

Thirty

I stooped to brush several grass clippings from the simple marble marker:

Lindy Parquette Roberts
Wife, Loving Mother
November 11, 1918-March 10, 1986

Beneath the sunshine of a late spring morning the moment seemed surreal. Only two days ago Lindy had been alive to me—beautiful, young, vibrant; now, beneath this close-cropped sod were her remains, ravaged by a disease that before yesterday I'd never even heard of. Dead at the age of sixty-eight.

I couldn't begin to imagine what she must've looked like at the end, how she aged, after I disappeared. Was it arrogant of me to think she'd have been happier with me than John Roberts? Perhaps it was at that.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to the marker, as if what lay beneath could hear me; the marble was cool to my touch despite the late morning sun, and I wondered if its chill might be representative of Lindy's reaction to my presence, this clumsy attempt at apology. "I'm sorry I abandoned you as I did, but I'm most sorry for never having told you that I loved you."

Wife, Loving Mother.

I felt the sting of tears, and I wondered what the marker might read, whether the lone adjective might be juxtaposed to a more prominent place had I not been suddenly thrust a century away from her.

"I'd like to think I could've made a difference," I said, for Lindy's benefit as well as my own. "But through hindsight we see ever so much more clearly."

I sighed.

"Maybe it means nothing to you now, Lindy, but I promise that I will, somehow, make a difference."

I touched fingers to my mouth, laid them on the marble, and told her again that I loved her.

A moment later I stood and made my way toward Ecstasy, who sat on the grass near the cemetery path. She offered her hand to me, an invitation to assist her to stand. I took it but instead sat down next to her. I listened a moment to the sounds of the city traffic that, moments ago, I hadn't heard but now seemed to intrude upon our privacy.

"Thanks," I said, "for giving me a moment alone."

She gave my hand a gentle squeeze, perhaps uncertain how to respond.

No, I thought, she knows precisely how to respond; such simple acknowledgement says more than any number of words.

I was grateful for the tenderness of her simple gesture, as well as for the warmth that flowed from her touch. It was so like the warmth I'd gotten from Lindy two days ago—two days that had spanned a century; for me a lost opportunity of a lifetime, for her, perhaps a lifetime lost. Warmth I'd denied until it was too late.

"Strange," I added, "but it's difficult for me to reconcile the finality of that marker with the fact that she still lives in her own time."

Ecstasy smiled, and I looked at her hair, spun gold that shone brilliantly in a variety of shades and textures that would surely drive mad an artist trying to duplicate them with the colors on his palette.

"In time that will be all that remains of all of us," she said.

I nodded. "A name, three words and two dates."

Ecstasy was too polite to ask so I told her: "Wife, Loving Mother." I sighed. "She even had her maiden name chiseled into the stone."

And then, looking back toward Lindy's grave: "I wonder where John Roberts lays."

"Ah, Joe," she said. "Don't blame yourself for her unhappiness."

"How can I not?"

"You can't hold yourself accountable for the choices she made."

"Choices she made subsequent to my abandonment of her, no doubt limited by the child with which I'd left her."

"But your abandonment, as you call it, wasn't your choice, and you can't know how it would've turned out had you stayed."

"That doesn't assuage my guilt and regret."

I looked at Ecstasy. A part of me despised her for the role she played in our tryst the other night, even as I detested myself for my weakness—and I wondered if I had reviled every woman I'd ever encountered over the years, and whether my hatred of my mother was why I'd treated them so callously.

But there was too much compassion in the blue of Ecstasy's eyes and so I banished my resentment, sighed, looked away—a feeble attempt to create an illusion of distance—and said:

"I'm not a hundred miles away from her, Ecstasy, or a thousand or ten thousand. Those distances I could surmount. But I'm a hundred *years* removed from her, helpless to find my way back to her, and now robbed of any chance to even repent."

"One can always repent."

"Little good that does her—now, then, and every moment in between."

"Perhaps not, but you have a chance to live differently from this moment forward."

"To give meaning to her unhappiness?"

"To do otherwise would be disrespectful to your memory of her."

"Why doesn't that make me feel better?"

"In time it will."

I lay on my back, held up my left hand, watched it clench into a fist, let it drop to the ground beside me.

"I can't even be sure she cares that I cared enough to visit."

"She cares."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Why wouldn't she?"

My fist relented, its fingers now lay splayed flat; the grass felt cool against my palm. I could say nothing to contest Ecstasy's wisdom. I'd found little comfort in visiting Lindy's grave. Not that I'd expected to; but I derived much from the notion Ecstasy might be right.

"Come on," I said, getting to my feet. "It's warm here, under the sun, and you wanted to get over to Connie's apartment to pack her things."

I extended my hand and Ecstasy took it. She stood, and I embraced her and thanked her again. She said nothing as she returned my embrace. I held on to her tightly, as if my life depended on her, as indeed it did. I couldn't hope to survive in this twenty-first century New York without a job, without money, a place to stay. Without her. I wondered if she was truly aware of my predicament, if she as yet believed that I'd come, literally, from out of the past, whether she could empathize, put herself in my place.

A moment later I found the courage to let her go and we slowly made our way toward the cemetery gate.

Leaving the cemetery seemed, somehow, therapeutic for me, as if I were leaving something behind, closing the door on a hundred years of lost living, although I was certain I was in no way finished with my grieving. It would be a long time before I realized I would never be quite done with that.