

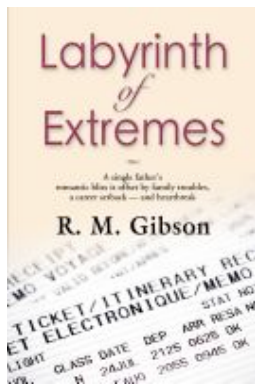
Labyrinth *of* Extremes



A single father's
romantic bliss is offset by family troubles,
a career setback — and heartbreak

R. M. Gibson

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A timeless story set in late 1960s New York and suburban Connecticut-told from the perspective of a single father who juggles his romantic interests while facing the prospect of losing a blue-chip management job, enduring the anguish of a personal loss, and giving moral support to a son who's gotten into drugs.

Labyrinth of Extremes

The CAM Gordon Chronicles

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Labyrinth of Extremes

The Cam Gordon Chronicles

Book Two

Labyrinth
of
Extremes

Second Edition

R. M. Gibson

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Second Edition

Preface

The 1960s and 1970s were decades when the quest for equality began to take root in the practical, everyday lives of millions who had yet to know the true meaning of it. America's blacks were registering to vote, becoming a part of integrated school systems, and finding that new career paths were open to them. It was also a time when women felt at liberty to take on roles that had generally only been open to men. As an integral part of this change, they were insisting on equal pay for equal work and like opportunities for advancement.

Those years also saw women's pursuit of similar freedoms in personal affairs. To some, it may have been better known as the sexual revolution—a distinct part of the women's lib movement. They asked for dates, or even proposed marriage, and, if so inclined, slept with a variety of partners.

It is within this social climate that Cameron Ross Gordon, a recently divorced single parent, begins his search for a new and lasting relationship. Taking full advantage of the less restrictive mores, he's involved in several caring liaisons before reaching a decision to finally settle down. But, cautious to a fault, he soon finds that a long-term commitment won't come about quickly.

The 60s and 70s were also decades that witnessed a marked increase in drug experimentation by America's youth. As the father of two teenage sons, Cam must also be alert to the possibility of substance abuse and to deal with it.

The business world of this same period, particularly from 1970 on, saw corporations making internal adjustments as a result of a significant economic slump. Cam's professional life is affected by this unwelcome turn of events, and it adds to the problems he faces.

While the chronicle that continues with *Labyrinth of Extremes* isn't a social commentary, care has been taken to preserve historical accuracy so that the narrative is a factual portrayal of the years in which it is set.

R. M. Gibson
San Antonio, Texas
July 2015

Chapter One

It was a weary Cam Gordon that stirred when the cabin lights were turned on aboard American's Flight 18, an overnight 707 from San Francisco to New York's JFK, and the final leg of a very long trip. A few minutes later a warm, friendly voice came through the overhead speakers.

"Good morning, folks. This is your captain speaking. Sorry about the late departure last night, but as you heard before we left the Bay Area there were some connecting flights we had to wait for. At American, we try not to leave anybody behind. And along with the delay, we haven't had much help from the jet stream, so, ahh, it means we haven't made up much time. Figure on being at the gate at, uhh, about eight o'clock. If we have to wait for a place to park, it'll be a few minutes after that. The weather in New York is overcast, kinda breezy, and it's a chilly forty degrees. We don't have far to go now, so just sit back, relax, and enjoy that good breakfast your cabin crew is serving. We hope you got a little sleep, had a good flight, and that you'll come back and see us again real soon."

As Cam ate, he reflected on the events of the past few days. He'd started in Sydney on Friday morning, spent a night in Hong Kong, then another in Tokyo before stopping in San Francisco to see Vicki Snider. For a year, they'd been lovers. She was ready to marry; Cam was a long way from being convinced that it was the thing to do as a second divorce had made him overly cautious. Vicki had grown increasingly impatient, but she had the feeling that his reason for wanting to make the stopover was to propose. When, after nearly three hours together, he hadn't asked the question she was expecting to hear, she told Cam they were through, left him at the airport, and walked out of his life, indifferent to the fact that he had a wait of almost eleven hours for his ongoing flight into New York. The day they'd planned together was abbreviated, and their affair died with it, yesterday, the first Sunday of November 1969. Now that it was over, Cam had few regrets. But his two teenage sons, especially the younger one, Jon, who'd already had a brush with drug problems, needed firm maternal guidance. Both boys thought Vicki might one day be their surrogate mom. It was never to be.

As they were making their descent into JFK, a pleasant young stewardess said, "Sir. Excuse me. We're about to land. You'll need to bring your seatback into the full upright position."

"Sure. Sorry. I was lost in thought."

The later arrival wasn't a problem for Cam. He could put in part of a day before going up to Grand Central and then taking a late afternoon train home to suburban Sudbury, Connecticut. He'd be at the station by about five o'clock, a time he'd already given the new woman in his life, Erin Coletti. Once back in his office, he'd call her to confirm that he'd be in as planned. He wasn't up to working much beyond midafternoon.

When the cab driver dropped Cam off at his downtown building, 4 New York Plaza, his office partner, perky, auburn haired Megan O'Brien was shocked when she saw him come through the door.

"Cam! Welcome back. But for heaven's sake, what are you doing here? You look absolutely wiped out. I didn't expect to see you until at least Wednesday."

"Actually, I feel pretty good. I just look like death warmed over. But, no big deal. It's better that I'm here and busy for a little while and not sitting at home thinking about it. The nine-hour time change is a bitch, so it'll take a few days to get turned around. From the looks of my desk, I'll need to do that sooner rather than later. And I've got some romancing to do, too, you know. Be best if my internal clock is reset to Eastern Time." Megan smiled thinly.

"The only personal call you had while you were away was from Erin. Another one, Cam? You sure do keep busy. Maybe someday it could be my turn. Whatever, she said on Friday that if you wanted to come out earlier than you'd planned on, she could still pick you up. Sounds like she has a fun welcome home reception planned. You up to it?"

"Sure give it a try. But before we go on to other things, there's some old business I think you'll find interesting. You were right about Vicki. She's gone. You remember I was to meet her in San Francisco. We kept our date yesterday, but then out of the blue she pulled the plug. It's over. Odd thing is, it really doesn't matter all that much anymore. A while back, I got the feeling she'd walk if I didn't show her a ring fairly soon, so what she decided wasn't exactly a shock. And Cris is getting so wrapped up in her business that after a year of being snug she's beginning to drift. At least that's the way it looks. So I'm fallin' on hard times, girl. Erin and I have gotten to be good friends, but she's not the marrying kind. We just enjoy each other's company and let it go at that. No commitments of any kind. Anyway, I'm glad she called, but I may stick to the schedule we agreed to a couple of weeks ago."

"I told you last spring what I thought about Vicki, so I'm not surprised. But if times are tough, there's always me, you know."

“Megan, you’re an absolute sweetheart, and I love you dearly, but I’ve said it before. There isn’t any way we can work side-by-side Monday through Friday and then sleep together on weekends. Still, I’m pleased that you think I’m someone you’d like to snuggle with. Good for my ego. Should the day come when one of us leaves the company, and you get around to cutting your Colin loose, then I’ll look at it differently. Maybe.”

“When he’s gone, you’ll be the first to know. Then I’ll name the day, the time, the place, and hope that you’ll show up and let me show you what kind of lover *I* can be.”

“Down, girl. You’re way ahead of me when it comes to turning your fantasies into the real thing.”

“In that case, I’ll be patient and then pounce on you when you’re least expecting it.”

“You’re hopeless. Let it be. Now, on a much less stimulating subject, I started writing my trip report over Indonesia and finished it on the flight into Tokyo. If you can get it done fairly soon, one of us will deliver it to the boss before I go. As I recall, his name is Barnes.”

Megan chuckled softly. “No change. Still the same dynamo, and I’ll get right to it.”

“Speak of the devil, look who just walked in. Mornin’, Matt.”

“Hello, Cam. I’m surprised to see you here, but since you are, how’d it go?”

“Good, I think. It was a pretty busy week. Only got in about an hour of sightseeing, and maybe eighteen minutes of shopping.”

“I’ve heard from Malcolm, and he seems happy with what you were able to get done for various parts of GMI-Australasia. And I’m sure you know about this from him directly, but while you were on your way back he confirmed that he wants you back to help with their search for a new personnel head. I said yes, of course. The evaluation process begins on December 15. That’s firm now. It’s a Monday, so he suggested that you might want to come in a couple of days earlier. Since it’s a busy time of year, you probably ought to get your reservations started before you leave today.”

“Good thought. And if you can stand it, my trip report’s done, and one of us will get it to you before I leave—whenever that is.”

“You’re amazing. Always trying to stay one step ahead of me. And you’re doing it. Says something about your dedication.”

“Appreciate the kind words. I’m just trying to do a good job. You pay me well.”

“OK. See you on Wednesday, maybe. Have a good rest.”

“Thanks, Matt.”

When Cam finally got to his desk, he phoned Erin.

“Hi, babe. How’re you?”

“*Cam*. So good to hear that sexy voice of yours again. I’ve really missed you, especially after the sun goes down.”

“Easy, dear heart. Megan gave me your message. I thought on my way in from Kennedy that I’d wait until the four-something train we talked about just before I left. Then it finally dawned on me that I’d be spending the better part of a full day in the office. Truth be known, I ain’t up to it.”

“Then you’ll like my news. I’ll still be able to pick you up because I’m taking the afternoon off. The people I work with are starting to wonder what’s going on. I’ll let ’em guess. Can’t wait to see you.”

“And you. That’s my kind of good news, babe. What I’ll do now is wait until my report’s finished and then get myself on a slow local that leaves at about midday. It’ll test my patience, though, because it’ll take an hour. I’m really glad you have the afternoon off. It’ll give us more time to get caught up. And if you were able to make arrangements for the overnight, that’ll be even better. I’m ready to get all tangled up in a world-class bear hug.”

“Mmm. I hear you. The overnight’s set, and all day tomorrow, too. It’s the way you wanted me to work it out if I could, and I’ve been able to do it.”

“Terrific. What’s missing is being able to see Drew and Jon. But it’s best if they stay with the Brunettis until after we’ve had our reunion, and I get my circadian clock running on Sudbury time.”

“It’s good that we did some planning before you left. Now that you’re back, I’m going to get you cornered and then keep you all to myself for a couple of days. It’s called being selfish. Or maybe greedy is a better word.”

“Ahhh, cornered is it? The southwest corner of number 710 is my bedroom, assuming that’s what you have in mind.”

“Now *you* need to take it easy.”

“OK. It’s just that I’m really looking forward to spending the better part of the next two days with you. Give us time to enjoy each other’s company, if you understand the master plan.”

“Sure do. But I’ve got to get back to work. See you at about one. Bye, guy.”

“I’m really pleased with all your news. Hope I survive the slow train ride out. Bye, gal.” He smiled at Erin’s latest surprise, her afternoon off, and their matching “guy” and “gal” goodbyes.

Cam then called T. J. Atwood, his good friend and former boss at Signa Oil, to confirm their date for drinks on Friday afternoon.

“Hi, Cam. Good to know you’re back. You’re you on my calendar. I want to hear all about your trip, but I’m late for a meeting and can’t talk. See you at Capricorn’s at around five thirty.” He gave Cam the address and suggested that they’d probably have one too many.

His trip report finished, signed, and delivered, Cam listened to Megan’s summary about the status of their various projects. When she was finished, he decided he’d given GMI management all they had a right to expect on the heels of his long trip. He gathered up all his things, said goodbye to Megan, and hailed a cruising taxi that took him straight up to Grand Central.

On the train ride out, Cam’s eyes took in the dreary cityscape. He found it gloomy after the beauty of Australia’s spring, and his lids grew heavy from looking at too many familiar scenes. Drowsy as he was, he couldn’t take his mind off Cristina Renzo, or Cris, as she was most always called. By chance, their paths had crossed in the laundry room of his building almost a year ago. It was shortly after he’d met Vicki at a conference in Las Vegas. Infatuated with Cam, she’d come east to spend several days with him and had then flown back to Vegas on Veteran’s Day Monday. It was the Saturday afternoon following that he and Cris had met. Other than the various machines in the room, they were alone and she’d made a bold comment about his messy sheets. They’d had a good chuckle, talked some, and then taken with her trim figure and pleasant face, Cam had invited her up to his place while their clothes were washing. They’d shared glasses of potent homemade Italian red wine. Later that afternoon, their defenses lowered, they’d found pleasure in each other’s bodies. Since then, they’d been lovers and constant companions. But their long-term aims seemed different now, and Cam was beginning to suspect that their romance had about run its course. Unlike his reaction to the end of his affair with Vicki, he’d hurt some if his relationship with Cris came to an end. Worn out from his travels, and by the thought of what might be, he dozed. It was only from force of habit that he awakened in time to get off the train at Sudbury Station. Lots of conditioning. Pavlov would’ve been proud.

Stumbling off the aged coach, Cam and Erin spotted each other at about the same time. She smiled brightly. He waved. And then she greeted her returning road warrior with warmth. The hug they shared felt especially satisfying.

Raven-haired, attractive and well built, Cam's eyes liked what they saw. "No need to ask how you are," he said. "You-look-terrific!"

"Good to know the clothes I picked out and the extra time I took getting ready this morning were worth it. The other part of it is that I'm also showing you how glad I am to have you back."

"It's interesting to think about what I've just done, but it's also good to be home again and to see you. The news I have to attach to that is I'll be going back to Australia in about six weeks. Tell you more about that later on."

"Not much doubt that you've had a long trip. It shows. Best thing I can do is to get you home so you can relax before we go out for dinner, assuming you're up to it. Maybe you can take a nap. I'll lie next to you and keep you company. After all this time, it'll feel good just to be close."

"I like your idea, but I can't take a nap. Except for the morning I arrived in Sydney, I haven't done that during the day since I was about three months old. Mother likes to say, 'You were such a pill'. I need to stay up. Otherwise it'll take forever for me to get adjusted to local time. And on an unrelated subject, if you want to dazzle all your friends, you can tell 'em that during the past two weeks I flew through twenty-four time zones, crossed both the International Date Line and the equator, the latter twice, while I was on my way down to and then back from Sydney. Aren't you impressed?"

"Of course I am. Completely. But will I be allowed to touch you, your eminence?"

"Of course, my child." They both chuckled. "But maybe not until we get home from dinner. Then we'll get involved in some serious touching. That presupposes that I'm still alive."

"Let me see what I can do about keeping you that way."

"Well, I'm yours for the next forty-plus hours, in fact right up until Wednesday morning. Glad you could work out having tomorrow off, too. You really are making my homecoming a special event."

"When you look back on it in a couple of days you'll be able to confirm it. But if we get involved too early, we might never get to dinner." Her mischievous smile was priceless.

Erin pulled into a visitor's parking space at 17 Laurel Ridge, and then the two of them made their way up to Cam's apartment, number 710. They both felt good about being back in his cozy nest and its familiar walls.

Cam shed his blazer and pants, badly wrinkled from the many hours on flights all the way from Tokyo. His intention was to put on something

casual. But as he was undressing, and despite what Erin had said, so was she. Except for her undies. They wouldn't come off until after she was under the covers. The reason? She'd had an emergency appendectomy years earlier, and she said the scar was offensive. In her mind, it confirmed that her doctor was a butcher, not a surgeon, and it was an imperfection she refused to let anyone see. Even her lover.

Fatigue had set in, so Cam was far from his best. But they loved, and both soon reached a place that took the edge off their needs. Then, for only the second time in more than thirty-nine years, Cam napped. He slept for nearly two hours. Erin watched him, fascinated with his face and the lively mind, now mostly at rest, that was hidden beneath his shaggy head of hair. What was he dreaming about that made him smile ever so slightly? Then, thinking about their relationship, she had to admit that she was fond of Cam and also taken with all he'd been through during the past two weeks. She cared about this man, someone who'd almost certainly never be her husband, but she always felt a special kind of warmth when he held her close. It was good seeing him at peace. But she wondered about their future and where their paths would take them. Most likely in separate directions. In various ways, the lives they led were different.

Later on, rested some and showered, Cam suggested they go out for an early dinner. Erin agreed. Before they left, he told her about his meeting with Vicki—at least parts of it—during his stopover in San Francisco.

"She's gone, just like Megan and Danielle, my former secretary at Signa, said she'd be. They'd both met her and were sure she wouldn't wait more than a year. By coincidence, maybe, it was exactly one year. Plus one day. It was Danielle who said that most women would hang on to the end, and maybe beyond, so she couldn't understand how Vicki might have the will to shut off her feelings, her affection, like a light switch. But she did it. And, you know what? I really don't much care. Part of it, I suppose, is that I found out she's fifteen years younger than me, not eight like she said. I'm convinced that being married to her wouldn't have worked, and there was no way my psyche could handle another divorce. Cris? I think we're headed in the same direction. Difference is, she matters. Another couple of weeks, and we'll have known each other for a year. That seems to be the magic number, and it explains why I need to be patient. It'll take at least a year, probably longer, for me to know if a relationship feels right and if it has a good chance to work."

“I can relate to that. So, two things. First, you can expect Erin Coletti to be around for more than a year. But, second, don’t count on me being the permanent squeak in your bed. I told you pretty much that same thing when we first met. I’ll be your companion, but there probably isn’t another ring, or another altar, in my future. I like you, Cam, maybe more than I should, but I want to keep things between us just about the way they are. And another thing. Since you and I have gotten close, I’ll have to decide if I should keep helping Cris out at her shop on weekends, assuming she asks. Could be that seeing our long friendship come to an end is the price I’ll pay for taking over her place in your life.”

“It’ll be something for the two of you to work out. Why don’t you just cool it and see what happens. And about the way you feel about us is fine with me. It means we don’t have to spend much time thinking about romance, or wondering where our relationship is headed. Now, babe, I’m not just tired, I’m hungry, too. How ’bout some dinner?”

Cam decided his Mustang could probably use some exercise, so he drove to The Hearthside Restaurant.

“We’re in a rut, kind of,” Cam said later. “Let’s go someplace else tomorrow night. Problem with that is there are ghosts in lots of the other restaurants in town. Same thing with coming back here if someday we decide we’ve had enough of each other. It’s because we ate here the night we met, so it’ll always be our place. I said that at the time. There would forever be an image of you sitting at one of the tables. I’m a hopeless romantic, dear heart. All soft and mushy inside at times.”

“You’re not telling me a thing I don’t already know. It’s one of the reasons I’m attracted to you. But you were going to give me a rundown on your trip, and the other one coming up in December.”

Cam went into more detail than was necessary, but Erin seemed interested in every bit of it. His problems en route, especially having to get to the Australian embassy in Athens before they closed for the weekend at noon on Friday, and then his briefly having lost his wallet on the way there, got an “Oh, my God” out of her. By the time he was done talking about the stops along the way, including Tehran, New Delhi, Hong Kong, Manila, his business in Sydney, and then stopovers in Hong Kong and Tokyo on his way home, they’d long since finished dinner.

Over an amaretto, Cam said, “The reason I’m going back to Sydney in December is that the head man down there, Harry Malcolm, wants me to interview candidates for his personnel director’s job. The current guy is retiring, and they need to find a replacement—yesterday, as the expression

goes. The search should have been started sooner, but that's out of my hands. Before I left at noon, we tried to arrange another round the world trip, but certain of the sectors, as they're called, were sold out. Bangkok to somewhere wasn't available, and then there was another one farther west that was also fully booked. Not important. Malcolm suggested that I ought to travel smarter anyway. What he meant was that I should fly straight down and back but make a stopover both ways in the Fiji Islands. So, I'm going to do just that. I leave New York on December 9 and get back on the morning of Christmas Eve. Once I'm home, though, I don't suppose we'll have much of a chance to see each other over the holidays."

"It's still a ways off, but we'll work something out. You can't push me aside that easy, hotshot. The holidays themselves are probably out, but we should be OK otherwise."

"I'm taking some time off starting the morning I get back. With both Christmas and New Year's Day on Thursday, I can turn five vacation days into almost two weeks off. Hopefully, we'll be able to find a night or two that we can cohabit."

"Good to have your schedule. Family comes first over the holidays, but I'll work around them. You can count on me fitting someplace into your days off. On second thought, I shouldn't get to be too much a part of your vacation, or your life. I might get to like it, in spite of what I said earlier."

"Before we find out if I have enough energy left for nocturnal delights, I have a little something for you."

Cam dug into a pocket of his jacket and pulled up a small box. He handed it to Erin.

After a moment's pause, and a gentle smile, she opened it. Inside was a magnificent black opal that he'd brought back from Australia.

Erin's radiant blue eyes came alive. "Oh, *Cam*. It's gorgeous. How can I ever thank you?"

"Just keep on being the Erin Coletti I've gotten to know. Call it an early Christmas present. I didn't know your ring size, so I couldn't have it set. Anyway, there wasn't enough time. If we can get to a jeweler during the holidays, you can pick out the ring. It's part of the deal that I couldn't get done in Sydney. By that I mean I'll pay for it, but don't mistake it for an engagement ring. I wanted to do this because you're important. Another way to say it is that I think you're special."

"I don't get misty-eyed very often, but you've almost gotten to me with this. It's beautiful."

“Now, let’s go back to number 710, get all tangled up with each other, and then see if I can pull off what you have in mind.”

“Let’s give it a try. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll understand. You’ve had a rough seventy-two hours or so. I won’t worry about it. There’ll be another day. And we have all of tomorrow. I like the idea of sleeping late on a Tuesday morning. Mmmm. I owe my sister. You remember Gina. She’s a sweetie.”

When they were home, Cam used what little energy he had left to share an especially fulfilling moment with Erin. Murmuring from the contentment that swept over her, she then snuggled up to Cam as their loving, and their day, came to an end. He badly needed rest and sleep came instantly. Feeling at peace, Erin smiled warmly before she slept.

On Tuesday, Cam’s body clock was so disoriented that he felt worse than when they went to bed, and he squandered much of the morning trying to decide if there was any possibility he’d live. It was a lot like the Sunday morning in Sydney when he went down and slept for almost sixteen hours. “I don’t know about international travel,” he grumbled. “It’s debilitating.”

“You’ll be fine. Just take it easy. I promise not to put a move on you, at least not until later.”

A quiet day, a very dry Gibson over ice, a high protein dinner out, and Cam did feel better by the time they got back. So much so that he was nearly his virile self after the lights were out.

“That was *much* better,” Erin said afterwards. “You’re almost back to normal.”

On Wednesday morning, the two of them slept later than usual. Didn’t matter. Erin would most likely get to her job at the Metro Agency on time. As office manager, she also had some small perks, such as being a little bit late. When they finally started their day, Cam walked Erin to her car. They each got satisfaction from an affectionate hug and a gentle goodbye kiss. Then, into the garage, Cam brought his Mustang to life and headed toward the parking lot across from Sudbury Station. Erin was at work by nine o’clock. Cam was more than an hour late.

When he got to the office, Megan smiled brightly and greeted him with her always cheerful, “*Good* morning,” and then added, “I thought maybe you were taking the day off.”

“No, I waited until Erin was ready to leave. She works for the biggest insurance agency in Sudbury and doesn’t have to be in until around nine or so. But I could have used another day. The turnaround hasn’t been easy.”

“Especially when you have someone to look after.”

“It took some extra effort, but I managed.” There was a hint of envy in Megan’s thin smile.

“You had a call from Cris at a little after nine. Since she called here, I guess she doesn’t know you’re back. Anyway, her message was that they just found out that an uncle who lives up in Worcester, Massachusetts has lung cancer, so she and her mother are going up to see him over the weekend. She said you’d know that her shop is closed on Monday, and with Veteran’s Day coming up the day after, she’s taking a four-day weekend and will call you when they’re back. I took everything down. Here are my notes.”

“That’s really sad news. He’s been like a father to her after her dad was killed in a rail yards accident about six years ago. She and this uncle have been really close. Why do these things happen to such good people? Makes you wonder if the Creator hasn’t abandoned her Uncle Gino.”

“I know. Do you want me to get her on the phone?”

“No. It may not be the right thing to do, but we weren’t to talk until Friday. She has enough on her mind, so I’ll let it be and call her then. We were going to spend the weekend together.”

“Her being away upsets your plans, but this is more important.”

“Cris will need lots of support when she gets back, and I’ll be there for her. She certainly has been for me when I’ve needed it. I know what she’s going through. The man is special to her. It’s best not to dwell on it further until she has a better idea about where things stand. So, to change the subject, what do we have in front of us this morning?”

“First item’s easy. It’s an update on your trip back to Sydney. You got confirmation from the travel department late yesterday that your flight reservations are all set. Departure on December 9 on BOAC’s Flight 591 is confirmed now. It leaves at 3:00 p.m. The return flight gets you into JFK just before eight on the morning of the twenty-fourth. Not much time for Christmas shopping.”

“I’ll do it en route—and in Sydney when I have time. I’m stopping in Fiji, as you probably saw. I’ll have about two days there going down, and just over twenty-four hours on my way back.”

“Travel also said that on your return you’ll have about a seven hour layover in Los Angeles before you fly overnight into Kennedy. BOAC will put you up at a hotel near the airport. It’s their Flight 592 all the way from Sydney to New York, even with your stopover in Fiji and theirs in Los Angeles. Here’s the itinerary they sent me.”

“Thanks. Not ideal, but I guess there aren’t too many options. Well, OK. It’ll give me another day to get turned around. Christmas ought to be a picnic. I’ll probably sleep through it. So, what else is on our plate?”

“The usual requests for support, and a workup that I’ve started for you on a trip to Toronto on the sixteenth that Matt wants you to make. These are the notes I took while he was talking about it. Looks to me like it’s another get acquainted trip more than anything else. Then he wants you to start thinking about a trip to London in April to visit GMI Ltd. Here’s what he scribbled out for you. He’d have talked to you about it himself, but he had to make a quick trip to Canada. Something came up, and he left on Monday evening. He knows it’s way early, but while it was on his mind he wanted you to have an outline of what he thinks your agenda should be.”

Cam and Megan busied themselves with the more important items first and then tackled the less critical requests. Not much work was needed on the Toronto visit as it really did look as if he’d be going up to meet with his counterparts in Canada. The trip to London was far enough off that it would keep until he got back from Sydney, meaning early in the new year.

Before he went to lunch on Friday, Cam phoned Cris to ask about her plans and to see how she was doing.

“Hi, sweetheart. I’m back, and Megan gave me your bad news. Are you still leaving today?”

“It’s good to hear your voice again. Feels like you’ve been gone forever. Yeah, we’ll be on our way at around four. I’m really sorry I can’t keep our date, but you already know that this is the uncle I told you about last Thanksgiving. He’s a favorite, and the father I haven’t had since we lost Dad. It’s a trip we have to make. And it looks like I won’t be able to see you at Christmas this year either. I know you’d planned on it, but it’ll be for the same reason. We really don’t have any choice.”

“Cris, I understand completely. It’s important to be with family at a time like this. Just let me know when you think we might be able to get together.”

“Probably the following weekend.”

“Not good. I’m going up to Toronto on Sunday, the sixteenth. On the other hand, maybe you could stay over the night before.”

“Been quite a while since I’ve seen you. I want to come over, even if it’s just for one night. It’s better than not seeing you at all.”

“I’m going down to Sydney again on the ninth and won’t be back on the ground at Kennedy until the morning of Christmas Eve. But you’ll have already left for Worcester by then. So, if it works out, I’ll see you a week from tomorrow. After that, it looks like the boys’ birthdays and maybe the

weekends of the twenty-second and the sixth; that is, until after the holidays.”

“We could always make it a week night, you know. With our busy schedules, we’ll have to be flexible. I’d like that. You’re still important to me.”

“And you are to me, dear heart. I’ll plan on seeing you on Saturday night next week.”

“It’s a date. I’ll try to get away at midafternoon. Now that I have some help, it’s easier for me to do that, and it’ll give us a little extra time together.”

“Great. See you then. And please drive carefully.”

“I’ll do that. Especially for you. Bye, love.”

Chapter Five

At three o'clock on Thanksgiving Eve, Cam wished anyone who was still around a happy holiday and a good weekend. And he made a special point of seeing the boss before he left if only to show him that he was in better spirits. Matt appreciated it. Then as Cam passed Megan's desk, he gave her a hug. She felt awfully good, so he decided that he shouldn't do that very often because he might get to like it too much. With the last of his holiday wishes behind him, he walked out of 4 New York Plaza with his colleague, Warren Lambros. They shook hands, wished each other a happy Thanksgiving, and then went their separate ways: Cam to Grand Central and Connecticut; Warren to Penn Station and New Jersey.

Coming up from the subway and onto the departure level at Grand Central, Cam found Joanna waiting for him. She looked terrific. They shared a brief hug, an even quicker hello kiss, and then went off to board the 3:30 train. For a change, they had a few minutes to spare. A good omen for what was planned to be a tranquil forty-eight hours or so.

And Joanna's visit would turn out to be the relaxing couple of days she'd hoped for. Her closest friends were mainly theatre, and ballet, and concerts, and art exhibitions. Spending Thanksgiving with people she'd grown fond of in the short time she'd known them gave her a feeling of being "at home" during a holiday celebrated each year as one that brought family together. Later, as they were putting their meal together, Cam had guessed right. She was a big help in the kitchen and their feast turned out to be a great success. Drew and Jon said it was just as good as Natalie's dinner last year. High praise. Joanna was pleased with the compliment, even if she didn't really know much about Cam's second ex-wife.

The Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and football filled the space around dinner. When Joanna got bored with too many first downs, she took out her knitting needles and continued working on a sweater. Nothing seemed to disturb her. She adjusted to her surroundings and in fact contributed to the serenity they shared. She was at peace with the world and herself. While not the most attractive of Cam's companions, either past or present, she had a unique kind of beauty that was inside. None of his other friends had quite the same characteristics. He made a mental note that they'd be qualities he'd look for in the woman he'd one day ask to share his life. He suddenly realized that his lost love, Danielle, had those attributes: beauty of mind and of heart. For the first time ever, Cam understood what the requisites were. The most important of them would be a woman's warmth of

character and of a special something within that would most likely transcend her physical appearance. Taking it one step further, he recognized the woman he'd just sketched in his mind's eye. His mother.

Their nights of gentle loving was followed by a spirited finale on the morning after Thanksgiving. Fortunately, the boys were asleep. At least Cam hoped so. He wasn't at all sure about his neighbors above and below number 710. Joanna would go home to East Eighty-third Street thoroughly satisfied. As they were getting her things together, she offered confirmation.

"There have been a few other men in my life. You know that. But when you and I are together, you help me find a new kind of awareness. Then afterwards, I have a feeling of total contentment. That's also something new. Maybe it's the animal thing I brought up the weekend we met. I said at the time that there was something special about you. For one thing, you're good. I say it again. This time with emphasis."

"Glad to know that what we do pleases you, but it takes both of us to make it all happen."

"I don't like a relationship to get too cozy, but ours has gotten to be very comfortable. You make me feel good all over."

"Before I get all wound up again," Cam said, grinning, "we need to change the subject."

"I understand." Joanna showed Cam a mischievous smile. "Probably a good idea."

"OK, let's talk about trains. You don't have to take the Penn Central back into the city, you know. I could drive you home."

"It's sweet of you to offer, but the Christmas shopping season started this morning. I wouldn't ask anyone to drive into Manhattan today. Traffic will be awful, even on the subways. No, it's best if you let me go back by train. Besides, I have a round trip ticket, and, being Jewish, it'd be painful to throw away the other half." They chuckled.

Joanna's original plan had been to leave early in the afternoon, but they were having such a good visit that they all found it hard to bring it to an end. When it was time to leave, finally, she made small talk with the boys as she gave each of them a hug. Just the way she said goodbye told both Drew and Jon that she was fond of them. Ready to go, but not really, Cam got Joanna's overnight bag and drove her down to the station.

As they were parking, Joanna said, "Hope I didn't delay the start of your other weekend plans. I really didn't intend to stay this long, but it's been a wonderful and peaceful couple of days. I enjoyed myself, completely, and I

hate to think that it could be nearly five weeks before we see each other again. I have to be honest. I'm going to miss y'all."

"If I can work it out, it might be possible for me to spend Thursday night with you on East Eighty-third, assuming I'd be welcome."

"You know how quickly I'll take that bait."

"I have no idea."

"You're teasing again. I'd love if you could. Just let me know."

"It won't take long to find out. I should have an answer for you by Sunday evening. But even if I'm not able to work out arrangements for the boys, the five weeks you talk about should whiz by. Part of that time, you'll be at home with family and will be busy with them. From the fourth, assuming I can stay over, think of it as just a couple of weeks, plus three days after you're back. In case the subject doesn't come up again, call me on that Sunday evening, the twenty-eighth, just so I'll know you're home OK and that we still have a date on New Year's Eve."

"I'll call before I even take off my coat." Joanna smiled brightly. "But I can confirm our date. Right now, in fact. By the end of December, I'll be glad to see you and the boys again. There aren't many things that would prevent me from coming back. I'm looking forward to it. Even more football." She chuckled softly.

"Next visit, you just can't be as raucous as you were this morning. The neighbors might have the police up to investigate physical abuse—or something worse."

"I understand. It's just that it was an extremely satisfying moment. You're very good at helping things along."

Joanna wasn't the teary-eyed kind, but as she was about to board the 5:52 express, it was obvious from her expression that she was sorry to see their abbreviated holiday weekend come to a close. So was Cam. Like Erin, it was highly unlikely she'd ever be his bride, but he enjoyed spending time with her. Very much so. The feeling was mutual. And the hug they shared just before the train pulled out said even more about the essence of their relationship. For the moment, Cris was forgotten. As was Erin. The explanation was simple. Joanna had introduced Cam to a new definition of beauty, the kind that would win a heart, not a contest. It was a lesson he was finally learning. The hard way. It had forever been a pretty face or a trim body that had gotten his attention, but almost always there was something lacking. Joanna showed him what it was. Soul. Cam would forever be indebted to her for helping him see the difference. It wasn't possible for him

to know it at the time, but he would eventually benefit from a fundamental truth that had eluded him until this holiday weekend, Thanksgiving 1969.

At two thirty on Saturday afternoon, Andy Brunetti buzzed at the main entrance to 17 Laurel Ridge. Cam couldn't imagine what was on his mind unless it concerned the boys and maybe some bad behavior during their stay last month. When he got to number 710, Cam greeted him cordially. Andy was a big, muscular man with a handsome face, not unlike that of Rock Hudson's. But his physical characteristics probably weren't important requisites for his job as warehouse manager with a cosmetics company based in Sudbury.

"Have a seat, Andy. What's on your mind? I hope it doesn't have anything to do with my guys."

"No, not at all. They're well behaved when they're over. If things get out of hand, I sit on 'em. It's personal, Cam. I don't expect you can help all that much. It's just that I've got to talk to somebody or I'll explode. You didn't grow up here, don't know many local people, and I think you can be counted on to keep quiet." Cam was certain he knew what was coming.

"Sounds like you mostly want me to listen."

"You're not a priest, and I don't want you to try to be like one, but I don't dare go to confession. What it's all about is that you know where I work and the kinds of people we hire because of our product lines. A good many of them are women. All ages. And that's the beginning of how I got into trouble back in late spring. We don't see many good looking ones in the warehouse, but one of my foremen hired this cute gal, and we hit it right off. We thought we were just good friends until a bunch of us went out on a Friday night, had a few beers, and the next thing I knew I was at her place and in bed with her. If I have a problem, it's that I attract women, but I can usually keep 'em at a distance. This one was different. I really wanted her. What's worse is that I've kept on seeing her fairly often. She's ten years younger and really turns me on. Cynthia's been a wonderful wife, and what I've done is terribly wrong. Thing is, I don't know how to end it. My guilt, and what she might do to my marriage, is about to eat me alive. It's close to driving me nuts."

"Whew! Not a very big corner you've painted yourself into, and there are damn few easy solutions. I guess if she isn't madly in love with you, then what I'd probably try to do is maneuver some handsome young stud into her line of vision. Let him put a move on her and hope that he'll take you out of the picture. I don't have many ideas, Andy. In the meantime,

you'll have to refuse her invitations to bed down. Work up a list of excuses, some of them that'll be for family reasons. Breaking the cycle is up to you. She may feel good for a few minutes every month, but alimony, child support, and visitation schedules are crummy alternatives to a little after work pleasure. I'd offer to help, but I'm a little older, a lot shorter, and don't have your looks. The other part of it is that I have a full stable. I'd need an eight day week if I were to get involved with someone else—assuming *she* was interested."

"You may have an idea about finding a replacement for her bed. I hate to give her up, but you're right. I'll need to find some grit and put an end to it. If it gets messy, there won't be anywhere for me to hide, so I'll have to face the music."

"Let me tell you a somewhat similar story," Cam said. "The difference is, I don't have a wife any longer, as you know. I'll try to keep it short."

Cam told Andy about the brief involvement he'd had with Danielle, his secretary at Signa Oil, just before the company was acquired. He then described the reasons they'd shared the decision not to look back, but how the end of their affair was utter heartbreak for both of them. "The rationale was fairly simple. She's fifteen years younger, wanted children that I can no longer father, and was worried about being a widow at a relatively young age. I could never have been her long-term solution unless she thought differently about what she saw as negatives. Yet the feelings were there, and I'm not sure how either one of us found the strength to turn our backs on what we had. That she moved to the Washington area didn't help heal my wounds any faster. Never in my nearly forty years had I cared so much about a woman as I did her. She's still in my dreams, and I've often made love to her when I'm with someone else."

"We male animals sure do like to take on punishment for ourselves. Wife or not, you've had a bumpy road this year, too."

"Thing is, we survive. Like an open wound, we heal."

"I appreciate your listening to my problems. I feel better, but whichever way things go, I'll face some tough decisions, and maybe some pain. We'll have to see how it plays out."

"Not sure I can offer any other suggestions, but if you want me to be a sounding board, let me know. You know where we live."

"Thanks again, Cam."

After having gotten his affair out in the open, Andy Brunetti would never be quite the friend he was before he came through the doorway at

number 710 on that Saturday afternoon. And Cam would never understand why it was that it turned out that way.

On Sunday afternoon, now the last day of November, Cam got his affairs in order so there'd be no loose ends that had to be dealt with while he was away. After the bills were paid, it was obvious that he'd have to ease up some on the use of his new Visa card that Chase Manhattan would like him to keep busy. A budget might be a good new year's resolution for him to commit to and follow. One other matter that he'd forgotten to nail down was whether or not Natalie would let the guys stay over on Thursday night.

"Drew? Did you ask Natalie about staying over on Thursday?"

"I called, and she said it wasn't a problem. Then I mentioned that on Friday you were meeting your old boss from Signa and would probably be late. When I told her that, she said if she had to feed us we might as well stay over to Saturday morning."

"She sure is being cooperative. Wonder why?"

"The last time we stayed there, she said you couldn't live together but she thinks you can be friends, kind of. Neil and Aaron like having us over, and we always have a good time. She's been a lot better mother since we moved out. It was almost like she didn't really know us when we lived over on Nelson Avenue. I don't understand much about it, but maybe that helps a little."

"It does. Thanks for doing my dirty work. I'm pleased to hear about Friday night. That means T. J. and I don't have to do all of our catching up in forty-five minutes. You and Jon remember that Cris will be back tomorrow and is staying over."

"We don't forget things like that," Jon said from the living room. "And then next Monday night, too. Right?"

"You got it. See? You can remember things when you want to."

Still from the living room, "Anything about her is easy."

Cam was beginning to worry about his son's affection for a surrogate mom who might not be there for him to lean on much longer. His fear was that in the absence of Cris's maternal sway, Jon would turn away from the mostly drug-free path he'd been on for the past year.

Not long after the Gordon guys had finished dinner and cleaned up, Joanna called.

"Hello, Cam. A voice from your recent past."

“Oh? Who’s this?” He asked, chuckling. “Just kidding. Couldn’t resist that. I was hoping you’d call. You and our holiday together have been on my mind.”

“Memorable. It was a special time with wonderful feelings that I’m not sure we’ll be able to duplicate.”

“Would you like me to reconfirm that I’d be pleased if we gave ourselves another shot at it on New Year’s Eve? You’ve begun to occupy an important place in the order of things, so I’d like to see if we can’t make bringing in 1970, and the new decade, another special event. But I have to ask. Are you uncomfortable with any of this?”

“A little. It’s by choice that I’m something of a lady hermit, so I’ve learned to do very well on my own. I’m not used to so much attention or affection. But from the time you and T. J. walked into Capricorn’s, and since then, you and the boys have given me both. What’s happened is that it’s weakened me some, I think. I’m not the loner I was a month ago, and I haven’t yet decided if that’s good or bad. But I have to confess that spending time with you sure has been pleasant. I’m just past my mid-thirties and haven’t said things like this before. Maybe it’s odd, but a chance meeting has changed how I look at life, especially after what happened behind the door at 11B. You’ve made a difference. An agreeably unexpected bonus is the place you take me when we’re together. It’s hard to believe. But you know about that already.”

“I’m not quite sure what to say, other than you’re an absolute delight to have around. In so many words, Drew said the same thing over dinner just this evening. He’s sixteen now and starting to notice personal things like that. On the other hand, we may have been overheard late at night.” Cam chuckled softly. Joanna joined him and then ignored his comment.

“You don’t have to say anything. Really. I just wanted you to know what’s on my mind. And that’s something else that’s new. Sharing my feelings. You’ve broken through my shell and it feels pretty darn good. Frees some stored up emotions, you might say.”

“All of this makes me feel good, too, you know. And as long as we’re talking about good things, I’ve been able to work out an arrangement for the boys. If I’m still welcome, I’ll stay over on Thursday night.”

“Oh, Cam, that’s wonderful. You know you’re more than welcome. I want you with me at least one more night before you abandon me for a kangaroo.” They both tittered. “But there’s more to it. When you can, I want you to go places with me here in the city. Share the things that I like doing. We can talk about it when you’re here on Thursday.”

"I like that idea, too. It'll be a matter of making arrangements for the guys. But that's always been the case. Be interested in knowing what's on your playbill."

"What time will you be up on Thursday?"

"Around six. Maybe we could go out for a bite. No reason to be busy over a hot stove when we don't have much time anyway."

"I agree with that. We can see what our taste buds tell us and then have dinner nearby."

"See you Thursday evening. Night, gal."

"Night, lover."

The start to Monday's routine went well, in part because Megan was full of efficiency. "You must have had a good weekend."

"That I did. Would've been better if you'd been a part of it."

"Let it be, Megan. We've been over this how many times? If you have somebody looking after your biological needs now, then I won't have to deal with your fantasies any longer."

"Don't you believe it. One day you'll see things my way."

"Let's get back at it, or maybe I'll start thinking you'd be better off in some other department."

"I get the picture."

With their weekly ritual behind them, they got busy once again dealing with problems and questions that seemed to come in just about every day. Cam was glad when it got to be five o'clock. A lot of what they'd worked on was just plain dull. As he was getting ready to leave, Megan asked him a question.

"Sure you wouldn't like me to come home with you?"

"Get a little crowded. Cris has just come back from having been up in Worcester. You do remember that her Uncle Gino has cancer? She'll need lots of support. It's been awfully hard on her."

"That's much more important. Under the circumstances, my question is out of place. Sorry. See you tomorrow."

"Night."

Cam was right about Cris. She looked gaunt. It was as difficult for her as he had imagined it would be. She asked him to hold her close, just as she had nearly three weeks earlier.

"He looks so bad, Cam. A big, beautiful man, a wonderful human being, just wasting away." Then she broke down.

Cam wanted to be as consoling as he could, but there wasn't much he could say. Her uncle didn't have long to live. Cris had no interest in being loved this night. Her mind was elsewhere, and it was possible that the events of recent days might change how she saw the road ahead and any long-term relationship with a man, specifically Cameron Ross Gordon. The "wish" that Cris had expressed one night not quite two weeks earlier, that of hoping to share a life together, was at considerable risk of becoming irrelevant, and it would follow that her "best week" would then be reduced to little more than a collection of rich memories. December was off to a bad start for Cris and her family, and, longer term, it would likely alter the direction of Cam's life. He was certain of his feelings.

"Would you like a drink?" Cam asked.

"Thanks. No. As soon as my eyes are fit to be seen in public, I'm going home. Mom needs me more than you do."

"I'd say it's about equal. But you know you can count on me to be the same kind of pillar you were for me when I was going through hell. I showed you that three weeks ago."

"You don't understand. I have to get myself together and then go give my mother support. Gino's my uncle, but he's her brother. And being loved is the last thing on my mind. It won't happen."

"I know that. There are too many other emotions we have to deal with. If you want me to just hold you, then I'm here, Cris." She was in tears again but recovered quickly.

"I'm sorry. You're being kind and supportive, and I'm treating you like so much dirt."

"Not at all. I know what you're going through, and it's up to you to decide what you think is best. That you'd put your mother first is the right thing to do."

"You do understand, then?"

"Of course. Only question I do have is what can I tell Jon about his birthday dinner?"

"I wish I had a good answer for you. Could be that my New York trip is off. Time's running out. We may have to go back up to Worcester at a moment's notice. Whatever happens, we'll be going back at Christmas like we've been planning on right along."

"Then let's leave it this way. Should you need me, all you have to do is let me know if you think a hug would help, or if you want to talk, or if you'd just like me to leave you alone."

"I don't really want you to do that, but if I had to go through something like this with you I couldn't handle it. It would destroy me. Makes me afraid to hope that someday my dreams about us would come true. Do you understand what I'm getting at?"

"I guess so. But you can't live in fear of what *might* happen. What's out there isn't for any of us to see with any certainty. In the end, though, it has to be your decision. It can't be mine."

"I'd like to have that glass of wine, stay the night, and have you hold me, but I'm needed at home. This is about as hard on Mom as it was losing my dad. In some ways harder. The rail yard accident and his death were quick. This is like watching the same thing in slow motion. It's terribly, terribly painful. But it's time I went home. I told Mom I'd be back. She was of two minds about it, but I know she was glad to hear me say that I'd be there to stay with her. She assumes that you and I will have our day. If I can keep our dinner date with Jon, I'll do it and maybe feel different about our night together. I thought when we left for Massachusetts that I'd be ready for some of you when we got back, but it just isn't there."

"Let me say it to you one more time, Cris. I understand. Don't worry about it. And about the birthday dinner, I'll talk to Jon. It's just as well he hasn't heard any of this. He'll be disappointed because he cares about you as much as I do."

"Ohhh, Cam. Like always, you're helping lift my spirits, and now I'm having guilt feelings about backing out on you."

"Cris. Stop it. You're doing what's right. I'll be here tomorrow, the rest of the week, and after Christmas when I'm back from Sydney. If next Monday works out, you'll make three guys very happy. If not, our prayers will be with you and your mother."

"That means so much to me." Tears welled up. Cam hugged her affectionately.

"Now, get going. Let us know how things are. Call when you can. I'll want to hear your voice whenever it's possible."

"Thanks. I will call. You're a big part of my support system, you know."

"Give your mother our love, and let her know that she's in our thoughts—just as you'll be."

"Night. Say good night to the boys. I couldn't deal with that right now."

"Wait a minute. I was about to say good night and let you go to your car by yourself. I don't believe it! Let me get a jacket."

Cam went down to the visitor's lot, saw that Cris was safely in her car and on her way down toward the Sound. Before she left, Cam gave her a firm, caring hug and said good night with a gentle kiss. It confirmed that he cared. To hang on, she clenched her teeth.

Back in number 710, Cam got a soup and sandwich meal together and then later on told the boys what he knew. They were concerned and even Jon, much as he cared about Cris, understood that she might not be able to have dinner with them.

"I hope she can make it," Jon said, "so I'd like to wait until next Monday. If she can't, then we can go to Donelli's and pretend like she's there." That got to Cam. He was having a hard time with all this himself. It was a difficult evening and his emotions were also just a bit frayed.

Later on, it was another night when Cam was visited by peculiar dreams. The apparition and the voice he'd heard in the past returned, but it was less adamant about having him re-examine his feelings. The key word spoken was "patience". Wait for the woman with beauty within. It may take time, it suggested. Then his Hampden Lake building lots came into view, as did the face of the young woman he'd seen briefly just about a year ago. Cam awakened and sat up. He didn't quite know what to make of it all. Was this another one of his periodic dreams that gave him a tiny glimpse into the future? Unlike most of the others, this one was uncommonly personal. When he slept again, he was completely at peace and rested well. The future would take care of itself a later dream assured him. At the beginning of the new day, Cam decided he'd give the advice and prophecies a chance, no matter how illogical the idea might seem. In time, he might well find them to be accurate.

Cam's week went by quickly. Preparations for his Sydney trip were complete, and his Thursday evening with Joanna would help take his mind off the three weeks that lay ahead.

"Glad to be back where the fire began," Cam said. "That was some night. Never forget it."

"And I'm delighted that we can have some time together before you leave. I keep telling myself it'll be almost four weeks."

"You remember I suggested that you break it into two pieces. It'll be two weeks and then you're off with family. After that, it's only a couple days more before we're together again. Makes it easier to handle, don't you think?"

“Still a long time, but I managed until you came along. I’ll be all right. Not much choice.”

For dinner, both Cam and Joanna decided they wanted something different and finally settled on Mexican food. Over enchiladas, Joanna went into more detail about what she’d proposed on the phone about sharing things with Cam that she liked to do in Manhattan.

“It’s best we talk about it now, because when we get back to 11B we’ll be involved with other things.” They both smiled at the certainty of what would follow.

“You’ve given me some idea over the past month about ways you like to spend your free time. What do you have in mind?”

“I know you like classical music because I looked at your LP collection when I was out last week. Impressive. And you’ve also mentioned your interest in theatre. I’d like us to spend some afternoons or evenings together going to the theatre or to concerts. It would be enjoyable for both of us, I think you’ll agree.”

“Whatever I did, it was nearly always by myself. That was when Natalie and I were in the process of divorcing, so it’s been well over a year since I’ve done much of anything. I’d love to. But before you map out a program, I should tell you that I’m not into ballet. And operas by Puccini, or maybe Mozart, are about the only ones I can tolerate. The rest are too heavy.”

“What about art exhibitions? You recognized my Calder, so you must know a little bit about the subject.”

“Not a whole lot. I’m oriented toward impressionists, if anything. The other end of the spectrum is that I’m taken with *some* abstract art. Generally, warm colors. Imagine that you’re looking out a window on a rainy night and seeing lights and colors that are blurred and fused. That sort of thing, if you can visualize it.”

“Good depiction. And I can. Perfectly. There’s an exhibition coming up in January that’ll feature works by some of the younger artists in and around New York.”

“Including Sheila Kerns?”

“Why, yes, I expect so. How would you know her?”

“By way of T. J., indirectly. One of his girlfriends at the time invited Sheila to his Christmas party last year, and we had a fling for a few months. I have two of her paintings in my office. She once said I brought a ‘vivid ray of sunshine’ into her life, and I asked her if she could do an oil that would portray her feelings. She loved the idea and proposed an abstract. I preferred something in the style of Monet, so she did it both ways and just gave them

to me. They're both extremely well done and nearly everyone makes a comment about them."

"You *must* have made her happy. Her work is in demand now, and she's gotten to be fairly expensive. You may have a small fortune hanging on your wall. But why she did what she did is no mystery to me, including the 'sunshine' part. But since it's nighttime, I have no doubt that you'll fashion an aurora, one just for me, when we get home. Only thing is, I can't paint. But I am good at knitting sweaters."

"And loving. Sure. I'll do my very best to deliver some late evening pyrotechnics, and then go to the exhibition with you. But if she's there, it could be uncomfortable."

"That's something I won't worry about. You shouldn't either. She's past tense."

"I'm being insensitive, maybe, but she's also the one who got the 'Chapter Two', in-charge arrangement started, something that you know well and enjoy."

"Still doesn't bother me. I'll improve on it. Wait and see."

"You're stirring things up. Best I don't stand. Let's get back to concerts and the like."

"I'd rather talk about the other, but I understand. Things like that don't cross my mind. But, all right, I have the concert schedules for both the Philharmonic and visiting orchestras. When I come out to Sudbury on New Year's Eve, we can take a look at them. Theatre? There are regular listings and reviews in the *Times*, so that's easy. If we see something we might like, and there are seats available at a reasonable price, we can decide then."

"The guys will figure into what kind of time I'll have available. If we make plans far enough in advance, then I can probably work something out. On the other hand, Drew's sixteen now and I might be able to count on him to fill in, say, for an afternoon. Depends. I really don't like leaving them alone. It's a trust thing. They're still too young for me to expect them to behave themselves."

Dinner finished, Cam and Joanna walked back to East Eighty-third Street. It had gotten miserably cold, so being inside 11B felt good. For more than one reason.

"Would you like a nightcap?" Joanna asked.

"Two of 'em. The Courvoisier worked last time. That's one. The second? I imagine you can guess."

The first nightcap out of the way, they went for the second and touched every nerve that had passion in it. Joanna did improve on “Chapter Two” and they loved until their bodies called time out.

“That doesn’t leave me with very much oomph for tomorrow morning,” Cam said, finally.

“I’ve been amazed at how well you convalesce after a good night’s rest. Tomorrow shouldn’t be any different.” They both chuckled softly.

With that, they slept. Then, early in the morning, Joanna was pleased to find that her assessment of Cam’s ability to recover was correct. It was an ardent loving that would be their last for nearly a full month.

Cam had brought a clean shirt and a different tie with him, but he knew that Megan wouldn’t be fooled—not for a New York minute. Then, before they left for work, they had an ample breakfast. Both needed it. Later, as they headed downtown on the Lexington Avenue Subway, Cam got off with Joanna at her stop under Fifty-first Street.

“This isn’t the best place to say goodbye,” Cam said, “but it’ll have to do until you’re back at the station in Sudbury.”

“I’ll miss you, lover. Sheila Kerns was right about the sunshine. It isn’t just the glow, it’s the incredible warmth that comes with it.”

Neither of them liked a public display of affection, but their hug and a quick kiss expressed at least part of how they felt about each other. No words could have improved on what passed between them in those few seconds.

“I have a favor to ask,” Cam said.

“Sure. What is it?”

“Would you call me on Tuesday morning? I want to hear your voice before I leave.”

Joanna might not be the kind given to tears, but she was just a bit misty-eyed. That Cam had asked her to call touched something inside, and it showed.

“I thought it was going to be something complicated. You’re on my calendar, as if I needed a reminder.”

“Have a good weekend. We’ll talk on Tuesday, then.”

“Say hello to T. J. for me,” Joanna said. “We have to get together with him when we’re into the new year. He and Linda are still seeing each other.”

“Good thought. He and I will talk about it this evening.”

Cam gave Joanna another quick hug and said goodbye. She started up toward street level, and then turned and waved just before she disappeared from view. Cam got on a Number 4 IRT train that had just pulled in. The

smiling image of Joanna rode with him all the way down to the Bowling Green stop. It made him feel good.

Chapter Seventeen

The relatively smooth sailing that Cam had known during the early weeks of 1970 came to an abrupt end on Friday evening, March 20. It also marked the beginning of events that would alter the direction of his life. It was close to eight o'clock and Jon hadn't come home yet. Cam was waiting for him so he could put dinner on the table.

"Drew, do you have any idea where Jon is? He didn't say anything to me about being late."

"I saw him right after school, but it looked to me like he was headed downtown, not home."

"Not good. Damn! I don't want to get the police involved, at least not for another hour."

Suddenly the door burst open, and Jon staggered in. His face expressionless, and his eyes barely open, he'd obviously gotten into something heavyweight. The battle was joined. Jon lurched toward their bedroom, partially undressed himself along the way, and then collapsed face down. Cam checked his pulse, and for a few seconds monitored his breathing.

"Drew. Come here. See what you can do to wake him up. He's in deep trouble. I'm calling Forbes."

"Will? Cam Gordon. Jon's done it, and I need an ambulance. He's bad off. Can you get one here quick?"

"Yep. And I'm on my way. Walk him if you can."

"He's collapsed, but we'll try. See you shortly."

The ambulance came within minutes and Will Forbes arrived right behind it. One of the medics inhaled sharply and said, "I hope we have enough time to save him. His blood pressure and respiration are way down. Get him outta here. Fast!"

"Drew, stay here in case I need your help."

"What can I do?"

"Stick close to the phone."

Will Forbes and Cam Gordon rode in the ambulance to the hospital while two attendants looked after Jon. Cam said a prayer to beg a caring God to spare the kid's life.

"I've let him down, Will." Tears welled up.

"Stop it! This is no time for a guilt trip. He's had to meet you half way. Every day. He hasn't. And you couldn't have reacted any faster than you did."

Cam guessed that Will was probably trained to lend support to a troubled parent. His words helped a little.

At the emergency room, the doctor and nurses on duty were in place to deal with this latest crisis of the evening. They moved swiftly to determine what had to be done to save Jon Gordon.

After what seemed like hours later, the ER doctor came out and gave Cam and Will his report.

“Well, Mr. Gordon, if you hadn’t moved quickly, we might have lost your boy. We got close to running out of time, but I’m pleased to say that we didn’t. He should make it now. Fortunately, what he did to induce his condition wasn’t taken intravenously. It most likely would’ve been too late for us to do anything if that had been the case. First indications are that the culprits were alcohol and Phenobarbital—a lot of it. And he still had some with him. Our preliminary opinion is that he may have taken it at intervals. Maybe he thought it wasn’t working the way it should. Be useful to find out where he got his hands on that much of a supply. Someone should be put away if it’s on the street.”

“I think we have the answer, Dr. Robb, and no dealer will go to jail,” Forbes said. “Looks like Jon broke into a doctor’s office up on Tower Hill. I just got a message from the police. I think we can make the connection. There was someone with him. Two sets of footprints in the frost at the back of the building. We’ll find out what the story is on that, too. You probably saw that Jon’s shoes were muddy. I’ll want to talk to him when you tell us he’s ready.”

“I don’t want him disturbed until at least Sunday afternoon. This is a very troubled lad. We may have an attempted suicide on our hands. He apparently knew exactly what he was after, had at least a vague notion about the amount to take, and what the effects would be. At least consider it a possibility.”

“Jon and I will get to know each other again real good. He’s ours now. If he wasn’t going to be placed, he’d go to juvenile hall for breaking and entering and theft of a controlled substance. Mr. Gordon and I will be back on Sunday at midafternoon. If he’s not ready by then, have somebody ring me at this number.” Will handed the doctor his card.

Cam asked the receptionist to call a taxi so he could get back home and Will could pick up his car. On their way to Laurel Ridge, Forbes remarked, “When this is over, I hope Jon appreciates the fact that you saved his life. On the other hand, he may have tried to take himself out, like the doctor suggested. But his life was in your hands, and you saved it. Most parents

would probably have thought he was just drunk. Given his history, you spotted the difference.”

“It was obvious that he was in serious trouble, but I also have to thank the late Vicki Snider for the introductory lessons.”

“She’s dead?”

“No, no. Wrong way to put it. She’s history since the beginning of November. She got tired of waiting. About six weeks later, Cris was gone. Sure do have problems with my love life.”

“Our pipeline on your social affairs has pretty much dried up. I guess you talked to your boys about it.”

“Sure did. I try to keep a low profile. They weren’t helping.”

When they got back to Cam’s building, he thanked Will for his support and confirmed that he’d see him at the hospital at about three o’clock on Sunday.

“You’re welcome, Cam. That’s what we’re here for. And about Sunday, I’ll be there a little earlier. I’ll want Jon one on one for a while, then I’ll see you before you look in on him.”

“Fair enough. Thanks again. See you on Sunday. G’night.”

Back at number 710, Drew told Cam that the police had been there. “Big dudes, and they said they wanted to talk to Jon. I told ’em what happened and that you’d just left. They didn’t tell me anything, but I guess Jon’s in big trouble. And Erin called. I gave her the same story, and she said she’s coming over as soon as she knows you’re home. You’re to call her back. But you’ve got to tell me what happened.”

Cam told Drew everything he knew up to the time they left the hospital. Drew’s expression showed nearly as much pain as his dad’s. “He’ll be a ward of the state, now. This weekend you might want to rearrange your bedroom for a single tenant. Jon won’t be coming home. Forbes said the first step will be the juvenile detention facility in Bridgeton, then a school of some kind for troubled young people like your brother. I’ll need to call your mom and give her the bad news. But before I get to that, I’ll ring Erin and then Danielle. This may change her feelings about wanting to be a permanent part of our family. Meaning marriage. This may scare her off.”

Drew looked surprised. “I didn’t know you’d decided on that.”

“It’s in the planning stage. I guess that’s the best way to put it. No. It’s a little further along than that. She’s trying to work it out so she can be here next Thursday evening, assuming she still wants to keep our date. It’s Easter weekend, and she has four days off. I’ll see how she feels about it.”

Cam called Erin to let her know he was back.

"It's late, but I'm coming over. No discussion. I've already made arrangements. There'll be no fun and games. I simply want to be there to give you my support and maybe talk about what this means for us."

"OK. But I'm pretty badly rattled. I may not hold up very well after you get here."

"That won't bother me a bit. It'll say that you're a caring father and very human. I'll be there inside thirty minutes."

Cam decided not to call Danielle until Sunday evening. She'd want to know more than he could tell her at this stage. He also had in mind that he couldn't handle talking to her just yet. No point in making a call when all she'd hear was his unsteady voice. It would do more harm than good. She'd already phoned him at the office earlier in the day, and he didn't want to take the edge off all the warm feelings she had when they talked. "Best to wait," he decided. "There's nothing she can do but worry. I'll spare her that until the doctor gives me his report. It's my load to bear, not hers."

With that decision made, Cam turned his attention toward Drew. "Did you have anything to eat?" Cam asked.

"Yeah. The stuff you made is cold, so I heated up a can of soup and made a cheese sandwich. I'm OK. What about you?"

"I wasn't hungry when the clock said I should have been. No surprise, I guess. Erin's on her way over. Maybe we can scrape up something later on."

"It's kinda late, but I know how you feel. What a bummer."

"Yeah. Damn sure is."

It wasn't long before Erin was at the door.

"Here's your support team, me and the good Lord. I'm here until Sunday afternoon."

She and Cam hugged. He inhaled sharply, had tears in his eyes, but held together fairly well given the emotional hit he'd just taken.

"I called Cris at home to tell her what happened. Bad idea. She screamed like she'd been shot and said, 'It's all my fault!' Then she broke down completely, wasn't able to say another word after that and hung up on me. Any idea what she meant?"

"No, unless she was referring to the fact that she walked away in early December and took Jon's heart with her. She sure as hell did that. You were here afterwards and saw how he reacted."

"I'll find out next weekend. She asked me earlier this week if I'd help her out in the shop for a little while next Saturday."

“Do I need to tell you how much I appreciate what you’re doing? It’s says a lot about you, and I’m touched. It gives me good feelings all over. I haven’t known this kind of support since I was a youngster on the farm. Anything went wrong, there were always people around to offer you a shoulder to lean on.” Erin gave Cam a hug. He was hurting.

“You didn’t grow up in Sudbury, so you wouldn’t know that it isn’t much different here, especially with people in the Italian community. The blood’s pretty thick. Your heritage is different. Doesn’t matter. You need help. I’m here.” Then Cam lost it.

Recovering quickly, he said, “Sorry. I meant to do that in private.”

“If you hadn’t showed me emotions like that, I’d have been mistaken about you. Your feelings run deep, and it’s what I’d want to see in a man if I ever marry again. It’s important to me.”

“You’re being kind.”

“I’m being honest!”

“It’s a shame we didn’t meet years ago, love, marry, and that your two boys couldn’t have been ours. Drew and Jon were what Kathy wanted. She didn’t figure into my plans, so I wasn’t ready, as a returning veteran, to be a husband and a father in my first year at Iowa State. What I expected to do was date and eventually make a lasting commitment to a woman I really cared about. Despite the way things turned out, and in case it isn’t obvious, I have a father’s love for both Drew and Jon. But the notion I had was that I’d be head over heels in love with the wife of my choice, really want the babies as they came along, and not have to accept someone else’s plan about parenthood. They were handed to me, and it was as if I was arguing with a voice that said, ‘Here, take the child. You made it happen. No. She made it happen. Do I have to? Yes. You were a part of what you did.’ If only I could’ve known the trap was set and that Kathy was the bait. She assured me that it was safe, but there were those wide-open eyes staring at me as we made love. She knew exactly what was about to take place. I had no chance to have what I wanted and in the way I wanted it to come about. But you and I were separated by geography. You were here; I was thousands of miles to the west—and older by nearly four years. That age difference meant that as you were making plans for a Halloween party, I was on a minesweeper sent to help clear out North Korea’s Wonsan harbor so the First Marines could land.”

“I’ve never heard you say things like this before, Cam. You’re bitter. It’s a side of you I don’t know at all. It sounds to me like you’ve lived with it all these years and kept everything inside. But I’ve been around you long

enough to know that you're a caring father. You didn't let Jon down. He let himself down. And he let you down. If you're willing to accept the blame for Jon, then you also have to take credit for Drew."

"He has his own problem. He likes beer, I've found out. Probably more than he should at his age, or any age for that matter. That could be another issue I'll have to deal with someday. My two are a reason why you and I might have a hard time making it work, at least until Drew is on his own. Jon belongs to the state now, so he won't be a factor for maybe two or three years. Whatever happens, I wouldn't want either of them to be a negative influence on your guys. We've talked about this before, so you know what my feelings are."

"You have a way of zeroing in on something. It's probably what makes you good at what you do. I can't disagree with you, though. Yet I feel that I'd like you to be a part of my life. Thinking about what you just said, what chance do you think we have?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. It's the wrong night to ask. Let's talk about it in the morning over coffee. I'm worn out and would just like us to hold on to each other for a while. Be my pillar tonight, will you?"

"Maybe longer than just tonight, Cam. Life hasn't treated you very fair. I'm beginning to see that now. I want to help, assuming you'd like me to."

"I would, and it begins in my room."

There was no loving this night for the simple reason that there was too much emotional wreckage to deal with. Erin snuggled up to Cam's back and they slept like spoons again. She wanted to be close to him. Among her reasons was one that now stood out above all others. She had come to terms with her feelings and had to acknowledge the truth. She cared very deeply about this man. In the early morning hours, they changed positions but throughout the night their bodies were locked in a warm embrace.

By the time morning came, they'd turned toward each other. Cam awakened and studied the pleasant face he saw before him. He wondered how her estranged husband could have walked away from such a compassionate and loving woman. Eyes open, the serene face smiled. Cam smiled back. "Morning," Erin said softly.

"Morning, dear heart. You brought good medicine with you. It made me feel better. Thank you."

"Glad it did. I was worried and wanted to help. You needed it."

"You have helped. More than you know," Cam said. "And what I'm asking myself is, how could we possibly improve on what we've shared

since last night? When we love, we get fulfillment from giving ourselves to each other. It's a desire, sure, but it's also a way of expressing, physically, what we mean to each other. And it's always good. That's one part of it. But what I'm feeling now is something that has a deeper meaning. What you've shown me is the kind of compassion that's at the heart of a really caring relationship. It's the sort of bond that's important if two people are to hold onto the affection they have for each other all through their later years. It's there after the passions cool."

Erin smiled and said, "I know exactly what you're getting at."

"Best example that comes to mind is of a gray haired couple I saw walking through the park over off Lincoln Boulevard. They had to be in their seventies, but they were holding hands like they were still dating. Their physical needs have diminished, I'm sure, but the love they were still sharing was shining like a beacon. It's been there for probably a half-century, and it looked to me like it was as solid that day as it's ever been. That's what I mean. It's what I call the love and the beauty inside, and those two seniors know to this day exactly what it is and how important it's been during all of their years together. And I'll bet if you asked them, they'd say that younger people don't have any idea what it's all about. They're a different generation. My parents had the same kind of love, so it was easy for me recognize what I was seeing."

"That's lovely, Cam. Now more than ever, I understand perfectly what you mean. We may never get to an altar, for the reasons we talked about last night, but it's time you knew that I'm in love with you. Those words haven't been in my vocabulary for a long time, and I never thought I'd say them again. But the sentiment's there. It's real."

Cam reached out, put his arms around Erin, and then held her tightly. For a few minutes, neither one spoke. She'd said what was in her heart, and he needed time to let her words sink in.

"I thought something was going on inside that pretty little head of yours, but you've caught me off guard," Cam said quietly.

"Question is, now that my feelings are out in the open, what am I going to do with them? You have a Danielle in your life again, a problem son, maybe two of them, and an uncertain future with your company. I have to be crazy to feel what I do, but I can't change what's inside. Just as important, I don't want to try. It took a while for me to decide that I wanted you in my bed, and it's taken six months for me to let you inside my heart. But you're in there now. No more of your just being under my skin. And I'm jealous, too. It's hard for me to think about sharing you with someone else, but I

don't have any control over what you do." It was Erin's turn to show a tear that wouldn't be denied. Cam wiped it away and then kissed her gently.

"When we met, I never wanted to do anything, ever, that would hurt you. It bothers me to think that I've done that. I give the appearance of loving the person I'm with, or maybe that I can love two women. It can't be that way, so what I have to ask of you is to be patient. Much as I care for Danielle, there are still some underlying questions, even if she's not willing to recognize them. The age difference isn't an issue with her, but it continues to bother me some. Why? I don't know. She's young and has a lot of spirit, and I'm about to become middle-aged. I haven't told her about Jon yet. I called you, and I find that curious. Why you, and just you so far? It tells me something, but I'm not quite sure what it is. Still, I agree. Even if there were no Danielle, the odds of your getting an engagement ring are probably slim."

"I already have one. It came from Australia, or at least part of it did." Erin smiled thinly. Cam was pleased to see her do that.

"For the time being, things may not happen the way you want them to. But don't throw me away just yet. Give us time. No. Give me time. Your life and your routine are pretty stable. Mine has been turned upside down, and I have this nagging feeling it's going to be in more of a mess before long. Jon's a part of it. GMI is another. If I'm on the street, we're going to have some rough sledding until I wind up with whoever will have me."

"Throw you away? Not very likely. You're inside, remember?"

"You're being better about this than I have any right to hope for. But by being here when I needed a prop, you've changed the way I look at the order of things. Meaning us."

"Let's talk about tomorrow afternoon. I want to go with you to see Jon. I'll get Dad to come to the house for a little while if need be. And I'd like the two of you to meet sometime soon. You'll like each other. You both have your heads screwed on straight."

"Not sure mine is. Would you take a look and see if it's OK?"

"It's just the way it should be."

"I don't have any objections to your coming with me to see Jon. In fact, it may be a good idea. He still needs to feel a woman's touch, and you have the designated hand. Give you a chance to see Forbes."

"I haven't seen Will in ages. Be interesting to hear what he has to say about Jon. This is serious. He might have died last night. Oh, God! I don't even want to think about it." Cam took Erin in his arms. She shivered but held on. The thought of what might have been got to her. "I put it into the

perspective of having lost Nico or Luca. I can maybe understand some of what you feel.”

“We were lucky. I might have had dinner with T. J., or you, or I might have been out. We talked about Friday nights. Remember? If that had been the case, we’d be down to Drew and burying Jon.”

“We need to change the subject because I’m having trouble dealing with what’s happened. Some pillar I am. But it’s finally hit me. The timing, the odds, the what might have been. It’s frightening.”

“You’ve been solid as a rock, and I’m grateful that you insisted on being here last night. I had so many different kinds of feelings. Anger, fear, frustration, distress, you name it. But having you up against me helped in a way that I think we both understand. Maybe there’s a book about the healing power of hugs and nightlong body contact. It was wonderful. So are you.”

After breakfast, Drew said he’d look after the laundry, and Erin offered to help Cam with his weekly shopping. She was following through on a commitment she’d made during the holidays. So they spent part of their day giving the impression they were a couple keeping a household up and running. A casual observer wouldn’t have seen anything much different from any of the other families in the store. The fact remained that they’d been married an average of one and a half times, had two sons each, and had been to a supermarket and shopped before. Probably thousands of times. A familiar picture. But Erin stayed close to Cam and smiled at him occasionally. It might have suggested that they were newlyweds. And he enjoyed having her by his side. A bonus was that she was good at offering shopping and product advice as they pushed their cart around the store. Cam was still something of a novice, so her suggestions were helpful.

“Never thought I’d be so caught up with doing the Saturday shopping,” Cam said. “It’s great having you help out. Makes me think we’ve already tied the knot. It’s a good feeling.”

“Strange. Me, too. Maybe we should think about it. Really.”

At home, Cam called Natalie to tell her what had happened. She was obviously upset and said if Cam needed anything that he should let her know. Kind of her. Next he phoned Jon’s mother, Cam’s first ex, Kathy, with the same news. She wasn’t exactly charitable and nagged at him for not maintaining tighter control and a heap of other rubbish that she knew absolutely nothing about. The New York metro area, and what went with it, was foreign to her and Cam elected not to get into a row with someone so ill informed.

“Aren’t you going to call Danielle?” Erin asked.

“In good time. Probably tomorrow evening. Until then, you get 100 percent of my attention. I’m pleased that you’re here. It’s a special thing you’re doing. I’ll never forget it.”

“It’s because I care. You’re important to me. You know that.”

“Feels good.” Cam gave her an affectionate hug to express how he felt.

“That said something words couldn’t have.”

“It was intended to.” They exchanged smiles.

“Have you told anybody at work about Jon?” Erin asked.

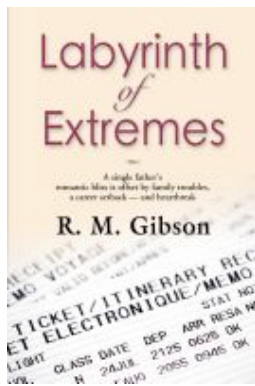
“I’ll call Megan at home tomorrow to let her know that I probably won’t be in on Monday. Depends on what the doctor says. Since he was on duty in the emergency room, I’m not sure if he’ll stay with this or if he’ll hand it over to our GP. I suppose he’ll get involved at some point.”

“I’m glad you’re letting me go with you tomorrow. If we ever get to be an item in the Sunday paper, it’ll help to know what’s been said.”

“One thing we haven’t thought about is dinner. I’m in favor of going out. Let me go interrupt Drew. He’s been changing their den into a single guy’s room. You willing to do Italian, or would you prefer something else.”

“Doesn’t matter. Ask Drew.”

They decided on Chinese, had dinner, and a quiet remainder of their evening at home. Since it had been a stressful twenty-four hours, they all went to bed early. Cam fell asleep quickly but had disturbing dreams. Then, for some reason, his Massachusetts land and the face of the nameless young woman with long brown hair come into view. This was now her fourth visit, the first since December, and he continued to wonder about the reasons for her appearances. Whatever they were, he slept peacefully afterwards.



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