

"Do you hear it?" Avrum whispered.

And then the first note from the voice of Amelita Galli-Curci, singing the "Shadow Song" from *Dinorah*, floated in, grew stronger, swam through the valley below Highmount. It was surprisingly clear from the tape player and the speakers that Sammy had taken from the Inn to Sul Monte.

Play from Sul Monte the music I most love, Avrum had written.

I saw Lila open the front door of the Inn and walk to the porch. She sat in the chair and listened.

Dan Wilder stood very still in front of his coffee and pastry shop, his head lifted.

Trinity - the girl of the jump rope and the bicycle and the bouncing ball - held to her bicycle on the sidewalk. She looked up and searched for the music with her eyes.

Avrum leaned to me on the bench. Again, he said, "Do you hear it? Do you?"

I could feel the voice of the music touching me.

"Yes," I said.

"Then you know, *ja*? You know."

"Yes."

"Go, go," Avrum urged.

I stood and crossed the street to the Inn.

"What is it?" Lila asked.

"I want to use the telephone," I told her.

She smiled and closed her eyes and rested her head against the cushion of the rocker. The brilliantly clear music from the throat and soul of Amelita Galli-Curci drifted across the porch.

Inside, I dialed Amy's number. She answered immediately.

"Tell him," I said.

"Do you mean it?" she asked. Her voice quivered.

"Yes," I answered. "Yes."

blithe

G. S. Jackson

Dedicated to the memory of JW Jackson
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One

Suddenly Chambers didn't give a damn. He could feel the floor vibrate with the speakers. Hear it echo through the walls. *Screw 'em*, he thought. And so the music played. Slowly. Sadly.

"...love is stronger than pride..." Sade sang.

He stood, peering outside through his sliding glass doors. On the ground below his balcony, a group of ducks waddled to the edge of the apartment complex's pond. Six little black and yellow ducklings followed their mother. Three herons flew above the pond, skimming over, dropping through the skin of the lake to snag a fish, and then circling around one another. Falling. Quickly rising again. Like drunk birds.

"Screw my neighbors." Chambers said aloud. "If its too loud, they can tell me to turn it down." He took a long glance upward at the evening sky puffed gently with clouds and reddening from the evening sun.

And then, suddenly he felt Alice in the room.

They sat face to face on the futon, pulled out as a bed, smelling the wax candles burn. And they were everywhere. Along the eve of the window sill. A dozen or so on the bar. Ten on the book shelves. Three on the television. Two on each stereo speaker. Glowing puddles of wax circling around each base. The wicks almost gone, but the flames still flickering, giving off a dancing yellow flame.

It was like breathing. Kissing Alice when there was a moment of not doing anything. If he wasn't touching her face, he was rubbing his hands from the tips of her fingers, up her arms, and then rolling his palms over the softness of her shoulders. Or again, he was kissing her. And kissing her was like breathing. Occasionally when he opened his eyes in-between the caressing and the kissing, he would see the lights from the other apartment buildings glimmering on the pond. Then suddenly see the leaves of the palm trees block the view when the ocean wind pushed through.

They stopped for a moment and Chambers stared. Her eyes took all the candle light in the room, and her eyes shined. He reached up and softly rubbed her cheek with his hand. "Alice?"

"Yes." And she kissed him on the cheek.

"Describe this." And he brought her hand up and kissed it.

Alice smiled and pushed her bangs behind her ears. "I don't know."

"Don't know?"

She shrugged her shoulders slowly. "Yes. I don't know. Butterflies in my stomach? Sweaty inside, and burning outside."

"Yes, that's it. Now just one word. Use one word."

Alice moved closer into him. She kissed the side of his neck and pulled away. "*Fire.*"

Chambers cried. Standing in his living room. His stereo loud and pounding. The ducks in the water slid across the pond. *Fire.* The tears burned as they pushed out.

A hard knocking erupted on the front door. Chambers wiped at his face and reached across to the stereo and hit mute. He unlatched the lock and opened the door.

"Hello," the man said. The man was shirtless, slightly overweight and tan. "I don't think we've met. But I just moved in a couple of weeks ago with my girlfriend. I live in the apartment beside you..."

"Do you want me to turn the music down?"

The man appeared surprised, but then calmly smiled. "Well, yes. I hate it we introduced ourselves like this."

Chambers nodded. "Me too. I'm sorry."

"Well, it's happened several times before, but I didn't say anything. The plates on the wall in my kitchen are rattling like crazy."

"I understand. It won't happen again." And Chambers extended out his hand. The man took it quickly and stepped away, and Chambers shut the door. *Screw this place.* He went to his phone and checked his small list of friends' numbers before dialing. It rang twice before a familiar voice answered.

"Peaches?"

"Chambers?"

"What are you doing Sunday?" he asked instantly.
The voice hesitated. "Well... uh... I don't know."
"I'm coming up."

The next morning, after four and half hours of driving, he arrived in Orlando. Chambers took the first exit off the Turnpike on 75 north. Wildwood exit. To the right sat a Steak 'N Shake. He picked a booth next to the kitchen. An old lady named Gracie took his order. Waiting for his chicken fingers, he noticed a married couple sitting in the booth across the aisle. The couple was in their fifties, Chambers supposed. Quiet. Eating their meals. Staring in any direction where there was noise. Yet hardly ever looking at each other. Once, he heard her say, "My sandwich tastes pretty good," as she was taking a second bite. Her husband grunted agreeing. *Why not just kiss her, man? Just reach over and kiss her. Does he know how lucky he is? She's given up her life to be with him. He's given up his life to be with her. And now, they just sit there. Like it was nothing. A big nothing.* Chambers leaned forward and took a sip of his ice water with lots of lemon. When the couple left, he watched them. And never once did they touch.

The party never happened. Just a couple of people drinking wine coolers and playing video games in the apartment next door. Chambers danced with Chuck and his girlfriend. Mostly Chambers danced by himself as Chuck and Christi grinded against each other. Chuck and Christi were drunk. Chambers politely refused any alcohol. He still had to drive home. At one point, Chuck stopped, opened the living room window, and scrambled out to relieve himself. Christi and Chambers laughed.

"Hey, Chambers, let's double team her. You get the front. I'll get the back." Chuck said clambering back inside.

"Look man, you've got a beautiful girl here. If I were you, I wouldn't be sharing her."

"Hell. She wants you to do it."

Christi grinned.

Chuck went to the stereo and put in another CD. And as the music came, he got in behind Christi and drunkenly began thrusting into her. "Come on, Chambers. Don't be a dick. Double team her. She wants you to."

Slowly, Chambers came up to Christi and she smiled. Chuck reached around her and grabbed Chambers by his belt and pulled him in. Reluctantly, Chambers began to move against her. She nudged back. Suddenly, Chuck lost his balance and fell to the floor. He laughed and crawled into the kitchen for more vodka. Christi and Chambers continued to dance. Swaying. Chambers had his eyes shut. It was too much to look. Finally he smiled and pulled away. A couple of people drifted into Chuck's apartment from next door and Chambers used the distraction to escape upstairs.

Chambers found a bed and sat down trying to think. Two months of being alone caught up with him in a single dance. Touching a woman made him feel desolate.

"What's wrong?" a voice asked.

Chambers looked up and saw Christi in the doorway. "Hey."

"Are you okay?" she asked, her hands gripping the door frame.

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Then why are you up here?" She moved across the room sat beside him.

"No logical explanation."

"Chuck told me you just broke up with your girlfriend."

"Yeah."

"I could tell you were a little uncomfortable or something just a minute ago."

"No I wasn't. Not really."

"Oh?"

"Just weird. You put someone in your mind as this, and when they reject it, it's tough mentally to withdraw them, you know?"

She smiled tenderly. "I know."

Chambers changed the subject. "Chuck's pretty cool, ain't he?"

Christi pushed her long blonde hair past her shoulders with a swipe of her hand. "Yeah, he's okay. But sometimes he gets too wild when he gets drunk."

"And you?"

"I think I mellow out."

Chambers sat quietly for a minute. He couldn't think of any more conversation.

"Thank you for what you said downstairs."

He gave a puzzled look. "What did I say?"

"You called me a beautiful girl. Chuck never says that."

"Sure he does. In his own way."

"Shit! Chuck never says that *period*." She put her hands on her knees. "Do you really think I'm beautiful?"

Now Chambers was nervous. "Yeah, you're cool. And you and Chuck look great together."

She turned to face him and licked slightly at her lips. "Yeah, maybe. But tell me again that I'm beautiful."

He muttered out, "Chuck's downstairs. Don't do this."

She moved forward. Putting her face closer to his. "He's drunk. Almost passed out. He won't ever know."

Chambers moved back. "I'll know. You don't understand. I have a bad conscience. Chuck has been my friend for a long time."

Christi touched his hand. "Chuck's sister has told me a lot about you. She had a crush on you there for awhile. She said that even some of her friends have had crushes on you. They told me before I met you that you were pretty hot. I think they're right."

Chambers pulled back. He could smell the citrus wine cooler on her breath. "Look, you're drunk. No disrespect, but I'm gonna leave. I don't want you to make a foolish mistake." And Chambers got up.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. It'll be our little secret." And Chambers rushed down the stairs and outside. He bolted down the sidewalk in front of the apartment complex and finally stopped next to the street. Then thoughts crept in. *I wonder where Alice is? Does she miss me?*

Two

Jackson, Alabama was the same as it always was. Hot in the May afternoon sun. Very slowly getting bigger. The last time he visited, a McDonald's had opened. Before that, suddenly there was a Burger King. Now, the Huddle House was having its grand opening.

He prayed his customary prayer as he neared downtown, "Please God, let me bump into Jessica."

Jessica was his high school Senior crush. She only went out with him once to stop the rumors and the nagging by her friends. But everytime he came home, the old feelings came around again. He wanted to let go of it. Laugh with her about how long ago he was so infatuated with her. Apologize about the raunchy poetry he had sent her. Laugh about some of the stupid things he had done to get her to notice him. He hoped now after all this time, she would be flattered by it all. But the odds were against it. People from Jackson didn't change much. Besides, Jessica attended the University of Alabama and hardly visited home from what Chamber's high school friends said who knew her. He had accepted never seeing her by now. But God knew best.

Chambers' mouth was dry as he passed the Spectrum gas station. He pulled in and parked. He hoped someone would notice him. "Hey! It's Chambers! He's home!" Yet no one seemed to care. Maybe someone would see the Florida license plate on his car and wonder, "Didn't Chambers move to Florida?" But the cars kept going past. The fat man with the beard at the cash register simply nodded when he walked in. Chambers made his way over to the beverage cooler. They only had one brand of bottled water.

He took the water and turned to make his way toward the front. That's when he saw a woman from the corner of his eye move from the door into one of the aisles. She looked familiar. And a small miracle happened. On the aisle over from him, glaring down at the small overpriced cans of Beanie Weenies, he saw Jessica. Alone. In khaki shorts, a gray sorority T-shirt, and sandals.

"Jessica?" He almost didn't find the voice to say it.

She looked up and gently bit her bottom lip. "Hi."

He moved forward reluctantly. "How are you?"

"I'm doing okay. And you?"

"Alright." He looked over her face a moment. Her hair was shorter than he remembered it. It came just below her ears. He had forgotten how brown her eyes were. "How do you like the University of Alabama?"

"Love it. You know how badly I wanted to get out of this town."

"Yeah." And Chambers smiled. *Thankyou God.*

Jessica leaned over and got one of the cans of Beanie Weenies and moved down the aisle toward him. "How about you? Where are you now?"

"Miami." Chambers said proudly.

"Miami? Then why are you up here?"

"Homesick."

"I don't see how you could miss anything from around here."

"Don't take it for granted."

"Maybe." And she pushed the can up on the counter for the fat man to see the price.

"That'll be two dollars." the fat man said.

She reached into her front pocket and pulled out a five.

The fat man took it and hit a few buttons on the register and the cash drawer sprang open. "Out of five."

"But you really didn't answer my question."

Chambers opened his eyes wide. "Which was?"

"Why did you come all the way up here?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "My Pa Paw. My parents."

"Oh."

"I'll ask you the same thing. Why aren't you in Tusculoosa?"

"Memorial Day weekend. Everybody in the sorority was gone. I missed momma's cooking." She grinned and took the change shoving it in her pocket. "Thanks."

"Come again." the man said as he twisted Chamber's water bottle around to see the price. "That'll be a dollar fifty."

Chambers pulled out the exact change. Jessica waited. "There you go, sir."

Jessica and Chambers didn't say much as they walked out together. Outside, they stood awkwardly for a moment until Jessica said, "Well, it was good to see you again."

"Yes, it was really good to see you. Maybe if you're ever in the Miami area, look me up, okay?"

"Sure. If I'm ever in the Miami area." She leaned forward and hugged him.

Chambers turned from the beverage cooler to make his way up front with the bottled water in hand. The store remained empty. *God knows best.* No one to "ooh" and "ahh" over the progress he had made with his life. Just the fat man with the beard at the counter who made change from his five and told him as he spun around, "Come again."

Peaches and her family had just parked in their driveway as he pulled in. They were just getting back from eating lunch after church. Peaches stood in the drive and waited for Chambers to walk up and hug her. She was beautiful. In a long, flowing, yellow dress that hugged her body. The yellow accented her dark brown hair. Funny thing happened as he went to hug her, his fingers unintentionally found their way down to the greatest part of her body: the tender indentation of her lower back. He sighed gently. "I think I've topped the stupidest thing I've ever done with this. Going six hundred miles and driving ten and half hours, just for one day."

She began to walk inside as he followed. "But ain't I worth it?"

"Worth every bit." And Chambers smiled.

He waited on the couch in the living room while she changed out of her church clothes. He kidded around with her youngest sister to pass the time.

"I don't have no boyfriends." And Little Jane giggled. "But we've had some dances."

"You have?"

"Well, one. It was a sock hop. I had to dress up like it was the fifties."

"Did any of the guys dance?"

"Some. But they mostly slow danced."

"Why? That makes me mad. Why are guys so afraid to dance?"

Little Jane looked puzzled over the conviction of Chambers' words. Then she shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know."

"Little Jane, why don't you go and watch television or something? Chambers and I want to talk." Peaches slid into the couch.

"Okay." And she slowly got up from the chair and left.

"She's growing up quick. She looks like she doesn't take any crap from any guy."

"She better not."

"She's going to be a looker too. Just like her older sisters."

"Yep."

He relaxed a little. "So what's up?"

"Hanging around the house." And then Chambers and Peaches began.

This was the whole reason why he had come. Peaches. He felt for some reason she had the magical solutions. The great emotional fix. Poor Peaches. She didn't have a chance. To have this great responsibility put on her unknowingly. He knew she wouldn't have any stupendous answers. But he wanted to feel love. She loved Nick deeply. She loved Chambers too, but in a different, special way. He wanted to see a woman in love and study it. Why was she in love? What made her in love? Chambers wanted to feel and sense a little bit of love. For two months, he felt trapped. Alice in Atlanta. He in Miami. Maybe his relationship with Alice was doomed from the start. But Chambers believed in love. And he had faith that love can endure even over long distances. Maybe that was it. Maybe Alice lost faith. She gave up. And maybe that was Chambers' problem now, he couldn't let go. That would mean failure. And that's why he was here. He wanted to see success. He wanted to believe again. Love exists. Fire exists.

Chambers told her about the couple he had seen in the Steak and Shake and about how angry it made him.

And how during the hours of driving, he thought about everything. Sex. Love. Marriage. Money. How did the State Patrol know where to park to catch people speeding? If the government could force people to sell their land to build a road, why not just make roads straight? Why Interstate 10 to Gainesville hasn't been repaved yet? Why is it that every damn song on the radio is about love? "I even thought about getting drunk. Screw it. So what I've never been drunk before. Maybe I need to escape a little while. Maybe it would mellow me out. Maybe I could love life again."

Peaches never interrupted. She let him vent. And she didn't blurt out, "No, Chambers. Don't think that way." or "That doesn't help anything." Instead, she nodded her head and smiled. "I know what you mean. And about getting drunk, I wouldn't mind staying drunk twenty-four seven," and she smiled, "but I'm too broke."

"I had the chance last night in Auburn. The apartment complex Chuck and them lives said they were having this throw down party last night, but it ended up being a bore." He thought about mentioning what happened with Christi, but who cared? Nothing happened. Just a silly situation.

Then he added a little to the situation between he and Alice. But finally he said, "Let's not talk about it anymore. I get sick and tired of pulling myself through all the emotional crap everytime I hear her name."

"Okay. Let me talk about me." And Peaches began.

Chambers watched her. Noticed her cut-off khaki shorts, the pockets hanging out from the leg, and the white T-shirt. Her smooth brown legs. Her dark brown hair. Her full smile. The slant of her eyes. They always had a little mischievous look. How in-control she seemed.

Her boyfriend, Nick, and Peaches' conversations hadn't been much lately. She did all the talking, and he didn't respond back, she explained. "He just sits there." She squeezed her arms around her. "I just want him to love me like there was no end, you know? I want him to not give a damn about the world around us, and just see me. Just once, I just want to be swept off my feet. And I tell him, but it doesn't seem to get through."

"Are you pushing him too hard?"

"God, I hope not. I don't think so. He's just so dang predictable."

She stretched out her legs and Chambers moved his out. Every once in awhile, he would feel her toes bump into his leg.

"What would change you?"

She wrinkled up her forehead. "What do you mean?"

"What could he do to dig himself out of this hole he's dug?"

"Do something spontaneous sometimes. Like what you did. Just driving up here. Just like that. No qualms about it."

"Maybe you shouldn't expect it so much, and you might be amazed at what you're overlooking."

"Maybe."

"Hey, look," Chambers ran his hands through his short hair, "I'm not trying to defend the guy. In fact, he's the luckiest S.O.B. in the world. You know how beautiful I think you are. You know how much I love you. In my eyes, he has you right there. Right where it would be a dream for any man in the free world to have you. To kiss you. To hold you. To love you. And he doesn't know what to do."

"Don't get me wrong Chambers. I love Nick. I love Nick terribly. He's very handsome. Very loving. Very faithful. But..."

"But something's missing?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "Something vital is missing. And if he would somehow find it, he would be perfect."

Chamber's heart sank. He wished his problem was that simple. He wished if he could find one thing and then apply it, his life would begin to make sense. Hurt would be erased. Love would begin instantaneously. But that wasn't the case. He was always lagging behind. Damn Nick. To be one piece from being whole. And to have at the same time, everything a man dreams about in his hands. *Damn Nick.*

Suddenly, the phone rang. Then Peaches' father called to her. She picked up the phone and Chambers used the time to use the bathroom.

"Who was that?" he said returning to the couch.

"That was Nick. He's coming over in about half an hour."

"Hey, that works out fine. I promised Pa Paw I would go and see him anyway."

Peaches smiled. "You don't have to leave. I don't care."

"I wish I was best friend's with Nick so I could talk to him. Tell him what he's got. Tell him what to do with it. But I don't even know him."

"I wish you were too." She went quiet for a moment thinking. "No. I'm glad you're not. I need you to be separate from him. You wouldn't be the same Chambers if you two were best friends. I need *this* Chambers. Not another one."

They sat quietly for a moment and finally Chambers broke the silence. "I wrote a poem at my parent's house this morning."

"Let me read it." Peaches sat up straight.

"I don't know if you can or not. There's a lot of scratching out and my handwriting is messy. You might want me to read it."

She smiled. "Then you read it." And she sank back into the couch.

He dug it out of a pocket and unfolded it. Then Chambers spoke slowly:

*by highway 431. May 26, 1996. Sunday.
Waiting for lunch on my front porch in Alabama.*

*beaches
memories of jet fuel
long four lane tar highways
with neon orange and white barrels
constantly contracting and expanding
I leave
push myself to winding narrow
country roads with green bountiful plush
sticking its ivory digits out to shudder
as I drive past
perfume of honeysuckle and rich summer soil
remembering a young playfulness with barefoot feet
and shirtless joy in my Ma Maw's yard
there's where my energies lie
before I knew anything, I knew everything
and I now after learning about something, I come
to forget
now sweating under the same sun
to remember I don't know anything
I can only enjoy that I am being
by grace of God
driving
by highway 431*

She grinned. "Thank you, Chambers."

Everytime he read something he wrote in person to someone else, he felt naked. It took a couple of minutes to compose his thoughts. "You know, I love the South."

"Me too." She added. "I love it so much that sometimes it hurts."

"Let me show you my brand new flower bed I made." And Chamber's grandfather struggled to stand from his porch swing. "My legs are getting worse and worse." He said after finally straightening up.

Chambers waited patiently, and let his grandfather take the lead to direct him out into the yard.

They pushed open the front porch door and headed out beside the driveway. The sky was red and orange as the sun began to set. The green of the trees and the grass seemed greener. The white paint of all the houses there in the mill village seemed whiter. Chambers slapped at his neck where a mosquito lit.

"Yeah. I found most of these rocks out from Bald Rock. I put it here so the driveway wouldn't wash out when it rains."

"It looks great Pa Paw." And Chambers watched his grandfather. Watched the way he walked and talked. How his fingers pointed at each rock. Chambers tried to soak in the time. Relish it as it was in front of him. But he couldn't. Never can anyone relish the time that is happening. *Only when it is over*, Chambers thought.

Chambers glanced down at his watch and saw it was nearly seven o'clock. Suddenly, guilt came over him that he would have to leave soon to meet up with Peaches.

"Pa Paw, can I ask you a question?"

His grandfather looked up at him suddenly. His black plastic frame glasses glinting a little of the setting sun. "Sure."

"It's kind of personal."

"I don't care. I'll answer it if I can remember it." And his grandfather laughed a little.

"Do you ever miss my dad's mom?"

"Yes." The answer came almost before Chambers finished the question.

"Have you ever thought about calling her?"

His grandfather shook his head. "No."

"Why?"

"Like I said, I miss Jean. Not the Jean who's boozing away, drunk and drugged up. The other Jean. The Jean from forty years ago." His grandfather looked away. Looking out somewhere else. Looking out at some other time.

"How old was she when she left?"

"Sixteen, I guess. I was twenty-something."

"Do you know why she left?"

"Yes. Because of what you just asked me. She was sixteen. I was twenty-something. She thought she was too young to be married and already have two kids." He stopped and then added, "And she was."

"Why did you marry her then if you knew or thought she was too young?"

His grandfather was quiet. "I loved her. And it doesn't really matter much when you love someone. "

Chambers didn't speak. He could see the wheels spinning in his grandfather's head. He simply waited for him to continue.

"I used to walk five miles to her house. Five miles to the movie theater downtown. Five miles back to her house. Five miles back to my house. It took me all day and most of the night to see her, but I didn't care. I would have walked a hundred. I thought she was so beautiful. She didn't act or look her age at all. I married her when she was fourteen, almost fifteen."

"Do you remember the first time you saw her?"

His grandfather shook his head. "No. I just remember her always being there. And one day, she wasn't. I was working third shift at the mill. I came home sometime that morning, and the babies were all by themselves. And she left a note saying she couldn't do it anymore. She didn't want to lose her life this way."

"Have you talked to her since?"

"Once. She came back when you were a baby, Chambers. She met your father and your Aunt Carol. But she was drunk most of the time. Didn't care about either of them. I think she was wanting money from her folks. But they were sick at the time and wouldn't give her any, so she left. They died soon after. She didn't even attend their funeral. I tried to talk to her while she was here, but she wouldn't stay in the same room with me."

"And you miss her?"

"I miss being twenty and walking with this beautiful woman to the movie theater. I miss the idea that she loved me. But you know, right after she left, my daddy, your great grandfather told me something I'll never forget. He said, love is either fire or blithe. Blithe I came to understand means not mediocre. But it's not the best it could be, and you know it. You can try to fool yourself, but really you're lying to yourself. Fire, on the otherhand, burns inside of you. Consumes, I guess. Until there is nothing left." His grandfather stopped and reached down pulling at some weeds that were already sprouting in the fresh black soil of his flowerbed. "But your great-grandfather never told me which one was the best love to have."

Three _____

"Hey, baby," Nick said as he bent down and kissed the top of her head.

"Hello stranger," Peaches smiled looking up.

He sat down on the couch next to her and took her hand. For a minute, Nick watched the television channels whir past. "Whatcha watching?"

Peaches shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing. Just exercising my thumb, I guess."

"You look great."

She set the remote control down on the arm of the couch and smiled looking over at him. His eyes were bright and dancing. "Really?"

Nick slid his fingers up and down her hand. "I'm thinking about something."

She pulled her legs up on the couch, turned her whole body to face him, and sat Indian style. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking I want to get out of here."

"Really?"

"I'm thinking I haven't seen you in two weeks and I want to show you how much I've missed you."

"You missed me?" she asked sarcastically.

He nodded. "You want to get out of here?"

"Yeah."

And they got up together.

"Mom, Nick and I are going out. We'll be back in a little while."

Somewhere in the house a woman's voice replied back, "Okay."

"What do you wish for?" Nick asked her as he shifted into third gear. The curve put the setting sun in his eyes. He reached up and put the visor down.

"Wish for? What do you mean?"

"I mean just that. What do you wish for? What do you want?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I guess for simple stuff. Passing my finals. Getting out of college and moving away from Birmingham. Children one day. Seeing you again." She paused wanting to say one more thing, but she stopped entirely and watched him drive.

"Is that all?"

Hell with it. Peaches went ahead. "Making love to you."

"Really?"

The two sat quietly listening to the faint music coming from the radio. Both deep in their own fantasy. Each making love to the other in their own way. Unselfishly. Selfishly. Peaches watched as the pasture stretched out on her side. How beautiful it was in the evening light. How green the grass was. How the trees rose on the distant hill. Such a beautiful place. "Stop the car here." She put her hand on his thigh.

"Stop the car?" he glanced over to see if she was serious.

"Pull off on that dirt road coming up."

They felt the vehicle slow considerably, and he caught a glance of the clearing of the road a few hundred yards away. He tapped his brakes.

They were at least a mile away from the main highway. When he began backing up into the driveway to a burned out house, Peaches jumped out. She crossed over a nearby barbed wire fence and moved out into the pasture.

A couple of minutes later, Nick found her. "Hey, where are you going so fast?"

She simply stood. Her back was to him, and she looked out across the field. The sun hung in the tops of the oaks and pines just in front of her. He came up behind her and put his hands around her waist.

"You didn't answer me." he said quietly almost whispering it in her ear. "Where are you going so fast?"

She slid around in his arms and kissed him deeply. When she pulled away, Peaches answered, "Right here." Then she began to unbutton his shirt.

"Hey, baby," Nick said as he bent down and kissed the top of her head.

"Hello stranger." she smiled looking up.

He sat down next to her and took her hand. For a minute, Nick watched the channels whir past. "Whatcha watching?"

"Nothing. Just exercising my thumb, I guess."

"Oh." he answered.

And the two sat and watched a rerun of "Three's Company".

Chambers swallowed hard. "Last night, I had a dream about Alice."

"And?"

He took a few seconds to come up with the first words. "I was somewhere. I don't know for sure where. Just a place that was familiar with Alice being there. And I was there praying I wouldn't see her. Afraid that if I did, I wouldn't be able to handle it. And soon as I thought the thought, she came right in wearing this red shirt cut a little short letting her belly button show. She was so beautiful and had a nice tan. I thought, *I can't believe she once liked me*. She was very happy. Instantly, I stood up to kiss her. Just a light kiss on the mouth, but she moved her head purposely and I kissed her cheek. Then she hugged me. She said she was very glad she had gotten to see me, but she was very busy. Lots of things to do. And just like that she walked away. And I just stood there. Still trying to get over how beautiful she was. And then the awful realization came to me: *she doesn't need me. She really doesn't need me.*" He went quiet.

"Hey, man," she patted his leg. "It'll get better. I promise you. Give it a little time." Peaches affirmed. The clock on the wall dinged signaling it was one-thirty in the morning. The movies they had rented were over. Everybody in the house was asleep. "While we are on the subject, I had a daydream." she said matter-of-factly.

"You did?"

"Yeah. Just before Nick got here." She pulled the pillow up to her chest and squeezed.

"What about?"

She laughed. "I dreamed Nick came over and we went driving just to get out of the house. Maybe having other intentions. I don't know. And I was looking out my window and saw this beautiful field. I felt this sudden urge that I wanted to be apart of it. So I told Nick to pull down this dirt road that led beside it. And he did. And we out in the middle of this field and made love. Made love as the sun went down." She stopped and smiled. "The dream was so vivid too. I remember being on top and throwing my head back and then opening my eyes and seeing the first stars coming out. Seeing the darkness move over the blue. I felt like the darkness was moving on me. It turned me on terribly."

"So what did you do when Nick really did come over?"

"Watched television and took a nap."

Chambers shook his head. "*Why?*"

"The Nick in my dream was different from the Nick sitting beside me."

"Blithe."

She looked over at him with a puzzling look. "What did you say?"

"It's something my Pa Paw told me while I was with him today. He said there's two kinds of love: blithe and fire. Fire is a consuming love. Makes you burn. Then there's blithe. There's nothing wrong with blithe. It's predictable. It's a fuzzy security blanket. Not overwhelming. Not overpowering. Almost without passion. Is that what people settle for? Is this the love everybody feels? I say, to hell with blithe."

Peaches nodded. "I agree. To hell with blithe."

Suddenly, Chambers had this sudden urge to kiss her. Not just to kiss because she was beautiful. But she was. Not just to kiss her because she was talking. Saying words and ideas that his own heart and mind thought. Which let him know they shared the same mindset. It wasn't because her feet were curled up on the couch, toes squished and pointing toward him. Although it was a temptation. Maybe kiss her toes first if he managed up the nerve to kiss her at all. He felt the urge to kiss her because he loved her. Loved her as deeply as a friend can love another friend. The kiss was simply an explanation point.

Five years ago, he had his first urge. They were sitting on the carport steps of a friend. They were waiting for their friend to come home so they could all dance in his garage. She and Chambers were talking about their lives. Peaches had just met Nick.

"I don't know what I feel about him." she had said.

"You never know. He could be the one." Chambers added.

He was listening and loving what she thought. How she said it. How she didn't give a damn what anybody thought. But at the same time, she was very delicate. Very feminine. Almost sensuous. Even though, at eighteen, she at sixteen, neither knew what the true meaning to sensuous was. It was all hormones then. Nevertheless, even with the hormones raging, and wanting to kiss her more than life, he left her to talk. Tugging at his heart and mind with every word she spoke. That night he kept himself up regretting. *Why didn't I just kiss her? Just move slowly up to her and kiss her.*

"Chambers, why is this life so confusing...?"

In mid sentence, Chambers moved slowly up to her. For a moment, they were face to face. An inch or so apart.

"Let's not do this." she quickly said looking in his eyes.

Chambers was startled. Taken back. "Are you sure?"

"I don't want to lose you, Chambers. We're so close. I can't afford to lose you by doing this."

"Okay." He pulled away and gently laid his head on her lap. Her bare legs were smooth against his face. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. Don't think I don't want to. But I'm just afraid. I love you." Then she added, "And I love Nick."

"I understand." And Chambers did understand, sadly enough. But he wished he didn't. "I love you, too, Peaches."

Four

"I'm sorry I'm late. I got caught up in a meeting and couldn't break away." the man said through the cashier window.

Peaches smiled. "That's okay. *This time.*" She grinned as she looked through a filing cabinet and brought out a file. She flipped through some pages and finally wrote something in pen. "Mr. Graham, you can come on in."

The door to the work out room was already open so Jeffrey Graham went in and stood. An old man was fitted with a prosthetic leg and was slowly walking around the room using a walker. A tall, skinny man with a black beard followed him answering questions.

"How's your foot today? I noticed you weren't limping as much as you did when you first came in last week." Peaches walked past him and motioned with her hands for him to follow. "Come this way."

"Yeah. It feels a lot better." Leslie went around the weight bench and paused in front of the stationary bike.

"Have you been doing the exercises I told you?" She squatted and began making adjustments to the bike.

"For the most part. Maybe one or two days I skipped because I got so busy with work or family."

"Have you noticed any increased mobility?" She stood and faced him. "You can get on and start pedaling."

He mounted and began to push at the pedals. "Maybe some. The only real difference I've found is as you've already mentioned, the limping is gradually decreasing. My foot is growing stronger." At first, the bike was easy, but slowly, the pedals grew tighter and tighter.

Peaches stood quietly for a moment and watched his feet work. "How long did you say you've been out of your brace?"

In-between breaths, he answered, "Two weeks, I guess. The first time I saw you, my doctor had given me the go ahead to start wearing regular shoes."

"Alright."

"Now what is this cycling doing for me?"

She watched quietly for a moment before answering. "I'm trying to see what kind of strength you have in that foot. I'm also trying to see the range of motion you have."

Mrs. Cane, the secretary from the front desk, came up beside Peaches waiting until she was through speaking. "Miss Conrad? You have someone here in the lobby to see you."

"Who is it?"

"The gentleman wouldn't give me his name, but he said it was rather urgent."

Peaches turned to look in the direction of the lobby, but she could see no one in the doorway. "Is it a patient or family member?"

"None of the above."

Peaches looked at Leslie. "Would you excuse me for a minute?"

"Go right ahead." Leslie said beginning to struggle with the pedals.

"Just keep doing what you're doing unless it just gets too much. I'll be back in just one second." And Peaches had begun to walk away even before finishing her last sentence.

The man who was waiting in the lobby had his back turned and was looking out the window when she entered. "Can I help you?"

The man turned around. He was wearing a white button down shirt with a purple and black tie and gray dress slacks. A small black pager hung off his hip. His skin was tan and his hair was shaved on the sides and was cropped on top. "Chambers?"

"Your mom told me this is where you worked."

She reached out and hugged him. "What are you doing in Auburn? I thought you were in Germany or something."

He smiled. "No. Not yet. Just traveling up and down the east coast." He took a long stare. "You know, you look gorgeous."

"Thanks. You don't look that bad yourself. Especially with that tie."

"Yeah, well. Ties make my neck stiff."

"I can't talk long. I've got a patient in there waiting on me. But I guess I know why you're here."

"I heard you and Nick have set a wedding date."

"Yeah. June twenty-first."

"Are you excited?"

She let out a big breath. "More overwhelmed than anything else. There's so much to do. Tuxedos. Dresses. The reception. The honeymoon. I didn't know getting married could be this big a pain in the ass." And Peaches smiled.

Chambers stood without speaking for a minute. "Hey, I know you have to go. I have to, too. I'm supposed to be catching a plane to Philadelphia in three hours. I wish I could take you out to eat lunch so maybe we could catch up on things."

"I'm sorry."

"So you're in love?"

"Yes." Her voice became stronger. "Yes, I am. I've always been. Just didn't know how to appreciate it, maybe? I have a one of a kind man. Yeah, he has his little quirks, but I love him. I'm a very lucky lady."

"And you have passion?"

"Chambers, don't." She reached out and took his hand. "I've learned to overcome some things these last couple of years. Nick and my passion comes and goes. Just like in every relationship. It's not always sunshine. I have to accept that."

"And you don't think you're settling?"

"No, I'm not settling. I love Nick. I want to be Nick's wife. I can see myself being old and gray with Nick."

"Hey, I'm sorry if I sound critical. I just love you. And I want you to be happy."

Peaches grinned. "I am happy. And I love you too."

"I'm just fulfilling my side of our promise. I promised you over the phone one time that I would come and kick your butt if there was no passion. If the love was merely a front. So I'm here to question and literally kick your butt if I have to." Chambers squeezed her hand. "I'm prepared to steal you away if I can. Or I'm willing to stand up when the preacher says, 'speak now or forever hold your peace.'"

She leaned forward and hugged him tightly. "Thank you."

"You're one of a kind, Peaches. I hate to lose you. But I guess I never had you, did I?" He hugged back tighter.

She gently pulled away. "You're coming to the wedding, aren't you?"

"Well, if you wanted me to stop the wedding, I'd be there. But the whole month of June, I'm supposed to be in Dallas. It remains to be seen."

"Oh, Chambers. I really want you there."

He looked off for a moment and then he came back to her eyes. "I'll try my damndest." The two stood quietly watching the other to see who would talk next. Finally, Chambers spoke. "I hate you in a way, Peaches. The opportunity came to you. Blithe or fire, it doesn't matter. You had the opportunity to love. You've never known the *nothing*. The *nothing* is having no one to vent your passion on. Nick has always been there. I feel that I am a very passionate person, but I never find the right person to give it to. And the passion just sits in me and rots and aches."

"She's out there, Chambers. She's waiting on you. And she's a very lucky girl."

"Nick is a very lucky man."

She smiled. "I have to go. Take care of yourself. And I'll see you at the wedding. You'll hear from me if I don't see you there. You'll regret it for the rest of your life."

He kissed her cheek. "I'll be there."

She stepped backwards toward the workout room. "Bye, Chambers."

"Bye." And Chambers headed outside towards his rental car.

The candlelight dinner made his wife's eyes sparkle. Chambers brought up the glass of wine and took a sip. "Nothing like pushing the kids off on my momma. Moving home was the greatest thing we've ever done."

"I think so." And Sandy smiled.

"You are so sexy. Have I said that lately?"

"Twice before dinner. Already once during." She took her own glass of wine and sipped. "You're very handsome yourself. The gray hair makes you look distinguished."

"I'm damn lucky. Two beautiful daughters. A beautiful wife."

"Speaking of beautiful daughters." One of Sandy's eyebrows arched. "I accidentally found something today."

"What?"

"A poem."

"A poem. To who?"

"To Chloe. He's a Senior this year, I think. Jesse Sanders. Nick Sanders' son."

"You mean Peaches' boy?"

"Yeah. Chloe had a crush on him her freshman year."

"Really?" Chambers was surprised. He thought he knew everything that happened with his girls.

"Yeah. I guess he's finally coming around."

Chambers smiled. "A poem? Do you know where it is?"

"I'm not going to go sneak around and get it."

"You won't have to. I will. Do you know where it is?"

Sandy took a bite of her steak and chewed. After swallowing, she said, "In the front pocket of her bookbag."

Chambers looked confused. "What were you doing looking in the front pocket of her book bag?"

"Chloe told me she had those financial CD-ROMs from the library in there. So I went to look and found the poem."

"I'll be right back." Chambers stood up and hurried to his sixteen year old's room. Opening Chloe's door, he saw her red bookbag hanging on the back of her desk chair. Chambers unzipped the front pocket, reached inside, and extracted the folded piece of paper.

blithe
if you took for instance this moment
and weighed it against the last moment
you would find time to stay
and love it for what it is
no anticipation
no fantasy
you would have your moment
and never regret
and realize you've never been more alive
than now
blithe

love Jesse.

Chambers laughed gently. *Now my daughter is Peaches' son's crush. Life is a circle.* He refolded the poem and returned it to the bookbag's front pocket.

But *blithe* didn't seem like the right word to Chambers, and so the poem began to haunt him. He hated the word *blithe*. Chambers pulled out an old dictionary from Chloe's desk drawer and looked it up. It wasn't even a noun as he had thought. It was an adjective. *Happy, gay, sprightly, joyous.*

Chambers shut the dictionary and felt a little ashamed. For all these years, he had underestimated the word. He underestimated what it meant. Underestimated what *blithe* brought. It brought the same things fire brought. Except maybe it was softer. Simpler. Securer. Perhaps more tangible. *Blithe* definitely meant more than mediocre love like his Pa Paw had told him years ago. It was happiness within love. It meant to love with an ultimate end: serenity.

"Did you find it?" Sandy asked when he returned to the dining room.

"Yes." And Chambers walked past his chair and knelt in front of her. He took her hand. "I love you, baby. It took me a long time to find you. And I swore, if I ever found you, I would love you like you've never been loved before. And I want to apologize now for all the times in the past and in the future, I take you for granted." He kissed her hand. "But not tonight."

Her face became serious. Sensuous. "I love you, Chambers." And she reached down, pulled his chin up, and kissed him.

