better than he ever expected.

Chapter 10

Lucy looked down at the financial aid form. She didn't seem to understand why Leo had shown it to her. "Dad won't have to pay a dime. All you have to do is fill out this form so I can get financial aid. I think I'll qualify and my tuition will be covered. And the college will give me a job so I can cover my travel and other expenses," he explained.

"That's really all you need?" Lucy asked. Leo nodded. "I don't think your father's going to feel comfortable with me telling these strangers how much money he makes."

"Please, Mom," Leo pleaded. "Give me a chance. It's what I want, and I've already gone to all this trouble."

"But, what about what your father wants? What about *my* trouble? He's not gonna be happy about this. You know that, right?" Lucy tried not to sound as if she was pleading with her son. She was proud of him for taking the initiative but also felt apprehensive about what her husband would do when he found out his son and wife conspired to defy him.

Savannah had helped Leo prepare an argument. It was time to use it. "If I join the army like dad wants, I could be sent to Vietnam. If I go to college, I will get a student deferment and the army can't draft me." He didn't like using this argument but he knew he had to. Lucy recalled when her little boy played war in the backyard with his friends. She thought it was cute then. It terrified her now.

Leo saw his mother's hesitation and thought she needed more convincing. "Things are getting worse over there, and, well..., I don't know if I'd come back alive."

Lucy sighed. She got Leo's point. If it meant she could keep her son alive, she'd somehow endure John's wrath. "I'll do it."

"Thanks, Mom." Neither said 'I love you' at the end of their conversation, although it was the closest they had come to feeling a mother-son bond in a long time.

Lucy felt she'd lost touch with Leo over the years. She knew it was natural for children to grow up and find their way into adulthood, but wished that hadn't happened and still saw Leo as her precious baby boy. Then she realized that, although he was no longer her baby, he was still precious. She had to defy his father and do what Leo asked if only because it would keep him safe. Lucy would figure out how to explain it to John when he found out. She hoped that wouldn't happen for a long time.

'College isn't what I expected, although having Savannah there every day helps a lot.'

"Wait, he's now in college? And, who's Savannah?" Marilyn asked.

Nathan felt as surprised as Marilyn was. Leo hadn't written much for several months and they didn't know what was happening in his life. "I don't know the answer to either question. Do you think we should ask?"

"Why not? He might enjoy sharing positive stuff for a change."

'What college?' Nathan wrote.

'Community College.'

'What community college?'

'Philadelphia, of course.'

'Right,' Nathan said. "He's lived in the suburbs for so long I forgot he grew up in the city."

“Where in the city?”

“Germantown.”

“Never heard of it,” Marilyn said.

“Back then, Philly was a big city made up of many small towns. Each has its own unique identity. Kids Leo’s age didn’t venture out of their neighborhoods much. That’s how isolated they were,” Nathan explained.

‘Where is community college?’ he wrote.

‘Downtown on 11th St. I go every day.’

“I guess he’s ventured outside his neighborhood, finally,” Marilyn commented.

Nathan nodded. “That’s good. But, who’s Savannah?”

“I’m almost afraid to ask, given how he’s been with other girls.”

“Do you think he’s changed?”

“Dare we hope?” Nathan replied.

“He had to start changing sometime. Maybe it’s finally happening. Don’t you want to know?”

“I do but I don’t want to be disappointed. What if she’s just another girl he’s taking advantage of?”

Savannah wouldn’t allow Leo to take advantage of her. She and Leo kissed when they greeted each other and held hands when they walked together. They spent time on the sofas in the corner lounges on each floor of the large campus building. When they were alone, they kissed more deeply and felt each other up. They also talked about themselves. In a way, that was Leo’s favorite thing they did.

Before Candace, girls had been no more than sex objects. Leo hadn’t cared who they were, only about what they had between their legs. He cared about what was between Savannah’s legs but had not yet touched her there. She stopped him once when he tried and made it clear that place was off-limits. Leo didn’t see her rejection as a challenge and decided he wouldn’t try to cross that frontier again. He recalled what he learned from Candace- that sex was different when a girl gave herself to him instead of when he took it from her.

‘Who is Savannah?’ Nathan wrote.

‘She’s my friend. She got me into college. I hang out with her there, too. We don’t have any classes together because she’s a year ahead of me, but that’s okay.’

‘She sounds nice.’

‘She is. Really nice. I never met anybody like her.’

‘Tell me about her.’

‘She’s Reggie’s girlfriend Cindy’s cousin.’

Nathan gasped. “Wait! She’s Black?”

Marilyn felt as shocked as he was. “Likely she is.”

‘How did you meet her?’ Nathan wrote.

‘On a double date last summer. We hit it off right away. She was already at Community College. I went there for a tour and liked it. I liked her, too, and could tell she liked me.’

“I wonder *how* he could tell?” Marilyn asked. She knew women could signal like or dislike in many different ways, but it seemed Leo couldn’t communicate anything more with girls than raw lust.

“Do you think I should ask? It might be too personal. I don’t want him to think we’re prying.”

“No. Don’t ask yet. Let’s see if he keeps mentioning her.

‘My cousin Maryanne saw me today. I was crossing the lobby on my way to the library. Savannah stopped and kissed me before she went to do her next tour. I spotted Maryanne waiting at the Information Desk when it was too late. I know she saw us kiss. She turned away without saying anything. I know she’s going to tell her mom and dad. My life at home is probably over.

‘It was weird at dinner tonight. I kept waiting for mom or dad to say something but nobody did. I excused myself and went to my room. I’m scared.’

If his father discovered Leo was dating a Negro girl, it could have been the end of Leo living at home and maybe the end of his life. Leo came to the dinner table every night wondering if it would be his last meal with his parents. Nothing happened. He didn’t see Maryanne at school again.

‘Dad found out today. I knew he would, eventually. Luckily, he only found out about college, and not about Savannah.

‘My preregistration letter came in the mail and he asked me what it was. He wasn’t happy but didn’t yell. I think it was because mom calmly took my side.’

John was livid. “I can’t believe my son and wife defied me instead of obeying me!”

Leo tried to remain calm. “I thought you’d be impressed,” he explained. “I haven’t asked you for anything. I like college. It’s way better than high school. And I’m doing okay so far.”

“Is this college going to teach you how to get a job?” John demanded.

“I already have a job. I work there between classes. They pay me. It’s how I pay for my lunches and the subway.”

John wouldn’t have admitted it, but his son’s initiative impressed him. Perhaps his inflexibility about the army forced the boy to start acting more mature and take responsibility for himself.

“Not that kind of a job. A *real* job!”

“It’ll help me figure out what I want to do.”

“And, then what?”

“I’ll take classes to learn how to do what I want.”

“So there’s a job somewhere at the end of all this?” John asked. Leo nodded. “And it’s not costing us anything?” Leo shook his head. “And, it will be a real job?” John glared at his son.

“Yes, dear,” Lucy soothed her husband. “It will be a *real* job. Won’t it, Leo?” Leo nodded warily. John didn’t say anything else. He was not agreeing to what his wife and son had done and accepted their defiance, for now.

College was only one of Leo’s secrets. Savannah was the other. He knew what would happen if his father discovered he spent time with a Negro girl. John would disown Leo.

Lucy might agree. No matter how precious her son was to her, there were things white boys just shouldn't do. If she thought of her son touching or being touched by a colored girl, it would have saddened her beyond anything she'd experienced in her life.

Leo wondered how much longer he would be living at home. He still needed to live with his parents. If they threw him out, he had no idea where he could go. He'd never consider breaking off with Savannah. Leo decided to start looking for another place to live. He had no idea where to begin.

"Hi, Leo," a girl whispered in the library one afternoon. Leo looked up and saw his cousin Maryanne. She was short, dark-haired, and had an almost pixie-ish face. They had spent time together as children but no longer knew much about each other.

"Oh, hello," he replied, nervously. "You go here now?"

"Yeah, I started in January."

"You like it?"

Maryanne smiled. "So far. How about you?"

"Yeah. It's not like high school."

"That's for sure!"

"The classes are harder but there's so many different people on campus that you never know who you're going to meet."

Maryanne grimaced. "Speaking of that."

"I know, you saw me- us- when you were here before. Was that for the tour?"

Maryanne nodded. "Your girlfriend was very good. She convinced me this was the right place for me."

"She's not really my girlfriend."

Maryanne looked at Leo. "That's not what she told me."

"You talked to her?"

"Yeah, after the tour. I introduced myself and told her you were my cousin. She seemed happy to meet me."

"She never mentioned it."

"I told her not to."

"Why?"

"Because who you date is none of my business, Leo. This place is different from high school. Everybody there cared about everybody else's business. Rumors were always flying. I hated it much of the time. Here, nobody cares. You can be a completely different person."

Leo couldn't believe what he was hearing. "You really don't care?"

"That's right. She's nice. What's her name?"

"Savannah."

"Pretty name. Tell her I said hello." Maryanne turned to walk away.

"Wait," Leo said. She turned back. "You didn't tell your parents?" Maryanne shook her head. "And you're not going to tell them?" She nodded. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Maybe you can do something for me one day," Maryanne replied. "Gotta go to class. See you around." Leo watched as she hurried away but didn't feel a sense of relief. His fear of what his parents would do if they found out about Savannah remained strong. He had to find a way to leave home. It was the only way he could feel safe.

Savannah grinned. Leo noticed her eyes sparkling the way they did when she became excited. "I thought you'd never ask." He had no idea what she was talking about.

"Um, *ask*?"

Savannah rolled her eyes. She liked surprising Leo. "Me to live with you."

"I, uh, hadn't thought of doing that. I was just talking about finding my own place."

"You don't want to?"

"No, it's a great idea. I just wish I'd thought of it."

"Aren't you glad *I* did?" She kissed him and hurried away to give another tour.

Leo sat wondering what was happening. Had living with him been her aim all along? Was that why she put her hand on his leg in the movie theater? Was it why she kissed him in the car with rum raisin ice cream on her beautiful lips? Did she like him that much? How could she? No other girl except Candace had ever liked him. That fact had never made any difference to him when he was younger and looking only for sex. It meant something now that he was older and sex was not even in the picture.

Leo wondered what Savannah had been looking for. He never thought it could be love. He did not know the word, even though he experienced it with Candace. She had never used the word love, either. It would be a while yet before he learned exactly what it meant. Savannah would show him that, and much more.

He was on the cusp of adulthood. Changes vaster than any he could have anticipated loomed in the months ahead. Leo wasn't ready for all or even most of them, but he would get through and grow in the process. Some of them would be bad; many would be good. Leo didn't know if he felt ready. He also didn't know if how he felt made any difference at all. Stuff was still going to happen.

Chapter 11

‘We found a place. Well, I found it and Savannah said it was okay. We couldn’t look at it together because we knew the landlord wouldn’t rent it to us. We’re painting it and we’ve been to several thrift stores looking for furniture. There’s more used stuff out there than I ever imagined. I thought we’d have to take ugly furniture just because it was cheap, but we found some things we both liked a lot.’

“Wow. He moves fast,” Marilyn said. “This is a big step. Do you think he’s ready?”

“Does it make any difference? This happened decades ago.”

Marilyn looked at her husband. “Yes, but in case you haven’t noticed, your mom’s name was not Savannah and you’re not a biracial child.”

“Shit! You’re right. Did we change something?”

“Not yet. You’re still here.”

“Might not be much longer,” Nathan said, grimly.

Marilyn put her hands on her hips defiantly. “Not if *I* have anything to do with it.”

For the first time, Nathan feared for himself instead of Leo. He liked that Leo seemed to be maturing, but Nathan had no idea who Leo was becoming. He suspected Leo could turn out to be someone vastly different from the father he knew. In his darker moments, Nathan considered ways to sabotage Leo and Savannah’s relationship so Leo could move on and meet Alexandra, Nathan’s mother. That seemed the only way Nathan could guarantee he would stay in the world.

‘I’ve been sneaking my stuff out of my room a little at a time. I take it to school and then to the apartment. Savannah doesn’t have to do that. Her father offered the car and she’s going to move all her stuff at once. I have to get my stuff out before I tell my parents because they’ll never let me come back to get the rest of it. My father will probably disown me. And, I don’t really care.’

‘I’m glad you’re being careful,’ Nathan wrote. ‘I wish I could help you. Good luck.’

Marilyn nodded when she read his message. “You genuinely feel this is for the best?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter what I think. He’s chosen a path. We’ll have to see how it works out.”

“He’s already taken on a lot- defying his father and starting college, dating a Black girl, leaving home and moving in with her. If his parents find out everything that’s going on they’re not gonna just want to disown him, as he fears; they may want to kill him.”

“Don’t joke, Marilyn.”

“I’m not joking. Do you think he can handle all this?”

“He seems to think he can.”

“We need to encourage him, Nathan. Make sure he knows he can count on our support. You made a start, but let’s get more involved.” Nathan had mixed feelings about encouraging Leo and Savannah, but he felt there might be long-term benefits that went beyond what he hoped was only a temporary relationship.

“Okay.”

‘Apartments are expensive. How are you and Savannah paying for it?’ Nathan wrote.

‘We both got jobs outside school. She’s waitressing. I’m working as a courier.’

‘That’s great. You must both be very busy. Do you get time to be together?’

‘Not much. We still see each other at school. And, we take stuff to the apartment. But, we’re always rushed.’

‘What about your schoolwork?’

‘It’s going okay. She’s almost ready to graduate. I’m doing better than I thought I would.’

‘Why is that?’

‘When I met her, she told me I was smarter than I gave myself credit for. I guess she was right.’

‘You’re probably smarter than she even knows. You became a beloved college professor.’

‘Did you have to tell him that? What if he has other plans?’ Marilyn asked.

‘It doesn’t matter. He has to become my father. That’s what my father was, and he was happy.’

‘You’re not gonna tell him about your mother, are you?’

‘I haven’t decided.’

‘Please don’t. Let him have his happiness with Savannah.’

Surprised by her comment, Nathan looked at his wife. ‘Whose side are you on, Marilyn?’

‘His, Nathan. I’ve begun to suspect his life is happening the way it was meant to, and I feel sorry for him because this won’t last.’

Nathan didn’t understand why Marilyn had changed. He wondered if she had started liking and caring about young Leo from the journals. *Maybe she doesn’t care about me as much as I thought she did*, he thought, jealously.

Marilyn sensed his distress. ‘I’m rooting for them, Nathan. But remember this is the 1960s.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Lots of Black and white people dated. Not many got married. There was too much negative social pressure.’

‘So, you think they’re doomed?’

‘Unfortunately, yes. That’s why I want him to know happiness and love *now*. It won’t last, but it will give him a taste of what’s possible when he meets your mother.’

Nathan nodded. As always, his wife’s insight impressed him. ‘I hope you’re right.’

‘You’re *here*, aren’t you? Don’t panic.’

Lucy carried Leo’s laundered underwear and socks into his bedroom. She opened his dresser and noticed there were almost no pairs of socks and only a single t-shirt and pair of shorts in the drawer. *Where is everything?* she wondered. *Did I miss some of Leo’s dirty clothes? What’s he done with them?* She looked to see if he’d left clothes lying around. The room seemed emptier than it usually was. *Where are his records?* Fewer books were on the shelves. *What’s going on?*

Lucy went to Leo’s desk to check the drawers. They were mostly empty except for a notebook she found in the middle drawer. Leo’s name was on it. So was the word PRIVATE. Lucy took it out and opened it. There were pages with dates at the top and a few lines

scrawled below. Lucy could barely read her son's handwriting. *I didn't know my son kept a diary.*

She flipped past the earlier entries in the journal looking for the latest ones. *Maybe they'll tell me what's been going on with Leo.* The final entry shocked her.

'March 2. I've been sneaking my stuff out a little at a time. I take it to school and then to the apartment. Savannah doesn't have to do that. Her father offered her the car and she's going to move all her stuff at once. I have to get my stuff out before I tell my parents because they'll never let me come back to get the rest of it. My father will probably disown me. And, I don't care.'

Lucy nearly fainted. Clutching the journal, she went to Leo's bed and sat down. *He's moving out? How could he do this to me?* Lucy composed herself and got up. She replaced the journal in the drawer and then left Leo's room. He was due home in a few hours and she would confront him. Maybe she could get to the bottom of this before John came home from work. She feared what her husband would do when he found out.

Lucy said nothing to Leo when he returned. He went straight to his room to study. She calmed herself and knocked timidly on his door. Leo told her to come in.

"I put clean underwear in your drawer today."

"Oh, great, Mom. Thanks." His mother never told him when she did laundry and Leo wondered why she was doing it now. "Um, I noticed there wasn't much in your dresser."

"Really?"

There was a long awkward silence. She looked at the dresser. Leo looked at the door.

"Do you have your own apartment?" Lucy asked. Her voice was weak. It was almost as if she didn't want him to hear her question. He nodded. "Oh." Lucy never felt as sad as she did at that moment. She was losing her other child. All the air went out of her life.

She waited for Leo to explain. He waited for her to ask another question. The tension felt unbearable. "Who's Savannah?" Lucy asked.

"My girlfriend."

"She's going to live with you?" Leo nodded. Lucy shook her head. "What kind of a girl does that?" Leo didn't reply. "Who is she?"

"Somebody from school."

"Maybe your father was right. Maybe going to college was a bad idea. You're not moving anywhere, young man."

"I've signed a lease."

"We'll get you out of it."

"I don't want to get out of it."

"So you're choosing this girl over your mother?" Lucy already knew Leo's answer. "How could you?" She almost burst into tears. "You're all I've got since Daisy died. Now I'm losing you, too? What am I supposed to do when you're gone?"

"I'll still be around. It's not like I'm moving far away."

"So where are you moving to?"

"A place downtown."

"Where is it?"

"I'd rather not say."

"You won't tell your own mother?" Lucy shrieked. Shocked by the intensity of her reaction, she took a deep breath and tried to calm herself. "How could you do this to me?"

Lucy didn't know what made her feel worse. Was it losing her son to a girl she didn't know or losing his trust? "When will we meet her?"

"Um..., I don't think you will."

"What has she done to you? Wait 'til your father gets home. He'll know how to knock some sense into you." Lucy stormed out. Leo looked around his bedroom. This was likely the last time he would see it. Most of the stuff he wanted was already gone. He quickly packed a few more things and then said goodbye to what remained. His childhood was ending.

Leo tiptoed down the steps hoping his mother wouldn't hear him. He made it to the front door before she called out from the kitchen. "Wait!" She ran to the front door. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm sorry I have to leave like this, but you give me no choice."

"I give you no choice? You're the one who chose to betray me."

"I'm not betraying anyone, Mom. I'll call you." Leo walked out leaving his mother feeling distraught. She didn't know what she would tell her husband. *I'll just say Leo's coming home late from school*, Lucy thought. *Maybe he'll come back when he realizes what he's done to his mother.*

Leo didn't come back.

He called Savannah when he arrived downtown on his way to their apartment. She was at her parents' house. "I know we wanted to spend our first night there together. But, I have nowhere else to go. I hope you don't mind."

Savannah regretted being so far away when he needed her. "That's all right. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay, but I'll miss you."

Leo lugged the last of his possessions to the apartment. He unlocked the door and went in. It looked different now that he would be living there. It seemed empty and strange. He regretted what happened with his mother but told himself it was for the best. He would have left soon anyway. *Why not today?* he thought.

He felt eager to start his new life. *My first night alone won't be so bad*, he thought. *Tomorrow at school, I can tell Savannah all about what it was like to sleep in our new place. Maybe I can fix it up a little more before she moves in.*

Leo reached into his bag and took out his journal. He wanted to document this momentous change in his life.

'Well, I did it. I left. I'm here, but alone. Mom wasn't happy. I don't know how dad will react. But, they don't know where I moved to. I can wait a few days and call home. Maybe they will have calmed down by then.'

'Savannah's moving in this weekend, so I'll have a few nights alone, but I'll see her at school during the day. It'll be great seeing each other in the daytime and being together at night, but it will only last a few more months before she graduates and goes to Temple. Then the only time we'll be together is at night. We'll have to make the best of it. She seems to be ready. I know I am.'

The doorbell rang. *Who could that be?* he wondered. Panic welled up inside as he feared his father had found him somehow. *That's impossible*, he told himself. *It's probably just a neighbor. I'll see who it is.*

Leo opened the door and saw Savannah with a large suitcase and a bigger smile. "I hear this place is available," she joked. "Can I move in right away?"

“What kept you?” Leo replied. He hugged her tightly and picked up her suitcase. Leo grunted at how much it weighed and lugged it into their apartment.

“Welcome home,” Leo said. His eyes began to fill with tears.

“Are you crying?” Savannah asked just before she squeezed him again. Everything that happened in Leo’s young life changed the moment they were together in their apartment. He knew he was where he belonged. He put what happened with his mother and his entire life up to this moment behind him. Leo felt as if he had been born again. In a sense, he had.

Chapter 12

“I can’t believe he’s done it,” Marilyn said.

“Did you think he wouldn’t?”

“I had my doubts. Leaving home the way he did it is hard. People ran away back then. That was easy. But deciding to move out..., planning everything, finding an apartment, getting your stuff together, that took a lot of work.”

“And, he did it all by himself. Savannah had it easy. Her parents supported her.”

“I wonder why?” Marilyn asked.

“I’ve thought about that, too. Black parents weren’t much different than white parents when it came to worrying about what their kids were doing.”

“They must have trusted her a lot.”

“She must have been very mature.”

“More mature than he was,” Marilyn commented. “Remember, he hasn’t mentioned having sex with her yet. That used to be all he wanted from girls. Now, I don’t know what he wants.”

“He’s matured, too. I assume it’s because of her influence. I think he just wants to be with her.”

“Yeah, but what an influence she’s had! She transformed him from a sexist pig, as some women called some men back then, into someone who seems to be in love, although he hasn’t used that word yet.”

“Do you think he will? Do you think he realizes it?”

“The Leo I knew was the embodiment of love,” Marilyn said. “He didn’t just love you and your mother, he loved humanity, as well.”

“Yes, he did. And I miss all that love.” Nathan started to fill up with tears.

“I’ve made you cry. I’m sorry.”

Nathan looked at Marilyn. “Don’t be. It feels good to remember how his love felt, but remembering it reminds me I can’t experience it ever again.” Losing his father unexpectedly hit Leo harder than anything else that happened in his life, even the loss of his mother.

“You can, Nathan. But, it’ll be different. It comes from me instead of your father. It will feel as wonderful. I guarantee it!” Marilyn kissed her husband to soothe him as he sobbed. She knew what it was like to lose a father. He would need time to get over losing Leo. She loved Nathan as much as his father had and was ready to help.

“Let’s praise him for what he did,” Marilyn suggested when Nathan’s sobbing ebbed.

“Good idea. And let’s ask him how he feels.” Marilyn nodded enthusiastically.

‘You did it! How do you feel?’ Nathan wrote.

Leo hesitated before he answered. His diary had always been private. Only his mother had read any part of it. He had wondered if he should conceal it from Savannah. *Would that be right?* He decided to keep it secret for now. *I’ll need a place to hide it*, he thought. If he couldn’t hide it, he couldn’t write honestly. Frankness was more important to him than anything else.

‘Scared.’

“Oh, my! Is he having second thoughts?” Marilyn said.

“I think the shock of what he’s done- what they have done- is still affecting him. He’ll need time to adjust.” Nathan replied. Marilyn nodded.

Leo and Savannah's first night alone together felt awkward. There was only one bed. Leo told her to take it. His offer surprised Savannah. "Where will *you* sleep?"

"In that big chair."

"The one in the living room?" It wasn't much of a living room. The chair, a small table, and an old lamp were all the furniture it contained. They were saving to buy a sofa. Leo nodded.

"Why?"

"Because I want you to be comfortable. You have to work a long day tomorrow so you need a good night's sleep."

"You have to work, too, Leo."

"Yeah, but only at school, so I have it easier."

"I don't want you to sleep in the chair," Savanna said.

"Then, where should I sleep? On the floor? That won't be comfortable."

She looked at him. "Um, Leo. Where would you be the *most* comfortable?"

"In bed."

"Next to me?"

"Well, yeah. Unless *you* want to sleep in the chair."

Savannah was determined. "I'm *not* sleeping in the chair! Why did we buy a double bed if we're not gonna use it?"

"But, I didn't want to assume..., we've got plenty of time to get used to...", Leo stammered.

"Sleeping together?" Savannah asked. Leo nodded.

"Let's start getting used to it right now."

Until now, Leo had sex in beds only a couple of times but had never slept next to anyone in a bed. He knew he was likely to get hard as soon as he laid down next to Savannah and wondered if he could hide his excitement. *I don't want to ruin our first night together*, he thought. *What if she thinks all I want from her now that we're alone is sex?*

They had never discussed their sexual histories. Leo didn't even recall when his history began. He had forgotten the girl he lost his virginity with. He didn't know if Savannah was a virgin. Given the so-called sexual revolution that was going on, he assumed she wasn't but didn't feel comfortable asking her about it. What if asking her offended her? That was the last thing he wanted to do.

Savannah couldn't see what he was struggling with inside, but she sensed his distress. "So, tell me, what happened at home? You weren't supposed to move out for at least a week yet."

"My mom discovered I had moved my stuff out. She confronted me. I told her the truth."

"Well, that's good. How much of the truth?"

"I told her I was moving in with a girl."

"Oh. Did you tell her my name?"

"No." He didn't mention that his mother likely read Savannah's name in his journal. Leo wanted to keep the journal a secret.

"Why?"

"I just didn't want her to know. I don't belong to her now. She no longer needs to know my business."

“My parents know all about you,” Savanna pointed out. “They like you.”

“I’m glad. I like them.”

“You told your parents nothing about me?” Savannah asked. Leo shook his head.

“Why?”

Leo tried to think of a lie Savannah would accept. She watched him and waited.

Exasperated by his silence, her face changed to a stern expression he’d never seen before.

“Look, Leo, I won’t stay here with you if you’re going to be dishonest with me. There’s enough dishonesty in the outside world. I don’t want it here in our world.”

“She wanted to know if they could meet you.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her no.”

“And why did you tell her that?” Leo looked pleadingly at Savannah. She glared at him. “Leo, *why*?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Maybe it is to you but not to me. Tell me.”

“You’re Negro and I’m white.”

“Does that make any difference to you?”

“No, of course not. But, it does to them.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s the way white people are. That’s probably the way they’ve always been.”

“Are you like them?” Leo shook his head. “Have you *ever* been like them?” Leo shook his head again. He hoped Savannah wouldn’t sense he was lying and reminded himself how important it was for him to hide his older journals. *Maybe I ought to burn them*, he thought.

“I want to be with you. I don’t care what society thinks.”

“Not all society, Leo. Just white society.” Leo nodded. She was right. *Just stupid, prejudiced white people. But, we can change; I’ve changed.* He knew immediately that his mother and father would never change.

“I’m sorry, Savannah. I really am.”

“Don’t be. As long as it doesn’t make any difference to you or me, I don’t give a fuck what other people think. Do you agree?”

Leo had never heard Savannah curse. He understood how important it was for her to talk about this. “Absolutely!”

Savannah kissed Leo. “I’m beat. Can we go to sleep now?” Leo felt relieved the crisis had ended. For a short while, he wondered if they had made a huge mistake and the apartment would end up being his and his alone. He felt grateful their cohabitation hadn’t ended before it began.

‘Our first night! I can’t believe it! We talked, and then we went to sleep. Just sleep. I felt so wonderful lying next to her. She breathed softly and sighed a few times. I hoped she was dreaming about me. It took me a while to fall asleep. I kept thinking about my parents. I don’t know if I dreamed about them. None of that mattered when I woke up beside Savannah. The sun was streaming in our bedroom window. We’re going to have to put up real curtains. Old bedsheets won’t do. She was already awake, looking at me. “Hello sleepyhead,” she said.

I liked her calling me sleepyhead. We got out of bed and began our first wonderful day together..."

Moved by Leo's journal entry, Marilyn commented, "Wow! He's actually eloquent and beautiful."

"He's happy, maybe for the first time in his young life."

"Do you think it lasts?" Marilyn asked. Nathan wondered if she was rooting more strongly for Leo and Savannah now. Maybe she liked the kids more than she loved him.

"I guess we'll have to read on and see," he replied, coolly.

Marilyn re-read the journal entry, smiling. "Well, what do you think of your father now?"

"It seems he's making progress. He's found love. But, as you pointed out, Savannah was not my mother."

"I guess that means this didn't last. However, it did help him grow."

"But, what if they somehow stay together? What if my meddling in his journal changed his timeline?" The possibility that Leo and Savannah would remain together and Leo would never marry Alexandra terrified Nathan.

"I don't know, Nathan. The good news is that you're still here."

"Well, if you wake up one day and I'm gone, will you miss me?"

Marilyn said the first words that popped into her head. "I probably won't know you ever existed." She regretted her statement immediately.

"Great!" Nathan had hoped memories of him would linger somewhere in Marilyn's subconscious. *Maybe that's not how it works when you're erased*, he thought. Then he tried not to think about it anymore. He didn't want to dwell on the possibility that his existence still could end.

Nathan hoped that, whatever was happening in Leo's life, he and Marilyn could assure that his father and mother still found each other. He also regretted writing his first spontaneous comment in Leo's journal. *If I hadn't been so impulsive I wouldn't be worrying about ceasing to exist*, he told himself. *I should have just read the journals instead of writing in them. How was I to know he could read what I wrote? How is that even happening?* Neither he nor Marilyn knew the answer. He felt sure young Leo couldn't explain it, either.

Leo's dark, depressing journal entries from previous years were gone. His new entries were enthusiastic, exultant, and sometimes breathlessly ecstatic. He described their first meals together, how they enjoyed a rare day off, taking bubble baths together, and how much he missed Savannah when they were apart.

Nathan and Marilyn couldn't figure out when Leo and Savannah finally made love. They felt certain, however, that their first sexual experience was not merely another crude conquest for Leo. He didn't write about what they did in bed. Marilyn felt pleased Leo kept their intimacy private. She thought his respect for privacy was another step in Leo's ascent to maturity.

Marilyn felt happy for the kids and hoped all their sex was mind-blowing. *That's how it's supposed to be when you're starting out*, she thought. *It only gets boring later on, when something happens and you fall out of love*. She felt convinced Leo and Savannah's feeling of love was mutual. She was still not certain their relationship would last.

Everyone who saw Leo and Savannah together noticed a glow of love enfolding them. They carried the little world they shared in their apartment out into the rest of their daily lives. Being apart only made it better when they were back together.

Savannah's parents helped them whenever they could. Her mother Gertrude stopped by with bags of groceries and cooked meals for the kids. They felt grateful for her help. Neither knew much about cooking. They were not inclined to learn how to cook, yet. They were still learning how to be in love. Gertrude felt delighted her daughter was happy.

Savannah graduated from Community College and went on to Temple. She gave up her work-study job at the college and found another one at the university. Leo had become used to seeing her at the college during the days. Although she was gone, he felt proud of her for moving on.

Leo began his second year. He still had not chosen his major. He liked many of his classes and could not choose a favorite. Several teachers encouraged him to continue his studies beyond the two-year school. "You seem at home in academia," Mr. Jenkins, his history teacher, told him. "From what I'm hearing, you're doing well in several classes, not just mine. You might consider teaching as a career." Leo thought Mr. Jenkins was nuts.

His parents were cold the first time he called home. He had been expecting only his mother would answer the phone but John was also there. Leo wondered if anything was wrong. John rarely took days off. "Oh, it's you," he said.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hello, Leo," Lucy said, on the extension phone.

"Hi, Mom."

"How are you, son? You eating well?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Did you call for a reason?" John asked. "You need us for something?"

"No, Dad. I just wanted to say hello and tell you I'm all right."

"Well, we're all right, too, just so you know."

"I'm glad."

"Well, I got work to do. That grass don't cut itself."

"Yeah, I gotta get to class."

"Wait, Leo. Can't you stay on a moment or two?"

"Sorry, Mom. I'll talk to you soon."

Everyone hung up. Lucy and John didn't talk about the call. Later in the day, unbeknownst to each other, they went to Leo's empty bedroom. The furniture was still there but his personality was gone. John and Lucy wondered if they would ever see their son again.

Chapter 13

Leo sat by the front windows in the library reading the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. He had some time to relax before his courier job started. “Hi, Leo,” a girl said. Leo looked up from the newspaper and saw his cousin Maryanne smiling. She held an armload of books.

“Hi. What are you doing with all those books?”

“I work here now. I have to put these back on the shelves.”

“Oh, great.”

“I haven’t seen your girlfriend around,” Maryanne said.

“She graduated. She’s at Temple now.”

“Temple? How’s she like it?”

Leo smiled. “She’s adjusting. I’m helping her.”

“Tell her I said hello. What was her name again?”

“Savannah.”

“Pretty name. Beautiful girl.”

“Yes, yes she is. So, what are you taking?” Leo asked.

“The usual freshman stuff.”

“Do you like it so far?”

“I love it. Gets me out of the house and away from my parents... but...”

“Problems?”

Maryanne frowned. “They don’t want me to be here.”

“Why?” Leo asked.

“Because I’m a girl.”

“Lots of girls go here.”

“I know.”

“Why don’t they want *you* here?”

“You wanna hear the simple answer?” Leo nodded. “Housewives don’t need college degrees.”

“Is that what they said? My father gave me the same kind of shit. They seem to think they know what’s best for us, but they’re living in the past.”

Maryanne frowned. “How are your parents? My folks don’t tell me much about what’s going on. That’s because I spend as little time as possible with them.”

“I haven’t seen my parents for months.”

“What do you mean?”

“I moved out. Me and Savannah live together now.”

“No way! Wow. It must be true love!” Leo had never thought of their relationship as having anything to do with love, true or otherwise.

“I guess so.”

“Um, if you don’t mind my asking, how do you afford it?”

“We both work a lot.”

“That’s rough.”

“But we’re together. And, her parents help us out. Not with money. Her mom makes food for us sometimes. That helps a lot.”

“I wish I could move out, too. It would be so much easier if I didn’t have to deal with my parents anymore. I mean, I love them and all, but they drive me nuts, you know?” Leo knew.

“You should look for roommates. I could ask Savannah to check the roommates’ bulletin board at Temple.”

“I don’t know. Living with strangers might be worse than living with my parents.”

“But, it might be better.”

Maryanne shrugged. She didn’t seem convinced.

‘My cousin Maryanne talked to me again today. She told me she’s been thinking about what we talked about in the library several weeks ago. She’s fed up at home. Her parents are giving her shit about being in college and she’s not even finished her first year yet. She’s afraid they won’t pay for a second. But, she loves it and wants to go on, maybe to Temple like Savannah. Maryanne wondered if Savannah and I would help her out and let her live with us for a while. She offered to pay.

‘I don’t know what to do. I like my cousin, but we don’t know each other very well. I don’t know if it would be a good idea having someone else living with us. But, she knows the truth about Savannah. What if I turn her down? She might tell her parents and they might tell my parents. I don’t know what would happen.

‘I call my mom every couple weeks. I haven’t spoken to my dad in a while. My mom never says much more than, “When are you coming to see me? I’ll make you a nice dinner.” I never answer her. I don’t know what to say.

‘I don’t hate mom or dad; I just don’t want anything to do with them.’

‘Judging by what he’s written, my guess is that he hasn’t told Savannah about Maryanne’s request,’ Marilyn said.

‘How do you know?’

‘I think he’s writing in his journal because he doesn’t know what to do, but needs to think about it.’

‘So, we should suggest he talk to Savannah?’ Nathan asked. Marilyn nodded.
‘Okay.’

‘Have you told Savannah about Maryanne?’ Nathan wrote.

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘I don’t know how she’ll react.’

‘Have you figured out what you want to do about Maryanne?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I don’t know what to do.’

‘Are you inclined to help her?’

‘Yes. Because I know what it’s like to not want to live at home anymore.’

‘But, you don’t want her staying with you?’

‘Right.’

‘How about if it’s only temporary, maybe a couple of weeks?’ Nathan suggested. ‘It would get her out of the house, but she would have to agree to find her own place as soon as possible.’

‘Savannah might go for that.’

‘So talk to her.’

“Absolutely *not!* I don’t even know this girl.”

“But, she’s my cousin.”

“I wouldn’t do it for my *own* cousin, Cindy, as much as I love her.”

“You don’t know what it’s like.”

Savannah interrupted him. “Know what *what’s like?*”

“Not getting along with your parents, hating living at home, wanting to be free. It can drive you crazy.”

“Having another person staying here would drive *me* crazy, Leo. I can’t believe you’re even considering this.”

“I feel sorry for her.”

“So do I, but I can’t solve everyone else’s problems. I have enough of my own.”

Surprised by her comment, Leo looked at her. “What do you mean?” Savannah didn’t answer. Leo waited. The longer she remained silent the more worry he felt. “What’s going on?” he asked, as tenderly as he could. “Is something wrong with me? Is something wrong with us?”

Savannah shook her head. “Not you... and not us. Me.”

“Tell me about it.”

“I can’t. You won’t like it.”

“You tell me this instant!” Leo demanded. Surprised he’d ordered her to do something, Savannah’s eyes widened. Leo had never done anything like that before. He was always careful, deferential, and encouraging. She liked him that way, but she also liked him this way, more direct and assertive. This was a different Leo and she might want to get to know him better.

“There’s this guy... at school.”

“Another student?”

“He’s the TA in one of my advanced classes.”

“And...?”

“He ... talks to me.”

“Um, what does he say?” Leo asked.

“He tells me he could help me get ahead. *Really* ahead.”

“What does he mean?”

“My major’s very competitive. The teachers only have so much time to talk to students outside class. Only the strongest students get extra time.”

“But, you’re a strong student, Savannah.”

“Yes, but I could still use some extra help.”

“And, he’s offered it?” Leo asked. Savannah nodded. “So, what’s the problem?”

“He wants something in return.”

Leo knew immediately what he wanted in return. It was what every guy who ever talked to Savannah probably wanted. “Oh.”

“Yeah. He makes it sound easy. I told him I live with my boyfriend but he told me he doesn’t care. He doesn’t want to *live* with me, just....”

“I’m guessing he was a bit more direct than that.”

“He has an apartment just off campus. We could go there between classes. It’s all he’s asking. Then he’ll tell the professors about me and give me the inside track. Plus, he grades my work.”

“Do you think he’ll lower your grades if you don’t give in to him?” Savannah nodded. “Bummer.”

Savannah’s eyes widened and Leo knew immediately that he’d said the wrong thing. “Bummer? That’s all you can say? This is fucking up my entire life! My whole college career is on the line! I can’t just transfer somewhere else. I’m stuck there.”

“Take it easy-.”

“No, Leo, *you* take it easy!” Savannah yelled. “You’re no damn help at all!” She ran out of the kitchen. Leo sat looking at the tasty dinner Gertrude had made. He wondered what Savannah’s parents would say if they knew about her problem. They were nice people, but they seemed clueless about the world their daughter and Leo lived in. They grew up in another era when life was smaller, simpler, and love would solve any problem.

Leo hadn’t thought about love much until that moment. He didn’t have loving parents. It seemed Maryanne didn’t, either. He realized Savannah did. Maybe that was why she was the way she was. Maybe that was why her parents liked him and supported what the kids were doing. He wondered what else love did that he hadn’t noticed before. He also wondered if he was capable of love. Then he realized he didn’t even know what love was. Leo wondered if he should try to find out.

‘I want to kill that guy,’ Leo wrote in the journal.

“Whoa! Looks like old hostile Leo might be back,” Marilyn said.

“We don’t know that. We don’t know what’s going on.”

“You don’t have to defend him, you know.”

“I’m not. But... well, he *is* my dad.”

“It’s okay. Ask him what he’s talking about.”

‘What’s going on?’

‘Somebody at Temple wants to screw Savannah in return for his help advancing in her major. I’d like to solve the problem by following him back to his apartment and just getting rid of him.’

‘But you won’t.’

‘Won’t I? This is my girl he’s threatening. I’d do anything to protect her.’

‘Has she reported this guy?’

‘To who?’ Leo replied.

‘Whoever supervises him.’

‘They won’t do anything. They never do. Sleazebags like him just hide what they’re doing and lie about it. I know. I’ve done it.’

“So, he’s aware of the way he used to be,” Marilyn commented.

“And, he regrets it.”

“That’s good.”

“But he feels helpless now. And, that’s *not* good,” Nathan added.

‘What about her parents?’ Nathan wrote.

‘She can’t tell them. They’d pull her out of school.’

Nathan didn’t know what to write. Marilyn couldn’t suggest anything either.

‘Well?’ Leo wrote.

‘Well, what?’

‘You seem to have all the answers. Tell me what to do about this.’

“If we admit we don’t know he might never communicate with us again,” Marilyn speculated.

“Well, we *don’t* know what to do.”

“Wait, I have an idea.”

Hoping it would work, Nathan scribbled what Marilyn told him. ‘Talk to Savannah again. Tell her how you really feel about her. Let her know you’re on her side and you’ll do whatever she wants. Maybe she has an idea you haven’t thought of.’

‘That’s a good suggestion. I’ll see if I can try it.’

“Savannah, I think I love you,” Leo stammered.

She gave him a half-surprised, half-smirking look. “*You think?* You’re just figuring this out?”

“I’m not used to love. My parents weren’t like yours.”

“I’m beginning to realize that, Leo. I’m sorry. But why are you telling me this now?”

“Because of that guy. I don’t like what he’s doing, but I don’t know what I can do to stop it.”

“Loving me is a start,” Savannah replied, sweetly.

“But, that’s not enough. I want to do more. In the past, I would have rounded up some guys and we would have dealt with the bastard.”

Savannah looked alarmed. “Wait, you *did* stuff like that?” It occurred to her there was much she didn’t know about her boyfriend’s past. Maybe she didn’t want to know.

“Well, I could have. Some other guys did.”

“I would want no part of that, Leo. Promise me you’ll never even think of it again.”

“I promise. So what *can* I do?”

“Let’s put our heads together. I’m sure we can come up with something.”

Their solution, when they came up with it, seemed simple and logical. Temple University had a counseling department like the one at Community College. Counseling departments existed to help students with personal problems affecting their education. Because the students’ problems were personal, the counselors had to keep everything confidential. Thus, Savannah could ask for help without her predatory Teaching Assistant finding out. She didn’t know what the counselor could do about her harasser, but it seemed her only choice.

It worked.

Leo didn’t report in his journal what Savannah chose to do. ‘It’s solved’ was all he wrote a few weeks later after Nathan asked. *But, how was it solved?* Nathan thought. *Are they still together?* He caught himself hoping they’d split up.

‘What did she do?’ Nathan wrote.

Leo explained what happened.

“Why didn’t we think of that?” Marilyn asked, impressed.

“I guess we forgot that Leo’s world was sixty years ago,” Nathan explained to his wife. He worried even more about how well the relationship between his father and Savannah was developing. He knew that when a couple faced and overcame a big crisis, the struggle strengthened their bond. Nathan didn’t want their relationship getting stronger. He wanted it to weaken and die, eventually. It seemed the only way that he would continue to exist.

Nathan had accidentally changed Leo's life by commenting on Leo's early journal entries, the ugly, disgusting ones. Now, Nathan thought he might have to try harder to influence Leo's life to protect his own existence. He had no idea how he would do that. Nathan started to wonder how much time he might have left.

Chapter 14

‘Leo, I thought I should tell you more about myself. I really am your son, and I’m in the future,’ Nathan wrote.

‘Savannah and I have a son? That’s amazing.’ Nathan thought it was more amazing that he and his father communicated over a sixty-year gap in time. However there was one problem.

‘Well, not exactly, Leo.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You were my father, but Savannah was not my mother.’

Leo didn’t write a reply.

“You had to tell him, didn’t you?” Marilyn said after she read Nathan’s note.

“I thought it was only fair.”

Marilyn looked skeptically at him. “That’s *not* why you did it, Nathan. You need to break up their romance so Leo can meet your mother.”

“I’m trying to make sure I don’t disappear, Marilyn. You got a problem with that?”

“You should have let this play out a little more without interfering. Like I told you before, interracial romances rarely turned into interracial marriages back then. This would probably have ended on its own. Now you might have prevented it from ending at all.”

“How?” Nathan asked.

“He just woke up to the presence of love in himself. He’s discovered he loves her. You’re going to strengthen his commitment.” Nathan knew what Marilyn implied. “He will go on to become the loving, compassionate, benevolent man people looked up to for his gentle strength, conviction, and helpfulness. But, you won’t get born and I’ll probably never meet him. Good job, Nathan!”

Her cynicism stung but Nathan knew she was right. He had revealed the truth to Leo hoping to save himself, but his frankness might turn out to be a fatal mistake.

Nathan’s experience of love was much more limited and focused than Leo’s was. Nathan loved his wife, mother, and father, but that was all. He didn’t love humanity, as his father had. He didn’t care much about humanity. Nathan always felt he could never be the same kind of person Leo was. He wasn’t certain he even wanted to be.

Over the years, Leo’s selfless love brought him some disappointment and pain. He always survived and learned from his experiences, but he never abandoned love. Nathan was never willing to love if loving would prove painful.

Loving was hard for Leo, sometimes. Not giving love, or doing it, but the results that came from giving and doing. Sometimes people didn’t want to be loved, but Leo stayed on them. His devotion often convinced unwilling people they were worthy of love and they came to love themselves. That was always Leo’s goal.

However, Nathan felt jealous of the other people his father loved. He wondered what they had that he did not. What was the point of loving humanity? Most humans didn’t seem to deserve it. Nathan felt he deserved his father’s love more than anyone else did.

Leo had helped many students, a few faculty, and even some neighbors in their college town. Sometimes troubled people came to him. Other times he sought out people he thought needed help. Occasionally, people didn’t yet know they were in trouble. Leo sometimes sensed something was missing from their lives, something only he could provide,

and he set out to help them. He only failed a few times, but those people went on to live their lives a little better than they would have if they'd never known Leo.

The people Leo helped often gave him credit and praise. He didn't believe he did anything at all. They changed because of what Leo saw inside them that they couldn't see. He just brought it out. He did that with love. They moved on with their lives, but never forgot Leo. He didn't care if people remembered him. He wanted them to remember themselves; who they were, what they were, why their lives mattered, and why love mattered.

Nathan had resented the strangers who came into their house and stole his father's attention away. His father was busy enough as it was. Why did he spend so much time helping strangers instead of being with his son? Nathan didn't understand. As a child, he had asked himself, *What's wrong with me?* As sensitive as Leo was to strangers, he never sensed his son's feelings of disappointment and rejection.

Now Nathan faced his own extinction because of his father loving Savannah. She was the wrong woman. If she and Leo had a child, that person wouldn't be Nathan but someone else.

Nathan wasn't certain Leo and Savannah's relationship would have happened if he had not interfered in Leo's journal. He did not share Marilyn's optimism that the couple would feel the social strain was too great and break up eventually. Rather, Nathan felt his end was closing in on him. If Leo and Savannah didn't separate, he would vanish as if he never existed. Even Marilyn wouldn't remember him.

Annihilation's a bitch, Nathan thought as he poured another glass of whiskey. He rarely drank the stuff, so it hit him hard almost as soon as he swallowed. He reasoned that a drunken stupor was preferable to facing eradication sober. He soon might cease to exist, but he didn't want to be there when it happened.

Marilyn found him drunk on the floor of his study. He had fallen out of his chair and curled into a fetal position on the floor. "What did you do?" she asked. "You're a mess!"

"Pretty soon I won't be anything at all," he slurred.

Marilyn wasn't certain she heard him correctly. She looked at the whiskey bottle. "You think *this* is gonna help?"

"It can't hurt."

"You're wasting time, Nathan. If we want to solve this problem, both of us need to be clear-headed."

"I just want to sleep," he pleaded.

"Okay, sleep. I'll be here when you wake up." *But, will he wake up?* Marilyn wondered. *Or, is he closer to the end than either of us knows?*

Marilyn took the journal to the living room. She found the page with Nathan's comment about Savannah not being his mother. It was time for drastic action. She had an evil thought and picked up Nathan's pen.

Scribbling hastily, Marilyn wrote something that would have been unthinkable only a few weeks earlier. 'Your son was afraid to tell you the truth about your girlfriend,' she wrote. 'Remember that TA she told you about? She didn't tell you what really happened. I didn't find out until I read more of your journal. She fucked him and liked it so much she thought of leaving you, but she decided not to because she felt sorry for you. She thinks you're pathetic.'

'You're lying!'

'Am I?'

‘Savannah loves me, and I love her. We’re going to get married when we finish school.’

‘That’s what she tells you now. She’s just stringing you along because you pay half the rent. She’d replace you tomorrow if she found somebody else with money. Remember, I have the journal and you don’t. I know what happens in your future. It’s ugly. You won’t like it. It will hurt like hell.’

‘Savannah wouldn’t hurt me.’

‘She hates you because you’re white. You’re inferior. She wants a Black man. Sooner or later she’s going to get one.’

There was no reply. Marilyn hoped she sowed seeds of rage that would result in Leo breaking up with Savannah. She had decided that Nathan’s existence was more important to her than the happiness of a Black girl who lived more than sixty years ago. It was a simple choice.

Marilyn closed the journal, sighed, and waited. Replies usually appeared in a moment or two. She opened the notebook. There was new writing on the page. It was not Leo’s.

‘What the fuck is going on? Who is this? Why are you writing these awful things?’

‘I’m Leo’s son’s wife,’ Marilyn wrote. ‘In the future.’

‘That’s impossible. You’re lying.’

Marilyn knew immediately what was happening. Both women would try to save their lovers. A battle had begun.

Chapter 15

Savannah and Leo planned a lazy Sunday alone at home. They could spend the day in bed if they wanted to because they didn't even have much homework to do. Savannah had bought half-dozen bagels from a bakery she liked near the Temple campus. Leo brought home a package of cream cheese.

They played the radio at low volume, puttered around the apartment, and enjoyed a rare few hours of leisure. The lovers wouldn't have traded their lives for anything else. All they wanted was to go on being together. Forever.

The doorbell rang after lunch. They weren't expecting Gertrude. Savannah's parents spent Sundays at church all day. They had stopped wishing their daughter accompanied them as she used to when she was a child, but hoped one day she and Leo would attend together. Maybe even get married there.

Probably one of the other tenants forgot their key, Leo thought. He hit the buzzer and then heard someone climbing the stairs. There was a knock on the door. Leo opened it. Maryanne stood there with a suitcase. She didn't say anything. Neither did Leo. Savannah was in bed drifting into an afternoon nap. *Oh, shit,* Leo thought.

The awkward silence lengthened and Maryanne couldn't stand it. "Sorry. I had nowhere else to go."

"What happened?"

"I left. They were giving me more shit about school. I couldn't take it anymore."

"How did you find my address?"

"I looked it up in the library files."

Leo frowned. "Oh."

"Please, can I come in... just for a while?" Maryanne lied.

"I guess so." Leo held the door. Maryanne lugged her suitcase into the apartment.

"Leo, who are you talking to?" Savannah asked from the bedroom.

"We got company."

"Company?" Savannah said as she came through the doorway.

"Hi," Maryanne greeted Savannah cheerfully. "Remember me? You were the one that inspired me to go to Community College."

Savannah looked at Leo. He could almost read her thoughts. *I thought I told you not to let her come here!* Leo shrugged.

Savannah grimaced. "Yeah, I remember you."

Leo knew Savannah was angry. *This isn't my fault,* he thought. "She looked up my address in the library files," he explained.

Savannah looked at Maryanne's suitcase. "Taking a trip?" she asked, coolly.

"I was hoping I could stay with you guys until I get a place of my own." Maryanne tried not to sound desperate. "Just a few days. I promise." Savannah knew she couldn't turn Maryanne away, but refused to consent to her invading their sanctuary.

The three stood awkwardly wondering what they should do. Maryanne wanted to sit down. Savannah wanted to go back to the bedroom and close the door. Leo wished he could run to the college library so he could escape for a few hours.

"Nice place," Maryanne finally said.

"Thanks."

“Mind if I sit down? I’m beat. I’ve been lugging that suitcase around all morning. I had to come here on a bus, the El, and then another bus.”

“I guess so,” Leo said. Savannah sighed. She knew Maryanne wasn’t going away.

“Want a bagel?” she asked. “We have cream cheese, too.”

“Um, just some water, if that’s okay.” *It’s not okay*, Savannah thought, *but there’s nothing I can do about it*. Leo got a glass for Maryanne.

Savannah wanted to talk privately with Leo in the bedroom but didn’t want to embarrass Maryanne.

“So, what happened at home?” Leo asked.

“They told me they discussed it and decided they weren’t gonna pay my tuition next year. They said they were sorry they paid it *this* year.”

“They can’t afford it?” Leo asked.

“They could afford to send me to Penn if I got accepted. It’s not about money.”

“It’s about *you*,” Savannah commented. Maryanne looked at her and nodded. “They think you’re not good enough, or smart enough, or worth paying for.” Maryanne nodded again. “I’ve been dealing with that kind of shit my whole life. Only *my* parents weren’t against me. They were on my side. *Society* was against me.”

“Savannah’s parents are amazing people,” Leo explained.

Maryanne looked at Savannah. “They must be. *You’re* amazing.” Savannah liked compliments. She warmed a little toward Maryanne.

“So, what are your plans?”

“Well, Leo mentioned there was a roommate bulletin board at Temple. I was hoping you could look at it and maybe find someplace I could go.”

Savannah nodded. “That might work. You got any money?”

“It’s in a bank account. I took my passbook.”

“Good. Everybody expects roommates to pay their fair share. If you can’t, you can get thrown out.”

“Well, I can, and *will*. I’m no freeloader.”

“You’ll sleep on the couch. It’s all we got.” Savannah said.

“It’s all I need. I’m really grateful to both of you. You don’t know what this means to me.”

“Do you think they’ll come looking for you?”

“They won’t know where to start,” Maryanne replied. “And, nobody knows you’re here, right?” Leo nodded. The initial awkwardness had evaporated. It seemed this arrangement- brief as they hoped it would be- might work.

Leo and Savannah had no siblings. Maryanne had several. She was used to competing to use the bathroom. To make it easier, Leo and Savannah often went in together to get ready for school. Maryanne tried to get up earlier than they did so she could use the bathroom first but the couch was so comfortable she often overslept and Leo had to wake her.

Maryanne was aware the couple needed privacy so she asked what time it was okay for her to return each night. Her concern didn’t make any difference. It was rare for Savannah and Leo to spend evenings in the apartment. Most nights, she waitressed well into the evening and Leo spent time at the library working on projects. It turned out that Maryanne had the place to herself.

Leo and Savannah had to steal their moments of intimacy after they closed the bedroom door when they retired for the night. It wasn't as much fun making love when they could feel someone out in the living room, but they made the best of it. Leo didn't know if his cousin had any sexual experience and didn't want to embarrass her by referring to their intimacy. She didn't seem to notice the unusual noises that occasionally drifted from the bedroom.

Maryanne had had only one boyfriend, and not for very long. Her father ran him off claiming she was too young for that sort of thing. She was fifteen, but her friends mostly had several boyfriends already, and she didn't know why her father made a fuss. She went on dates in high school but nobody asked her out more than a couple of times. She had trouble getting a date for the prom. Maryanne began to worry she was pathetically homely. She wasn't.

Savannah noticed how pretty she looked right away. She vaguely recalled Maryanne from the campus tour. That day, she seemed to feel out of place at the college. Savannah often met kids that rarely left the safety of their isolated neighborhoods and ventured downtown. They looked over their shoulders worriedly as they walked the streets and sometimes gawked at the variety of people they saw in the college lobby.

Maryanne had changed since then. She now felt more at home on campus. Her neighborhood probably now seemed almost provincial. She had also gotten prettier somehow.

The first time Savannah met her, Maryanne had worn no makeup. Now she seemed comfortable making herself attractive and the result was impressive. She wasn't as pretty as Savannah was, but still better looking than the mousy high school kid Savannah first met only a few months ago.

Savannah had always known she was beautiful but it never mattered to her. It did seem to matter to other people, however. Her beauty often opened doors her Blackness kept closed. She was learning what to do when she got through those doors. Beauty would get her only so far. Intelligence mattered more.

One day, after Leo left early for a class, Maryanne and Savannah were alone. "So how did you two get together?"

"We had a blind date. I was helping my cousin. She wanted to have time with her boyfriend but I didn't want to be a third wheel, so she asked a friend to take me out. I liked Leo right away, and he seemed to like me."

Maryanne looked Savannah up and down. She wore thin silky pajamas over her exquisite figure. "I can see why."

Savannah grinned. "Um, thanks, but I'm not sure that was the only reason he liked me."

"So... how did it happen?"

"I let him taste ice cream."

Maryanne smiled. "You got together because of an ice cream cone?"

"Oh, the ice cream wasn't on a cone."

"Um, where was it?" Maryanne asked.

"It was on my lips."

Maryanne felt a little tickle in a place inside her body she was not used to noticing. She giggled. "He liked the flavor?" Savannah nodded. "Wow. That's romantic in a way."

"I don't think either of us was thinking about romance, but I do believe we felt attracted to each other."

“But, your being different must have made you think twice.”

“I knew the difference didn’t matter to him the moment I kissed him.”

Now Maryanne looked surprised. “*You kissed him?*”

“Yeah. It was *my* ice cream.”

The tickle got stronger. Maryanne giggled again. “I admire the two of you. I don’t know if I’d have the courage to do what you’re doing.”

“You might if you met the right guy. That’s what made the difference for me.”

“That’s beautiful.”

Their relationship was beautiful, and Savannah thanked her lucky stars every day for sending Leo. He didn’t know anything about stars, but he knew he wanted to be with Savannah and would fight anybody who tried to come between them.

Weeks later, Maryanne was still sleeping on their old couch, and it seemed like she was coming between them. Leo and Savannah had started arguing over trifles. The arguments never lasted long. Some days they argued in the morning and one of them left in a huff. Other times they argued at night and their bed was not the cozy sanctuary they wanted it to be. They got over whatever they argued about after a good night’s sleep and remained affectionate, sometimes for days, until another outburst. They both knew why the eruptions happened. Maryanne, despite her deference toward them, her respect for their privacy, and her niceness, was an invader, and they wanted her gone.

Savannah had given Maryanne a list of names of people looking for roommates the day after she arrived. The girl claimed she checked out the places but always came back disappointed. She explained that she didn’t like the apartment, location, or potential roommate. At first, Leo and Savannah understood her caution. After several rejections, a pattern emerged and their suspicions grew. It became obvious Maryanne did not intend to live anywhere else.

Maryanne liked being with Savannah and Leo. She was the youngest of six children and was used to being looked after. The thought of going out on her own and taking care of herself terrified her. Therefore, she stayed put.

Savannah finally had enough. When they were alone one evening, she looked at Leo and he knew what she was about to say. “You’re going to have to tell her to leave, Leo.”

“But, she looks up to you. I think she feels closer to you than she ever did to me.”

“She’s *your* cousin! You have to do it, and that’s final!” Leo knew he had to do it, but he didn’t know how. He had never thrown anyone out before. What would she do when he told Maryanne her time was up?

The next morning, Leo confronted her. Calmly, she threatened to tell her parents where he was. They would tell his parents, and who knew what would happen then? Leo didn’t know how to reply.

“Let her tell them!” Savannah yelled when he explained later. “Now I know she *has* to go. Right now!”

The next day, Maryanne found Savannah waiting when she got home from school. Her suitcase was packed. “What going on?” Maryanne asked.

“Your time is up.”

“You can’t just throw me out.”

Savannah crossed her arms and glared at Maryanne. “Actually, I probably could. You’re smaller than I am. Waiting on tables has made me pretty strong.”

“I thought we were friends.”

“So did I, but I don’t appreciate a friend threatening me and my boyfriend.”

Maryanne pouted. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Leo and I don’t care whether you meant it or not. Get out!”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

“Go back where you came from.”

“I don’t want to.”

“I don’t care what you want. I’m through helping you. You’re too immature to be on your own. Go back to your mommy and daddy.”

Maryanne looked down. “I can’t,” she mumbled.

“Then go to a hotel for the night. Use some of the money in that bank account of yours.”

“That’s for my tuition.”

Savannah sighed. She felt sorry for the girl but had to throw her out. “Maryanne, you ran away from your parents but mentally never left home. You still expect somebody to take care of you. That’s your problem, not ours. Either you grow up right now, and really go out on your own, *alone*, or you remain a child and go home. Either way, you’re done sleeping here.”

“Can’t I stay one more night, please?”

Savannah didn’t reply verbally. She shook her head slowly. Maryanne got the message. She knew she had lost and walked out with her heavy suitcase. Savannah immediately started worrying but knew she wouldn’t take the girl back if she returned. She didn’t know what Leo would do when he found out what she had done. Maryanne was his cousin. Family was important. Would he take her side?

Chapter 16

Marilyn tried to think of a way she could sow seeds of doubt in Savannah's mind that would be compelling enough to drive a wedge between her and Leo.

'If you want to know how he really feels about Negroes, read those early entries in his journal,' she wrote.

Savannah replied immediately. 'I read them. It doesn't make any difference how he felt when he was a boy. He's a man now and he loves me.'

'If what he wrote about Blacks doesn't alarm you, read what he wrote about girls. He fucked everybody in sight, but never dated anyone. He was a sex maniac.'

'He still is, but he's my sex maniac, and I'm his.'

Savannah was a strong-willed girl who knew how to fight for what was hers. Marilyn couldn't change her mind. She admired Savannah's steadfastness and wondered if she was as strong-willed as Savannah. *Maybe there's nothing I can do*, she thought. *Maybe the damage Nathan did when he first wrote in Leo's journal was bound to come to this. I wish he hadn't meddled! He should have ignored what happened 60 years ago and not tried to change it.* Marilyn reminded herself that Nathan didn't write in Leo's journal that first time so he could change Leo. He was just reacting to what was on the page. *Why couldn't Nathan just have kept his fucking opinions to himself?*

Nathan woke up with a colossal headache. Marilyn got him some Tylenol and made him drink coffee. He noticed the open journal on the table. "What are you doing?" he asked. There were new words on the page that he didn't recall writing.

"I'm having a dialogue with Savannah."

Nathan gasped. "You're *what*?"

"We're getting to know each other." Marilyn didn't want to share the brutal truth with Nathan. He didn't need to know she was fighting for him but losing that fight, so far.

She tried to concentrate on the present. How would she live if Nathan was no longer there? If he disappeared, she wouldn't be a widow. If he never existed, she could never have married him. She might find herself married to someone else. She would likely never have known Leo and Alexandra. There were likely no other reasons in her life for their paths to cross.

Nathan's life was about to be erased. In a sense, so was Marilyn's. She didn't like not knowing what would happen after he was gone. Who would she be without Nathan?

Savannah heard the doorbell. *Leo must have forgotten his keys again*, she thought. He had left for work fifteen minutes earlier. *He probably ran back hoping I'm still here. Maybe I should pretend I'm gone and teach him a lesson. No, I can't do that. He won't be able to get back in until I get home tonight.*

Savannah buzzed him in and waited by the door to kiss him. A moment later, she heard a knock and went to open it, expecting Leo. He wasn't standing there grinning sheepishly.

"Who the fuck are you?" an older man said. He tried to push his way inside. Savannah blocked the door.

"I beg your pardon? This is my apartment. Who are *you*?"

"Leo's father."

Savannah kept her cool. "He's not here. He just left for school."

"Who the hell are you?" the man repeated.

"His girlfriend. Someday I'll be his wife."

"Not if I can help it!" John shouted. He tried to push his way past her.

"Hey! What do you want?"

"You're lying! I know he's here."

Savannah feared he was about to hurt her. She screamed. A door opened and she heard someone running down the stairs.

"Savvy? I heard yelling. You okay?"

"Come here, Jesse, please." The only way to save her from John's wrath would be the presence of another person. Jesse was a big guy, almost as big as John was.

"Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," John shouted. "This girl and I are having a conversation. Butt out." Jesse looked at Savannah. If she told him to leave, he would, but reluctantly.

"This is Leo's father," she said, trying to remain in control. "He was just leaving."

"No, I wasn't. We're not done here."

"I think you are, sir," Jesse said. He felt as frightened as Savannah was. John seemed as if he was about to go berserk. If he didn't leave voluntarily, Jesse didn't think he could throw him out.

"I'll tell Leo you stopped by," Savannah said to appease John. "Maybe he'll call you."

"He damn well better call me!"

"I promise I'll get him to do it. Now please leave. You're upsetting me."

"Upsetting you? You're just a nig-."

"Don't say it!" Jesse exclaimed. John stopped himself. Still seething, he turned and walked down the stairs. Jesse went over to Savannah. She was trembling.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Some white people are crazy."

"Most of us are," Jesse said.

"So why are you and Leo different?"

"Because we got sense. Assholes like that don't have sense any at all. They think they own the whole world."

Savannah felt herself near tears. "They used to, Jesse. And, some of them owned people like me."

"Leo's not gonna be happy about this," Jesse declared.

"Now I know why he never talks about his parents."

"He's a good man, Savannah, and he really loves you."

"And, I love him. But, how can I be sure he won't turn out to be just like his father? Maybe deep down, all white people are the same inside."

"Leo's not."

"I hope you're right. Thanks for coming to save me."

"I'm glad I was here. I don't know what he would have done if I hadn't intervened."

"I don't know, either, Jesse, and I don't want to think about it. What I need to think about now is what Leo's gonna do when he finds out what happened."

"It's not safe for you to stay here."

"You're probably right. I'll talk to Leo about it. Thanks again."

Jesse left and Savannah sat down. She couldn't understand how some people's parents could be so different than they were. Her folks liked Leo and supported their being together. They didn't care that he was white. Leo's father might have killed her because she was Black.

"That bitch Maryanne must have gone back to her parents!" Leo shouted. "I've never told my mom where I live. She's asked me several times."

His comment surprised Savannah. "You talk to your mom?"

"I call her every couple of weeks from school to let her know I'm okay. I never tell any more than that."

"You're right. It must have been Maryanne."

They remained silent for a few moments and regretted their kindness toward Leo's cousin had backfired.

"I think we have to move, Leo. The sooner the better."

"Before we do, maybe it would be safer for you to go back to stay with your parents. What if he comes back when you're alone again and Jesse's not here?"

"You think he really would hurt me?"

"I don't want to take a chance."

Savannah didn't want to leave Leo but knew he was right. There was nothing she feared more than a crazy white man. She'd heard stories about what white people did to Negroes in the past. They lynched them for no reason, torched Negro neighborhoods, and massacred people. Savannah didn't want to think about it.

She slept in her parents' house that night. What John had done didn't surprise them. They didn't blame Leo for the way his father behaved. They'd dealt with hostile white people all their lives.

In the days that followed, Leo and Savannah only spent time together in their apartment packing to move. Savannah's parents helped them find another place and offered to pay for movers that could relocate them quickly. Once they were gone, John couldn't threaten the kids anymore. They got a post office box for their school mail so John couldn't trace them and felt safe again.

"I was so scared," Savannah admitted to Leo the first night they slept in their new apartment. "The way he looked at me. All I could see was rage. I wasn't even a human being to him, I could tell."

"It's over, baby. We're safe again. Put him out of your mind."

"What I don't understand is how somebody like you could have somebody like him for a father."

Leo didn't reply. He remembered how he used to feel the same way as his father did about Negroes. He, too, called them niggers. He had changed because of Reggie and Cindy. Leo never thought of them as niggers. He would have punched anyone who called them that vile name. Leo would probably try to kill anyone who called Savannah a nigger. His father almost did.

Leo put off calling his mother. He didn't know what he would say after his father's angry visit. He didn't even know if his mother knew John had gone to the apartment. Leo felt certain he didn't want anything more to do with his parents. He regretted feeling that way but had no choice.

Lucy called the college looking for Leo a month after John's visit. When she couldn't get anywhere with the receptionist, she insisted it was a family emergency and had to reach her son. The receptionist transferred the call to the Registrar's Office. The person who answered knew Leo and Savannah. "Oh, Leo? Yeah, I know him, but I haven't seen him in a while. He doesn't work in this office."

"Well, where does he work?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Could you find out?"

"I'm not allowed to give out that information."

"This is an emergency. It's his father. He's had a heart attack. He's in the hospital."

"Oh, of course. Could you leave a number?"

"Leo has my number. I need to talk to him. Now. Please. It's urgent."

"Okay, I'll look for him right away."

"Hurry," Lucy pleaded. Then she hung up hoping her deception would work.

Leo assumed his mother was lying. He suspected she called him because of what happened between his father and Savannah. He didn't care how his parents felt about Savannah. He was out of their house and their lives. Nothing they did now could make a difference in his life. He knew they wouldn't agree with him, but they had no right to interfere.

He and Savannah talked that evening. "What do you think I should do? Should I believe her?"

"He's your father. Do you still care about him?"

Leo didn't know what answer she expected. After her confrontation with John, she expected Leo to answer no immediately. He hesitated as he thought about how to reply. That was all the answer she needed. Leo may no longer love his parents; maybe he never did, but he still cared about them. He should find out if his father was in the hospital.

"You should call her back, Leo. Just in case she's *not* lying."

They talked again the following night. Both had had a difficult day because of the dilemma hanging over Leo. Savannah wanted him to do the right thing but he would have to decide what that was.

"I called my mother. She admitted nothing was wrong but begged me to listen to her. Then she told me she was worried about me. She said you told my father we were gonna get married."

"Yeah. It just came out. I think it's what set him off. I'm sorry I blurted it out. But, I'm not sorry. We never talked about it and I didn't mean to presume-."

"She tried to talk me out of it. She called you 'that nigger whore,' and told me she was trying to save me from making a mistake I would regret for the rest of my life."

"Do you believe her?"

"The only mistake I'd regret would be *not* marrying you."

Savannah's face glowed. "You mean it?" Leo nodded, smiling. "Oh, Leo!"

"But, maybe you shouldn't take my last name. Maybe I should take yours so nobody associates me with my bigoted parents."

"I don't know. I'd like to be Savannah Cummins. It has a nice ring to it."

"Then that's what you'll be called."

Chapter 17

Marilyn recalled feeling Alexandra's presence in the house after she died. Maybe both she and Leo were still around the place they lived in and loved for so many years. "His spirit is there, even if he isn't," she argued. "Maybe he'll help us find a way out of this." Nathan felt skeptical when Marilyn proposed the idea but hoped she was right. It was their last hope, and both knew it.

They took the box of Leo's journals back to his study. Maybe reading the rest of the journals in Leo's house might somehow reconnect them with his spirit. Perhaps by reconnecting, they could find a way to avoid catastrophe.

They decided to read the rest of the journals as fast as they could to look for facts that would show what happened to Leo and Savannah after they moved. It seemed the incident with John briefly described by Leo didn't dampen their relationship. It took Nathan a while to realize it had the opposite effect. It strengthened the love between Leo and Savannah.

Then Nathan turned the page and read the journal entry he dreaded finding.

'Our wedding day! I never thought I'd ever get married when I was a stupid teenager. I thought girls were only good for one thing. Then I found Savannah and fell in love. Now I can't imagine my life without her. I hope we live long lives together. Maybe even have a kid or two (but not for a while until we're both out of school!) Anyway, today, I'm beginning the rest of my life. I'm the luckiest man who ever lived!'

Nathan looked up from the page. Marilyn sat in the overstuffed chair in the corner, absorbed in reading her journal volume. Nathan sighed. He picked up a pen and started scrawling a note in the journal. Then he felt as if he was burning and tried to call out. A moment later, Nathan dissolved from the room.

Marilyn heard a gasp and felt a whoosh of air. She looked over and saw Nathan was gone. She assumed he'd left to go to the bathroom without saying anything. Then she got up to go see if he was okay. She walked past Leo's desk, felt light-headed, and flopped down in his chair. *What's wrong with me?* she wondered, hoping the dizziness would pass. Her eyes fell on the open journal and she read it. Marilyn realized Nathan hadn't gone to the bathroom. What happened to him was a lot worse. She passed out.

Leo came into his study and found Marilyn sprawled in his chair. "Who are you?"

"I'm..., I'm Marilyn Jacoby," the woman replied. She seemed dazed and confused. Who are *you*?"

"Leo Cummins. What are you doing in my study?"

"*Your* study?"

The woman seems out of it, Leo thought. *I wonder if she's on drugs. I need to get her out of here and get her some help.*

"How did you get in here?"

"I... I don't know."

"Did you come for a reason?"

"Mister, I don't remember anything before this moment."

"Are you on something?"

"*What?* Of course not!"

"Then I think you should leave."

Still feeling groggy, Marilyn nodded. "Okay, I guess."

"You're sure you're all right?" Leo asked as he escorted Marilyn to the front door.

"Yeah. That's my car outside. I'll just go home now."

"I can drive you if you're not feeling well."

"No, no. I don't want to trouble you anymore. I'm sorry I bothered you."

"It's all right. You're sure you're okay?" Marilyn left. Leo watched her walk to her car and drive away.

Alexandra came out of the kitchen. "Was somebody just here?" she asked. Leo was always taking in stray people. She assumed it was one of them.

"Some woman I found in my study. She claimed she didn't know how she got there or why she even *was* there."

"Was she okay?"

Leo shrugged. "She said she was."

"You're sure?" Alexandra asked. Leo nodded.

"Look, I have work to do before Nathan, Carol, and the kids come for my birthday dinner. Do you mind?" he asked.

"Of course not."

"Thanks." Leo headed back toward his study. He passed the long wall filled with photos of the people he knew and loved throughout his life. The most prominent person was his son Nathan.

Nathan was born when Leo and his first wife were in their early thirties. Savannah didn't survive the birth. Leo raised Nathan alone for several years with the help of an excellent nanny.

He met Alexandra when Nathan was five and the boy took to her almost immediately. Leo read Nathan's affection as a good sign and thought Alexandra might prove to be special. She was. They fell in love with each other but only after she and Nathan fell in love first. The day Nathan asked Alexandra to become his mommy was the happiest day of all three lives.

Back in his study, Leo thought about the stranger he'd found there a short time ago. *Did she take anything?* he wondered. Leo looked around. Nothing seemed disturbed. *Was she looking for something?*

He sat and noticed one of his old journals open on the desk. Leo didn't recall taking it out. He kept them for old times' sake. Maybe someday he would write a book about his wonderful years with Savannah and how she changed his life. Her photos were on the wall too, and it felt good to look at them and recall her whenever he passed. It was Savannah who taught him to love.

The journal was open to the entry Leo made the day he and Savannah married. He remembered it well. They had been together for several years and knew each other intimately. He'd described how happy he was on their wedding day. Later, he wrote extensively about their years of happiness in the journal in the years that followed.

Leo noticed other handwriting on the page and wondered how it got there. 'So this is when my life ends,' it read, 'before it even began...'

Leo had no idea if that strange woman wrote it, or why, and had no way of asking her now. He closed the notebook, placed it in the cardboard box with all the other volumes of his journal, shoved the box on the topmost shelf of the closet, and sat down to read his email.

The delightful aromas from Alexandra's cooking wafted in from the kitchen. Leo smiled. *She's making my favorites, he thought. I can't wait. This is going to be my best birthday yet.*

Somewhere in oblivion, Nathan hoped for another chance at life.

PART 2

Chapter 18

Marilyn had trouble recalling where her apartment was. Fortunately, the car remembered and she arrived home a few minutes later. She recognized the massive old house built nearly a century and a half ago. *Oh yeah, she thought, this is where I live. It's nice. Impressive, too.*

She unlocked the front door and climbed the sturdy ancient stairs to the second floor. After she unlocked the apartment door, she went in. "Hi, apartment," she said. "Remember me?" *I wish I remembered me*, she thought, and then wondered why she thought that. Was there something she'd forgotten? Marilyn wasn't sure.

She found a half-full bottle of wine in the refrigerator. After grabbing a glass, she filled it and guzzled half the wine. Then she sat the glass on the kitchen counter. "There, that's better," she said aloud to herself. "Now what the fuck just happened?"

Marilyn didn't know the man whose study she just found herself in, and he hadn't recognized her. "So no one else will know I was ever there," she told herself. "That's good. I can avoid further embarrassment. But, how did I get there? Do I need to see my doctor?"

Fortunately, Marilyn's doctor Robin Crane lived downstairs. This was her big house. Marilyn had rented the apartment for the past fifteen years and planned to live there the rest of her life if she could. She liked to stay in a place for a long time.

Her parents had moved around a lot and Marilyn was always an outsider in whatever new school she attended or neighborhood she lived in. By the time she got to know classmates or made neighborhood friends, her parents pulled up stakes and moved on. Marilyn never knew why.

When she was old enough to learn about secret identities and the witness protection program, she fantasized that her father, mother, or both were former spies hiding from their mortal enemies. She never told anyone her fantasy and her parents never told her why they moved so much.

She gave up wandering when she went to college and stayed in the same place for four whole years. Being settled was so much better that she stayed another two after she earned her bachelor's degree and studied for a master's. She should have taken a position at the college after she graduated. The promised job fell through, however, and she sought employment elsewhere.

Marilyn came to Philadelphia hoping to find work. She lived briefly in a couple of different apartments in the city until she found the apartment in Haverford. The Philly region was home to almost seventy institutions of higher education, but none of them wanted to hire her to teach or do anything else. She transitioned to writing documentation for computer applications and earned enough income to meet her frugal needs.

She had a good life, overall. She worked at home and made her own hours. There was a home office deduction from her income tax. The best part was that she had several close friends who didn't change every few months. She even had a boyfriend or three but never settled down with anyone. They all wanted her to change. Marilyn swore she was never willingly going to change anything in her life again.

Until today, it seemed as if she was in complete control of her life. Now she wasn't sure what her life even was. *Why can't I recall what I had for breakfast this morning, what movie I watched on Netflix last night, or what projects I'm working on?* She knew broad facts about her life but no recent details. It felt as if her life began in the last few hours instead of

nearly forty years ago. *Or, maybe I'm just a character in somebody's novel and the author changed my story for some unknown reason.*

Marilyn could not shake off feeling disoriented and dislocated. She refilled the wine glass and wondered if she ought to call Dr. Robin downstairs. *Maybe she should examine me.* She decided to wait. Perhaps the feeling of displacement would pass. *If it persists, I'll call her tomorrow.*

Marilyn took the wine into her office. Her current projects cluttered the desk. She glanced at them to refresh her memory. *Oh, yeah, that's that new accounting software. What a piece of crap. Nobody's gonna buy it; but as long as they pay me to write the documentation, I don't care.*

She moved the folder aside and looked at another one next to it. *What's this? Oh, yeah. This is that new point-of-sale software. It's way too complicated for a sales clerk without a bachelor's degree to run, but I'm not gonna tell the company that. I'll just write the instructions and get paid. Life is good.*

A pile of papers sat on the corner of the desk. Several large clips held the pages together. *Must be chapters, she thought. Funny, I don't remember breaking anything into chapters recently. What job is this?*

Marilyn picked up the first pile of clipped-together pages and started flipping through them. All the pages had been handwritten, and the handwriting wasn't hers. That wasn't unusual. Clients often gave her their handwritten notes. It was archaic, but she didn't care as long as they paid her.

She read the first handwritten page. 'Those damn niggers were at it again. They packed the school bus and wouldn't shut up. You can't say anything to them because they're looking for an excuse to beat us white kids up. I wish they would all go back where they came from- all the way back to Africa if that's possible.'

Marilyn worried immediately that she'd drunk too much wine. *Have I been writing a novel without knowing it? she asked herself. I wonder if it's any good?* Marilyn always enjoyed good fiction. Reading was one of her favorite ways to relax.

She worked on boring nonfiction manuals that contained dry information and nothing more. Her clients were people that created new software and thought they were creating a wonderful new world run by efficient algorithms that would revolutionize society. Marilyn thought they weren't anywhere close to creating anything new or valuable. There was more real life in any novel than in the efforts of most of the people that hired her. However, they paid her.

She read a few more pages and began to understand what she was reading. It could be a sketch for a novel. There was different handwriting and it seemed a dialogue was underway. After five minutes, Marilyn knew she hadn't written it. *If this is somebody's notes for a novel, how did they get on my desk, and what am I supposed to do with them?*

Marilyn wondered if someone had mysteriously appeared in her office. Maybe the same way she found herself in that stranger's study. She moved the pile of pages to a shelf behind her desk and went to bed.

Wine usually made her sleepy, but not tonight. Marilyn kept thinking about that stack of mysterious papers. If it was a novel, as she assumed, the main character was disgusting. She doubted anyone would want to read about him. However, that other character, the one in the handwritten dialogues, sounded more normal. The notes didn't say much about him.

Marilyn thought whoever wrote it had wasted their time. *It sucks*, she decided, just as she fell asleep.

The next morning, Marilyn ambled into the large kitchen, found orange juice, day-old coffee, milk, and cereal, threw everything on a tray, and carried it to her office. “Let the day begin!” she announced.

The day began.

Marilyn spent most days working in her robe and pajamas and didn’t even comb her hair. She only dressed up for videoconferences. *I love my job*, she thought, smiling. She worked through the morning and felt good about her productivity. She wanted to stay on deadline and it seemed she would. The stack of papers on the shelf behind her didn’t attract her attention until she stopped to get more coffee. Then she couldn’t stop thinking about them.

Where did that shit come from? How did it get into my office? I didn’t write all that. Who did? What the hell is going on? Am I becoming mentally ill?

Marilyn was not a big fan of mysteries. She’d watched a few on TV and mostly figured out whodunit long before the end of the movie. Now she had a genuine mystery on her hands. Fortunately, it didn’t involve a murder. *At least, not yet*, she thought, cynically. *But, I haven’t read all the pages.*

She decided to read them. Maybe there would be a clue about who wrote them, or whom they were about. Marilyn took the first clipped stack of pages to her living room and sat down to read. It was a cloudy day outside and gray somber light came in the window. *Perfect weather for a mystery*, she thought. Marilyn switched on the lamp next to the sofa.

She read the first page again. The page had a date on it. *Maybe it’s a historical novel*, she thought, *set sixty years ago, back in my parents’ day*. She read on, page by page, and a complex and contradictory character emerged. He started out being what her mother would have called a sexist and racist pig but revealed an unexpected emotional dimension when his sister was taken to the hospital. Although he didn’t describe it in words, she felt his devastation when the girl died. *Who is this guy?* she wondered. *Does he have a name? Is he somebody real? Maybe these are notes for a biography or original research taken from an actual diary or journal.*

Marilyn finished the first stack of papers and went back to her office to get the second. This stack had a name on the first page, Leo Cummins. *I never heard of him. Should I have?* Marilyn went to her computer to look up Leo. There were many entries describing academic work he’d done. She found out where he taught, and wondered if she could discover his address.

Her heart nearly stopped when she found it. Leo Cummins was the man in whose study she woke up yesterday afternoon. The old *Twilight Zone* theme music started playing in her head. Marilyn didn’t often have ‘what-the-fuck’ moments. Mostly, her life was stable, sedate, and predictable, and she liked it that way. This blew her mind and she didn’t know what to do. *What possible connection could I have with Leo Cummins?* she asked herself. There was no immediate answer.

Leo was used to strangers appearing at his house asking for help. They usually came to the front door and rang the bell. He had never found one sprawled in his study. He’d hurriedly scrawled the woman’s name after she left. Later, he found the note and started

searching for her online. She was on Facebook and LinkedIn. He looked for her address. She lived two miles from his house. He considered emailing her but thought it best not to. What if she was unstable and thought his email was an overture of some kind? Leo had helped unstable people many times, but none of them ever showed up in his study unannounced. This woman might be beyond his help. *Leave her to the mental health professionals*, he decided.

He couldn't stop thinking about her, however. Who was she, and was there any connection between them? He hadn't recognized her so he assumed he'd never seen her before. She hadn't recognize him, either. She hadn't even known whose house she was in. *But, there must be some reason she was here*, he thought. *What was it, and is it important?* Leo regretted escorting her out so quickly. *Maybe I should have talked to her longer. Maybe she needed my help. Well, if she does, I hope she'll come back.*

Chapter 19

In October of nineteen-sixty-seven, Maryanne walked through the glass doors into the huge Community College lobby and immediately spotted her cousin Leo standing by the long escalators. She called out to catch him before he walked away. “Leo!”

“Hello!” He turned and walked toward her.

Maryanne smiled. “Hi. I didn’t know you were a student here.”

“I just started. Do you go here, too?”

“No,” she replied. “I’m just here to check out the place. My parents don’t want me to go to college, but I think I need to. I hear this place is pretty good. What do you think of it?”

“Well, I’ve only been here a couple of weeks, but I like it so far. It’s not high school, that’s for sure.”

“But, that’s good, right?”

Leo shrugged. “I guess so. I’ll let you know when I get my first grades.” Maryanne laughed.

“So where do I start?”

“See that long desk across the lobby? That’s Admissions. Ask for an application.”

“Okay, thanks. I hope I see you around.”

“Yeah, same here. Let me know what happens. I’d be glad to help if there’s anything I can do.”

“Thanks, again.”

Leo and Maryanne were cousins. Their families spent much time together when they were kids but rarely saw each other now that they were older. Maryanne had a couple of brothers around Daisy’s age. They were still alive. Daisy wasn’t. Leo tried to keep her out of his thoughts.

Leo and Maryanne hadn’t played together much when their families visited because he was a boy and she was a girl. Boys didn’t play girls’ games and girls didn’t play boys’ games. Once they reached adolescence, the games they played changed, of course, but the cousins never thought of playing the new games with each other.

Occasionally, one of his friends came over, saw Maryanne, and asked Leo about her, suggestively. “Eww. She’s my cousin,” Leo pointed out. He was certain Maryanne felt the same way. They hadn’t seen each other in a year or two. They also knew nothing about each other’s teenage lives.

It was nice to see her, Leo thought, later. He hoped she would become a student. Maybe they could catch up and become friends while they attended classes. Leo went up the escalator and headed for his most challenging class.

Professor Marcy Gold presided over the most disciplined classroom at the college. To her students, it was just an English 101 class. To Marcy, it was Life 101-201-301-401- and on into her students adult lives.

She had a reputation as a strict taskmaster. Some students thought she should be teaching at a ‘real’ college instead of what they thought of as an extension of high school. Professor Gold knew Community College was the make-or-break time in her students’ lives. She preferred to ‘make’ them by working them hard and thereby awakening their hidden talents and capabilities. Marcy wanted them to discover inner strengths that would serve them throughout successful adulthoods no matter what careers or lives they led. However, if she

broke them, that was okay, too. At least they would know what they weren't capable of, and could plan their futures accordingly.

She terrified Leo on the first day. He tried transferring to another class but found all the others had filled up. English 101 was required for all freshmen. Leo almost regretted fighting his father for the opportunity to go to college. Maybe he should have joined the Army and gone to war. Basic training seemed easier to than Professor Gold's English 101 class would be.

Professor Gold was never unfairly critical, stern, or harsh, but her praise was short-lived. She might write 'Good Work' at the top of a student's paper. At the end, she might add, 'But you can do better.'

The first paper Leo wrote caused him to interact with her in an unexpected way. 'See me in my office,' she wrote at the top of his paper. *Oh, shit*, Leo thought. *What does she want? Am I flunking so early in my first semester? Maybe my dad was right about the Army.*

Leo found her sitting behind her desk piled with student papers, blue exam books, and several paperbacks. "Did you bring your paper?" Leo nodded. "Please take it out so we can go over it."

Why do we need to go over it? Leo thought. *She already graded it. It's over and done with.* He didn't want to question her aloud and took the paper out of his briefcase. "Do you remember the assignment I gave you?" she asked. Leo nodded. "What did I say?"

"You called the assignment Turning Points. You said we should write something looking back on our younger lives, something that we remembered from when we thought we stopped being children and started becoming adolescents." Professor Gold felt she had to awaken people to their true self-nature. Then she could lead them toward mature self-awareness that would help them lead better lives after they went on in college and beyond. She didn't explain the assignment that way, however. The students would have probably thought she was nuts.

She nodded. "And, what did you write about?"

Leo started feeling uncomfortable. "Um, the first time I... um."

She looked at him. "Go on. The first time you *what*?"

"The first time I had sex. I'm sorry if I offended you, but it seemed relevant. I was just trying to be honest. It was an important moment in my life."

Marcy looked at him. "Why was it important?"

"Because I learned what girls were good for..."

"Explain."

"Little boys can't stand girls. I guess it's the same with little girls- they can't stand boys. Then there's that moment when a boy and a girl connect for the first time in their lives and a whole other world opens up."

"And?"

"And *what*?"

"And, what does *that* mean?"

"Like I said, I learned what girls are good for." Leo thought he saw Professor Gold blush. She reached up and brushed her dark hair away from her eyes. He noticed her gold wedding band.

"I see. And this was a turning point in your life?"

"Oh, yeah."

“Do you still feel that’s the *only* thing girls are for?” Leo didn’t know how to reply. He rarely had feelings toward girls. If someone attracted him he might go after her, or he might not. Some girls were worth the trouble, but some weren’t. Leo prided himself on knowing the difference. He didn’t only want to chase girls who seemed easy. The girls he went after had to be worth his effort, and have something special. And, it wasn’t merely about sex. Sometimes it was about the challenge. Were the girls worth conquering?

They rarely were, but he chased them anyway. It gave him something to think about when his classes were boring. Although he had been a college student for just a few weeks, he’d already noticed several possible conquests. Community College students came from all over Philadelphia. The student body was so big that people could almost remain anonymous and chase their objectives without reputations getting in the way. Leo liked anonymity. It would allow him to prowl more freely.

“Well? You haven’t answered me.”

“Look, professor… that was just an essay. I was just doing an assignment. You can’t punish me for trying my best to do what you wanted me to do.”

Professor Gold looked at Leo. He wasn’t sure how her look made him feel. “What if that’s not all I want from you?” Leo had no idea what Professor Gold meant. “Leo, you’ve had experience with girls. But, have you had experience with *women*?”

It was a weird question. Leo didn’t know how to reply, or if he wanted to. He thought about leaving her office, going down to the Registration Desk, and dropping English 101. *Maybe it would be better if I take it next semester*, he thought. *With a different professor.*

“Be honest.”

“I guess not.”

“Would you *like* to?” Leo wondered what she was getting at. He looked her over. She seemed at least ten years older than he was, early thirties, at most. She didn’t look half-bad, but she wasn’t a girl. That fact frightened Leo. He had always dominated his girls. That was part of the pleasure of being with them. He felt wary of Professor Gold and knew immediately, because she was older, she would likely dominate him. Leo suddenly felt turned on. She noticed.

Marcy had a sweet face that reminded Leo of a storybook maiden. She wore her dark hair up in a bun. Her large glasses magnified her deep green eyes. She had a small mouth and perfect teeth. Marcy was slender but her belly bulged almost as if she was a few months pregnant, only she wasn’t. Leo wondered what she looked like under her ruffled blouse and tweed skirt.

Pleased that he was looking her over, she made her move. “If you’d like to experience another turning point, come back and see me again. If not, I’ll see you in class. Thanks for dropping by. I’m glad we had this little chat.”

So am I, Leo thought, *so am I*. She handed back his paper. He took it and walked out. He covered the bulge in his pants with the essay as he strolled down the hall. *What has she done to me?* Leo had fallen under Dr. Gold’s spell, and would remain there for a long time. The risks and rewards would be far beyond anything his adolescent mind could imagine and he would no longer be an adolescent when she was done with him.

Leo went back to see Professor Gold the following afternoon. She ignored him when he walked into the office. He sat down and waited while she finished grading the paper in front of her. “My impression is that you know a lot about girls, Mr. Cummins,” she said, not looking up.

Her statement startled Leo. "Um, I guess so."

"Don't guess. Either you do or you don't."

"I do."

"That's what I thought. Let me rephrase my question from yesterday- and think carefully before you reply- do you know anything, anything at all, about *women*?"

"Well, I guess so."

"That's not the right answer."

"No, ma'am," Leo replied, meekly.

Marcy nodded. "Thank-you. Would you like to *learn* about women?"

"I guess so."

"There's that guessing again. Here's the first lesson: women like straight answers. Well, certain women do, anyway. They don't have time to waste like the girls you've been dating. They're young and think they have all the time in the world, so they can dillydally. *Women* don't dillydally. They move fast and want men who can keep up. Can *you* keep up?" Leo remembered that time Candace told him she'd always been precocious, and how he assured her he could keep up with her. Was Marcy Gold an older Candace?

"I can keep up, yes, ma'am."

"That's what I hoped you'd say... Now, why did you come in today?"

"I..., I don't recall, exactly."

"Was it because of what we just talked about?" Leo nodded. "Good. And did you have something to *tell* me?"

Leo felt the dynamic had shifted. It was his turn to take control. "No, ma'am." His reply surprised Professor Gold. A look of disappointment creased her brow. Leo had been waiting for that look.

He got up, closed the office door, and walked around the desk to stand over Professor Gold. It was the closest they had ever been, and the professor liked his young, virile presence. She started getting wet.

Leo leaned over, took her head in his hands, gently turned her up to face him, and kissed her softly. Professor Gold reached up, grabbed his head, and pulled his mouth down on hers, hard. After a long kiss, she pulled away, and then smiled. "I'm glad we understand each other," she whispered. "I was hoping I was getting through to you."

Leo assumed they would do it there but the professor stayed in her chair and gestured for Leo to sit in his. Surprisingly, he felt relieved when she did. As he walked around her desk, she noticed the bulge in his jeans.

Leo feared the raw sexual power that had erupted in her small office. There was nowhere to have sex, and he didn't want to mess things up by trying and then failing to meet her needs. He also wondered if all she wanted was a young stud with a hard dick, and he didn't matter to her as a person.

Professor Gold took off her glasses and looked at him. She seemed unaffected by their kiss and Leo wondered if he had imagined it. "So, Mr. Cummins, tell me about yourself. Where do you live? Who are your parents? Any siblings? Where did you go to high school? What are your dreams? What's your future gonna be like?" Leo felt pleased he interested her as a person. He didn't know why that was important to him, but it was.

Leo told her a little about himself. Then she told him a little about herself. "I'm married, as you can see by my wedding ring, but that's all you need to know about me. What

I do at home and what I do here are completely separate areas of my life- like two different worlds.” Professor Gold paused and looked at Leo. The bulge in his jeans hadn’t gone down.

“I’m going to invite you to be a part of my life- a special part- and you must answer me *immediately* without hesitation. You will get *no* second chance to change your mind. Whichever answer you give me will be the right answer; so don’t think, just reply. Is that clear?” Leo felt overwhelmed but nodded anyway. “Good.”

“Wait, Professor Gold.”

“Something wrong?”

“What is it you want from me?” Leo expected her to answer ‘sex’ but she didn’t.

“I don’t want any specific part of you, Leo. I want *all* of you, body and soul, as the saying goes. I don’t do anything halfway. You’re either in, or out. Which is it going to be?”

Leo didn’t hesitate. “In.”

“Come back and see me again tomorrow.”

That’s it? Leo thought. *What’s she doing to me? I can’t wait until tomorrow.*

“It will be worth the wait,” she said as if she read his thought. “I promise.”

Her assurance erased his apprehension. Leo got up without a word and left. Professor Gold smiled. She felt happy to wait and see what happened tomorrow. It would be Leo’s first test. A real test, not a written essay, or a verbal exam, but a life test. She felt certain he would pass.

Leo didn’t feel certain of anything after he left. He liked sex and would do it with any girl he could, regardless of whether he liked her or not. He would screw Professor Gold if she allowed him to. However, would it be the same? Leo felt it would not, and not just because she was an older woman.

There was more to Professor Gold than the other females he’d known. Candace was the only other female he’d ever had a relationship with. It seemed Professor Gold wanted a relationship and not just sex. Leo didn’t know why she picked him, but was willing to give it a go, just to see what happened the next day. He could always pull out if it didn’t feel right.

Or, could he?

The Community College of Philadelphia building had previously been a department store annex. The store had gone out of business, despite being on the major downtown commercial street. There were several other thriving department stores nearby. Too many, as it turned out.

Pine Street was only a short walk from the campus. Several blocks of stately, old row houses lined both sides of the street. Professor Gold had a key to an apartment in one of the houses. It belonged to a friend who traveled a lot. Professor Gold used the apartment whenever her friend was out of town.

When Leo arrived at her office after his last class of the week, Professor Gold handed him a piece of paper with an address written on it. “I’ll be there at ten am tomorrow.”

Leo read the paper but didn’t understand why she’d handed it to him. “Um-.”

“Are you working tomorrow?”

“No, ma’am.”

“You have Saturday plans?”

“No ma’am.”

“I’ll be there all day, maybe even into the evening. There’s plenty of food there.”

Leo wondered if she was inviting him to eat or have sex. *Maybe both*, he thought. *I might need to keep up my strength.*

“I’ll be busy *here* for the rest of this afternoon. Lots of papers to grade today.” Leo turned and left without saying a word. Professor Gold went back to work.

After his work-study shift at the college, Leo thought about Professor Gold as he rode home on the subway. He didn’t know what to expect tomorrow. Leo realized he didn’t know what she had in mind. He decided it was best not to try to guess. She probably had more surprises up her sleeve and hoped he would be ready when he found out what they were. There was no doubt in his mind that he would show up at ten am. He might even stay until dark.

Chapter 20

Leo rang Professor Gold's doorbell well past ten am. He hoped she wouldn't be angry. He also hoped she would still be there.

"Sorry. I've never used the subway on a Saturday before."

She didn't appear annoyed. "Yeah. Service sucks. That's okay. Come in and make yourself comfortable."

Professor Gold wore loose-fitting slacks, a roomy blouse, and sandals. Her hair was down over her shoulders instead of up in a bun as she wore it at school.

Leo looked around. He stood on a worn oriental carpet, and saw a sofa, chair, writing desk, a few lamps, and large drapes that covered the tall windows of the old row house. "Nice place."

"Yeah. I love to work here when my friend is away."

"Your friend?"

"Nadine Wallace. She's some kind of financial wizard. She works with banks as a consultant. I'm not sure what exactly she does but she travels all over the country. She's a financial genius. You would think she would have a fancier place in a new high-rise building in Society Hill or on the Parkway. But, she likes it here because she likes being around old stuff."

"Been friends long?"

"Since junior high school."

"Nice."

"How about you?" Professor Gold asked. "Any close friends?"

Leo shrugged. "Most of the guys I went to school with aren't going to college and I don't see them much anymore. We try to keep in touch but it's hard."

"What about the girls?"

"What girls?"

"The ones you went to high school with?"

"I was never friends with any of them."

"Why not?"

Leo searched for a reason and then something occurred to him. "I guess none of them wanted to be friends with me."

"Not even the ones you had sex with?" Her question should have surprised him but didn't. Leo shook his head. "That's a shame." Leo couldn't understand why she said that. He wanted to ask but decided not to. She might start lecturing on how to treat girls.

There was an awkward silence. Leo didn't know how it felt to her. She seemed in control of the situation. He waited to see what would happen next.

"Um, are you hungry?"

"No, ma'am. I ate breakfast."

Marcy grinned. "Oh, one thing, Leo, before we move on." *To what?* Leo wondered. "When we're alone here, you can drop the 'ma'am.' My name is Marcy."

Leo nodded. "I know. It's a pretty name."

Marcy smiled. "Thank-you. I've always liked it."

"So, Marcy... why did you invite me here?"

"Why did you come?" she countered. Her question surprised Leo.

"I guess..., I thought..., well, you know."

“I don’t know. Why don’t you tell me? Take your time. We have all day.”

Leo had never been a boy who leered at girls or bragged about what he could do sexually. He suddenly felt eloquent. Looking at Marcy, he smiled. “I was planning to undress you... very slowly... but not out here in the living room.” He nodded toward a doorway. “In that bedroom.”

Marcy’s eyes flashed. “Go on.”

“I was planning to look at you. Drink you in. I suspect you are very beautiful underneath those clothes. I can’t wait to get them off you.”

Marcy nodded. “And, *then* what?”

“Then *I* was going to get undressed, unless you wanted to do it for me.” Marcy didn’t react. “Then *I* was going to invite you to lie down in bed with me so I could feel your body.”

“Have you been thinking about my body?”

“Actually, no.” His admission surprised Marcy. She raised one eyebrow. “I was afraid to,” Leo confessed. Marcy liked where this was going. She waited for Leo to continue. She also noticed his arousal. “I knew what would happen. I wouldn’t have been able to concentrate on anything else.”

“But, now that we’re alone, you can,” Marcy said. She stood up, took Leo’s hand, and led him through the bedroom door. “You can concentrate on me,” she whispered after they entered the room.

Nadine’s bedroom furniture looked as if it she bought it when the house was brand-new. There was a large four-poster bed made of dark wood. A filmy canopy draped down from the ceiling. A huge chiffrobe took up one wall. Nadine had made that one concession to modernity. Leo looked down and noticed plush dark carpeting. Leo wondered if the carpet was thick enough to have sex on.

“Yes, it is,” Marcy said. She pulled him close and kissed him. “You can start undressing me anytime you want.”

They spent the rest of the day naked in their private world and didn’t put their clothes on until they were ready to leave. Marcy wanted him to see her naked for as long as possible. She wanted him to drink her in and remember what she looked like when they were no longer together, when he was at home, at work, in class, or riding the subway.

As soon as Marcy let Leo inside her body, she seized his mind. Leo felt her enter the moment it happened and welcomed her. For the first time in his life, he knew what being with a woman was like.

Leo forgot about all the girls he had ever been with except Candace. He knew he would never forget her. Nor did he want to. Nevertheless, he wanted to keep her presence in his memory separate from Marcy’s presence in his consciousness. Candace was part of his past. Marcy, he felt certain, was his future.

“I’m here most Saturdays,” she told him as he was leaving. “Even when Nadine’s in town. She goes to her office on Saturdays.” Marcy smiled. Leo realized he hadn’t seen her warm smile before. She was never stern or grim at the college but seemed mostly serious and matter-of-fact. He liked her smile. It made her look prettier and younger. “Drop by anytime.”

“You know I will.”

As soon as he left, Leo looked forward to going back. The week dragged by and he counted the hours until they could be together again. He saw her in her class and in her office at the college, but they only discussed coursework and other school stuff. They never hugged

or kissed. "What we're doing is, strictly speaking, a big no-no," she explained when they were alone at Nadine's again. "So it's better that no one knows, or even suspects."

Leo wondered if that included her husband. He knew she had one, but never mentioned him. A couple of times he wondered if her wedding ring was fake and she wasn't married. Maybe she used the ring to keep men from hitting on her, or so she could do what she did with Leo and hit on them. Leo didn't care about what she did when he wasn't around, as long as she was around when he showed up on Saturdays.

She was, and she was always ready for him.

They talked much more than they had sex. Marcy liked to do both, and she seemed genuinely curious about Leo. She delved into his past, and wanted to know how he saw his future. Leo felt ambivalent. He didn't like looking too far ahead. Next week, maybe the week after, that was enough. Looking beyond made his head hurt.

"But, what do you want to *be*?" she asked as they snuggled beneath the comforter on Nadine's bed. "When you grow up, I mean."

Leo thought he had grown up already. "You're not, sweetie. Not even close." She had the uncanny ability to read his thoughts. Leo wondered if she was telepathic or had merely talked to many males his age and was good at guessing what they were thinking.

"I can't decide."

"Can't, or *won't*?"

"Don't want to," he admitted.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Planning to live with mommy and daddy forever?"

"God, no!"

"Then where?" Leo thought it might be nice to live with her but quickly suppressed the thought before she picked it up. "Seriously, Leo. Young people think that life goes on forever, but it doesn't. You have to make decisions and find your direction early. You can get lost or get stuck where you don't want to be."

Thinking about his future seemed like too much work to Leo. He doubted what she told him. "I don't know..."

"It's true. I know. It happened to me." Leo assumed she was exaggerating to persuade him to take her seriously. She wasn't. He waited for her to explain.

"You grew up in a neighborhood surrounded by a big city. I grew up in a small town surrounded by nothing at all. Sure, there were farms, but I didn't care about them. They were empty spaces to me."

"My parents ran the general store. They hated being there but couldn't sell it and couldn't afford to walk away to go somewhere else and start over. They felt trapped and died in their trap. I watched them fade away and resolved to get as far away from that town as I could."

"I hitchhiked out on the same day I graduated from the tiny high school. I didn't tell anyone I was leaving, and I knew I would never go back. I didn't care where I was going; I only cared where I was leaving."

"The guy that picked me up asked me where I was headed. I had no idea. He told me he was going all the way to Chicago. It sounded good to me. I had an aunt that lived in Chicago. He offered me a ride, and said it would take a few days. Once we were on the

highway, he slyly told me he couldn't take me along for free. I had money, but I couldn't part with it."

"What did you do?"

"I parted with the only thing I could bargain with."

"You're serious?"

Marcy nodded. "It wasn't so bad. He was actually kind of nice. He offered me a place to stay when we got to Chicago but I turned him down. I didn't know if I wanted to stay there, and I wanted to check out the city before I decided.

"My parents had talked about that aunt but I couldn't find her. I didn't have an address and the phone book wasn't any help. There were many people named Gold, and I didn't even know if that was her last name.

"I gave up, looked for a job, and found one right away in a variety store next to the cheap hotel where I was staying. It wasn't a pleasant place, but it was all I could afford. I think the desk clerk thought I was a prostitute when I showed up. He told me sternly that prostitution was against the law and he didn't allow *that* sort of thing in his hotel. I smiled and promised to be a good girl."

"Were you?" Leo teased. He had become comfortable with Marcy in the month they'd been seeing each other and discovered a few unexpected facets to her personality. She had a wicked sense of humor and a raucous, infectious laugh. She adored bad puns and loved to curl up next to him like a kitten or small child when they were in bed. She almost made him feel as if he was the older of the two. He liked that she trusted him.

"Yes, silly! I was too *busy* to fool around. And, I didn't see anyone around there I wanted to fool around with. It wasn't a bad neighborhood. It was just poor. I had to be careful, but because I was so young and well behaved, I think people looked out for me. I felt safe there, for a while."

"But, only for a while?"

"I woke up one day after dreaming about the tiny town I came from. I realized I had run away from there successfully, but I hadn't run *toward* anything. I was in a sort of limbo, and I didn't like that. I had seen how being caught in a life you don't want ruined my parents. I didn't want the same thing to happen to me."

"So what did you do?"

"That's enough for now. I don't want to tell you my whole story. Then you might stop coming here on Saturdays." Leo knew nothing in the world could stop him from showing up every Saturday. He didn't want to think about a time in the future when she would no longer want him to. Marcy didn't want to think about it either, although it would come. She knew things eventually fell apart. If they didn't, people could end up trapped, and she didn't want that for either of them.

"So what was it like living in Chicago?" Leo asked the following Saturday.

"I got bored with it after a couple of months. So, I left and roamed around. I hitchhiked or took buses. I found the country of my birth was bigger and more interesting than the shitty history textbooks in my school made me think it was. Truth is, I became fascinated, and I wanted to learn more. That's when I decided to become a historian."

"But, you teach English."

"Yes, that's what I *teach*, but a historian is what I am."

“Fascinating.”

Marcy enchanted Leo. He hated to admit it, but he would have never guessed that women like her could even exist. All the older women he knew were like his mother, or friends’ mothers, or neighbor wives and mothers. *They’re all pretty much the same.* Marcy was about as different from these women as anyone could be. It seemed clear that Marcy liked- no, loved- her life. The impression Leo got of the other women he knew was that they hated their lives, and felt trapped in them. Maybe they hated them because they felt trapped.

He began to realize what Marcy had told him was true. ‘You have to make decisions and find direction early or you can get lost and get stuck where you don’t want to be.’ Leo decided he would make his decision early so he could create the life he wanted instead of being stuck in a life random circumstances forced on him. He would be in control of his life the same way Marcy was of hers. It was his important decision. He thought it would be easy to carry it out now that he had made it, but it wasn’t.

The following Saturday, Marcy picked up where she left off the week before. “There’s something you need to understand, Leo. Those other students at the college think they are choosing the lives they want to lead, but they’re not. To them, education is learning a skill, acquiring knowledge applicable to doing a job, and nothing more. There’s nothing wrong with learning skills. I’ve learned several in my short time in this life.”

Leo interrupted her. “Like what?”

“I learned to be a storekeeper, how to hitch-hike around the country, and how to cook. I’m also a half-decent carpenter, although I don’t use that skill much. I also learned how to teach. I think I’m pretty good at *that*.”

“You’re great.”

“I don’t mean in the classroom.”

Leo smiled. “Neither do I. I meant here.”

Marcy felt pleased Leo understood what was happening between them. Being with her was a learning experience. That was not the only purpose of their relationship, but it was the most important one.

“So, I think I know what I’m getting out of this, but what do *you* get out of it?” Leo asked.

“You.” Leo looked at Marcy. She smiled languorously and closed her eyes. After she stretched out beside him, she curled up as if she was ready to nap. He waited for her to say more, but she didn’t. Leo wondered what he possibly had to give her. He knew she liked sex, but that didn’t seem enough from him in return for the life-lessons she tried to impart. *There has to be something else, something more*, he thought. He didn’t know what it was but hoped he would find out as their intimacy went on.

“Last Saturday we talked about the students at the college. Do you remember our conversation?” Leo nodded. “I thought of something I should have added to what I said.” She paused. Leo thought she was going to keep him waiting, as she liked to do before she went on with her thoughts. Sometimes she took a short nap, or made a sandwich. Occasionally, she trotted off to the bathroom, or went out to the living room to read a book or grade a few papers. Leo didn’t know why she did that.

Marcy wanted him to be ready for what she would tell him. She wanted him eager to hear what she had to say. She wanted it to sink in and become part of his essential truth.

This time she didn't keep him waiting long. "It's not about what you *do*. It's about who you *are*."

Well, then, who am I? Leo asked himself.

"I knew when I first met you. I had a feeling," Marcy explained.

"What feeling?"

"That you were someone I could help."

"Help?"

"There's two kinds of teaching. Classroom teaching is for the masses. It works and gets the job done, but it doesn't get at the essential truth."

"What essential truth?"

"The truth of who a person is."

"Oh?"

"Disappointed? You thought it was about spending long Saturdays in bed with me, right?" Her question embarrassed Leo. It also confused him. *Where the hell is she going with this?*

"Leo, most people I met when I roamed around the country that year after high school had one thing in common. They were alive, but didn't know it. Or, to put it another way, they didn't know what it meant to be alive. When I met you, I felt you might be a person who could benefit from knowing. It was knowledge I couldn't teach, however. You had to learn it for yourself. Most people find out at the end of their lives in the last moments before they die. They see themselves clearly for the first and last time, and then they're gone. But, if a person can see when he's young, there's no limit to what he can become."

"You mean, like, famous, or rich, or something like that?"

"No, the people who choose *those* goals are as clueless as everyone else."

"Okay, then what *do* you mean?"

"The only word I can use is *human*."

"But, I already knew that."

"You know your body is human, Leo. But, what about your mind?"

Leo couldn't reply. It occurred to him that he might have to spend the rest of his life trying to figure out the answer. That was what Marcy hoped he would do.

"I think I know what I want to be when I grow up," Leo said later. He was on top of Marcy, lazily moving in and out. She was enjoying his slow, dreamy motion that didn't build toward a climax but extended her ecstasy in time. Marcy liked rising to a sensual cloud and floating there for as long as she could. Leo liked taking her up and watching her face as she enjoyed what he was doing.

"Uh, huh," she said as she felt him pushing into her again. "What?"

"I want to be Leo when I grow up."

Marcy's eyes opened wide. Leo thought she was having an orgasm.

"My God, Leo, I can't tell you how good..." She paused and moaned. "It makes me feel..." she moaned again. Leo felt pleased he was giving her pleasure. "To hear you say that. That's what I've been hoping you would say."

It was such an easy thing to realize, but he didn't know until after he realized it.

Chapter 21

Students at the Community College of Philadelphia often thought of it as an extension of high school. It had a lot more pupils than the high schools they came from, but the classes were all in one large building like most high schools were. Leo thought Temple University would be an extension of Community College, but he was mistaken. It had many, many more students and too many buildings to count.

On the first day of the fall nineteen-sixty-nine semester, Leo felt convinced he would get lost and never be heard from again. *Why did I pick such a big school?* The answer was simple. Temple was the only university he could afford and he received generous financial aid. He would have to make the best of it.

The most important task was finding his first class. He couldn't even find the building. Other students milled around in groups waiting for their classes to start. Leo felt embarrassed approaching them for directions. He thought they'd scorn him for being lost. Worse, they might know he was from Community College and make fun of him. Leo didn't need that today. He needed directions.

He noticed a girl stopped at the intersection of two walkways. She looked down at a piece of paper, and then looked at nearby buildings. She looked like she was just checking where she had to go next and didn't seem as lost as Leo was.

“Excuse me. It’s my first day and I’m confused.”

“Get used to it. I’ve been here two years and I’m *still* confused.” She was a slender blonde with a sweet face and bright eyes, a bit taller than most other girls Leo knew. If he hadn’t felt helplessly lost, he might have considered hitting on her.

“Oh, well... ah, I’m supposed to be in McMonagle Hall-.”

“Oh, that’s on the other side of the campus!” *The other side?* Leo thought. *The Community College campus just had other floors. Maybe I should go back there.*

“Don’t give up yet. I happen to be going there. I can show you. I was just stopping to check my roster.”

“As long as you wouldn’t mind being seen with a lowly transfer student.”

The girl frowned. “Being seen? Nobody sees me here. I’m mostly just a number. No one pays any attention. Not even in my classes.” Leo couldn’t believe what she said. The girl was pretty. Were guys at Temple stupid?

“I find it hard to believe no one pays attention to you. You’re very pretty.”

The girl didn’t reply immediately. She frowned at Leo. “Uh, are you a real student, or are you just on campus trying to pick up girls?”

Leo felt embarrassed for the first time in his adolescent life. “No, I’m a real student. Let me show you my roster.” He pulled the paper from his jacket pocket.

“Oh, Leo Cummins. Nice name. I’m Alexandra Malone.”

“Nice to meet you.”

They walked across campus and entered McMonagle Hall. She walked him to his classroom. Leo thanked her profusely for helping him. “Look, since this is your first day, if you need to find your way around, I’d be glad to help you. Meet me at the front door after class.”

“But, the school day is just beginning.”

“Yes it is, but your next class is in a different building.” Leo panicked. *How the fuck did that happen? Are those people who make class rosters trying kill new students?* He again

considered going back to Community College. “Don’t worry. You’ll get used to it pretty fast. In a week you’ll be able to find most of your classes blindfolded.” Leo didn’t want to be blindfolded because that would mean he wouldn’t be able to see Alexandra. He already liked looking at her.

She walked Leo to his next building but didn’t go in with him. “My next class is back at McMonagle,” she explained.

“You mean you went out of your way just to show me where to go?” he asked. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

Alexandra grinned. “Buy me a coffee at lunch. If you can find the cafeteria, that is.” Leo knew he would find the cafeteria was if it was the last thing he did.

“So what’s your major?” Leo asked when they sat down at lunch. It was a compulsory question. A student’s major defined him or her. There was a hierarchy of majors on every campus. Students in most majors thought theirs was the most important in existence. They often didn’t even connect with people in other majors. The schools were so big they didn’t have to.

“Anthropology.”

“What’s that?”

“Let me see... how does the catalog describe it? ‘The study of human societies and cultures and their development.’”

“Which is...?”

“The study of human biological and physiological characteristics and their evolution.”

Leo nodded. “Oh, right.” Alexandra grinned. Her bright smile made him sparkle somewhere inside.

“There are four major fields,” she went on. “Biological anthropology, cultural anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and archaeology.” Leo knew what archaeology was. Alexandra didn’t look like somebody who poked around in dusty tombs. At least, he hoped she wasn’t.

“So which one are you?”

“Cultural. I like studying societies. People don’t realize it but they are part of several societies and cultures in their lifetimes. Each one has rules of behavior, shared values and practices, and sometimes strict rules.”

“Rules?” Leo had never been a big believer in rules. He had never seen them as having any other use except controlling people, especially adolescents like he was.

“Like taboos. Stuff you can’t do if you want to stay in the group.”

“Like what?”

Alexandra thought for a moment. “Having sex with your sibling is a big one.” She noticed Leo’s face darken and worried she’d offended him by mentioning sex, or had hurt his feelings.

“That’s not a problem. I don’t have a sibling... anymore.”

Alexandra looked worried. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“No, it’s all right. She died a long time ago. It hits me every once in a while when I least expect it.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen.”

“And how old was she?”

“Ten.”

“My God! That must have been awful for you and your parents.”

“I think it was, but I didn’t understand it at the time. I’ve only come to understand since I’ve gotten older.”

Alexandra sympathized. “I bet it still hurts, though.” Leo nodded. He didn’t think he ought to mention the ongoing hurt that lasted long after his sister’s death. *Yes, losing Daisy the way I did still hurts, but what hurts more is the way my parents turned cold toward me. They’re not the same now as they were back when Daisy and I were kids. They were warm and happy when we were just one family. Now I don’t know what we are, but we don’t feel like a family anymore, just three people living under the same roof.* Leo didn’t say any of this aloud. He didn’t want to drive Alexandra away before he even got to know her.

“What about you?” he asked.

“It’s just my mom and me. She’s never told me much about my dad. We’re very close. We have to be. We live in a one-bedroom apartment near the northern end of the subway line. We sleep in the same bed.”

“It’s nice that you’re close,” Leo replied. He wanted to add ‘I envy you,’ but didn’t.

“Wow. This got heavy fast, didn’t it? So what do you like to do for fun, Leo Cummins?”

Leo didn’t have an answer. He couldn’t tell Alexandra that he used to spend Saturdays with Marcy for fun. Then she told him her friend Nadine was giving up the apartment and moving to another city because she found a new job. Leo suspected Marcy was lying, but it was okay. She didn’t owe him anything. She had given him more than anyone else in his young life. If it was time for her to move on, that was okay with Leo. He was graduating, anyway.

Their last Saturday together was bittersweet. She handed him a small wrapped present before they parted for the last time. He wanted to cherish it unopened. She insisted he open it before he left. He untied the ribbon and began carefully removing the paper. “It’s okay if you tear it,” she insisted. Leo opened the box after he unwrapped it. It was empty. He looked at Marcy, puzzled.

“It’s empty now,” she explained, gently. “You’re going to fill it with yourself, and then, at the end of your life, you’ll know what I gave you.”

“I didn’t give you anything,” Leo apologized.

“Oh, but you did! More than you could possibly know. And, I’ll always be grateful. Thanks for everything, Leo.” That was all she said before she kissed him for the last time and closed the apartment door behind him.

Leo stood on the steps outside the house. It looked just like all the other row houses on Pine Street, but it was unique. Inside was a different world. He didn’t like leaving that world but knew he had to. He thanked Marcy silently for letting him share her world and then walked to the subway.

Leo didn’t ride downtown for school anymore. He now got off the subway at a stop long before the train reached City Hall, and emerged from the subway into a new and different world. Leo wasn’t certain he was ready for that new world, but Marcy felt certain he was. She had prepared him for it.

Leo and Alexandra often rode the subway together after the school day. He usually got off before she did. Sometimes he rode to the end of the line and walked Alexandra to her

apartment. Then Leo went back to the subway and rode to where he usually got off so he could ride the trolley home.

Leo's parents' house had stopped feeling like a home long ago. His mother and father didn't talk much. He had the feeling they lived in separate little worlds now. They didn't ask about Temple, his work-study job in the library, or anything else. If they talked at dinner, it was mostly about the weather.

Lucy, his mother, tried to talk to Leo occasionally. It was usually awkward and ended without either of them saying much. Leo felt she was reaching out, but for what he didn't know. *Maybe she wants her little boy back*, he thought, *the little boy who once needed her, who she took care of*. Leo felt sorry for her.

He didn't know what he felt for his father John, who rarely spoke to him. If John had feelings, he never showed them. He never even got angry anymore. Leo assumed his parents slept as far away from each other as they could in their double bed. He felt sorry for them. *This must be what Marcy told me happens to most people*, Leo thought. *I'm not gonna let it happen to me. My life is going to be different*.

One afternoon Alexandra invited him to come in when they reached her apartment. Leo thought she wanted him to meet her mother and happily agreed. Alexandra unlocked the door, led him up a narrow stairway to the second floor, and unlocked the apartment door. Leo noticed a mezuzah on the doorframe. They entered a small, uncluttered, and spotlessly clean living room. A tarnished menorah stood on a high shelf. Leo hadn't known Alexandra was Jewish. Behind it was a galley-style kitchen. Alexandra invited Leo in and closed the door behind him.

She pointed to a closed door. "That's the bedroom. It's bigger than out here," she explained. Leo assumed her mother was inside.

"Is your mom asleep?" he asked.

"She's at work. Won't be back until around nine tonight." Alexandra's mother Bea worked as a bookkeeper at a small factory a short bus ride from the apartment. Once a month she stayed late to prepare the next day's payroll.

"Wow. That's late."

"She doesn't mind. It gives me time alone for quiet so I can study... or..."

"Or, what?"

"Invite a friend over sometimes."

"Anybody in particular?" Leo asked expecting she would tell him about her neighbors or girlfriends. She and her mother had lived there for a many years and knew several other people.

"Well, *you're* here. Isn't that enough, for now?"

"Oh, yeah."

"You don't have to leave right away, do you?"

"No. My parents know my days can be long."

"So, you can hang out a while?" Leo nodded. "Want a soda?" Leo nodded again.

Alexandra went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Oh, shoot, all we got is Tab. It's what my mom likes."

"What's Tab?"

"It's a diet cola Coke makes. It's new."

"I'll try it if your mom won't mind."

"There's not many left. We'll share a can if that's okay."

“Sure.” Alexandra popped open the can and handed it to Leo. “You’re the guest. You get the first sip.” Leo took the can, sipped the liquid, and grimaced. “Don’t like it?”

“I guess you have to get used to it.” Alexandra nodded, took the can from Leo, and guzzled Tab. He liked the slurpy noises she made. They seemed sexy.

“So, Leo. Do you have a girlfriend?”

Leo felt awkward. “Um, I don’t know how to answer that question.”

Alexandra grinned. “I was just curious. I would think a good-looking guy like you would have several.”

“Um, not right now, no.” *But, Leo began to realize, I might have one soon, maybe real soon.*

She waited for him to ask if she had any boyfriends. He didn’t care. If she did, they weren’t here and he was. *Their loss*, he thought. *Let’s see how far she wants to go.* Leo took the soda can from her hand. She thought he wanted another sip. He sat the can on the small kitchen table. Then he leaned over and kissed Alexandra on her lips.

“I thought it might taste different,” he joked.

“Did it?”

“Yeah. I like it now.”

“Oh, good.” She stood up and put her arms around Leo. Then Alexandra kissed him harder.

“Are you sure about this?” Leo asked.

“It’s just a kiss, Leo.”

“But, we both know what kisses lead to.”

Alexandra smiled. “I can’t wait. My mom’s not coming home for hours. Wanna get started?”

Bea stayed home at night because she couldn’t afford to go out, not even to the movies. She watched them on her small bedroom TV and enjoyed other nighttime shows as well. After dinner, she made a large batch of popcorn and grabbed a can of Tab. She then closed the bedroom door.

Alexandra always called out when she and Leo arrived after a date. Bea yelled ‘hello’ from her bed. “She’s settled in,” Alexandra whispered. Her mother never went anywhere except the bathroom once she closed the bedroom door every night. They had the rest of the apartment to themselves.

The couple tiptoed into the kitchen. Alexandra turned her back to Leo, lowered her slacks and panties, and let him enter from behind. He always made her glow. Her mother never caught them doing it. Leo didn’t know what he would have done if she had. Then he realized she probably knew they were making love and didn’t care.

Leo liked Alexandra’s mother, a lot.

Chapter 22

Bea asked Leo to sleep at the apartment when she had to stay in the hospital. "Just so I know Alexandra's safe," she told him. "It'll only be for a short time. It would mean a lot to me if you could be there." Leo didn't care how long it would be. He was happy to do it.

She never came home.

Alexandra couldn't forgive her mother for dying. "I warned her about those damn Tabs! There are rumors they contain a dangerous chemical that causes cancer."

"Did you mention it to her doctors?"

"Yeah. They told me it *wasn't* cancer. She had a heart condition for years she never told me about. But, how do I know the Tabs didn't make it worse?"

"You gotta stop thinking about it, Alexandra. She's gone."

"I *know* she's gone, Leo. What's gonna happen to me now?"

"Your life will go on without her. That's what happened to me when Daisy died. I never got over it, but I went on."

"Leo, you obviously don't understand. She was all I had. I'm all alone now."

"No, Alexandra. You're wrong. You're *not* alone. You have me."

"You mean that?" Leo nodded. "You're not gonna leave me alone?"

"How could I?"

"I don't want you to stay because you feel sorry for me or because you just want to take care of me."

"I'm not. I love you, Alexandra." Leo had never said it before. The spontaneous way he said it now shocked him, but he knew it was true. He never knew until now that he could love. Maybe Marcy did and that was why she befriended him.

"Leo... I... I... think I love you, too."

"You don't have to say that. I'm not going anywhere. I'll move in permanently if you'll let me."

"Let you? I'll *help* you!"

Living together was new. The freedom of their own place made up for their lack of money. Together, they earned barely enough to cover rent, frugal meals, and subway fare.

The kids were happy together in the daytime but the nights were hard. Alexandra had a hard time getting over her mother's sudden death. She slept next to Leo but remembered sleeping next to her mother all those years. While it made her happy to have Leo beside her, the reason he was there weighed on her.

Alexandra felt there was something she ought to have done to help her mother before her heart condition became terminal. "Maybe I should have quit school and got a job. Then she could have stayed home and rested and she would still be here," Alexandra said. "What fucking good is getting a degree in anthropology if my mother can't be there to see me graduate?"

Leo knew how survivors blame themselves for not seeing their loved one's death coming. He soothed her when her grief overwhelmed her. She always calmed down. They usually went to bed and made love. Alexandra fell asleep relaxed. A few hours later, she woke Leo by thrashing and crying out wildly. He shook her gently, woke her, and then held

her for a long time. Alexandra kissed him and fell back to sleep. She awoke again when the alarm went off but rarely felt rested.

Leo felt helpless.

As he held her, she sometimes talked about her nightmares. "That one was about a fire. She reached out to me, but then told me to run. And, I did! I escaped. She got killed."

"That one was about a blizzard. I begged her not to go to work, but she went anyway. I waited by the window. She never came back."

"That one was about her drowning in Atlantic City. We never even went there. My mom *hated* the beach!"

Leo was glad he was there to soothe Alexandra in the middle of the night. He also envied her love for her mother. Leo realized he had no memory of loving his parents. He assumed he felt love once, but it must have been a long, long time ago and he'd forgotten.

He also lamented that his parents seemed so distant from each other and wondered if his moving out might change them, bring them closer together, or help them heal from Daisy's sudden death, finally. Leo doubted it and felt sorry for them. It was the first time he'd felt anything for his parents in years. Between his parents' estrangement and Alexandra's grief, it was the first time he thought about healing as something people needed to do. He wondered how a person helped other people heal and decided to look into it.

Maybe I could become that kind of person, Leo thought.

After her graduation ceremony, Alexandra and Leo took the subway from the stadium where Temple held the formal event and went to Chinatown. It was their first time eating in a real restaurant. They couldn't afford it but agreed it was the best way to celebrate. They would go without lunches for a couple of days to make up the money they splurged on dinner.

When they got back to the apartment they found an envelope addressed to Alexandra. It was from Leo's parents. Leo wondered what was inside and watched apprehensively as she opened it. Alexandra took out an ornate card that read *Congratulations Graduate!* A paper fluttered out when she opened it and landed on the floor. Leo bent down to pick it up and gasped.

"What's wrong?" Alexandra asked.

"Look at *this!*" He handed the paper to Alexandra. It was a check for one thousand dollars. The memo field read, 'Congratulations.'

"Is this real?" Alexandra asked.

"Looks real to me."

"Is the bank still open?"

"Not 'til tomorrow."

"Shit."

Leo grinned. "I think it will be safe until tomorrow."

"Let's hide it somewhere, just in case."

"How about under our pillow?"

"Great idea!"

Leo called his mother a couple of days later to thank her. "Oh, it was nothing," Lucy said.

"It wasn't nothing, Mom." They fell into an awkward silence.

“Is Alexandra there?” Lucy asked.

“Yes.”

“Could I talk to her?”

“I guess so.” Leo called to Alexandra in the bedroom. ‘My mother wants to talk to you,’ he mouthed when she peeked through the bedroom door.

“I guess it would only be right for me to thank her personally,” Alexandra whispered as she took the phone.

“Hello, Mrs. Cummins.”

“Please, call me Lucy.”

“Thank you for your *very* generous gift. You didn’t have to do that.”

“We felt we did. We also felt it was time you guys came for dinner. Or, we could take you out. Would that be okay?”

“I’ll talk to Leo and he’ll get back to you.”

“Make it soon. I’d like to get to know you better.”

“Me, too.” *Why did I say that?* Alexandra thought. *I don’t even know if I like this woman. Leo certainly doesn’t like her. He’s going to hate me.* “Um, I gotta go but it’s been nice talking to you. Should I put Leo back on?” Leo shook his head vigorously. “Oh, wait, he just went to the bathroom.”

“That’s okay. We can talk when you guys come for dinner. Don’t forget to ask him and call me back soon.”

“Thanks, again. ’Bye.”

“Bye.” They hung up.

“What the heck is going on with your parents, Leo?”

“I don’t know, but I have to believe this is a good sign.”

Alexandra felt confused. “*What?*”

“They’ve been weird since my sister died. Maybe they’re finally coming out of it. You don’t know what it was like living with them for the past several years. It wasn’t living; I don’t know what to call it.”

“No wonder you were so eager to move in with me.”

“I’d go back to my parents tomorrow if doing that would bring your mom back.”

Alexandra sniffled and put her arms around Leo. He hugged her tightly. “Maybe they have changed. I hope so, for your sake,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“Leo, you have no idea what it’s like to lose a parent.” Leo thought he did, in a way. However, he understood what she meant. His mother and father weren’t dead, as Alexandra’s mother was. He shook his head. “Let’s visit them and see if they’ve changed. We kinda owe it to them for that check they sent.”

“I don’t think they’ll cancel it if we don’t go,” Leo joked.

“But, I don’t want you to think I’m doing this just because of the check. I’m doing it for *you*- and them.”

“I appreciate that. Let’s turn in.”

They went to bed. It was the first night in a while that Alexandra slept peacefully.

John and Lucy were all smiles when Leo and Alexandra arrived. John offered drinks but they declined politely. Lucy told them she was making meatloaf for dinner and Alexandra

lied and said it was one of her favorites. Lucy beamed. They sat down at the dining room table a short while later. Lucy carried in platters heaped with meatloaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, and creamed corn.

“Mom, this reminds me of Thanksgiving dinner.” Pleased her son recalled the lavish meals she used to prepare every year, Lucy smiled.

Alexandra gasped when she saw her platter. “Oh, no, that’s way too much. I can’t possibly-.”

“Eat what you want and take the rest home in a doggie bag. Please, enjoy!”

They dug into their food and ate in silence for a few minutes.

“This is great, Mom.”

“Yes, it is, Mrs. Cummins.”

“It’s excellent, Lucy!” Leo couldn’t recall ever hearing his father compliment his mother. He smiled at his father. He couldn’t recall the last time he smiled at either of his parents. *What’s happening here?*

“Look, my friends tell me that it’s hard for a young couple starting out these days with school, jobs, an apartment, and all the other stresses of daily life. If you guys ever need anything...,” John said.

“We get along okay, Dad.” Leo hadn’t said much to his father in over a year. He hadn’t said the word ‘dad’ longer than that.

“Just let us know... okay?” Lucy added. Leo nodded. *What the fuck are they up to? Why are they being so nice? Do they want to be involved in our lives? They almost ignored me for years and now they want to be friendly. Is it because of me, or Alexandra?*

Then the reason hit Leo. His parents saw Alexandra as a replacement for Daisy.

“I feel flattered,” Alexandra said when they were alone later and Leo told her what he thought. “But, I don’t know if I want anything to do with them.”

“I don’t know if I do, either, but at least they’re trying. Maybe...”

“Maybe *what*? Maybe you guys can become a real family again?” Leo nodded. “Well, good for *you*, Leo!” Alexandra seemed jealous. Leo was her family now that her mother was gone. He was all the family she needed or wanted. If he wanted to reunite with his parents he could go ahead, but they weren’t her parents and she didn’t know if she even liked them.

“Maybe if we got to know them...,” Leo suggested. “You would like them, a little.”

“This is important to you isn’t it?” Leo nodded. “Why?”

“Because of who we are, or maybe were, a long time ago.”

“I don’t understand.”

“We were the Cummins family, and then we weren’t. There were four of us, and then only three. We were all hurting after Daisy died. We never discussed it with each other. I don’t know if they had nightmares like you did. I didn’t have any, but a lot of other stuff happened to me. Most of it I’m not proud of.”

“Do I want to know?” Leo shook his head. “Okay, I’ll do it, but only for you. I owe it to you for what you’ve done for me.”

“I only did what any loving man would do for his woman.”

Alexandra’s eyes widened. *That’s how you think of me, as your woman?* Leo thought he’d made a huge mistake. He nodded sheepishly. “I *like* that. It has a nice ring to it. I’m glad I’m your woman.”

“So am I, Alexandra. So am I.”

They went to bed and found new places within each other to deepen their love. Afterward, Leo and Alexandra knew they wanted to be together for the rest of their lives. Leo felt he'd finally grown up.

Chapter 23

Leo and Alexandra had never seen a whole block of stately old Victorian houses before. There were similar individual houses in the neighborhood where Leo grew up but not whole blocks of them. Some sat far back from the sidewalks and walls or fences hid them. Leo had mostly walked by without noticing. He noticed this one, however. Maybe it was because he and Alexandra were looking for a new place to live.

“Can we afford this?” Alexandra asked, in awe.

“The rent’s reasonable. The question is, is it the right place for us?”

“God, I hope so. It’s magnificent.”

The rental agent had given them the keys and told them to go in even if she hadn’t arrived yet. Leo unlocked the dark oak door that had been there since the day the builders finished construction. They walked into a tiled vestibule and then opened a second door into a long hall. The polished wood floor, high ceiling, and dark wainscoting charmed them.

“My God!” Alexandra said in the voice she often used after vigorous lovemaking. She sometimes exhausted Leo but not until he took her to the peak of orgasm. Leo started getting turned on. Alexandra didn’t notice. The house was exciting her now.

“Yeah, it’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he commented.

They explored the old place. There was an outdated but serviceable kitchen and four decent-sized bedrooms. “This one’s my workroom,” Alexandra said as she walked around the smallest bedroom.

“Okay, I’ll take that other room downstairs for my study.”

They paused as they realized they were mentally moving in, even before they signed a lease, even before they knew if they could rent it.

“Do you think it’s still available?” Alexandra asked.

“The realtor said a few others were interested.”

“I hope she gets here soon so we can tell her we’re taking it!” Alexandra said. Leo hadn’t realized they’d decided and smiled. Maybe they would get to make love later in their new old house. He couldn’t wait.

The house still looked empty after they moved in. It had more rooms than they had pieces of furniture. Leo had a desk, a rickety old chair, and a bookshelf in his study. Alexandra had a table in her workroom that she scrounged from somebody’s trash. They also had a bed, a dresser, a kitchen table and two chairs, a TV, and a sofa. Aside from kitchen utensils, linen, and many books, that was all they owned.

But, the house! That was magnificent. As they roamed around the first few weeks, they discovered architectural features and flourishes that charmed them. *Somebody put much love into this place when they built it*, Leo thought. *I hope we can put as much love into it for as long as we live here*. He knew they would try.

Alexandra taught anthropology at a girls’ college ten minutes away. Leo taught history on a campus he could walk to in good weather. Life was good. Their salaries were decent enough and their lifestyle frugal enough so could save money every month. A few years later, when the owner decided to sell the house, Leo and Alexandra agreed to the asking price immediately and the place became theirs.

Owning wasn’t the same as renting, however. The house’s problems were the owner’s problems when they were tenants. They became the couple’s problems after they bought the place. They handled the problems and kept the property up as best they could. It wasn’t the

fanciest or best-kept house on the block. Nor was it on any of the holiday house tours every December, but it looked presentable year-round, and they never stopped loving it.

“I missed my period,” Alexandra said. At first, Leo panicked. He thought there might be something wrong with her. Then he realized nothing was wrong and hoped something was very, very right. Her pregnancy test came out positive and she saw a gynecologist for confirmation.

She gave birth to Nathan Alexander Cummins in the late spring of their third year in the house. Lucy and John visited the maternity ward an hour after Leo called them. Leo had stayed with Alexandra during her long labor and his parents found him asleep in the waiting room. Alexandra teased him for years that she did all the birthing work but he was the one who passed out. Leo felt grateful he didn’t have to give birth. He didn’t think he would survive the ordeal he’d witnessed.

Baby Nathan made the ordeal worth it. They took him home three days later. As soon as she recovered from childbirth, Alexandra went back to teaching and they hired a nanny to care for the infant. Leo worked close enough to home that he could drop everything if the nanny needed him. They felt secure in their new life as parents. ‘We can do this,’ they told themselves late at night when the baby wouldn’t go to sleep or woke up crying.

Marjorie, the nanny, was an older woman who liked the couple the moment she met them and hoped they would hire her. Despite their declaring they were new at this and out of their depth, she could tell they were a calm, capable, and loving couple who would make great parents. She was right.

Nathan Alexander was a healthy, good-natured baby who grew into a sweet child. Lucy and John wanted to be doting grandparents but lived far enough away that they couldn’t hang around all the time and drive Leo and Alexandra crazy. Life was good, and they knew it.

It was about to get more interesting. Leo thought he knew himself well, and knew what the rest of his life would be like. A quiet life on a suburban Philadelphia campus seemed good compared to what faculty at other schools had to deal with.

He thought back to Marcy who had complained about how her daily teaching grind overwhelmed her. She seemed calmly in control of her life when she and Leo spent Saturdays together. However, she wasn’t. There were too many students competing for her attention, and too many meetings that sapped her strength and stole her time. It was no wonder her husband complained he never saw her and eventually left her. She often thought she would have done the same thing if the situation had been reversed.

Leo wondered if she survived. He would have liked reaching out to her but thought Alexandra might object. She knew little about Marcy. Leo told her only enough to make it clear they had a months-long intimacy that ended warmly. He didn’t show Alexandra the little empty box Marcy gave him on their last Saturday together. It was in the closet in his study. Leo hoped he might understand why she gave it to him someday.

“You remind me of my dad,” Roger began.” Leo wondered if that was a good thing or a bad thing. “He’s a bit older than you but you could be my uncle.”

“Where is your father?”

Roger looked away. "He just died."

"I'm sorry to hear that. When's the funeral?"

"Soon, I think, but it doesn't matter."

"Funerals are important. Of course, it matters. Are you leaving school?" Roger shook his head. "I can't go."

"Why not?"

"I grew up in rural Oregon. My family has always been poor. It didn't matter because we were happy, mostly. I loved school, got amazing grades, and I'm here on a full scholarship. My parents didn't have to pay a dime."

"That's good."

"Yeah, in a way. But it means there's no money for me to get back home for my father's funeral. My mom's going to barely scrape by now living on just her wages."

"I'm sorry. This must be hard for you."

"I really loved my dad. And, I love my mom. I have a brother and sister, too. They'll be there for her, but they don't have money to send me either. So I'm stuck here."

Leo understood why the student came to him. They had developed a special connection in class. Roger seemed to have a deeper interest in history than the other students did. Most took Leo's class because it was an elective. It wasn't easy (no class at Leo's college was) but it wasn't impossibly hard, either. Leo tried to keep it interesting enough that his students got something of value out of the course even if they weren't aware of it right away.

He considered a familiarity with history to be essential to living a well-informed life. "Knowing where you came from is important in helping you choose where to go," he told his students. "It's not just your personal choice that's important. It's important to the choices made by your community, your town or city, and your country. You should be part of that."

There was nothing wrong with needing help. Leo wanted to help Roger, but he wanted the student to ask. He felt it was important for people to get used to asking for help. A person wasn't weak because they needed something. They could become stronger because they asked. It showed they were self-aware and aware of others. People who asked for help sometimes were often best suited to give it.

"Could you... would you...? I mean... I need... Please, I want to go home. Please lend me the plane fare. I'll pay you back. Or, I could work it off. I promise." Leo felt Roger was the kind of responsible young man who would keep any promise he made.

"How much is it?"

"Three hundred dollars."

"How soon do you need it?"

"As soon as I can get it. They might be able to postpone the funeral if I tell them when I'm coming back. I'd hate to miss it."

"I'd hate for you to miss it, too."

Alexandra discovered the money was missing a couple of days later. She asked Leo if he knew what happened to it. When he told her, she looked stunned. "You did *what*?"

"I gave it to Roger. He's going to pay it back."

"But, that was our rainy day money we were saving to fix up the kitchen."

"I know, but I felt like I needed it to save that kid's life. You and I both know what it's like to lose someone important. I had to help him out."

Alexandra sighed. "I guess you did." It was too late to argue. "I hope he comes back."

“He will.”

Roger didn’t come back. When he arrived home, he discovered how bad life had become for his family. His mother lost her job when she skipped work to take care of his dying father. She wanted Roger to go back to college but he felt he couldn’t; at least, not right away. He wrote a long letter apologizing to Leo, explained what was happening at home, and promised to pay Leo back every dollar he borrowed. Leo didn’t care. He also didn’t tell Alexandra.

Word got around the campus that Professor Cummins wasn’t like the other teachers. It wasn’t just that he was younger. The students felt he understood their lives better than the older teachers did. Some had been there for decades. Most were excellent academically, but life’s nuances escaped them. The reason was simple. They had forgotten what it was like to be young. Also, the world they had been young in was long gone.

Leo remembered his youth and sympathized. He knew it wasn’t easy being a student. He and Alexandra had struggled separately and then together just to survive and graduate. Leo also knew he was luckier than most other students because of two women.

If it were not for Marcy and Alexandra he would not be who he was. Marcy intervened in his aimless life when he needed it. Later, Alexandra completed his life when he fell in love with her. He wanted to have the same transformative impact on students the two extraordinary women had on him. He wanted to help the ones that needed it the most.

However, he decided not to seek them out and offer help. There were campus services that took care of that sort of thing. He waited until they reached the point where they sought him out. First, they had to overcome their apprehension. It was part of the process of growing up to understand and ask for what you needed.

Leo waited. They came.

Alexandra sighed whenever the doorbell rang unexpectedly. Sometimes she called out, “Leo! It’s probably for you.”

Although Alexandra taught at a college like Leo’s, she did not have the same reputation. No students knew she and Leo were married. She used her maiden name on campus and kept her distance. Student problems were for student services to take care of. Alexandra had enough work teaching her anthropology classes. Everyone considered her a good teacher because she made an obscure discipline accessible.

She also refashioned Leo’s statement about history. “He only teaches them history, which is mostly made up of trivia,” she joked with friends at parties. “I teach them their *essence*, which is an inescapable truth. You can deny history, but you can’t deny human nature.” Her listeners usually looked at Leo to see if Alexandra’s wry comment provoked him.

Leo nodded sagely. “My wife is right, of course. Always.”

Alexandra usually smirked and muttered, “Damn straight.” Everyone laughed and envied the couple.

Eventually, it was not only the students who sought Leo’s help.

Chapter 24

After the class ended, Leo reached for his jacket after he stuffed papers in his briefcase. He happened to look up. A lone woman sat in the back row of the lecture hall. All the other students had left.

“There’s no class meeting in here until tomorrow,” he said.

“I know. I’m not a student.”

“Oh? Then why are you here?”

“It’s warmer than being outside on the street.”

“You mean you have nowhere to go?” The woman nodded. Leo left his jacket and briefcase and walked up the steps toward where the woman sat. She was petite, but he could tell from her face that she was too old to be a student. “You want to talk about it?”

“I got kicked out of my place.”

“Where did you live?”

“One of the small buildings nearby. You probably never noticed it.”

Leo didn’t want to ask why she was kicked out. “Have you eaten today?” he asked. The woman shook her head. “Why don’t we walk over to the cafeteria?”

“I can’t. They know me there. They won’t let me in anymore.”

“But, they’ll let *me* in. C’mon.” The woman got up and followed Leo to the front of the lecture hall. He put on his jacket, grabbed his briefcase, and led her out the door.

The cafeteria guard frowned when he saw the woman following Leo. Leo smiled.

“Afternoon, professor,” the guard said. The woman kept her head down.

“What would you like?” Leo asked.

“Anything.”

“How about some nice hot food?”

“That would be great.” Leo led the way to the hot food bar and smiled at the server. This wasn’t the first time he’d bought someone in for a free meal. The server rolled her eyes at Leo. He tried not to notice.

“Ask for whatever you want,” Leo said. The woman took a large hamburger, a bowl of soup, and pie. “That’s all?” Leo asked.

“For now.”

“Find a place to sit and I’ll join you in a minute.” Leo paid for her meal and bought a coffee for himself. He found the woman sitting in the corner at the back of the dining hall.

“So, tell me what’s been happening.” He tried to sound as if they were old friends catching up after a while apart.

“Well, Professor Cummins-.”

“Leo, please. I never use professor.”

“I haven’t worked in six months. My money ran out. My landlord let me stay because I kept telling her I was just about to get another job. But, I never did. It’s rough out there.”

“So I’ve heard. You have no place to go? No family or friends to take you in?” She shook her head as she sipped the soup. She hadn’t started eating the hamburger yet.

“Everybody has friends, miss-?”

“Alice. Mine gave up on me a long time ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Leo didn’t want to ask why they gave up on her. He would wait for her to share her story.

“That’s pretty much it. I’ve been going from building to building to get warm and scrounging food where I can. Some students saw me going through a dumpster and asked me why I was there. I told them. They gave me a few dollars. I was surprised. Students don’t usually have any extra money, but they were kind. They also told me to find Professor Cummins. They said he- *you*- could maybe help me. They were right. I’m feeling better now that I’m eating.”

“So where do you plan to go after you eat?”

“I haven’t planned that far ahead, Prof.- I mean Leo.” Leo knew what he had to do but also knew Alexandra wouldn’t like it. He did it anyway.

Fifteen minutes later, Nathan was watching for his father to come home from the campus. He waited by the front door almost every day. “Somebody’s coming up the walk with daddy.”

Alexandra steeled herself. She assumed Leo had picked up another stray. “Lord, give me strength,” she mumbled.

Leo introduced Alice to Alexandra. Nathan made a fuss over Alice. Her face lit up when she saw him.

“Alice has no place to stay,” Leo said as if that was supposed to be a satisfactory explanation for why he brought her home. Alexandra knew there was likely more to Alice’s story but could wait to hear it.

“I don’t think your wife likes me,” Alice whispered when Alexandra went back to the kitchen.

“Nonsense, I’m sure she’s delighted to have you here.”

Feeling awkward, Alice looked down. “Maybe I should go, professor. You’ve helped me enough.”

“No. Please. We have an extra room. Nathan likes you. That’s a good sign. You wouldn’t want to disappoint him by leaving so soon after he met you, would you?” Alice shook her head.

“Dinner’s ready,” Alexandra called from the kitchen. Nobody moved. “Nathan, Leo..., Alice?” Nathan got up from the floor and took Alice’s hand. He led her into the kitchen.

“I just ate a while ago,” she protested.

“Well, sit with us anyway.” Alexandra knew Alice had a story. Leo’s strays always did. *This meal might be entertaining, at least*, Alexandra thought. *I’ll deal with Leo later*.

Alice ate another bowl of hearty soup, several pieces of heavy coarse bread, and a piece of apple pie alamode. “I haven’t eaten like that in months. I have to thank you folks. How about I do the dishes?” Before Leo could decline her offer, Alexandra jumped up from the table, took Nathan’s hand, and led him out of the kitchen.

“That’s very kind of you,” Leo said. He stood up and started to clear the table.

“Let me do that. You put the food away since you know where it goes.” They worked together in silence for a half hour. Leo liked her quiet presence and her efficiency. Alice liked being in a warm building with two recent meals in her belly. She almost believed her life might be turning around.

The students who told her to seek Leo’s help hadn’t told her what he might do for her. She would have been grateful for a couple of dollars or just a meal in the cafeteria, but he had already given her much more. She already liked Leo a lot, and Nathan, too. Alice wasn’t

certain about Alexandra. She decided to be careful and hoped Alexandra might warm to her if she got to know her.

Alexandra refused to do more than tolerate Alice. It took a while before she was glad Leo brought her home.

Alice and Nathan seemed to form an instantaneous bond. The child got along well with most adults, but his parents were the two prime stars in his firmament and he usually stayed close to them. Alice didn't know why Nathan took to her. She had never been around children but liked them. Maybe Nathan saw her in a way she had never seen herself. Alice liked that he did.

The first thing Alice did with Nathan after dinner was ask him to show her his toys. When he brought out a large Tonka truck, she asked if she could play with it. Alice sat on the floor, pushed it around, and made 'vroom-vroom' sounds. Delighted, Nathan ran and got the rest of his little cars and they played happily. When Alexandra mentioned bedtime, Alice asked if she could put Nathan to bed. "Well, one of us usually reads him a story," Leo said.

"I *love* stories! Would you like me to read you one?" Nathan enthusiastically said yes.

Two weeks after Leo brought Alice home, Mrs. Robinson, Nathan's afterschool caregiver, told them she had to quit because her family needed her full-time at home. She had taken care of faculty children for as far back as anyone could recall. No one remembered ever seeing her as a young woman. 'Maybe she was born old,' was the joke parents told each other when they talked about her. She came highly recommended and was punctual, reliable, and efficient. She always did everything her employers asked of her. However, there was one thing Mrs. Robinson never did with her little charges. She never played with them.

Leo arranged a part-time job for Alice cleaning tables in the college cafeteria. She liked the job, although it was nothing like the jobs she'd had before. There were no computers involved. Alice liked that she didn't have to think all day. She could relax and do her tasks mindlessly and then go home to play with Nathan.

When Mrs. Robinson quit, Alice offered to take care of Nathan after school. She asked to change her hours at the cafeteria. In two weeks, she went from a woman with no home or possessions to having a place to sleep, regular meals, and two jobs. Alice felt happy for the first time in many months.

She'd led a hard life, so far. Leo and Alexandra didn't know it, but she was older than she looked. She had always been a good person and tried to do the right thing, but it never seemed to make any difference. Her parents instilled a belief in a caring and compassionate God who would lift her up when she was down and use her to help others when she wasn't. She waited years for what her parents promised. Two weeks after Leo and Alexandra took her in, she knew it had finally happened.

Alice resolved to make the best of the situation God handed her. Nathan was the supreme blessing. She smiled when she cleaned tables as she anticipated going back to Leo and Alexandra's house to wait for Nathan to come home from school. On pleasant days, she walked to the school to meet him.

Nathan was a sweet and kind child. He assumed his parents' lives were wonderful because he'd lived with them his whole life. He wasn't sure what Mrs. Robinson's life was like and didn't want to speculate. She was gone, anyway. Alice had replaced her, but she was so much more than a mere replacement. She became Nathan's best friend, and he wanted to know more about her.

One day, about a month after Alice started taking care of him after school, they were walking home. "Who did you used to be?" Nathan asked.

Charmed by his abrupt question, Alice smiled. "I've always been Alice."

"I know, but who did you belong to before you belonged to me?"

"I never belonged to anyone, Nathan."

"You were alone?"

"Yes."

"Did you miss me?"

Alice didn't know how to reply. She didn't want to tell Nathan she'd never heard of him before the night Leo took her to his house, but she didn't want to hurt his feelings. Most children thought they were the center of the universe. Nathan knew he was, because of the way adults talked to him and made a fuss over him wherever he went.

Now that he had a playmate all his own, Nathan couldn't imagine his young life being any better than it was. *Yes, Nathan, maybe I did miss you, but I didn't know it*, Alice thought. She didn't tell Nathan. Her complicated reply probably would have confused him.

When other parents approached Alice to care for their preschool children, she gave her notice at the cafeteria. On her last day, she ran into the students who gave her money and told her to seek out Professor Cummins. Alice thanked them heartily. She knew God had sent them. Alice soon became the new 'Mrs. Robinson' and felt grateful for her new life.

Chapter 25

Leo heard that Larry Jackson was in the hospital. He barely knew him. Nobody did. Larry was not loved by students, other faculty, or administrators. Leo also knew Larry had no family and the rumor was that he was terminally ill.

When Leo saw him at the hospital, Larry looked like someone who was dying. His face was gaunt, his breathing raspy, and he couldn't keep his eyes open very long. Larry recognized Leo but seemed gruff and distant. He accused Leo of only coming to visit because he wanted something. Perhaps Larry's choice office or his precious books. Leo ignored Larry's accusations and chatted about himself. Larry warmed to him slightly and shared a little about his long career at the college.

When he heard the end of visiting hours announced, Larry begged Leo not to leave yet. "There's something I need..." Larry said, trembling. Leo wondered if Larry was having a seizure and was about to call the nurse. "Leo, I want to die. It's my time. But, I can't."

"I don't understand."

Larry got a faraway look in his eye. "I was only a little boy when my daddy took me to a huge march in Washington, DC in August 1925," he began. His voice had changed. It was still weak, but his speech became clear and more forceful. He sounded almost as if he was lecturing one of his classes. "More than 50,000 Klan members walked in lines as wide as 20 abreast. Nearly all the marchers wore pointed hoods. Leaders wore colorful satin robes. The rank-and-file wore white. A circular red patch containing a cross with a drop of blood at its center adorned every white outfit. I didn't want to be there. My daddy made me go, but when I saw all those people, I tell you... I was never so proud.

"However, that day, I didn't know what the crowd represented. All I saw was the pageantry. I didn't understand the evil until years later. Now I'm ashamed I was there, and that I *liked* what I saw. Now it disgusts me."

Leo knew about the Klan of the 1920s. Its members were disproportionately middle class, and its public activities included festivities, pageants, and social gatherings. The Klan encouraged native-born white Americans to believe that bigotry, intimidation, harassment, and extralegal violence were all perfectly compatible with, if not central to, patriotic respectability.

"Those people, including my father, were not patriots but violent vigilantes. The Klan was not all about parades but terrorizing eastern European immigrants, Catholics, Jews, and, of course, Blacks. My father was part of all that. He bragged about what he did. I bragged about what he did, too. I wanted to be like him when I grew up.

"The Klan weakened in the early 30s. I never got a chance to go with my father on any of his nightly secret activities. I never knew the truth about the Klan until the late 1950s when its resurgence in the South happened in conjunction with the Black civil rights movement. I never went on a Freedom Ride. My father would have killed me with a shotgun if I even mentioned I was *thinking* of going.

"I've never forgotten what the Klan did. Those people the Klan hurt- they never did anything to us. Nothing at all. They were just trying to live their lives. The Klan just picked on them. It was a bunch of bullies, and nothing more. I've been a vile human being my whole life."

"You're being too hard on yourself," Leo said.

"No. I feel I can't die until I apologize for what my father did in the 1920s and for what I didn't do to fight racism in the 1950s. I could have supported the Freedom Riders but I didn't."

“Larry, don’t you think your life as a professor dedicated to spreading the truth has been enough?”

Larry shook his head slowly. “I *have* to apologize. Otherwise, I can’t die. I think my father took part in at least one murder but he was never prosecuted. Nobody was. I’ve suspected it for years, but I never said anything to the police.”

“They probably wouldn’t have investigated anyway. A murder of a Black person meant little back then.”

“But, it meant something to *me*, Leo. It still does.”

Leo tried to convince Larry he wasn’t a vile human being because he realized what he did was wrong. “Just say you’re sorry. The universe, or God, or maybe even some people hurt by the Klan are still around and will hear you.”

“That’s not enough,” Larry protested.

“What do you want to do, then?”

“I have to apologize directly.”

Larry’s confession moved Leo deeply. He tried to think of a way to help him find peace. He left the room and found the Black nurse and doctor who took care of Larry. Leo told them what he needed to do. They felt bewildered but agreed to play along. To them, what the man did fifty years ago didn’t matter. They followed Leo into the room and greeted Larry. He looked at them, felt his redemption was at hand, and confessed. The nurse and doctor almost cried. They accepted his apology on behalf of all the people the Klan hurt and thanked him for making it. Larry died peacefully soon after.

Leo led a small campus memorial service for Larry but didn’t mention his deathbed confession. He felt sorry he hadn’t gotten to know Larry better when he was still teaching. They might have become close friends.

Leo waited on the train platform after attending a one-day conference downtown. He heard a garbled message the train would be delayed and found a bench to wait. As the platform filled up, Leo people-watched. A girl sat at the other end of the bench. Leo heard her sniffling and thought she had a cold. *Glad she’s far away*, he thought. *I’m too busy right now to catch a cold*. The sniffling changed to sobbing. Leo couldn’t help himself.

“Miss, are you okay?” he asked.

She didn’t look at him. “Yes- well, actually, *no*.”

“Is something wrong?”

“How much time you got?” she quipped through her tears.

A woman carrying a briefcase approached the bench to sit down. She saw Leo and the girl talking and heard the girl sobbing. The woman backed off and looked for another place to sit.

“Just until the train comes,” Leo replied, smiling. The girl looked at Leo and liked his kind face. She thought it would be safe to talk to him.

“Okay, I’ll make it quick. I just had a big fight with my mom.” Leo waited for her to elaborate. She didn’t.

“What about?” Leo assumed the girl had done something her mother didn’t like and had been criticized or punished. “Something you did?”

The girl shook her head. “Something *she* keeps doing,” she replied. Her reply surprised Leo.

After she didn’t elaborate, Leo asked, “What?”

“I work two jobs! She takes the money I earn and gives it to her boyfriend. That money’s for rent and food. He pisses it away. I don’t know what she sees in him. He’s like a vulture.”

“That’s awful.”

“It *is*! We can’t get ahead. Every time I tell her to dump the guy, she says she will. Then I come home and find them in bed.”

“Maybe you should move out.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“She’s sick. If I don’t take care of her, no one will. She has no friends.”

“Look, I can give you some money, but I don’t think it’s what you really need.”

“Keep your money, mister. What I need is a way to get her away from him.”

“Where would you go?”

Leo heard his train announced. The girl heard it, too. She assumed he would get up before she finished talking. He didn’t.

“I have an aunt upstate. I’ve been to her house. She wants us to move in with her. I’d go in a second, but my mom won’t leave-.”

“Because of the boyfriend?” The girl nodded. “What if your aunt just comes to get her and the two of you take her away?”

The girl appreciated Leo’s sympathetic suggestion and spoke more freely. “I don’t know what she would do if we tried that. I think she would scream and carry on and we’d probably get arrested.”

Leo’s train came and went noisily. He didn’t seem to notice and nodded. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

“So, what *should* I do?”

The girl’s question placed Leo in a dilemma he rarely experienced. He had no solution to offer and felt helpless. “I have no idea,” he confessed. She stared at him as if she hadn’t heard or perhaps not believed what he said. *There must be a solution*, she thought. *I can’t go on like this.* “Sorry.”

The girl turned away. Her last glimmer of hope vanished. She was suddenly alone again with her insurmountable problem. “Thank you anyway, mister-.”

“Leo.”

“Mister Leo. Sorry to bother you.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything for you and your mother.”

“I don’t think anybody can.” She started sobbing again.

Leo thought about the girl as he gazed out the train window on the ride home. He didn’t like not being able to help her. Leo wasn’t a religious man, but sometimes he wondered if there were problems that were so big or complex that only God could solve them. *I hope He was listening*, Leo thought. *That kid needs help*.

When he arrived home, Alexandra complained he was late for dinner again. Leo just mumbled there had been train problems. He could have explained what happened but didn’t mention his conversation. Alexandra would have felt happy that he only talked to the girl, instead of bringing her and her mother home with him.

Leo and Alexandra lived in a quiet neighborhood that rarely heard a barking dog or loud music after dark. Late one night, they were sleeping and heard yelling outside. They got up and looked out the bedroom window. A car had stopped in the street out front. A male stood outside the open back door screaming at the person inside. They heard a woman's voice. "This looks serious," Leo mumbled. "I better get out there."

Alexandra tried to stop him. "What if he's got a gun?" she whispered. Leo didn't care. He threw on some clothes and rushed out. Alexandra went back to the window. She hoped the noise wouldn't awaken Nathan or Alice.

"Get out! Get the fuck out!" the man yelled. He didn't notice Leo approaching the car.

"You folks having car trouble?" Leo asked, calmly.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm the guy you just woke up with your yelling. I came to help."

"We don't need your help. Leave us alone."

"Uh, it's 1:30 in the morning. If you keep yelling somebody's going to call the police." The man seemed chastened by Leo's comment.

"Yeah. I guess I didn't realize what time it was."

"You want to come inside for some coffee?" Leo hoped Alexandra hadn't heard him. She sometimes mentioned how it was bad enough that he brought strays home with him, but made him promise he wouldn't take crazy or violent people into the house. She worried about Nathan.

"No. Mind your own business."

"This *is* my business, friend. You're out in front of my house making a racket in the middle of the night. Why don't you come inside and talk it over?"

Leo looked inside the car. A young woman sat on the backseat. Her terrified expression softened when he spoke. "Would *you* like some coffee, miss?" Leo asked. The woman looked at the man and then nodded. "Great! Please come in and I'll put the pot on." Leo reached in to help the woman. She clutched his hand and he pulled her out. "My name's Leo. I teach at the college."

"College, what college?" the man asked.

"The campus about a mile from here."

"Where's *here*?"

"You don't know where you are?" The man shook his head. "So, you're lost, then?" The man nodded but Leo thought he was lying. "I have a map. You can look at it while we drink coffee. Coming?" The woman was out now. She moved away from the man as soon as she exited the car. "I'm Leo," he repeated. She didn't reply. "And you are...?"

"Patricia. Her name's Patricia."

Leo turned. "And your name?"

"Dave. Look, mister, we don't need to come in. I was just dropping her off. Now that she's out of the car I'll be on my way."

"Dropping her off, *where*?"

"Anywhere is fine."

"Is that true, miss? Is he dropping you off?" Patricia shook her head. "What *is* he doing?"

"What he always does when he gets mad at me. He takes me on a long drive and tries to get rid of me."

Oh, shit, Leo thought. *What did I just get myself in the middle of?* He was committed now and had to follow through. “Why don’t you pull into my driveway, Dave? Shut off the motor, and we’ll go inside.” Dave looked at Leo wondering if he could trust him. Patricia waited. She knew Dave wanted to drive off and leave her. That’s what he was about to do before their argument erupted on Leo’s street.

Leo walked to the front of the car and stood blocking the street. “So, do you want to pull into my driveway?” He pointed. “It’s right there.” Dave had no choice but to cut the wheels sharply to the left and pull into the driveway. A moment later, all three entered the house.

Alexandra watched the drama from her bedroom window and cursed Leo under her breath. *I have to get up for an early seminar tomorrow! How am I going to teach without any sleep?* She knew the drama would likely play out for the rest of the night inside her house instead of out on the street. *Shit!*

Leo escorted the couple into the cozy kitchen and invited them to sit at the table while he started the coffee. Neither said a word. Leo noticed the man was slightly older than the woman was. He was shorter than his wife, and skinner. Patricia wasn’t fat but she was heavy-set. She had a round, friendly face, a soft voice, and seemed vulnerable. Strangely, so did Dave. He had a squarish, handsome face. Both were dressed casually. Dave wore jeans and a flannel shirt. Patricia wore mis-matched sweats.

“So, where are you guys from?” he asked.

“Nowhere,” Dave replied.

“Northeast Philly,” Patricia answered. Dave glared at her. She ignored him. Patricia felt safe with Leo there. She didn’t want to defy Dave, but felt grateful for the help Leo offered and wanted to seem friendly.

Alexandra entered the kitchen. “Babe, these are Patricia and Dave. My wife, Alexandra.” Patricia nodded but Dave ignored Alexandra. He was beginning to think he made a mistake coming inside. He regretted not jumping into the car and driving off when he saw Leo approaching. Then he remembered he hadn’t noticed Leo until he spoke to them.

“Look, it’s nice of you to invite us in,” Dave said. “But, it’s very, very late and I’m sure you guys want to go back to bed. Why don’t we just leave and not take up any more of your time.” Alexandra couldn’t believe what she was hearing. *Maybe I will get some sleep, after all,* she thought.

Dave stood up. Patricia stayed in her chair. “I’d like some coffee,” she said.

“Great! I think we have some coffee cake, too.” Leo smiled at Alexandra. *Leo, I’m going to kill you!* He suspected what she was thinking.

He got out four mugs, sugar, and creamer, and found the coffee cake. No one spoke while the coffeemaker did its thing. Finally, it finished. Leo poured cups for Patricia and Dave. He looked at Alexandra and she shook her head. He poured a cup for himself and sat down.

Alexandra stood by the counter. She wasn’t sure if she should stay and listen to the strangers’ story or go back to bed and let Leo deal with his new friends. She decided to listen for a while.

Leo never knew where to begin inquiring about strangers’ problems. Too direct a question might seem intrusive, but an excessively vague inquiry might waste time getting to the crux of the matter. What Leo wanted to ask was, ‘why were you two stopped in front of

my house yelling at one-thirty in the morning when you don't even live around here?" What he asked was, "So, Dave, what kind of work do you do?"

"Construction, when I can get it."

"And, when you can't?"

"Odd jobs. Handyman stuff. I'm good with my hands."

"Oh? People are always looking for good handymen," Leo commented.

Leo, don't you dare hire him to fix anything at two o'clock in the morning!

"Well, I *am* good, but I can always get better. There's always new stuff to learn."

"You like to learn?" Leo asked. Dave nodded. "You ever go to a trade school or community college?" Dave shook his head. "You could get training and probably get a regular job. It must be hard not knowing when you'll get work."

"It is. It's mostly word-of-mouth, you know? That only works some of the time."

"What about you, Patricia? What do you do?" Alexandra asked.

"She stays home and takes care of our little place," Dave replied before Patricia could answer.

"Oh? You like doing that?" Alexandra knew she could be asking an incendiary question, but had to probe a little deeper. Patricia didn't answer verbally. She shook her head. Dave noticed but didn't say anything. "What would you like to do?"

"Anything that gets me out of the house," she replied, meekly.

"You miss Dave?"

Patricia nodded. "It's lonely all day." Dave seemed surprised.

"What would you like to do?" Alexandra repeated.

"Well, I've done waitressing, office work, sold newspapers, worked in a bookstore and a toy store, and did a few other kinds of jobs."

"Sounds like you have a lot of experience but no career." Patricia shrugged her shoulders. "Do you *want* a career?" Her eyes brightened and she nodded. "Doing what?"

"You won't laugh?" Alexandra shook her head. "Long-haul trucking."

Dave gasped. "You never told me that!"

"You never asked."

"I've read about couples who drive as a team," Leo said. "They get to travel around but be together, too."

"Is that what you *really* want, Patricia, to be together?" Alexandra asked. Patricia nodded. "With Dave?"

"Of course, silly. Who else?"

"You mean that?" Leo asked. Patricia nodded again. "You're sure?"

"Yes, dammit! I want to be with Dave!"

"Dave? It's your turn. What do you want?"

"I... I don't know. This is all so sudden. So much has happened in the past few minutes..."

"And *more* can happen if you want it to. It doesn't have to be bad stuff. It can be good stuff. You two have made a start. Do you want to continue?" Patricia and Dave nodded in unison. Leo felt it might be the first time they agreed on anything in a long while.

"So what happens now?" Leo asked.

Patricia looked at Dave. He took her hand. "I think we should go home."

“Are you sure you’re ready?” Leo asked. They both nodded. “Finish your coffee first,” Leo said. Alexandra glared at him but didn’t say anything. *Dammit, Leo, I’m ready. Let them go so we can go back to bed.*

A half-hour later, Alexandra settled into bed after Patricia and Dave backed out of the driveway and drove away. “So how did it happen that were they in front of our bedroom window at 1:30 am?”

“To get my attention. I think they needed me, but they didn’t know it. Neither did I.”

Remind me to kill you when I’m more awake, Alexandra thought the second before her head hit the pillow and she fell sound asleep. She forgot the incident by morning. They never saw or heard from Patricia and Dave again.

Chapter 26

When Marilyn found out the journals belonged to Professor Cummins, she felt too embarrassed to contact him after the strange incident in his study and set them aside. *I think I'll just shred them*, she thought. Then she wondered if Leo noticed the copies were missing and assumed that she stole them. She decided to ignore them and shoved them into her closet. Thinking she had finished with the journals, Marilyn went back to work.

The journals weren't done with her, however, as she was soon to learn.

Nathan and Marilyn bumped into each other on the sidewalk. Literally. He was on his way to work carrying a huge box of fresh doughnuts. Marilyn had turned to look behind her when she thought she heard her name called.

They crashed. Both survived the impact. The doughnuts didn't. Nathan dropped the box, the flimsy tape holding the lid broke, and fresh tempting doughy treats spilled onto the sidewalk.

"Oh, my God! I'm so sorry," Marilyn exclaimed. Nathan watched a couple of doughnuts roll into the gutter as he heard her apology. Feeling infuriated, he looked up ready to rebuke her for not watching where she was going. When he saw her face, he didn't want to scold her anymore.

"It's... it's okay," he stammered. "They were day-old doughnuts anyway."

"They're fresh," Marilyn argued. "I can tell."

"No, they *were* old. I didn't want them, anyway." *Why did I say that?* Nathan asked himself. He realized it was because he just began wanting her.

"I don't believe that. You've already lied to me twice and we only just met."

Have we actually met? Nathan thought. They hadn't. "My name's Nathan Cummins." He offered his hand, the one that had been holding the box of doughnuts until a few seconds ago. "And, that's *not* a lie."

"Marilyn Jacoby," she replied, spontaneously. *Why did I just tell this stranger my name?* she asked herself. She knew the answer immediately. It had something to do with his eyes. They were the deepest blue she had ever seen. "And it seems I owe you a box of doughnuts. Where were they from?"

Nathan no longer cared about the spilled doughnuts. The scavenger birds were welcome to them. Marilyn interested him more. "They don't matter," he said.

"Oh, but they do. Donuts always matter. My boss says they are one of nature's most perfect foods."

The perfection of donuts is nothing compared to her perfection, Nathan thought. Marilyn had something. He didn't know what it was yet, but he desperately wanted to find out.

"I should buy you another box," she declared. She looked down at the box broken box on the sidewalk and read the doughnut shop's name. "Oh, I know that place. Come on, I'll buy you some more." Marilyn reached for his hand. The second he gave it to her, Nathan knew he might want to hold it for the rest of his life. That feeling should have alarmed him, but it didn't.

Nathan was coming out of a failed romance that had soured him on women. Although he knew the failure wasn't the woman's fault (he didn't know whose fault it was), he had sworn to take it easy and not jump into anything else for a long time.

Suddenly, he felt he was jumping. *This woman*, he told himself, *seems different*. He had no idea why he felt that way. They had only talked about doughnuts. Why wouldn't he assume that would be all they could ever talk about? Also, why had a simple downtown morning rush-hour sidewalk collision become an event that might change his life? Nathan didn't know, but he wanted to find out. He hoped their trip to the doughnut shop would never end.

Marilyn insisted that he order the same dozen doughnuts. He couldn't remember what they were. He didn't even try to recall them. She ordered for him, choosing the ones she liked.

The salesgirl filled the box and told Marilyn the cost. She opened her wallet to get cash and a card fluttered to the floor. Nathan leaned down to pick it up and handed it back to her. "Keep it," she told him, nonchalantly. "You might need it." Nathan glanced at the card. It had her name on it. Marilyn Jacoby, Attorney at Law.

Nathan panicked. *She's a lawyer?* The woman he just broke up with had also been a lawyer. Their meeting felt weirder than it had moments ago. He put the card in his pocket. The sales clerk handed the doughnuts to Marilyn. She took them and thanked the clerk. They headed for the door. Nathan reached for the box. "I'll carry them this time," Marilyn said. "Don't want to lose another dozen. They only make so many each day," she joked. "We can't keep leaving them for the pigeons."

She told him she would walk him to wherever he was going when they collided. "It's my new office," he said. "Just around the corner." Nathan wished it was miles away and they could spend the rest of the day walking there. Then he reminded himself this was only his third day on the new job and he was almost late.

No time for romance. Gotta work. Maybe later. Nathan hoped later would come as soon as possible. He didn't want to seem forward and invite her to meet him for lunch or dinner. Lawyers often worked through meals when they were busy. He hoped she wouldn't be too busy to talk to him when he called later to make a date. *I hope this isn't over before it begins*, he thought. *That would be sad. I like her already.* Nathan had no idea why he felt such a strong attraction to Marilyn. He hoped he would get to find out.

Marilyn forgot about the doughnuts when she arrived at her office and dived into her workday. She wasn't an expert in doughnuts anyway. Her partner Larry was. He ate at least one every morning and looked it.

Larry would have happily eaten her if she gave him the chance. Marilyn never even considered it. She liked Larry. He was a good lawyer and she learned a lot from him, but he was about as romantic as the fat round sugar-laden monstrosity he munched every morning as he planned his day. She had gotten used to the way Larry leered at her but knew he would never make a move. He admired Marilyn and didn't want to do anything that would cause her to quit because he sexually harassed her.

Although she had only been out of law school for a few years, Marilyn was already a good lawyer. She had won a few difficult cases for their clients and her victories added to the reputation of the small law practice and brought in new word-of-mouth business. Their clients were mostly poor, but the settlements netted commissions for the firm. Larry liked having money coming in.

He had inherited the small practice from his father. Ralph had been a left wing radical in the Fifties who decided to fight from within the system instead of outside it. When the radical Sixties rolled around, Ralph was ready to take on cases involving protesters and marginalized people fighting for their rights, dignity, and (sometimes) survival.

Just after Larry finished law school, Ralph died from a massive coronary in the early Eighties. Larry took over the firm. It was almost more than he could handle, and he started eating doughnuts to help deal with the stress. He started drinking, too, but stopped himself when the alcohol affected his practice. He needed a clear head to win cases for his clients. *Doughnuts don't cloud your brain*, he reasoned. *I'll go with them*. He did. He also started winning cases.

Larry met Marilyn when Klara, one of his friends from law school, told him about her. Well, Klara was more than just someone from law school. Larry would have married her if they'd stayed together. Klara left him after Ralph died and Larry had to immerse himself in saving his father's practice. He was so preoccupied he had no time for Klara. She hung in for a while to get him past his grief but then realized the romance they thought they had wasn't strong enough to last a lifetime. Larry (to his regret) hardly noticed she was gone.

Marilyn reminded Larry of a young Klara. She had a sharp mind and could think on her feet. Larry soon learned she knew a lot more law than he did and could think faster than he could. He felt happy he'd hired her.

“Sorry I’m late, boss,” Marilyn said when she walked in. Larry sat at his desk. Marilyn noticed a huge half-eaten doughnut on a paper plate. She thought of Nathan again. *Down girl*, she told herself. *You can’t get distracted. Today is going to be a busy day*.

They had agreed to take on a landlord-tenant case that involved several people in a run-down building. The landlord had been repeatedly promising to make repairs only so he could collect the rent every month. The tenants refused to give him any more money and placed it in escrow instead. He was suing them for back rent. They wanted to fight back.

Marilyn begged Larry to take the case. She was sure she could win if it went to court. Social values had changed and slumlords had lost much of their political influence in City Hall. Tenants were fighting and winning cases that involved their rights and dignity as human beings entitled to decent housing. They weren’t asking for fancy penthouses, just apartments that were clean, secure, and serviceable. Were clean water, no vermin, and adequate heat too much to ask? Marilyn knew they weren’t, and she was willing to fight to get the beleaguered tenants what they needed.

She rarely stopped to think about what she needed. There was too much work and not enough time. Marilyn knew Ralph’s busy law practice had stressed him past the breaking point and killed him. She didn’t want to die the same way he did, nor did she want Larry to drop dead the way his father did.

Marilyn mentioned hiring another lawyer but Larry claimed there wasn’t enough income. “But, another lawyer would *increase* the firm’s income,” Marilyn pleaded. Larry told her he could never hope to find anyone else as good as she was, and it was a waste of time looking. She always sighed in frustration. She knew what Larry’s refusal meant: more work for her and less of a personal life.

She didn’t care much about having less time for a personal life until today. Marilyn didn’t know why, but she felt meeting Nathan might have an impact on her future. She might want to start having one, with him. *Down girl!* she told herself again. *It was just a box of*

donuts, and he didn't even offer me one. Marilyn decided to wait to see if she ever heard from him.

She didn't have to wait long.

Two nights later, Nathan and Marilyn chatted over dinner at a small Italian place he liked. "I know what I said might sound creepy, and if you tell me it does, then I will tear up your business card and never call you again,"

"Oh, no. Telling me that you feel we have some kind of deep connection and fate made us crash into each other the other day doesn't sound creepy at *all!*" Marilyn joked. She would have stood up and left her pasta on the table if she didn't share Nathan's feeling. Instead, she wanted to know why they both felt the same way. She decided to allow this accidental encounter to play out a little longer just to see where it went. Marilyn dived into her plate of pasta. "You were right. This is great! I've never noticed this place."

"I stumbled on it a few years ago," Nathan lied. His previous girlfriend had taken them on their first date, and it quickly became their favorite place. He thought back to that date, recalled it clearly, and couldn't remember ever feeling they were fated to be together. *Maybe that's what was missing*, he told himself. *Maybe it wasn't her fault or my fault we broke up. It just wasn't meant to be.* The thought that followed immediately startled him. *And, maybe this is.* He had no idea why he felt that way.

Marilyn sensed Nathan had become lost in thought. She suspected she knew why. "So how long were you and she together?"

"Couple years. Long enough to develop a relationship, maybe even a romance, but not a commitment. It happens."

It had never happened to her. She had several relationships going back to early adolescence. None of them made it to the romance stage. *Nathan's lucky, she thought. He's been there, at least. He knows what it's like. Do I want to find out? Do I want to find out with him? He seems nice, but sidewalk donut catastrophes are hardly enough to base a relationship on, let alone a romance or commitment. Still, I like him.*

Marilyn decided liking him was a good start. Of all the people she could have crashed into on the sidewalk, she felt pleased it had been Nathan. Marilyn knew she hadn't chosen, of course. She refused to accept that fate had brought them together. Lawyers didn't believe in fate, they believed in argument and persuasion. She wasn't going to need either in this new relationship with Nathan. For the first time in her life, Marilyn chose to follow her heart. From that moment on, she was glad she had.

The bond between them turned out to be stronger than she could ever have imagined. It seemed to be there from the beginning. Maybe it had been there long before they met. Marilyn didn't like to think about mystical and mysterious stuff like fate or karma. Concepts like that made her head hurt.

She knew somehow that Nathan would never hurt her, nor would he let anyone else hurt her. His parents welcomed her warmly the first time she met them and she felt she had joined their family long before she and Nathan agreed to marry.

Their wedding night wasn't much different from the many nights they had already spent together as single people. They had sex. Marilyn rolled on her side facing away from Nathan. He cuddled behind her, put his arm around her, and placed his mouth close to her ear. This was her favorite part of their post-coital settling-in. He usually whispered, "I love you," as she closed her eyes. This time, however, what he said was different. "Return the journals... return the journals... return the journals..."

Marilyn rose into half-sleep with the words 'return the journals' lingering in her mind and felt herself grieving the loss of someone she never met. The dream continued haunting her when she was fully awake, and she found it unsettling. Suddenly, she needed answers.

Who the fuck is Nathan Cummins? she asked herself. Wait, could he be related to Leo Cummins? But, who the fuck is Leo Cummins? All I know about him is what I found online. This is too weird.

In the morning, Marilyn couldn't concentrate on writing documentation for boring software. Feelings of grief and loss distracted her all day. She wondered how such strong feelings could come out of a dream. Marilyn thought they might have a deeper source within her. There was a mystery right in front of her, but she wasn't watching it on TV. It involved her, although she couldn't understand how or why. She also didn't know if she was a victim or merely a bystander.

What am I supposed to do? Then she realized the answer. That journal! It belongs to that guy, Leo Cummins. I have to get rid of them. Then maybe this craziness will go away.

Chapter 27

A woman answered when Marilyn called. “Hello, Mrs. Cummins? You don’t know me but I met your husband the other day and I seem to have somehow acquired something that belongs to him.”

Alexandra assumed the caller was another person who needed Leo’s help. She liked it better when people called instead of showing up unannounced at their front door. This caller seemed unusually vague. *What does ‘somehow acquired’ mean?* Alexandra thought. *Does that mean, ‘stole?’*

“Um, what is it you have?”

“Papers. A whole stack of them. They look like journals. I know your husband is a historian and I thought they might be copies of some research he’s working on. I don’t know how I got them, and I’d like to get them back to him.”

“I’ll tell him. Could you give me your number?” Marilyn recited her phone number and Alexandra wrote it down. “He’ll get back to you.” Alexandra didn’t wait for Marilyn to reply and hung up. She put the note on Leo’s desk and forgot about it.

Leo found the phone number when he went to his office to do some computer work after dinner. He asked Alexandra about it. “Some woman called. She said she’s found some papers that have your name on them.”

Leo felt puzzled. “I’m not missing any papers. Did she say what they were?”

“She said they look like copies of a journal. Are you researching something?” Leo shook his head. The only journals he could recall ever working on were his own. *Why would I have copied them? The originals are in my closet.* Then he remembered he’d found a volume open on his desk after that strange woman left the other day. Leo wondered if there was more to that incident than he yet understood.

“She wants to return them if you want her to.”

“I’ll call her. Thanks.”

Leo called the next afternoon. “Look, like I told you, I don’t know how or why you found me in your study. I’m sorry about that. But, I somehow have these pages that have your name on them. Do you want them, or should I just shred them?”

Leo felt curious. “I guess you can bring them over if it’s not too much trouble,” he replied.

“It’s no trouble.”

Later, in his office, Leo got out his journals and reread the oldest entries. They were regrettably familiar. He recalled what he was like and again lamented being a revolting adolescent. Leo felt he had redeemed himself over the years. He still couldn’t figure out why he would have made copies of those embarrassing pages. Better to forget them.

Marilyn dropped off the copies a couple of days later. She apologized as she handed Alexandra the thick envelope. “Please tell him again that I’m awfully sorry about what’s happened. I won’t bother him again. Have a nice day.”

Alexandra took the large manila envelope to Leo’s study. There was no room on his desk. She often teased him about his mess. His retort was, “Messy desk, orderly mind.” Alexandra usually snorted a derisive laugh. Leo loved it when she mocked him. She dropped the heavy envelope on his chair.

Leo opened it when he found it a few hours later. His Friday had been exhausting with several classes and a long meeting. He wasn't as young as he once was and long days wore him out. He felt grateful the week was over.

A soon as he took out the stack of papers he noticed added writing he didn't recall when he looked at his original journal the other night. 'I was stunned by this. I can't believe Leo wrote it. It's so unlike him.' Leo got the box down again, took out the first volume, and opened it. The only writing on the first page was his.

He placed the pages side-by-side. The handwriting was identical. However, the new writing below it was different. *Who wrote this?* he wondered. *And, when?* The new handwriting looked vaguely familiar but he couldn't recall where he'd seen it before. Leo carefully examined the copy to find out if it had been tampered with, but the comment was printed in the same toner as the rest of the text.

Maybe I'm too worn out to do this tonight. He decided to attack the problem in the morning when his mind was fresh. They didn't have any plans for the weekend and he wasn't working on anything else. Solving the mystery might help pass the time.

On Saturday morning, Leo started reading page-by-page and found more comments. He approached the journals the same way biblical scholars parsed the *Book of Genesis*. They analyzed individual lines or passages and then determined which of the multiple authors wrote them. So far, Leo's task was easy. He labeled his writing 'L' and the mystery writer 'M'. One comment written by 'M' disturbed him more than the others. It brought back memories of pain that had dulled over the years, but (he realized) never went away.

'I really am your future son. I know your future, and I can prove it, but you won't like it. Something is going to happen to your sister on September 19. You can't do anything to change what's going to happen, and I don't know what the outcome is. But, it's big.'

Leo recalled what happened on September 19 and then the heartbreak days preceding Daisy's death. *How could anyone have written this?* he wondered. *How could anyone have known beforehand about Daisy's accident?* The journal comments made it seem that someone had.

There was more. A conversation. Leo read it, captivated. 'If you hurt my sister I'll kill you.' It was in Leo's handwriting, but he knew he hadn't written it.

'I can't do anything to hurt her. You can't do anything to protect her. I just wanted to warn you. It's the best I can do.'

'What's going to happen? You have to tell me that, at least.'

'I don't know any of the details, but she ends up in the hospital in a coma.'

'You are a sick motherfucker. I'll find out who you are and punish you for hurting my sister.'

'I didn't do anything! You can't hurt me. I'm not in your time.'

'You must think I'm a complete dope.'

'I knew you as the smartest man I ever met.'

'Knew me...?'

'My father just died.'

Leo blinked when he read that line. He wasn't certain he should go on. *Maybe this isn't really my journal, after all*, he thought. Perhaps it belonged to different Leo Cummins whose handwriting just happened to resemble his. Perhaps that strange woman had delivered it to the wrong person. However, the mention of 'my father' struck him and he realized why the handwriting seemed vaguely familiar. Nathan.

Leo kept reading.

‘You’re crazy.’

‘No, I’m perfectly sane, and I want to help you.’

Leo re-read the dialogue several times. *What the hell is happening? Am I going crazy? Maybe this isn’t real. Maybe I’m dreaming it.* The journals- his journals- were similar but different. He had no idea why and wasn’t sure he wanted to know. However, there they were right in front of him. He wasn’t dreaming.

He read on and came to September 19. Leo didn’t need a reminder about that day. He recalled the awful lines as if he’d just finished writing them.

‘Those fucking doctors aren’t telling us anything. And, one of them is a fucking nigger. I know he’s just happy to have white people to torture. All we know is that something happened to Daisy at school and she’s in a coma. They won’t tell us when she’ll come out or what they’re doing for her. She just lays there, barely breathing.

‘I’m going to find out who did this to her. The school is lying, I just know it. Somebody hurt her. I don’t care who it was. I’ll kill them when I find out. I made a promise when she was lying there unconscious and my parents were outside talking to the nigger doctor. I’ll kill everyone who fails to bring her back, and burn down that fucking school and that hospital, too. I’m serious! ’

Beneath the entry in the copy were more words that were not in Leo’s original journal. ‘How the fuck did you know about this? Was it because you hurt her? Who the fuck are you? You can’t hide from me. I’ll find you somehow.’

‘I found your journals in a box in your house after you died,’ the reply read. ‘I’ve been reading them. That’s how I know. But, I only know as much as you’ve written. And now that you know about me, I expect you will change what you write.’

‘That’s bullshit. Do you think I’m stupid? How can you be reading stuff I’ve never written yet? No, something else is going on. I’ll find out who you are and when I do, you’re dead meat.’

Terror displaced Leo’s sense of disbelief. *Is this how Alzheimer’s begins? I’ve read about people losing their personalities. Seems I might be losing mine.*

He considered showing the journals to Alexandra and then decided against it. *It will probably scare the crap out of her*, he thought. *It’s already scaring the crap out of me.*

Feeling more urgency, Leo read further. The occasional exchanges continued. Then, to his amazement, the handwriting changed. A third person entered the conversation.

‘Your son was afraid to tell you the truth about your girlfriend. Remember that TA she told you about? She didn’t tell you what really happened. I didn’t find out until I read more of your journal. She fucked him and liked it so much she thought of leaving you, but she decided not to because she felt sorry for you. She thinks you’re pathetic.’

Leo suddenly recalled Savannah telling him about the Teaching Assistant that harassed her. He hadn’t thought about it in years. He knew, however, that nothing had happened between Savannah and the TA. *Who really wrote this?* he wondered. *And, why were they lying?*

Leo read on a few more pages. Another person’s handwriting appeared and Leo recognized it immediately. It was Savannah’s. He read the most bizarre exchange yet.

‘What the fuck is going on? Who is this? Why are you writing these awful things in Leo’s journal?’

‘I’m Leo’s son’s wife.’ Leo knew Nathan was married to Carol, and that was definitely not her handwriting.

‘That’s impossible. You’re lying.’

This was too much to deal with. He thought again about Alzheimer’s. *Maybe it’s getting worse fast*, he thought. *It’s as if I’m reading someone else’s life. Can you get Alzheimer’s in a weekend? It’s not like catching a cold.*

He thought about it some more, and an even more bizarre idea struck him. *What if this all happened? What if my past life isn’t what I think it was? What if my journals are not really mine? What if I’m not who I think I am?*

Leo had read some science fiction but he was not a fan. He always considered the stories nothing more than writers’ imaginations gone to extremes. What he was experiencing wasn’t fiction, it was real. He felt certain it had nothing to do with Alzheimer’s.

It’s almost as if someone tried to rewrite my life, Leo realized. *Why would anyone do that?* Then a more troubling thought struck him. *Perhaps what I thought was my real life...really... wasn’t.*

But how...?

Leo suddenly felt dizzy. *Am I having a stroke?* He tried to call Alexandra but couldn’t speak. His life started flashing before his eyes. He saw his parents, Lucy and John, recalled his brutal adolescent behavior, glimpsed wonderful Candace, exquisite Marcy Gold, his enchanting first wife Savannah, their son Nathan, and then Alexandra. Lastly, he saw that weird woman Marilyn Jacoby. He hardly knew her, yet felt strongly that she was important to him somehow.

Then everything jumbled in his memory and he couldn’t recall what was real and what never happened. Again, he came back to Marilyn Jacoby. *If I never met her before, why do I feel we’ve known each other for years?* He didn’t have time to ponder the enigma. Leo began to feel unloosed in space, time, and reality, and then faded into nothingness.

Marilyn shook Nathan. “Wake up, sleepyhead. It’s getting late. It’s time for us to leave. Maybe *you* can sleep here, but I want to sleep in my own bed.”

Nathan stirred. He opened his eyes. “Huh? Oh, sorry babe.”

“Let’s go home. I’m tired. We’ve done enough for one day.”

“Okay. You drive.” Nathan stood up and stretched. He grabbed his jacket and followed his wife out of his deceased father’s study, ready to start the rest of his life.

As they rode home, it occurred to him to leave Leo’s study untouched when he and Marilyn moved into the house. *We’ll redecorate the other rooms*, he thought. *Dad spent the best years of his life in that study. I’d like to keep it the way he left it.*

Nathan had no idea what events had taken place there, or in his father’s life. He would never find out. His life went on as if there had been no interruption. Marilyn didn’t know, either.

Somewhere in oblivion, the Leo who thought he was the real Leo asked himself, repeatedly, *what the fuck happened to my real life?* He’s still waiting for an answer...

The End

