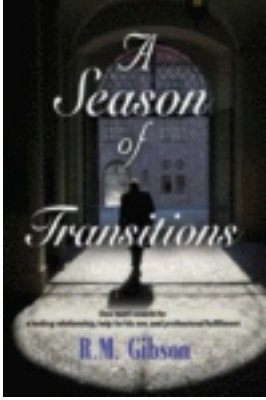


*A
Season
of
Transitions*

One man's search for
a lasting relationship, help for his son, and professional fulfillment

R.M. Gibson



A timeless story-told from the perspective of a single father who juggles his various romantic interests while facing the prospect of losing a blue-chip job, dealing with a son who's into drugs, and enduring a heartbreaking personal setback.

A Season of Transitions

by

R.M. Gibson

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The Cam Gordon Chronicles

Book One

A Season
of
Transitions

Second Edition

R. M. Gibson

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2015

Second Edition

To Sandra

For her tolerance, understanding, and unwavering support.

Chapter Six

The week was coming to a close. Vicki had done her homework, made some calls and had people to see on this second Friday in November. They got to the 8:01 with time to spare and settled into mid-car seats. The train was popular and their coach filled up quickly. At Grand Central, Vicki kissed Cam, pulled out a map and said she would see him at mid to late afternoon. Then she was off on her own. Theirs was a familiar scene, repeated many times over on any given morning.

In his office, Cam reflected on their goodbye at Grand Central, and their conversation on Wednesday evening. He decided that Vicki was certainly her own woman, one able to take charge and make decisions. She did that in the first minutes after they met in Las Vegas. Cam was now the object of a full court press and had been almost from the moment she arrived in New York. Why should he be surprised? But there was something that was beginning to gnaw at him deep inside. "What is it?" he asked himself. A clear-cut answer eluded him.

Mid-afternoon got to be late afternoon, but no Vicki. It was time to be concerned about her. At almost that same moment, she practically exploded through the door, came over to a seated Cam, plopped on his lap and gave him a big kiss. "If you can master this town, I can, too. I've just had a great day bearding would-be lions. You're next."

In a timorous voice, Cam said, "It isn't easy being a lion. Please be gentle. I'm a very fragile one. My mane's been shorn so many times there's hardly any of it left."

Vicki reacted with a hearty laugh. His farcical comment was so out of character that she couldn't help herself.

"Easy. Save some of that for tonight. T. J. will be delighted to know a woman whose laugh is genuine and not counterfeit."

"Oh, Cam. You're such a joy. You make me feel so good."

"Now that you've conquered New York, who or what's next, miss lion-tamer person?"

"I've already put you on notice." In a feigned, husky voice, she said, "You are."

Silliness at an end, Vicki moved to a chair opposite Cam and waited while he called T. J. to ask him what the plan was. He suggested that Vicki ought to see another slice of New York living and that the three of them should ride the subway up to his Upper East Side neighborhood.

Cam asked Vicki if she was game. She agreed. In fact, she wanted to have at least one subway ride before she went home.

“You’re on,” Cam said. “See you down here whenever you’re ready to hit the sidewalk.”

“Be there in a few minutes.”

Vicki said that rather than bore everyone over dinner with stories about her adventures, she’d offload now. “I didn’t meet many competent people today,” she began. “I’ve been around you just long enough to know what a real professional is. Most of them aren’t. They’re order takers and really don’t have any interviewing skills, or much else. I had the feeling that two or three of them would have rather taken me to bed than to see if they could earn a placement fee. I was able to deal with those dudes. That was the bearding process, but it wouldn’t be appropriate for you to hear how a lady with proper upbringing dealt with them. I was tough. They shriveled. Kids mostly. They figure, and their owners do too, that if you throw enough manure against the wall, some of it will stick. Not a nice expression, but it makes my point.”

Cam was very familiar with what Vicki was describing. The name often given agencies of that kind was “shlock houses”. She’d now met some of the people who worked in places like that—and dealt with them. He couldn’t help but smile.

“I did run into a guy named McIvers with Ira North Associates. Said he used to work at Signa and thinks he remembers you from about two years ago. He seems to know what he’s doing and said that if I come back in the spring he might be able to place me in a decent, good paying job in either public relations or with a major hotel. He went through a list of their clients. Impressive. He didn’t need to be straightened up like some of the other clowns did. He’s competent, I think.”

“Jordan McIvers? He should remember me. I was his boss for a couple of weeks. But the interesting part is that Ira North is one of our outplacement partners. They’re among the best. If there’s a secret, they now know that I’ll be available in the spring. When the time comes, I may lean on them for help. Small world. Glad you had a good day. It looks as if you fit right into the picture. So, having passed today’s test, would you like to move in with me?”

“If I thought you really meant that, you know what the answer would be. Don’t play games with me, Cam. On that subject, I’m the one who’s fragile.”

“Fragile? What’s fragile?” T. J. asked as he came through Cam’s door. “Ahhh, Miss Vicki. Good evening. You look delicious, and I can see that you need a hug to welcome you back to Signa Oil.”

I better keep an eye on you two, otherwise I might wind up with an empty bed.” That was good for a chuckle as they went out the door.

T. J. led the way to the Lexington Avenue subway and then down the escalator that took them to the platform level.

“We can take any train that comes in. Won’t be but a few minutes.”

Cam asked about Miss Judy.

“She lives in my building. I’ll go get her after I’ve let you in.”

Off at Seventy-seventy Street, and at his door, T. J. said, “Here we are. Just relax. I’ll be right back.”

“Comfortable place,” Vicki said. “Very much like yours. You guys do have a talent. It’s not surprising that you work together well and that you’re friends. In some ways you’re very much alike. A little bit too much so, maybe.”

T. J. came in with Judy Haynes, and everyone was introduced. “She is petite,” Cam thought. “Even shorter than me. And cute. My instincts are right. There *are* alternatives, but it’s the wrong evening to think about things like that.”

Drinks were served and the four of them got better acquainted. Judy was a few years older than Vicki and unhappily employed as an administrative supervisor with a New York-based paper company. She was looking around, as she put it. After nearly an hour of drinks and chatter, they went off to dinner.

The Captain’s Table wasn’t far from T. J.’s apartment. The weather was chilly, so the warmth of the restaurant felt good on cold ears. Quite a find. Tables and the interior accents were of elegant dark oak, and there was a fire ablaze in a massive stone fireplace. The ambiance was to Cam’s taste. “T. J., if the food is equal to the atmosphere, we’re in for a real treat. Great choice.”

Drinks were brought and nursed. Menus came and decisions, at least for Cam and Vicki, turned out to be hard. There was a wide selection. Vicki toyed with the idea of ordering the Icelandic scrod. “You do know that scrod’s the pluperfect of screwed?” T. J. asked. The well-mannered foursome burst into hearty laughter. Heads at adjoining tables turned.

“That’s rich,” Vicki said. “I’ll have to remember it.”

Ordering was done, finally, and the chatter resumed in earnest. Judy and Vicki talked some about themselves. Their backgrounds were the least familiar, so it was interesting to follow the lives, and careers, and hopes of these two young women who were less interested in home, hearth, and babies than doing well in their chosen professions.

Dinner was served and everything looked absolutely wonderful. More than that, the food was excellent. About halfway through their meal, Vicki asked Cam how he liked his haddock. With a full mouth, he muttered.

“Won’t talk while the flavor lasts.” Swallowing his bite, he added, “Somebody else’s line, but it fits. Anyway, one word will answer your question. Superb. Yours?”

“Never any better than this. Even in the top Vegas restaurants.”

The consensus was that this was one fine restaurant. The food was exceptional. “Glad to know about this place, T. J.” Vicki was certain that she understood the reason why, pinched him on the leg and scowled. Cam ignored her.

Everyone skipped dessert. No room. But coffees and liqueurs were ordered and the gossip resumed. Their topics were all over the place and included the results of Tuesday’s election that Nixon had won. It was politics. The subject quickly died—in spite of the fact that Cam had been “volunteered” to work briefly for the Nixon-Agnew Finance Committee.

On the street, Vicki and Cam thanked T. J. for dinner. He asked if they’d like to come back to his place for a nightcap. Cam said he’d like to, but he wanted to see if they couldn’t be on the 10:25 train. That would put them home in time to relieve his boys’ sitter by midnight. They told Judy it was nice meeting her, thanked T. J. again, and said good night. Then, within thirty-seconds, they were swallowed up by the Lexington Avenue subway station on Seventy-seventh Street.

Vicki and Cam made their train with about a minute to spare. They settled into a seat and almost immediately Cam found himself the object of a serious snuggle. “I’m glad I know you,” Vicki said.

“And I’m pleased you’re here. It’s been an evening that makes me feel good all over.”

The creaky old train stopped at all fourteen stations between Grand Central and Sudbury. They dozed for a few minutes en route, but the screeching brakes and noisy doors woke them up. Yet, there was no letup in the cuddling. It lasted throughout their seventy-six-minute ride.

At home, Cam paid Arch Radford, thanked him and sent him on his way. It was good to have a senior, and a friend, who was reliable and nearly always available when Cam needed him.

The boys had gone to bed well before midnight. Cam and Vicki undressed quickly, were under the covers immediately afterwards, and then slept like two embracing logs.

Morning came earlier than either Cam or Vicki would’ve liked, but this was the day Cam promised Vicki they’d drive up to Massachusetts. More sleep would have suited them better, but she really wanted to make the trip and to see more of New England.

They got themselves together, had breakfast, left the table set for the boys and then got ready to leave. Cam knocked on the boys' bedroom door. Drew responded.

"Dad?"

"No, it's the Easter Bunny."

Drew reacted with a hoarse morning chuckle. "Yeah, sure it is." Cam went in.

"I try to respect your privacy, but I just wanted you to know that we're on our way up to the lake. Breakfast is partly set up for whenever you get to it."

"Thanks. I like weekends. I'm going back to sleep after you leave. Oh, I forgot to tell you. We got free tickets for the game this afternoon, so Jon and I are going."

"OK. Remember, I'm counting on you to behave yourself. If you stay through the fourth quarter, we may be back before you're home. Anyway, we'll see you late this afternoon."

"Bye, Dad. Be careful."

The drive up the Wilbur Cross and Merritt Parkways was worth taking even at this time of the year. Vicki was captivated by a landscape with so many trees—now mostly with bare limbs—the stone fences, and the distinctive New England-style homes.

"You're going to get tired of hearing me say it, but this is so different from anything I've ever known. I'm really pleased that you're willing to make the trip instead of relaxing at home."

"I can do that when I get old, but there's nothing stressful about doing this. Wait till we get up to retreat country, and then you'll see what I mean. Anyway, we have tomorrow off."

When they were well east of Hartford, old Route 15 was being turned into a new Interstate Highway, probably to be numbered I-86 Cam thought he'd read. There were a good many pieces of construction equipment along the road, plus several crossovers with lanes that were squeezed down into two-way traffic. The speed limit was 30 MPH, so it made for slow going.

Off Route 15, finally, they turned left onto a bridge that crossed over the highway. Once across, they were on a surfaced road that took them in the direction of the lake. Almost immediately there was a sign marking the state line, and they were now in Massachusetts. "Another state that you can add to your collection," Cam said.

Shortly afterwards, they saw the long, narrow lake, which was cut in half by a causeway. Cam knew his way and made all the turns needed to get them up to the cottage that he no longer wanted. He parked in front. The two lots he'd buy instead were just up the road.

Vicki hadn't made a sound since they came off the highway. She was obviously taken with the beautiful scenery that had surrounded them over the past several minutes. Then, in a voice that was nearly a whisper, she said, "This is absolutely beautiful."

"Glad you like it. The cottage isn't anything to write home about, so let me show you my building lots first. They're less than 100 yards up on the left. The road, by the way, is called Hemlock Drive."

As they got closer, Vicki recognized the prominent granite outcrop that Cam had mentioned. It was rugged and added immense character to the site. As they climbed over it, there were all kinds of plants and small shrubs that were now at home in the soil that had collected in the stone's fissures. "What's this?" Vicki asked. "It's lovely,"

"Laurel. Our neighborhood and the street we live on are named after it. They flower in the spring and with their waxy leaves and white or pink flowers it's a sight to behold. When you're back, maybe it'll be in bloom. Just for you."

Vicki had the urge to give Cam a hug, and she did.

Up on the lots, Vicki saw that they were inside a horizontal "V" of sorts. Hemlock Drive was below them. The road continued to the left and then became Summit Trail as it bent sharply around behind where they were standing. Cam's two lots were wide but not especially deep. "I see now why you want the easement back there," she said.

"It'll be more secure than that. The land will be a deeded twelve-foot strip for a driveway."

"Smart," she thought. "He may not have figured out where he's going with me, but he knows exactly where he's headed with this. I want to see it happen. This is so tranquil." She could visualize a scene when on some winter's day there would be snow on the ground, the fireplace ablaze, and the two of them sharing his retreat. There was a lump in her throat and tears welling up. Vicki didn't want Cam to see how all this was affecting her, so she turned away. How could she possibly explain her feelings? Simple words wouldn't come anywhere close.

The two of them walked the property and he showed her where the cottage would be built, or approximately so. This time of year, with the trees now mostly bare, there was a view of the lake. Just below the road and down a steep slope was a small pond that was fed by a rapid, tumbling stream that ran alongside the cottage where they'd left the car. "All this is the stuff of dreams," Cam said, "but someday it'll all come together. That my job at Signa will be gone next year means there'll be a delay, but I can wait."

Cam pointed out where the well would be drilled, a security light put up, and the sewerage system installed. When he saw that Vicki wasn't overly excited about those kinds of details, he suggested they walk out the back way, around the switchback, across the face of the property, and then back to the cottage. He still had a key, even though the deal for him to buy it would soon die. It was a bi-level building, hung on the steep slope they saw from his upper lots. There were fireplaces and big decks on both levels. Not a bad property, but it no longer suited his needs. Natalie liked the place. That alone was enough to chill his ardor.

They'd seen what Cam wanted Vicki to see. She was completely taken with all of it. Back in the car, she asked if they might drive around the area. The name "Sturbridge" fascinated her for some reason, and she wondered what it was like. On the way, Cam took the wrong fork in a road leading away from the lake and they wound up in a place called Bloomfield. Before he got oriented, they passed by a white, Early American church set in the middle of the town green. "Nothing like this in Las Vegas," Vicki said. "It's lovely." Then she thought, "It's the kind of church in which to marry. How could it not last if it began there?"

Finally headed in the right direction, with the help of a local man who was good at pointing, they found Sturbridge and discovered that it was home to a recreated early 1800's New England village. Cam and Vicki looked at each other, and said, as a duet, "Let's do it."

"But how about some lunch first?" Vicki asked.

"My stomach agrees with that idea. A slice of toast doesn't have much mileage in it."

They stumbled upon a great little place on a side street called "Smokey's". A friendly customer on his way out the door said, "You gotta try the plate with homemade smoked sausage and warm potato salad. It's great." They did and ate themselves full. Then they headed for "The Village", as they discovered it was called.

Tickets bought, they walked the various pathways and quickly discovered that it was a big place. The OSV guide said it was about a 200-acre site, had nearly 40 structures, all of them authentic, and that each building had been brought in board by board from all over the Northeast. As they continued their tour, it also didn't take long for them to realize that they hadn't allowed enough time to see it all. "Next time," Cam said, "we'll give ourselves a full half-day, maybe more." Still, they made the most of their time and got a sufficient overview to know they wanted to make a return visit.

After two hours, they were starting to feel the effects of trying to cover the grounds too quickly. Tired, Cam suggested that they start back. Vicki agreed. As they were driving toward Hartford, they talked about their day and the visit to “The Village”. Cam said he was impressed with what they’d seen and was especially taken with the clock museum. She liked the Parsonage. Both agreed that OSV was a special place and that it gave them an authentic glimpse of early New England. Vicki was of course in love with the building site above the lake and also excited about Cam’s aim to have a retreat there. Suddenly, she had an unsettling premonition and a feeling of sadness swept over her. She was certain that she’d never be a part of the dream or see the project begin to take shape and then finished.

Arriving home right at sundown, the boys were just coming in, too. They’d been to the game and afterwards gone to a local teen hangout for a root beer. “Good game,” Drew said, “right up to the end. Only thing is, we lost.” The weather had turned colder, and both boys were glad to be inside and warming up.

Cam stirred up their drinks and then made dinner. It was his mother’s chili soup recipe and a good night for it. Served with a green salad that Vicki made, the meal was a hit. As they were cleaning up, Vicki talked about her premonition. She was still depressed by it. “You can’t see that far ahead,” Cam said. “My guess is, you’re not looking forward to Monday and that it’s bothering you. Don’t worry about the future. It’ll take time, lots of it maybe, but I won’t walk away from you. If anything, you’ll run out of patience.” Vicki turned and stared briefly at this man she cared about so much. Then she put her arms around him.

“I’m not handling any of this well,” she said in a shaky voice.

“There are lots of tomorrows,” Cam said. “I’ll still be here then, and next spring, and a year from now. As someone once said, ‘The oxen are slow, but the earth is patient’. I’m not going anywhere anytime soon. You should know that by now.” Vicki wouldn’t let go.

They held each other until what Cam said began to sink in. She relaxed and then smiled. “I needed to hear you say that. Thank you.”

That evening they all talked about their day. Vicki, her mood improved, went on and on about their trip, the cottage, the land, the building project, and their visit to Old Sturbridge Village. It was likely that she’d forever remember this day. Cam was glad to see that she was mostly over her blue funk. It made the evening far more pleasant, but he could see that the next couple of days would be a test for both of them. He was beginning to feel like he wasn’t ready to face them either—which led to a bit of uncertainty about the hard line he’d been taking and how he thought he wanted to see

the future unfold. The truth finally hit him. "About the only control I have over my future is what I decide about Vicki. At least some of how my future is shaped, and all of hers, is in my hands." He shuddered at the thought.

With different levels of interest, the four of them watched the end of a college football game played in California. After the final whistle, and a quick recap by the announcers, the news came on. That turned off the boys. They got up, kissed Vicki on the cheek and said good night.

"Different kind of evening," Vicki suggested.

"Monday morning is hanging over us like a dark cloud. The other part of it is that we're tired to the marrow. A good night's rest will improve our frame of mind. Count on it. In the meantime, could I interest you in joining me in a search for whatever delights we might find in the adjoining room?"

"Mmmm. I wouldn't want to miss out on any evening treats," Vicki replied with the brightest smile Cam had seen since they left Sturbridge.

Their snug embrace and soft kisses helped melt away the cares that had been on their minds since late afternoon. It was comforting to know they could withdraw to a private place that would put to rest whatever pain they felt. After a day to remember, it was a night to cherish. Their loving was brief, but no less satisfying. "Late evening dessert," she said afterwards. They kissed, squeezed hands, and were sound asleep within minutes.

Vicki's last full day in New England did begin in the positive way Cam had predicted it would. She was herself again, and in good spirits. Cam was relieved. "Maybe it was the 'dessert' that did it," he thought. "No, we were just worn out, and the mental fatigue got to us. It's been a busy week, getting used to each other, having discussions about some touchy issues, and making adjustments. Not the least of it is that we've been physically active. I'm not used to it. Better eat my Wheaties, like Larry Dodd suggested." He smiled at the thought.

Drew and Jon finally came alive and the four of them had a breakfast that was intended to hold them until dinnertime. A two-meal day. Afterwards, they settled down to an NFL game for the boys, and the *Sunday Times*, which weighed a ton, for Cam and Vicki. They had plenty of sports and reading and chatter to keep them occupied. Cam wanted the four of them to share the last day of Vicki's visit exactly this way. And he was pleased that she seemed contented. It was the kind of scene that Norman Rockwell might have painted.

At midafternoon, Vicki asked about washing some of her things. Cam gathered up coins and soap and went with her down into the bowels of the building. They got everything loaded and running and then went back to

number 710. While Cam was getting a snack together, Vicki put her suitcase on the bed and started to get it organized for her return trip at midday tomorrow. The countdown to departure had begun. Cam was feeling just a touch of emptiness. He'd miss Vicki, and the warmth she'd brought to their home. These were new emotions to reckon with.

The snacks ready, and a couple of stiff drinks poured, they munched and drank. The talk had gotten around to Vicki's return trip in the spring when she exclaimed, "My clothes!" She and Cam went down, threw everything in a dryer, and then came back to their refreshments. "So, we left you flying somewhere next spring. You have a destination in mind?"

"If you haven't figured that out by now, Mr. G., then you're a hopeless case."

"Please, it's Cam. I'm 'Mr. G.' in the office."

Vicki smiled. "That's not as funny as it was a few days ago."

"Good grief," Cam thought. "Has it only been a week? Feels like we've known each other forever. And what delightful company she can be when she isn't into a full court press and hoping I'll propose."

"I guess what you're saying is that you'd like to come back and share our table. The new leaves should be out by then to welcome you. The season will be green, and new, and fresh. And when we go up to my land, the smell of those big pines will bowl you over. It's Mother Nature at its very best."

"The long wait is going to be about the hardest thing I've ever had to do."

"And the hardest?"

"Not being able to do what I wanted to after we'd had dinner at Dante's." Little fires danced in her eyes, and Cam could see that tonight would most likely be a special farewell event.

The spell was interrupted once again by Vicki blurting, "Dryer!" Off they went to retrieve the clean stuff that would be folded and packed in her luggage for the long trip west. "Just remember that these things are New England scrubbed and dried."

"I'll probably sleep with at least one of them under my pillow. It means you'll be there with me."

"Those are your things, not mine. You won't have to do that to know I'm there in spirit."

"You'll be on my mind every day from now until spring, so I won't need any reminders. Still, I like the idea of maybe having the handkerchief that's in your pocket. Silly, I suppose, but rub it on your cheek so it has the scent of your English Leather. I'll sleep with it, smell it, and love it. You'll be close all night long."

“Interesting idea. Why don’t I do a fresh splash of the stuff? That way you’ll have a long-term subscription to Cam Gordon’s ‘Leather’ scent. But what about me?”

“I’ll leave something behind. You’ll find it after you get back from LaGuardia.”

Having dispensed with the teen-like exchange of reminders, they got back to being adults and sipping their drinks. Drew and Jon weren’t quite sure what to make of all this, but they were old enough to know it meant that their dad and Vicki liked each other.

Time got away from them and Cam said, “It’s too late to start cooking, so why don’t we go out for a bite. Any suggestions?”

“Pizza,” the guys said.

Cam screwed up his face, turned his palms up, and asked, “Any objections, Vicki?”

“None at all.”

“This isn’t exactly what I had in mind for your last night here.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’re acting like we’re a family. It’s a perfect ending to my visit.”

They ordered, then ate and ate and enjoyed themselves to the fullest. As always, the boys wanted dessert. “Not the kind we’d order,” Cam said. Vicki grinned at his reference to what they’d shared.

While the guys were having their dessert, Vicki and Cam sipped cognac and coffee. It hit the spot and it was a good way, they thought, to wind down the evening and Vicki’s visit. They drove back to Laurel Ridge and got ready to call it a day.

Cam reminded the boys they wouldn’t be able to loll around until noon because they’d all have breakfast together at midmorning. No complaints. The boys understood and said they’d want to say goodbye to Vicki when the time came. Ready for bed, both Drew and Jon went through their ritual of giving her a hug. She loved it, as always. In their room, then in bed, the boys talked about their dad and Vicki before they went to sleep. They liked her and hoped she would come back again.

Before going to bed themselves, Cam and Vicki sat snuggling on the sofa. They talked about her visit, and the fact that this sofa and his bed would be empty tomorrow night. “Maybe I’ll sit right here at this hour tomorrow and imagine,” Cam said. “And it could be that I won’t be able to handle a bed where all my fingers will touch are memories.” He was making himself feel sad.

Having done all the self-inflicted emotional damage his mind would allow, Cam asked Vicki to heal wounds he wouldn’t have until tomorrow afternoon. They were under the covers and loving within a matter of

minutes. Afterwards, Vicki tensed, and then cried softly. “Oh, Cam. I care about you so much.” It would be the last of her tears until she was on her flight to Chicago.

Cam got the boys up, and they all enjoyed their meal together before Vicki closed her bag and said she was ready. “Not really, but it’s time.” She hugged Drew and wished him well. “Be good to your dad, and keep helping him out. He has a big job, you know.”

“Yeah. Maybe we could start by cleaning up the kitchen.”

“Jon. You’re into something that isn’t good for you. I can see it in your eyes. I had a cousin, someone I loved dearly, who started down this same road at about your age. It killed him. Give it up.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hopefully, I’m wrong, then. It’s been wonderful spending this week with you, both of you. May I come back?”

Two young male voices answered, “*Yeah.*”

After Cam and Vicki were out the door, she turned, saw goodbye waves, and two long faces watching them as they got on the elevator.

“You’ve made quite an impression on my guys,” Cam said. “But what were you trying to say to Jon—and me?”

“He’s into drugs of some sort. His eyes give him away. If you haven’t ever been close to substance abuse, it’s likely you wouldn’t know what you’re looking at. My part of the U.S. is beginning to have serious problems because of our easier access to drugs coming through Mexico, some of them all the way from Colombia.”

“We’ll get into that after I get back.”

“Go easy with him, Cam. My suggestion is that you start by talking with someone, maybe a state agency that works with kids that are just getting into drugs of some kind.”

“Something to look up later today.”

They made good time on their way to La Guardia. Holiday traffic was so light at this hour that they practically had the road to themselves. Pulling into the airport parking facility, there were a good many spaces available. They sat for a moment, and then Cam said, “We have plenty of time. How about a coffee?”

“I’d like that, but let me check in first.”

She did, and afterwards they found a coffee shop, ordered, and were quickly served.

“This is a fine idea, Sir Knight.”

“Where’d that honor come from? Please, it’s Cam...” He paused. “No, it’s hard to finish. That’s something . . . part of a much happier moment.” He was having trouble with his words.

“Now you’re the one who’s down. If I promise to come back, will you have me?”

“You know the answer to that. We can start making plans as soon as you have some idea when your project will be finished.”

They both smiled. Vicki reached across their little table and held Cam’s hands.

“I’ve really enjoyed being here, seeing a part of the country that’s so different from mine, and being able to spend time with you. It’s been wonderful beyond words.”

“This has also been good for me,” Cam said. “It’s the first time I’ve had a genuinely mature relationship. No entrapment. No daily verbal abuse. That pretty well sums up my two marriages. And it’s been great for the boys. It sets a new kind of example for them, one they’ve never known before. They’ve been able to see that a man and a woman can have a relationship that’s caring and meaningful. It’s no wonder they’re taken with you.”

They talked on until it got to be boarding time. At the gate, Vicki showed her boarding pass to the agent.

“You need to board right away, Miss Snider.”

“Well, I guess this is it,” Cam said.

“It doesn’t have to be this way forever, you know, but whatever future you and I have is in your hands. So to help keep our flame alive until next spring, I’ll stay in touch.”

“I’d like that.”

“Miss Snider. Please. The flight’s ready to leave.”

“I’ll call you when I get home and try to write every week.” Cam and Vicki hugged, kissed gently, and then she was into the Jetway. Before she disappeared from view, she turned, waved, and blew a kiss. Cam returned one of his own. And then she was gone.

Cam watched as the 727 was pushed back. Then when the agent left her station at the gate, he thanked her for her patience.

“This happens all day, everyday.” She offered Cam a friendly smile. “We try to be understanding, but we do have a schedule to keep.” In a kindly voice, she added, “Have a good day, sir.” She could see that saying goodbye hadn’t been easy.

Cam watched American’s flight to O’Hare break ground and then disappear into the low clouds. It was the end of just about the most pleasant ten days he could ever remember. With Vicki gone, Cam had a vague,

hollow feeling inside. "A little piece of my heart is on that 727," he mused. "Wonder what'll become of it?"

There were moments when the drive home wasn't all that easy. Holiday traffic was fairly light, but there were times when Cam had trouble with his concentration. And it continued. Vicki wouldn't let go of his mind to think about much of anything else but her for several days to come.

“You remember how I answered you then?”

“Yes, but there’s always a chance that a handsome stud might come along someday, I wouldn’t be around to protect my interests, like just now, and, intended or not, things could get out of hand. There wasn’t any reason to shed tears at the end of my earlier marriages, but if I somehow lost you, I’d be devastated.”

“In a way, you’re telling me how much you care, that there is love in your heart. It’s just about the sweetest thing you’ve almost said to me.”

“I guess that’s what it is. You know you’re important. Where we don’t agree, I think, is that your timetable and mine are different. Danielle thought you’d give me a year. She was sure I wouldn’t be ready by then.”

“She could be wrong on both counts, you know.”

“Could be, but we have a fun weekend coming up so let’s enjoy it and give the subject a rest.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth.” Vicki smiled and squeezed Cam’s arm.

Chapter Nineteen

At the station lot, they quickly spotted the Mustang and got themselves organized to begin their trip Down East. They’d already put a change of clothes in an overnight bag and stowed it in the trunk. Before anything else happened, Cam loosened his tie, unbuttoned his shirt at the collar, and put his jacket on the back seat. He was all set. “Ready to travel, ma’am?”

“Ready, driver.”

Considering that they were in the midst of Friday rush-hour traffic, and that sunset was at a little after eight o’clock, they might run out of daylight before they got to Sturbridge. Didn’t matter. The evening and tomorrow were theirs to spend any way they liked.

When they were on a stretch of I-86 that had been completed, Cam let his ‘horse’ run. “Handles eighty, eighty-five pretty well,” he said.

“That is, until a state trooper spots you. Guess you like driving fast. It’s a part of your persona that I haven’t met.”

“I’m kinda short, so it makes me feel taller. No? Then let me try something else. I’m in a big hurry to get you into bed. Hmmm. Guess not. Seriously, do you want me to slow down?”

“Please? I’m not used to riding with Mario Andretti. If we’re fortunate enough to get there in one piece, we’ll be able to enjoy the treats that’ll be available later on.”

Cam pulled into the Drover's Inn at a little after eight o'clock. They'd made exceptionally good time. After they checked in and had changed into something casual, they went off to find the Tricorn Tavern, a place recommended in an area guide supplied by the motel. It turned out to be a pretty good choice. The decor was colonial, the drinks tasty, the food appetizing, and the prices reasonable. It wasn't quite high season yet.

"Back at the motel, Vicki asked, "We still have tomorrow ahead of us, but can you guess how I feel about our trip so far?"

"Let me try. You're miserable and want to go home. Tonight."

"You silly, lovable man. I already have such good memories to take back with me, but I'm really anticipating a wonderful day tomorrow. Everything is so different in the spring. It's such pretty country and there's so much history. I could easily live here."

"It's an option then, after your project is finished?"

"Certainly is, but it'd only work if the man in my life, the anchor I need, is here to teach me how to be a New Englander."

"How would I know much about that? I was born in the Hawkeye State and lived in California for years. But we might turn out the lights and try studying some lessons together."

"Wonderful idea, professor. Maybe there'd be time for another one before we leave in the morning."

And there was. The complete privacy they had in this distant setting seemed to enhance what they shared.

After breakfast, Cam asked, "Ready to do The Village again?"

"I'm ready for whatever involves you, my love. But, yes, you know I am. We promised that to each other six months ago."

They parked in the lot at Old Sturbridge Village, bought their tickets, and spent hours wandering the two hundred or so acres that took them back in time to the early 1800s. When their breakfast wore off, they ate at the tavern on the Village grounds. An enjoyable outing, but Cam could see that they'd get back to Sudbury later than planned. "So what," he thought.

After they'd worn themselves out walking what seemed to be miles, they drove to the lots that Cam showed Vicki last fall. At the big granite outcrop they'd climbed over the last time, the laurel was in bloom. Vicki remembered it, and said, "The waxy leaves and the white and pink flowers are just beautiful. I'd love to somehow take one of the little plants back with me."

"Not sure it's true, but somebody once told me they're protected and you can't disturb them. I said in November that they'd be in bloom—just for you. But, if you want to see them again, you'll have to come back. They bloom every spring."

“Will we be then what we are today?”

“Let it go, Vicki. We’re here to enjoy the day, not predict the future.”

After they’d walked the lots again, they went down to the cottage where they’d parked. It was beginning to sprinkle, so they ran for cover. Once inside, Cam had completely forgotten there was a single bed of sorts in the living room and assumed the previous owners had left it behind. Vicki saw it and said, “Make love to me here. I want it to be among my memories of your place in the woods.”

And they did. Then, it wasn’t but minutes after they were dressed that there was a knock at the door. They glanced at each other. Neither of them had the faintest idea who it could be. Cam looked out and saw that it was his real estate guy, Owen Thorpe.

“Hello, Cam. Didn’t recognize the new car, but I remembered your vanity plate and thought I’d say hello.”

“Hi, Owen. It’s been a while. Just checking the place over to see if there’s anything of mine I missed earlier. I was about to come over to your office to give you some money and sign the contract on the lots.” Cam didn’t especially want him to see what had been going on. The little bed was a mess, and he might assume that it was their doing.

Then it started to rain. “Could I come in?” Thorpe asked. “I’m getting wet.”

“Sure. It’s much drier in here.”

Owen saw Vicki and said hello. It was obvious to him that since Natalie was gone from the scene Cam had wasted no time finding a romantic interest. It was easy to see that Owen was taken with her. Few if any young women in the area could match her beauty, and Owen’s lust was on display. Cam finally introduced them.

“I won’t keep you,” Owen said. “I’m on my way back to the office, and I’ll get your file out so we can finish up our business. See you in, what, about half an hour?”

“Less than that, I should think. We’ll be pretty much right behind you. I’ve gone through the place once and only found a couple of things that were mine. Just give us a few minutes.”

After Owen was gone, Vicki said, “Did you see how he looked at me? He practically undressed me on the spot. The guy’s a lecher.”

“Not to worry, love. I’ll be that knight in shining armor you’ve referred to in the past.”

Before they left, Cam made one more pass around both levels to make doubly sure that he’d gotten everything. When he came back to the upper floor, he couldn’t find Vicki. The rain had stopped, so he assumed she’d

gone outside. He found her on a landing about halfway down the long set of steps leading to the pond below. She was staring intently at the stream that was cascading downward alongside the stairway. But there was more to it than that.

“Vicki? What are you doing?”

She didn’t answer. When he went down to see if she was OK, he found that she wasn’t. Tears were streaming down her face.

“Talk to me, Vicki.”

“This is so beautiful, so serene. I just love it here. But I’ll never be a part of it, never share your retreat on that snowy night that I’ve always dreamed about. I’m certain of it.”

“What you’re saying is you’ve decided that in time you’ll cut me, and this, out of your life. That means you’re choosing the path we’ll follow. I’m not ready to give up on us. If you have, then you should be honest with me, and yourself, and tell me if I’m right.”

“No. I don’t know what it is, but I’m sure this is the last time I’ll be here. The thought of that makes me sad, so terribly sad.”

“Didn’t we deal with this same premonition last fall? I thought we decided then that we couldn’t predict the future. If you want answers now to questions about our tomorrows, I don’t have them. At least not yet.”

“*Oh, Cam. Just hold me.*” He did, and Vicki sobbed. There were no words. Vicki couldn’t talk, and Cam had none. He didn’t quite know what to make of what was happening. But his instincts led him to suppose that Vicki was posturing herself to look elsewhere for a husband. Cam let her anguish run its course. Later, when she’d gotten herself under control, and her eyes were about back to normal, they left to keep their date at Thorpe Realty.

At the beautiful 1800s Federal house that served as his real estate office, Thorpe greeted Cam and Vicki at the door and then asked them to join him at a conference table. Vicki sat quietly while Owen and Cam made the contractual exchange of the cottage for lots 146 and 147 on Hemlock Drive. Cam wrote out a check and signed the land contract that bound him to the buy. After Owen was finished staring at Vicki, he asked Cam if he’d consider coming to work for him. “You’re the kind of man I need to run my companies out here at the lake. Not many capable people around town. Oh sure, there are lots of plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and the like, but very few men, or women, with a good business head. You’d need a broker’s license. Wouldn’t be a problem. I could help you get it. Think it over.”

“I’m pretty well set down on New York Plaza, so I can’t see much reason to uproot and make the change. If things go to hell, and that’s

always possible, I might just come back and talk with you further about what it is you have in mind. I like it up here. But more about that some other day. We're out of time and have to be on our way back to Sudbury. The boys will be home before long, and there's no one there to look after them. I try to avoid letting that happen. Thanks for the offer. It's good to know that you feel I might be able to fit into your operations here."

"Keep it in mind. We'd work together well. And let me know when you want to put up a building over on your lots."

"I'll be in touch when the time comes."

Ready to start back, Cam asked Vicki if she'd like to drive. "No, you've worn me out, or I wore myself out over on the stairs. Maybe it's today's excitement or that my cycle has done me in. All related, I suppose. No, it's your 'horse', and I'm very happy sitting in the right seat. If I get drowsy, I'd rather that you have the reins."

Things change, and Cam reflected on how different this drive home was from the last trip they'd made into Massachusetts. There was small talk then, but this time Vicki was mostly quiet on the way back.

When they weren't far from Sudbury, Cam finally said, "Penny for your thoughts."

"Just thinking about yesterday's meetings, the beauty of last night, and again this morning, and the abysmal frame of mind I let myself fall into at midafternoon."

"You're tired, and Monday is on your mind again. It's a mirror image of the last time you were here. Maybe a recuperative hug will help you mend. I'll see that you get a couple once we're home. And let's plan on eating out. It's too late to start dinner."

"That suits my mood. Be good to sit with the boys and open up with them about what we did. And you're right about Monday. These trips I make are hard on both of us. The arrival is wonderful. The departure isn't. But I like the idea of a hug. That also suits my mood. And I've discovered something. I'm generally 'down' after my fertile window closes. As I look back, there is a pattern. Usually I'm too busy to think about it, but when the pressure is off I have time to recognize that I am a little depressed. Sorry to be gloomy. When I get home, I'll be angry about having been a killjoy when we have only a few days together."

"Don't worry about it. A hug with healing powers will help, and you'll be back to normal tonight."

Vicki finally smiled and then squeezed Cam's hand to show him that she was on the mend. "There you go again. Dr. Gordon's special medication for an ailing Vicki. I feel better already."

“Good. Now that we’re home, take that great smile up to number 710 and wow the boys.”

“I’ll show them nothing less than radiant sunshine.” And that’s exactly what they saw.

Afterwards, Cam delivered on his promise to give Vicki his special version of a recovery hug. She trembled slightly, held on, and felt much better following his treatment.

Cam and Vicki each had a drink, and then got the boys organized to go out for Italian, again, at a new place in town called Puccini’s. The owners named it after the famous Italian composer. “I read that the guy in charge of the pizzas is from the old country. He makes them with thin crust and they’re very tasty. At least that’s what the food columnist wrote in the Sunday paper. Want to give it a try?”

“Affirmative responses times three made it a unanimous vote.

After they’d been seated, each of them had a drink and at the same time ordered something other than pizza. Later, when they’d finished, everyone said their meals were good. Just as important, they all had a good time. The dour atmosphere of late afternoon was greatly improved.

After the lights were out, Vicki thanked Cam for helping her overcome a bad case of the blues and followed it with a loving at its affectionate best. The two weary lovers then kissed softly and slept like embracing logs.

Sunday, Vicki's last full day in the East, dawned bright and cheerful. Her frame of mind was back on track and equally sunny. She apologized again for having been morose before they started home yesterday. "My trip is so short. Every hour should've been filled with happiness. I let you down."

"Forget it. We're fine now. Let's enjoy the time we have left."

They relaxed and achieved their objective. It was a good feeling. Late in the afternoon, Cam and Vicki took drinks to the terrace and watched the sailboats out on Long Island Sound. No discussion about where their lives were going, or world affairs, or any other matter of substance. It was a time to unwind and just be themselves. It worked. It could be Vicki had concluded that this would be her last trip, that her plans for a life with Cam Gordon were destined to fail, and that she might as well enjoy these last moments with this man she cared about so much. It might be interpreted as a sense of relief that the future was now clear to her. If so, she was still well ahead of Cam and what direction he would allow his personal life to take. But there, too, his cautious approach to relationships was defining the path that would be his into the foreseeable future. He enjoyed the company of different women at different times, and until he was as certain as humanly possible about the next Mrs. Gordon, he would let the future unfold by itself. There would be no plan, no goal, and no target date. Cam had just turned thirty-nine, was in good health, virile, and in no rush to remarry. His sons, at least Jon, looked at the future rather differently.

As afternoon faded into twilight, Cam and Vicki put dinner together and then had a family meal on the terrace. The weather was exceptionally warm for late May, so it was a pleasant evening they shared, Vicki's last in New England. The boys enjoyed it, but they were also looking forward to seeing Cris tomorrow afternoon.

That night, and early the next morning, Cam and Vicki said their goodbyes with the same fervor that had always been there. Later, they all had breakfast together and not long afterwards the two of them left for Kennedy. Vicki hugged the boys, told Jon she was proud of him, and then she and their dad were gone.

As with Veteran's Day last November, Memorial Day traffic was lighter than on a regular weekday. Even so, it was busy because it was perfect beach weather. They arrived at JFK in plenty of time for Vicki's flight at noon. After she'd checked in, they went for coffee.

"Well, here we are again," Cam said. "I hope your short visit has turned out the way you mostly wanted it to. It's been wonderful having you here. You know that."

“It has been all that I wanted it to be, or nearly so. The only thing missing, at least from my point of view, was a proposal.”

Cam reached across their little table and took Vicki’s hands in his. “Time, Vicki. Time and patience. I’m not there yet. We still don’t know that much about each other. Like you said, we don’t live close enough to have a normal courtship. Maybe you feel as I do that we only have our best foot forward, as the saying goes.”

Vicki frowned slightly. “My concern is that at the end of a year or two you might find that I’m not the woman you want. In the end, I’d be left with nothing, and you’d have made all the decisions about me and the path my life would end up taking. I feel that I should have a part in the process, too. It is my life, after all. What I’m trying to say is that it seems only fair that I be allowed to determine when I think it’s time to give up on us, assuming you don’t propose in the meantime. Maybe it is a year. Maybe more. I can’t really say. We’ll stay in touch, and I will want to see you in San Francisco in early November if you come back that way. In the meantime, I’ll still be your girl because I love you dearly, Cam. I can’t say it any more clearly than that.”

“Thinking about the wait of a year, or longer, we could marry soon, of course. Easily done. But suppose one or the other of us changed our minds two or three years down the road. Meaning, I’m not what you want, or you’re not what I want. Isn’t it better to give ourselves some space and hopefully find out what our chances of success are?”

“It is. But there has to be a point at which I’m allowed to decide how serious you are, or aren’t, and how long I’m willing to wait for something that may never happen.”

“We surely are different people than we were last October. I know where you stand, so I guess I’m the problem.”

Smiling warmly, Vicki said, “You’re not a problem. You’re a love. My love. Now, I’ve got to show up at the gate or I’ll be fired tomorrow, Wednesday at the latest.”

They went to the departure gate and saw that boarding was well underway. Cam gave Vicki a hug and kissed her gently. “Call me when you get home?”

“There isn’t any way you could keep me from doing that.”

“I care for you, Vicki. You do matter, but I have no idea how much time that’ll buy me.”

With a look that confirmed what was in her heart, she said, “Oh, Cam. I like hearing you say that I’m important to you. But, about time? It’ll buy you at least five months. And you know I love you. Too much for my own good, probably. See you in the fall, I hope.”

Vicki walked to the departure door leading to the Jetway. She turned, waved, and, as was her habit, blew a kiss. Cam smiled and waved in return.

Unlike last November, Cam didn't have the same hollow feeling inside. Vicki would be his if he asked, but his window of opportunity would close by year-end. He was fairly sure of it. As if to validate how he felt, he didn't wait for the flight to leave and was out of the terminal building only minutes later. He'd come a long way since last fall. As much as anything, Cris was responsible for the difference in the way he felt. But Vicki *was* on his mind, as was Cris the closer he got to number 17 Laurel Ridge.

"Hi, guys. I'm here." No response. He walked into the bedroom and saw two notes. One was from Vicki with a simple, but sincere, expression of her love and a "Thank you for everything". The other was from Drew saying they were down below doing the washing. None of it had been done this past Saturday. Cam's bed had also been stripped. He couldn't help but laugh. "Very interesting," he said aloud. "They want to make sure that any damage Cris has suffered over the past week is minimized. It's certainly obvious where their hearts and minds are."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Because others on staff had important commitments elsewhere, the “team” going to the company’s alloy products subsidiary would be made up of just two people: Cam, and Warren Lambros. Since their association went back to Signa Oil, it suited both of them perfectly. They didn’t see each other that often, except at staff meetings, so it would be a good chance to get reacquainted.

The twenty-third arrived, and they left from La Guardia for the trip to Birmingham. A company driver met their flight and dropped them off at a motel near the alloy products facility outside the city. It was still warm in Alabama, so Cam was glad he’d been able to talk Matt out of having them make the trip during the hottest time of the year.

In their rooms, both Cam and Warren looked at their trip files and checked the times of their meetings. Cam saw that he had only two, one each day before they flew back on Friday morning. The subject matter suggested that neither would last all that long. He and Warren had agreed they’d meet for a drink at half past six, so he went off to knock on his door. Through it, he heard, “Yo.”

“Cam. You ready for a soda?”

“On my way in twelve seconds.”

“Good thing this isn’t a dry county,” Warren said. “If it had been, I’d have called the driver back and asked him take us to one that serves booze. A man can sure work up a thirst out here on the road.”

“I just went over my trip file, and I’m not at all sure why I’m here.”

“Matt and I met yesterday, and he said the meetings are secondary to our seeing the facility and just getting a basic feel for the manpower and training needs they have.”

“My kind of trip,” Cam said. “I won’t have to think too hard. The brochure, and the time that went into it, nearly did me in.”

“You came out smelling like a rose. The people I’ve heard talk about it think it’s excellent. I agree. Now for your next trick, I’m having a training seminar in the spring, and we’ll be getting into all of the personnel functions. I’ll want you to do a presentation on recruiting and placement. We’ll have people in from all of GMI’s locations worldwide. I’m calling it a ‘train the trainers’ workshop. Lots to put together before then. I’ll work with you on what your part of it should cover.”

“I’m not very good in front of groups. Stage fright, maybe?”

“I’ll help you with that, too. You know, or will know, most of the people by then, so that ought to boost your comfort level.”

“Before the restaurant runs out of food, let’s eat.”

The introduction to GMI's alloy products operations was interesting and Cam and Warren's meetings were straightforward and informative. The trip was worthwhile after all. On their way back to New York, they both agreed that the high point was going through the foundry. It was well worth seeing. They also enjoyed the break they'd had from their daily routine at 4 New York Plaza.

Back in the office, Megan cornered Cam immediately and said his son, Drew, had called yesterday after school.

"Was there a problem?"

"Not with him, but he was certainly upset. His message was that someone named Chris was in the hospital. She saw her gynecologist first thing yesterday morning, and she had her admitted right away for tests. Something about stomach pains. You've mentioned the name before, but it didn't register. I thought at first he was talking about another boy."

"I was right. Damn! She's Cristina, but goes by Cris, spelled C-r-i-s. We've known each other since last November. The pain's in the pelvic area. Started just before Labor Day weekend, and I leaned on her then to see a doctor. I guess it finally got to her."

"No woman wants to hear that another woman has abdominal pain. It could mean serious trouble, lots of it, and I guess her doctor thinks so, too. I hope she'll be OK."

"Me too, Megan. She's a sweet, compassionate gal. The Almighty isn't playing fair with her. Well, I'll want to look in on her after I get things squared away here. This really worries me. You think about the worst thing it could be. We lost a relative when I was in my first year at Iowa State. It was a form of cancer. Started out like it was something minor, but it took her life. Quickly. She was about thirty, not much younger than Cris. That kind of memory comes back. Scary. She may not be the next Mrs. Gordon, but we've been close. No matter what the future holds, I don't want to see anything happen to her. She's a love."

"You know I'll cover for you if you'd like to go home."

"Appreciate it, dear heart, but I can't justify leaving this early. Besides, I imagine Cris is pretty busy right about now. I'll call the hospital if Drew said where she is."

"He didn't, but he did give me her doctor's name. Now, where did I put my note? Ahh. Here it is—and the number where you can reach her."

"I'll call her. Thanks."

Cam had to wait several minutes before he could talk with Dr. Roslyn Shapiro. She was with a patient the receptionist said. When she answered, he identified himself.

“Doctor, this is Cam Gordon. I believe you’re looking after Cristina Renzo. Can you tell me how she’s doing? She’s a close friend, and I’m worried about her.”

“Ahhh, Mr. Gordon. Good afternoon. You’ll no doubt find this a coincidence, but I also look after your ex-wife. And about your question, I have to wonder why it is you waited until after lunch on Friday to express your concern.”

“I just came in from Birmingham and didn’t know a thing about any of this until about twenty minutes ago. My older son called the office yesterday and left a message with my colleague.”

“Sorry. My remark is out of order. As to what we’re dealing with, we’re trying to determine that now. If the people at General Hospital are doing what I’ve instructed them to do, she’s undergoing further testing. My preliminary opinion is that it’s not life threatening and that it *is* treatable. But for me to reach a firm conclusion at this stage would be unprofessional and foolish. So, what I can tell you now is that Cristina’s answers to my questions, and the results of my initial examinations, seem to indicate that we’re not dealing with a malignancy. But again, we don’t want to speculate further until we know more than we do. We’re running an all-inclusive battery of tests, as I mentioned, and leaving nothing to chance. There can be several causes for the pain she’s been feeling. We’re going to pinpoint the reason for it, and then do our best to fix it. I’m aware that you’ve been physically active, so in the meantime, I want her right where she is over the weekend, and then we’ll see where matters stand on Monday. The rest will be good for her. She may be able to go home early in the week, but when I say ‘home’ I’m talking about her mother’s house. That’ll remove any urge the two of you might have to find out if everything still works. Is my meaning clear, Mr. Gordon?”

“It is. But I’m not exactly an animal, Doctor.”

“Not from what Cristina’s told me. But that’s neither here nor there. You may visit her this evening between seven and eight. No later. She’s in room 306. Now, Mr. Gordon, I do have other patients, not just your friend Cristina. I must get to them.”

“Thank you for your time, Doctor.”

“You’re entirely welcome.”

If Cam was to have any chance of getting to Room 306 by seven o’clock, he’d have to organize the boys. He called Natalie at work and asked if she’d mind if the boys came over after school, assuming he could get in touch with Drew.

“Love to see them,” she said. “I understand they were in California this summer. I’ll feed them, too, if you want. Just remember that I’d like to be worked into your rotation one of these days.”

“I haven’t forgotten, but this isn’t the time to talk about it. Sorry to lean on you for a spur of the moment favor. Been traveling some and just got back. This was a surprise for me as well, so I appreciate your help. I owe you. I’ll try not to be too late. Thanks a million.”

Natalie never did ask why he needed her help. Could be she’d learned that it wasn’t a good idea to inquire, especially after their exchange last Christmas Day about why Cam looked so tired.

Next, he called the high school and asked if he could talk with Drew. Turns out he was in study hall, so it wasn’t a problem.

“Dad? Glad you’re back. Something wrong?”

“Not with me. It’s Cris, and I wanted to bring you up to date. When I get to the station, I’m going straight to the hospital. I talked with her doctor, and she doesn’t want Cris to have any visitors after eight o’clock, so I can’t get home, get you, and easily see her inside the hour I was given. Anyway, Natalie said she’d be glad to see you after all this time and to hear about your trip. She’ll feed you, too. So, find Jon after school and then head over to her house. I shouldn’t be terribly late, but I haven’t had much to eat today, so I’ll probably grab a bite before I pick you up. And don’t worry about the bus fare. I’ll cover it.”

“OK. See you at Soundview whenever you get there. Thanks for letting me know what’s going on. You can tell us about Cris when you pick us up. Bye, Dad.”

“See you guys tonight. Bye, Drew.”

At the end of the day, Megan sent her best wishes to Cris. Touched, Cam thanked her for her concern. He in turn hoped she’d have another memorable weekend. His meaning was clear.

Cam was at Grand Central a little earlier than usual and boarded a train he hardly ever took. He’d need a few extra minutes so he could stop at a florist’s shop near Sudbury Station. The least he could do was take Cris some flowers.

Once off the train, Cam got to the florist, found a cheerful bouquet and went up to the hospital. When he got to room 306, he called out softly, “Is there anyone in here I know?”

No answer, so he went in. Cris was in bed. And asleep. The evening meal had been served long ago, so it, or whatever medication she was on, had knocked her out. Cam found a dreary plastic flowerpot for the bouquet, and then he sat and watched her in the depths of peaceful sleep, just as he

had so many mornings over the past ten months. Her face was pale and a bit drawn. Had he paid closer attention, he might have seen to it that she got medical attention sooner.

After nearly a half-hour, Cris woke up, saw Cam, and then the flowers he'd brought, and she got all misty-eyed.

In a weak voice, she said, "Oh, sweetheart. So glad to see you. I feel better already. And the flowers. They're so pretty. Thank you."

"I'm glad I could make it, I think. I'd much rather have you up on Laurel Ridge. But how are you doing, girl?"

"Lots of pain overnight on Wednesday. Had me in a fetal position. I should have taken your advice a lot sooner. Sorry I had to leave the boys alone, but I didn't have much choice."

"Shhh. Not to worry. They're fine. The doctor needs to get you fixed up so you're healthy again. Can I get you anything?"

"No. Thanks, love. Just stay here with me."

"Your hard-nosed doctor said I have to be out of here by eight, and when you're discharged, she's sending you home to your mother's. Doesn't trust us to behave."

"She's right about that. We'd be tempted, but it wouldn't be a good idea until I'm cured of whatever it is that's laid me out."

As Cris paused, an attractive, dark haired young woman came through the door. She saw the two of them together and said, "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to barge in on you."

"No problem." Cris turned toward Cam and said, "This is Erin Coletti. You remember she's the one who sometimes helps me out in the shop. Erin, you can guess who this is."

"Sure can. Hi, Cam. Heard an awful lot about you. I even know what your favorite drink is. Sounded kinda naughty to me when I heard the name." Then, to Cris: "I can see now why you don't let him out very often. Somebody might run off with him."

"Time for me to blush," Cam said. "You have to careful with a comment like that. Might go to my head." Cris chuckled softly. He was glad to see her do that. It could help her mend.

Cris, more to Erin than to Cam, described the kinds of tests she'd been through. It was woman talk because their plumbing was the same. His tests would have been different, as they were several years ago. Judging from what Cris was saying, it sounded as if they were giving her a thorough checkup. Good. It was the only way to locate the problem and then hopefully find a cure for it.

The girls talked on until a scrawny, hatchet-faced nurse came in and ordered them out. “Visiting hours are over,” she proclaimed with authority. It sounded as if she enjoyed being a pain.

Cam gave Cris a gentle kiss and said, “I’ll be back with the boys at seven tomorrow evening. Mind the nurses. I’ll expect to see you looking better by then.”

“I’ve heard about your boys so much, I’d like to meet them,” Erin said. “Will it be all right if I come back, too?”

“Yes. I’d like that. See you tomorrow, and I’ll be awake so we can have the whole hour together. Night, Erin. Night, love.”

As Cam and Erin were going down in the elevator, he said, “I haven’t had anything to eat since a skimpy continental breakfast in Birmingham. That was early this morning. Any interest in having a bite? I’ve never met a blue-eyed Italian gal before, at least that I can recall, and I’d like to find out how something like that comes about. And for your information, a drink of your choice comes with the meal. All you have to do is recommend a place.”

“That’s pretty smooth, Cam. Now I know how that laundry room episode got its start. Sure. Be happy to join you. I have two boys to feed, so we ate earlier. But a salad and a drink would hit the spot. Since I don’t get out that much, it’ll be a treat. And so you know what I know, you’re not exactly an unknown quantity. Should be fun.”

“Sounds like Cris has shared me with you—not meaning that exactly the way it sounds—so you’ll have to be the one in the spotlight. The only thing I know about you is that you were great support when Cris’s mother was sick. And then before that, back in June, you set Cris free to meet me at Kennedy when I came back from Guatemala. That was sweet of you, and I told her so at the time. But, any suggestions on where we can eat? I don’t have a lot of time because my ex has the guys, and I have to pick them up at Soundview Heights afterwards.”

“We’re in the same boat. Dad is looking after my two. But let me think. Tasty food, decent service, and a good drink? Maybe we should try The Hearthside. Little early for a fire, but I think it’ll be pretty close to what you’re looking for.”

“Don’t know the place. I’ve only been here two and a half years. This has been your hometown for what, thirty-five years?”

“How would you know that?”

“*Star Trek’s* Mr. Spock would say, ‘It’s logical’. You two were classmates, she turned thirty-five in early July, so it has to be a good guess that you’re the same age.”

“I hate logic, but you’re right.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“February 23, but we’re cutting into our social hour. Why don’t you follow me home, and then we can go in your car. OK?”

Erin lived close to Cris’s mother, and, in the other direction, about three blocks from the house Cam and Natalie had leased on Nelson Avenue. Small world.

When Erin got into Cam’s Mustang, she made a fuss over it. “I love the smell of a new car. Makes me wish I could figure out a way to replace my old Dodge. How long have you had it?”

“Five months. In fact, five months ago today. I bought it as a birthday present for myself just two days before.”

“I remember the attaché case Cris gave you. I was with her when she went shopping, and I helped her decide. Guess you can say there’s a part of me in that gift.”

“What else do we have in common?”

“Two sons, and the added responsibilities we have of being single parents. Other things? I don’t know. Dormant needs, although that’s not true in your case. But unlike you, I haven’t done anything about them. Thing is, I’m not willing to give them much thought on a first date, or a third, or maybe ever. Guys lose interest. You might be the exception, Cam Gordon. It isn’t hard to see why Cris is taken with you.”

“Want some help deciding how to proceed?”

“Cris is right. There *is* a streak of rascal in you. No, but thanks anyway. Whatever, it still wouldn’t turn out the way it did with her. There’s a certain amount of protocol that I stick to, so if it ever happens it’ll take time. On the other hand, ask me again after a second glass of Chianti.” Erin chuckled softly.

“You just gave away your Achilles’ heel. But it isn’t important. I’m not on the prowl, although it might not seem that way. As Mother likes to say, ‘Patience is a virtue’. I try to remember that.”

“She has the right idea. Whoa, stop. We just went past the place. It’s in from the street and sits at the far end of their parking lot. I got caught up with our conversation.”

Cam backed up, then pulled in and parked. When they went in, he liked what he saw. Dimly lit, intimate, and there *was* a small fire in their colonial brick fireplace.

“I’ve never been here before. My kind of place. Could we call it ours?”

“You’re a hopeless romantic, it sounds like. Sure, we can call it ours if you want.”

“First time in a place like this, especially with someone new, it’s the association I make. I don’t know. If it feels right it just happens. You and The Hearthside will always go together. My meaning is that if I ever come back again, even by myself, you’ll be here.”

Seated, drinks were ordered and served almost immediately.

“Cheers, Erin.”

“Salute, Cam.”

“That’s a touching thought. But here we are, just minutes away from having visited a sick friend, a good friend, a woman who cares about you, and we’re into needs and how, and on what kind of timetable, they might be met. We should probably ask ourselves the question: what kind of people are we?”

Cam took a sip of his drink before he answered.

“Cris has possibly told you where she thinks we’re headed. I’ve had maybe two loves in my life, the last being my secretary who’s still a painful memory. I’ve also been part of two mistakes, so I want to believe that if there’s a third time around I’ll get it right. Cris is a wonderful gal. I care about her a lot, and the guys you’ll meet tomorrow evening love her dearly. They want her to be the woman of the house. Yesterday, if it could be that way. Problem is, I can’t convince myself that we have much more in common than her looking after the boys, and then what we do well, I think I can say, when the lights are out. But after the fire has died down, and my guys have left home, then what? You understand. Still, Cris is a fine, selfless, caring woman, equal to any I’ve ever known. Maybe better than equal. She’s an absolute love, but I’m fairly certain that she and I won’t marry, or even be companions, long-term or otherwise. Believe it or not, it’s hard for me to say that. She’s always been there to offer her support. Is this the way I repay her for all she’s done? She is first, last, and always a very compassionate person. She’s been your good friend since you were kids, so I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.”

Erin didn’t respond, so they changed the subject and made small talk for a while about nothing in particular. Then, returning to what Cam had said, Erin asked, “Before I add my two cents worth about Cris, could I have another glass of wine? It’ll help me sort out what I want to say.”

“Sure. And I’ll join you.” Cam signaled the waiter to repeat the drinks, and he also asked him to bring menus.

“Where to begin? First, I guess it’s that you’re being honest with yourself, but it’s also about your need to avoid hurting a really sweet person. I understand your feelings. Second, I know about your affair with the girl who was your secretary. You suffered a lot of damage. Cris gave me some of the details, at least as she understood them. Even from her

secondhand telling of the story, I know what you felt. I've known hurt, too. Then, about Cris, I think she knows the end isn't far off, but she'll hang on until then, and maybe beyond that—even when all hope is gone. Forgive me for saying this, but the two of you are something of a mismatch. She's a shopkeeper with a high school education and you're a New York corporate guy with lots more than that. It sticks out all over. But if you and Cris don't marry, or live together as long-term companions, I have a hunch that you've ruined her for anyone else. After you, there won't be another man. By now, you own her heart but she won't ask you to give it back. She'll survive on her memories of what you've been to each other for however long your relationship lasts. I know Cris better than she knows herself. Believe what I'm telling you."

Cam stared into the fire briefly and then said, "We should order. If we don't, we'll sit here for hours and not see our boys until morning. Before we do that, I have to say that I'm enjoying this. My guess is, you've been down some of the same paths that lead you to, or from, those painful moments that happen in lots of people's lives. You're a joy to be with, Erin, and if it doesn't come across as being too aggressive, I'd like to see you again. Don't take that to mean I'm trying to put a move on you, it's just that you're like a breath of fresh air." She smiled warmly.

Cam and Erin paused briefly to decide on what they wanted to eat.

"Not sure about being 'fresh air', but it's nice to hear you say it. Coming back to us, Cris has told me quite a bit about you, so in a way I'm involved, too. Other than some of the younger bright lights at the agency where I work, I don't have much of a chance to talk to anyone whose focus isn't on their job, or the bowling league, or golf scores, or how their favorite football team did over the weekend. Refreshing? Being here with you is certainly different. Like I said, I can see why Cris cares about you. But she and I are very different in lots of ways. I've had my marriage, have two boys to look after, and I don't need anything beyond what I have right now, other than to maybe someday deal with what we talked about earlier. In other words, another husband doesn't interest me at all. Should the day come that we find ourselves closer, let's call it, that'll be the extent of it. No pressure, and when it's over, it's over. But, for what it's worth, I get the impression from Cris that you're very compatible. I've nearly forgotten about things like that."

"If you have, I'd be willing to reacquaint you with the steps, when and if you're ready.

"Now you *are* being aggressive. Back off, Cam. We just met. Don't crowd me."

“My apologies. Really. It’s partly my concern about Cris, a very long day, and the martinis on an empty stomach that are doing at least some of the talking.”

Food served, Erin told Cam about having grown up in the same neighborhood with Cris, knowing each other as kids, going all the way through school together, each having marriages that failed, and the differences in the way they look at life.

“I like being a mother, and I love my boys. Vito makes payments to support them, and me, but I can’t live on what he pays us every month. I need to work to make ends meet, so I have a job at the Metro Agency. By the way, Cris always tells others I’m an agent, but just so you’ll know I’m the office manager. It isn’t anything important like what you do, but the pay is good and the atmosphere is the kind I want. Most of the people are good-hearted except that their world outside the insurance business is maybe football scores, like I said before. So, it’s been great fun hearing stories about you at the shop. The big difference between Cris and me is that she no longer has any interest in raising a family. She prefers to run a business and be her own boss rather than an employee like I am. She’s opening a second shop up at the new Mall, and if that works out she has plans for at least two more somewhere in the area.”

“I knew about the second store, but she hasn’t said anything about her plans beyond that. Guess I’m too caught up with my own job to spend a lot of time thinking about ladies’ accessories and the retail business. If I went to work for myself, I’d probably be involved in real estate in some way or another. The broker up near Sturbridge, in the little town where I’m buying a piece of land, wants me to work for him, get a license, and run his businesses. The idea has some appeal.”

“Cris mentioned that. She was there, I think, when the subject came up. I have an uncle who’s a broker, and he makes a good living at it. It’s possible if you’re good, and he is. I’ll bet you would be, too. You have business experience, and you can smooth talk an arm off a statue.”

“You haven’t told me about your dark hair and blue eyes.”

“Not so rare. Sinatra has blue eyes. Dad’s side of the family is Italian, obviously, but my mother was of Irish descent, and I inherited her blue eyes. She also picked out my Christian name. Mom’s been gone for a couple of years, heart problems, so it’s just Dad and me, my sister, Gina, and my two boys from the only marriage I’ll most likely ever have. That’s fine. In a few years, I’ll have grandchildren I can spoil, unless someone comes along who wants me to make more babies. The thought of that doesn’t turn me on, so it would take the likes of a Robert Redford to make me reconsider.”

“No more family. We agree on that. Now, I hate to be a killjoy, but it’s time for me to go. Let me have your number, and I’ll call you. Maybe we can have an evening out sometime soon.”

“Or one at my house. You can meet the boys, and we can have dinner or a TV date.”

“You decide. I’ve got to run or Natalie won’t look after my guys again after tonight.”

At Erin’s house, Cam pulled into her drive, got out, and opened the door for her.

“My, what a gentleman. You do come from a different planet. I can’t remember the last time anyone did that.”

Cam curled an index finger, slowly lifted Erin’s face to his, and kissed her softly.

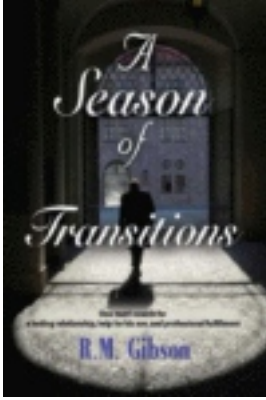
“And I can’t remember the last time someone kissed me like that. No more, please. We’re getting way ahead of my protocol.”

“I understand. And I’m not trying to be pushy. If ever we’re to go further, it’ll happen on your timetable. See you tomorrow evening.”

“Night, Cam. Thanks very much for a pleasant outing. It was one of the more interesting evenings I’ve had in a while.”

“It was for me, too. Night.”

As Cam drove to Natalie’s, he had conflicting emotions. They were at the same time, elation and guilt. Erin was, after all, a lifelong friend of Cris’s. “If she gets wind of this, it could destroy a friendship that’s lasted for more than three decades. Go easy, Cam.”



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