

Despite the support of a coterie of Manhattan friends, film critic Noah Wilburn is so distraught at the death of his longtime companion that he contemplates suicide. But a mysterious young woman with a secret changes everything.

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END CREDITS

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CHAPTER TWO

“**Y**ou’ve done what!” Everett blurted out, his face red with astonishment.

“I’ve put the house up for sale,” Noah explained, trying to hide a slight case of the jitters after working for the past two weeks on The Plan. This was, so to speak, its public premier. “I spoke to the agent yesterday,” he went on hurriedly, “and she’ll list it starting next week. She says it should sell pretty quickly.”

“Of course it’ll sell quickly, for God’s sake,” Richard said. “After all the work you and Cal put into it? But...oh, Noah. How could you!”

This was proving more difficult that Noah had expected. Outside the hotel bar in which he had chosen to make his announcement, the city’s lunchtime crowds scurried in and out of Union Square, just a block south and so near that Noah could see the squirrels dotting its frayed lawns and the pigeons hunkered down on the statue of George Washington guarding the entrance to Broadway. Inside the bar, sleek, black-clad young people artfully smoked and drank at little teakwood tables, Noah having arrived early to commandeer one of the bar’s two banquettes. Everett’s red face and bleating objections were already drawing a few stares, while Richard had slumped down into the banquette’s deep cushions as if someone had punched him in the stomach. If this was the reaction to just the first phase of The Plan, what was to come?

A few minutes ago, he had watched Everett and Richard through the window as they strolled through the park and waited to cross Park Avenue - watched the easy talk of two old lovers safe in the world they had built together, cushioning each other from the chaos swirling around them. They were coming, Noah suspected, from their flagship WhizBang store down on University Place, the first in what had now grown to seven WhizBangs in New York, Miami, Scottsdale and San Francisco, all purveying high camp merchandise like Elizabeth Taylor fright wigs and Divine costumes for Halloween. WhizBang now

had its own magazine and website, not to mention Everett's invention of the Camper's Club, membership in which earned eager shoppers store points toward the kind of gifts banks used to give out for new accounts - ancient Sunbeam toasters, transistor radios and Melamine sets. Richard was the purchasing maven, an unrealized talent until he had landed a job as a props buyer on one of Cal's early films.

Now, still feeling the wave of loneliness that had nearly overwhelmed him as he had watched them approach, Noah said, "There are just too many memories. Every corner of that house, down to the dust bunnies under the bed...they all remind me of Cal."

"He's only been gone a couple weeks," Richard said gently. "You have to give it time, Noah. Don't do something you'll regret later. I know that's the standard line in situations like this, but it's true. Right, Ev?"

"Yes," Everett said. "You don't want to rush in to anything." But he was studying Noah closely - even, Noah felt, suspiciously. "Still," Everett went on, "I'd be interested to know how much you're asking."

Richard slumped even further. "Ev!"

"No, I want to know how much Noah thinks his memories of Cal are worth."

"That's not fair," Noah protested.

"That's what you're doing, Noah. It's too soon. Think about it." Everett flapped his hand toward the bar. "Waiter, another round."

"I *have* thought about it, goddamn it!" Noah snapped. How dare they interfere with The Plan, these two who had just strolled together to meet him, who would go on strolling together while he, Noah, now had no one. "How would you like it if Richard were dead and you were left with nothing? How would you deal with...what? Is it twenty years you two have been together? Twenty years of your life, gone. Nothing. Just imagine that, Ev."

Richard now appeared about to disappear completely under the table. "That's a terrible thing to say," he murmured.

"I'm sorry, but that's how it feels, Richard," Noah said. His world was different from theirs now, the gap between them filling up with his resentment toward them, toward anyone who had another arm to hold, another life to share. He had to make them understand.

The three of them sat, completely silent, avoiding each other's eyes, until the waiter glided alongside the table.

"Go away," Everett said to him, irritated at his presence.

The waiter, glaring, tried to stand his ground. "But you.."

"I changed my mind. It might be best if we leave soon."

"Then would you like the bill?"

"I'll take it," Noah said, grabbing at the chance for a quick exit. He'd unveiled step one of The Plan, not exactly the commanding performance he'd envisioned, but it was done and now it was time to move on.

"Nonsense," Everett snapped. "Bring it to me. My treat."

Noah shook his head. "No, I want to."

"Just bring us the check," Richard said wearily.

The waiter, wilting and thoroughly confused, fiddled with his cuffs for a moment. "Well, then...I'll just...um...." He hurried away.

No, this hadn't turned out at all as Noah had expected. Why couldn't they let him just let go, like Marguerite had said? Let go of memories, houses, pictures, books; let go of the emptiness; let go of everything, finally and irrevocably? That was the idea behind The Plan, after all. The house was on the market and that was the first step, no matter what anyone said.

"Where will you live, Noah?" Richard had forced himself upright again and was gazing at him with wide, moist brown eyes. While Everett had settled grudgingly into the gently oval shape of the middle-aged and largely inert man-about-town, Richard still had the slim, wiry body of a farm boy. During Richard's prop buying days, Cal had cast him in two films as the innocent boy-next-door, even Cal admitting it was little more than typecasting; and now, Richard's question carried with it the wide-eyed wonder of a little boy being regaled with the stories of a favorite uncle.

"I'm thinking of traveling for awhile," Noah suddenly said. "Maybe I'll be one of those people who just stays in hotel rooms. A few weeks here, a couple months there. Beds made everyday; towels changed every day, meals served just downstairs." It was actually sounding quite appealing, and for a moment he considered scrapping The Plan for life as a melancholy expatriate, restlessly on the move in a world he imagined as not unlike the one in *Casablanca*. But it was just

a momentary, cowardly fancy. He'd have to do it sooner or later, and it had to be done cleanly and quickly. No dramatics. There was The Plan, and nothing else.

"And the magazine?" Everett asked. "You can't just drop all those years you've given it."

"No, of course not. But I've been thinking that I could cover more foreign films, before they open here." How easy it was to embroider, once you got started. "Do some profiles of emerging directors overseas. Writers, actors. The magazine would go along with it, I'm sure." Everett still looked suspicious, but Noah could see that Richard was warming to the yarn he was spinning.

"I have an idea!" Richard said. "You could start with a retrospective piece on Ida. Her family was very famous in England in the old days, y'know." Yes, Noah knew. They *all* knew, Ida Lupino being Richard's one peculiar fascination. Even Noah had to agree that Ida had broken the studio mold forced on young female actresses of her day, had refused to be crammed into corsets and paraded on the arms of handsome leading men, had eventually directed her own films about hard women in hard times - yes, they knew all that, but Richard's admiration for her was exuberant and unfettered. He collected information and memorabilia about her the way others collected ceramic lighthouses or Grandma Moses prints and could, of course, recite whole chunks of dialogue from many of her pictures. He had commissioned an oil painting of her which now hung in the dining room of his and Everett's already overstuffed East Side apartment, and he carried a small publicity photo of Ida in his wallet. Their recently deceased Pekingese had been called, inevitably, Miss Ida.

Noah was sure the Ida addiction had something to do with Richard's childhood. Richard had been parsimonious with Noah and Cal concerning details of his past life, only revealing he had grown up in rural Pennsylvania before moving to New York when he was nineteen. He'd never once spoken of his parents in all the years Noah had known him. "Housefrau and hubby," was all he had dismissively said when Noah once asked about them. Noah was of the opinion that Richard suffered from some childhood trauma of the Monster Mommy variety; but he had indulged Richard's Ida addiction by professing particular admiration for *They Drive By Night* as one of the best B-

pictures ever produced. Cal had even arranged screening parties at the house, sort of their own private *Rocky Horror Picture Show* evenings, right up until Cal's first symptoms had appeared.

The waiter put the bill on the table and they all stared at it. "Well," the waiter said after another awkward moment, "I'll just take that when you're ready. Take your time." And he went away again.

"The house will go pretty quickly, y'know," Everett finally said. "All the parties we had there. The summer weekends, remember? Out on the porch, watching the sun go down over the pasture. All that will be gone."

"There's a lot of *us* in that house, too," Richard said.

Noah reached across the table and pressed both their hands. "I'm sorry." Cal's death was painful for all of them, but Noah was bearing the worst of it, worse than the loss of a few sunsets and parties and an empty house. Couldn't they see the emptiness inside him?

"Me too," Everett said. "It seems so....so desperate, Noah."

The bar had emptied and grown quiet, wrapped in the solitude of the hours between lunch and cocktails. The waiter over by the bar was trying not to appear impatient for them to leave.

"You could stay with us until things get organized," Richard said. "Right, Ev?"

But Everett didn't answer, his expression somber, and instead handed Noah the bill.

The offices of American Cinema Review were stuffed into one narrow floor of an aging office building on lower Broadway. Its flaking sandstone exterior, encrusted with grimy terra cotta embellishments and crowned with a rusting iron cornice, presented a forlorn face to the swirl of south-bound traffic streaming toward the Brooklyn Bridge or Wall Street or the ferry. No one actually stopped there except for the delivery trucks disgorging cartons of cigarettes or snack foods to the newspaper stands and sad little coffee shops that lined the sidewalk. Noah had once been inspired to research the history of the building but had discovered that its only notable feature - a lobby mural said to have been painted by Diego Rivera - had been destroyed in an ill-conceived renovation during the 1950's. The building had been left ever since to sag into decrepitude.

The magazine, like the building, had managed to survive nearly seventy years of management abuse. Since the 1930's, by which time a scholarly magazine about movies had no longer seemed incongruous, it had nearly gone bankrupt twice and had suffered a number of disastrous renovations of its format and appearance; but bi-monthly issues had been mailed regularly to its loyal subscribers during all those years and film critics for more popular and successful publications still considered it an essential background source for their work. Noah allowed himself the smug luxury of knowing that he worked for a publication people actually respected and ranked in awe with *Cahiers du Cinema*, and felt obscurity was a fair trade that left him free to enjoy a satisfying home life with Cal. It was an advantage important enough to him that he had resisted the occasional urge to write for the glossy, overstuffed commercial magazines. American Cinema Review couldn't afford gloss, and its issues were spartan in their page counts and illustrations. It was reliable, practical and useful, and Noah's loyalty had never wavered during the twelve years he'd been writing for the magazine.

Now, as Noah rode up to the seventh floor in the creaking elevator, the floors drifting through the little wired window in the door, the familiar smells of moldy plaster and mildewed rugs seeping through the green formica walls, it suddenly occurred to him that Cal had never set foot in the place. It wasn't a policy they had deliberately set. The magazine knew of the relationship, of course, but besides carefully handing out Noah's assignments so that he never reviewed Cal's pictures or career, it had never suggested anything inappropriate. But, in the end, Noah had never invited Cal to the office.

Miss McPheeters, nonetheless, was effusive in her condolences for the loss of a man she had never met. The expression in her watery blue eyes as she looked up from the reception desk she had occupied for twenty-two years touched Noah. "I'm so glad to see you back, Mr. Wilburn," she said, patting his hand. "It's hard the first few days, but work is the best remedy, I always say."

"Thank you, Miss McPheeters." He wanted to add the usual, "It's good to be back," but it wasn't and Noah knew it would sound unconvincing. He wondered if Miss McPheeters, too, had once lost a loved one, but he suspected she would consider it bad manners for him

to inquire. He had no idea what her Christian name was. No one in the office did, although one of the old-timers insisted it was Gladys, which seemed entirely likely. Nor did anyone know how Miss McPheeters had come to work at the magazine or who had hired her or if she had any interest at all in films. It even seemed impolite to ask if she ever went to the movies, although in Noah's imagination she had once been an actress in silent films who had suffered some misfortune and had been forced to support herself as a secretary. Perhaps an unfortunate liaison with a rakish leading man? Or perhaps shock at the loose morals of movie people had forced her to seek more honorable employment? Now, he was surprised to find that the effect of his future demise on Miss McPheeters worried him. He had no doubt she would mourn him, even though their only contact had been standing here, against the odd-colored walls of the magazine's faded lobby, passing the time of day as Noah came and went.

"I wish you could have met him, Miss McPheeters," he said now. "Cal would have liked that."

"I know he must have been a fine man if he..." What was this? Miss McPheeters, flustered? "...I mean, if you and he...were....such good friends," she finally said. "I've only seen one of his films, I confess. It was about a woman who finds out her boyfriend's an addict..."

"That would be *Dark at Dawn*."

"Yes. I thought it was very fine. Very sensitively handled. And a happy ending, too. I know that's old-fashioned, but when I was a girl, that's why we went to the movies. Especially during the war. We needed happy endings back then."

"Happy endings aren't at all old-fashioned, Miss McPheeters," Noah said. "Cal said that even if everyone wasn't happy at the end of one of his films, at least they should be hopeful."

"I know I would have liked him," Miss McPheeters said. She reached out and patted his hand again. It was the first physical contact of any kind in Noah's years at the magazine and made his eyes water. He caught himself and squared his shoulders.

"Is Ollie in this morning?" Noah asked briskly. Eyes on The Plan. No diversions.

Mrs. McPheeters recovered just as quickly. “Yes, and he did mention he’d like a word with you. Shall I buzz him?”

“I’ll just wander back.” Noah preferred catching Ollie Gilman off-guard whenever he could, Ollie being one of those irritatingly suave people whose every word and deed seem perfectly tuned and orchestrated. Likewise, Ollie’s editing could turn the most distracted piece into a model of scholarly sobriety. Noah’s grudging admiration was often tinged with resentment, and he had planned today’s encounter the way Cal blocked and planned a scene. The door to Ollie’s office was open, and he strode in purposefully, fully intent on implementing the next step in The Plan and bluntly announcing that he was quitting.

Lew and Miriam were there.

“Noah!” Ollie boomed, lifting himself from behind a meticulously kept desk and extending a hand. “Look who’s here!” If there was any secrecy, any guilty complicity, in the meeting, Ollie hid it completely behind his well-toned frame and designer wardrobe.

“What a surprise,” Noah managed to get out, completely knocked off kilter. It was as if, after all these years, Cal finally *had* come to the office, or at least had decided to send his parents as his representatives. He forced a smile as they, too, rose to greet him, the whole room on its feet now, Noah apparently viewed as some kind of royal presence. “I thought you’d gone back to Florida.”

“We just came back up last night,” Miriam said. “You’ll see why.” She brushed his cheek with her lips. “How are you getting on?” she murmured. “We’ve been worried about you.” The pain of losing her only child was still evident in her blue eyes and in the little squeeze she gave his arm..

Lou, on the other hand, kept his grieving firmly in check, always more comfortable with a corny joke and a slap to the back than with facing life’s complexities head on. “Who is this Al Fresco, anyway?” Lou always felt compelled to ask in any Italian restaurant he visited. “He sure eats out a lot!” He seemed like a kid’s windup toy, doomed to helplessly repeat the same motions, the same words, even as the world crumbled around him. “Miriam and I want you to help us with something,” Lou said, pumping Noah’s hand. “It’s a tough time for all of us right now, but maybe we can pull some good out of it.”

Noah admitted his blindness to their suffering. Which was worse, the death of a son or that of a lover? He felt their eyes on him, as if he were supposed to say something that would make them all feel better, but all he could see were two people who still had each other, even if they no longer had Cal. They could help each other, share their grief and their memories, fit them into a broader tapestry of a life being lived together, soldier on together. All Noah had was a bag of ashes and the hole in the pasture waiting to receive them. And The Plan.

“Why don’t we all sit?” Ollie suggested.

Yes, The Plan. As he sat, Noah had a sudden rush of renewed purpose. “Ollie, I just came by to tell you that I’ll be leaving the magazine.”

But now there was a complication, Noah realized. He’d just told Richard and Everett that he intended to keep working for the magazine, as some kind of foreign correspondent.

Noah soldiered on. “Sometimes when there’s a big change in one part of your life, you want to make changes in the other parts. So that’s what I’m doing.” He turned to Miriam and Lou. “I was going to tell you privately, but I’ve put the house on the market, too.”

Miriam sighed. “Oh!” was all she said.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little hasty?” Ollie said. “Maybe you should give it a few months, Noah. Let all this change soak in. I’d hate to see you leave, and so would Miriam and Lou here. In fact, we were just talking about an assignment for you.” Ollie employed his very white teeth in a broad smile for emphasis, and for a moment Noah suspected he’d been talking to Richard and Everett and was working off a script they’d written together.

“But I don’t want to take on any new assignments,” Noah said. “I’m serious, Ollie. I’ve thought a lot about this for the past few days. I’m sorry, but I have to refuse. I really am intending to quit.”

“What about Cal?” Lou spoke softly. “Don’t you think you owe Cal just a little bit more of your time?”

“What do you mean?”

Ollie leaned forward, arms resting on the desk and hands folded, as if in prayer. “Lou and Miriam want you to do a retrospective of Cal’s work for the magazine,” he said. “We could even make an arrangement with the parent company’s book division and use it as the

basis for a biography. No one's rushing you. I'm not expecting anything from you until, say, the autumn, so we can run the piece in the lead issue next year. And you can take as long as you like with the biography. Then we can talk about your future here, Noah. But not now. Not just yet."

Noah, feeling as trapped and angry as that day in the pasture two weeks ago, looked from one to the other. "But I'm not the one to write a retrospective, for God's sake. How could I possibly be objective about it?"

"Not a retrospective, then," Ollie said. "That's the wrong word. But think about it, Noah. It could be a pioneering work of...of...cinematic literature," Ollie concluded triumphantly. "I mean, who else could examine the creative process of making a film than the guy who" -

"Who was Cal's lover? You want me to be a kind of voyeur for film addicts, is that it?" Noah noted with satisfaction that for once Ollie had talked himself into a corner.

"No, that's not what I want. What I want is for people to realize, through the eyes of someone who knew Cal better than anyone else, how his life and his movies are connected. Doesn't that make sense?"

"We're Cal's parents, remember?" Lou objected. "I'd say we sure knew him pretty well!"

"Yes, but Noah's a writer," Ollie said patiently. "He would certainly rely on you for childhood memories and that sort of thing, wouldn't you, Noah."

"And Cal didn't make films about *us*," Miriam said to Lou. "I want people to know Cal through the movies he made about them." She turned to Noah. "No one but you could do Cal's work justice," Miriam said. "It would make Lou and me so happy, Noah. Please."

It was impossible. He couldn't delay *The Plan* for a whole half-year! How could he stand the emptiness that long? And there was the further complication of the house now about to be sold. Where would he move? He could not, in fact, delay *The Plan* at all, but would instead have to rush it, virtually collapse in a heap within days. Of course, that would mean he also wouldn't have to explain to Richard and Ev that he wasn't, after all, becoming some romantically-tinged expatriate writer in Europe; but there was no getting around the fact he was now heading

for the untidy, hasty end, with all its complications, that he wanted to avoid. Didn't these people understand he was trying to make it as easy as possible on them? But...no, of course they didn't. Suicides don't generally send out pre-event announcements.

And that led to yet another complication. A note. Shouldn't there be some kind of an explanatory note, carefully placed for easy discovery? Maybe even mailed to those concerned. Maybe that would be more efficient. And it couldn't be some incoherent babble. He was a writer, after all. It had to be a carefully composed, literate note, so everyone would understand, fully and without doubt, why. This was going to take some doing.

"What if I decide I can't finish it?" Noah finally said.

"Then I'd ask you to give me your notes, and we'll have someone else finish it," Ollie said smoothly.

Well...that made sense. It wouldn't take him long to get an outline done. Then they could worry about the rest. He couldn't leave everything last thing tied up neatly, after all. He looked at Miriam. She smiled, dimples forming on her rouged cheeks. Noah had to close his eyes for a moment, because it was as if Cal was smiling at him, too.

On the train home (how much longer would he be able to call it that?), Noah watched the scenery rush past the window and let his thoughts wander over what he knew of Cal's moviemaking. Ollie obviously assumed an intimate knowledge on Noah's part, but the fact was Cal had almost never spoken about his craft. "It's just what I do for a living," Cal always said with a shrug. No, despite their ten years together, Noah would have to look elsewhere for materials, just as he'd done scores of times before with Ollie's assignments on film makers Noah had only known through their pictures, except now it was the other way around. He could describe every wrinkle and muscle of Cal's body, every shading of his voice, from whispered intimacies to booming laugh; he could write about Cal's aversion to brussel sprouts and his love for 1958 Chevys; he could describe Cal's lovemaking that first time, when Noah was unsure and cautious, the male terrain a mystery to him.

But all that lay in the future when Noah had walked onto the set of *Night Song* for the first of a series of interviews the magazine had

arranged, after Noah had met Richard and Everett at an Ida retrospective and the idea had been suggested. Noah remembered it had been the kitchen set, and it had taken him a minute to identify which of the jeans-and-tee bodies swarming over it was Cal, huddled in a corner of the set with the only decently dressed people present who were, of course, the actors. Noah was struck by how unassuming Cal was, how unlike other directors he'd watched at work, some of whom only arrived on the set when the shot was ready and film was set to roll. He remembered how Cal seemed the calm center of a busy, but ordered, universe; how his tall, lanky figure and crinkled smile seemed to radiate a kind of peace that enveloped everything near him.

Noah had fallen willingly into orbit, following Cal around that first day with notebook in hand, asking the occasional question but mostly watching Cal's style. *Night Song* had been Cal's third picture, by which time he had enough clout to work with favorite crew people, who knew how to interpret his every nod and gesture, and who knew, for example, what Cal meant when he called for "the Fracktenschlept", a lighting rig of Cal's own design that he used for closeups, adding an almost liquid quality to the kind of love scene being shot that day.

It was at their next meeting - a tête-a-tête two days later at a diner near the warehouse serving as the soundstage - that Noah began to fall in love. While Cal spoke, Noah tried to ignore the little wisp of hair visible through the open neck of Cal's shirt, undulating as Cal spoke; the veins on the back of Cal's large hands; the way his left ear wiggled when he laughed. He repressed the satisfaction he felt on learning (strictly for the article, of course) that Cal was unmarried and that there was little time for a social life while working on a picture. What about afterward?, he had wanted to ask.

The finished article barely registered on Noah's mind, busily occupied with the startling discovery that, at the age of forty-two, he'd fallen in love with a man. He couldn't deny it, since all the signs were there. Cal was constantly in his mind, Noah toying with a list of invented excuses to call him or, even more bold, arrive unbidden at the studio. He considered sending a card ("Thinking Of You!") or, in a more flamboyant mood, flowers. And he wondered what Cal's body would feel like in closer proximity, with a set of carefully considered maneuvers to that end - a hand casually thrown across a shoulder, or

laid gently in the small of Cal's back. Most of all, he wondered about sex with Cal. He'd seen a few magazines at Richard and Everett's place, had studied them with what he felt was clinical detachment; now, he imagined himself and Cal in some of those pictures as he could not with any other male of his acquaintance. He found himself surprisingly untroubled by the discovery that he, Noah Wilburn, was attracted to a man, felt no compunction to declare to the world his newfound sexual orientation, engage in group therapy, or intellectualize. It was as if he'd tried on a new suit of clothes and found it comfortable. It was his own business, and anyone who bothered to make it theirs would just have to get used to it.

When Cal telephoned some weeks later, after wrapping *Night Song*, to thank Noah for the coverage, the invitation to dinner slipped from Noah's lips before he could stop it and before he realized he hadn't the slightest inkling of Cal's sexual preferences. Cal could be an upright, studly male with a string of adoring female groupies, for all Noah knew. So, "Strictly social," he'd babbled over the telephone. "Nothing for publication, just two guys having dinner."

The pause at the other end of the line seemed interminable. But then, "I'd like that a lot," Cal said.

Noah chose the restaurant carefully. Too upscale, and Noah might come across as a smarmy, predatory seducer, like Clifton Webb in *Laura*; too downscale, and it might seem tawdry and noir-ish. He finally settled on a wood-and-brass, chintz-peppered place on Amsterdam serving a Low Country menu - gumbos, hoppin' john, She-Crab soup. It was equally favored by Upper East Side matrons who felt adventurous striking out from their usual linen-draped haunts, and by black-clad hipsters who'd grown up watching Paul Prudhomme on television.

Next came the wardrobe decisions. There was the chino-and-white-shirt/Montgomery Clift/*A Place In The Sun* look, but that might be too boyish. He could try the casual professional, Tom Cruise/*Rain Man* look - V-neck sweater, button-down Oxford shirt, custom-fitted jeans - but that might detract from the seriousness (for Noah, at least) of the occasion. Noah finally decided on a middle course - the white shirt with the jeans, adding a little dignity with a blazer and laced shoes instead of the loafers he'd initially planned.

He arrived at the restaurant fifteen minutes early and chose a table toward the back and in a corner, where he sat nervously folding and unfolding his napkin while other diners traded murmured confidences, clinked silverware against china, flagged down waiters, set off against the restaurant's lime green paneling and whitewashed floor. Noah had made a mental conversation list, starting with the usual pleasantries about the restaurant, how the neighborhood had changed, and so on; passing on to congratulations on completing the film and Cal's next project; perhaps touching on favorite leisure time activities or places visited, by which time Noah hoped he would have determined if his feelings toward Cal would be reciprocated. He was unsure exactly how he would make this determination and hoped instinct would guide him.

Cal had been ten minutes late.

"Sorry," he'd explained. "The editor had a few questions about part of the *Night Song* footage. He would have kept me there all night, but I told him I had an important date." The place on Noah's arm where Cal laid his hand felt warm. "I'm really glad we're doing this," Cal said softly.

"Me, too," Noah said.

By the time their main courses arrived, they'd already covered their respective recent histories - Cal, about *Night Song*'s journey from story idea to finished film; Noah, about a few of the more challenging pieces he'd been assigned by the magazine before moving further back in his personal history, to marriage. Noah was surprised how easy it was to talk about Suzanne.

"It was pretty passionate at first," he'd shared with Cal. "All fire and heat, which can never last very long. So then we had to find something else to hold the relationship together, and that turned out to be work."

"Poor substitute, I'd say," Cal answered. "Maybe you can't have fire and heat, as you put it, forever. But can't there be a kind of comfort in familiarity?"

Noah shrugged. "Maybe we just never gave it enough of a chance. And, anyway, we got so involved with what we were each doing that there was no time to be familiar. She started working as a fundraiser for non-profits all over the East Coast; and I started writing

film reviews for neighborhood papers and ended up with Ollie's magazine eventually. By then, there was nothing left."

"Must have been rough," Cal said as the brandy snifters arrived after dessert. "After you broke up, I mean."

Noah nodded. "Yeah. I feel like I've been floating. Like sometimes when you see a balloon way up there, floating away over the trees in Central Park after some kid's let it go. How they kind of bob around with the wind, with no direction. That's what it feels like sometimes."

"And now?" Cal asked. "I mean, now. Right this minute?"

Noah swirled the silky brown puddle left at the bottom of his brandy snifter. "I feel like you're the first person I can talk to," he finally said. "I don't know why that is."

"Sure you do. But I think you're having a tough time admitting it." Cal's hand had come to rest again, lightly, on Noah's arm. It was, as Noah always remembered, the beginning.

He looked into Cal's warm brown eyes. "Okay. I'm very attracted to you," he said softly. "I've never said that to a man before, but there it is. I hope it doesn't upset you or anything."

Cal leaned forward, until his lips were just inches from Noah's. "No, Noah," Cal whispered. "It doesn't. And I'll tell you something else. You're not the first, for me. There've been other guys in my life. Not many, but some. I hope that doesn't upset *you*."

"What do we do now?" Noah asked, trying to keep the nervousness out of his voice.

"We pay the bill," Cal said. "And didn't you say you lived near here?"

"I've never done this before," Noah said.

"I have. Don't worry. I'll tell you about it, but later."

It was only a few minutes' walk back to the apartment that had once been Noah's and Suzanne's where, stricken by post-divorce inertia, Noah had continued to live for the past two years. Cal had spent the first half-hour carefully studying the memorabilia from the marriage that Noah had left in place all that time - pictures of the wedding, the ladies in frilled lace and the men in bell-bottomed corduroys; an anniversary party, everyone looking a bit older and decidedly more

cautious; framed theater programs from their first trip to London. He had kept them dusted and polished, like a shrine to happier times.

“Are you sure about this?” Cal had asked, before intently dealing with buttons, belts, zippers with a dexterity Noah assumed came with experience. He remembered the discovery that they both wore the same brand of underwear, hilarious at the time, and the neat line of hair running down to Cal’s navel, and the helpless release at Cal’s first touch.

“Same thing for me, the first time,” Cal whispered in his ear. “Now we can take our time.” And they had, as Cal guided Noah’s hand between his own legs and taught him the proper motion and speed, how Noah’s fingers could gently massage the tip of Cal’s cock until the first moistness came. Noah remembered the strange thrill of Cal’s lips and the glow that spread through Cal’s chest as he came in Noah’s hand.

“I figured it out shooting the second picture,” Cal said later, during a pause in their exertions. “*Bound For Home*. There was a guy...one of the extras in that ballroom scene.” He shrugged. “We just connected. No one ever knew. It was like that, back then. But I found something about me that had been missing. Then he got a picture in L.A., and that was the end of it. But I’ve kept looking ever since.”

All Noah knew, sitting there naked on his living room couch with another man, was that this was the first person since Suzanne that he wanted to know more about, to explore and try to understand. The sex, the different feel and taste and smell of it, added a kind of alluring luster to the discoveries that lay ahead.

Yes, Noah knew the man, every nook and cranny of him. It was the artist he still had to meet.

The train shot out of a tunnel and light spilled onto his seat. He roused himself and switched into writer mode. He would have to start the book with the usual - his subject’s childhood. Noah viewed his own boyhood only from a protective distance. Both of his parents were long dead, but too much was buried with them, too much he had tried to accept as normal when he knew it hadn’t been. It wasn’t normal for a father to beat his son once a week, like clockwork, carefully choosing the night when his wife would be out for her weekly bridge game; or normal for a little boy to wonder what excuse would be used to start the blows falling, and to make excuses about tripping and falling, or getting

beaten up at school, when the bruises were too big to hide. His father's rage had been predictable, but no less terrifying or mysterious for that. Perversely, it was the one thing his father had left him, shaken awake by Cal's death and prowling for a target, unaware of The Plan designed to kill it once and for all. It was the movies that had helped Noah tame it, however temporarily. Up there on the screen, there were other kids, in other homes, like Andy's, with other kinds of parents, like Judge Hardy; that there was, in fact, hope. Anger melted into a happy ending and a fade to black.

Noah found himself wishing there had been similar upheavals in Cal's childhood, something to form a context for Cal's pictures; but from the bits and pieces culled over the years from Cal and from Miriam and Lou, there was nothing. No unrecognized whiz kid hidden in the emptiness of California suburbs; no abusive home life thrusting him into the wider world; no wandering odd-jobber ending up in Hollywood painting sets and falling into a director's chair, no frustrated actor moving behind the camera to make a living. *Cal Dudley, at ten years old, hardly seemed the type to become a famous film director*, Noah mentally wrote. He would go on to discuss Cal's early education at P.S.12 on the Upper West Side (were any of his teachers still alive?), completely at home in the buzz and whirl of the city by the time he headed uptown to study film at Columbia, rather than at NYU's more prestigious film school. "Columbia was only four bus stops away," was Cal's only explanation.

But then, Noah went on writing, *while hurrying to a class one day, Cal walked onto his first movie set*. Well, not a set, really; just a small, B-picture crew from the old Marathon Pictures commandeering a sidewalk and a storefront to shoot one of the studio's signature ten-day quickies that brought the rest of America a dangerous, black-and-white New York peopled by crooks and floozies. The director, Cal had told him late one night after an especially raucous party, had been arguing with one of the actors and was, in fact, in the process of firing him when Cal passed by, unaware that the disgraced actor had been cast in the lead.

"He asked me if I wanted to make a quick three hundred bucks," Cal had said. Cleaning out one of Cal's closets, Noah had come across the dusty old fedora Cal had been given to wear in that long-

forgotten picture. (Another mental note: was there a print mouldering on some shelf?) With his craggy features and deep-set eyes, the fedora transformed Cal into the perfect small-time New York criminal, so much so that Richard and Everett had asked Cal to make it his costume two years running at their annual Halloween party. But it wasn't the acting that engaged his attention, Noah now added to his mental notebook. It was the director's power to create his own world, complete with people and buildings and loves and hates and battles. "Like when you were a kid," Cal had said once, "and you played cowboys and Indians. Only it's all written down on paper."

Noah would have to talk about cinematic influences, of course - another topic that had somehow never been explored in their years together, Cal always resistant to probing too deeply into his professional life. "My job is telling stories, not art history," was all he said once. But at least Noah knew there was no easy recourse to the *auteur* cliché usually ladled out for any director growing up in the fifties. Noah had used it himself in writing about other directors, but Cal was no Truffaut clone, or even an admirer of *nouveau vague*. Noah's opinion was that Cal's inspirations came from much further back. *For Cal Dudley, it was the romantic comedies of the thirties that suffused his own work*, Noah decided he would write. Directors like Lubitsch, and films like *Ninotchka*, which he knew to be one of Cal's favorite pictures. All the elements of Cal's own films were there - the articulate leads (well, if you took Garbo's accent into account), the humor rooted in sadness, the brisk pacing, the silliness evaporating like magic into serious lovemaking, and the deft gathering of plot strands in the last ten minutes into a satisfying whole cloth woven from both human foibles and dignity.

The train jolted and swayed over a crossing. Noah fished in his coat pocket for his notebook and pen to jot it all down. At this rate, he could throw an outline at Ollie in a few weeks and then get on with The Plan, never mind what Ollie eventually did with the material. But the pen wouldn't write, no matter how hard he shook it or how many times he took the little plastic ink tube from inside its plastic casing and blew in it.

"Here, try mine," a voice said from behind him. Noah turned to find a girl with a helmet of purple and orange hair holding a Bic up to

him. “You’d better get it down quick before you forget it. I can’t remember anything for two seconds if I don’t write it down.” She slapped her forehead and then made a flighty motion with her hands, decorated with black nail polish. “It just disappears somewhere.”

It was the first time a stranger on the train had ever spoken to him and, confused by the novelty, he took the pen.

“Thanks,” Noah said. Turning back to his notebook, he carried away further impressions of one of those long quilted parkas that, with people in them, reminded him of toothpaste tubes; of brown eyes; of a sprinkling of freckles on the nose. He began to write.

“How far are you going?”

He twisted around again. “Armonk,” Noah said politely, trying not to appear ungrateful for the loan of the pen.

“Oh.” She nodded her head, as if she knew everything there was to know about Armonk.

Noah, prodded further by social graces, felt compelled to add, “And you?”

She leaned forward and dropped her voice to a whisper. “Not sure. See, I sneaked on to the train. It’s easy if you know Grand Central like I do.” She leaned forward even more. “I’ve kind of ...well, I’ve more or less been living there the past few days.”

Noah, not sure what a proper reply might be, merely said, “Oh.”

“It’s not so bad, actually,” she went on. “There’s food and everything right there and no one really notices you if you don’t look too weird.”

Noah was intrigued enough, and aware enough of a crick developing in his neck, to turn more toward her, resting his back against the train’s wall. She seemed remarkably cheerful for someone who’d been living in Grand Central. Not starving, certainly, and without the vacant eyes of a drug abuser. “What will you do when the train gets to the end of the line?”

“Get off, I guess. Then...I don’t know...” She shrugged. “But..gosh, I’m sorry. I’m distracting you. You go ahead and write. I was watching you, and whatever it is you’ve been thinking about, it looked pretty important.” Her voice inched up a little at the end, not quite into a question, but definitely probing for further information.

Noah imagined that trying to survive in Grand Central didn't include much opportunity for conversation, and it wouldn't hurt to provide a few minutes' more comfort from normal human discourse. Besides, he thought, how many people still said 'gosh'? No one since Judy or Mickey in an Andy Hardy movie.

"It's a book I'm supposed to write," Noah said. "I was just starting to get some ideas about it."

"Well, then, I was right, wasn't I? It *is* important. Go ahead, now. You just write."

She fell silent, so Noah began scribbling in his notebook before further conversation broke out. *Cal Childhood*, he wrote. *What's unusual? P.S.12. Teachers? Marathon. Anybody remember? Trace if any staff. Prints?*

He heard the car door rattle open behind them. "Tickets! Tickets, please!" Also, from behind him, he heard a little groan. He stopped writing.

"May I have your ticket, miss?"

"Well, the thing is..." she started to say....

"She's with me," Noah found himself saying. "We just made the train, you see. There was only time for me to buy a ticket," he babbled on, "but I suppose I can pay for her ticket now, can't I?" He turned back to her and tried to smile nonchalantly. "I told you not to be late, didn't I?" She looked at him, astonished, as the conductor punched his ticket, took his money, and strolled off.

"You didn't have to do that," she said, her eyes still wide in surprise

No, he didn't, especially since he had other things to deal with right now. Or *the* thing, The Plan. He'd promised himself no distractions, but somehow the thought of her being hauled off by police at the next stop offended his sense of propriety. She'd loaned him the pen, after all, a small gesture, but kind-hearted nonetheless. Besides, his rescue pleased his sense of drama and at least for a moment made him forget the loneliness. He wondered what happened next, though. "Don't you have friends you can -" He stopped, since it appeared she'd fallen asleep, her body slumped against the wall; but her eyes fluttered open, two brown pools below the streaks of purple and orange.

"No," she said, and sneezed.

“Are you all right?”

“Just a little cold, I guess. Grand Central’s pretty drafty. You wouldn’t think so with all those people, and the trains and everything.” She pulled the parka tighter around her. “It’s nice and comfy in here, though,” she said, and sneezed again.

She got off the train with Noah at Armonk. “Bye now!” she called out to the conductor as Noah helped her down to the platform. For a moment, he was Clark Gable and she was Carol Lombard, arriving for a film premiere, perhaps, or for a studio press junket. There wasn’t any swirling steam from the train, of course, no bustling crowds in overcoats and proper hats, just the two of them on a bleak Metro North platform in Westchester on a chilly late winter afternoon. They walked toward the parking lot, and when they were out of the conductor’s sight, she stopped and held out her hand.

“Thanks a lot,” she said as they shook. “I’m glad I got to meet you.” Another sneeze, and Noah fished in his pocket for a tissue, even though he knew he didn’t have one; but it bought some extra time, because he felt awful about just leaving her. The Plan could wait just a couple minutes more, couldn’t it? There was some terrible sadness about her, and the presence of train tracks brought Greta Garbo in Anna Karenina to mind, even if MGM had changed the ending and she hadn’t thrown herself under a train.

“Maybe they have some Kleenex in the newstand over there,” he said helpfully.

“It’s OK. I can get some tissue from the bathroom inside.”

“Look, can’t I at least buy you a return ticket to the City? They close the station after the last train. I can’t just leave you standing here, sneezing.”

“Gosh,” she said, grabbing his arm and starting to weave.

“What is it?”

But he didn’t find out, because she fainted.

The baby-faced intern shrugged. “I’d say it’s simple exhaustion.” Noah thought the poor man looked pretty worn out himself, standing in the glare of the emergency room and rubbing his eyes. “Her blood sugar’s pretty low and she’s a little dehydrated.”

“What do we do now?” Noah asked, stepping out of the way of a gurney being whisked in the door bearing an extremely pregnant woman. Across the lobby, others waited their turn in rows of plastic chairs, looking like a casting call for *General Hospital* extras.

“She just needs some rest and a few square meals, and to stay off the street for a few days. They get on the trains because it’s warm, y’know. Like people who sleep on the subways in town.”

“Can’t you keep her here?”

“It’s not medically necessary,” the intern said. “And we need the beds for serious cases. She just needs some TLC for a couple days, that’s all.” He looked at Noah. “You don’t know her?”

All Noah knew was that she had given the name Artemis Sinclair to the emergency room’s admitting nurse. Noah had at first doubted anyone would name their child after a Greek moon goddess, but later reflection during the long wait turned his thoughts to secret rites and odd women dancing around stones, and the name began to seem strangely appropriate. Noah himself had gone on the form as “acquaintance,” with his own home address, since Artemis couldn’t supply one. They could have been taken, he supposed, for father and daughter, or uncle and niece, but an emergency room didn’t seem the best place to try for dramatic effect. By the time they had completed the form, she had seemed recovered, if still beset by sniffles, and had wanted to leave; but Noah had insisted on having someone look at her.

“No, I don’t know who she is,” he said now to the intern, explaining about the train ride.

“I suppose you could take her down to the police station,” the intern said.

The suggestion made Noah think of Dickensian orphanages and, worse, *The Snake Pit* and Olivia de Havilland in that awful asylum wardrobe. “No, not the police station,” he said.

He considered. There was the Holiday Inn out near the interstate; but the man who had done carpentry work around the house for he and Cal also worked the evening shift at the hotel’s desk, and what if he was on duty tonight, as Noah ushered a young girl into one of his rooms? Armonk was only forty minutes from New York, but it was still a small town. Besides, he had considered a room at the

Holiday Inn as the setting for the final scene of *The Plan*, and putting Artemis there would spoil the effect for him.

The intern shrugged. "You think about it," he said. "I'll go tell her she can leave."

"You can drop me anywhere," she said as Noah guided the car out of the parking lot.

"Isn't there anybody we can call?"

She seemed alarmed at the thought. "Nope. Nobody. Nobody I want to talk to, anyway. You were really nice to take care of me, but honest, you can just drop me somewhere. It's OK." She stared out at Armonk, at the antique shops and the Starbucks and the health food store on the corner. She could be no older than twenty, by which age, he acknowledged, there could be plenty of things to be running from. Parents, ex-lovers, who knows? Twenty was plenty of time to run up a list.

"Can you buy anything useful in this town?" she said.

"No. Everybody goes to White Plains. What do you need?"

"A bathroom, mostly. The one at the hospital was locked. You can just drop me at a gas station. They at least must have one of those around here."

"Yes. But we'll pass by the house first. You're welcome to use ours...I mean, mine." It sounded strange to him to say it.

She looked at him intently.

"Look," he said, "I'll even wait outside the house and then drive you wherever you want to go. Fair enough?"

"I guess it's OK," she said. She seemed to relax a little. "So. What kind of book are you writing?"

He tried to keep the answer simple, but it had all come pouring out by the time they got to the house, not just about the book, but about Cal. It was as if he wanted to introduce her to Cal and make someone who hadn't known him understand the bitter, angry darkness that had descended with his death. Despite her tender years, she seemed someone who knew a thing or two about darkness; someone who, like Noah, had been abandoned.

“I think it’s good you’re writing about him,” she said as they climbed the steps to the porch. “It’ll be like one last hug before you let him go.”

Noah had forgotten that the urn still sat on the table inside the door. He’d grown used to it, like a favorite vase that had been in the family for years; but the girl paused, then reached out to touch it. Noah watched her face - the brows drawn together, scrunching the freckles on her nose, as if she were deep in thought.

“It’s pretty,” she said, sniffing back another sneeze. “I like those little ridges below the handles.”

“He was crazy about art deco.”

“So am I. I think it’s cool the way they made just plain old things look beautiful.” Noah almost laughed, for it seemed to him that her observation had neatly dispatched centuries of overblown, verbose art critics. Ollie - no stranger himself to verbosity - should meet her, Noah thought.

He showed her the bathroom, then retired to the kitchen. What should he offer her? Cookies and milk were too adolescent. Tea, that was it. Even better, an herbal tea, something with Vitamin C in it. He nervously rattled cups and saucers, dropped the lid of the kettle on the floor, spilled a box full of tea bags over the counter. It was, he had realized, the first time there had ever been a total stranger in the house. Even when Cal was alive, the only visitors were Richard and Everett, or Suzanne, sometimes Lou and Miriam, or other members of their eclectic circle; but never someone they didn’t know. Now here he was making tea for a girl he had met on the train, a girl with purple and orange hair, someone who still said ‘gosh’, and who could, at this very moment, be filling the voluminous pockets of her parka with small pieces of his and Cal’s life for profitable pawning. Worse, those pockets could be hiding a gun. Or a knife. It was an Ida Lupino B-movie come to life.

“You don’t have to do that.”

Noah’s heart flipped over as he turned to face her, fully expecting to be looking down the barrel of a pistol. But it was just a kid standing there, a lost kid huddled in an ugly brown parka. She stood with her hands buried in her pockets and her shoulders hunched up.

“I thought you might like some tea,” he said.

“No, that’s OK. I should get going. I kind of feel like I’m intruding. I mean, you probably need to be alone for a while, huh?”

Well, he did, come to think of it. The Plan’s major prerequisite was solitude, after all. “Where will you go?” he asked her.

She shrugged. “Maybe I’ll just get back on the train. Except I’ll have to borrow some money from you for the fare. That conductor won’t be so easy on me if I’m alone.”

“You mean, you’ll just go back to Grand Central to....to live there again?”

“I’ll be OK.”

He thought of her alone, ignored, entombed by granite and cold marble. No one would even know her name.

“Please. Take off your coat and have something. You can’t just wander off.”

“Why not?” she asked, a bit defensively, Noah thought.

“For one thing, you know what they said at the hospital. And if you just go back to the City, that means you’ll have spent your whole day making one round trip between Armonk and New York, and you won’t be any better off than when you started. It’s so...so pointless.”

“Maybe I don’t see the point to much of anything right now, so what’s the difference?”

He thought of the little vial carefully stored in his dresser upstairs. Maybe she had one, too, something they had in common. Hers could be hidden away somewhere in the vastness of Grand Central, and who would notice her? How long would it take for someone to figure out she wasn’t asleep? It was different in his case, he argued to himself, a perfectly understandable choice to anyone who knew him, a carefully and neatly planned choice, with no chance that whichever of his friends discovered him would think he had just fallen asleep. But, to do it in the middle of thousands of uncaring, unknowing strangers seemed to him infinitely sad and robbed of meaning. That would be the worst thing. No one would understand why.

“Look, here’s an idea,” he said. “There’s a spare room upstairs. Why don’t you at least stay the night, get some rest, before heading back?”

She sneezed again. Perhaps it was the shock of the suggestion, even to Noah. But it was only one night, for God's sake, and the poor kid was obviously ill. He plunged ahead.

"This is not a nefarious suggestion and I am not a crazed sex fiend. If there's somebody you can call to let them know where you are, that's fine. And the guest room door locks from the inside. Deal?"

"There's no one," she said. "But I can scream pretty loud."

"Good. We'll leave the front door and all the windows open."

She gazed at him until Noah began to feel uncomfortable and regretted his offer. But then, she pointed to the tea bags he still clutched in his hand, and smiled.

"Do you have peppermint?"

Despite the support of a coterie of Manhattan friends, film critic Noah Wilburn is so distraught at the death of his longtime companion that he contemplates suicide. But a mysterious young woman with a secret changes everything.

End Credits

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