

# **Loving Ryan**

**A Novella  
By Edward H. Barr**

## Chapter One

I loved Ryan – more than I will ever love any man.

I heard him before I ever saw him. I heard the sounds he made on a piano as I walked through the upper lobby of the University Club in Pittsburgh to a Saturday evening party I didn't really want to attend.

I heard the faint sounds of an old song, "The Shadow of Your Smile," and I had a sudden feeling of sitting in front of a fireplace in the arms of someone who completely fulfilled me. The image of the fireplace lingered in my mind after the music had faded and I entered the large banquet room where the dance was always held.

My friend Sarah and I came that Saturday night to the University Club in Pittsburgh's Oakland section. We usually went to the U Club when we were home from college, mostly when we were bored. We knew there would be bodies there, typically the people we knew from Fox Chapel, the exclusive neighborhood near Pittsburgh where most of us grew up, or from Sewickley Heights or Upper St. Clair, the other rich areas of our old steel town.

Sarah and I were standing near the bar watching Drake Douglas make a fool of himself in the middle of the dance floor doing his version of the "Chicken." The son of Daniel Nelson Douglas, a former chairman of United Steel, Drake had lots of money, lots of inherited money. Sarah and I knew him from grade school and tolerated him, although he was obnoxious. Any other observer would say he was disgusting.

“I’ll be back,” I said to Sarah, leaving my drink on a nearby table. “I can’t take too much more of this.”

“I’ll watch the rest of the performance,” she said, “so I can fill you in later.”

“Oh, thank you, daaaahling,” I said in mock gratitude, waving back over my shoulder and exiting the large ballroom. “Don’t spare the details.”

The U Club is one of many stately buildings on the University of Pittsburgh campus. A four-story brick structure, with several meeting and banquet rooms and sleeping quarters for guests, it is open to members from the university, as well as to anyone who is admitted and can afford the fees. An upper middle class and high class of people use the facility for parties, receptions, private meetings, banquets and other social events.

I drifted into the “Fraternity Room” because I knew the bartender, Tommy Jacobs, whose sister had played on a select soccer team with me when we were kids. I also picked up on the piano music I had heard earlier. The piano player was in a corner in the shadows quietly improvising and I asked Tommy Jacobs how his sister Becky was doing. Then I heard the unmistakable sound of a Schubert impromptu.

Looking back on it now, I guess I expected a fifty-ish guy with a black tuxedo and a toupe’ to be playing the piano, but instead, when he turned his face into the light, I saw the most gorgeous man I had ever seen in my life - dark, young, handsome, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Even seated at the piano bench, he looked athletic and powerful.

“When I heard you playing,” I said, moving close to the piano, “I knew you weren’t “Lenny Larson and His Velvet Touch, the guy who’s usually sitting in that seat.”

“Lenny’s got the flu,” he said softly. “I’m his replacement.”

“We never hear Lenny play much more than ‘Moon River,’” I said.

“This is a Schubert impromptu,” he said, continuing to play.

“In E flat,” I added, “and, you have beautiful eyes. “I’ll bet you’re really cocky.”

“And I’ll bet you’re a ‘Chappie,’” he responded.

Right away he had me figured out. I was a “Chappie,” the word that even we who live in wealthy Fox Chapel call ourselves.

“I am,” I said with a certain amount of pride.

“You probably played the glockenspiel in high school,” he said.

“Nope, trumpet,” I said. “I was a big Miles Davis fan.”

He almost stopped playing when I said that. His eyes widened.

“Got you there, didn’t I?” I said.

“Next you’ll tell me you liked Thelonius Monk,” he said, moving his eyes from me to the keyboard and back.

“Yeh,” I liked Monk I replied, “but I liked Bill Evans better. I took piano lessons, too.”

“Bill Evans...very cool,” he said. “And I suppose you played on the Fox Chapel lacrosse team?” He was trying to dig for a real, true Chappie.

“No way,” I said. “That’s for sissies. I played soccer. Got an ACL scar to prove it, too.” I pulled my Laura Ashley dress up to show him.

“Remember where you are, Chappie?” he cautioned, looking around to see if anyone was paying attention.

“Where do you go to school and why do you smoke?” I asked, changing the subject and dropping the hem of my dress.

“Senior at Pitt,” he said. “And I only smoke when I play the piano. Where’re you? Vassar?”

“Allegheny College,” I said, and added, “Meadville. Don’t you think smoking’s a disgusting habit?”

“Don’t want to confuse Allegheny College with Allegheny County Community College, do we, Chappie?” he said, blowing smoke in my direction. “And, yes, smoking is disgusting but....”

“I know, you only smoke when you play. Doing your Bill Evans thing.”

“Chappie, anyone who knows about Bill Evans definitely qualifies as a friend of mine,” he said, a huge smile lighting his face.

“Elizabeth’s the name,” I said. “You’re a smart aleck, aren’t you?”

“Not so much, Elizabeth,” he said, drawing out the second syllable of my name. He was coming to the end of the impromptu and had added an improvised coda, focusing on the keyboard.

After he ended the song, he leaned toward me and into the light. That's when I saw just how beautiful his eyes were - the clearest, brightest blue eyes I had ever seen.

"So, you're coming to my game then?" I said matter-of-factly.

"Sure," he replied, surprising me. "When is it, Chappie?"

"Tomorrow. We're playing Chatham College, a sissy girls' school here in town."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he said and began playing the Beatles' "I've just seen a face."

I thought about his blue eyes as I walked back to the ballroom and Sarah. I never thought those eyes would close for good, the light disappearing from them forever. I never doubted I would love him deeply and I never thought Ryan Capeletti would die.

## Chapter Two

I saw him during a time out. He stood by the fence surrounding the Chatham College soccer field. I felt great, young and strong and in the best shape of my life. My knee didn't bother me at all. I had scored two goals and wondered if he had seen them.

The game was tied 2-all. Chatham fielded a good team and I was going head-to-head with their best player, a 6-foot Russian exchange student named Olga. She and I had bumped heads a few times and I had elbowed her on the back, a sharp, deep blow, if her yelp was any indication. In fact, I was penalized for the infraction and my coach called me a few choice words.

"Look, Liz," she said, "I want you to be aggressive but watch out for the stupid mistakes. We want this game. OK? We get it; we get the conference. Stay cool. Back off the Russian."

I frowned, knowing Ryan watched and hating her calling me "Liz."

"Don't worry. We'll get conference," I said before running back to the field.

We played a hard last period and I felt exhausted but we won the game in the final minute on a goal that I set up, and we danced and hugged as if we had won the gold medal at the summer Olympics. I saw Ryan still standing in the same place by the fence, holding the one page game program. As my teammates and I walked past him toward the dressing room, I tossed my hair back and smiled at him.

He would know my name and some other information from the program.

Elizabeth Jensen, Senior, Captain

Shady Side Academy  
Pittsburgh, PA  
Age 20  
Height: 5' 9"  
Major: Business Administration

I have to admit that I forgot about him in the excitement and celebration in the dressing room. But when I came out he was still there, dressed in a dark blue cotton turtle neck sweater, hands in the pockets of his tan cargo pants. His eyes seemed even bluer in the daylight and I walked right up to him, said, "Hello" and kissed him on the lips.

"Did that shock you?" I asked.

"You're top banana in the shock department, Chappie," he responded.

"So, it's Ryan Capeletti," I said. "Gorgeous Italian boy, most likely from Bloomfield?"

"You must be majoring in private investigation, Chappie" he said, surprised that I had kissed him and wiping his lips. He didn't try to hold me or kiss me back, like some macho fraternity guy might. "Actually I am from Bloomfield, born and bred there."

"How'd ya like that kiss, Ryan from Bloomfield?"

He just smiled and said, "That was nice, Chappie. You know what Shelly said?"

No, Ryan, what did Shelly say?"

"He said,

“See! the mountains kiss high heaven,  
And the waves clasp one another;  
No sister flower would be forgiven  
If it disdained its brother;  
And the sunlight clasps the earth,  
And the moonbeams kiss the sea:  
What are all these kissings worth,  
If thou not kiss me?”

“That was nice, Ryan from Bloomfield,” I said. “Are you an English major who plays piano or a piano major who plays English?”

“I’m an English major, Chappie,” he said. “But I’ve been playing the piano since I was five.”

“What did you think of the game?” I asked, taking his arm.

“You certainly run around a lot,” he said, tightening his bicep.

I wanted him to say that he thought I was tough and talented and I knew that he thought I was, but I also knew he wouldn’t say it.

He waved the game program at me. “Jensen,” he said. “I don’t suppose you’re related to the people who have Jensen Boulevard downtown named for them, Chappie?”

“Same,” I replied. “I feel ridiculous every time I drive on that boulevard.”

“Hey, Chappie,” he said, “you shouldn’t. You can’t be held responsible for them.”

“Oh yeh,” I said. “How would you feel if you had to drive on Capeletti Boulevard or go to lunch in the Capeletti Room of some building?”

“I’d feel OK,” he said, “unless I had been whacked by you in a soccer game. You sure whacked number 11. Do you ladies always play so rough?”

“I’m no lady, pal.” I said, bumping my shoulder into him.

“Hey, easy Chappie,” he said, pulling away and sprinting a few yards. I noticed a great butt and he noticed my noticing.

“Come back, Thelonius,” I teased. “I won’t hurt you.”

We walked quietly for a few blocks through the campus, enjoying the fall beauty.

“So,” I said, “are you coming to my game at Westminster this weekend?”

“Can’t do it Chappie,” he said. “I’m playing in a chamber group in Oakland. “We’re doing the Mendelssohn Trio in D Minor and an adagio I wrote.”

“Of course, a chamber group,” I said, smiling. We had reached the team bus. “Here’s where we part, Blue Eyes. Good luck with your trio.”

“Good luck at Westminster, Chappie,” he replied. “Watch out for the Russians.”

“No Russians at Westminster, just Amish,” I replied as my teammate Sarah came to stand beside me.

“Well, watch out for horse drawn carriages, then, Chappie,” he said, waving over his shoulder and walking away.

”And who was that?” my teammate Sarah asked as we climbed aboard the bus and took our seats.

“A piano player,” I said.

“Does he have any friends? A drummer? A guitarist?” she asked, giving me the third degree about someone I hardly knew as we road on Interstate 79 from Pittsburgh to Meadville. It was true I knew little facts about Ryan Capeletti but I felt somehow that I had known him forever.

When we arrived in Meadville, I called his cell phone, from the number I had from the restaurant, but he didn’t seem surprised to hear from me.

“You sure you’re not studying to be a private eye, Chappie?” he asked.

“I bribed the manager of the U Club for your number,” I said.

“Friend of Daddy Jensen, Chappie?” he asked. I could hear him practicing arpeggios on the piano.

“You got it,” I said. “Look, I just wanted to ask what you would think if I told you I love you.”

“I’d say you probably got hit too hard in that soccer game, Chappie,” he said and hung up.

### Chapter Three

I re-injured my knee at Westminster. It wasn't fatal or career-ending, just a sprain, but it hurt like hell and I watched most of the game from the bench. I'm sure I had overdone my playing because my mother and father were in the stands.

It was Homecoming for Westminster and my mother was an alumnae. The day was pretty bad as Homecomings go, overcast and cold, not one of those picturesque Pennsylvania fall days, scarlet and vermillion. My parents sat uncomfortable and huddled in the stands, a blanket across their aging knees, along with a dozen or so equally miserable and blanketed parents.

I wanted to escort them to more comfortable surroundings, tell them they didn't have to do this parental thing. I'm sure the only reason they persevered was that they thought it the right thing to do. They obviously preferred to sit it out anonymously, rather than with the fat, balding middle class bankers and doctors who roamed from one building to another in the small college town.

We lost 3-1 to a weaker team, and my parents insisted I ride to Pittsburgh with them to eat dinner and spend the weekend.

We ate in a private room at the Duquesne Club in Pittsburgh. My great great grandfather had helped to found the club, along with a few guys known as Carnegie and Mellon, and we ate, appropriately, in the Jensen Room, always giving my mother and father a great amount of pride, pride that I had a hard time understanding.

“Well, Liz, have you completed your applications to Wharton?” my mother asked between bites of her Virginia spots.

Mother and Father had me going to Wharton or Harvard for my MBA, an act I was extremely undecided about.

“No,” I replied pushing my Cobb salad around with a fork. “I haven’t applied anywhere.”

“You’ll be left behind, Lizzy,” my father said, pulling a cigar from his suit pocket and clipping the end with a gold, engraved tool my mother had bought him.

I used to like that he called me “Lizzy” until I realized he was patronizing me. I knew that from his mistresses and his chauvinistic attitude with female members of his business.

“I’m not at all certain I want to own an MBA from Wharton,” I said.

“Of course you do,” my mother responded, looking at my father for validation.

“It’s the ticket these days, Lizzy,” he said, blowing a draft of thick white smoke up toward the sculpted ceiling of the Jensen Room. “I can talk to Dean Morgan at Wharton, if you want me to.”

“No, for God’s sake,” I said, “don’t do that.” I felt the little I had eaten twist in my stomach.

“Well, you must decide soon, Lizzy,” he said and mercifully changed the subject, trying to inject some humor into our conversation. “Do you think you should go on with this soccer business? You’ve hurt your knee again and you don’t want to limp around like your old man, the aged victim of a youthful rugby war.”

“I want to continue,” I said. “It helps me release my anger.”

“Goodness, Liz,” my mother interjected, again deferring to my father, “why would someone as young as you with so few problems need to release anger?”

I wanted to pull her up out of the chair and yell, “You don’t have to clear everything with him!” But I said nothing, instead. I said nothing knowing the dinner would end soon and I could go home to my room and be alone.

## Chapter Four

I visited Ryan the next day at the Music Building on Pitt's campus. I walked around the building, opening one practice room after another, annoying all manner of musicians-in-bloom, an opera singer, a violinist, even an oboe player. Finally, after listening outside the door of a piano room, I found my guy.

I barged in and he was on his cell phone, talking to a "Bianca," an unlit cigarette hanging from his mouth.

"Yes, Bianca, I will do just as you say. No, Bianca, I wouldn't have it any other way. You are right. You are always right. And, I love you, Bianca. You know that I love you. There is no other."

I was a little upset by the conversation but refused to leave. If he had a girl already, he was going to have to sweet talk her in front of me. If I had to compete, I wanted to know exactly with whom. I reached over and yanked the cigarette from his mouth and he looked surprised.

Finally, he ended his love talk, "Yes, Bianca. I love you, too," he said and closed the cell phone, smiling at me.

"So," I said, throwing the cigarette into the waste can, "there's another woman in your life?"

"Oh yeh, Chappie," he said, playing a series of diminished chords on the piano. "I'm afraid you'll have a tough time competing with her. She's as stubborn as you."

"Who exactly is this other woman?" I asked, sitting beside him on the piano bench and flattening my fingers on some random keys.

"My mother, Chappie."

“You call your mother by her first name?”

“Of course, Chappie. What do you call yours?”

“Not Eleanor, that’s for sure,” I said. “Nor would I call Barkley, Barkley.”

“Barkley!” Ryan said. “That’s great. We’ll name our first born, Barkley Capeletti. He’ll be a great musician, a tenor sax man.”

”Soccer player,” I said.

“Right,” he replied. “A saxophone playing soccer man.”

“What about your father,” I said. “Won’t he want us to name his grandson, Gino, or Guido, whatever his name is?”

“His name was Richard, Chappie. No sexy Italian name. And, he’s been deceased for twelve years.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, putting my arm around his shoulder.

“Nothing to be sorry about, Chappie,” he said, playing a Chopin prelude. “Richard led a good life. He died from cancer, which he probably grew after working for the Pennsylvania Railroad and Conrail. He spent too much time in asbestos.”

“Sorry, anyway,” I said. “It would have been nice for little Barkley to know his paternal grandfather.”

“He will,” Ryan said, playing the beginning of a famous Bill Evans song, “We’ll be together again.”

“Why don’t we go to your place,” I said.

Chappie?!” he responded. “What kind of boy do you think I am?”

“I’ve been using my imagination, Kid,” I said, rubbing my hand on his stomach, feeling the rippling muscles.

He turned on the bench and put his hands on my face.

“I’m saving myself for our wedding day, Chappie,” he said in mock seriousness.

“Let’s go get married then,” I said, putting my hands on his legs.

“Shouldn’t I get down on one knee to propose, Chappie,” he said, moving from the bench to the floor and reaching for my hand.

“I accept,” I said, pulling him up by the hand until he put his arms around me and I felt the power of his forearms and the strength in his back.

“Mmmm,” I said, leaning into his body, feeling myself relax. “I like this.”

He waited a minute and eased me away, holding me at arm’s length.

“Let’s go to your place,” I whispered.

“I have a class in ten minutes, Chappie,” he whispered back to me, before kissing me.

“Don’t do this to me, you tease” I said, wrapping my arms around him as he walked out the door. “You’ll have to carry me to class. I will be a permanent attachment to your side. You’ll never be rid

of me. We'll be in the Guinness Book of World Records, the longest living, and only, Siamese Twins attached after their birth."

Finally I relaxed my grip and he walked down the hall. "Just wait," I said. "You'll know what it feels like to be stalked."

He peeked back around the corner and blew me a kiss.

I called him later that evening and invited him to dinner for the next night.

"You just can't get enough of me, can you, Chappie?" he said.

"I'm going to take you out to a romantic dinner, fill you full of wine and then seduce you," I said.

"I'll remember to wear my chastity belt," he replied. "Only Bianca has a key."

"I'll tear it off," I teased. "You saw what I did to Olga."

"What you did to Olga should be done to no human being," he replied.

"Just pick me up at six o'clock at 718 Ellsworth Avenue in Shadyside," I said. "My friend, Sarah, has an escape pad there."

"An 'escape pad?'" he asked. "It sounds like something for crack dealers."

"Not quite," I said. "It's a place she rents that her parents don't know about."

"OK, Chappie," he said. "There's much I don't know about you rich people."

“Don’t worry, Mr. Poor Boy from Bloomfield,” I said. “I’ll teach you everything.”

“I’m not sure how much I want to learn,” he said. “See you at six tomorrow.”

## Chapter Five

He picked me up on Ellsworth and we drove to the Hyehold, a four-star restaurant in the suburbs of Pittsburgh. Actually, it's more like a castle in the woods of Pittsburgh.

“This looks like a fortress, Chappie,” he said as the valet took the keys to the car and we walked across the parking lot. “Do we joust for a table?”

“If we must,” I said, taking his arm, “I’ll know that I’m with Lancelot.”

“Right,” he said. “More like Lance-a-little.”

We sat in one of the small rooms of the Hyehold with two other small tables. One of the couples looked like two high school seniors on their first date.

“Expensive way to get laid,” I said. Ryan looked at me disapprovingly. “Oops,” I said. “My handsome Italian does not like bad language.”

“It’s not that, Chappie,” he said looking me right in the eyes. “You’re better than that.”

“OK,” I said, “Not another cuss word....if you promise to teach me all the Italian ones.”

He ignored my request and opened the menu. “Some bill of fare at this place, Chappie.”

“Not exactly like Eat and Park,” I said. “Will you be having the pasta?”

“Hey, I’m a steak and potatoes guy,” he said.

“Not your typical Italian?” I replied.

“Italian from this place?” he said. “I’ll stick with the filet mignon. Are you sure you can afford this, Chappie?”

“This one’s on Barkley,” I said, flashing my dad’s Am Ex Gold Card.

“In that case,” he said, “let’s order the champagne.”

“Let’s,” I said and toasted him with my water glass.

As we drove back to Pittsburgh after the meal, he said, “That place is big on ambiance and small on nutrition, Chappie.”

“It’s the place to be seen,” I said. “Very important consideration to Eleanor and Barkley.”

We pulled up in front of Sarah’s apartment and walked to the door. “You’re coming in, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Can’t do, Chappie,” he said, kissing me lightly on the cheek.

“How will I devastate you if I can’t get you alone?” I asked, tugging on his arm.

“You devastate me already, Chappie,” he said and kissed me gently on the lips.

“But I want you,” I said, using my best Marlene Dietrick accent.

“And I want you, too, Chappie,” he said. “But tomorrow I have rehearsal. Gotta be up real early.”

“Is there something I don’t know, Ryan?” I asked. It was possible that he was gay, even though he exuded such masculinity.

“You are so beautiful,” he said, changing the subject. “Are you sure you’re not Italian. Those dark eyes, that Roman nose.”

“Are you kidding me?” I said. “Mother wouldn’t hear of it. We’re in the Blue Book for God’s sake. She tells people we go back to the Mayflower. I think she means the Mayflower Moving and Storage Company.”

“I don’t know, Chappie,” he said, holding my chin in his hand and turning my face. “That aquiline nose. That strong chin. Are you sure there wasn’t a Dago in the woodpile somewhere?”

“I’ll ask Eleanor the next time I see her,” I said, pulling him toward the door. “Now, come on in here.”

“Sorry, Chappie,” he said, ducking away and handing me a CD he had pulled from his coat pocket. Go in and listen to this, Chappie,. It’s a little something I wrote for you.” He backed away then toward his car and said, “Gotta go home” and blew me a kiss.

I stood by the apartment door, holding the CD and watching him drive away.

## Chapter Six

Sarah Sutton was my best friend. We had gone to pre-school together, to Ellis School, a private grade school, and to Shady Side Academy. We were each a member of the same club and team at Shadyside and no one knew me better than Sarah, including my parents, who, next to Sarah, knew almost nothing.

We sat together in Kiva Han, a non-Starbucks coffee shop in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh, across the street from a Starbucks.

“Who is this guy?” Sarah asked.

“Just a guy,” I said. “Just a wonderful, amazing, incredible guy.”

“I’ve heard this before,” Sarah said. “Didn’t I hear this about Neal Hardon?”

“You heard something like this about Neal Hard-on,” I said, exaggerating the last syllable of his name.

“And, didn’t I hear something like this about Jimmy DeRiggi?” she said.

“He was different,” I said.

“Different.’ That’s an understatement,” she responded. “Isn’t he in jail or something?”

“He’s not in jail,” I said, defending poor Jimmy. “He went to work for the county and used some workers to help build his house.”

“Right,” she said. “And that was just the slightest bit illegal. As I recall, in high school you were going to save him from his poverty,

as I recall. It was a real ‘spiritual’ thing with you. Mother Theresa Jensen.”

“You exaggerate,” I said, sipping my coffee.

“You were going to save Jimmy from his Sharpsburg life,” she said. “And now what? Are you going to save this Ryan Capeletti from his East Liberty existence?”

“This is different,” I said.

“What’s different?” she said. “He’s a poor boy, right? Dad’s dead. Mother works in, what, a convenience store?”

“A confectionary store,” I said.

“OK, a confectionary store. That’s an anachronism, if I ever heard one,” she said.

“It’s his uncle’s, OK?” I responded. “He’s had it for thirty years. Ryan’s mom just helps out.”

“And Ryan, he’ll play piano there?” she added sarcastically.

“This is different, Sarah,” I said. “Really. I feel in my soul that Ryan is my life mate.”

“And what do Eleanor and Barkley think about your life mate?” she asked.

“They’re not keen on it,” I admitted. “But, they’ll have to get used to it.”

“You’re asking for trouble, Elizabeth,” Sarah said.

## Chapter Seven

I planned a romantic weekend for Ryan and me.

“Where’re we going,” Ryan asked as I drove east on the Parkway.

“Big surprise, dimples,” I said.

“Does it have a piano?” he asked, leaning against the car door.

“In fact it does,” I said. “But I intend to keep you away from it.”

“Did you like our song?” he asked.

“I love it and just happen to have it here with me,” I said, slipping it from my pocket and sliding it into the CD player. “I’ve been playing it over and over and even played it for my friend, Sarah. She a little bit country, though. Didn’t quite get it.”

“Not everyone does, Chappie.”

We drove to the small village of Ligonier where my parents keep a country estate.

“Whoa, who lives here,” Ryan asked. “the ghost of Andrew Carnegie?”

“We do,” I said. “My family, I mean. The three of us. We come out here in the winter when my mother’s allergies can’t be bothered.”

“This is a lot of house, Chappie,” he said.

“Oh, we’re not going there,” I responded, driving around the back of the house to the bungalow. “We’re going here.”

“Servants quarters,” he said.

“I suppose,” I answered. “Maybe back at the turn of the twentieth century. I have never really known servants. That would embarrass me.”

We parked in front of the bungalow and I opened the trunk of the car to retrieve the dinners I had bought at Pittsburgh’s fine Italian restaurant, Abruzzi.

“A little something to keep us nourished,” I said, as we walked into the bungalow.

I asked Ryan to fix a fire in the fireplace and we ate our Italian dinner in front of the blaze.

After eating, we began kissing and were soon shedding our clothes.

“Look, Chappie,” he said, before we had gone too far. “Will you marry me?”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” I said, leaning back and looking into his eyes.

“Totally,” he said.

“For a minute there I wondered if....” I said

“Wondered what?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing, Ryan,” I said. “I guess I just wondered if you were really interested in sex.”

“Nothing interests me more than sex, with the possible exception of a new Steinway,” he said, reaching for me and pulling me to him.

“Ryan,” I said, in a rare moment of introspection, “I have wanted you since the night I saw you for the first time and we’ve known each other for, what, three weeks. Do you realize you just asked me to marry you?”

“Of course,” he said. “But you’re mistaken, Chappie, I have known you for eternity. I love you and I have always loved you. Besides that, you’re my best friend.”

“Then how can I deny you?” I said, reaching for him.

Ryan was as gentle and imaginative as an artist. He kissed me and caressed me until I thought I’d tear the last of his clothes off. When I thought I might have to rip my own under clothes away, he carefully unhooked my bra. His eyes never left me and his slight smile never left his face.

Then Ryan Capeletti slowly and softly kissed me and touched me and never rushed to penetrate me. He was the third man I had made love with and unquestionably the best, the others being a high school quickie and a drunken fraternity brother.

Everything was slow going with Ryan, and he loved to watch – everything. And, he wanted me to watch. We always left the lights on or the drapes open. And he talked.

“You are perfect, Chappie,” he whispered. “Look at you! Look at the curve of your breasts. Look at your hips.”

“A little wide,” I said.

“No, Chappie, perfect,” he said. “Perfect for childbearing.”

“We’d better wait until we’re married,” I teased. “Big Barkley won’t like it.”

“What do you like, Chappie,” he asked.

“Touch me,” I whispered.

“Where, Chappie? Show me. Move my hand there,” he said.

And, I’d move his hands and his fingers and his other parts. And he’d tell me what he liked. And, he watched me and I grew to enjoy his watching. I performed for him and we made love as if we were making art.

Ryan wore a charm, an abstract yin-yang symbol, not the black-on-white, white-on-black trinket that New Age shops sold, but something his father had made and given to him, a symbol more abstract and purposefully rough.

“What’s it mean to you, Ryan,” I asked.

“It means we must live in balance and live true to our nature,” he said. “Good and bad, we all have a specific nature to live out, something we haven’t finished from our previous visits here. And, it’s both good and bad.”

“What were you before?” I asked.

“Something less,” he said. “We’re all cycling upward. I was probably a honky-tonk piano man, playing in a New Orleans brothel.”

“That’s where you perfected your touch,” I said. “And what was I?”

“You, Chappie, were a warrior,” he responded. “You were a runner for Caesar, carrying a spear and kicking the enemy out of your path. You were definitely fearsome.”

“And what will you be next?” I asked.

“Maybe I’ll be Bill Evans next, and then in the life after that one I’ll be Schubert, and then Bach in the life after that, and then who knows, maybe a nun. We all live many lifetimes, Chappie,” he said. “And, time is an illusion. We can go backward or forward; it doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’ll be near me in each one. We were together before. We’ll be together always. You know what Dante said.”

“What did Dante say, Ryan?”

“I have been here before,  
 But when or how I cannot tell:  
 I know the grass beyond the door,  
 The sweet keen smell,  
 The sighing sound, the lights around the shore.

You have been mine before,  
 How long ago I may not know;  
 But just when at that swallow’s soar  
 Your neck turned so,  
 Some veil did fall, I knew it all of yore.

Has this been thus before?  
 And shall not thus time’s eddying flight  
 Still with our lives our love restore

In death's despite,  
And day and night yield one delight once more?"

"You better stop reciting poetry, Ryan," I said. "I will definitely attack you."

"Poetry is music, Chappie," he said, "and it carries the Truth. We have been here before."

"Oh, yeh? If you come back as a nun, what will I be?" I asked.

"Obviously a priest, Chappie," he said. "I'll be Clare and you'll be Francis."

"Francis of Assisi," I like that idea," I said, standing and beginning a sermon to the pigeon that had roosted on the window. "But, wait a minute, they never married."

"We were married many different times in many lifetimes ago, Chappie," he said. "We've always been together, married or not."

I liked the idea that I would always be near him, and I half believed him. He had entered my soul, no question about it. This wasn't just a ploy to get over on me.

## Chapter Eight

I don't know why I went out with Pierce Johnson. Perhaps it was to test my love for Ryan. In any event, I went to dinner with Pierce a week after Ryan and I had returned from our weekend. The dinner with Pierce turned into a fiasco.

He picked me up at 7pm and we went to a restaurant in downtown Pittsburgh called Palomino.

"You look great, Liz," he said when he helped remove my coat at the table. I had the unnerving feeling that he was looking at my breasts when he said it. I should have known things weren't going to go well when he let his hand linger on my shoulder after helping with my coat.

"Hey, there's Buck Leonard," he said, pointing to a guy across the restaurant. We had both known Buck, son of the owner of a Pittsburgh investment firm since grade school. "Hey, Buck," Pierce yelled. "Ooooga. Ooooga."

Everyone in the restaurant looked at our table as Buck returned his own "Ooooga."

"What the hell was that?" I asked Pierce, sitting and slumping at the table.

"That was our fraternity call," he said, smugly, still standing. "If you're nice to me, I'll share the secret handshake." He grinned and stared lewdly into my eyes.

"I don't think I need to know the handshake," I said. "What I'd like to know is what's worth eating in this place?"

“Oh, you’ll want to know the handshake,” he said. “All women do.”

“I think I’ll have a drink,” I said and ordered a wine spritzer.

He ordered an Old Fashioned and drank it quickly, nearly in one gulp, waving the empty glass to Buck, yelling another “Ooooga” and then ordering another. After he had two more Old Fashions and I had another spritzer, we ordered our meal.

Buck ordered Oysters Rockefeller for an appetizer and made a big scene with the waitress because he thought they were undercooked.

“Why would you bring us this shit?” he demanded of the young woman who looked as if it were her third day on the job. “Does the management let you serve this crap to its customers?”

In her defense, she said very little and stayed out of his intimidation radar, which may have upset him more. When she brought his salmon, he raged that it “looked like something the homeless wouldn’t eat.” He made her return it, as well.

Meanwhile, I ordered another two wine spritzers and hardly ate any of the filet I had ordered.

“These people think they can get away with feeding that crap to someone who knows better,” he said, chugging his Old Fashioned.

“Why don’t you just give it a break?” I said, beginning to feel quite fuzzy and very pissed off.

“Hey, you’re not getting angry with old Pierce, are you?” he said, reaching under the table and squeezing my knee.

Ordinarily, that wouldn't trouble me but I was just pissed and drunk enough to explode on him.

"Get your goddamn hand off me," I yelled, standing and knocking my glass of water to the floor.

"Ooooga," he yelled, standing and raising his fist for Buck to see.

"I've had enough of this shit," I said and tipsily walked to the hostess station. "Will you please order me a cab?" I asked, slurring the words a little. "And I'm sorry for the way my friend, I mean, that asshole and I have acted. Will you please give this to the waitress." I handed her a twenty-dollar bill and walked to the lobby to await the cab.

The night was cold and I stood outside hoping the air would sober me. Finally, the cab arrived and I asked the driver to take me to Ryan's apartment.

I stood a little wobbly in front of the door to his apartment and pushed the bell. I was afraid he might not be there and had no idea what I might do if he wasn't. Finally he answered in his robe.

"Chappie," he said. "This is a nice surprise. I thought you were going out with Sarah."

"I love you, Ryan," I said, falling against the doorway.

"Chappie," he said, removing his robe and putting it over my shoulders, "have you been drinking?"

"Just a little," I said, holding my thumb and forefinger up for measure.

"You better come in here," he said, leading me inside.

“I want to take a shower,” I said, beginning to tear up.

“Sure, Chappie,” he said, leading me toward the bathroom.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you feel good?”

“I want to cry,” I said, beginning to feel the tears trickle down my face. “When a woman cries, she should always cry in the shower so no one will know.”

“OK, Chappie,” he said, pushing the door closed behind me. “You go in there and cry as long as you want. I’ll wait our here.”

I took a long and hot shower and cried as I had not cried since I was a child. I felt much better afterward, except for the queasy feeling in my stomach.

“Here, drink this,” Ryan said, after I came into the living room, dressed only in his robe. He had made me an herbal tea. “This will fix what’s wrong with you.”

“You mean I shouldn’t take some of the snake that bit me?” I joked.

“That’s the last thing you should do,” he said.

“We sat there quietly for a good while. He had put Chopin’s nocturnes on his CD player and the sounds of Maurizio Pollini playing those beautiful works was both soothing and despairing. I felt the tears welling up again.

“What’s wrong, Chappie?” he asked.

“I went to dinner with Pierce Johnson,” I said, curling my lower lip like a child who has been caught eating the cookies.

“That’s OK, Chappie,” he said.

“No it’s not,” I replied. “It’s not OK. He’s a jerk, a rich jerk. He made a complete ass of himself and me. He thinks that just because his dad owns Johnson Steel Fabrication the world should bow down to him.”

Ryan said nothing; he just looked at me.

“Don’t you want to know why I went out with him?” I asked.

“It’s your business, Chappie,” he said. “I’m sure you had a good reason.”

“I don’t know why I went out with him,” I said.

“I can’t help you with it,” he replied.

“Maybe I wanted to see if I really love you,” I said, reaching for a Kleenex.

“You love me, Chappie,” he said.

“I do, don’t I,” I said. “I really do.”

“Yes, Chappie, you really do,” he said, sitting beside me on the sofa. “You always have and you always will.”

“That’s so nice,” I said before falling asleep in his arms.

## Chapter Nine

We slept in until 11am and then woke and made love. He never said a word about my having been drunk or having gone on a date with Pierce Johnson.

“So, what does this day have in store for us, Chappie,” he asked as we stood under the water in the shower. “Shall we drive to the local Justice of the Peace and marry?”

“No way, buddy,” I said, scrubbing his back. “We’re going to do that right, all the bells and whistles. Besides, we want Bianca to be present.”

“OK, so what should we do if we can’t tie the knot?” he asked.

I had a wild thought and said, “We’re going bareback riding.”

“Whoa, Chappie,” he said, raising his hands. “That’s not in my genetic code. Besides, are you sure your stomach is up for it?”

“Don’t worry about a thing, Ryan,” I said, pinching him on his nice butt and hurrying out of the shower. “My stomach’s made of cast iron and I’ll pick your horse for you. It’ll be like falling off a log.”

“Hey, forget that word, ‘falling,’” he said, closing the shower door.

When he exited the shower and I saw him standing before the mirror with the carved abdominal muscles and broad shoulders, I attacked him and we made love again on the floor of the bathroom. Finally, we dressed and drove over to Henley Stables, a pristine boarding place near Ligonier.

“Hey, Chappie,” Ryan said, running his finger over the wooden stable, “I know people in Pittsburgh who don’t live this well.”

“Wait here,” I said, pointing to Sharky, an old gelding. “He’ll keep you company. He’s a gentle old soul who’s used mostly with children. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Wait. Wait,” he said as I rounded the corner. “Oh, well, old man,” he said to the horse, “I guess we’re going to have to get to know each other.”

“You don’t really have to establish rapport with them,” a voice said behind Ryan. “Just be the master.”

I walked into the room just as Drake Douglas was introducing himself to Ryan.

“He’s a beautiful horse,” Ryan said.

“Yes,” Drake replied. “He reflects years of good breeding, not unlike Elizabeth here. You’re the piano man, aren’t you?”

“I’m Ryan Capeletti” Ryan said, extending a hand to Drake, “a friend of Elizabeth.”

“Rumor has it you’re a bit more than just friends,” Drake said, pulling on his riding gloves.

“Believe half of what you see and none of what you hear,” Ryan said.

“Real clever, there,” Drake said.

Just then a group of young men and women entered the stables.

“So, where’re you from Ryan?” Drake asked. “We have most of the desirable addresses here.” He pointed to the members of the group who had now assembled at his rear. “Moirra is from Upper St. Clair.” She curtsied. “Princess is from Mt. Lebanon, a poor relative.” She beamed a signature smile. “Pierce here is from Sewickley Heights and Biff here and I are from Fox Chapel.”

I’m from Bloomfield,” Ryan said.

“Well, piano man form Bloomfield,” Drake said, “how’s about coming to the party I’m having tonight. You could tickle the ivories for us.”

“I’m not sure you could afford me,” Ryan said.

“Touche’, piano man,” Drake responded. “But, I do think we can afford you.” He turned to his friends and smiled and his friends returned knowing looks.

“I don’t do private parties,” Ryan said, becoming annoyed.

“Just pretend it’s the U Club,” Drake returned. “Although, my house is definitely twice as big as that goofy place.”

“Sorry,” he said, hoisting himself up on Sharky as if he’d been riding all his life. “Elizabeth and I have some riding to do.” With that he pulled Sharky around, the horse dropping a steaming turd at Drake’s feet, cooperating with Ryan as if he disliked Drake as much as the rest of us.

Drake and his crew stood gaping at the excrement.

“That was pretty slick,” I said as we rode across a meadow.

“No, it was really pretty bad, Chappie,” he said, stopping Sharky. “I was ready to punch that smart ass. In my neighborhood that’s how we responded to dorks.”

“You were perfect,” I said.

“No, Chappie, don’t kid yourself,” he said. “This is not my kind of company. I’m not like these people.”

“But, I’m these people, Ryan,” I said. “And we love each other.”

“You’re different, Chappie,” he said. “These people are as phony as they come.”

“Hey, they’re not all like that,” I argued.

“They suck the life out of each other,” Ryan said.

“Hey, wait,” I said, feeling offended.

“Life is too short, Chappie, to accommodate those people,” Ryan said. “I’ll not do it. And, you need to see clearly the choice you make when you agree to spend your life with me. Love is not blind, Chappie. It sees clearly all that you are and all that you’re not. I accept all of you and you need to accept all of me – without them.”

“I accept you, but don’t write them off simply because they are rich,” I said.

“It’s not their wealth alone,” he said. “You brought me here to meld two worlds that won’t blend. I am not like Drake and never will be. None of them has had a sincere or unselfish moment in their lives. Sure, they’ll all marry and continue the bloodlines but they’ll never find love. Some poor fool will marry Princess and

believe he has the rarest diamond, but he'll find that all he has is the ice."

"You're stereotyping all the wealthy," I responded. "I am not like that."

"You're right. You aren't, Chappie," he said. "That's why your soul came to mine. I am your soul mate."

He dismounted the horse and handed the bridle to me.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"This is not me, Chappie," he said. "I'll walk back to the bungalow."

"But it's five miles," I said.

"I can handle it, Chappie," he said, walking away. "Walking is redemptive. Think about what I said. You have a choice here. Choose love, Chappie."

I led the horses back to the stable and drove over to the bungalow. Ryan was sitting at the piano smoking a cigarette and playing Bach variations.

"Ryan Capeletti," I said, much too loudly, standing in the doorway. He stopped playing and stared at me. "I choose you, Ryan, and I love you. I always have and I always will."

## Chapter Ten

The Pitt Chamber Ensemble was playing Antonin Dvorak's Quartet in E-flat Major for Piano and Strings at the Carnegie Music Hall. My mother had been a member of the board of the Pittsburgh Symphony for years and had taken me to many performances as a girl but I preferred pop and hip hop just like everyone else my age. Until I reached college and learned about be bop and Beethoven and other greats with names like Chopin, Schubert and Dvorak.

Ryan looked great in his tuxedo and the brunette cello player in the red gown, "Amanda Cunningham, senior performance major" according to the program, looked gorgeous. Every time she stopped swinging her bow and glanced at Ryan, she smiled. I was ready to rush the stage and body check her.

"So, what's with the cello player?" I asked him as we left the music hall.

"It's just professional, Chappie," he said, squeezing my arm.

"You sure?" I asked. "She gave you some intimate looks through the Quartet. And when you played the Ravel encore she practically moved onto your lap."

"It's just the communication between two musicians, Chappie," he said. "Nothing to worry about."

"Do I have your word on it?" I asked.

"Scout's honor, Chappie," he said, holding his three fingers up in a scout salute.

“I can just see you in your little blue scout uniform,” I said.  
“Bianca must have been proud.”

“That she was, Chappie,” he said. “That she was. And you’ll be proud of Little Barkley when he’s a scout. So, where are we eating?”

“We’re celebrating,” I said. “Celebrating your concert and my good news.”

“What’s that, Chappie?” he asked.

“I got accepted!” I said.

“Stanford?” he asked.

“Yep!” I said, proudly. “And Big Barkley had nothing to do with it.”

“Then, let’s eat, Chappie,” he said, pulling me toward the parking lot.

We drove to the South Side of Pittsburgh and ate at a small Italian restaurant named “Maggie’s.”

“You must order the wedding soup, Chappie,” he said pointing to the menu. “It’s the best in town, with the exception of Bianca’s, of course.”

I ordered the soup and the lasagna. He ordered escarole and angel hair with oil.

“I have some good news, too, Chappie,” he said. “I’ve got a gig in New York.”

“Are you talking about New York City,” I asked.

“Yes, isn’t it great?” he said.

“But, it’s 3000 miles away from Stanford,” I said.

“Last I checked, it was, Chappie,” he said. “Didn’t you think it would come to this? I get work in one place and you get accepted in another.”

“But what about us?” I asked.

“What about it, Chappie?” he said. “I’ve been thinking. You’re a young woman from a very wealthy, old Pittsburgh banking family. And I’m the son of a railroader from East Liberty. Not exactly the same social strata. Maybe we should test this with some distance and time.”

“But we’re soul mates, Ryan,” I said. “You called us ‘soul mates.’” I felt that I might begin to cry at any moment.

“We are soul mates, Chappie,” he said. “Nothing can change that. And we will cycle together through various lifetimes. We’ll be together for all time.”

“But I thought we were engaged and getting married. What about our wedding?” I said.

“Are you really ready, Chappie?” he asked.

“Yes, for God’s sake,” I said. “I want to prolong our time here right now.”

“Aren’t you supposed to get down on one knee, then, Chappie?” he said, smiling.

I pushed my seat back, quickly, and bent down on both knees. The scraping of the chair made a few of the patrons look our way. When they saw me on my knees, they paid closer attention.

“I really love you, Ryan Capeletti,” I said, looking up into those clear blue eyes, “and I want you to be my lawfully wedded husband, father of Little Barkley, and soul mate here on Earth. I am like you. I always have been. Money and social status mean nothing to me. I choose us, Ryan.”

“Aren’t you supposed to have a ring?” he asked, unembarrassed that twenty or so diners were now watching and listening to every word we said. He left me in my bent position.

I improvised and gave him the ring I had had since I was a little girl. I fit it on his little finger.

“I accept,” he said, helping me to my feet and hugging me, “and we can live in Palo Alto.” The restaurant crowd cheered us and I blushed like a little girl.

“But what about New York City?” I said as I sat.

“Hey, Charlie Parker started in Kansas City,” he said. “Miles Davis started in St. Louis. San Francisco is near Stanford and I can probably find gigs in both towns.”

“We’ll get to the Big Apple eventually,” I added.

“Hey, no sweat,” he said twisting the ring onto his pinky.

“You may never get that off,” I said. “I’ll never take it off,” he replied.

We finished our dinner, drove up to Mt. Washington, and looked down at the city. The three rivers of Pittsburgh, the Allegheny and Monongahela, met to form the Ohio River. The stadia nestled against the rivers, Heinz Stadium, home of the Steelers and PNC Park, home of the Pirates. We saw the lights of cars moving through the city below us into the many hills of our city. We felt young, strong and in love.

## Chapter Eleven

Ryan called my cell phone early in the morning. “Chappie, get dressed. We’re going out.”

“Where are we going,” I asked

“On a picnic,” he said.

“Where?”

“That’s a surprise,” he said.

And it was a surprise, a great surprise. He took me to West Park, on Pittsburgh’s North Side.

“Are you sure it’s safe over here?” I asked as we parked the car on North Avenue.

“Would I take you to an unsafe place?” he said, opening the door and popping the trunk. From where he took a blanket and picnic basket. We walked to a small hillside and spread the old army blanket.

“What about all the stuff everyone says about the North Side?” I asked, sitting on the wool blanket.

“It’s all exaggeration,” he added, extracting a bottle of Pinot Grigiot and two glasses from the basket. “Mostly the media. Sure, lots of poor people live on this side of town but they’re not all crack heads.”

“I’ll admit it’s very nice here in the park,” I said. “That pond is clean.”

“You mean ‘Lake Elizabeth,’” he added.

“You’re kidding?! You actually brought me to a pond with the same name as mine!”

“Nice of me, huh! It’s probably named after a very wealthy forebear. Maybe an aunt of yours. Some of the wealthiest people in America once lived on the North Side of Pittsburgh. Of course it was called Allegheny City then. The Jones and Laughlins of J&L Steel, your great granddad’s buddy, Andrew Carnegie, started his American life on the North Side. Heck, even Gertrude Stein was born here.”

“I thought you were an English major,” I said.

“I’m just a true Pittsburgh boy, born and bred.”

We ate our lunch and watched the geese and ducks foraging near the Lake Elizabeth.

“You look like you have something on your mind, Ryan Capeletti,” I said, noticing his introspective posture.

“It’s time to meet the parents, Chappie,” he said.

I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“I think you might be avoiding this, Chappie” he said.

“I’m not,” I said.

“Hey, Chappie, you’re talking wedding and I have yet to meet Barkley and Eleanor. It’s traditional that I ask for your hand. We want to follow tradition, don’t we?”

“It won’t be pretty,” I said. “They’re not nice people.”

“They’ll love me,” he said.

“We shall see what we shall see,” I added, quoting the one-time Pittsburgh Pirates announcer Bob Prince and trying to lighten the conversation.

That week I made arrangements for us to have dinner at my parents’ home the following Saturday.

“Just call her Mrs. Jensen,” I said to Ryan as we drove in his car up Fox Chapel Road toward my parents’ house.

“How about if I call her Mrs. Chappie?” he joked.

“She wouldn’t say anything, Ryan,” I replied. “She’d just give me one of her looks as if to say, ‘Lizzie, where did you find this one?’”

“Hey, you found me in a bar, Chappie,” he said.

“That’s all she needs to hear,” I said.

Our house was one of the few in the exclusive Fox Chapel neighborhood with an electric gate leading to a winding drive way. At one time, probably when I was a teenager and wanted to show off, I liked that gate and driveway. Now it seemed ostentatious and inconvenient. And I knew it was more trouble than it was worth for my parents. My dad wasn’t the rake-the-leaves type and never picked up a hammer in his life that I knew of. He and my mother still retained landscapers to care for the grounds and a fulltime cook to make them their dinners.

“Whoa, Chappie,” Ryan said as we stopped before the gate.

“Impressive. What’s the password?”

“Put your window down,” I said leaning across the seat and across his lap.

“You lean any further, Chappie,” he said, “and we will not make it to dinner. I will ravish you right here in front of the gate.”

“Promises, promises,” I said to him, pointing to the call box.

“Push that button, please.”

He reached out the window and pushed while I fiddled with the crotch of his pants.

“Yes,” said the voice of my mother, ever the polite and formal one. Ryan squirmed in the seat. “May I help you?”

“It’s me,” I said. “Open the gate.”

“Beam us up, Scottie,” Ryan said.

“What’s that?” my mother responded.

I reached a hand over and put it on Ryan’s mouth. “Please let us in, Mother.”

The gate opened and we drove up to the house, a Tudor with nine bedrooms and every amenity one might expect from people with, what my father called, “Old Money.”

Mother answered the door in a velvet gown. I had told Ryan to expect as much and had insisted that he wear a sports coat, not a suit. He looked very handsome, athletic and the picture of health in his gray herringbone jacket with patched sleeves. I felt tremendously proud of him. My father came down the stairs in a pinstriped suit, his idea of leisure wear.

“Mother and Father, this is Ryan Capeletti,” I said.

“So, this is the young musician Lizzy has been going on about,” my father said, striding over from the staircase extending his right hand, a martini in his left. “And, a firm grip, I might add, not necessarily to be expected from a pianist.”

“How do you do, Mr. Jensen,” Ryan said.

“Please, call me Will,” my father said. “I have never really cared for Barkley but it’s a name that was passed to me by other Barkleys, so I’m stuck with it.”

“It’s a perfectly respectable name,” my mother said, offering her hand to Ryan. “And, mine’s Eleanor.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Mrs. Jensen,” Ryan said.

“Well, we’re all pleased to meet each other,” my mother said, “so, let’s go to the dining room. “Delfine has prepared a wonderful meal. I hope you like lamb, Ryan.”

“It’s one of my favorites, Mrs. Jensen.”

The dining room with its long table, high backed chairs and floor to ceiling drapes reminded me of the many evenings my mother and I sat stiffly there having our dinner alone, without my father, whom my mother excused as having “much work to do at his office.”

My father held my mother’s chair while she sat and I waved Ryan off from doing the same for me. He waited until my father sat.

“Well, Ryan, you play the piano,” my mother said, fixing her napkin.

“Yes, Mrs. Jensen,” he responded. “I have since I was eight years old.”

“Interesting,” she said. “I once took lessons. It was required of my sisters and me. All good girls were required to take. We even had Liz take lessons. Did she tell you? We were so upset when she quit.”

“She told me that she studied, Mam,” he said. “She told me she also played the trumpet.”

“Yes,” my mother said, fixing her napkin on her lap, “Liz and her friends were different from my generation. We didn’t play soccer, either.”

With this she smiled at me, one of her joyless smiles.

“Tell me about the Capelettis,” my dad said.

“My father passed away some years ago,” Ryan said, “but my mom still lives and works in Pittsburgh.”

“It’s a shame a woman can’t be properly provided for after her husband goes away,” my mother said. I knew she wasn’t trying to be nasty but her comment offended me anyway.

“It’s not like Ryan’s father wanted to die,” I blurted.

“That’s not what I meant,” my mother insisted.

“It’s all right, Mrs. Jensen,” Ryan said. “I knew what you meant.”

I gave Ryan a kick under the table.

“Well, here’s Delphine, bearing gifts” my father said, changing the subject as the cook came into the room with a tureen of bean soup. “There will be no misunderstanding of its quality.”

Delphine was a grumpy and unkempt white woman in her early 50’s who had cooked for my parents for the past ten or so years. I always thought her food tasted awful. Her personality matched the food, in my opinion, sour and stale. My parents had tried to make her wear a little black uniform with a white apron but she would have none of it. I often wondered if she might some day poison the lot of us. She seemed constantly unhappy.

“Thank you, Delphine,” my mother said, as the cook set the soup in front of her and left the room.

“We’ve had Delphine for over ten years now,” she said to Ryan, obviously trying to impress him.

“You say that as if she’s our indentured slave, Mother,” I said.

“God knows you can’t enslave Delphine,” my father injected. “That’s a strong-willed woman.”

“Strong-odored is more like it,” I said.

“Elizabeth,” my mother chided, always using my full name when she was angry.

“So, what do you intend to do with this music of yours,” my father said to Ryan.

“I have always dreamed of being a jazz musician,” Ryan replied. “I know that’s not an easy life but I think I can teach private

students during the day and make a decent living. Also, I have a degree in English and could probably teach at a public or parochial school.”

“A jazz man,” my dad said. “Something like Louis Armstrong.”

“He’s been dead a hundred years,” I said.

“Actually, Louis Armstrong is exactly the kind of jazz man I’d like to be,” Ryan said. “Pops was the man who made jazz a household word.”

“That word has sexual overtones,” my mother said as she ladled soup for my father.

“Eleanor,” my father said, “I didn’t think you knew anything about that.”

Meanwhile I was so embarrassed I wanted to grab Ryan by the shoulder and drag him out of the room, out of the house, and out of Fox Chapel.

“Jazz has always made great use of tension and release,” Ryan said, not understanding that my parents didn’t understand or care about jazz, music, or any culture except that of money.

“So, Lizzy,” my dad interrupted, “have you decided on B-school? I can always talk to Wharton, you know.”

I hadn’t told them about Stanford and I was displeased at the way they were treating Ryan, as if he were a passing fancy, just another stray that Liz had picked up off the streets of Pittsburgh. I felt ready to explode.

“I don’t need you to talk to anyone for me,” I said. “I am perfectly able to take care of myself.”

“Now, Liz,” my mother said, “we all know that in this life networks are important. It’s not what you know; it’s who you know, isn’t it Mr. Cassletti?”

That insult was the last straw for me. “It isn’t Casseletti. It’s Capeletti, Mother. And, he is a great piano player.”

“I’m sure he is, Lizzy,” my dad said. “Maybe we’ll find out after dinner if Mr. Capeletti will grace us with a selection.”

“I will be happy to,” Ryan said. Then the lamb arrived.

## Chapter Twelve

“I can’t believe them,” I said to Ryan as we drove back to town. “She watched everything you did, how you picked up your fork, how you wiped your mouth – I wouldn’t have been surprised if she followed you to the toilet to watch how you wiped.”

“Liz,” he said, imitating the way my mother corrects me.

“It’s true,” I said. “They are awful. Sometimes I just hate them.”

“They’re OK,” he said. “This is what they know. It’s the way they were brought up, the way they’ve lived their lives. It’s their nature.”

“But it’s wrong,” I argued. “Who are they to presume they’re better than you – or anybody?”

“It doesn’t bother me, Chappie, honest it doesn’t,” he said. “I think I won them over with my Chopin ballad.”

“They are not easily won over, Ryan,” I argued. “You don’t know them. I have never been good enough for them and anyone I ever liked has never been good enough for them.”

“You’ve got to lighten up on them, Chappie,” he said. “They are who they are. They will never be who you want them to be. All parents are like that. We want them to be superheroes. I wanted my father to play for the Pittsburgh Steelers, not work for the railroad.”

“You’re different,” I said without thinking.

“We’re all different, Chappie,” he said softly.

“I didn’t mean it that way, Ryan,” I said.

“I know, Chappie,” he said, touching my leg. “It doesn’t matter. We are all different. That’s what makes life interesting. That’s what makes life work. We are different, but love holds us together. It’s the only reality in this make-believe world - love. And I love you, Chappie, even if you are a little rich girl and I’m a poor piano player.”

“But the way you describe your parents makes them seem to nice,” I said. “Why can’t mine be?”

“We choose our parents, Chappie,” he said. “I know it seems strange but as we come back to this reality we choose the mother through whom we will travel here. We do this because we’re trying to work something out, to realize something. They help us. We wouldn’t want them any other way.”

“Well, I certainly made a weird choice,” I said.

## Chapter Thirteen

I met my mother at the Duquesne Club for lunch. She looked impeccable in her suit. She was the only woman I had seen for a long time wearing a hat. I felt proud of her as I had when I was a little girl as she took me shopping at the department stores that have now faded into memory – Boggs and Buhl, Hornes.

I took her hand and we walked into the section that had at one time, before liberation, been for women only. She still asked to be seated in there, even though men and women now occupied the room.

I always felt a combination of humility and ridiculousness in the club. The mahogany and marble, the high ceilings, the starched linens and polished silverware – I was certain Andrew Carnegie and Andrew Mellon and their pals had designed the club for just that reason – to intimidate their guests and competitors.

“You look a little peaked, Liz,” she said after we had ordered. She had her usual Bloody Mary and lit the first and last of her daily cigarettes. She had allowed herself only one of each for as long as I could remember. “Are you not sleeping?”

“I’m OK, Mother,” I said, sipping an ice tea.

“Have you been keeping late hours with that young man?” she asked.

“I have been seeing Ryan a lot,” I responded, annoyed and a little loud. “He has a name, you know. Ryan Capeletti.”

“No need to be so expressive,” she said, dabbing the corners of her mouth and shifting uncomfortably in her chair. The last thing Eleanor Jensen wanted in the Duquesne Club was a scene.

“I love him, you know,” I said, ready to challenge her now that I saw the real reason she wanted to have lunch. “You don’t like him, do you?”

“He seems a pleasant enough young man,” she said.

“What does that mean?” I challenged.

“It means what it says, Liz,” she continued. “He’s a pleasant young man but hardly the kind of young man that you want to continue with.”

“Continue with.” That was exactly like her. It was her way of demeaning the relationship.

“I love him, Mother,” I said, a little too loudly.

“Elizabeth,” she commanded, “lower your voice.”

“I don’t care what these people think,” I said, sweeping my hand across the table. “I love Ryan and want to marry him. I knew it the first time I saw him.”

“Playing the piano,” she said sarcastically.

“He was doing that to pay his way through college,” I said.

“Exactly,” she responded, “and that’s what he will do to pay your way through life.”

“And I’ll have a good job,” I said.

“And the two of you will drift apart,” she said. “I know about these things, Liz. When I was your age, I fancied a singer. When

he opened his mouth, I nearly swooned. But, my mother helped me see that I was infatuated, just as I am helping you see your own infatuation.”

“This is not infatuation, Mother,” I said, dropping my fork on the plate with a resounding clang.

“Elizabeth,” she said, “settle down. Really. We are not alone here.”

“I don’t care how many people are in this stuffy old place,” I said. “I love Ryan and I will not listen to you belittle him.”

“Elizabeth,” she said, “we can not be belittled, as you say. We are what we are. You happen to be the daughter of one of the oldest and proudest families in this city. You have a certain position. You have attended good schools and have associated with the best people. Ryan is a nice young man but he’s from another world. He’s not one of us.”

“One of us,” I nearly shouted. “One of us. He’s lucky not to be. He’s honest and sensitive and loving. He loves me. Can you understand that? And I love him. That makes us the same, not different.”

“Liz,” she said, as if consoling a sick person, “you think you love him. You are a young, impressionable college girl. You are an egalitarian; you always have been. You want to save the world. I remember when you brought that young black man to our house. What was his name, Ardell-something. I believe you thought you loved him, too? And what would that have been?”

“Ryan Capeletti is not my charity case,” I said. “We are soul mates. I have known and loved him forever.”

“That is a little dramatic, don’t you think, Liz,” she said. “A little New Age.”

“No, it’s true,” I said. “He has taught me this and I have learned that it’s something I’ve always known.”

“You haven’t gone to church for years, Liz,” she said. “And if you did, it would be to an Episcopal church. He’s a Catholic, if I remember correctly. And an Italian. They have bad tempers and beat their wives. He’s not our type.”

“So, that’s what this is about,” I said, rising from my place and slapping my napkin to the table. “You don’t like him because he’s a Catholic and an Italian. I should have known.”

“That wasn’t it at all, Elizabeth,” she said, struggling to maintain decorum. “I’m talking about your place in society. Now, please sit down and eat your lunch.”

“Those days are long gone, Mother,” I said. “Those days of social status and prejudice and bigotry are over. We live in a different world. I will not be a part of that old and ugly world.”

As I walked away from the table, she said, “This is the world, Elizabeth. After you have thought about it, you will know that I am trying to help you. You will see He will never really be accepted into your world. He’ll always be an outsider.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Ironically, that evening Ryan asked me to visit his home and meet his mother. He said it would ground me and give me a better perspective on my own family.

The neighborhood he grew up in was much different from mine. It was truly a neighborhood, an area of small houses with small backyards, small side yards and small sidewalks. Each house – some brick, some wood, some covered with siding – each had its similarities yet its own character.

A red brick house, Ryan's was built in 1937 by a Mr. Maroon and purchased at the cost of \$15000 by his parents after his dad returned from the Viet Nam War. Ryan only knew this home and this neighborhood.

He pointed out to me the places where he played and the homes of his childhood friends.

“Mr. Lobb lived next door,” he said, pointing to the two and a half story home next to his. “We grew the best vegetables and we used to raid his garden every summer. His daughter Nancy was my first crush. She was three years older than me and I used to stand in our hallway in the evenings watching her bedroom window hoping the curtain would part just enough for me to see in.”

“I think I'm going to be jealous,” I said.

“Hey, Chappie” he said, “I was thirteen and raging with hormones. If Mother Theresa were undressing in front of that window I would have been watching.”

“I changed my mind,” I said. “I think I'm going to be sick.”

“Chubby Johnson lived over there,” he said. “He was a great bowler. Could have been the best. And Tommy Moyer lived in that house. When his grandfather died, they laid him out in their living room. I still remember seeing my first dead guy. All I remember is that waxy look. If I ever die, Chappie, you have to promise not to let me look waxy.”

“I promise,” I said. “Besides, you’ll never die.”

“We all gotta go sometime, Chappie,” he said, “but fortunately we recycle. In our case we’ll keep coming together again until we fuse.”

“Fusing,” I said, squeezing his waist, “I like that.”

“Not here in the street, Chappie,” he said. “What would the neighbors think?”

Just then his mother opened the front door and called to him, “Ryan, filia mea.” She came to the steps her arms outstretched and he walked into her arms. “My handsome son,” she said. “You are your mother’s joy.”

And it was obvious that he was her joy. Her happiness could not have been disguised.

He stepped back and pinched her cheeks with both hands. “Bianca, you are the love of my life. And let me introduce you to the love of my soul, Elizabeth Jensen.”

I have never been bashful, shy or afraid of meeting people. I spent most of my life as a child meeting my father’s business acquaintances and my mother’s social partners, as well as their children. I was programmed to be sociable, but when Ryan

introduced me to his mother I felt speechless in front of her direct gaze. She seemed able to judge character easily, to look into my heart for the answers to my intentions, my values, my honesty.

“Che bella,” she said, smiling, and lifting her arms for me to walk into, which I did, feeling as natural as if she were my own mother.

“She’s beautiful,” she said to her son while I stood in her arms, smelling the faint odor of spices. Then she released me and said, “Come, let’s go into the house. It’s getting cold.”

The house was very simply decorated and furnished and the smell of garlic lingered over the rooms.

“I have linguine cooking,” she said as she took my coat, as if to explain the odor. “We’ll get a good meal into both of you.”

“I hope you’re ready for this, Chappie,” I said. “She won’t let us go until we’re stuffed like pigs.”

“What does this ‘Chappie’ mean, Ryan,” his mother asked him.

“Oh, it’s just my nickname for her, Mom,” he said.

“Please, let’s call her Elizabeth,” his mother replied. “It’s such a beautiful name and she’s such a beautiful young lady.”

Any fears or apprehensions I had quickly disappeared in the face of this wonderful woman’s total acceptance of me. If Ryan were my soul partner, I had also found a soul friend in his mother.

“May I help you with the dinner?” I asked.

“No, no, no, no,” she said. “You are our guest. Please, relax. Ryan, show Elizabeth around the house. Tell her the stories of

your youth. Show her your baseball cards, Clemente and Mazeroski and the other Italians. Dinner will be ready soon.”

Ryan led me to the basement. “She thinks anyone whose name ends in a vowel is Italian,” he said, referring to the baseball players. “I had to show her Roy Campanella’s photo so she would see that he was African-American.”

We looked through pictures of Ryan as a baby, a toddler, a teenager and, indeed, I felt a genuine familiarity with him as I looked at those photos, as if I did know him always. His mother prepared the dinner quickly and called up back upstairs where we sat at the table for hours. She not only made linguine with clams like I had never tasted it, but pastina soup with a chicken broth, an endive salad, a dish of escarole with beans and garlic, meatballs, a dish of cooked green peppers in olive oil, a dish of hot peppers prepared in olive oil, as well as three loaves of Italian bread she had baked and assorted antipasto items. The coup d grace, however, was the cannelloni. I had never eaten so much and enjoyed it as well.

“Mrs. Capeletti,” I said, “that was by far the best Italian meal, or maybe the best meal of any nationality, that I have ever eaten.”

“Bianca,” she urged. “Please call me Bianca. And thank you for your kind words, Elizabeth. I love to cook. I love to fill Ryan as I loved to fill his father. We say that if your stomach is full your mind is empty.”

“If that is so,” I said, “then I am totally mindless!”

“Good, good,” she said. “Now, why don’t you go into the living room and relax and I’ll clean up.”

“No, let me help you,” I insisted. But, Ryan pulled me away. “She loves this stuff, Chappie,” he said. “It’s her life, her art. Let’s go sit down.”

It occurred to me that her style was simplicity and functionality. She decorated with basic colors and inexpensive items from department stores and she cooked and ate simple but nutritious foods. She and her husband had passed this simplicity and directness to their son and I loved him all the more for it.

She joined us in the living room after washing the last dish.

“You should marry her quickly,” she said to Ryan. “You must not let Elizabeth get away.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Mom,” he teased. “I’m not sure she can support me. She still has another year of school in California. Besides, I’m not sure she can make linguine with clam sauce.”

“I can teach you in no time, Elizabeth,” she said. “Until you learn I will send you linguine. You must spend your time making little grandchildren for me.”

“I was thinking twelve or fourteen,” Ryan said. “Half boys and half girls.”

“Ryan,” she said, “she will lose all her teeth if you do that.”

I stayed out of their conversation for the most part. I loved watching them interact. Their deep love and respect for each other was evident in all that they said. I had never seen my mother and father interact that way and they certainly never interacted with me that way. I grieved for what I had missed and celebrated what I had gained.

## Chapter Fifteen

We married in a private ceremony in the Catholic chapel on campus. I became Elizabeth Jensen Capeletti and I was proud of it. I attended classes at Stanford and Ryan played piano in a jazz trio and took on private students. We both worked relentlessly and were poor but we had a great apartment in an old three-story home with Ph. D. students. It was the best time of our lives.

We made love constantly, at all hours, before I went to class, in mid-morning, after lunch, after dinner in the middle of the night. If I were showering before class, Ryan, who had played until two o'clock in the morning, woke up to join me and we usually lay exhausted in the shower stall, water pouring over us. If he came home late, as he often did, I awoke to make love to him.

In the evenings when he and his trio played off campus at "Cool Club" I occasionally sat at the bar and watched him, hunched over his piano, smoking a cigarette in great concentration. Often I had to fend off the men who thought I was on the make. Typically they were younger college guys and I told them as nicely as possible that I was "with the piano player."

Once in a break between sets Ryan and I went to his car in the parking lot and made love. We just could not get enough of each other.

In the spring I graduated from Stanford, first in my MBA class, and I accepted a consulting job with McKinley Group with the unusual promise that I didn't have to travel or be away from home for more than a night or two a month. I didn't want my marriage to Ryan to end because I was never around.

When I took the job, Ryan and I rented a small apartment in San Francisco and I'd like to say that I learned how to make great

spaghetti, lasagna and linguine with clam sauce. Truth is: we ate take out most of the time, especially Chinese, who, they say, invented the noodle anyway.

I was allowed to spend most of my work on day trips in and around northern California but I had lots of work and really felt the responsibility. So many companies needed outside advice after the dot.com bust and our company had contracts with most of them. Funny, bad times for companies meant good times for consulting firms.

I was working on a project for a firm called, “Buzzwords” that had got its start with a software that managed logistics. After attracting \$20 million of venture capital it had tanked and laid off twenty of its sixty staff. Now it was trying to regroup and reclaim both its market and the loyalty of its remaining staff. At the same time it was trying to prove to the banking community that it was worthy of working capital. The project was keeping me very busy.

“Liz,” my secretary said, “it’s Ryan on Line One.”

“This is Mrs. Jensen-Capeletti,” I answered.

“I wondered if you’d be up for a little quickie Mrs. Hyphenation,” he said.

“I’m a married woman, Sir,” I responded.

“Forget him,” Ryan whispered. “He’ll never know.”

“He’s a musician,” I said. “They have ears that hear everything.”

“OK,” he said. “You just missed a big opportunity... and I mean big!”

“That opportunity could never be as big as my husband’s opportunity,” I said. “So, what else might I interest you in, Sir?”

“How about that your mother called and she and Daddy want to visit us?”

“What? That’s all I need right now,” I said, a little too harshly. I felt I had put my past and my family behind me. “What would they be doing out here? She must be coming for the shopping.”

“Hey, Chappie,” he said. “She really sounded like she misses you. Your dad has some kind of business in the city and I think she just wants to see you.”

“That’s a laugh,” I said. “She must need to replenish her wardrobe at Nordstrum’s.”

“Hey, why don’t we let them stop by,” he said. “They won’t be in this life forever. No one is.”

“Screw them,” I said. “They didn’t come out here for our wedding. They never call. They never even wanted me to marry you. I’m happy with my life without them”

“Hey, what’s a wedding ceremony?” he said. “It’s just one day. They’ll be in our lives forever, cycling through with us until we straighten out with them whatever it is we need to straighten out.”

“Don’t give me that New Age bullshit,” I said, losing my patience. “He’s a prick and she’s his maidservant. I don’t care if I ever see them again.”

“Chappie,” he said, “you don’t talk like that. And, I know you don’t mean that.”

“How do you know what I do and do not mean,” I said. “And, do me a favor, don’t call me that stupid name anymore.”

“You don’t mean that, either, Chappie,” he said.

“The fuck I don’t,” I screamed and slammed the phone down in its cradle. I walked to the window thinking about what I had just said and done. I couldn’t believe that the person who had acted that way and said those things was me. I tried to call Ryan back right away but he didn’t answer. I tried to work on the Buzzwords account but couldn’t focus, so I left and tried to find Ryan.

He was scheduled to play solo at The Loose Goose, a restaurant near the wharf. He wasn’t there, of course, so I decided to drive around to the music stores, knowing he might visit them to distract himself from our argument. After looking in two malls, I couldn’t find him.

Then, in an act of futility, I called his mother on the cell phone in my car.

“Mrs. Capeletti,” I said, “Has Ryan called you?”

“Bianca, dear,” she said. “Please, call me Bianca. How is my daughter?”

“I’m fine, Mrs., I mean, Bianca,” I said. “Has Ryan called you?”

“Yes,” she said, and I felt a sudden rush of hope. “He called me last week.”

My hope faded. “He didn’t call you today?” I asked, swerving to miss a car that had cut into my lane.

“No,” she said, “but he did say last week that the two of you might come for a visit soon. When will you come to Pittsburgh?”

I didn't want to engage in a discussion about Pittsburgh or have small talk with Mrs. Capeletti at that moment. I wanted desperately to find my husband and apologize.

“We want to bring you out here, Bianca,” I said. “We want to bring you out here real soon.”

“You know how I feel about flying, Elizabeth,” she said

Traffic on the expressway was crowding and I was having a rough time driving and talking, especially driving as fast as I was.

“Mrs. Capeletti, may I call you back,” I said, seeing an exit a few blocks away. “The traffic here is a nightmare.”

“Bianca, Elizabeth,” she said. “I do wish you'd call me Bianca, or Mom.”

“OK, Mom,” I said, feeling the word awkward in my mouth. “I'll call you back later and we can talk about your visit..”

I hung up and called our place to see if Ryan had returned home. I didn't know if he had any private lessons scheduled for the late afternoon. Usually he kept that time for his own practice. I imagined him sitting at the keyboard warming up by playing from Bach's Well Tempered Clavier. No one answered and I decided to drive to Palo Alto thinking he may have gone there, the place where we were always very happy. I found him at Cool Club listening to a jazz guitar player.

“You're predictable, Mr. Capeletti,” I said, sliding next to him in the booth.

“Do you know how hard it is to play the guitar,” he said, pointing to the player. “It’s like a piano turned sideways. You can play anything on one of those that you can play on the piano - chords, melody, rhythm. You can sustain longer; and you can bend the notes.”

“I love you,” I said.

“In fact you really can’t bend the notes on a piano,” he said, “despite what most piano players try to do.”

“I will always love you,” I said, putting my arm through his and leaning my head on his shoulder.

“Of course you love me, Chappie,” he said, turning to me. “We have always been together. We have always loved each other. And, we will always be together, through the good and the bad.”

“We’ll just have good,” I said, putting my head on his shoulder. “I promise.”

“You can never promise that, Chappie,” he said, squeezing my arm. “The universal truth of life is that we have good and bad. It’s the yin and yang, the Eternal Duality. We have it until we rise above it. Until we accept it. Until we merge ourselves. Until we merge everything. Until we become love, Chappie. And love is forever.”

“Let’s go home, then, and merge,” I said. “I want to merge with you as soon as possible, even if it’s in the parking lot.”

“We can merge at home, Chappie,” he said, moving me out of the booth.

## Chapter Sixteen

Ryan had spent most of his time in school studying music. He wasn't a football player, or basketball or soccer player or even a swimmer. But, he was physically coordinated, and in the first year of our marriage we made it a habit to get to the gym as often as we could, together. In fact, we were an anomaly, of sorts, a married couple going to the gym together, going to a place where mostly singles were looking for a mate, despite their aloof attitudes.

I had a hard time getting to the gym because of my job and Ryan had some unusual hours. He should have slept late because of the late hours he kept when playing in his trio or playing solo gigs. But, he typically got up with me, even after a few hours of sleep. If he walked up behind me in the bathroom, fresh from the bed, hair mussed, and put his arms around me, we often made love right there, usually on the toilet but once in the bath tub. Then he would go downstairs, fix me toast and tea and talk with me before I left for the office.

He didn't sleep much and I sometimes felt he was burning the candle, not at both ends, but by dipping the whole thing in gasoline. I wanted him to slow down but I knew how much he loved music and how much he loved life.

"Time's an illusion and what we perceive as time is mostly wasted, Chappie," he would say. "Most people hurry through life but pay no attention to it. Look in the sky at those clouds, for instance. Aren't they awesome?"

"Ominous is more like it," I'd say. "Or ugly."

"Nothing is ugly," he'd respond.

"Oh yeh," I'd say, "what about my toenails?"

“They are especially beautiful,” he’d say and then grab my foot and suck my toes.

“What about war?” I’d ask, “or Death?”

“The Big ‘D’,” he’d say. “It’s the most beautiful of all.”

“Ryan,” I’d protest, “don’t say that.”

“Why not, Chappie?” he’d say. “It’s true. Death is beautiful and awesome. It’s the portal, the opening to your new life, your new chance to get things right, to get closer to your goal, to self-fulfillment. And, it’s another chance for us to try this togetherness.”

“Forget that,” I’d say. “Let’s get it right – here and now.”

“You’ll learn, Chappie,” he’d say. “We’ll be together again. And again, and again, and....”

## Chapter Seventeen

My parents visited. They were the same as they'd always been – he was patronizing and she was obsequious. I felt uncomfortable the whole time, despite the fact that they insisted on staying at a hotel and treated us to dinner the entire weekend.

“So, how's the playing going?” my dad asked Ryan.

“It's going well,” he said. “In fact, and I haven't even told Elizabeth yet, my group may have a recording contract.”

“Ryan,” I said, reaching over to kiss him, “that's wonderful news.”

“Does that pay well?” my mother asked.

“Pay has nothing to do with this,” I said, leering at her.

“I'm afraid it will pay next to nothing, Mrs. Jensen,” he said.  
“Very few people these days purchase jazz CD's.”

“Yes, they all buy that dreadful thing; what's it called, rap? You don't play any of that, do you?”

He laughed,” No, I certainly do not, although I believe it's a legitimate musical expression.”

“I'm not sure I would call it music,” she said.

“Eleanor,” my dad interjected, “I think these kids would be very amused by the music you listened to and thought of as legitimate. Might I just say, ‘Woolie Bullie.’”

“That was different,” she said. “I would think a piano player would want to record Rachmaninoff.”

“I agree with you, Mrs. Jensen,” Ryan said, “but the market for classical music is as bad as the market for jazz. And, the number of talented classical piano players is astonishing.”

“So, why are you doing this?” my dad asked.

“Because it’s art, Mr. Jensen,” Ryan said. “I really feel that my music will stand the test of time, that it will be here long after I’m gone to be enjoyed and that our children will be proud to know that their dad made this music.”

“Oh,” my dad said, raising his eyebrows, “is there something we should know about grandchildren?”

“I should hope not,” my mother said. “This boy needs to have a real job before these two can start having babies.”

“That is absurd and rude,” I said. “Your problem, Mother, is that you’re stuck in another time zone.” I pointed at my father and added, “You think that because you don’t work and you take money from him that you know the model for how the world should work. Well, it’s just not that way anymore. Ryan does a great thing. He is a wonderful musician and a wonderful man and I love him. I would work my fingers to the bone to help him make his music.”

We all sat silently for a long few moments. Finally my dad said, “Shall we have dessert?”

Ryan excused himself from the table. He looked pale and I was convinced that my mother’s insults had affected him. When he returned, my mother said, “I didn’t mean to criticize you, Ryan. It’s just that I want the best for my daughter, as I always have. She has been accustomed to a good life and I always want her to be comfortable.”

“Don’t you understand that I have a good life,” I said. “Don’t you understand that I love this man and always have, through all of my lifetimes.”

“You hear that, Eleanor,” my dad said, trying to make light of the situation. “If Lizzy is correct, it means that you’ll be stuck with me into eternity. How do you feel about that, Eleanor?”

She didn’t reply, and although I’m sure she didn’t want it to happen, my mother’s face betrayed a deep, deep sadness and I actually felt sorry for her

## Chapter Eighteen

Ryan was always thin. But, more and more he seemed carved, his face angular, his eyes hollow and intense. I took it as a sign of the suffering artist. He had been playing a lot, teaching a lot and writing a lot of music. The sheets of paper lay all over his piano.

With one of my big paychecks we had invested in a baby grand and I began to feel both worried about him and jealous of that damn piano.

“Are you going to sleep with her?” I teased one day, pointing to the Steinway.

“Lucille and I do spend a lot of time together,” he said, laying his head on the keyboard.

“Lucille?” I said.

“Yes, Isn’t it a great name?” he said.

“Where did you come up with that?”

“I borrowed it from B. B. King,” he said. “It’s the name of his guitar.”

“Look, don’t you think you should lay off Lucille for a while?” I said. “She’s invincible but you’re just a starving artist.”

“All Lucille and I need is a little tuning once in a while,” he said, giving me one of those imploring looks.

I smiled and went to his piano seat. “Well, I think I can tune you better than this wench. Let me see if I can’t tune your string.” I moved my hands up his lap and he leaned against the keyboard.

“Oh, wait,” he said moving quickly out of the room. I heard him coughing in the bathroom. I was afraid he might gag.

When he walked back into the room, I asked, “I hope the prospect of my making love to you doesn’t have that effect.”

“It isn’t you, Elizabeth,” he said moving the back of his hand across his mouth. “I’ve just been working a little too hard lately, I guess.” He sat back on the piano stool and took my hand. “Now, where was this hand when last we spoke?”

After I had finished, we lay on the floor under the piano.

“I’m worried about you, Ryan,” I said. “You work too hard.”

“It’s the provider instinct in me, Chappie” he said. “Remember what Eleanor said. I need to support you in a manner to which you have been accustomed.”

“I don’t need to accustom myself in any manner to which she thinks I might need to be accustomed,” I said. “I don’t care to be so accustomed, period. I just want to be with you.”

“Just think if Chopin had spent more time with George Sand,” he said. “How much more beautiful music we would have.”

“Chopin didn’t make more music because Chopin didn’t take care of himself,” I said.

“That’s just my point, Chappie,” he said. “He didn’t last too long so he had to make every moment count. And, besides, he has come back or will come back. We all do.”

“Ryan, please, I love you,” I said. “Please don’t talk like that, coming back. It makes me feel like I’m going around in circles. I want you here with me, now, not in some abstract, ephemeral way. I want to hold this body and I want this body to be strong and lasting. Promise me you’ll go get a checkup. Just a checkup. That won’t take much time and it’ll make me happy. You do want me to be happy, don’t you?”

“OK, Chappie,” he said, “I’ll get a checkup. No sweat. I’ll be going downtown next week to rehearse with the boys for the new album. I’ll see some quack when I’m down there.”

“Thank you, my darling,” I said. “You will make me very happy. I can’t even think of a life without you in it.”

Ryan took my hand and rubbing his thumb over it recited this poem,

“As the flight of a river  
That flows to the sea  
My soul rushes ever  
In tumult to thee.

A twofold existence  
I am where thou art:  
My heart in the distance  
Beats close to thy heart.

Look up, I am near thee,  
I gaze on thy face:  
I see thee, I hear thee,  
I feel thine embrace.

And absence but brightens  
The eyes that I miss,

And custom but heightens  
The spell of thy kiss.

## Chapter Nineteen

When I got to the hospital, Bobby Mason, his bass player, told me that Ryan had collapsed at the rehearsal.

“He lay on the floor, Elizabeth,” Bobby said. “He couldn’t get up. He said, ‘I’ll be fine. Just give me a few minutes to get my energy back.’ But, he couldn’t get all the way up. RH and I decided to call an ambulance.”

RH, the drummer in the trio had left the hospital but Bobby gave me his phone number in case I wanted to speak with him. Meanwhile I gathered my courage to go into Ryan’s room.

“Chappie,” he said when I entered the room, “nothing to worry about.”

He looked awful. His skin was pale and with the whiteness of the room he seemed almost transparent. I had never seen anyone look so anemic. He had an IV line in his arm and was receiving blood in the other arm.

I tried to make light of the situation.

“So, you think you can get some pity from me by coming to the hospital? You still have to take the garbage out this week. No getting around it, Bub.”

“Hey, consider that garbage out,” he said, his voice betraying his weakness.

“Oh, Ryan,” I said, leaning over to stroke his face, tears forming in my eyes.

“It’s nothing, Chappie,” he said. “I’m just a little tired, that’s all. Couple days in here, a few transfusions, and I’ll be back on my feet.”

“You’re staying here until you are good and healthy, Ryan Capeletti.”

“OK, Chappie,” he sighed and closed his eyes.

I left his room and went to the lobby to call Pittsburgh on my cell phone.

“Momma Capeletti,” I said, “you have to come to San Francisco right away. Ryan is very sick. I’ve never seen him like this. I’m so scared, Bianca.”

“I will come tonight,” she said. “You and I will nurse him back to health. Some good pastina soup and cooked greens and he will be as good as new. Don’t you worry, filia mia. Ryan is a strong young man. He comes from strong stock.”

I stayed with Ryan that evening and met his mother at the airport the next morning. I was scheduled to meet Ryan’s doctor, Neal Adamson, that afternoon.

“I won’t pull any punches with you, Elizabeth,” Dr. Adamson said in a small consultation room in the hospital. “We took a look at Ryan and did exhaustive blood work. He has acute lymphocatic leukemia.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s basically cancer of the blood,” he explained. “His white cells are essentially overrunning his red cells.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It’s not good, Elizabeth,” he said. “He’ll need to begin a chemotherapy regimen immediately. He’ll likely be very sick and he could lose his hair. I can’t promise that it will work. These things can be very strange. Some people go for a long time and eventually beat it and others last a couple of weeks. It can be very insidious.”

“A couple of weeks.” The words echoed in my mind. “What are his chances?” I asked.

“Frankly, I can’t say for certain, Elizabeth,” he said. “Ryan is a strong young man and that is certainly in his favor. He has you to look after him. If I had to do it, I’d put the odds at 60-40 in his favor. But, I have no guarantees. He could do very well with the chemo or not do well at all.”

“Have you talked to him about this?” I asked.

“Yes, I have,” he said.

“And....”

“He has agreed to the chemo therapy. We will be starting it tonight.”

I had no more questions to ask and stood alone at the window watching the sunset and trying to decide what to say to Ryan. I decided to be organized and positive. I would be strong for both of us. I walked back to his room.

“OK, Buddy,” I said when he turned to me. “I have this all figured out. You’re taking the chemo and I’m here to help. I’ll be in here every morning before I go to work, here at lunch time and here

after work. I'm thinking about staying in the hospital's family center. We're going to whip this thing."

"You spoke to Dr. Adamson, Chappie," he said. "I knew I could count on you to get the facts and organize them. It's your gift, Chappie."

"It's all taken care of," I said. "We have the best oncologist in America. I have a super duper health care plan. You are a young and tough character. The odds are in our favor."

"Right," he said. "But remember, Chappie, if it doesn't go according to your plan, it's OK. We will always be together."

"Ryan," I said, losing my control, "please don't talk that way. I love you. I don't want you to go away. I want you here with me, now and for the next 60 years."

"We have no guarantees, Chappie," he said reaching for my hand. "We don't control this. One of us could go tomorrow. You could get killed by some crazed CPA."

"This isn't funny, Ryan," I said, pulling away and turning from him to hide my tears.

"You're right, Chappie," he said. "It isn't funny. It's profound and wonderful."

"And it's certainly not wonderful," I said, beginning to cry. "You talk as if you don't want to be with me, as if you want to...."

"You can say it, Chappie," he said. "The word is die."

"Yes, and you sound like you've already given up," I said reaching on his nightstand for a Kleenex.

“I don’t want to die any more than you do, Chappie,” he said, handing me the box of tissues. “And when I say it’s ‘wonderful,’ I mean that it’s full of wonder. It’s life and it’s living through me in all its aspects – its good and its bad aspects. I understand it; I fear it. And, I can assure you I have not given up. If I were to give up, I wouldn’t take the chemotherapy. I love you, Chappie. I always have and always will. And I truly believe we will always be together. Always. Whatever you do, especially now, Chappie, don’t make me question that belief.”

“I won’t,” I said, laying my head on his legs.

“So, you’ll be here tonight when I get my first taste of the juice?” he said.

“Wouldn’t miss it, Pal,” I said. “I’d have a cocktail myself if I thought they’d let me.”

“You don’t want one of these, Chappie,” he said. “It’ll make your hair stand on end...and then fall out.”

## Chapter Twenty

Sarah called from Pittsburgh to try to cheer me up.

“I checked this out on the Internet, Liz,” she said.

“Thank God we have the Internet,” I said sarcastically. “We can all become actuaries.”

“Hey, it’s positive stuff, Liz,” she continued.

“How could it be?” I asked gloomily.

“Well, for one thing, survival rates have increased,” she said brightly. “And, the younger you are the more chance for your survival. More than 400,000 people are living with this kind of...disease.”

“Cancer, Sarah,” I said. “He has cancer.”

“Yes, you’re right, Liz,” she responded seriously. “He has cancer and so do a lot of other people. Of all the people who have lymphoma only about 40,000 die from it each year.”

“Oh, God,” I said. “Sarah, listen to you. 40,000 people are dying from this each year. You expect me to be happy about that?”

“Liz, they’re mostly older people,” she said.

“Look, Liz,” she said, “you’ve got to be positive. You’ve got to be strong for Ryan.”

“I know, Sarah,” I replied. “I know you’re only trying to help, and I appreciate it, honest I do. It’s just that....”

“What, Liz?”

“Well, I have a feeling Ryan is just giving up,” I said. “He keeps talking about how we’ll always be together. It’s his philosophy. He believes in a duality of life, that we can’t have pleasure without pain, life without death, health without sickness. I believe some of that, but I want him to fight this.”

“You’ll have to fight it for him, Liz,” she said. “Go to him and challenge him, make him see the family you two will have. Tell him how you’ll have a little boy, a little girl. Tell him about Ryan junior. Tell him about playing piano with his daughter. Make him see the future with you.”

“I’ll try, Sarah,” I said wearily. “I’ll try.”

## Chapter Twenty One

“I’m afraid it’s not good, Liz,” Dr. Adamson said. “We can’t get his white blood cell count down.”

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“In all honesty, Liz,” he said, “I’m not sure I know exactly what it means. We have had people walk away from here after the chemo and never see them again. On the other hand, we have had people come in here and expire within a week. There just doesn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to it. People respond differently to the disease and to the treatment.”

“What can I do, Doctor?” I asked near tears.

“I suggest you do as much as possible to get him to fight this thing.”

“I have tried that, Dr. Adamson,” I said. “I have talked to him into the night about the family we will have, the names we will give our children, the days we will spend together on our porch babysitting the grandkids. He smiles and agrees with everything I say.”

“Maybe you need to do something extravagant,” he said.

“Like what,” I asked.

“I don’t know, Liz. Have you been looking at anything that the two of you have dreamed about? A boat? A new car? A trip to Rome?”

“We have fantasized about living on the beach in Sausalito,” I said. “He’s a musician and I tease him about putting a piano on the deck so that he can play to the seagulls.”

“Can you afford to buy a place down there?” he asked.

“We can’t,” I said. “But, we could if my parents helped out.”

“Why don’t you talk to them, then,” he suggested. “At this point, anything might help.”

## Chapter Twenty Two

I called my dad at his office to ask him to help.

“I want to buy this place in Sausalito, Dad,” I blurted.

“Whoa, slow down. How’s my little girl?”

“I’m fine, Dad,” I said impatiently. “No, as a matter of fact, I’m not fine.”

I hadn’t said anything to him or my mother about Ryan’s hospitalization, not that it would have mattered a whole hell of a lot to them, especially her.

“So, tell me about this house, Liz. It’s kind of sudden, isn’t it? You and Ryan have only been in that place of yours for, what, a few months.”

“I have to get this place, Dad. I think it will help Ryan live.”

“What are you talking about, Liz? What do you mean, ‘Help him live? Is he sick?’

“It’s nothing,” I said. “I meant help him live better... as an artist. Sausalito is an artists’ community.”

“Seems to me he should be a better artist without luxury. You know, the old suffering artist thing. Look at all those jazz players, Parker, Davis, that bunch. None of them had it too easy.”

“I don’t want him to suffer, Dad,” I said and began to cry. “We need this house. Can’t you just let it at that?”

“Calm down, Liz,” he said. “Let think this thing through. How much is this place?”

“Three million dollars,” I said quietly.

“Three million dollars! Good god, Liz, you could own the three best homes in Fox Chapel for that much.”

“This isn’t Fox Chapel, Dad.”

“Why don’t you come back here,” he said. “Pittsburgh has great jazz, from what I hear. The two of you can stay here until you get your own place.”

“Ryan needs a reason to live, Dad.”

“A reason to live?” he said. “What about you? Doesn’t he consider you a good reason to live?”

“Ryan loves me, Father,” I said, crying more and wiping my eyes. “I must do something to keep him alive.”

“Elizabeth, I’m not sure I know what you’re talking about. If I were Ryan, I’d bless the day that I found you. You’re talking about taking on a huge financial responsibility. A three million dollar house, for God’s sake. When your mother and I first married we lived in an apartment. Granted, it was a pretty nice place near Wall Street, but still. Where will you get a down payment for such a financial burden?”

“I thought you could lend it to us?” I said, feeling defeated.

“Isn’t this really about a marriage that’s failing, Lizzy?” he said. “A house can’t save it, Dear, certainly not a three million dollar house. You’ll exhaust your trust – and for what? A piano man?”

I didn't wait to hear any more. I knew he had made up his mind not to help me. I said I had another call waiting and hung up.

Not thirty minutes later Eleanor called. She didn't bother with small talk. She had the confidence that I had seldom ever heard, as if she knew she I had lost and she had won.

"Elizabeth," she said, "it's obvious from what your father just told me that your marriage is over. Just admit it and I'll fly out there and help you pack. There's no dishonor in dumping that leech. This has happened to plenty of respectable young women from established families."

I hung up, again, lay my head on my desk and cried.

That evening when I visited Ryan at the hospital he looked weaker. I stood over him trying to stuff food into him but he just couldn't eat. Suddenly I felt tears running down my face. I was weakening under the strain of the last several days.

Ryan took my hand.

"Look at me, Chappie," he said.

I didn't want him to see the tears that were now streaming down my cheeks.

"Chappie, please look at me," he implored.

I reached for a hospital tissue to wipe my eyes and when I looked at him, so weak and pitiful, I burst into sobs.

"Chappie," he said. "Listen, I have a confession to make. "I saw you before you ever noticed me at the U Club back in Pittsburgh.

How could I have missed you with that confident stride, that athlete's grace, that respect for the underdog?

“When you came to the piano and I looked close up at those big brown eyes, when I looked into the depth of those beautiful eyes, I knew you were my once and forever love.

“I now know I had called to you without words. I called to you through the music and you heard me, as only lovers can hear each other.

“If I leave now because this body fails me, I will come again and call to you...and you will hear me. You will hear me through the centuries, through eternity because love can never die, our love can never die, Chappie. You must believe that. If I know you believe, then, whenever I must go, I will go with courage and hope.”

He pulled my hand to his mouth and kissed my fingers. :Tell me you believe, Chappie.”

“I believe, Ryan,” I said through my tears. “I believe.”

He then fell into a restful sleep

## Chapter Twenty Three

Mrs. Capeletti sat by Ryan's bedside all day. I thought that if anything she wouldn't let him die. I joined her before and after work.

Once when a young male resident physician came into the room, Ryan introduced me.

"Dr. Gustafson," he said, weakly, "this is my wife Elizabeth. Isn't she beautiful?"

Embarrassed, he answered, "Yes," and kept his eyes on Ryan's chart.

"If anything happens to me, Doc," Ryan said, smiling at me, "I won't take it personally if you want to pursue her."

"Ryan," I said. "Please don't talk like that."

"Nothing's going to happen to you, Mr. Capeletti," the young resident said, his face turning scarlet as he finished his look at the chart and hurried from the room.

"I guess I embarrassed him," Ryan said.

"And you pissed me off," I said.

"Elizabeth," Mrs. Capeletti said.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Capeletti," I said. "It's just...."

"It's OK, Chappie," Ryan said. "It doesn't matter. Remember, we'll be together for eternity."

“I’ll settle for next week, and the week after that, and the week after that....” I said.

But the weeks after that never came. Ryan Capeletti passed from this life into his eternity during the night. And I wasn’t even there with him, nor was his mother.

I had fallen asleep in the chair next to Ryan’s bed and had awoken at 1:15AM. I had to go to work the next day so I leaned over to Ryan, who had also fallen asleep, and kissed him good night. Two hours later I received a call to go to the hospital. I knew on my way across town that Ryan had died.

When I arrived at his bedside his mother was there. She and the nurse tried to be gentle with me. Ryan was in his bed, the sheet tucked under his chin. He was as handsome as he’d ever been. His body was still warm when I lay my head on his chest and wept.

“Oh, Ryan,” I cried, “I love you so much. Don’t go. Please don’t go. Please, Ryan.”

Not many people came to the wake. I had decided, with Mrs. Capeletti’s consent, to keep Ryan in San Francisco. The two other members of his jazz trio, RH and Bobby Mason and several of his piano students came. Sarah came to be with me and some of my colleagues from work showed up to offer their condolences.

On the last day of the viewing, before everyone was asked to leave, one of his piano students, Amy Tashimoro, played the Mozart Adagio in B Minor, one of Mozart’s most serious and solemn works, but one that has within it the joy and hope that Mozart so beautifully expresses. It was one of Ryan’s favorite piano pieces and I kept a version by Ryan that I had secretly recorded during one of his practice sessions.

All who sat in the funeral home were touched by the music and Amy's careful interpretation of it. We all cried and I felt the collective sorrow of everyone who understood that a vital young man had had his life cut woefully short.

The undertakers let me stay by myself in the room with Ryan before they closed the casket and the pallbearers carried him to the hearse. I knelt before the casket and looked at his face, a face that had unbelievably not suffered the ravages of disease and death so common to so many. He looked so alive and so handsome.

I touched his hair and his face, half expecting him to move at my touch.

"Ryan, my darling," I said as I held his cold hand. "I love you so much, my darling. I always will love you. Always, darling. Until the end of time. Until we meet again. Where will we meet again, darling? When will you come to me again, Ryan? Please come to me again, my darling."

I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Mrs. Capeletti. "Come, my child," she said. "Ryan is with God. He is asleep in the Lord."

"I love him so much, Bianca," I said, turning to face her, tears rolling down my face and onto her shoulder.

"Yes, my child," she said, gently patting my back. "And he knew that you did."

I turned and looked at Ryan. "I want to kiss him farewell," I said, leaning over the casket and kissing him on his cool lips. "I will always love you, my darling."

At the cemetery, Fr. Petro said a simple service. When all had departed the gravesite I stayed on and read Ryan a farewell poem that I had adapted from poet Anne Bradstreet.

### To My Dear and Loving Husband

If ever two were one then surely we,  
If ever man were loved by wife, then surely thee;  
If ever wife were happy in a man,  
Compare with me, any woman, if you can.  
I prized your love, Ryan, more than whole mines of gold  
Or all the riches the world can hold.  
My love is such that rivers cannot quench  
And only your love can recompense.  
Your love was such I can no way repay,  
But, may the heavens reward thee greatly, I pray.  
We lived in love, Ryan, and let us remember  
That even if we live no more, we will live forever.

I placed the poem and a final rose on his bier and walked away.

The End