

Chapter 1

Hannah Cooper shook her honey brown hair back and forth as she strummed hard on her guitar. “When the truth is found to be lies,” she sang in the middle of the near-empty room. Her voice was raw, vulnerable and invulnerable in turns, channeling the feelings she usually pushed down deep. She felt safe here in the patients’ lounge with the vaguely acrid smell and the yellow walls, the paint too bright like the forced cheerfulness of a polite smile. As her left hand changed chords, the pique of the chorus rose in her voice:

“Don’t you want somebody to love?
Don’t you need somebody to love?
Wouldn’t you love somebody to love?
You’d better find somebody to love.”

She tried for the emotional abandon of Grace Slick, the lead singer of one of her favorite bands, but this was lost on Mr. Olsen, who she saw first as she scanned the near empty room. Mr. Olsen was in a dopey sleep, dribble glistening on one corner of his mouth. Nurse Claire was next to him, her cocoa fingertips pressed against the vein in his neck, checking his pulse. She made a note on the chart that hung from his wheelchair and said to Hannah, “Girl, you bring some soul into this place.”

It had a name, The Queens Manor Nursing Home, but everyone called it The Place. There was nothing inherently wrong with the name; it was the function of The Place that no one wanted to acknowledge. A way station, a place of sickness and despair was what most people thought. Surely it was a last resort, and, like any resort, one where towels were refreshed, linens changed, meals provided and activities planned. Which is where Hannah and her family came in. Her father ran the nursing home.

The Place made Hannah Cooper different. This became apparent to her in fourth grade math class. The assignment in the classroom that day was to make a chart of one's family. Hannah, nearsighted in a way her thick glasses didn't entirely correct, hunkered down, nose practically to the paper and began to draw her boxes, one for each member of the family, as instructed.

Soon she asked for more paper. Mrs. Berger, the new math teacher, handed Hannah another sheet and repeated, just over Hannah's head, "Chart your family, the people you see all the time."

All the time: that meant Hannah could erase Mrs. Mirkin, the recluse. Never saw her. And there was someone on the third floor who was in and out of the hospital, so he was out. Simpler to arrange them by starting with her favorites, Hannah thought. She wrote quickly, filling in her row of boxes: Solly, who was teaching her poker, had the big room in the corner; Margaret, dear Margaret, who softened her pain with a smile and conversation; Vincenzo, her dad's surrogate father, and of course, there was Mrs. G. whose mob boss son visited every Sunday. It was hard to remember sixty people when they were changing all the time. But her father did it. More than remembered their names, he knew them. Really knew them.

"We are a family here," her father would tell the relatives of prospective patients. They all wore similar expressions when they first came to tour The Place. Faces slightly drawn, shoulders tight with worry or shame or failure that they had to turn a parent to the care of strangers. Her father helped them relax, introducing them to the nurses and some of the livelier residents.

Eventually Hannah's father would bring them to the kitchen with its seductive

smells; cinnamon, ginger and paprika, from Lena the cook's Hungarian background and conviction that food could heal. Lena might be making stuffed cabbage, brisket or dark bread, her ample arms stirring a big wooden spoon in the metal pot. Whatever she was preparing, she'd adapt the dish for the myriad of special diets - diabetic, low salt, low fat, or a puree for the residents who could no longer chew.

The families would usually do a double-take at Lena -- half their size and close to the age of their own parents. Lena loved to chat with visitors while she worked, as she never needed to look down at recipes. There were none. Lena had never learned to read or write, save for the Dick and Jane readers Hannah had shared with her. Every assistant cook had to have small hands so that Lena could teach them her recipes – ingredients were often measured by the handful. Lena had a near photographic memory and could still recite the dietary requirements of residents long gone. She was the best card player at The Place.

“We're a family business. Families are our business,” Hannah's father would tell families touring the facility as Lena would slip them a plateful of rugeluch always on hand for such visits, and biting into the rich, sweet dough, they'd feel better about the choice they had to make.

Mrs. Berger grabbed Hannah's still unfinished papers, looked at them, and said, “Hannah, all these people?”

As her teacher arched her eyebrows into a scold, Hannah pleaded, “Mrs. Berger, I got to mostly everyone, I just need more time.”

Which prompted one of what would be a series of notes sent home from school, all with the same theme, stated or implied, that what Hannah talked about in class either

could not be true or should not be true. She was not appropriately socialized, the notes admonished; Hannah shied from peer relationships, and had an unhealthy depth of knowledge of medical conditions and terminology (bringing a catheter in for show-and-tell, she knew, was deserving of reprimand). Sometimes Hannah posted these teacher's notes on the bulletin board by The Place's second floor residents' lounge, sharing them with the only people who she felt truly understood her.

During recess that day, Hannah sat against the brick wall of the school while her classmates played. After class Mrs. Berger had quizzed Hannah about her response to the assignment, placed a note in an envelope and asked Hannah to give it to her mother. Hannah considered waiting until the end of the week when her mother came back from her trip. But what if her mother was supposed to respond?

She pulled at the envelope flap and pictured her mother in a hotel room, dresses spread out on the bed, running her elegant fingers over the fashions she was there to show, her hands tracing the perfect seams. The vibrant colors and bold patterns of the clothes captured her mother's attention in a way Hannah wished she could.

Hannah put the envelope behind her back as some of the kids from her math class came over to where she sat. One of the boys was walking like a hunchback, his hand cupped over an imaginary cane. In voice that was meant to sound elderly but was more like the wicked witch of the west, he said, "Can I be in your family too?" A couple of his classmates laughed. One of the girls called out, "Get away from her, you'll catch the cooties." Hannah stuffed the note into her pocket. She'd open it with her father later.

"Yes, Hannah," her father said as they ate dinner in the empty nursing home dining room. "You told her true. The Place is home and everyone you drew, we are their

family.”

But Hannah could tell from the way her father’s lips pinched as he read that the note’s words stung.

“Hannah’s progress is being impeded by her challenging home environment.”
Hannah’s father sighed. “What does she know about providing a home environment?”
He put the note down on the table and looked around. “I’m doing the best that I can.”

Chapter 2

Sunday was family day. For some of the residents, it meant a visit from their relatives, but for others their isolation hung heavy over the lounge. For Hannah's schoolmates it meant a ball game, or a family outing with brothers and sisters and cousins piled into the back of the family station wagon. Hannah spent Sundays at The Place.

When she was younger she'd relished the days of welcoming and often toothless smiles from the residents in what seemed to be an endless maze of rooms, of showing off her reading skills to Lena, and kitchen treats that followed. Even the smells were alluring. When she'd follow the nurses on their rounds, the menthol packs that relived congestion and the rubbing alcohol before injections would make her nose run, and the strong and ever-present pine disinfectant made her think of Christmas.

When she thought about her classmates' taunts those smells turned sour. There was nothing pretty about old age, and the repugnance they felt rubbed off on her. Hannah became as isolated as the residents. But she loved her father far too much to rebel. As a remedy for the loneliness that crept into her soul she'd started to bring her guitar to The Place. Her father applauded it as entertainment for the residents and each time she played would give her a few dollars which she put in a jar, saving it up for a blood red Rickenbacker electric guitar.

Sometimes Hannah played so long her fingers bled and one of the nurses would put cotton balls soaked in Betadine on her raw, calloused fingertips, staining them burnt orange. She welcomed the pain in a way; it was real, and one of the few feelings she

could not repress. She'd work on the same finger-pick, repeating the pattern over and over, trance-like, until she no longer had to think the strings at all, and the notes formed a rhythm as regular as a heartbeat. The nursing home residents didn't mind the repetition. It was not monotony but salve. They could relate to the nuance and progress in measured steps.

The residents loved to look at her, her youth itself beautiful to them. Some of the residents who'd been at The Place for a while would celebrate even the subtlest of her changes. When Hannah first got her contact lenses and she felt she'd been released from the cage of her glasses, her metamorphosis was roundly noted. Who needed a mirror, and there were few at The Place, when Hannah could see herself through these admiring, albeit glaucomatous eyes? Hannah welcomed the appreciation. It almost made up for what she didn't feel inside.

For the residents, Hannah was a reason to turn off the TV, a big black-and-white unit in a blond wood cabinet. A matchbook had to be stuffed in the grooves of the speaker to cut the buzz from the sound. One resident was in charge of adjusting the rabbit ears that transformed the picture from electronic snow to just plain grainy black and white. He'd lost his leg to diabetes and his wheelchair put him at the perfect height to reach up and adjust the wire antenna atop the TV.

On Sunday nights when they watched The Ed Sullivan Show on Channel 2, he'd have to keep his hand on the rabbit ears throughout the program. It was his job, his purpose, without which life at The Place couldn't go on. His family would never understand how satisfied he felt to hear the three blasts of music at the start of the program's theme song come on just as he had the picture in place.

He would turn off the TV ceremoniously when Hannah arrived. “What do you have for us this week Hannah? What’s today’s sound?” That particular Sunday she played songs from The Jefferson Airplane and The Rolling Stones. Naughty, bluesy, she liked them so much more than The Beatles. She pulled out her slide, the shiny metal was cold against her fingers.

Chairs lined the room in three rings, with the outer wall closest to the exit reserved for those most infirm or senile. Hannah sat in the center of the room in an upholstered straight back chair, long separated from the dining set it had belonged to. “Time is on my side, yes it is,” she sang, but the lyric was lost amid the newly animated chatter.

The inner circle began to fill with the more lively residents whose visitors had left. Hannah packed up her guitar. It was time for the news. Not the incessant horror from Vietnam that visited American living rooms in nightly installments, but the personal kind. Pictures of grandchildren. Forbidden sweets. Gossip about the relatives who had come that day, and those who didn’t visit. Some residents doled out their stories like sugar rations, measured to last the full week.

The window was open and the smell of soon-to-be-spring revved up the conversation. And there was something else. Word spread from resident to resident. “Did you hear?” “Who told you?” “How come she didn’t tell me?” Little affronts could magnify in such a limited, sheltered circle. But those slights could wait. There was news. There would be a welcome dinner that night. A new resident was coming. Margaret, one of Hannah's favorites, called her over.

“Who is coming today? I hear it’s a man. Hannah, come tell me everything.”

Hannah gave Margaret her arm and walked her to her room. She was taller than Hannah, and light for her frame from the cancer slowly eating at her. Margaret had come to The Place seven years ago; her nieces were too far away to help care for her. She'd doted on them when they were young, and again as young adults when her sisters had died. Any sadness at her own inability to have children hadn't stopped her from living a rich and full life. When her breast cancer was diagnosed, the doctors told her about a treatment with radiation that might cure her but would make her hair fall out. She opted for surgery, and a remaining lifetime of pain medications as the remnants of her cancer slowly spread.

Margaret sat in the guest chair on her side of her small room. The pink crocheted pillow covers and little patch of lace on the back of the chair reminded Hannah of a jewelry box with a dancing princess on top she'd had as a child. Hannah got the comb from Margaret's drawer. In what had become a ritual between them, Hannah removed the bobby pins and let down the older woman's hair. The comb was well used, made of ivory, yellowed and sleek to the touch. Hannah could picture how it once sat on a dresser, on a mirrored tray with silver edging, maybe with a bottle shaped like a swan next to it.

Margaret's hair was bright white, long and coarse at the ends. The nurses wanted her to cut it because it took so long to dry -- afraid Margaret would get chilled and be vulnerable to pneumonia. But Margaret insisted on keeping it long, her badge of courage for her decision to tough out the pain. Hannah could tell it used to be soft and silky straight like Jill's or Joanne's, the popular girls at school. Cheerleaders. Margaret, Hannah thought, was always popular. Hannah had yet to find where she fit in.

“I want to wear it down today. And help me put on my green dress,” Margaret said. Those residents who could, made the welcome dinners into festive occasions. For like them, the new resident likely had not selected The Place himself, he was put here, and a fun first night could mitigate some of the feeling of loss of personage.

“What do you know about him?” Margaret asked.

Hannah didn’t know much, but didn’t much like what she heard. Not that they could afford to judge -- the new resident would be a private patient, which meant better fees than what Medicaid would pay. Lately her father had been talking about how hard it was for a small place like his to make ends meet.

There was less information on private patients when they entered -- usually their medical or emotional problems were greater than the family revealed.

“I think he’ll start on the third floor,” Hannah told Margaret, meaning that the newcomer needed observation either because of senility or acute medical need. There was more staff on three.

Hannah could see that Margaret was disappointed, that she’d hoped for a fun new companion, someone to enliven the passage of time, to broaden her insular world. Life for the residents at The Place was limited to the people and things immediately around, not unlike a young child’s world, Maybe that was why The Place felt so comfortable to Hannah when she was young, and why as she grew she felt little impetus to expand beyond it.

Hannah didn't usually divulge anything about the business of The Place. Her father shared the daily details but expected that she’d keep them to herself -- sometimes even excluding her mother from her knowledge. But she couldn’t deny Margaret a little

information.

“I know he lived on Central Park West. I think the daughter and son-in-law are taking over his apartment.”

Hannah saw Margaret’s disappointment flush away by the mention of Central Park. It triggered a memory of dressing for an anniversary long ago. Margaret told Hannah of going to the Metropolitan Opera, how she and her husband, Philip, had dressed in their finery and discretely tried to identify the famous and elite patrons around them.

“Jussi Bjorling was singing ‘nessum dorma’ from Turandot. The breath control. The lightness. The drama. Bjorling was the most incredible tenor ever to sing. Oh how I cried,” Margaret said, her face lighting up, transforming her, Hannah thought, into one of the lovely, lovely people Margaret had described.

“The jewels, the gowns. We drank champagne after the first act,” she went on, with a laugh now girlish and giddy.

“After the opera, my Philip and I walked to Central Park and took a carriage ride.” Margaret lowered her voice, looked away from Hannah and out the window, then turned back to her with a broad smile, and a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

“Oh, the things we did under that blanket. Thrilling. I can still remember his touch.” She ran her fingers over her torso. “There is no better feeling than to be wanted. I can tell you this, Hannah, you’re practically a woman now.”

As Margaret said this, the teeth of the comb caught on a snarl of hair. Hannah pulled a little too hard. Margaret winced.

“It must be wonderful to be wanted,” Hannah said, her momentary jealousy

softening, “To have somebody to love.”

“Come closer. Give me that comb,” Margaret said.

She took Hannah’s shoulder-length, straight brown hair, the same color as the light maple syrup in the giant bottle in the kitchen, parted it to the left and combed it so it swept over the side of Hannah’s face. With unsteady but sure hands Margaret smoothed the newly acquired contact lens squint from Hannah’s brow.

“There, Hannah. Look at you.” Margaret held up a small hand mirror, then turned it to herself, pleased with what she saw, said, “Look at us.”

“Help me dress, Hannah. I want to sit with the new man and make him feel welcome, show him there’s life in this place. Hannah, join our table tonight. Can you stay for dinner?”

Hannah said she could not; as she had plans with her mother. She left Margaret’s room and walked down the narrow hallway towards the elevator. Hannah heard a whistle. Actually, more of a cat call.

“A handsome man like you doesn’t need to whistle,” she called in to Solly’s room.

“Can’t help myself when I see something I like,” he teased as she entered. Solly was seated at his desk. His blue eyes shone a greeting. Hannah could look into his eyes and forget everything else. His curly hair was still mostly dark, his face only slightly lined. He was the youngest resident in the home, sixty, she supposed. Dark and mysterious. And leg-less.

Solly had come to The Place six years before, after many months in the hospital. There was a shroud of secrecy about the cause of his accident, though Hannah had

correctly guessed the place. Cuba. Once she heard him dreaming in Spanish, and he easily conversed with the Dominican orderlies.

There had been a lot of visitors at first, closed-door visitors. He had the big room lined with the low bookshelves Hannah's father had installed. A generous government check covered his expenses each month, the money a godsend to Mr. Cooper, who in return, saw to it that Solly never had to answer questions about his injury, or more specifically, why his work for the government placed him on a land mine in Cuba in 1961.

It was the least Bennett Cooper could do for his one-time teacher. Too poor to afford college, Cooper had taken the special aptitude tests the Army had offered. He'd placed into the Army intelligence program hosted by the University of Chicago, where Solly's interrogation class included memory games that would last well into the night and some fierce extra-curricular hands of poker. After the end of World War II, Solly was called back to the field and Cooper went on to work with older veterans. Through that work, Cooper was able to cobble together the government loans to start The Place, leaving an easy trail for Solly to follow when the need arose.

Solly was a voracious reader, and he spent much of his time writing in and reading from his black moleskine notebooks. It was Solly who introduced Hannah to the writings of Marcuse, Thomas Jefferson and the radical manifesto, The Port Huron Statement, issued at Berkeley the previous year by the radical anti-war group, The Students for Democratic Society. Solly also loved playing poker, and he presided over a game that sometimes included Mrs. G's son and his cronies, Doc Safran, the primary doctor for The Place, Lena, the cook, and occasionally Mr. Cooper. Sometimes, he'd just

play with Lena.

“Lena had me going last night. Cards were going her way, everything on suit,” he told Hannah, to whom he was trying to teach the game. “All I could do was raise and fake. She bought it, too. It’s easier to bluff a strong player than a weak one.”

Chapter 3

Hannah was accompanying her mother to a meeting of the local Democratic Party. In her own way, Hannah's mother was active. Each year she organized a fashion show, a major fundraising event for the local Democrats. She was not really the luncheon type. Certainly she was as classy, or more so, than any of the ladies who attended, but she was of a different class. She was fiercely engaged in her job, but she could never forget, and the luncheon 'girls' did not let her forget, that she had to work.

For two months each year she planned the event -- picking the outfits to showcase, the centerpieces, the raffles, and arranging the tables of the lady Democrats, who she regarded with a mix of superiority and jealousy. The fashion show was her contribution -- the Coopers could never be major donors like the increasingly wealthy families in their community -- and the event bought them into the wheel of social events, black-tie fundraisers and dinner dances that were the fast and fun Saturday nights the Coopers lived for.

But Natalie Cooper was also a committed Democrat -- she'd believed in JFK's Camelot, in the kind of statesmanship Adlai Stevenson had exemplified, and like her daughter hated Nixon and early on had taken a stand against the Vietnam War.

Hannah and her mother didn't do too much together. If there were times when Hannah might have needed maternal touch, she'd learned to do without. Their occasional outings usually involved going to a department store or one of the boutiques on Central Avenue.

“Hannah, look at this three button jacket,” her mother had said on their spring shopping expedition a few weeks before, pointing to a straight and simple light wool jacket that would downplay Hannah’s uneven and emerging curves. Hannah’s eye was on a long maroon velvet duster with bell sleeves.

“Velvet is not a practical fabric for an everyday coat. And there’s nothing springtime about the color.”

“But Ma, I saw a picture of it in a magazine,” Hannah retorted, knowing how to play her mother.

“What magazine?”

“Something from England,” Hannah said, and her mother was hooked. Anything coming out of Carnaby Street interested her. “What magazine?”

“Melody Maker. Hendrix was wearing it.”

“Well, you’re not Hendrix,” her mother said as she held up the coat to inspect the seams.

Hannah had moved on to the selection of bellbottoms. This year the girls in her class had won the right to wear pants to school, and Landlubber jeans were a symbol of this fledgling freedom.

For her mother, clothes-shopping was a kind of religion, filled with ritual and rules. No white after Labor Day, outfits that could mix and match, and the right accessories. Natalie Cooper was built like a model, had worked as one as she maneuvered her way up to a mid-level retail representative of the fashion company she worked for. The designers still used her perfect size 6 as inspiration, while Natalie Cooper aspired to design her own line.

There was not a word from her mother when Hannah put on her well-worn bellbottoms and brown suede fringed vest to go to the meeting that night. When Hannah looked in the mirror she liked what she saw -- with-it would be her mother's description - but she also felt pretty, bolstered by her afternoon with Margaret and Solly.

The crowded meeting room felt even more so because of the low ceilings. Hannah and her mother looked around and found some seats in the back. Hannah could feel people watching them. Natalie Cooper was stunning in her simple slacks and a sweater, and as always, looked like she stepped right out of a magazine. Her blonde hair, double processed for a more natural look, skimmed her shoulders, showing off her impossibly good posture.

Usually Hannah would slouch when she entered a room, folding into herself, trying to recede from judging eyes. Tonight she held her head up and looked around, ready for the attention her mother commanded. There were other mothers there, but next to Natalie Cooper they all seemed frumpy or old fashioned. There were nods of recognition from some of Democratic ladies who watched them enter. Hannah recognized a few seniors from her school, but no one from her tenth grade class, which made her feel grown-up.

The first speaker, one of the Clean for Gene kids, as the college students who canvassed for Eugene McCarthy were called, had already started.

“What happened in New Hampshire really was a miracle,” he said referring to McCarthy's surprisingly strong showing in the primary two weeks before. He told how hundreds of college students descended on that conservative state, shaved their beards, changed their clothes, and fueled by donuts and soda, went door to door promoting

McCarthy's candidacy on an anti-war platform in the 1968 Presidential election. They were warned, the speaker told, that the older people, fiercely independent in the New England tradition and who represented the swing vote, wouldn't even want to open the doors to them. They loved the freshness, the promise of the kids.

Natalie Cooper scanned the room to take in what everyone was wearing. Her eyes focused on a group of college students.

"Look at those beads," Hannah's mother whispered, gesturing towards a 'hippie girl,' with long blond hair parted in the middle, and an inch-thick bracelet of multi-colored beads with a peace sign at the center.

"And her bag," which was macramé crochet, "a perfect accessory."

"Mother, how can you think about fashion here?" Hannah said, with a trace of scold in her voice. But really she was tickled that her mother was so deferential. Just the other day she was at her friend Susan's house after school when Susan's older sister, dressed similarly, was grounded. Susan's mother yelled, "I'll not have a daughter of mine leaving this house looking like a freak."

"Darling, presentation matters," Hannah's mother said.

She reached into her big, black leather purse, a recent purchase from London, and pulled out her little red notebook and a pencil. Discreetly, and as serious as a student taking notes in science class, Hannah's mother began to sketch. As the pencil hit the page, Hannah felt a new sense of promise, of power, as if her mother had somehow just given her the ultimate hall pass. By virtue of accepting the fringe and beads, her mother had offered permission to all that Hannah could become.

The speaker continued, "and now I'm asking you to throw your support behind

the man who orchestrated it all, Al Lowenstein.” Everyone cheered. “He’s running for a seat from the 5th Congressional District and we’re here tonight to start the Friends of Al Lowenstein Committee.”

Hannah and her mother had read about Lowenstein in the paper. How he convinced McCarthy to run against LBJ when Bobby Kennedy at first declined. That Lowenstein was the one working behind the scenes within the system to lobby against the Vietnam War. They’d seen pictures of him at civil rights demonstrations. But they weren’t prepared for how he looked when he stepped on to the small stage. The tall man in the hopelessly wrinkled suit and thick black glasses looked more like a grocer than a leader. Mrs. Cooper shot a glance of doubt toward Hannah.

The doubt quickly dissipated as Lowenstein spoke, his voice sure and engaging. He told stories of the Freedom Marches and how he gathered busloads of college students from the North to make a stand for Civil Rights.

Hannah was studying American History in Social Studies that year, but it never before seemed real. That there were separate schools, bathrooms, water fountains, seats on the bus -- and not so long ago. She thought of Nelson, an orderly at The Place -- his family was from the South. His mother must have lived that way. And no one said it was wrong, until this man.

“One by one we can change the world by standing up for what we believe. We can stop the war. We can use the tools that we have, use the system to effect change. When you see injustice you have to stand up, and I will stand up. I will stand up for you if you elect me.”

Hannah felt shaky and strong at the same time. She thought of the pictures of the

guns and bodies they saw each night on TV. Thought of Walter Cronkite, usually droll, who just last week broke down on his program, looking away from the script, and said it was clear this war was unwinnable, that the casualties were immeasurable, stopping short of saying the government was underestimating American losses, and misguided about what victory was.

Lowenstein would say it, was saying it, right there in that room with the waffle-tile ceilings and uncomfortable bridge chairs. Hannah looked around at the mothers and hippies and kids like her, and felt Lowenstein really could and would speak for them. She was filled with possibility, and while this man before them did not shy from outrage, she, like everyone who heard him speak, was infused with an optimism that was otherwise lacking that spring of 1968.

After the speeches there was a small reception downstairs. Lowenstein's core supporters, mostly college students, staffed tables, signing people up for different tasks. Hannah's mother air-kissed one of the lady Democrats. "The event committee, Hannah, go sign us up," she said, nudging Hannah in the direction of the tables. As she walked through the crowd, Hannah spotted a senior from her school. Tall, wealthy and gregarious, Bruce was one of the popular boys. He caught her eye and approached her.

"Don't tell that I'm here, my father would kill me," Bruce said, giving her arm a squeeze.

"Who is there to tell?" Hannah said, her way of acknowledging that they were in different social circles.

"You're here with your mother?" he asked. Hannah was surprised he continued talking to her.

“Man, you have the coolest parents going.”

Hannah, who had spent the bulk of her years being teased relentlessly about her father’s occupation and her mother’s work-related absences from school events, who accepted her social status as ‘from the other side of the tracks,’ could not process what she was hearing.

“What’d you say?”

“I’d give anything to have parents as cool as yours. My old man, he’s still talking about Eisenhower. Wants me to enlist.”

Hannah tried to present an appropriately sympathetic face, but was still smiling broadly from Bruce’s remark about her parents.

Hannah worked her way through the crowd to the sign up tables, with Bruce at her side.

“Peace, man,” said the college student behind the table, greeting Bruce. Hannah was immediately taken by his looks -- long, dark hair, not quite obscuring his cucumber green eyes. He was tall with an athletic build and wore a jean jacket with a flag-like red and white striped lining. A peace sign and an Out Now button emblazoned the front pockets and collar.

“So you’ll be there?” he asked Bruce, who responded, “I’ll find a way.”

“Good, we need a turn out. You bring your pretty friend,” he said looking in Hannah’s direction. Hannah felt her cheeks immediately burn. She couldn’t say a word. She had intended to sign up for her mother, but suddenly she wanted nothing to do with her mother. Wanted to be on her own, old enough, but for what she didn’t quite know.

“I, er, wanted to sign up for the event committee.” His eyebrow rose slightly, as

if amused. She wished Bruce would introduce her to him.

“We’re planning a rally. Do you have any special skills?” he asked.

“Well, um, er, well, I play the guitar,” she replied.

He shot a glance at Bruce that said that he was humoring her. She looked back at him, holding his gaze.

“Well, ok. We’ll expect to see you and your guitar at the rally,” he said, handing her a clipboard. She wrote her name on the bottom of the list. Next to it he wrote, guitar.

That night alone in her room, she played the scene over and over in her head. Any time spent with Bruce would be a social coup for her at school, but she couldn’t even tell where she had seen him. And while yesterday it would have been tempting to have something juicy to pass notes about in math class, now all that seemed silly. Besides, it was not Bruce she was interested in. There was a campaign to be part of, and the guy whose name she didn’t know but whose face she couldn’t quite forget.

Hannah’s thoughts were interrupted by a knock on her door. “Hannah,” her mother called out. “The news. Johnson just announced he’s not running for reelection. And he’s stopping the bombing in North Vietnam.” Everything was changing that spring of 1968.

Hannah rifled through her albums, found The Lovin’ Spoonful, whose saccharine sound had been relegated to the back of the stack that winter. She turned the record up loud.

“Do you believe in magic in a young girl’s heart?”

Chapter 4

Margaret's evening had held promise only because of her incessant optimism. She did, indeed, look lovely and had been able to sit at the table with the new resident, Herman Steiner. He was still a handsome man, and younger than she'd thought he'd be. Late sixties, maybe seventy, she guessed. He wore well-tailored pants and good leather shoes, appropriate for a Sunday dinner. He listed to the left as he walked, and his left eye twitched almost imperceptibly.

But Mr. Steiner did not come to dinner alone. Mr. Cooper always asked the families of new residents to stay for the first dinner, but few ever did. They'd leave The Place hastily to celebrate their relief or drink down their guilt. This time Mr. Cooper had insisted, wanting to impress Mr. Steiner's family, knowing that the meal they'd have would rival any neighborhood restaurant, wanting to, needing to insure that they were happy. A small nursing home like The Place needed the higher fees from private patients in order to cover the ever-increasing costs.

So Mr. Steiner's daughter, Emily, and her husband, James Henry Black, a writer for The New York Herald, stayed for dinner. Mr. Steiner didn't say much. He had trouble feeding himself. James Henry Black looked at his father-in-law with distaste when his fork shook and his knife made the meat slide across the plate. Emily looked away. Margaret tried to make light of it, tried to catch Mr. Steiner's eye. James Henry Black talked on, all about Ozone Park and how the neighborhood was changing.

“To know New York you have to know the neighborhoods,” the portly writer told them in the tone of a grade school teacher.

Margaret turned away and talked to Mrs. Gariano, who knew exactly what he did not about the neighborhood. Her son was a ‘family’ man, and his cement company and many of his associates were frequently referred to as reputed mobsters in the pages of The Herald. When James Henry Black asked if they’d seen his work, Mrs. Gariano muttered, “He calls that work?” and Margaret thought she saw her spit.

“I’m a Times reader,” said Margaret, not sure if the son-in-law caught the jibe. She saw Mr. Steiner’s face light up, turned her head and waited for him to say something. His daughter, too, turned to him, waiting for words. Mr. Steiner said nothing.

“Talk to Mr. Cooper,” she said to James Henry Black. “He’ll arrange for your father to get whatever paper he chooses.”

“Father-in-law,” he quickly corrected. His eyes barely acknowledged that she was speaking, but the daughter looked grateful for the light conversation.

Her remarks weren't really meant for them, anyway, so Margaret continued, “We have discussion groups and sometimes guest speakers -- politics, entertainment, and even fashion. Mrs. Cooper is bringing photos from the collections in Paris.” Margaret saw Mr. Steiner's comportment pick up visibly at her mention of the fashion photos. She filed that away like a clue in a mystery.

The next day Margaret went up to the third floor and brought Mr. Steiner a copy of The Times. She hadn’t finished reading it, but figured he might nap and she could get it back then. Mr. Steiner was sitting by himself, not watching the TV, in the corner of the light

green common room, under the framed bright yellow Marimekko fabric flower Mrs. Cooper had hung the other day.

“I could tell you weren’t much interested in The Herald. May I sit down?” Margaret asked and showed him The Times. Mr. Steiner gestured to the seat next to him and with his good hand, snatched the second section of the paper from her. She unfolded the front page and started reading aloud.

“Big news this morning. Johnson says he won’t run,” she said neutrally, hoping to elicit an opinion. Mr. Steiner responded with a nod. Margaret turned the page.

“Bet that means that Humphrey will run,” she continued. Mr. Steiner half shrugged, the gesture, though small, was more labored than disinterested.

In a couple of minutes Margaret tried again, carefully folding the paper first lengthwise then in half to show a picture. It was of Paris, a view of protesters from a distance. In the bottom of the frame, a single protester was heading toward the crowd, shoulders forward, captured in a quick, determined walk.

“An extraordinary photo,” she said. “makes you feel like you’re walking right into the action.”

Mr. Steiner scrutinized it, and her. He said nothing. But his face telegraphed that something resonated deeply. Margaret tried to bring it out of him.

“I think that boy has courage,” she said pointing to the protester in the photo. “Pahr-ee,” she continued in a not bad French accent, “it even sounds heavenly. Ever been there?”

Mr. Steiner looked back at her long and hard. He moved his body slightly forward, then back, a full body nod, the motion telling Margaret it was a place he had fully experienced. He leaned in towards her, his lips parted. Mr. Steiner did not say a word.

Each day that week, Margaret again brought her carefully folded newspaper to the third floor lounge. Mr. Steiner would gesture for her to sit down and Margaret would talk about the headlines, often looking up and into his deep, brown eyes. Mr. Steiner did not talk.

“You can get a paper here, you know,” she said to him at the end of the week, although she was glad he had not yet made that effort. He nodded in affirmation, his motion stronger and surer than the previous day, letting her know that he was at least accepting of her company, perhaps even welcoming it.

Emboldened, Margaret offered, “Join me for lunch. You don’t have to eat in your room. Sit at my table -- the nurses call us the live wires. You’ll hear some good stories. Wait ‘til Mrs. G gets going. Or Solly, he’s a regular history scholar.”

Herman Steiner lowered his head and said nothing. Then he looked away, glancing at the residents in wheelchairs watching the TV. Margaret let the silence sit a minute, thick and loaded. Time at The Place was measured against a different clock. Simple everyday tasks could be slow and savored when there was incremental progress, while catastrophes, happened quickly and frequently. With an uncertain ending ever looming, the pace of relationships was a kilter, accelerated and intensified.

“What do you say? Tomorrow, maybe?” she said, lightly touching him on his arm.

Mr. Steiner still said nothing. His chin sunk deeper towards his chest. Margaret waited. All week she’d been making an effort and now she was giving him plenty of time to

summon some words, or even a simple gesture of thanks. But Mr. Steiner receded, lost in himself, wallowing.

Margaret was stung by his lack of effort, his seeming lack of response to her. “It’s not like you’re the first person who has had a stroke,” she said.

He looked up at her, as if he was shocked at her boldness and change of tone. His face reddened from shame.

“You strike me as a man who had good manners.” She let her words sink in for a second before she continued, “Do you want to be locked inside yourself forever? Tell me, did you spend your life around people?”

His eyes widened in a mix of fear and gratitude. With a slight nod of his head, he mouthed “yes.”

“Did you have a lot of friends, talk about ideas and music and people you knew?” And then she softened, “Did you spend a lot of time in Paris?”

Tears filled his eyes. His mouth contorted, the left side refusing to hold a shape. In more a hiss than a whisper, he uttered “Yes. Oh g-g-God, yes.”

He reached his hand to her. She stroked it. Quiet for a minute, they sat, Mr. Steiner averting his eyes like a vulnerable, guilty little boy. His face quivered. His cheeks puffed and reddened from the effort of his forced words. He bent forward and balled up his right hand. His knuckles were white from tension and frustration. But it was too hard, and he let out a long, sad breath and said nothing.

Margaret’s voice turned motherly as she said, “You’ll never be what you were. But you don’t have to be like this either. You can try. You can learn to adjust. Get them to pay

for physical therapy. You'll get better with time. It's your money isn't it? Talk to Mr. Cooper. Or you'll crumble from loneliness or turn hard and sour."

She got up and walked across the room to the magazine rack filled with old issues of Life, Esquire and Family Circle. She picked up a big stack. Margaret sat down next to his good side and moved her chair closer to him. She opened a magazine, spread it across his legs and pointed to the pictures.

"So who are you, Mr. Steiner? Show me who you are."

Chapter 5

Hannah was talking with some classmates in the parking lot outside the back entrance of school when she saw her father's car pull up. He honked twice, and she waved excitedly. Mr. Cooper saved up any errand he could so as to bring her along. Sometimes they'd go to the odd lots or auctions in Long Island City or the Lower East Side and troll for bargains. They'd pack the trunk full with ten-pound cans of tomato paste or cheerful hand towels and bring their loot back to The Place, like Santa and his elf. Other times they'd venture down Manhattan's way west side to one of the butchers in the maze of the meat-packing district and wrestle slabs of frozen meat into the trunk lined with bags of ice. Then they'd speed back to Queens, windows down, no matter what the season, radio on, singing along with Frank Sinatra or Rosie Clooney at the tops of their lungs. If the ancient elevator at The Place was in need of a part, they'd stop for street dumplings before climbing too many flights of stairs to the top floor of a parts warehouse below Canal Street.

"Find a supplier," Mrs. Cooper would tell her often bone-tired husband. But his efforts kept his costs down, and he knew the source of everything at The Place, from the ingredients in the minestrone soup to the big glass cabinets of first-aid supplies. Besides, he cherished those afternoons with Hannah.

That day Hannah's mother was in the back seat. Hannah caught her father's eye, nodded in the direction of her mother and gave him a 'what's-this-about' look. Her father shrugged as Hannah got in. Her mother's eyes were half closed, and there was puffiness to them that her concealer didn't hide. Hannah knew that meant that her mother had been up

working most of the night. As she got in she touched her mother's face gently and settled in the seat in the front.

“Some of the kids were going to the Green Acres mall today.”

“You can go sometime, you know,” her father said. Hannah saw the corners of his mouth turn down. “You help out enough on weekends. Maybe you should spend more time with kids your own age.”

“They just stand around and talk about everyone or buy earrings and things. Joanne invited me.”

Her mother perked up. Joanne lived in the wealthy Harbor section, and was one of the popular girls, normally not in Hannah's circle of friends.

“She saw me talking to Bruce. He wants to go to the rally on Sunday, and I'm his alibi. Joanne heard him saying we had a date, so now she's interested in me.”

“You should cultivate that friendship,” her mother said about Joanne.

“Even if it was a friendship, I'm not that interested,” Hannah said as she turned to her father and asked, “my guitar in the trunk?”

“And your mother's suitcase.”

A suitcase in the trunk and a sudden departure might have meant trouble in one of her classmates' families, but it was not unusual for Hannah's mother to travel. Hannah, however, had no recollection that her mother was going away. She felt a subtle panic run through her as she searched her memory for some reference to her mother's trip. This, she thought, was how some of the residents must feel when they lost their train of thought mid-sentence. They'd have to search through a lifetime of memories just to get back to where they were. No wonder they'd often follow one thought with an observation on a completely

unrelated topic, decades old, stumbling as they did on a morsel of the past too tasty to pass by without reflection anew. Then she landed on it. There'd been no Sunday night conversation about their plans for the week ahead; they'd been riveted to the TV watching the newscasters stumble as they tried to comment on Johnson's surprise announcement.

Her mother's absence didn't much matter to Hannah; she had everything she needed in her tiny back room at The Place: a bed, a radio, a pair of bellbottoms and some other clothes, and an odd assortment of books left from residents past -- a Russian elementary school text, numerous bibles, and a bookshelf full of novels like *Call it Sleep*, *Marjorie Morningstar*, and *Studs Lonigan*. She stayed at The Place anytime her mother was out of town. Her mother, ever practical, had always felt that at least they'd have prepared meals. And like her father, Hannah was inured to the oddness of the environment.

"How long?" Hannah asked

"I'll be back Friday morning. Just Chicago. Financing for a new project. Came up unexpectedly."

Hannah couldn't tell if her mother wanted her to ask about the project. "So what's happening?" Hannah asked her father instead, wanting to keep abreast of the goings-on of The Place.

"I heard from Mickey. He's coming by this week or next -- wants to work out some new material. He's on Ed Sullivan again in June."

Most of the families were known only by their association to the residents. Mickey Lack was an exception. Hannah's father's oldest friend, he was an up-and-coming comedian who got his start in the hotels in the Catskills. Mickey's father, Vincenzo Laquidara, was a long time resident.

“Your friend Margaret has taken Mr. Steiner under her wing. He’s not as bad off as the family made him out to be. Might move him to two the next chance I get,” her father said.

Hannah didn’t ask which patient was likely to pass. It unnerved her a bit that her father could predict it, even when the doctors noted no change. “The spirit,” he’d tell her. “You have to read the spirit.”

She could not remember a time that a memorial candle was not burning in her father’s office. Once after a resident’s nephew visited with an undiagnosed case of mumps, there’d been five candles burning at once. It was the only time the Health Department had to file a report outside of the regular inspections.

Death was an inevitable and frequent fact of his business. No matter what the resident’s faith, when a resident passed away, her father said the Kaddish, the Jewish prayer of mourning that celebrates life and God. Each time he’d try to remember something special about the deceased before the mad scramble of phone calls to try to fill the bed.

For Hannah it was more complicated, this ever-presence of death. It made her feel superior to her peers, as if she was let in on a mystery they’d yet to discover. But it also made her aloof. It was easier sometimes to keep people and things at a distance, seeing and seeing again how transitory attachments could be.

Hannah sought out Nelson as soon as they got to The Place. He was in the laundry room sorting a pile of cotton floral housedresses on the low counter facing the door. Nelson was nearly six feet and had to stoop. The white enamel of the wall of machines set off his

espresso colored skin. His crisp light blue uniform showed two rings of sweat under his armpits.

“Hey Nelson. Know any civil rights songs?”

Nelson looked startled, as if he hadn't heard right over the clatter of the machines.

“You know, protest songs?” Hannah said in a much louder voice.

“Protest songs?” he said. “I got nothing to protest. What do you have to protest? Seems like everything's right fine.”

Everything was fine for Nelson since Hannah's father had offered him the job that was his second chance. Nelson was well-liked, with an easy smile that made his face look boyish even though he was 35, he'd been only cordial to Hannah for a long time. She didn't get it. Finally she asked Claire, the head nurse and her father's second-in-command. “You're a white girl, and the boss's daughter,” she'd explained.

Hannah had spotted the old steel string guitar behind the folding table in the laundry room. A couple of times she'd heard Nelson playing over the hum of the machines; it almost sounded like his low, sad song was tuned to the sound of the dryer.

It wasn't until her 16th birthday dinner last year that the ice broke between them. Lena had prepared a feast for all the residents and staff. Hannah opened her gifts -- a new dress from her mother, who took time off from the fashion world to be there; nail polish from the nurses, and strings of beads made by some of the residents. And there was something else. It was carefully wrapped in newspaper; all that the card said was ‘for Hannah's 16th birthday, 1967.’ She opened it, finding a shiny metal cylinder -- a slide for her guitar. She'd scanned the room until her eyes rested on Nelson, who was grinning. “Now you can play the blues,” he said.

Since then he'd been teaching her guitar. But as this conversation with Hannah continued, it was clearly about more than music. Nelson took his hands to his collar and fanned himself with the fabric.

"It's not about me. No, that's not true. It's all about me. More about me than anything, well, except the guitar," Hannah said.

Her words spilled out too fast, sputtering, and it was hard for Nelson to hear over the ga-dunk, ga-dunk of the machines. Nelson gave her a puzzled look as she continued, raising her voice to be heard over the pounding.

"There's a rally in Elm Park to support an anti-war candidate and I'm going and I said I'd bring my guitar. They don't really think I can play cause I'm a girl. I bet they think I'll play "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" or something sappy. But it's not about them. The war. It's wrong. We just keep sending over troops and more and more get killed. We'll never win, and there is nothing to win."

Fluorescent light bounced from the metal edges of the laundry's work table to the two beads of sweat on Nelson's nose. The heat from the dryers was dry and sweet, sickly sweet. Hannah could see the vein running across his forehead beat along with the clack clack of the machines. Sweat formed like pearls around the edges of his closely cropped hair.

"Child, you're not making sense." Nelson looked down at the pile of laundry before him, as if it required all his attention.

"I'm making absolute sense." Hannah took a breath, gathering courage. She wanted to say much of what Lowenstein had said. She hadn't been raised to make distinctions of race or class, she shared her father's fierce belief in dignity, respect and each

person's worth. But she still knew that Lowenstein's words delivered to an audience of liberal, white supporters meant something different and deeper shared here by her with a black man, her father's employee.

"We all have to talk about the injustice we see. Someone has to speak out."

Lowenstein's words echoed in her head and drove her to continue.

"You know what they're not saying. No one is saying who they're sending. The boys at my school, they're getting deferrals. Anyone in your neighborhood getting out of the draft?"

At first he didn't answer. She could see that he was taken aback. She was acutely aware now of the heat of the dryer. The buzzer went off, another load was done. Nelson turned from her and slowly removed a pile of sheets tangled in a vine of thin cotton floral dresses. Hot to the touch, their scent masked the odor of his sweat.

She could see him weighing his response. "My cousin's over there," he said slowly, stopping his work for a moment, but not looking up.

Hannah sensed his uneasiness, and kept talking. "There's one man who is talking. He's amazing. You should see him; his suits are as ruffled as Mr. Klein's, and he has these goofy, thick glasses. But the things he says, the things he's done! He's not just saying what's bad. He's doing something. You know when it was a problem in the South to register to vote," she said carefully introducing the subject of race. "Lowenstein's the one who got everyone together to change that."

Nelson looked directly at her as she continued.

"He's the one who convinced Aaron Henry of the NAACP to run in a mock election so people could see just how many Negroes would vote if only they could register. And

now he's speaking out against the war. The rally's for him, he's running for Congress in the district my parents live in. He stands for something."

Nelson put the pile he was folding aside. "Now you're making sense," he said, nodding as he stepped over to reach behind him for his guitar. He pointed to her guitar case as he started singing:

"A change is gonna come
It's too hard living, oh lord
Well I'm afraid to die
You see it's been a long time coming
But I know, yes I know
If you keep on living, change will come."

She took out her guitar, watched his left hand, then struggled to copy the notes his long fingers easily reached.

"Move that pinky down," he instructed. "Stretch it, then hammer the string."

It was more of a tap than a hammer, but she followed the chords as they played the verse together. As Nelson was singing, he paused and pointed his right index finger up in air, and his voice went up at the spot it had gone down before.

"You changed the melody on me," she said as she stopped playing.

"I'm worrying the line."

She looked puzzled.

"That's where more voices would come in - so you change it up if you're singing it alone. It's not a song that's meant to be sung alone."

He started playing again. "Try this, it's a little easier," he said as he began singing "This Little Light of Mine."

She picked out the notes easily and they were singing together when the buzzer of the next dryer went off. Nelson put down his guitar, opened the glass door of the machine, leaned in and took a deep breath.

“Fresh dresses for my ladies,” he said, his voice forcedly cheerful. He made shooin motion with his hands, telling Hannah it was time to go.

“When’d you say that rally was? A week from Sunday? You got some practicing to do.”