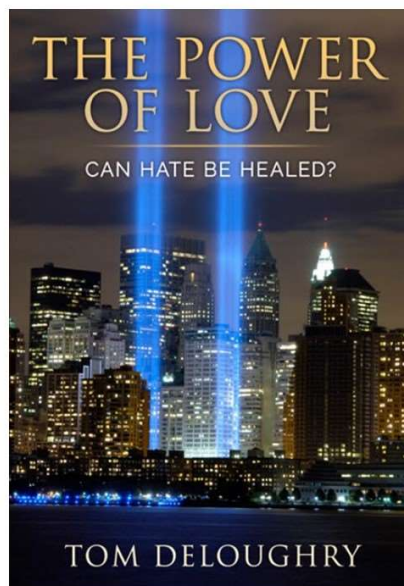
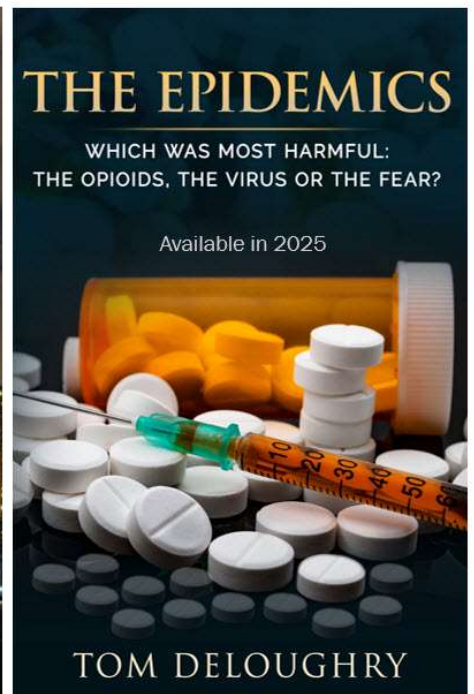
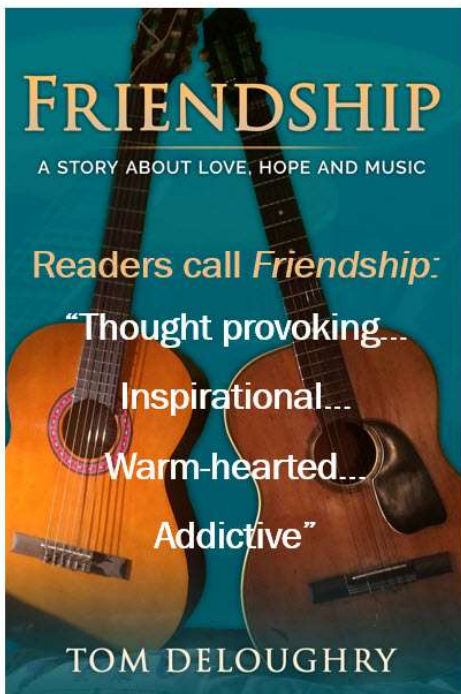


The Power of Love - Part One

For Discussion Questions, please choose that menu option

FOUR MUSICIANS MEET IN THE SIXTIES... ARE STUNNED BY TERRORISM... THEN FIGHT THE FEAR EPIDEMIC.



To save her daughter's life, Susan must persuade a former lover to admit he is the father while he runs for the 1992 Republican Presidential Nomination.

Donna is expelled from her ministry for supporting same-sex marriages. The next day, she disappears during the World Trade Center attack.

Years later, Susan finds Donna's charred plea for forgiveness on display at the September 11th Museum. Did Malik, an American al Qaeda member, lure Donna to the Twin Towers to avenge his family's honor, after a sex scandal involving his sister surfaced in the news?

...And what does 'forgiveness' mean in the age of terrorism?

The Illness Susan

Buffalo, January 1992

Was she still breathing?

A trail of wires connected Jenny's gaunt body to a softly beeping monitor behind her hospital bed. Her skin was taunt over her bones, her bald head marking her for death like a prisoner at Auschwitz.

A year and a half ago, her sandy hair flowed like silk over her shoulders, enriching the exotic beauty of her sculpted cheekbones and green eyes as she entertained the restless toddlers on the neighboring blanket. As we packed up the remains of our picnic, Ed and I watched James, who had told us about the surprise he had planned for our daughter. I was thrilled when he reached into his jeans, pulled out a ring box and held it towards her. But Jenny was so busy smiling at the toddlers that she didn't notice him.

He leaned closer, murmuring something to get her attention. She turned, her delight growing as she saw the ring. Their eyes met, and she touched his cheek before pulling him into a hug. "Yes! Yes, James! Of course, I'll marry you!!"

We shared happy grins as they babbled about a future even brighter than the cascading colors that began booming above us.

Jenny muttered something and moved her arm, bringing me back to her hospital room.

James leaned over and kissed her cheek, his dark hair shining in the harsh fluorescent light. Jenny responded with words blurred by the medications that I hoped would ease her pain.

Anger stirred up my misery. My sweet girl with the happy smile. Why her? So many people loved her, and she loved us back so sweetly. Could I have prevented the cancer? When she was little, I should have insisted she eat all the vegetables I put on her plate. But she always looked so cute hiding them under her napkin.

James blinked back the tears in his soft brown eyes as he said, "Mrs. Gardener, when she wakes up, will you tell her I'll be back tomorrow afternoon?"

“Of course, James. This has been such a strain for you, too. Thank you for being so wonderful towards Jenny and the rest of us.”

“I think I’m getting more than I’m giving,” he said with a half-smile, squeezing her hand and getting up to go.

“You are so sweet,” I said. “Have you been able to keep up with your classes?”

“I’m doing okay. I mean, hospitals are a pretty quiet place to study, right?” He put his economics textbooks in his backpack and zipped it closed. “It’s a lot of work, but it’s not so hard if you keep up.” I didn’t understand much about his doctoral program in ‘ecological economics,’ but I knew that Jenny believed in him, and that was enough for me.

He gave me a half wave and moved slowly out the door. Both of us knew he would be late for his shift making pizzas at Bocce’s.

An hour ago, Dr. Schwartz, a nearly bald man with warm brown eyes behind his glasses, had walked into Jenny’s hospital room with an intern at each elbow. “I’m sorry, Jennifer,” he said, wrinkling his brow, “but our tests show that the last round of treatments didn’t work.” The interns nodded in agreement as if he had just announced a disappointing football score instead of a death sentence.

“What are our other options?” Jenny asked, her eyes darting from the doctor to the young men. A year earlier, they would have competed to date this smart, beautiful woman. Now, the one with the dark, curly hair glanced at his watch, eager to leave as Dr. Schwartz explained we had exhausted all our options unless a new experimental drug unexpectedly appeared.

Last spring, he had told us that a bone marrow transplant from a matching donor could lead to a cure. “The combination of chemotherapy and radiation works best with a transplant from a family member,” he explained. “Brothers and sisters are the best candidates, even better if they are identical twins. Parents are usually not a good match, but it’s possible.”

I immediately volunteered, but I wasn’t a match.

I told Dr. Schwartz that my first husband, who I knew wasn’t Jenny’s father, had died in Vietnam in 1972. Why raise anyone’s hopes about finding the slick bastard who had charmed me by listening to my dreams on Spring Break in the Bahamas, then vanished after

our one-night stand? Only Donna and Ed knew the truth, which I had always kept from Jenny.

So, with no viable donor, the doctors harvested Jenny's stem cells from her bone marrow and froze them before the last round of chemotherapy. Afterward, they re-infused those cells back into her. But it didn't work.

Jenny's treatments had reached a dead-end, and the true meaning of that trite phrase was crushing.

After James left, I rolled up my coat and put it behind me to ease the ache from sitting for too many days in the stiff orange chair next to her bed. I closed my eyes, hoping for sleep, yearning for oblivion.

But my conscience nagged, and my eyes popped open. For months, I had been floundering at both of my jobs, though I barely cared anymore.

I sighed and pulled two folders from the bulging tote propped against my chair. I was a week late in submitting the training report in the red folder to the Teachers Union. It was a major funder of our statewide program – that I led with Ed's brother, Paul - to help students, teachers and their families to have less stress, better health and more love.

The twenty-four papers in the green folder were from my seventh graders, the gifted and talented kids that I taught half-time. They would be disappointed tomorrow if I didn't write some encouraging words on the essay I had assigned: 'What work will make me happy as an adult?'

What would Jenny have written at that age? Probably something clever and surprisingly profound. She had been such an easy child to raise. My sweet love. Was there nothing more that I could do to save her?

I edited one from a short boy who planned to be a basketball star. The second was from a girl who wanted to be a teacher so she could spend the whole summer camping with her children.

I closed my eyes to rest, remembering our family's lovely weeks camping at Allegheny State Park. For ten years, Donna had been hired by the Park to be their musical artist in residence, which she happily took as a week's vacation from her job as a Methodist minister. Each evening, she and I would do a concert or a big campfire on one of the cabin trails, then

go and sing some more around our own campfire. After we finished roasting the hot dogs, Jenny and whatever girlfriend she had invited to camp with us would make s'mores for the grown-ups. When it got late, the girls would snuggle into their sleeping bags in the top bunk of our VW pop-up camper. The sweetest sound I remember from those summers was the music of their giggles before they fell asleep; as they imagined what might have happened if we had actually met a bear or a beaver on one of our hikes.

So much happiness, and now.... I took a few deep breaths, opening myself to whatever inner wisdom might be available. But all I found was a mix of nausea and rising dread. I willed myself not to cry, so Jenny wouldn't see me sobbing if she opened her eyes.

When I awoke, my neck was stiff, both folders were still on my lap, and the sky outside the hospital window had turned black. White snowflakes whirled manically as they bounced against the glass. Lake effect snow had been forecast for Buffalo, so I turned on the TV and lowered the volume to check the weather.

Maybe I should just stay here and sleep in the orange chair? When Jenny was having a bad night, the nurses always brought me a pillow, a blanket and a snack.

I kept the volume low as channel two wrapped up the national news before going to the local weather. The final story was about the Republican Presidential debate. I knew George Bush and Jack Kemp, but didn't recognize the tall sandy-haired man with high cheekbones, until he walked across the stage with a rolling limp to shake hands with Pat Robinson.

Peter? The Dream Catcher? Then, a close-up. He had Jenny's eyes, her cheekbones and her nose. Oh, my God! Jenny's father? A bone marrow donor that might save her life?

I flashed to a memory of a romantic walk late in the evening on a beach in the Bahamas with a very cute, very fit Southern boy. I was a college senior on spring break in '68. At first, I thought he was drunk because he weaved when he walked until he explained that one leg was shorter because he fell from a tree when he was a kid.

The other boys that week just wanted to talk about themselves and whatever stupid sport they played. But Peter had charmed me by listening to *my* dreams.

In his soft drawl, he explained, "Asking about dreams has kind of been my hobby ever since I visited the Southwest as a little boy with my mother. In every little shop, she kept asking to see a 'dreamcatcher.' I didn't know it was something you hung in a window. I

thought it was someone's job, like being a medicine man or psychiatrist who listened to people's dreams. But it stuck with me as a good way to get to know people."

So, in my mind he became the Dream Catcher, even before our first kiss with the moon rising over the harbor. An hour later, too drunk and too aroused to think clearly, I had invited him into my bed.

The next night, after I learned that Martin Luther King had just been murdered, I saw Peter walking on the other side of the pool, sharing a bottle of rum with a friend. After they learned the news from a group they were passing, Peter raised his bottle to the heavens and toasted, "May he rest in peace!" more a merry mockery than a hopeful prayer. Sick that I had slept with a racist who had snuck out in the middle of the night without even saying goodbye, I ran to my room and never saw him again.

My guilt grew two days later when Dave, my steady boyfriend, met me at the Buffalo airport. That night, I wore my sexiest nightgown when we made love, trying to make up for my unfaithfulness. When he asked me to marry him the next morning I hesitated, but then said yes.

Even after Dave was killed in Vietnam when Jenny was two, I still agonized about who her father was. She never looked like me, Dave or any of my relatives. But after she lost her baby fat, I recognized Peter's high cheekbones and his green eyes.

I fell asleep in despair and woke to see Jenny's father on TV? This *must* be a dream. The Dream Catcher? What are the odds?

He was speaking now, responding to a question in a soft Southern drawl, saying, "The dreams of both the Israelis and the Palestinians need to be heard and reconciled."

A man named Peter with a Southern accent who listened to dreams? The boy, who told me he wanted to be a teacher or a counselor instead of becoming a local politician like his father, had grown up to be a Republican running for the Presidency? My heart was pounding so hard I put my hands over my chest to keep it from bursting.

In the final wrap of the story, John Chancellor said, "There were no-break out moments for any of the candidates, but George Bush's experience as director of the CIA and Ambassador to China was evident in his answers. And Peter Rudolph, the Arkansas

businessman known as ‘the Chicken King,’ continued to charm the audience with his down-home wisdom.”

The boy who wanted nothing to do with his father’s chicken ranch because it was too much work is now the ‘Chicken King?’ Am I losing my mind?

I stood looking at the snow outside Jenny’s hospital window, dizzy from what I had just seen.

I fetched this morning’s paper from the waste basket. Sure enough, there was a story about the Republican Presidential Primary debate in New Hampshire. One of the candidates *was* Peter Rudolph, a businessman and two-term congressman from Arkansas who owned a national chain of poultry farms and fast-food chicken restaurants. So that’s how the Dream Catcher became the Chicken King?

The weather came on and I studied the forecast map. I didn’t need to get home. I needed to get to New Hampshire.

On my way out of the hospital, I sat down in a phone booth near the lobby, put in a quarter and closed the door. “Ed?” I said, when he answered. “Could you do me a favor?”

“Sure, Susan. How is Jenny?”

“Not good. We got bad news from Dr. Schwartz this afternoon. I’ll tell you when I get home. But I need to learn more about something I just saw on the news. Last month, you subscribed to Compu-Save, didn’t you? The thing that uses the phone to connect our computer to other computers?”

“Yeah, it’s called CompuServe. It’s pretty amazing.”

“Can it connect you to the news?”

“Yeah, I haven’t tried that part, but I’ve seen the New York Times and some other papers on the menu. Mostly, I’ve been using it to poke around and see what’s out there. Do you know that the other night, I was able to read the agenda for a town safety meeting in New Zealand?”

No time for tangents. “I’m on my way home now. But I need you to see what you can find out about a Peter Rudolph, a businessman from Alabama who is running for the

Republican Presidential nomination in New Hampshire. Could you learn as much as you can about him, and maybe get his picture?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen many pictures on CompuServe. I think it takes up too much data. But I'll check. But why the sudden interest in Republican politics?"

"Ed, before we married, do you remember me saying that I thought that Dave might not be Susan's father, and instead, it might be a boy I met on Spring Break in the Bahamas?"

"Of course. You mentioned it again a couple of years ago when we looked at Jenny's senior portrait in her college yearbook. Also, I think, when..."

I interrupted. "On the news tonight," I continued, "I saw this guy, Peter Rudolph, a congressman from Alabama who was in the Republican Primary debate. He looks like the guy I met, has the same odd limp and has the same first name."

"That's quite a coincidence."

"If you think I'm crazy, I agree," I said, "but I really think it might be him. And finding a close relative who could be a bone marrow donor for Jenny is her only chance. I've got to go for it."

"Does Jenny know?"

"No, she's been sleeping all afternoon."

"If it is him, New Hampshire is probably a seven- or eight-hour drive. Do you want me to take you?"

"No. You're sweet, but could you stay here instead? Someone has to be there for Jenny."

"OK," he said. "If you decide to go, I'll take tomorrow off to be with Jenny and support you from a distance."

By the time I got home, Ed had found two news stories about Peter Rudolph on CompuServe, but no pictures. He had learned that Rudolph and some of the other candidates planned to address a town meeting in Concord at 8 PM tomorrow night.

I knew I had to go, but what should I do when I got there? Stand along the rope line at the rally where people shook the candidate's hand? Then, be the woman who wouldn't let go? Grasping his right hand with mine while I waved Jenny's picture in his face? My stomach turned over as I imagined it.

Were Presidential candidates protected by the Secret Service? If so, grabbing onto Peter's hand would be strike one. Waving a picture of Jenny in his face would be strike two. And babbling hysterically to "save our daughter" would be strike three. I'd be thrown out or arrested. ...But to save Jenny, I would do anything!

Ed did what he could to help, like saying he would drop off my lesson plans tomorrow morning for the substitute teacher. But mostly, he asked questions I couldn't answer, got in my way and made it hard for me to think.

I walked upstairs and stood at the door of my closet. What should I wear to a Republican rally in the dead of a New England winter? Something professional and conservative? Or something soft and silky, hoping to rekindle a tiny memory of the pleasure Peter and I had shared. Taking no chances and knowing I could be gone for a couple of nights, I packed a mix-and-match assortment, all in complementary shades of green that would highlight my eyes: a skirt, two silky shirts, a cotton button-down, a tailored blazer, a cashmere sweater and two black bodysuits.

I left at five the next morning. The snow had stopped and the roads were clear, but I guessed I might catch up to the storm by Utica or Albany. That would mean a tricky drive through the smaller Vermont highways before arriving at Concord in New Hampshire.

I set the car on cruise control and headed east. As an early glow from the sun crept up over the horizon, my mind drifted back nine months to our first meeting with Dr. Schwartz at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

The Doctor - Susan

Buffalo, May, 1992

Roswell Park, one of the country's best cancer treatment centers, was a jumble of mismatched buildings that sprawled across a few blocks near downtown Buffalo. About nine months ago in early May, after much testing and more forms, James and I had sat on either side of Jenny as Dr. Schwartz walked into his office. He greeted Jenny warmly, nodded to Peter and ignored me as he settled behind his desk and took a minute to page through a thick file.

“I have bad news and good news, Jenny,” he said, peering through his horn-rimmed glasses. “I regret to tell you that you have chronic myeloid leukemia, a form of cancer. CML begins in the blood-forming cells of the bone marrow and then, over time, spreads to the blood and other areas of the body.”

Jenny reached for James’ hand as nausea filled my belly.

“The good news is that CML spreads and grows slowly,” Dr. Swartz continued. “However, it can change without warning into a rapidly growing, acute form of leukemia that can spread to almost any organ in the body. So, we must begin treatment this week. What questions do you have?”

My mind screamed, ‘Can you save her?’ But that was a question Jenny or James needed to ask.

“I think I’m in good hands with you and the team at Roswell,” Jenny said, “I’ll follow any recommendation that you make.” Always a diplomat, Jenny began new relationships by building bridges before she told them what color the bridge should be.

Dr. Schwartz nodded and relaxed into his chair.

“James and I got engaged last summer and plan to marry in the fall. How successful will the treatment be, and how will it affect our ability to have children?” she said, looking at James. He shifted his chair closer to her, so it was easier to hold hands.

“Good questions,” Schwartz responded.

“Most people who get CML are middle-aged, and the success rate after treatment is over 60 percent. That is, they were still alive five years after treatment. You are young and healthy, so that increases the odds in your favor.”

“So maybe there is a 75% chance that I’ll be cured?” she asked.

“We don’t have as much data on younger people, but I think your chances should be at least that high right now, and our success rates improve every year.”

“And having babies?” Jenny asked, now holding James’ hand with both of hers.

“Almost all women become infertile immediately after treatment due to the toxic effect of chemotherapy on the ovaries. A small percentage, less than twenty percent, recover and conceive within a few years.

“Your best chance for a baby is to freeze a number of your eggs that have been fertilized with James’ sperm in-vitro. That means your sperm,” he said, looking at James, “would fertilize Jenny’s egg in a laboratory instead of in her fallopian tube. The fertilized egg becomes a blastocyte, a round mass of about 200 cells, after five or six days. At that point, the size of your fertilized egg would be somewhere between the thickness of a nickel and a dime,” he said, sliding a dime across his desk to James.

James picked it up and examined its edge. Then he handed it to Jenny who stared at it before saying, "So, my fertilized egg would be the size of a tiny seed when it was frozen?"

"Yes, but here's the problem: you'd have to wait two months before starting your cancer treatment. That's because you'd need hormonal therapy to produce enough eggs to ensure the in-vitro fertilization would be successful.

"So, if we go with in-vitro, Jenny couldn't begin her cancer treatments until July?" asked Peter. "How much would that delay decrease her chances for survival?"

Dr. Swartz brushed his hand over his brow and scalp like he still had hair to push back. There was sorrow in his eyes as he said, "I wish I knew for sure."

He sighed and then continued, "But I can tell you that if you start cancer treatments this week, the chances are excellent. You'll celebrate your five-year anniversary together and, most likely, your ten-year anniversary, too. However, if you wait two months to begin treatment, there's at least a twenty-five percent possibility, or maybe a fifty-fifty chance, you won't live to your wedding day this fall. MCL is an unpredictable cancer, and it's very dangerous."

Jenny's eyes filled with tears. She looked at James.

"Jenny," James said. "I think you should start cancer treatment as soon as possible. We can always adopt, but I want to spend my life with you whether or not children are in the picture."

Then she looked at me.

I swallowed hard. "The decision is entirely up to you and James," I said, handing my role as chief advisor and protector to the man she loved as I held back the sob that was rising in my throat. "I'll support whatever you decide."

I was dreaming of grandchildren even before the fireworks ended on the night they were engaged. Changing their diapers as they giggled. Sleepovers with cuddly pajamas and bedtime books. Making pancakes and baking cookies. But deep down, I agreed with James; her life was more important.

Dr. Schwarz said, "Here's some materials that two of you should read. Please make an appointment with my nurse for tomorrow afternoon. She can answer any other questions you may have, and then you can give her your decision.

"In these materials," he continued, "there is information about in vitro fertilization. But remember it is expensive and many insurance companies don't cover either the initial phase of collection or in-vitro fertilization. The implantation in your uterus may also not be covered two or three years from now."

I didn't understand everything Dr. Schwartz was saying but knew how I could help. "As far as costs goes," I said to Jenny, "please keep in mind that your father and I have saved well over

\$100,000 for our retirement. But we're really not going to need it since we both have good pensions, long-term-care insurance and we've paid off our mortgage. So, you and James can afford any option you choose to take."

Two months later, I sat quietly in a corner of the hospital coffee shop, looking out to a small garden. Twelve floors above me, Jenny was waiting to begin her first cancer treatment after fifteen of her fertilized eggs were stored in the clinic's freezer. Might one become a baby I could hold?

**

I knew every mile of the New York State Thruway because two or three times a month for the past five years, I had been driving around the state to direct our "Seeking Satisfaction" program. We aimed to reduce stress, decrease conflict and improve health in schools and worksites, as well as medical and faith-based settings. It was created from a mash-up of what Donna and I learned about 'stupid-vision' and 'super-vision' from a Bahamian missionary woman on the day we met. Plus, Paul drew from his work with teens and their families while directing drug abuse and adolescent services in child psychiatry at Buffalo Children's Hospital. It was amazing to see the seeds we planted sprout into something better as others began to nourish it. Paul's HMO and the teachers union each kicked in enough money that we could afford to invite a mix of teachers and health educators for a four day conference at an Adirondack inn. They took what Paul and I had been doing, improved it and shaped it into a middle school curriculum that could be used to meet mandated requirements in health, home and careers and phys ed classes. When someone suggested we do it as a whole school program and attract teachers to personally participate by featuring it's weight loss benefits, I thought the program had a chance at being successful

But for me, the program was deeply personal. Like it had happened yesterday, I could recall every detail about the horrible nightmare I had at the exact moment David was killed in Vietnam. I was running towards him in a muddy jungle, gunfire blasting all around me. The last words he shouted at me and his men was, "Stop it! Stop the fighting!!

Then, as I froze from the flash of the explosion that killed him, he smiled at me, sharing the same sweet love and gratitude I saw on one of our most special nights, like I was giving him the moon and the stars. I woke up screaming.

For nearly a year after he died, I was crippled by guilt and alcohol. But after I began playing in Friendship with Donna, Ed and Paul, the music and Jenny became my best medicines. But, deep inside, the hope that kept me going was that we were teaching something that could stop the fighting. And if our skills helped kids to stop fighting in classrooms, maybe the same strategies could also help politicians to stop fighting other countries?

I stopped to call Ed at eight o'clock from a phone booth at the first rest area past Syracuse. He told me, "I learned that most of the candidates and the press stay at the Wayfarer Hotel in Manchester. It's only a half-hour north of Concord so maybe that's where you should go first. I called them and made a reservation in your name. But I couldn't find anything about where your Chicken King might be campaigning this afternoon."

'My chicken king?' Was Ed upset about my sudden trip? Was there anger or a taunt in his tone?

"Ed," I asked, "Are you OK? Do you think I'm crazy for taking off like this on what might be a wild goose chase?"

"I don't know Susan. You haven't seen this guy for over twenty years and then, when Jenny needs him so desperately, he conveniently appears on TV? Are you sure you didn't find out who he was a long time ago and were just too embarrassed to tell me?"

"No, Ed. I swear to God! I didn't know enough about him to begin tracking him down. I never even learned his hometown, his last name or even where he went to school!"

God, he must think I was such a tramp to sleep with a boy I knew nothing about. No wonder he doesn't trust me.

There was silence on the line. Was he jealous? Or something else? My stomach twisted.

"Ed, honey, I love you." I said. "I'm so sorry about all of this."

Still no answer, then a stab of fear shot through my chest. Jennifer?

"Ed. Is Jenny OK? What's going on there?"

"Jenny's fine, or as good as could be expected. I called her nurse about an hour ago and she's resting comfortably. I'll head down there in a few minutes."

"Ed. I'm so sorry about all of this," I repeated.

"Susan, you're a great wife and a wonderful mother but please remember that you're not the only one who's worried about Jenny. I raised her since she was 9. But ever since she got sick, it's like I'm living with a distant stranger."

Was he jealous that I hadn't been paying enough attention to him? That we hadn't made love in weeks? That son of a bitch! It was *my* daughter who was dying. Did he think that teaching middle school all day, spending nights at the hospital, running a state-wide program and feeling heart-sick all the time was supposed to make me lovey-dovey toward him?

I took a deep breath. This was no time to argue. “Ed, I’m sorry. I know this has been tough on you too, and you’ve been such a good husband and a great father.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“But I’ve got to do anything I can do to save Jenny.” I paused. “I’ll call again when I get to Albany.”

“I’m guessing that will be around noon. You’d have to call me in Jenny’s hospital room. Do you want her to know where you are and what you’re trying to do?”

“Oh, God, no. The last thing she needs to learn that Dave wasn’t her father. She really has no memories of him, but she idolizes the legend I created about ‘Daddy Dave,’ Just tell Jenny I’m teaching... but I’ve been feeling under the weather, so I won’t be able to visit her this evening.”

“OK. How about if I call you at your hotel tonight?”

To support me, or make sure I’m not getting cozy with my old lover? My anger was wrestling with my gratitude as I said, “That would be great. Thank you, Ed.”

Until I was hit with Ed’s little burst of worrying, the thought of sex with Peter had never occurred to me. What if Peter had matured into a total sleaze ball, and the cost of his cooperation was a role in the hay?

No, don’t flatter yourself. I’m a forty-five-year-old woman who’s getting thick around the middle. But, still, men do stare at me sometimes.

My neck was aching, and I reached up to rub it as I got up to speed on the Thruway. I glanced at myself in the rear-view mirror. My face hadn’t wrinkled yet, and my green eyes were still my best features, especially when my dark hair framed my face. I felt its thick, dark silkiness against the back of my hand.

Would I ever have sex with a man, any man, to save my daughter’s life? Never. ...Well, maybe never. But sex with my daughter’s father? ...if I thought it might save her life? Peter did look handsome on TV. I felt my heart rate speed up as a fantasy flashed through my mind.

To squelch those thoughts, I put a cassette of Friendship’s recording of ‘Play Me’ in the tape deck, remembering how being snowed in with Ed after our Ellicottville gig led to our first night of passion.

You are the sun, I am the moon

You are the words, I am the tune

Play me

And I pictured our room where a fireplace cast a deep glow on the bearskin rug that stretched to the foot of the bed... and how we made love a second time on the couch with silk pillows.

A mile later, I was wishing I had accepted his offer to drive me to New Hampshire so I could sleep with him tonight. Sometimes Ed might be jealous or pouty, but he had always been there when Jenny or I needed him. And I wanted him now.

The Politician

New Hampshire, January 1992

A half-hour ago, when I checked in at the Wayfarer Hotel, the young, attractive woman at the front desk confirmed that Mr. Rudolph and his aides were guests at the hotel. She refused to give me his room number but said she could deliver a note. What did she think about me, a woman traveling alone, so eager to contact him when I wasn't even sure he was staying there?

I looped my tote bag over the handle of my suitcase, so I'd only have one thing to pull to the elevator. On the way, I stopped to buy the *Manchester Guardian* so I could read their front-page story profiling the Republican candidates. Maybe there would be some clues about who Peter had become. And why he might be willing to save the life of a daughter that, as far as he knew, didn't exist?

Waiting for the elevator, I stood my suitcase upright next to me and scanned the front page. A few seconds later, the door opened, and there was Walter Cronkite, ready to step off with two other people.

Walter Cronkite! The long-time anchor of the CBS evening news, the most trusted man in America, was four feet away, staring straight at me!

To give him room to get off I stepped aside, brushing against my suitcase. It began falling, dragged down by my heavy tote. I grabbed for it but missed. As it landed, my tote spewed a landslide of red and green folders sliding across polished floor, drifting into a messy pile under the elevator button.

As I twisted to retrieve the tote bag, the most famous voice in America said, "Here, let me help you." And there was Walter Cronkite on one knee, scooping up loose essays and putting them back in their folder. His bushy mustache and hair was snow white. Hadn't he retired years ago?

"Oh, Mr. Cronkite, I'm so sorry!" I said.

"Oh no. It was my fault," he replied, "I should have given you more room."

I righted the suitcase and stuffed the other folders back into the tote.

"Are you a teacher?" he asked, standing up to hand me a few more essays.

"Yes, but I'm here on personal business."

"Well, have a good day," he said, then walked away before I could apologize again or thank him.

Or maybe ask him for help? But how could I tell the most respected man in American that when I was twenty, I got drunk, then got pregnant by a boy I didn't know who was now running for the Presidency? But asking Walter for help might be my last resort if all else failed.

I put my suitcase on the bed of room 218 and settled into a wingback chair. It was angled toward a window flanked by burlap colonial curtains with blue stenciled stars. Outside was a covered bridge, its roof frosted with snow, perched just above an ice-crusting waterfall.

Beautiful, but I wasn't here for the scenery, so I read every word about Peter in the newspaper. Then, using the "Wayfarer Hotel Guide" binder as my lap desk, I took a piece of hotel stationery and began writing a note. After throwing my first two drafts in the waste basket, I wrote:

Dear Peter:

I hope you will recall that we met in the Bahamas at the pool of the Oceanview Hotel on the evening of April 5, 1968.

Should I write 'the day before Dr. King was assassinated?' No, stay away from the racial thing, so he doesn't think I'm a liberal who wants to blackmail him.

Memories surged through my head. His warm smile and steady eyes at the poolside table as he listened to my dreams. His arm around me on the bench as we watched the moon rise over the Nassau harbor. The shadow of his face looming over me as we made love. The pleasure that surged through me. And then the next night. Hearing his mocking toast across the pool, as he raised a bottle of rum up to the stars and his prayer, "Rest in peace," became the sound of snickering satisfaction.

This is the man who fathered my child? A racist who pretended to be a good listener, then snuck out in the middle of the night and never tried to find me the next day? How could I have been so stupid... stupid!! ...But without him, I wouldn't have Jenny, the true love of my life.

I continued to write:

I am very sorry to intrude at such an important time for you, but I am here because I am certain you are the father of a beautiful girl we conceived that evening. Jennifer is dying of chronic myeloid leukemia and may not live to see the spring.

Her doctors have told me that the only possibility of saving her life is a bone marrow donation from a close relative. Since the tests show I am not a good match, our only hope, a very long shot, is her biological father.

Jennifer is now a twenty-three-year-old teacher, like the sister you told me you admired. She is engaged to be married to a wonderful young man this fall. But the doctors doubt that she will live to see that day unless a donor is found.

I have enclosed a recent photo that shows her strong resemblance to you. I choose her formal college graduation photo since it showed the strongest similarity to Peter's high cheekbones and green eyes.

Please be assured that this is not about politics or money. We have no wish to embarrass you. My husband and I are both professionals with good salaries, health insurance and ample savings for medical expenses.

Should I provide more detail, to help him remember? Assure him that this wasn't blackmail by establishing him as a gentleman who couldn't resist my seduction that evening?

You were a gentleman that evening by the hotel pool, expressing concern for a bad blister I had, and listening to my "dreams." Then you offered to buy us something to eat at a clam shack in the park across the street. It was closed, so we sat on a bench and watched the moon rise over the harbor, the most romantic moment of my vacation. Although we kissed on the bench, you remained a gentleman and allowed me to just enjoy the warmth of your arms after I reminded you that I had a boyfriend.

And now, time to confirm that my parents were right. I was a tramp.

We began walking back to the hotel when, uncharacteristically, I was overwhelmed by a strong attraction. I initiated another kiss and later invited you into my hotel room, where we made love.

I am providing this detail for two reasons. I want to provide enough information to jog your memory of what happened that night on spring break in 1968. Secondly, I know that you are running for the Republican Presidential nomination and cannot afford a whiff of scandal. Thus, I want to be on the record saying that you treated me respectfully.

I am also eager to avoid a scandal since I have been employed for the past twenty-four years as an elementary school teacher in the Northern Erie School District. I became engaged to Dave—my boyfriend I told you about—the day after returning from the Bahamas. We married in June 1968, and he died in Vietnam in 1972. He always believed that Jennifer was his daughter. To this day, I have given Jenny no reason to doubt that.

I married Ed, my second husband, in 1977. Once we began dating, I told him that I was fairly certain that Jenny was not Dave's baby. She looks nothing like him, me or anyone from our families, and I did not want to start a new relationship under false pretenses.

I was stunned when I saw you on the national news yesterday. First, as I saw you walking across the stage, I noticed your limp. When we met, I thought you might be drunk but you explained that one of your legs is shorter because you fell out of a tree when you were a boy.

I have just checked into room 218 and will wait for a message or a call from you here.

Please don't delay. Without additional treatment, Jenny may have only weeks or, at best, months to live.

I sincerely apologize for approaching you at such a busy and important time in your life. I just need two minutes. All you would need to do is to take the cotton swab I will give you and moisten it with the saliva from inside your cheek. I would then bring it back to Buffalo for testing.

If you could be a donor, the bone marrow transplant would require just a one night stay in Buffalo, which I am sure would be kept in the highest confidence.

Please, please help our beautiful and loving daughter!

Sincerely,

Susan Morgan Gardener.

I sealed the letter inside a hotel envelope, addressed it to Mr. Peter Rudolph, and marked it “Personal” and “Urgent.” Then took it to the front desk and asked if they could deliver this immediately to him or someone on his staff.

At 4 PM, I decided I needed a nap and was starting to doze when the phone rang.

“Mrs. Gardener?” It was a Southern voice, but I didn’t think it was Peter’s.

“Yes?”

“This is Johnny Stepford, I’m a member of Mr. Rudolph’s staff. He’s read your note and asked if I would meet with you.”

I sat up, my heart pounding with joy. Yes!

“Yes, Mr. Stepford. I would very much like to meet. Please thank Mr. Rudolph for his interest and, especially, for his prompt response.” I rubbed at the tears pooling in my eyes.

“I will. Could we meet for coffee downstairs in the restaurant at 4:30? That’s 20 minutes from now.”

“Yes. Of course. I have black hair and will be wearing a green suit with a pale green blouse.”

“Very good. Can I ask you a favor?”

“Certainly,” I said.

“You may not realize it, but this hotel is crawling with reporters, and most of them have very little to report. Please don’t speak to anyone while you are waiting. If I’m asked, I’ll just say that you are a campaign donor who wishes to remain anonymous. There’s a big

fireplace in the center of the room. Sit as close to that as you can so it will be easier to find you.

“Yes. Thank you, Mr. Stepford. I’ll see you downstairs in 20 minutes.”

The restaurant reflected the colonial décor featured throughout the hotel. At this hour, it was almost empty, so I picked the table in front of the round stone fireplace. I ordered coffee and a fruit plate with cottage cheese. An old colonial rifle was mounted on the mantel. Only a man would think a weapon was an appetite enhancer, but I appreciated the warmth of the blaze on my stockinged legs.

If a lizard could walk, he would look very much like the man who I saw slithering across the restaurant towards me. His beady eyes blinked rapidly out over a broad humorless smile.

“Mrs. Gardener?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, half rising to shake his hand.

“I’m Johnny Stepford.” His hand was like ice.

“Please sit down. I’ve just ordered a snack. Can I get you anything?” I said.

A waitress approached wearing an outfit in which the modesty of her colonial bonnet clashed sharply with the low-cut blouse, frilly short skirt and black stockings of a seductive maid.

“I’ll have an apple cobbler and a glass of milk,” he told her, then turned to me. “The food is actually quite good here, which I can’t say for most of the places on the campaign trail.”

“Thank you so much for meeting with me, Mr. Stepford. All of this has been so sudden for me. Until I saw the news last night....”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Gardener,” he interrupted. “I want to hear your story but, as I mentioned, this place is infested with reporters. Any minute now one of them may sit down next to us. So, to make the most of our time, we should probably keep our voices down to just above a whisper and, remember, if someone nosy stops by, please be as rude as you can, avoid eye contact and don’t answer any questions. Did you check in under your real name?”

“Well, yes,” I sputtered. “I’m sorry if that might be a problem.”

A toothy grin spread across this face. “Don’t worry. More problems mean more job security for me. Unless they get so big that they swamp my candidate.” His blinking stopped as he said, “I’m hoping you won’t.”

No smile now. Just a cold silent stare. Was he wondering how he could kill me and drag away my body? Well, surely, I was safe here. I looked around and saw John Chancellor enter the dining room.

“My goodness,” I said, “isn’t that John Chancellor from the NBC Nightly News? He looks shorter and thinner than he does on TV.”

“Yes, they all do,” Stepford smirked. He caught Chancellors’ eye and gave him a bright smile and a friendly wave as he joined two other men on the other side of the room.

Then Walter Cronkite entered, deep in conversation with a tall man wearing a cowboy hat and sunglasses... When it was snowing outside?

I looked away, not wanting to attract even a nod from Walter, knowing that Stepford didn’t want me talking to reporters.

“There’s that Cronkite bastard,” Stepford muttered, his voice lower than before. “I hope he’s not coming to Peter’s rally tonight.”

Was he kidding? “You don’t want Walter Cronkite to hear Peter speak? I would think a report by him would be worth its weight in gold.”

“Wrong,” he said. “Last night Cronkite came to a forum where Peter, George Bush and Pat Buchanan were speaking. Cronkite shows up just as Peter begins his talk. So, who do you think the crowd pays attention to?

“They turned and looked at Walter Cronkite?”

“Worse. Some even got out of their seats and lined up in front of Cronkite for an autograph, just as Peter got to the best lines in his speech. Cronkite refused the autographs, but the line kept getting bigger. It threw Peter off, and he didn’t have his best night.

“If Cronkite wanted to do a one-on-one sit-down with Peter, *that* would be gold. I’d go over and ask him now, but you see that tall asshole who’s sitting with him? He’s Hunter S. Thomson. You know him?”

“I recognize the name Doesn’t he write for *Rolling Stone*? Funny, irreverent kind of pieces?”

“‘Irreverent’ is way too polite a word. He’s a drug-addled idiot who delights in causing trouble. He’s in New Hampshire to write a book about the 1992 campaign. He says he’ll call it ‘Better than Sex,’ because politicians are addicted to attention and winning more than anything else. Last night at the bar, he shouted, ‘Journalism is an art and should be used like a hammer to destroy your enemies!’ Somebody should lock him up.”

I felt my eyebrows climbing up my forehead but had the good sense to change the topic.

“I know you and Peter must be busy,” I said. “Thank you again for meeting with me.”

“Yes.” Again, the cold, silent stare.

A mix of nerves and nausea suddenly threatened to travel up my throat. I pressed my lips together to make sure it didn’t wind up on the tablecloth.

I focused on the breath coming into my body, imagining it was bringing peace, then exhaled my tension. I couldn’t let fear trick me into seeing only the bad that might happen.

Finally, Stepford said, “Mrs. Gardener, I’ve read your note, but why don’t you tell me your story in your own words? And please remember to stop if the waitress or anyone approaches. When I was here in ‘88, working for Bob Dole, NBC had a waitress on the payroll, and ABC had the bartender in their pocket.”

“I never realized there was so much secrecy or spying in politics.”

“Actually, it just adds to the fun. In ‘88, my specialty was telling stories that would make the competition look like shit.” Again, the unsettling grin. Was he clever, evil or both?

I began summarizing the note I had written and was mostly finished when the waitress returned with our orders. Stepford leaned over the cobbler, as if daring it to move. I watched, expecting to see his long, forked tongue dart out of his mouth and flick a morsel back inside.

“OK,” he said after using the fork for his first few bites. “Here’s what’s going to happen. It’s now 4:45. At 5:15, please be waiting at front door under the canopy. I’ll drive by and pick you up. Again, please be rude if anyone tries to start a conversation with you. Say no more than, ‘I’m waiting for a friend, and I don’t talk to strangers.’”

The few bites of the cottage cheese I had swallowed were curdling in my stomach. Was it safe to get into a car with this man and have him drive away with me?

“What about meeting Mr. Rudolph?”

“I’ll take you to him, but we want to make sure no one sees the two of you together, OK?”

“OK. 5:15 at the front door. I’ll be there. Please tell Peter I’m very grateful, and that I apologize again for this intrusion.”

I walked out the front door at 5:10. The snow had dwindled to random flurries, and glimmers of the fading sun were leaking through the gray clouds. Mounds of snow made dirty little walls between the sidewalk and the street. By 5:25, there was still no sign of Stepford, and I was getting cold. Had he changed his mind? I pulled my scarf up higher around my neck, kept my gloved hands in my pocket and stamped my feet to warm up my toes. Then, a silver Chevy pulled up the driveway, and Stepford waved for me to get in.

“Did you talk to anyone?” he asked as I got in.

“No. I think I must look boring.”

We stopped at the end of the driveway, and Stepford’s head swiveled toward me, his eyes examining my hair, my face and the curve of my coat over my breasts. “You don’t look boring. How long are you planning to be in town?”

Did he think I was a floozy, a loose woman who would sleep with him?

“As long as it takes me to persuade Peter to help our daughter.”

His eyes flicked to the rear-view mirror as we started down the street. “*Our* daughter, huh? How sure are you that this girl is Peter’s? Did you sleep with any other boys in the Bahamas?”

How dare he say that? But then, why wouldn’t he? “No,” I said firmly. “I went steady with Dave for two years before he and I got married. Peter was the only other man I slept with in all that time.”

Tears blurred my eyes as Stepford made another turn. What would Peter be like? Would he threaten me? I glanced over and caught Stepford looking at my chest just before he made another turn. Where was he taking me? Should I get out and insist Peter meet me in some public place where I didn’t feel threatened?

“Aren’t we going in circles?” I asked, recognizing a grocery store we had passed about three minutes ago.

“Very observant. Yes, I’m going around the block a couple of time to make sure that no one is following us.”

He put on his directional signals and pulled into the parking lot of Stewart’s Ice Cream Shoppe. Stepford backed his car into an open spot far from the door, close to another car facing the building next to the snow wall that bordered the lot.

“That’s Peter in the car next to us.”

I looked past Stepford, and there he was, turning to look at me through the window of a dark blue sedan.

I gave him a little wave, my stomach in knots. Only a curt nod in reply. Was he angry?

“OK. Get out and go sit in Peter’s car. I’ll stay here and keep an eye out, so the two of you won’t be disturbed. He’s free until six this evening, so you have a half-hour to talk if you need it.”

I opened the door and walked around the front of Stepford’s car, then behind Peter’s. As I approached his passenger door, I leaned on the car, careful not to slip on the icy pavement.

Would he think I looked fat? I weighed 15 or 18 pounds more than I did in the Bahamas. Goddamn it! I’m here to save Jenny’s life, and I’m worried about my looks?

I opened the passenger door and slid in. It was Peter, the Dream Catcher, older but more handsome than I remembered.

“Hello, Peter,” I said, removing my glove and extending my hand to shake his. It was warm and strong.

“Hello, Susan,” he said.

I hesitated, not sure what to say. “Do you remember me?”

“I remembered you even before I got your note. And now that I see you, I remember even more. You’re still a very attractive woman.”

My heart sped up. “Thank you. Did you see Jenny’s resemblance to you in the picture I included?”

“Actually, I think she looked more like my sister’s daughter. In fact, they could be twins.”

My breath caught. Wasn't that a confirmation they were related? But go slow. Tell him about Jenny. His daughter. Our daughter.

"You would like Jenny and be proud of her. She's a bright, attractive, caring woman."

"I'm glad to hear that." His faint smile faded into a frown. "But what about her illness and the care she's been getting? Have you gotten a second opinion?"

"Roswell Park Cancer Institute is one of the top-ranked hospitals for cancer care and research. We think her doctors are the best."

He looked away, silently staring at the wall in front of them.

"I'm so sorry for the timing of all of this," I said. "From what I've read about your campaign, it seems like you're a good man trying to do good things. I don't want it... I don't want Jenny or me to cause any problems for you."

"I read your note a couple of times," he said, looking at me. "I guess you should know that being with you that evening was the best part of my vacation, too. I left while you were sleeping because I was afraid it would get awkward when your roommate got back. But when I knocked on your door after I woke up around noon the next day, you didn't answer."

By noon, I would have been in the Jeep, meeting Donna as we started the tour with the missionary couple. Had he really cared enough to come back?

I said, "I saw you that night, right after I learned that Martin Luther King had been killed. You were with a friend by the pool, but I was in the middle of talking to some people who were even more upset than me. When I looked up, you were gone."

I lied because I didn't want Peter to know I had run away after seeing him and his friend celebrating King's death. I was so upset I had slept with a racist that I ran upstairs and threw up.

Something buzzed, and he pulled a black plastic thing from his coat pocket. When he drew an antenna from the top, I realized it must be one of those cell phones I'd read about. "I'm sorry," he said, frowning at the little screen, "this will just take a minute." His side of the conversation was an assortment of 'yes', 'no' and a couple of 'goods.'

What would have happened if he had come to my door an hour earlier? I would never have gone on that tour and never met Donna. And I still might believe that becoming Homecoming Queen was the high point of my life. ...a life without music.

When he got off the phone, I said, “We did share a beautiful evening together, but I never stopped to think we might be creating a beautiful new life.”

His eyes shifted again to the wall. “You’ll have to bear with me for a while,” he said. “I’m still in shock, thinking that I might have a daughter.”

Might have a daughter? He wasn’t convinced.

“I’m sorry. This must create a problem for you or your family.”

He snorted, dismissing my concern. “My wife and I already have so many problems that she’ll barely notice this one. We both wanted children, but we were unable to have them. Our twentieth anniversary is approaching, but we’ve just been going through the motions for the past ten. If I don’t win the nomination and get elected, we’ll probably end it next year. And, since I’m only polling in the single digits, it’s unlikely that I’ll win. Not against a well-known conservative like Pat Buchanan or the kind of support Pat Robertson has from the evangelicals.

“It sounds like an uphill fight,” I summarized.

“Yes. All of us are attacking President Bush for reneging on his pledge: “Read my lips. No new taxes.’ But my voice is getting drowned out by the others.”

“I’m sorry it’s not going well.”

He smiled, his eyes twinkling as he faced me. “Well, actually, I’m having fun. I like making speeches and meeting people. Like last night before the forum, I had a delightful little conversation with President Bush about fly fishing while all the candidates were sitting in the holding room. Plus, our marketing team estimates that every time I’m called the ‘Chicken King’ on national television, we sell a thousand more Finger-Lickin’ meals. For me, there’s really no downside to being a candidate whether I win or lose.”

His cell phone rang again, but after looking at the display, he pushed a button to silence it. Then he looked at me, his eyes searching my face. “So, Susan, have you been happy?”

I looked back at him, remembering the boy who was so interested in my dreams. “You know,” I said, “one of the things I remember liking about you is that you were such a good listener. So let me give you a real answer.”

I took a moment to think. “There have been times I’ve suffered more than I ever thought possible, especially when Dave died. He never knew that I had deceived him, so that made a dark time even darker.”

His smile dimmed as he raised his eyebrows, encouraging me to continue.

I thought about Jenny, beaming as she reached out to me as a child. Playing music with Donna. The early years with Ed. “And there have been times I’ve had so much happiness that I could talk forever and still not tell you how wonderful it felt.”

“I imagine you’ve been a very good mother,” Peter said. His warm smile spread up into his eyes, and I remembered why I had been so attracted to him.

“When I was driving here,” I said, “I thought the question you might ask would be, ‘Have your dreams come true?’ If you did, I had decided I would say, ‘My dreams will come true if Jenny lives.’”

“Or course. Her illness is heart breaking.”

We were both quiet. Then he said, “Stepford says I should have refused to meet with you. Denied knowing you. But growing up, I spent too much time living a lie. So now I’m done with that. Plus, one of the reasons I got into politics is to maybe make the world a better place, and...”

He went quiet, staring through the windshield, but continued after a couple of breaths.

“But it’s confusing. Growing up in the South, ‘a better place’ meant very different things to very different people.”

How much time do we have left? Should I let him ramble, or focus back on Jenny?

“So,” I said, “I guess what I’m offering, or what I’m hoping, is that you’ll help make this world a better place for your child... our child. The doctors tell me is that all you have to do is to take the cotton swab that’s inside this little bottle...”

I took it from my coat pocket and removed the cap, holding the Q-tip between us. “And rub it against the inside of your cheek. I was tested, but my DNA isn’t a good match. Yours may not be either. But at least we’ll know we did everything possible to save the life of a beautiful, bright, caring young woman. A life we created together when I guess, at least, I should have known better.”

He stared at me as I held the Q-tip between us.

“Please, Peter?” My heart was pounding.

He looked left out the driver's window, then turned to me with a somber look. "I want to help.... But I need to have another talk with Stepford."

He took the swab and container from me, examining them. Then he put the swab back into the bottle and slipped it into his coat pocket. "I have a speech tonight in Concord at 8 PM. Would you like to come?"

"Yes," I said. "I'd love to hear you speak. I imagine you're good at it."

"We shouldn't be seen together there, but Stepford will tell you my answer afterward."

A spark of hope warmed me as I slid over the ice back to Stepford's car.

Support from Donna

I phoned Donna as soon as Stepford brought me back to the hotel. After being ordained six years ago, she had become the minister of a small Methodist church in the country about an hour and a half from Buffalo.

I admired that spirituality was the guiding force in her life. But I had repeatedly warned her against becoming a celibate minister in the United Methodist Church, which believed that "homosexuality was not compatible with Christian teachings."

There were other Christian denominations that would have accepted her the way that God had created her. But, she was convinced that she could do the most good offering support to gay teens in the places they needed it the most. "Plus," she often said, "the Methodists aren't like the Catholics where the Pope and the Cardinals make all the rules. Instead, as a minister, I'll be able to vote – and maybe even be a leader – in re-focusing our theology on what Jesus taught about love, compassion and forgiveness."

I admired her courage and respected her goals, but I often thought she was hopelessly naïve.

We hadn't spoken for a couple of days, so I quickly summarized the most important developments: the death sentence from Jenny's doctor, recognizing Peter on TV, and my trip to New Hampshire.

"What a roller coaster!" she exclaimed. "How was your meeting with Peter?"

Well, I've actually had two meetings. Earlier this afternoon, I had coffee with Peter's campaign manager, Johnny Stepford, in the hotel dining room. He made me so nervous I almost threw up.

"Then, this evening, he drove me to a dark parking lot where Peter was waiting in another car. Peter and I talked for about twenty minutes. He said he'd give me his decision about the DNA after his rally tonight. It starts at 8 in Concord. That's about thirty minutes from here, so I have to leave in about an hour."

"What's Peter like?"

I hesitated, embarrassed to be honest, but knew I didn't need to pretend with Donna. "Actually, he's lovely. I remembered why I was so attracted to him."

"Attracted?" She said, a little note of alarm in her voice.

"I remember him as warm-hearted... and a good listener. He's still like that," I said, then summarized our conversation.

"All of that bodes well for him deciding to help Jenny, doesn't it?" she said.

"I think so. But I know Stepford is against it. He didn't talk much when he drove me back to the hotel. The vibes I get from him are anger, control and lust. Peter doesn't want to be seen with me, so if he gives me a DNA sample, I think he'll have Stepford bring it to my room tonight."

"Will you be safe with Stepford?"

"I hope so, but he really frightened me this afternoon. He strikes me as the type of guy that likes to manipulate women.... or force them."

"Well, let's think about what we can do, so you won't feel vulnerable being alone in a hotel room with him." She paused for a few seconds. "How about this? The instant you get back to your room tonight, call me. Then, I'll call you back every ten minutes until Stepford shows up. Tell Stepford I'm having a crisis, and we have to talk. Then I'll hang on until he tells you Peter's decision, and you lock the door behind him when he leaves. How would that be?"

"That would be good. Thank you. Remind me to tell you about my run-in with Walter Cronkite."

"The famous Walter Cronkite?"

“Yes. John Chancellor from NBC and Hunter Thompson from Rolling Stone are here, too. I kind of feel like I’m Dorothy, who’s suddenly landed in Oz. I’m in way over my head. And the worst of it is that whatever I do, or don’t do, can literally mean life or death for Jenny.”

“You *are* under a lot of pressure, and so far you’ve done amazingly well.” She paused. “Do you have time to sit quietly and reflect on the powers you can use tonight?”

I always love how Donna prays. “Yes, thank you. Five minutes?”

“OK,” she said, “Are you someplace where you can sit comfortable with your back head and neck in a straight line?”

“Yes,” I said, carrying the phone as I moved to the chair by the window.

“OK. Now, rest both feet on the floor and close your eyes. Each time you take a breath, be aware of the air, the oxygen, flowing into your longs... nourishing each cell in your body. ...That nourishment is only part God-given support created from the energy of a nearby star, interacting with billions of plants to fuel that the trillions of cells inside your body. Through Divine Order that collaborate with each other so that we can live, think and love. And we, our bodies, are just two of the countless everyday miracles

And be aware of the spiritual powers of love, imagination and wisdom and your other spiritual gifts so you can not only co-create your highest good, but also be a bright light that can help others in a ways you’ll never know.

It seemed must faster than five minutes later when Donna spoke, “It’s the power of Love that launched you and sustains you on your journey. Tonight, you will be a shining beacon of strength and your understanding that will guide you to your highest good.”

She continued on, finally ending with, “And so it is. Amen

“After a minute of quiet I said,”Thank you, Donna. That really helped. “Jenny’s illness and now all of this with Peter is driving me over the edge.”

“You’re a wonderful and strong woman,” she added. “And be glad that Peter is still sweet after all these years.”

Suddenly, something popped in my brain and fear flickered in my gut. “Wait. No! Wait...” I hesitated.

“Peter’s not sweet! He’s slick! This is the same thing that happened before! The first night I met him, I thought he was so sweet and sensitive that I went to bed with him. Then,

after he got what he wanted, he snuck out without saying goodbye. And the next night when Dr. King was killed, I saw him across the pool making racial jokes and celebrating with his friend.”

“Wow, so maybe Peter seems sweet, but he’s really a schemer? What do you think is going on?”

“Seriously, Donna, I don’t know what to think.” I was biting my lip again, a habit I’m trying to break. “When I first got into his car, he came on strong, telling me I was ‘still a pretty woman.’ Immediately, a thought flashed through my mind that maybe I should have been calling him the ‘Bull Shitter’ instead of the ‘Dream Catcher.’ But two minutes later, I was back to being mesmerized by him.”

“How can I help?”

“I think you already did, reminding me that I’m not at the mercy here of either Peter or Stepford. Instead, I can use my God-given abilities, plus friends like you, to find the best possibility for Jenny and me.”

“I love being your friend because you’re never boring,” Donna, said and we both laughed. “Don’t forget to call me as soon as you get back from the rally.”

THE RALLY

The roads were dark but clear and dry all the way to Exeter Academy in Concord. I paused while pulling into my parking space to let a handsome young man in an expensive looking top coat open the passenger door of the car I had followed into the lot.. He glanced at my New York license plate then waited on the sidewalk in front of me.

“What’s an attractive woman like you doing so far from home on a night like this?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, I don’t talk to strangers,” I said and kept walking, remembering Stepford’s advice.

Mr. Handsome fell into step next to me, followed closely by the scruffy middle-aged man who got out the drivers door lugging a camera. “Well, then, let me introduce myself. I’m

John Ryan from ABC news. I'm here to cover Peter Rudolph's rally this evening. Can you tell me why you came to see him?"

His assistant hefted his camera to his shoulder and pointed at me, ready to record my answer. I laughed to myself. Even if I wanted to respond, the real answer would require a novel or TV mini-series, rather than the ten-second sound bite he was looking for. "Sorry. No comment," I said, walking faster.

As I turned to enter the building, I glanced back at my car and saw his cameraman standing in front of it, copying down my license plate. Shit.

I was guided into a large gymnasium, and then through a door in a movable wall at one end that crowded the rally into just one-third of the available space.

I got hooked on reading political books in high school because my girlfriends and I had a crush on John F. Kennedy. "The Making of the President: 1960" by Theodore White was an eye-opener because it focused as much on JFK's personality and sense of humor as it did on his politics. I love reading about him, but became fascinated by some of the larger points, like with how television impressions became more important than policy discussions in that election.

For example, radio listeners who heard the 1960 debates between Nixon and Kennedy were convinced that Nixon did better. But, because Nixon had a dark stubble that made him look shifty, television viewers were sure that Kennedy was the better candidate. More people watched television than listened to radio, so Kennedy won the Presidency.

A campaign tip shared by an insider in White's book was 'always book your candidate's rally into a hall that is too small.' I was sure Stepford must have read that advice because the hundred or so people who had come to see Peter were crammed into the smaller part of the gym, creating a standing-room-only crowd that would look impressive on television. But the little room was so much warmer than the rest of the empty gym that I took off my winter coat and blazer when I claimed the last remaining seat in the last row.

A local politician spent ten minutes heaping praise on himself and one minute introducing Peter. Then, suddenly, there he was, walking across the front of the room, his rolling limp looking more like a boyish bounce than a childhood handicap. His face beamed a warm-hearted glow as if he were greeting a hundred of his best friends who had traveled

here just to applaud him. The sparkle in his eye and the auburn curls the crowned his head and cascaded onto his forehead added an adorable appeal. The electricity he generated doubled anything I've ever seen of JFK in action.

His speech mixed hawkish foreign policies to deter dictators and liberal strategies to strengthen our country by helping the disadvantaged. A partnership between businesses, faith-based organizations and government? The idea surprised me, but I liked it. However, I didn't quite get why he spent so much time telling us how he would stop pollution.

Later in his speech, he bragged about his success as a businessman who "employs thousands of people who provide great meals to millions each year." Then, he ended with, "Yes, our constitution is a sacred document that has stood the test of time and served our country well. But, if I am your President, I will also follow another sacred guide: Christ's words about the Golden Rule from His Sermon on the Mount: 'Do to others what you want them to do to you.' If you elect me, I will follow that guideline to launch a new era of peace and prosperity for you and your family, plus all the citizens of the world. Thank you very much for coming tonight!"

The applause he received was about half-way between polite and enthusiastic.

As he began taking questions, I felt hands gently grasp my shoulders and a voice murmured. "Don't turn around."

From the corner of my eye, I sensed Stepford crouching behind me so he could whisper in my ear. I winced as his cheek brushed my hair and his thumbs moved gently over my silky blouse, exploring the flesh where my neck met my shoulders. "Don't approach Peter when he's done," he murmured. "I'll come to your hotel room before eleven tonight to give you the news." Then, after a slight squeeze and a last feel from his thumbs, he was gone.

That creep didn't have any right to get that close and touch me! I saw reporter John looking at me from where he stood by the wall on the side of the room. Was it curiosity or concern in his eyes? He raised his brow as we made eye contact. Then he moved toward the back of the room, and I couldn't see him.

Peter was still taking questions, and I didn't want to leave until I had stuffed myself with every last morsel of his personality and politics, or anything that might give me an edge in persuading him to save Jenny.

Peter took his last question and thanked the crowd, who responded with sustained applause. The heat, or maybe the tension, made it hard for me to breathe in the crowded room. As I walked out through the door of the portable wall into the much cooler gym, I heard, "Hello, Mrs. Gardener." Startled, I turned and saw John, the ABC news reporter.

God, damn it! This son of a bitch knows who I am. A simple trick, I suppose, for someone from a large news organization who knows your license plate. But if Stepford or Peter see me talking to a reporter, they'll never trust me enough to help Jenny.

I raced to leave the building, but he easily kept pace with me.

"I know that you don't want to be interviewed," he said, matching my pace as I moved toward the exit, "but I hope you can give me a minute of your time. I saw Johnny Stepford approach you and I think maybe we can help each other."

Help each other? I glanced over my shoulder. The wall blocked us from being seen either by Peter or Stepford from the smaller room.

"Please leave me alone," I said as I sped up to leave the building.

"I saw that you were upset by whatever Stepford was whispering to you," John said as I stepped outside onto the sidewalk. "Maybe I can help. I don't want to talk about you. I want to ask you about Peter Rudolph for a piece I'm developing. You wouldn't be named as a source. And I could tell you some things about Randolph and Stepford that maybe you can use to protect yourself."

My first priority was getting Peter and Stepford to trust me. If one of them was watching, I needed to be obvious about rejecting someone from ABC news. But maybe I shouldn't slam the door on whatever help a reporter might provide?

"This is neither the time nor the place for a conversation," hinting that I might be available later as I walked even faster.

We had reached my car, but I couldn't get to the driver's door because his cameraman blocked my way. As I turned back to John, I had the crazy thought: now I know what it is like to be a deer in headlights: Eyes wide, staring at the danger that's barreling toward you - but too afraid, too paralyzed or too dumb to get out of the way.

But I wasn't powerless. Or dumb. I was smart. And strong. And these men were *not* going to block my way. I hissed at him, "You want to help me? Tell your cameraman to get out of my way." I squared my shoulders, ready to push his assistant. "Now!" I shouted.

John nodded for his cameraman to move, then handed me his card saying, "I'm always available if you want to talk."

I made a show of throwing the card back at him like a Frisbee that bounced off his chest. Then I stepped around his associate and got in my car.

My heart was hammering so hard I could hear blood pounding in my ears. The parking lot was choked with cars, but the last thing I needed was a fender bender to draw more attention. So, I took two mindful breaths, sensing my power and the wisdom that guided me, before I backed out of my parking spot and retraced my route to the Wayfarer.

I got back to my hotel room a little before ten. I didn't expect Stepford for another hour but called Donna immediately with a quick summary. She confirmed she would phone back every ten minutes to ensure I was safe if he came early.

I went into the bathroom, wiped off my lipstick and brushed my hair up into a no-nonsense bun. I put on my black horn-rim readers, which I never wear in public, buttoned my blouse to my neck and put on my blazer. My reflection was businesslike. I was ready.

I was pacing the room when Donna called back. "Just me checking in," she said. "Any visitors yet?"

"No, but thanks for asking."

"OK. Well, let's keep this line clear. I'll call back in ten."

The Burning Bus

About two minutes after her fourth call, I heard three gentle taps on the door. It was only 10:35. I looked through the peephole and saw it was Peter. This must be good news!

I quickly opened the door and was on the verge of saying hello when I saw him holding his finger over his lips. He whispered, "Shh."

Without an invitation, he quickly stepped into the room, all the while holding his finger up to his lips, still whispering, "Shhhhh!" There was alcohol on his breath.

Once the door was closed, he spoke in a hushed tone, “Sorry for the rude schussing and barging in. But there are over a dozen reporters and their staff in this hotel. I can’t risk one of them being across the hall and hearing a woman’s voice say, “Peter!” A small smile appeared.

Up close, in the soft light of the room, he looked even better than he had in the car or the harsher lights of the gym. The English Leather he wore reminded me of the Bahamas.

“I have my DNA sample,” he said, fishing in his pants pocket and handing me the little bottle.

My heart soared. Another chance for Jenny!

“I came here,” he continued, “instead of sending Stepford, because there’s something I want to explain, or maybe apologize for.”

“Oh, Peter, there’s no need for you to explain or apologize for anything. I’m so grateful that you’re willing to help Jenny. Nothing is more important than that!”

He smiled ruefully. “I’ve found apologizing is good for my soul. But my back is aching like it usually does this time of night, and I need to sit down. Could we visit for a few minutes and have a drink?”

“Um,” I hesitated. At any minute, the phone might ring. What if it was Ed calling as planned? If he knew I was alone in my hotel room with my former lover, he might go nuts. And I wouldn’t blame him.

But I couldn’t afford to alienate Peter, because getting the DNA sample was the easier part. If he was a good match, next he would have to fly to Buffalo for the bone marrow transplant and stay overnight in the hospital.

“Sure,” I said, gesturing to a chair at the little round table in front of the drawn curtains. I gave him a glass and a little bottle of Scotch from the mini-bar.

Sitting with him at such a small table would be too intimate. But if I sat on the bed, that might seem like an invitation. So, I took the chair opposite him and moved it back a few feet, tugging my skirt down as I sat.

“Peter, I have to tell you that I’m expecting a call from my husband at any minute, and probably my girlfriend too. My husband will be upset, understandably, if he knows that I’m alone in my room having a drink with...” my former lover? Jenny’s father?

“An old friend?” he teased, a smile on his lips.

“Yes. I hope we do become friends. After all, we share a daughter.’

“I’m still trying to get my head around that,” he said, slowly shaking his head. “But don’t worry. If your husband calls, I won’t do anything to make you feel uncomfortable. Just tell him I gave you the DNA. You don’t have to say I’m here.”

“Good. Thank you,” I said as the tension in my shoulders eased. “So, Peter, if either of us needs to apologize, I would think it’s me, coming here and disrupting your campaign.”

“Well,” he responded, “it *was* a shock this afternoon when I read your note about Jenny. But, in some ways, the most upsetting part was when you told me you were across the pool that night when I learned that Martin Luther King had been killed.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I have a vivid memory of learning that he was dead. I think I know what you would have seen and heard. And I’m embarrassed by it.”

“Really?” It was obvious that he and his friend were delighted. Maybe I should have been remembering him as the Bullshitter.

“What do you think I heard?” I said.

“You heard me acting like a racist asshole.”

Despite myself, I laughed. “Boy, you don’t mince words, do you?”

“You would have heard me sounding like a racist because that’s how I always acted then. I remember walking by the pool that night with my buddy, Carl. We each had a bottle of rum in a brown paper bag. Some kids sitting at a table told us Dr. King had just been shot and killed in Memphis.

“Carl, who I had known since high school, was delighted. He hated King and the trouble he was causing. He raised his bottle and cheered, ‘The King is dead!’ And I, as I think you may have heard, raised my bottle and echoed him by toasting, “May he rest in peace.” It was a sincere feeling, but I *wanted* it to sound like a mockery or an insult because that’s how I wanted Carl to hear it.”

I was annoyed that he was trying to rewrite history, but I wanted him to talk and bond with me, so I said, “What do you mean when you said you *acted* like a racist?”

As he began to answer, the phone next to the bed rang. I stood to face it. “It’s either my husband, Ed, or my friend, Donna.”

“Go ahead and answer. If it’s him, I’ll sit here and play possum like a good Southern boy,” he said, exaggerating his accent.

I stepped over to the phone on a table between the beds and stood with my back to Peter. “Hello?”

“Hi, Susan!” It was Ed. “How did your evening go?”

“Great! Peter decided to give me a DNA sample, so I’m thrilled about that. If I leave here before six tomorrow morning, I should be able to get it to the doctors at Roswell by midafternoon.”

“Did he give it to you at the rally? I would think he’d want to keep it a secret.”

“You’re right. He doesn’t want anyone to know. So, Stepford, his campaign manager, brought it to my room a few minutes ago.” I said, aware my voice had dropped almost to a whisper as I lied.

“Oh Susan, that’s wonderful! I don’t know how you did it, but you are one amazing woman to have pulled this off!”

“Thanks. I’m so grateful that Jenny still has a chance. But I’m exhausted, and I need sleep. I want to leave by six in the morning so I can get it to Roswell by tomorrow afternoon. But, first, tell me: How’s Jenny?”

“Still the same. I was at the hospital for most of the afternoon. She rallied a little after supper and even laughed at one of my jokes.”

Ed always could make Jenny laugh. When she went through her terrible teens, she often acted like I was her enemy but always kept Ed on a pedestal

“Thanks for being such a wonderful father. I’ll update you from the Thruway on my way home. I love you, sweetheart.” I would have said it anyhow, but I wanted to make sure Peter heard it before I hung up.

Just as I started to sit back down, the phone rang again.

“Sorry. I’m usually not this popular. This must be my friend Donna, who’s going through a rough time tonight. This should be short.”

“Hello?” I answered.

“Hi Susan,” Donna said, “Anything new to report?”

“Yes. Good news. Peter is here and he just gave me a DNA sample.”

“Oh, Donna, I’m so pleased! Do you feel safe? Should I stay on the line until he leaves?”

“No, I’m fine. Thanks for checking on me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” I glanced at Peter, who was looking down at his drink. “He’s a gentleman and I’m so grateful to him. How about if I call you tomorrow when I stop for gas on my way home?”

As I sat down again, I said, “I’m sorry for the interruptions, Peter. You were saying you *wanted* your friend to think you were a racist? Really?”

“Yes, that’s how you survive when you’re growing up in the South,” shrugging as if it was a casual admission.

“I guess you did what you needed to do.” I wanted it to sound sympathetic but was afraid it came off as frosty.

A lopsided grin grew on his face. “A few minutes ago, didn’t you sacrifice *your* honesty to keep your husband happy?” His grin grew wider, “But I guess you did what you needed to do.”

I felt heat run up my neck and into my cheeks. “I’m sorry. You’re right, Peter. I shouldn’t judge. I really don’t know what it was like to grow up in the South.”

“I really didn’t understand it myself, until they burned a bus in front of me.”

The Burning Bus

“What do you mean?”

He winced as he finished his drink and shifted position in his chair. “I want to tell you, but I ran out of the medicine I usually take for my back. Would you mind if I helped myself to something else from your mini-bar?”

Does he have a medical problem or a drinking problem? “Sure, help yourself. You’re welcome to anything.”

He peered at the little bottles and cans in the half-sized fridge. “It’s the standard assortment. Would you like something?”

Why not? “Is there any wine? White is my preference if there’s a choice.”

He chose a Royal Crown whiskey and poured me a Chablis. I nudged my chair a little closer to the table so I could reach it without stretching. As I took my first sip, my shoulders began to relax.

“So,” he said, toasting me, “Here’s to healthy days for Jenny...and happiness for her mom.” That was sweet of him.

And,” waving his glass again, ”and here’s to growing up in the glorious South.

“So here’s my story

“My life changed on Mother’s Day when I was thirteen. Or maybe I should say, ‘my eyes were forced open when I went with my father to pick up something for my mom from Forsyth’s general store. I had saved some of my allowance to buy her a big box of praline chocolates which I knew she loved.

“But the main reason I wanted to go is because I had a crush on the shopkeeper’s daughter, Janie. The day before, a bunch of boys and girls from my school met to go swimming at Yahou Lake. That’s where I held Janie’s hand for the first time.”

He took a sip. “Actually, it was the first time I had held any girl’s hand. My hormones surged, and I never let go for the rest of our walk around the lake.”

He gave me that crooked smile again, and this time I smiled back, remembering how happy I was when John Gates held my hand for the first time in College Park.

Peter continued, “For nearly a week before Mother’s Day, all the adults had been riled up about the Freedom Riders. You may remember they were black and white students from Fisk University in Nashville. They planned to challenge segregation in the deep South by riding interstate buses and by using the food counters and restrooms in the bus stations.

“At the time, I didn’t know anything about that. But I figured if something big was going on, maybe I could sneak away for some alone time with Janie. I’d been going to their store since I was a kid, so I knew there was a picnic table tucked away in back I hadn’t been brave enough to kiss her at the lake with all the kids around, but I thought, maybe this could be my chance.

“Later I learned that before we got to Forsyth’s, the Ku Klux Klan had attacked the Freedom Riders’ bus when it made a stop in Anniston, a few miles up the road. They slashed some of its tires before the bus escaped.

‘There were a lot of cars parked at the store when we got there. Some men were walking up the highway toward town, breaking bottles on the pavement. Then I heard car horns coming from that direction. As they rounded the bend, I saw cars weaving back and forth in front of the bus to make sure it couldn’t pass, and they forced it to stop in front of the store. The crowd ran to it, shouting and stabbing at the tires that weren’t already flat. Banging on the sides with steel pipes. Breaking windows with chains. All the while screaming a lot of vile stuff I don’t want to repeat.”

“It sounds horrible!” I said.

“Oh, that was nothing. It gets worse.” He took another sip,

“Somebody threw a bottle with a flaming wick through one of the windows. Then, another firebomb was thrown in a different window. Thick black smoke started to billow out of the bus. But the riders were trapped because three or four men were leaning against the bus door to keep it closed. Everybody was shouting. “Let the niggers burn!”

“Oh, no,” I said, feeling sick.

“Flames were swallowing the rear of the bus. ‘Get back! It’s going to blow! Get back!’ people were shouting.

The guys blocking the door moved away. Then, it burst open and the passengers started to escape. They were coughing, collapsing on the ground, retching. By now the bus was one huge bonfire. Even though my father and I were near the back of the crowd, I could hear the thunk of steel pipes hitting heads as the riders tried to move away. The heat from the fire was intense.

“Then, I saw Janie, the pretty little girl I liked, walking up to the riders who were sprawled on the ground. She gave one black lady a cup of water and wiped her face with a wet cloth. Without thinking, I ran to help her, but I didn’t even get two steps before my father grabbed my arm and pulled me back, saying, ‘Don’t you dare!’

“Janie looked at me as I tried to break free. But her eyes turned angry when I didn’t try hard enough to break away. Then a state policeman fired a shot into the air and yelled, ‘Get back. You’ve had your fun for today!’

“Janie kept moving from one rider to another, wiping their faces and giving them water. She was the only one who helped them. The only one.”

“I never imagined anything like that,” I said.

“Me either... I biked over to see her two days later, but as soon as Janie saw me, she turned her back and ran into the house. I’ve never felt so ashamed,” he said, staring into his drink.

“Afterward, they sent Janie out of town to punish her. My father said, ‘Everybody knows that girl is addled in the head, so she probably didn’t even know what she was doing.’

“It was a lie. Every kid knew that Janie was the smartest girl in her class. And the nicest.”

“How awful!” I said, barely able to imagine what he was telling me.

“On that Mother’s Day, I realized that all those white folks who had been so nice to me since I was little were really vicious haters. And the signs and rules that kept us segregated were evil.

“That night, lying in bed, I remember deciding that when I got older I would do something about it. But, after they sent Janie away, I knew I’d really have to be careful.

“So, for years after the bus burning,” he continued, “I began pretending I was like a member of the French resistance who fought the Nazis in the World War Two movies. Play along with the bad guys and make them think I was on their side, until I was ready to defeat them. Get power, then lead the change.”

I asked, “You didn’t have much of a choice, did you?”

“I don’t think so. I did a lot of lying in those days. As a kid, my leg injury kept me from becoming the most athletic. But in high school, I was surprised to see that I was becoming the most popular. I think it was because I listened while other guys bragged. I liked being the president of the class in high school and president of my fraternity in college.

“I wanted to go into local politics like my dad, but I told everyone it was the last thing I was interested in. But I knew what I was doing when I romanced a senator’s daughter I met in college and married her. I really did love Linda at the beginning, but part of the appeal was that a senator’s son-in-law would be harder to beat. And by that time Dad was raising more chickens than anyone else in Alabama, so there was a lot of family money to support my election campaigns.”

I was starting to feel a mild buzz from the wine.

“You know,” I said, “Part of me is aching for what you’ve suffered, but another part is amazed that you’re sharing all of this with someone you haven’t seen for over twenty years, despite the fact that we share a daughter.”

“I suppose there are two reasons I’m opening up,” Peter answered. “For four years, I was in Alcoholics Anonymous. Part of the program was to make a list of people I had harmed, then make amends to them. The more I did that, the better it made me feel. So, the part about making amends stuck. And I think I have some amends to make with you.”

I didn’t know what to say.

He drained his glass. “The sobriety part didn’t. However, as we twelve-step veterans like to say, ‘I have my drinking under control,’” raising his eyebrows and toasting me with his empty glass, as if he was mocking himself.

“So, anyhow, about the Bahamas. I want to apologize for just walking out at the end of a beautiful evening. I left without saying goodbye because I didn’t want to be there when your roommate got back. But I should have woken you before I left. I’m also sorry that all I did was knock when I came to your room the next day. I should have at least left a note.”

“Thank you for saying that,” I said. But still, there was something off about his story. Why was he trying so hard to convince me he was a good man?

As if he read my mind, he said, “The main reason I’m explaining all of this to you is that, once Jenny is better, I’d like to get to know her... and maybe have a relationship if she’s interested.”

My stomach flipped. If Peter felt comfortable barging into my hotel room late at night and helping himself to a couple of drinks from the mini-bar, how pushy would he be with Jenny? And how would Ed react to another man, my former lover, competing for Jenny’s attention?

Peter continued. “I’m flawed, but I’m not evil. I’ve had a good taste of success, ‘again the crooked smile, “but rarely any lasting satisfaction. That’s why I’m ignoring Stepford’s advice and putting my campaign, such as it is, at risk.

“I came here tonight to make amends with you, and let you know who I am. If I’m a good match, I’ll come to Buffalo and do whatever you and the doctors want me to do to save Jenny.”

A flush of joy raced through my body, erasing my doubts. A small voice inside me, said ‘See his goodness. Help him.’ Was it wisdom, wishful thinking or the wine?

I paused before saying, “I think you’ll be a blessing to Jenny, and I hope she’ll be a blessing to you. I think you’ve grown up to become a very good man, Peter. And I’m so grateful that you’re willing to help Jenny.” I resisted the urge to squeeze his hand or hug him. “But it’s late and I do have an early drive.”

He reached into his pocket and handed me two cards. “Here is contact information for Stepford and me. Please let both of us know when the doctors tell you whether or not I’m a good match for the transplant. “

I stood up walked him to the door. As he placed one hand on the doorknob, he half-turned to me, saying, “And I think *you*’ve grown up to become a good mother and very strong woman, Susan.” Then, brushing my cheek with the back of his fingers, he added, ...“and a lovely one. Thanks for listening.”

A cascade of tingles surged down my body. And then he was gone.

Hope Susan

Buffalo, January 1992

A little after 10 AM, I stopped at the Thruway rest area at Indian Castle, one of my favorite stops near the Capital District. Ever since I was a kid, I’ve enjoyed seeing the trucks and cars and zooming under my feet as I crossed the pedestrian bridge from the parking lot to the restaurant. Even though it was twice as expensive as McDonalds, I took a chance on a new place, Starbucks, for a dark roast coffee, betting that the extra caffeine would be worth it. I asked for four quarters in my change so I could talk to Donna for at least ten minutes.

After I closed the phone booth door and dialed, Donna said, “Susan! I’m so glad you called! How did things go with Peter after we spoke last night?”

“Wonderful. Better than expected, but also very strange”

‘How long did Peter stay?’

“Until eleven.”

“Eleven? He was in your hotel room for more than a half-hour?”

“I think so, yes. But the most important thing is that he said he would come to Buffalo and do whatever the doctors wanted to help save Jenny.

“That’s terrific! You must be so pleased!”

“I’m thrilled that Jenny’s getting one last chance. But I’m also sick to my stomach imagining how I’ll tell her.

“Like, ‘Oh, by the way, your father wasn’t Dave who was killed in Vietnam. He’s actually some guy I slept with on spring break when I was so drunk and horny that I never even learned his last name or where he was from.’”

“Ouch. You’re being pretty tough on yourself.”

“Maybe I should be! When I was young, my father would call me a tramp if I stayed out late with a boy. But doesn’t sleeping with a boy I didn’t know prove he was right?”

“Jenny knows you better than anyone, maybe even me. Has she ever seen you acting like a tramp in the twenty-three years you’ve been raising her? I certainly haven’t.”

I sat there, silently, knowing what Donna was getting at. I know I neglected Jenny in the year after Dave died because I was depressed. But after, my mother pushed me to straighten up, I *have* been a good mother, putting Jenny first every day since then.

“I don’t know,” I said. Maybe I’m being too harsh with myself. My mind is such a jumble, I can’t think straight.”

“Of course. Who wouldn’t be rattled by all you’ve had to deal with. Have you spoken to Ed?”

A metallic voice interrupted: “*PLEASE DEPOSIT TWENTY-FIVE CENTS FOR ANOTHER THREE MINUTES.*”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I’ve got more quarters here.” The phone bonged as I inserted two of them. “We’ve got six minutes. Let’s keep talking.”

“So,” Donna asked again, “have you spoken to Ed?”

“He called just before you did last night. I was afraid he’d flip out if he knew Peter was there, so I told him that Stepford had just left after giving me Peter’s DNA sample. And I was too exhausted to talk because I needed to sleep.”

“Oh no, I hope that doesn’t come back to bite you.”

“Me too. I don’t plan to tell anyone but you, and I know you’re good with secrets.”

“Of course.”

“But at this point I’m more worried about telling Jenny that Dave isn’t her father? She was just two when he died in Vietnam and doesn’t have any real memories of him. But I wanted her to feel loved, so I created this incredible legend about Daddy Dave and all the wonderful things he did.”

“Did anything happen with Peter that you wouldn’t want Ed to know?”

“No. I kept my distance,” deciding not to tell her how my body reacted when he touched my cheek.

I looked at my watch. “I still have a three-hour drive before I get to Roswell and I need to focus my attention on Ed tonight. Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Anytime.”

“But, quick, before I go. How are things with your church? You just started volunteering with your fire department as an ambulance driver and an EMT. How is that?

“Church is good. I’ve decided that if *both* our most conservative and our most liberal members are mad at me, I must be doing a good job. And so far I’m doing OK with the ambulance calls. Mostly accidents, chest pain and things like that.

“I’m glad I went through the EMT training,” she continued “Although sometimes I feel like I’m being more helpful when I’m driving people to the hospital, than when I’m praying with them.”

“Don’t doubt the power of your prayers,” I said. “I was a nervous wreck before I went to Peter’s speech last night. But, after you prayed with me, I became a strong woman who wasn’t going to take any shit from anybody. I’m amazed at myself.”

Donna laughed. “You’re awakening your hidden powers. But, to me, you’re always amazing. Let’s talk tomorrow.”

Ed and I agreed that it would be best not to tell Jenny anything about my trip to New Hampshire or the new DNA sample until the doctors told us it might make a difference. But two days after I returned to Buffalo, they confirmed Peter was a perfect match. As instructed, I called Stepford with the news.

He phoned back the next day while I was on my lunch break at school. “Mrs. Gardener,” the congressman and I will arrive at Prior Aviation at the Buffalo airport on his jet tomorrow afternoon at about 1:30. I’ve arranged ground transportation to the Roswell Park Cancer Institute.”

“Thank you, Mr. Stepford,” I said. “Should I plan on meeting you at the hospital then?”

“Well, frankly, ma’am, we’d prefer that you not see the congressman at all while he is here.” My stomach twisted. I didn’t want to see Peter, but I didn’t want him blundering into Jenny’s hospital room on his own..

“Does he want to meet Jenny? I want to be there for that. I just found out yesterday that his DNA is a match, so I plan to tell Jenny about her biological father this afternoon.”

“The congressman does want to meet his daughter, but he hopes to remain competitive in the next couple of primaries. So, he’s decided to forego the meeting for now. I’ve contacted the Roswell Hospital administration and told them how important it is to protect his privacy. I mentioned that the congressman would like to make a large anonymous donation to support their efforts, so I think we’ll be okay on our own.”

I left school as early as I could that afternoon and walked into Jenny’s hospital room about four o’clock. She was sitting up, attentive, as James explained why governments would never do anything about clean air and clean water until people started caring about it.

I could tell she was feeling better because her questions were clever and showed she had a good grasp of the dissertation he was finishing for his doctorate. But other than the bright light in her eyes, she looked like a living skeleton, bald and boney.

After a few minutes, I interrupted. “Jenny, if you don’t mind, there’s something personal I’d like to discuss individually with you.”

I glanced at James who looked at me with raised eyebrows. “James, this isn’t anything we’re going to keep secret from you. And don’t worry, it’s not any bad news about Jenny’s

health. Actually, it's more about me than it is about Jenny, but it's awkward for me to talk about. Could you give us maybe 15 or 20 minutes?"

His face relaxed into a grin. "Sure. How about if I give you a half hour so you don't have to rush. I've developed a taste for the fried bologna and cheese sandwich in the cafeteria, so I think I'll go treat myself and catch up on some reading. Can I bring anything back for either of you?"

What a sensitive young man he was.

As he walked out the door, Jenny reached for my hand, saying, "What's wrong, Mama?" It was what she called me as a little girl. Recently, she slipped back into it when she was very sick or very worried. "Are you sick?"

"No, honey, I'm not sick but I'm suffering from a very weird mix of embarrassment and happiness."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure how to tell you," I paused, "so I guess the best thing is just to blurt it out."

I took a deep breath. "David, my first husband, raised you and loved you from the time you were born until he died in Vietnam. But he wasn't your biological father. Your biological father is a man named Peter that I met one romantic evening during spring break in the Bahamas."

Of course, 'one romantic evening' wasn't a totally accurate description of my night with a very cute boy when I was lonely. But I wanted her to believe that she was conceived in love, not lust.

"What?" she said, wide-eyed, "My real father is a man named Peter?"

"Yes, and the good news is that I tracked him down last week. The doctors have tested his DNA and he's a match. They still have to do more testing, but there's a decent possibility that you'll have the bone marrow transplant you need within the next few days."

Tears started down her face. "You mean there's a chance I can live? ...and marry James?and have his babies? because of a man named Peter?"

"Yes, honey, I think so." Should I keep her from getting her hopes up in case this didn't work? No, because if this didn't work, there was no hope.

We hugged and cried. The first happy tears in a long time.

“So, it wasn’t my father who was killed in Vietnam?” She looked away, thinking. “I’ve sometimes wondered why I don’t look like you or anyone in the family pictures. But what about my... What about your husband, Dave. Did he know I wasn’t his?”

“No. I had been going steady with Dave for almost a year before I went on spring break in the Bahamas. The day after I returned to Buffalo, he asked me to marry him, and I said yes. I never told him I had been with another man.”

“Did *you* know I wasn’t his?”

“No. I wondered about it, and sometimes I worried, but I had no way of knowing. As you got older, and I saw how much you looked like Peter, I was pretty sure you were his. I told Ed the whole story when we started dating, because I didn’t want to burden our relationship with a secret.”

“So, when will I meet him?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “He wants to meet you and help you, but because he’s in the middle of something important, he wants the bone marrow transplant to be a secret.

I saw her forehead wrinkle. “The Bahamas? Isn’t that where you met Aunt Donna? Does she know Peter?”

“No. Actually, I met Donna on a tour the day after I met Peter.”

“So, tell me about my father? What is he like? Do I look like him?”

“Well, yes you do look a lot like him. I met him one evening at the hotel pool where my girlfriend and I were staying. She was off with some other guy, and I was soaking my foot in the pool because I had a bad blister. He came over and we started to talk. He was nicer than any other boy I had met the whole week I was there.”

“How do you mean?”

Well, for one thing, he asked me questions and really listened to my opinions. In my memory, I’ve always have thought of him as ‘the dream catcher’ because he was interested in my plans and my dreams.”

“The dream catcher?”

“Yeah. He said when he was a little kid on a family trip in the Southwest, his mother kept stopping at little stores, asking to see a dreamcatcher.”

“One of those stained glass or woven things you hang in the window?”

“Yes, but because he was little and they were visiting Indian reservations, he thought his mother was looking for a person, like a medicine man. Something about that appealed to him, so asking people about their dreams became his hobby.”

“He sounds nice... How did you find him?”

“When we met that night in the Bahamas, I never learned his last name, where he lived or even where he went to school, so I had no way to track him down. But then, maybe it was a miracle, I saw him on television a couple of nights ago. I was sitting right here, and you were sleeping.”

“How did you know it was him?”

Well, his cheekbones are pretty distinctive, like yours. I remembered the southern drawl. And he walks with kind of kind of a rolling limp from when he fell out a tree when he was a kid.”

“What was he doing on television?”

“Well, he’s a businessman from Arkansas and a former congressman who’s running in the Republican presidential primary.”

“In New Hampshire? Mom, what’s Peter’s last name?”

“Peter Rudolph.”

Jenny sat up a little, a smile growing on her face. “The chicken king? My father is the chicken king?”

What? Not only did Jenny know who he was, but she was happy about it?

“How do you know so much about Peter Rudolph?”

“James loves him!” she said, beaming at me.

“What? I thought James is a liberal democrat.”

“Well, I am, like you and Dad.” She hesitated. “But part of what I like about James is that he’s not big on labels, and sees some good in Republicans, Democrats and Socialists.”

“Socialist? Isn’t that like a Communist?” Who is this man that my daughter wants to marry?

“Not really, but James could explain it better than me. James is kind of a political junkie. You know his doctoral dissertation is on the role of governments and their economies on global warming?”

“Yes. It seems kind of complicated,” I said.

“It is. But James likes Peter Rudolph because he’s running as a compassionate conservative, which is a new type of liberal Republican. But, most of all, he likes Rudolph because he is the only candidate who attended the United Nations Summit on Global Warming in Rio de Janeiro this summer. The issue is hardly ever discussed but James thinks, and Peter Rudolph agrees, it’s the biggest threat to our future.”

She looked toward the door, her eyes glowing. “I can’t wait for James to come back. Not only am I going to live, but he’s going to meet one of his heroes!”

I was worried that when I told Jenny the truth, she would think I was a liar and a tramp. But, right now she was happy. She was going to live! Maybe the judgments would come later?

So, who was Peter Rudolph? An alcoholic who’s willing to risk his political career to save a daughter he never knew he had? A hero who will save the earth from whatever global warming is?

And what will Ed, a deeply Democratic college professor, think about all this? Our beloved daughter was going to be saved by a wealthy Republican politician who had gotten me pregnant. A man who our future son-in-law apparently idolizes?
