

# Prologue

## When Jacob Met Nina

Every writer who's ever confronted a blank sheet of paper, or the pulsing impatience of a digital cursor, dreams of discovering the literary Holy Grail. Capote found it in a blood-drenched home in a remote corner of western Kansas. Salinger found it in the voice of a disaffected teenager tottering on the edge of sanity. And Steinbeck, the show-off that he was, found it in pretty much every subject and character he chose to write about.

After twelve years of writing obituary notices and a teen advice column for a suburban Boston bi-weekly and collecting a Sunday-newspaper's worth of rejection slips for three great American novels, I too have experienced a literary epiphany. I've come face-to-face with my own Moby Dick, and my life will never be the same.

And what's really interesting is that none of this would have occurred if I hadn't made out with a nun.

Now, in the interests of full disclosure, she wasn't actually a nun. She was more like a novitiate or a nun in training or, as I liked to tease, a "nit." And, if you twisted my arm so tight that my sphincter muscles felt loose in comparison, I'd admit that we did a lot more than make out. And if I were not the gentleman that my dear Nana Lillie taught me to be, I might even allude to the fact that it was right up there on my all-time top-five pieces of ass. But I'm jumping ahead or, perhaps, too far back.

The important thing is that I once boinked a nit and the great spirit in the sky felt obliged to smile down on me.

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The irony is that I owe it all to a severe case of the hots for my sister-in-law, Tess. I was twenty when Tess married my brother, Mark. They'd met in college and married a year after graduation. Mark was an over-achieving simpleton with a goofball toothy smile and sports-imbued DNA that coaxed teachers and professors into granting him the benefit of doubt and awarding him extra credit just for showing up. Mark was able to turn a B-minus grade point average and a middling career as a Division 3 first baseman into a high-paying schmoozing sales job with a second-tier pharmaceutical

company. He's now an even more highly paid regional sales manager for a first-tier pharma company; and if I sound bitter and resentful and astounded at his success, it's because I am. So enough about Mark. It's Tess I really want to talk about.

In truth, I've always had a thing for my sister-in-law, even when she first started dating Mark and I was just a teenager trying desperately not to stare at her hips, thighs, breasts, and unmistakably heart-shaped butt. I realized from the very first moment I laid eyes on her that her legs were far too long, tanned, and toned to be touched by the stubby, paste-colored fingers of my brother. Her lips and tongue were too soft, plump and pink to be wasted on Mark's slit of a pie hole, let alone the nether parts of his anatomy. When they were planning their wedding, I suggested that Joe Jackson's "Is She Really Going Out With Him" would be an appropriate song for their first dance. Tess smiled and, at that precise moment, I believe she came to the realization that it would never work out for them but that the process was too far along to be stopped. So, less than three years later, I was neither surprised nor unhappy when Tess walked out on him.

"What took you so damn long?" was my telephone greeting when I called Tess to express my insincere sympathy about their separation.

I swear that I heard the beginning of a chuckle before Tess broke into a woeful sobbing.

"Tess, I'm sorry," I stammered. "I was just trying to make a joke. Trying to lighten the moment."

Her sobs were momentarily interrupted by a low-pitched grunt that I took as an acceptance of my apology.

"I mean I know this has to be very painful," I said. "You guys seemed so happy together," I lied.

"It's been coming on for a long time," said Tess as her sobbing turned into sniffing. "Then I found out the bastard had been cheating on me for over a year, so I told him to go fuck himself up the ass with a cactus and I left."

I had always loved Tess' colorful use of the English language. It was one of the many traits we shared and, hopefully, one of the factors that would draw us together for a lifetime of happiness and wildly imaginative, albeit steadfastly monogamous, sex.

Mark's cheating, however, was a new wrinkle. I knew he was an asshole but cheating on Tess would place him alongside the likes of Tiger Woods

and Jesse James as members of the Asshole Hall of Fame. Tess Botticelli, Elin Woods, and Sandra Bullock were women to be worshipped and adored. Screwing around on them was insanity incarnate. I knew Mark was stupid but I didn't think he was mentally deranged.

"Holy shit," I said. "I had no idea."

"No one did," said Tess. "He's the all-American boy when there's other people around, but he's really a self-centered arrogant prick and I hope he rots in hell with his dick tied in a knot."

I expressed my wholehearted agreement in at least a dozen ways and then asked if it would be okay if I stopped by some time.

"How about tonight?" said Tess. "I'm ready to move on with my life and it would be nice if you were part of that."

"Perfect," I said and then hung up before she had a chance to change her mind. She wanted me to be there when she moved on with her life. She wanted me to be part of it. Move over big brother, there's a new Botticelli in town.

Of course, that's not the way it turned out. What Tess meant was that she wanted pretty much everyone she'd ever known to join her in moving on. When I arrived at her house (and based on the divorce settlement, it was now one-hundred percent her house), the crowd was overflowing onto the front lawn, backyard and driveway. Music was blaring, everyone was drinking, and the sweet scent of weed wafted overhead. It took me a good fifteen minutes to track down Tess and, in return, I got a dry peck on the cheek and a "thanks for coming" as she drifted through the drunken throng (try saying that five times fast).

My dream of eternal bliss alongside Tess' heaving breasts having been summarily shattered, I quickly assessed the situation. I was

at a party with a two-to-one ratio of women to men, plenty of beer and wine, and nowhere else to go. I downed a Blue Moon white ale, grabbed another cold one, and began my search for either the perfect woman or any other woman who would have me.

I spotted her sitting alone on the edge of Tess' pool, her legs flapping in the water and her shoulders swaying to the beat of some Madonna-wannabe, one-hit-wonder pop star. She was wearing a two-button white polo shirt and Nantucket red shorts. Her hair was shoulder length, brown with auburn highlights, and somewhere between frizzy and naturally wavy.

Compared to the hard-partying hard bodies showing off their wares, she seemed quiet and plain. I figured she'd be easy to impress.

I sat down beside her, plopped my legs in the water and mimicked the cadence of her kicking.

"Wanna race?" I asked.

She glanced at me with a look that was probably intended as stern but came across as come-hither.

"I'm not very fast," she said.

"Me neither," I said. "But I can go for hours."

She increased the severity of her gaze while simultaneously boosting the intensity of her come-hither message. As I lost myself in her eyes, she shouted out "Ready. Set. Go!" and started kicking her legs at a pace so frantic that it reminded me of a flipped over June bug trying to right itself. I quickly matched her intensity and was about to surpass her when she leaned towards me with parted lips and a flickering tongue. I moved closer to meet her surprisingly plump and pink lips with my own, and closed my eyes to enjoy the moment. I felt her hand on my neck and, as I waited for her to pull me even closer, she made her move. Combining the elements of surprise and leverage, this little bit of a woman managed to toss me into the pool headfirst.

When I bobbed back to the surface, she was standing up and, to throw fuel on the fire of my embarrassment, she splashed water in my face with her toes.

"Guess I am faster than you," she said.

I climbed out of the pool and extended my hand.

"I'm Jacob Botticelli," I said.

"I'm not falling for that trick," she said, backing away and refusing to shake my hand. "Plus, you're wet enough for both of us."

"Fine," I said. "But can you at least tell me your name?"

"Nina," she said. "Nina Roberts."

"And how do you know Tess?" I asked.

"I don't," she said. "I came with a friend. And you?"

"She's my sister-in-law," I said. "She finally got smart enough to dump my loser of a brother."

"And would he describe you in such loving terms?"

"Probably," I said. "We're like total opposites."

“You mean he gets the hot chicks like Tess and you have to settle for plain Janes like me?”

I shook my head and smiled. “Nina, I’ve just met you but I have to say that you are one crazy bitch. And, yes, Tess is beautiful; but you’re no slouch in the looks department either.”

I was going to add that, “I’d gladly tap that ass of yours,” but realized it might ruin the moment.

“So that means you’d like to tap this ass?” she said.

I simultaneously laughed, shook my head and nodded. I looked up at the heavens and said, “Thank you, God.”

“How ironic,” said Nina as she took my hand and led me to her car. “Let’s go get you dried off.”

I assumed she was going to grab a towel from the trunk, but instead she hopped behind the wheel of a Jetta and told me to take the passenger’s seat.

“My apartment is close to here,” she said. “And I’m not much of a party person.”

I just nodded and kept my mouth shut as she pulled away from the curb. I figured the less said, the less chance there was of her coming to her senses.

“Don’t you want to know what’s ironic?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I said it was ironic that you were thanking God about having met me.”

“Yeah?” I figured monosyllabic words were my best bet for staying out of trouble.

“Don’t you want to know why?”

I sensed a trace of irritation in Nina’s voice and thought that perhaps I was playing this all wrong. Perhaps she wanted more than just my body. Maybe she was looking for a friend-with-benefits relationship where we’d have to share thoughts and feelings along with bodily fluids. I could easily play that game, but I’d stick with safe monosyllables nonetheless.

“I would like to know,” I said. “Please tell me.”

“Well,” she said, “it’s probably a good thing that you’re sitting down. I...uh...I’m still in school...and I’m studying to become...uh...a nun.”

“You’re a nun?”

“Not yet. Officially I’m still a novitiate,” she said. “But, yes, I will be a nun soon.”

“Whoa,” I said. “So are we going to your place to read the bible or some shit like that because, you know, I think maybe I should get out of the car and go back to Tess’ house.”

Nina laughed and put her hand on my thigh. “We are not going to read the bible,” she said. “Though I am hoping we can get to know each other in the biblical sense.”

“As much as I hate repeating myself,” I said, lifting her hand to my lips and kissing her gently. “Thank you, God.”

Nina pulled up in front of three-story apartment building and I followed her to the entrance.

“So is this some kind of a nun sorority stunt?” I asked. “When you open the door am I going to be attacked by a gang of nuns swinging crucifixes at my head and chanting *Kyrie Eleison*?”

“You’re a funny guy,” said Nina. “I think we can have some fun.”

The fun started as soon as we closed the door behind us. If it were up to me, I would share every detail of our lustful commingling; but, in exchange for inviting me to tell the story of Walden 3.0, Nina made me swear on a stack of Birkenstocks that I would take her lovemaking secrets to my grave.

So when the fun ended -- or rather, when the first round of fun ended -- I asked Nina why a soon-to-be nun would break her vow of chastity before it had even begun.

“It’s better to break the vow before rather than after,” she said. “After tonight, I’m closing up shop.”

“But why?” I asked. “You seemed to really be into it. How can you give up sex for the rest of your life?”

“It’s hard to explain,” she said. “And it’s probably even harder to understand. But I believe in my heart of hearts that there has to be more to life than the life we lead with our physical bodies. I want my life to have meaning. I want to be able to look back when I’m on my death bed and be proud of what I’ve done and how I’ve made the world a better place.”

“And sex precludes being proud of your life?”

“No,” she said. “I don’t believe that, but I very much like the idea of being committed to something. Being totally committed and disciplined. And the church provides that opportunity.”

“So why tonight?” I asked. “Why me?”

Nina shrugged. “I didn’t plan it,” she said. “It’s not like I was a sailor on leave and looking for nookie wherever I could find it. I was sitting there all

by myself and then you showed up. It was almost like a sign from God. A test of my faith and resolve.”

“And God won?”

“Yes,” she said. “God won. But perhaps we should test Him one more time.”

She pulled me towards her again, and that’s as much as I can tell you about the next hour.

Afterwards, Nina said she had to get up early and walked me to the door.

“You’re a really sweet guy,” she said. “If we had met at another time or place, things might be different.”

We kissed goodbye and I drove away. Now I’m not a particularly sentimental guy, and romantic notions of things like love at first sight strike me as trite and contrived. Nonetheless, I was truly smitten by this nun-in-training and was tempted to turn back and try to talk sense into her Catholic-guilt-ridden brain. But Nina was right. Had it been another time or place, things might have been different. In fact, I was quite certain that they would have been very different.

But the time was now and the place was here; and so I left Nina that night never expecting to see or hear from her again.

But I did. And I’m glad I did. And this is our story.

# Chapter 1

## The Fleeing Nun

My first thought upon hearing Nina's voice was, "Oh my God, I knocked up a nun."

My first reaction to that thought was split between giving myself a high-five or a WWF-style smackdown.

My second reaction was to count on my fingers how old the kid -- my kid -- would be. I figured six years old.

"Can we meet for coffee or a drink?" she had asked. "I want to talk to you about something and it's too complicated for the phone."

It must be twins, I thought, and she's got some terminal disease and is about to drop them on my proverbial doorstep. What the hell would I possibly do with twin six-year-olds? My life was over.

"Sure," I said gallantly, trying to be strong for both of us.

We agreed to meet the next morning for breakfast at the IHOP right off of Route 93, just before the slick suburbs of Massachusetts fade into the redneck rube towns of New Hampshire.

Nina was already sitting in a booth sipping coffee when I arrived. The good news was that there were no children with her. The bad news was that she looked nervous. She stood up and gave me a big hug.

"It's so good to see you, Jacob," she said. "And thank you for agreeing to meet me. I've thought about you a lot over the last few years."

"Really?"

I mean I knew I was good, but having a lifelong impact on a nun was something very few guys could brag about. I couldn't wait to tell the guys about it.

The flipside, of course, is that I too had thought of Nina many times. My history with the opposite sex was rather pathetic. Lots of short-term flings and zero lasting relationships. Even the women whose parting words were that we "remain friends" had disappeared from my life. There was just one connection that haunted me. One what-if scenario that I could never resolve. There was just one Nina. My buddies would smirk whenever I mentioned the "nit" and mused about what might have been. They



reminded me that it was easy to idealize a woman I'd spent a grand total of five hours with. I'd never seen her in the morning without make-up. I'd never seen whether she turned into a bitch with a capital "B" when she got her period. Shit, they'd say, I'd never even seen her in daylight without a few drinks in me. "Whatever" was my pat response. Nina was special. Someone I would have liked to get to know better.

"You were my last," said Nina. "And to a young nun, the last boy you were with holds a very special place in your heart. So I followed your career on FaceBook and Twitter, read your articles and columns online, and heard bits and pieces from friends of friends."

"So I guess you know I've yet to hit it big," I said. "Still trying to get a novel published. Still not sure what I want to do with the rest of my life."

"And that's exactly why I'm here," said Nina. "I have an opportunity that I think you'll find very interesting and, hopefully, very rewarding."

"Do I get to go to the Vatican and meet the Pope?"

Nina gave me a look that, unfortunately, I was all too familiar with -- like I had three heads, two of which were brain dead. And then she laughed.

"I guess you haven't been following *my* career very closely, huh?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I figured a nun's a nun. Sorry."

"Nothing to be sorry about," she said. "But I guess the big headline is that I'm no longer a nun. I left the convent, in fact I left the church, a couple of years ago."

"Wow."

I was truly speechless for the first time that day.

"Wowee."

Did this have anything to do with our lovechild? Did she have to leave the convent when they discovered she was pregnant and now she's out on the street? A single-mom, ex-nun looking for a sugar daddy to make it all right?

"Wowee. Wowee."

"Jacob, are you okay?" she asked. "It's not that big a deal. It's like changing careers or getting a divorce. It's weird for a while and then it's fine."

"So, like, what are you doing?" I asked. "I mean you're the first nun I ever knew so you're also the first ex-nun I've ever known. What do you do after being married to Jesus?"

Nina shrugged. "He actually wasn't all that great a husband," she said. "It was really all about Him. And when it came to sex, it was like the Immaculate Conception -- it was over in a flash and I had no memory of any of it."

"Spoken like a true divorcee trashing her ex," I said. "Except that your ex can literally make your life hell."

"If there even is a hell," she said, "but that's a whole other issue. Anyway, in response to your question about what I'm doing, I've settled in northern Vermont and I'm communications director for a non-profit consortium called Walden 3.0."

"Never heard of it."

"Precisely," said Nina. "We desperately need people to know who we are and what we do."

"And what exactly does Walden 3.0 do?" I actually didn't care, but I was hoping that maybe I could be Nina's rebound lover after that Jesus character. Nailing an ex-nun was high on my personal bucket list.

"We're out to change the world," she said. "One person at a time."

"That's a pretty lofty goal," I said.

"It is. And the one-person-at-a-time approach is extremely inefficient," she said. "And that's why I'm here."

Now I've never claimed to be an expert in the whole seduction thing (though I suspect there are many women who would argue otherwise), but I do know that gross ignorance is not a trait that lifts many skirts. Ergo, I feigned tacit understanding by nodding. And smiling. And waiting.

"We want you to tell our story," said Nina, confirming what I wanted her to think I already knew. "This could be your big break. This could be your Gatsby. Your Holly Golightly. Your Titanic. It's all so exciting."

"The Titanic sunk," I said.

"In the ocean, yes," she said, "but not on the silver screen. Not the way James Cameron told the story. He turned a shipwreck into a romantic love story that no one could ever forget."

"So are you telling me that Walden 3.0 is a shipwreck?"

"Hardly."

"Then is it that you want me to be DiCaprio to your Kate Winslet?"

"What I'd like, and what I hoped," said Nina, "is that you would stop your wise-cracking and macho bullshit and be serious for a moment. I

actually think I know you better than you know yourself. Our one-night stand was anything but. Ninety-nine out of a hundred guys would have fucked me hard and left it at that. They couldn't have cared less if they hurt me or pleased me. They wouldn't have given a thought or touch to the non-vaginal parts of my body. But that's not you, Jacob. You were gentle and caring. You made love to me as a person, as though we were in love. As though we were falling in love."

Nina took a quick sip of coffee, put down the cup and immediately lifted it to take another sip. She chewed her lower lip and shook her head.

"Jacob, I've gone way out on a limb recommending you to our leadership team, and I do not want to be embarrassed. I view this as a once in a lifetime opportunity for the right journalist. I thought you were the perfect person for the job, but maybe I was wrong. You know one of the things I've loved about your writing was that the passion always came through and it always rang true to me. You have a very fluid style that can turn the most complex subjects into an easy-to-understand story. Remember that piece you wrote about the difference between going green and lowering carbon emissions? Up till then, I thought it was all the same issue. You opened my eyes and I think you can do the same with our story. But you need to want it. Really want it. You need to want to be the voice of our generation's utopian dream. And if that's not what you want, then maybe I need to look elsewhere."

The next move was clearly mine. Nina could have approached me for any of a thousand reasons. Maybe she really did admire my writing style. Maybe she knew my career was going nowhere and I'd

jump at any chance to do something different. Maybe she knew I was frustrated, and knew that I, just like she, was about to turn thirty years old. It was a milestone birthday that forces you to assess where you've been and where you want to go. In short, when life gives you lemons, don't look a gift horse, bearing lemonade, in the mouth.

"I'm in," I said.

"Jacob, are you sure about this?" asked Nina. "I haven't really told you anything about Walden 3.0 and what we want you to do. This needs to be an all or nothing commitment."

"I'm all-in," I said. "I know we only spent one night together, but I trust you completely. Plus I'm intrigued. I do think the world needs to be changed; and if I can help make that happen in some small way, I'm all for

it. And the thing is, I truly hate my job. I've got to find something different. Something more exciting and meaningful. This Walden story might be it, but even if it isn't it will get me away from my boring pitiful life for a while and that can't be bad."

"That's wonderful," said Nina. She leaned over the table and gave me a painfully awkward hug, but it was the thought that counts.

"So when do we start?" I asked.

"How soon can you get to Vermont?"

"Tomorrow afternoon?"

"Tomorrow afternoon it is," said Nina. She handed me a manila envelope. "The directions are in here. And I've included a summary of our operating principles and profiles, with pictures, of our leadership team. You're not going to find a lot of detail because I don't want you arriving with any preconceived notions, but there should be enough there to help jumpstart the process."

Nina stood up from the booth and gave me a strong and decidedly less awkward hug, complete with a peck on the cheek.

"This is great," she said. "I can't wait to tell the team that you're coming to visit. Everyone will be very excited."

Nina scurried out of the restaurant. I finished my breakfast and sent a text message to my boss that I was taking a short sabbatical, effective immediately. I got in my car and headed home to pack my bags. I wasn't sure what you were supposed to wear to kick off the opportunity of a lifetime, so I stuck to the basics -- jeans, polo shirts, and sneakers.

Of course if I had known then what I know now, I would have followed Nina to Vermont with nothing but the shirt on my back.

Conversely, I might have tightly grabbed hold of my heart, sped away and assumed a new identity in the mountains of Mexico.

Either or.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Camp OMG WTF**

The entrance to Walden reminded me of the overnight camp I had gone to for five straight summers between the ages of ten and fourteen. I had wonderful memories of Camp Hickory. It was the place where I experienced my first kiss (the lovely Lorraine DeLella), my first taste of vodka (Gordon's), my first puking hangover (decidedly chunky and

painfully acidic), and my first acute realization that the world was not always as my parents, school and the church had described it. I often refer to Camp Hickory as my first college experience; and, unlike my actual college experience, I aced it.

Walden was situated off a secondary road set deep in the woods of northern Vermont. The written directions Nina included in her homework package had been far better than the recommendations of my Jeep's GPS navigational system. If I had listened to FiFi Leroux, as I called the device's metallic albeit disturbingly sensual voice, I would likely have meandered over the Canadian border, eh?

Walden's entrance consisted of a wide gravel driveway that ran beneath an arched white sign with forest-green type welcoming me to "A Community Unlike Yours." I smiled at the corny, self-deprecating tone and had a feeling I would enjoy my stay at Walden. Indeed the thought had crossed my mind at least a dozen times during the six-hour drive from Boston that if the men were half as smart as Nina and the women half as beautiful, I might be convinced to stay permanently.

The aforementioned Nina was waiting for me on the wraparound porch of the community center, just as she had promised. As I parked the car and walked towards her, I felt the kind of nervous flutter that I remembered from high school -- struggling to look confident and unfazed even as I wondered whether a woman as charming as Nina could ever be seriously interested in a goofball like me. The last twenty-four hours since meeting Nina again had been a dizzying non-stop pastiche of excitement, self-doubt, puppy love, intellectual curiosity, sexual fantasy, and the soundtrack from *Saturday Night Fever*. There was something about the beat and harmony of the Bee Gees, combined with the imagery of John Travolta's androgynous dance moves, that goaded my brain into working harder and faster. The background material Nina had given me proved more compelling than most Hollywood movie scripts, and I had read it through twice. I reacquainted myself with the community's namesake, *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau, and discovered its more recent and more relevant archetype, *Walden Two* by B.F. Skinner. And I traced Walden 3.0's evolution from a 1960s-era hippie commune to a thriving, self-contained community that now ranked as the tenth largest city in Vermont. I learned that the community was originally called "Tres Walden" in a gracious bow to its neighbors in nearby Quebec. It took several years for the abysmal French skills of the founders to be

recognized and corrected, and the community was renamed “Walden *Trois*.” When the NBA introduced the three-point shot back in 1979, some knucklehead Waldenites convinced the community to call itself “Walden Trey.” That lasted for less than a year when it was replaced by “Walden 3,” which was replaced by the current “Walden 3.0” during the dot-com boom of the late nineties. I still needed to learn and understand a lot more about Walden’s civic, cultural and corporate philosophies, but I liked what I had gleaned thus far and I was eager to show off my knowledge to Nina.

Nina stood up and watched with a broad smile as I approached her. She was wearing a pale yellow sundress and leather sandals. Her arms were crossed tightly over her chest the way people do when they are trying to hide something or keep their distance. In this case, however, it struck me that Nina too was struggling to contain her excitement. This was a special day for both of us. The first day of the rest of our lives. The beginning of something much bigger than either of us.

We embraced at the top step and exchanged air kisses.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” said Nina. “You must be tired from your drive, but there’s so much I want you to see and hear. So many people to meet and talk to. Would you like to freshen up or get a bite to eat? We’re going to have dinner with our leadership team, but there’s time for a quick snack. Or maybe something to drink? Coffee? A beer?”

Nina’s voice had the sing-song quality of a young girl combined with the rapid-fire efficiency of a Marine drill sergeant.

“A coffee would be good,” I said. “And I’d love to take a hot shower.”

Nina nodded. “How about this? I’ll get you settled in your room and drop off a coffee. How do you like it?”

“Milk, no sugar,” I said.

“Then you can relax for a while and I’ll pick you up in an hour for a quick tour of the community and then we can meet the others for dinner. Sound okay?”

“Perfect,” I said. “Should I grab my stuff from my car or will we be driving?”

“Your car can stay where it is,” said Nina. “In fact you won’t need it at all during your stay here. We don’t allow combustion engines anywhere in the residential district. We either walk, ride a bike, take a golf cart, or wait for a trolley.”

“A trolley?” I asked. “It’ll be like I never left Boston.”

“Our trolleys are a little different,” said Nina. “They’re quiet, safe and one-hundred percent emission-free.”

“Sure,” I said, “but do they smell like urine? I mean it’s not a real trolley if you can’t smell someone else’s piss.”

“I think you’ll get used to it,” said Nina. “But you’re staying right here in our community center slash hotel slash dining hall, so you’ll be right in the midst of everything we do.”

I went back to the car and removed my duffel and briefcase. Nina was waiting for me in the lobby. She was holding two cups of coffee and was standing alongside a tallish man who was also holding onto and sipping a coffee. A half-dozen or so other people were also mingling about the lobby, trying to look busy while surreptitiously sizing me up.

“Here’s your coffee,” she said, exchanging my briefcase for an oversized ceramic mug filled with a deliciously aromatic brew. “I think you’ll like it. It’s our custom blend that puts Starbucks and Dunkin’ to shame.”

I took a sip and nodded. “It is good. Surprisingly good.”

“I think you’ll find everything about Walden surprising,” said Nina. “At least I hope so.”

Nina’s male companion and I had been eyeing each other during this brief exchange of coffee banter.

Nina tapped her forehead like she could’ve had a V8.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “Jacob, this is my husband Allen Jefferies. Allen, this is my good friend Jacob Botticelli.”

The air that was sucked out of my lungs could have filled a dozen intergalactic black holes.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” said Allen. “Nina speaks very highly of you and we’re all excited that you’ve agreed to help get our story out. So welcome. Welcome to Walden.”

I’ve noticed that at time like these when drugs, alcohol or punching bags are not immediately available, one’s body often comes to the rescue. I took a sip of coffee to steady myself and then gagged and choked as the hot liquid went down the wrong pipe. Some of the coffee dribbled down my chin and as I tried to wipe it away I spilled the rest of the cup onto the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“No problem,” said Nina. “Let’s get you situated in your room and Allen and I will clean this up.”

I nodded in appreciation and embarrassment and watched as Allen headed off to get some paper towels. I followed Nina up a flight of stairs and watched her open a door marked “201.”

“This is our penthouse suite,” she said.

I followed Nina inside and almost tripped as she stopped short to throw open her arms and wave them around the room.

“Ta-da!” she said.

The room was the size of a Chevy Suburban. Literally. There was a single bed, a tiny nightstand, and a two-drawer dresser. And the kicker? No windows.

“There’s no one staying in 202,” said Nina, “so you won’t have to share a bathroom.”

Nina could hardly contain her giggles as she placed my briefcase on the bed and waved goodbye.

“Be back in an hour,” she said and closed the door behind her.

I sat on the bed, cradled my head between my legs, and emitted a litany of whispered shouts.

“What the fuck?”

“She’s fucking married?”

“Why the fuck didn’t she tell me?”

“Give me a fuckin’ break!”

“This is fuckin’ bullshit!”

“Fuck it.”

“Fuck. Fuck Fuck.”

“Fuck.”

Did you happen to notice a theme? There was a whole lot of fucking now that I knew I wouldn’t be doing any fucking.

“What a bitch.”

“What a fuckin’ bitch!”

I was rapidly progressing through the stages of mourning and had replaced anger with blame and resentment. This was all Nina’s fault. She should have said something. Warned me. But no, she wanted to get me up all the way up here before she sprung it on me. She knew how I’d react. She knew.

I was about to break my lifelong vow to never refer to a woman I knew with the C-word, when there was a knock at the door. I assumed it was Nina coming back to tell me that she had been terribly wrong to deceive me and



that the whole marriage thing with Allen was a sham and of course I would always be her truest of true loves.

I opened the door and was greeted by none other than the man of the hour himself, Mr. Allen Jefferies.

“Sorry to bother you,” he said, “but I thought you might want some fresh coffee.”

He handed me a mug and gave me that secret man-nod acknowledging that he knew I wanted to fuck his wife and that was okay because we both knew it would never happen but it was still okay for me to think about it because that’s what men do.

“Nina said to remind you that she’ll come by to get you in a little while.”

I thanked him and headed to the shower. I wanted to be clear-headed and clean-smelling when Nina arrived. I wanted her to know exactly what she was missing and grieve appropriately.