

Working titles: LEARNING TO LOVE or A TEAM OF FOUR
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CHAPTER 2

From down the hall, he saw her standing in front of a bulletin board. He thought he recognized her, but he wasn't sure, so he quietly walked closer.

The first time he had seen her was in the food room, before class. When he had walked in, twenty minutes before that first class had started, there were already a dozen students, clustered into three groups, holding coffee cups and getting to know each other. He had sort of noticed her, but only from an angle, mostly behind her. When she turned around, a few moments later, he had noticed that, while most of the people in the room looked more determined than happy, she was smiling. Within a few seconds, glancing around the room, he realized it was the only real and genuine smile he could see, in the whole room. She'd been talking to the woman next to her, and after a moment the other woman began to smile too. By then, the image of that first smile was settling into in his mind, in a nice place.

After the class had started, he had taken a seat two rows behind her, and off to one side. She had glanced at him, a couple of times, usually still smiling.

He was almost sure it was her. Her figure seemed the same, and she was tall, like the woman in class. In class, she'd been wearing pumps, and those had put her up to about five-ten or five-eleven. In tennis shoes, she was more like five-eight, or maybe nine. But it still looked like her.

When he decided to say something to her, his mind ran through a dozen opening lines and questions. None of them seemed right, so he decided to just say hello and see how she answered.

He walked closer, and she glanced at him. He smiled and asked, "Pardon me. Are you in that history course with Professor Sloan?" he asked.

"Yes. I recognize you."

"I don't want to bother you, if you're busy. But, I was hoping I could meet at least one or two people from class, before the day is over. I'm Martin Helper."

She held out her hand and said, "I'm Anne Willman. It's nice to meet you."

He took her hand gently, without squeezing it, and said, "Have you met any other students from the course?"

“I talked with some people after class.”

“Same here. Everyone was trying so hard to impress everyone else, it was funny. It’s going to be hilarious reading those essays.”

“Do you feel self-conscious, knowing they’ll read yours?” she asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t read it since I mailed it in,” he answered. “I probably should, so I’ll remember what I wrote in it. How about you? You feel self-conscious about it?”

“A little,” she admitted. “When I wrote it, I had no idea the other students would see it, or it would be published. I thought it was private.”

“We all did. That’s why they’ll be so interesting.”

She smiled and said, “So tell me, what’s in yours? Do you want to warn me about anything, before I read it?”

He smiled back. “Why don’t we pretend they don’t exist, and try to get to know each other, like normal people? It’s nice outside. Want to go out and sit on the grass, or on the steps in front of the library? Or, can I buy you a cup of coffee?”

“Any of those sound nice.”

Two minutes later they were sitting on a bench, looking over the main courtyard. Concrete sidewalks surrounded three sides, and a brick wall fronted the fourth. Martin turned toward some frisbee throwers so he could watch them rather than focus on looking at her. “I wonder how many acres of grass are in all of Manhattan,” he said.

“Are you from a place where they measure things in acres, instead of blocks?”

“Yeah. Iowa.”

“Wow. This must be a real shock.”

“I lived in Boston for a while, so it’s not like I made it in one huge jump,” he said. “But sometimes, when I see some grass in the middle of a big city, I think of the word *bucolic*, and I wonder why they call quiet places ‘*bucolic*’. That doesn’t sound peaceful at all. It sounds like *bubonic*. Like the plague. Or like *butyric acid*, which is what makes butter smell awful, if it goes bad. So, I get this image of a hospital, with people dying and moaning, and smelling this horrible chemical. But then I stop and think, ‘Oh, wait a minute – you said *bucolic*.’”

She laughed, and said, “And how long have you been having these nightmares?”

“Only since I came to New York, doc.”

They both grinned, and she said, “Instead of me playing psychiatrist, I’ll tell you about a game I played once, at a conference. It’s the kind of thing Sloan might do, so I’ll tell you about it, in case you haven’t heard of it.”

“Great. I appreciate all the warnings I can get.”

“First, the organizers paired everyone off, in couples. And each couple spent ten minutes together. I spent five minutes telling my partner about myself, then five minutes

listening to him. Then we got back into a big circle, and then they pulled a surprise. We had to introduce our partner. Most of us did okay, but some people hardly knew anything about their partner. They were really embarrassed, because they hadn't listened to what the other person said. I've always remembered that. Whenever I meet someone, I tell myself that someday I might have to introduce him to someone else, and I try to get enough highlights so I'll be able to, without embarrassing myself. It was sort of like what Sloan talked about in class, about listening to people. That's why I wanted to warn you."

"Were you able to introduce your partner?"

"I was lucky. I didn't get called on for several minutes, so I had time to remember what he had said."

"You're also modest. You had to be listening, or else you couldn't have remembered it."

She smiled and asked, "So . . . what should I know about you?"

He almost laughed. "How am I supposed to answer a question like that?"

"Okay, I'll start over. Since it's a history class, tell me about your past. Were you *born* in Iowa?"

"Yeah. I was born and grew up in a place called Marshalltown. It has about thirty thousand people, and two big companies. One makes valves and computerized control equipment for oil refineries and chemical plants, and the other makes air conditioners and furnaces. So, about half the people are farmers, and the other half are scientists and engineers. It's a strange combination, but I liked it. Most of the people are friendly, since they know they'll probably be neighbors the rest of their lives. Sometimes you hear about people in small towns being narrow-minded, but Marshalltown didn't seem that way to me."

Anne nodded. "Having a lot of scientists and engineers probably made at least some difference."

"Yeah. And my parents probably shielded me from a lot. They always acted like they had better things to do, when people started gossiping. They had a good outlook on living in a small town. My dad was from Baltimore, and my mom's from Chicago. They told us kids we could leave Marshalltown if we wanted, as soon as we finished high school, but it was a good place to grow up, so we should learn as much as we could while we were there. If we lived in a small town first, and a big city later, we could see two different ways of life, and we could choose which one we liked best. It was a good attitude. I liked it."

"Good. What kind of work do they do?"

"My dad's a chemist. He's a research director at the company that makes valves and controls for refineries. My mom started out as a chemist. That's how they met, in college. Now she teaches chemistry and biology in high school."

"Think you'll ever go back?"

“Not to live.”

“How many brothers or sisters do you have?”

He grinned. “Boy, you’re going straight down the list of things to ask.”

She smiled back. “I just want to know more about your family. With parents like yours, what kind of kids did they raise?”

“I’ve got two sisters, and a brother. My big sister works in Des Moines, my younger brother’s a sophomore at Iowa State, and my younger sister is still at home. A senior in high school. It’s hard to talk about whether they’re all happy. We’re not some kind of family you’d see on TV, where every problem gets solved in an hour. My father’s very competitive and hard-driving, and my brother has a hard time coping with that.”

“Let’s talk about him, later. What are your sisters like?”

“My big sister just graduated from law school in Des Moines. She’s waiting to hear whether she passed the bar exam, which she took in July, and she’s working for the state environmental agency. She was always good at science, because of my mom and dad, and she wanted to put it to good use. She’s interested in politics, and she doesn’t try to hide it. She’ll probably run for office some day.”

“That’s interesting. I’d like to meet her. What’s her name?”

“Ellen. Short for Eleanor. After Eleanor Roosevelt. My parents had this thing about naming their kids. I’m not sure I want to explain it. Most people think it’s weird.”

Anne laughed and said, “In that case, you *have* to tell me.”

“No. Not yet.”

She looked sincere. “Please? I’d like to hear it. And I might not be able to listen properly to anything else you tell me, because I’ll be wondering about that other thing.”

Martin looked at her. “Do you really want to hear it?”

“Very much. And, that is completely, totally sincere.”

“Okay. It started with my grandfather, on my dad’s side. His last name was Heller. Like Joseph Heller, the novelist who wrote *Catch-22*. But my grandmother, before they got married, didn’t like that name. She was a preacher’s daughter. And, she did not want to go through the entire rest of her life, with the word ‘hell’ in her last name. The way she saw it, if a baker is someone who bakes, and a teacher is someone who teaches, then a Heller must be someone who creates hell. So, when he asked her to marry him, she told him she would, but only if he would change his last name. Because she didn’t want to go through life having to say the word ‘hell’, every time she said her name. Or, having to listen to it, every time someone *else* said her name.”

Anne grinned, and Martin smiled at her and said, “Well, he really wanted to marry her. So, he decided to change his last name to Helper. That’s how my family got the name.”

“Good for him,” Anne said. “It’s nice to hear of a man actually doing something

because a woman wanted him to. That is so rare. Were they happy? Or, did he resent it, and gripe about it the rest of his life?”

“Oh, they’re happy. They’re still alive. They’re neat. After my grandfather retired, they moved from Baltimore, out to Marshalltown, so they could see us grandkids grow up. And, they still go out ballroom dancing, every Friday night. I like them, a lot. Anyway, my dad was brought up with the idea that names should really mean something, for not just one, but two reasons. Number one, if you’re lucky, a good name might be able to help create a person’s identity, a sense of who he really is, and a good first impression. And number two, a good name can give someone something to aim for, and aspire to. So, he and my mom decided to name their kids after people they admired. They named my older sister Eleanor, after Eleanor Roosevelt. They named me Martin, after Martin Luther King. My younger sister is Marie, after Marie Curie, and my brother is Bradley, or Brad, after Omar Bradley, the general.”

“You were named after Martin Luther King?” He nodded, and she asked, “Does that feel strange?”

“Sometimes. My older sister’s middle name is Harriet, after Harriet Tubman, the black woman who helped runaway slaves. Some kids made fun of my sister, for that, when she was little, but my parents worked with her on it, and she ended up with a good attitude about it. She doesn’t like being called Harriet, because that sounds dated. But, she’s proud of being named after someone who had that much courage. And, she’s happy with the name Eleanor, because she admires Eleanor Roosevelt. She goes by either Ellen or Eleanor, because she likes the way both of them sound. I call her Ellen, since it’s shorter. Anyway, growing up with her, I could see how she eventually became proud of her name, once she got to high school. She used the fact that one of her names was deliberately chosen to honor an African-American woman, to help her be accepted by African-Americans. I mean, how many white people can say they were named after a black person, and be proud of it? So, she found a way to turn it to her advantage, and being able to do that, has really helped her. And, I don’t mind being named after Martin Luther King. Part of the lesson he can teach people is, even though he had to struggle with huge problems, he still worked hard enough, and smart enough, to become one of the greatest men who ever lived.”

“What’s your middle name?”

“Marshall. After George Marshall, the general who was Roosevelt’s top commander in World War Two. He was the guy who proposed the huge plan to help Europe, after the war, and Truman called it the Marshall Plan, because nobody in Congress would vote against something named after George Marshall. My father felt like one of the greatest dilemmas facing the world is how to balance war and peace. So, he decided to name me after one man who talked of peace and love, and another man who commanded armies. He’s told me, several times, that some day, I’ll have to face up to that conflict. But he always said he hoped I

wouldn't have to, until I'm at least thirty. Until then, I should work on other things, learn as much as I can, and work on character."

"I'd like to meet your father some day," Anne said. "You know, the way he uses names to say something, and mean something, that resonates with a phrase I've been hearing on the radio, and seeing on subway and street signs. It's a woman's name, Sharon Walk, and that name has become the marketing face for something going on here in the city, called 'Share and Walk.' The main version says, 'This is Sharon Walk, and she likes to Share and Walk.' Except, every time you see a poster or subway ad with that name on it, it's usually a different woman you've never seen before. Have you seen any of those, or any TV ads with that name?"

"I've seen some street signs with that name, and I noticed they all had the same names, but different women. I don't have a TV, so I haven't seen anything there, and I don't listen to radio stations with ads. The first time I saw one of those ads, I got the impression that it's for women, not guys. So, I didn't bother reading the whole thing closely. Did I miss something?"

"Sort of. There's a downloadable app which can only be installed on women's phones, but any cellphone store can do that, for a woman, once they make sure a woman actually owns and uses that phone. Guys have to be invited to become members, and they get a different version of the app. They have to be nominated, first, by at least two friends, then they have to go on at least four sharing walks, with women who work for the organization."

"Have you got that app?" he asked.

"Not yet. I haven't had time, yet, and when I go walking, I want to be able to go anywhere that looks interesting. Once I get settled into a routine, I'll look into it."

"So, can you tell me what a 'sharing walk' is? I mean, it sounds nice, so, is it something simple, or something more complicated? And, is there an actual person named Sharon Walk? Or do they plan to just use that name, on street signs and ads?"

"Well, from what I've heard, from a couple of different women who belong to it, is that it has become more than just an advertising name. It's a name that women in New York have started using, when they meet a guy they don't yet know. It's an implicit statement, and maybe a warning, if you think in those terms, that she belongs to a network of people who regularly walk with her, and share things with her, and care about her. The statement is, 'I'm willing to share with you, and walk with you, but I also need to be able to walk away, cleanly, and by myself, without you trying to follow, or hold on, or keep me from walking away. So, if you want to share, for a while, and walk somewhere, while we're sharing whatever it is we agreed to share, we can do that. But we both need to agree, in advance, that no matter where we walk, and no matter what we share, both of those things have to be done with restraint, and respect. Those are two big words that too many people really do need to learn more about. And, they're two things that people need to exercise, and practice, and use.'"

She could see from the look on his face that he found those things interesting, so she

came to a full stop, to see what he would say next.

“Sounds like those two subjects – restraint, and respect – might make pretty good topics to talk about, during the first few sharing walks,” he finally said, after several seconds. “What else can you tell me about them?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I haven’t joined yet, I haven’t read their rules, and I haven’t been on any of those walks. So, let’s get back to you and your family. You told me about your older sister, Ellen, or Eleanor. What’s your other sister’s name, again, and what is she like?”

“Marie. She’s very athletic, and competitive. She’s a senior in high school. Ever since she was a sophomore, she’s been the best tennis player on the women’s team, and the best swimmer in the whole school, male or female. Last year, in tennis, she was second in the state, in women’s singles. She practices with the men’s team, and she can beat most of the guys.”

“Can she beat you?” Anne asked with a mischievous smile.

“Not in tennis. I’m not going to let someone who’s six inches shorter than me, and a whole lot lighter, beat me in a game where I can use all the power I want. If she gets ahead, I start hitting it hard enough to turn it into a power game. She can keep up for maybe a set, but her arms get tired after that. You don’t think of a tennis ball as heavy, but it’ll wear you down if the other player keeps hitting it hard enough.”

“Does that bother her?”

“She doesn’t complain. It’s good practice, and good exercise. And one of the rules at our house was, you can’t complain if someone beats you without violating any rules. If someone’s bigger and stronger, that’s life. Everyone has some combination of advantages and liabilities. Besides, we don’t just play tennis. She can wipe me out in swimming. I don’t know how she does it. It’s like her body stays halfway out of the water, and she just skims across the surface. I feel like a big heavy submarine, racing against a speedboat. I get embarrassed, racing against her in swimming.”

“But you do it anyway?”

“Sure. If I get to beat her in tennis, she gets to beat me in swimming. That’s fair.”

“That’s nice,” Anne said with a smile.

Martin grinned. “Give my father credit. He makes me race her.”

Anne laughed, a true laugh, out loud, and Martin thought it sounded wonderful. “Oh, now I understand,” she said. “The truth comes out.”

Martin smiled at the sound of her laughter, thinking how nice it sounded. “When I was in high school, my dad paid me four dollars an hour to play tennis with Marie,” he said. “That’s how I earned spending money. But, I couldn’t hit any balls past her. That was a rule he made up. If I hit a ball where she couldn’t reach it, and at least touch it with her racket, she won the point. So, I had to hit it where she could reach it, and we’d keep going until she either hit a winner, or made a mistake. Sometimes we’d volley fifteen or twenty times across the net.

She got to where she could beat me when we played like that, so we started backing off and playing that way every other game, then every third game. Finally we quit, so now it's an even match."

"Except you're bigger and stronger."

"Yeah, but I can't help that. Actually, I can, and I do. I usually wear wrist and ankle weights when I play her. I get more exercise, and she has a fair chance to beat me. Besides, if you want to talk about fair, how come I always have to pay for dates, when she has guys lined up, wanting to spend money on her? *That's* not fair."

"What do you mean?" Anne laughed. "That sounds perfectly fair. She dates a lot?"

"Yeah. She even uses tennis to help her decide who to go out with. A guy has to be willing to play, and if she beats him, he can't get upset. If he loses his temper, or starts making bad shots when he falls behind, she loses interest."

"What if a guy doesn't play tennis?"

"She'll teach him."

Anne laughed again and said, "I should have guessed."

"Well, a guy has to be in good shape, and he has to like sports, or she's not interested," Martin explained. "If he's got all that, but he doesn't know how to play tennis, she'll teach him. For free. If the weather's nice, they've got courts all over town. And if it's raining, or too cold, or too hot, my dad'll pay for court time at an indoor tennis club. If he knows they're playing tennis, he doesn't have to worry about what else they might be doing. So, for a guy, it's a cheap date, and good exercise. Some guys can't stand losing to a woman. But some guys admire a woman who's good enough to beat them at something, in a fair game. That's the kind of guy she'd rather date. What's so funny about that?"

"It's the Kennedys of Iowa."

Martin grinned. "No, there were only four kids," he said. "Maybe if there were ten of us, and if we lived in a mansion, and if our father was rich and famous, we'd be different. But we're in a town nobody's ever heard of, except in Iowa. Besides, only two of us really like to play sports."

Anne was still smiling. "Okay, since you're so normal, let's keep going. You grew up in a small town, and you came all the way to New York to see a big city."

"By way of Boston. Actually, Cambridge. But I did see Boston. It's across the river. You can see it from Cambridge."

"Did you go to school there?"

"Yeah."

"The only schools I know of, in Cambridge, are Harvard and MIT."

"No. There's Radcliffe too."

"Which one did you go to?"

“I don’t like to tell people.”

Anne began laughing almost hysterically, and brought her hands up to cover her mouth, and said, “Oh my God . . . *Radcliffe?*”

Martin laughed too. “You really do think I’m strange.”

Anne stopped laughing and looked at him, as though she wanted to laugh but was holding it in. “Okay, tell me where you went.”

“No. I already told you, I don’t like to tell people. Maybe I’ll tell you later, if you really want. And if I ever do, I’ll even tell you *why* I don’t like to tell people.”

“This is really a secret?”

“Yes, and I want it to stay that way. If you find out, please don’t tell anyone.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“You didn’t drop out or anything, did you?”

“No.”

“Did you say anything in your essay that wasn’t true?”

“No. I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. I majored in the history of science. Which is hard, since you have to cover so many different areas. Science, engineering, history, and half a dozen other things, all at once. And, I graduated with honors. I’m not afraid to tell that to anyone. But, there’s something else, and some people respond to it, in unhelpful ways. So, I’d rather just avoid it, and talk about other things. Speaking of which, let’s talk about you. My five minutes are up. Now it’s your turn.”

“But I’m not finished asking questions.”

“We’ll alternate. You got five minutes for your questions, so now it’s my turn. We’ll keep going back and forth.”

“Okay, that’s fair,” she said. “But we can’t time it. It has to seem like five minutes. And we have to reach a good stopping point. I don’t want either of us looking at a watch. And, you can’t say, ‘*Time’s up!*’ as an excuse to not answer a question.”

Martin sat up and smiled. “I like this,” he said. “This is like a nice game. We play for a while, then we have to stop and make some new rules, because something happens we didn’t plan on. But, instead of arguing, or trying to take advantage and beat the other person, we just decide what the new rules will be, so we can keep playing. Okay, where’d you grow up, and how’d you get here?”

“I grew up in Akron. And, I got a sociology degree at Ohio State. I moved to Cleveland and worked for a year, for a consulting firm, before I came here. Now I’m working on a master’s degree. I might go for a doctorate. I don’t know yet.”

She stopped, as though she had finished.

“Wait a minute!” he laughed. “I need more than that if I’m going to introduce you to

anyone else.”

“Well, I wanted to give you an overview.”

“Okay, what was Akron like? Did your father work for one of the tire companies?”

“No. He worked in an auto parts store for a few years, but it went out of business, and he had to do all kinds of other things after that. My mother mostly kept house and did babysitting for neighbors during the day.”

“Did she like it?”

“Not really. There were three kids in my family. Two brothers and me. She would have been happier if she could have taken care of just us. But, we couldn’t afford that, so she had to take in other kids.”

“Tell me about your brothers,” he said.

Anne didn’t answer; instead, she looked away. “Let’s call a time-out,” she said, still looking away. “My family wasn’t very close, or happy, or anything like yours. It’s hard for me to talk about them. That’s one of the reasons I kept asking about yours. It’s nice to hear about a family like yours. My father dropped out of high school. The place where he worked, for fifteen years, went out of business, and he never got another good job after that. And, he didn’t get along with my mother. He usually didn’t want to talk, after he came home, so he just turned on the TV, and drank beer, and came to the table once dinner was ready.”

She paused, but Martin didn’t know what to say, or whether he should say anything.

“There was a lot of fighting and arguing at my house,” she continued. “Not just between my parents, but with my brothers, too. So, I decided I’d rather be at school, than home. I got into lots of activities at school, because that’s how I stayed out of the house. And when I was home, I got away from the fighting by going to my room, closing that door, and then going into my closet, and closing that door, too. So that I could have some quiet, and study. Or, I went next door, if things got too loud. A retired couple lived next door. They were nice, and they knew what was going on at my house, and I sometimes went over there to study, when things got too noisy, or angry. So, I did okay in school. That’s how I got here. I’m not really ashamed of how it was at my house. In a way, I feel proud, because I found a way to overcome all that. But I don’t enjoy talking about it.”

He reached out and took her fingers in his. He squeezed them gently in his hand, then let them go. She still didn’t look at him, and he wondered whether he should have waited for a time when she could have smiled and taken his hand willingly, holding it as they walked somewhere together.

“You have every right to be proud,” he said. “And I’d like to talk about it, later. I don’t ever want to pry, but I’d like to know what it was like. So, let’s make another rule. I won’t ask any questions about your family. If you ever want to talk about it, you bring it up. Okay?”

“Okay.”

She fell silent, and he knew he had to say something.

“What’s the happiest memory you have, from when you were growing up?” he asked.

It sounded dumb as he heard the question, and he hoped she wouldn’t take it the wrong way. She smiled slightly, and as she talked, he could hear the sound of strength coming back into her voice.

“I got a scholarship to Ohio State,” she said. “I’ll always remember getting that letter, because it meant I could finally leave, for good. I hid the letter, and didn’t tell my parents, or brothers, for a month. I didn’t know what they’d say, and I didn’t want to give them a chance to spoil it, or say I couldn’t go. I told a couple of teachers and school counselors, because I wanted to start finding a way to go, without costing too much. And, I wanted to have someone who could help convince my parents, in case they didn’t want me to go. But my parents didn’t argue, when I told them. They realized it was the best opportunity I had, and I told them I’d get a job while I went to school, so they said okay. When it was time to go, my father drove me to Columbus, and we probably didn’t say more than thirty words, on that entire drive. The main thing I remember him saying, after he helped me take my things up to my room and was ready to drive away, was, ‘Goodbye. Don’t get in trouble.’ That was almost the only thing he said. And I just kept thinking, over and over, that what he really meant was, ‘Don’t get pregnant.’ After eighteen years, that was all he could tell me.”

“That was the happiest moment in your whole life?” Martin asked. “My God, I’m almost ready to start crying.”

“No, the scholarship letter. That’s what I meant. When I opened it and realized . . .”

“But you had to hide it,” Martin said.

“Yeah, but that was okay. Because it felt like I had a wonderful secret. I had time to think about it, and plan what to do, and I could see everything move into place, one piece at a time, until I was ready to tell them.”

“When you were telling me about your father driving you to college, without even talking to you, I wanted so much to reach out and give you a hug,” he said. “But I don’t know how you feel about things like that. I mean, out in public, in broad daylight. I’ve lost the moment, but I really wanted to.”

“That’s a nice thought,” she said. “I’m glad you told me. Let’s save it for later.”

“Okay, now, Ohio State is . . . where? The state capitol? Columbus?”

“Yes. It was wonderful. The happiest time of my life, so far. Columbus is great, with the university, the state capitol, lots of concerts and nightclubs and parks and museums, and other things to do. Most of my teachers were good, and I loved being in college. I couldn’t afford to be in a sorority, or live in a dorm, so I shared an apartment with three other girls. None of us had much money, so we all had to work. But that was okay, and the first time one of them moved out, the rest of us decided we wanted someone else who had to work while she went to

school. We didn't want to feel jealous of anyone who didn't have to work. And besides, work helped give us a better perspective on what was important. We didn't have time to argue about little things."

"Where'd you work?"

"As a waitress, three nights a week, my first three years. Then, after my junior year, I got a summer job with a state senator, at the Capitol. I stayed in Columbus that summer, and I kept working for him while I was a senior. It gave me a chance to see politics up close. That's one of the reasons I'd like to meet your sister. The one who might run for office some day."

Martin said, "Maybe you will. She's dying to see New York. What was your major? You said sociology?"

Anne smiled and said, "Well, you were listening, weren't you? I chose sociology mostly because of a teacher I had my freshman year. She was the best teacher I ever had. She could take ideas, and show how they fit together, despite conflicts and inconsistencies. I remember her talking about the melting pot concept of America. She didn't attack it, but she showed us how America is more of an ethnic stew, than a melting pot. Where each part is still the same as before it was added to the mix, but it's different, in some ways. It's not a potato, any more – now, it's a piece of potato, in a stew. I'd heard the melting pot phrase lots of times, and it really made an impression on me that this teacher could come along and show us a better way to think about what really happened.

"But she didn't stop there. She made us realize the melting pot idea wasn't a lie, it was an honest mistake. Most things that are wrong aren't deliberate lies, they're mistakes. But then, most people act like they're trapped because of mistakes someone made in the past. They won't do what it takes to fix something that's wrong, and do things differently after that. It changed my outlook to realize what she was saying. It wasn't just hearing that one thing from her; it was lots of things, all happening at the same time. I'd gotten away from all the fighting and arguing my parents and brothers did, and I was meeting new people, and everything was more open and mature than what I'd grown up with. I'd been trying not to hate my father, but it was hard not to, because he acted so selfish and angry most of the time. Then I started seeing him as someone who just made a few mistakes while he was young, and now, he was spending the rest of his life, paying for those mistakes. On one level, it's sad, and I feel sorry for him. But, on another level, it's his fault too. He never really tried to solve his problems.

"And now, my brothers are doing the same thing. I get tied up in knots every time I think about them. They're making the same mistakes my father did, and no one can stop them. My oldest brother got some stupid girl pregnant, so they got married, then they started fighting the same way my mom and dad did. My brother thought he could change the rules by just walking out and saying to hell with her. But then he smashed up his car, driving drunk, and he lost his job, and now he'll walk with a limp for the rest of his life. But instead of blaming

himself, he blames her. He hates her with a passion, like everything was all her fault.”

She stopped talking. She was looking down, at the grass in front of her, with an unhappy look on her face.

“I’m sorry,” she said after a while. “I didn’t mean to get into this. I said I didn’t want to talk about my family, and now here I am . . .”

“I don’t mind,” Martin said. “You have every right to be proud of climbing out of that, and doing something better. It’s sort of like living in a small town, and then a big city. You’ve seen two different ways of life, and now you can choose the one you like. If you want to keep telling me about your family, I’d like to know more about them, because I admire you for being able to overcome all that. I mean that. Sincerely.”

She almost smiled. “No, let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay,” he agreed. “What else did you write in your essay?”

She didn’t answer; instead, she looked away, and looked upset.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want,” Martin said.

“Your question got me thinking about something,” she said. “I’d kind of like to talk about it, but only between us. I don’t want to tell anyone else.”

“I won’t tell anyone. I promise.”

“I feel sort of like . . . well . . . there wasn’t anything in the application info that said whether we could, or couldn’t, show our essays to other people. So, I showed a draft to my sociology professor. She had a lot of questions, and comments, and suggestions, and . . . well, the way it ended up, I feel like she sort of helped me write it.”

“That doesn’t bother me in the slightest,” Martin said. “I’ll bet everyone showed their essays to someone. I showed mine to my parents, half a dozen friends, and two professors. They all made comments, and I don’t feel guilty for listening or rewriting my first drafts. It’s stupid to not ask for advice. Besides, if I didn’t get in, it was still a chance to think about who I am, where I’m going, and why. I wanted to learn as much as I could, and it helped, to talk about things, and ideas, and the kind of stuff I wanted to talk about, with other people, and then try to actually write it down, knowing that those other people would genuinely and seriously read it.”

Anne looked relieved. “I’m glad you see it that way.”

“Besides, how much did your teacher really do? I bet you wrote it, and she just looked at what you wrote, and asked some questions. Nothing wrong with that.”

A troubled look covered her face again. “I don’t know,” Anne said after a while. “Maybe that’s why it still bothers me. I never really managed to break out of the teacher-student mode with her. I’d write something, then she’d write comments on it like she expected me to rewrite it, and then show it to her again. And, we had to keep going until she was completely happy with it. Like we were coauthors, and it was half hers.”

Martin sat up. He wasn't just listening, any longer; now, he had a chance to argue for something he really believed in. "Yeah, but that's not dominant-submissive, that's good cooperation. It's teamwork, and partnership. You should be flattered that she was willing to put in enough time and effort, into you, to help make sure you could do your absolute best. Most professors are way too busy for that. Besides, even if she made a lot of comments, you're still the one who wrote it."

He took her hand again, and he didn't say anything until she looked at him. When their eyes met, he said, "You know, I admire someone who can feel self-doubt, without feeling paralyzed by it. It's good to be bothered, and even driven, sometimes, by doubts about whether you did enough, and contributed enough, and whether you're good enough to really accomplish something. If people learn how to use that self-doubt, it can help them. Seriously. And in several ways."

He let go of her hand, and continued, "But it's also sad. Because, too many times, the best people . . . the people who truly are, the very best people . . . never really manage to be happy with what they've done. Because that's part of the driving force they need to use, and harness, to help them keep working as hard as they can, and doing the best they can. You wrote the essay, and you didn't violate any rules. You proved you could take advice, and you kept working at it until the final version was good enough. Think of it like a mother having a baby. Sure, a doctor might help. The doctor might even save the lives of both the mother and the baby. But, no matter how much he does, no matter how much he helps, he's still just the doctor. It's the mother who has the baby."

Anne smiled at the thought. "I like that analogy."

"It's true, and it fits this situation perfectly."

"I'm glad you feel that way," she said. She was silent for a while, then she added, "But still – don't tell anyone. Okay?"

"I promise. And I hope that's not the last secret you'll ever trust me with."

He looked at her, and he saw her mouth tighten, and purse, in a way he hadn't seen before. She looked away, and they sat quietly for a while.

When he sensed she might be ready to talk again, he said, "You said something about working in Cleveland, after graduation."

She nodded. "I worked for a management consulting firm. I made slave wages, and shared a desk with another girl. We spent most of our time writing things other people put their names on, and finding and copying book reviews, so the consultants wouldn't have to read a whole book, to be able to pretend they knew what it said."

"Sounds like good experience in sociology. Modern-day field work. You chose a tribe, and you studied it. Did you like any of the consultants there?"

"Some of them were nice. The good ones. But some of them acted like they had to save

any tact for clients. To them, it was like tact, charm, and humor were valuable commodities, to be sold, rather than given away, and they only had a limited supply. Which was probably true, in their case. Anyway, I knew I wouldn't be there long, so I didn't let anything bother me too much. They knew it too, so they piled as much work onto me as they could. When I heard about Sloan's course, I decided to apply, partly because of him, and the whole worldwide history project, and partly because I wanted to see New York. This is where a lot of other cities are heading. All the problems here are showing up in other cities, and people in those other cities aren't doing what they need to, to avoid or at least minimize those problems."

"Neither are the people in New York."

"I know. But I don't plan to live here forever. I wanted to see New York, the way some people wish they could see the future. In a lot of ways, this is the future. The problems here are the future of every other city. This is where a lot of other cities are headed. I don't feel safe here. I don't think any realist *can* feel safe here. It's hard to face up to that. But, that's what people need to realize, if they're going to be motivated enough to actually find and create and work with ways to keep these kinds of problems from happening everywhere else."

"It's unusual to see a woman walk up to danger, to see what she can learn from it," Martin said. "I've known men like that, but not many women."

"I'm not always like that," Anne answered. "Mostly, I'm pretty careful. I honestly didn't realize Columbia University is so close to Harlem. I mean, I knew it was up here in this general area. But I thought the campus would be surrounded by student housing, for several blocks in every direction. Sort of like an island. But Columbia is more like a boundary. Like a river, or a cliff, or something. The run-down neighborhoods kept growing until they pushed up against it. I don't want that to sound wrong, or racist, or anything. It's not a race issue. But you just can't ignore the fact that there's so much crime, and violence, and danger. I honestly don't think I could walk down a street, just two or three blocks north of campus, without feeling seriously afraid, even in broad daylight."

"I know. In a way, it's hard for me to deal with being named after Martin Luther King. I'd like to do anything I can to help, but I keep coming back to a phrase King used, about wanting to live in a world where people are judged on the content of their character, rather than the color of their skin. A lot of people living in slums and ghettos are just plain flunking that test. They *are* being judged by the content of their character. So, what should the good people do? That is a huge question, with a hundred ever-changing answers. A couple of times, my father told me he didn't think I'd be ready to start tackling those kinds of questions until I'm in my thirties or forties. He said that was the kind of time frame he had in mind, when he named me after both King and Marshall, and I shouldn't get too upset by anything that happens before then. I should just learn as much as I can, to get ready to do whatever I decide to do with my life. As long as I'm still in school, that's my job. If things outside school can help me learn

even more, fine, but don't let those get in the way."

"Do you agree?"

"Sort of. But it's not really an answer to tell someone, he won't be able to deal with something until he's older. That's not an answer, it's a delay. An evasion."

"Maybe it is an answer. It says, keep these questions in mind, and keep an eye on them, because someday, you'll have to answer them. But not yet, so don't worry about them until it's time. That might be some of the best advice I've heard. I'd like to meet your father some day."

"Well, maybe you will. But suppose I told you that you'll probably be in your thirties, or maybe even your forties, before you could meet him. You wouldn't find that a very satisfying answer, would you?"

She grinned and answered, "No, but that's different. And since we're talking about time, it's after four. I need to get home and do some reading."

"Where do you live?"

"South of here. On 108th, between Broadway and Amsterdam."

"I'm in that general direction. Can I walk you home?"

"I would appreciate that. Very much," she said.

They both got up, and began walking toward one of the gates. He made a display of looking directly at the backpack she had on her back. "That backpack looks heavy," he said. "Should I offer to carry it, for you? Or, would that sound patronizing, or somehow negative? And, might you be interested in seeing if we can craft a compromise? Maybe we could take the two biggest and heaviest books out of it, and put those in my backpack until we get to your street."

She stopped walking, to think about what he had said. After a few seconds, she said, "You have an interesting way of being polite, and offering to help. It's sort of like, instead of just offering to do something, you turn it into two or three different questions, and I get to choose which one I want to answer. I have to say, I'm impressed. If they teach young men to do that, in Iowa, I might want to visit Iowa, some day. Or, was it just your parents, and your family?"

He grinned, and said, "Oh, it's not just me. Every guy in Iowa will either be super-polite, or become tongue-tied and dumbstruck, if he somehow gets a chance to walk a pretty girl home. They'll start telling jokes, doing magic tricks, showing her he can walk on his hands, and anything else they can think of, if they think she might like it, or even just be amused by it. And, the girls eventually realize that the nicer guys are the ones who will keep being as polite as they can be, even when they're tongue-tied and dumbstruck."

She looked at him, for several long seconds, and finally said, "Can you really walk on your hands?"

"Well, I'm not going to show you that, *now*," he said, trying to look as sincere as he

could. “I’m going to *save* that. In case I ever need it, for an emergency.”

She finally grinned, and said, “Okay, here’s the deal. I can carry this backpack, all the way home. I see that as good exercise. But, my good shoes are in there, along with some books. And I get worried that the books might scrunch up my good shoes. So, if you would volunteer to take the books, I could be more relaxed, and happy, and conversational, while we walk.”

He slid off his backpack, stepped toward her side, and motioned to her to turn around, so he could get to her backpack. “I like all three of those things. Relaxed, and happy, and conversational. So, if you’re going to make it this easy to get an extra scoop of all three of those, I’d be silly not to.”

He opened her pack, and pulled out the books, and spent several seconds, placing and arranging them in his backpack. When he had it zipped up and on his shoulder again, he said, “Those look like very nice shoes, in there. I’m happy to help protect them.”

“And I’m grateful to you for doing so,” she said.

As they walked toward her apartment, she asked, “Do you have any dinner plans?”

“Yeah. I started chatting with some people, at lunch, and some of agreed to meet at a pizza place, at seven-thirty. I’m sure it’d be okay with them, if you join us.”

“No, I’m meeting some other students at a Thai restaurant. I was going to ask if you might want to join us there.”

“I would, and thanks for the offer, but I might get a reputation for being fickle, and flighty, if I ditch my group the very first night. And, to be honest, I’ve found that most guys tend to get jealous, and annoyed, and even angry, if they find out one of them is trying to start spending time with a beautiful woman before they’ve had a fair chance to even say hello to her. And the last thing I need, or want, is for the guys in our class to start getting jealous and resentful, of me, because I ditched them to be with a woman *they* wanted to get to know.”

He glanced toward her, to see if he could gauge her expression, but she was looking intently down, and forward, at the sidewalk. After several long seconds, she said, “That was a complicated statement. And I have to ask – was there an element of flattery, in it?”

He pondered her question for several seconds, and said, “An element? Perhaps. Probably. But it was an absolutely true statement, about something that I have already begun to genuinely wonder, and maybe even worry about. If any of the guys in the class happen to be on this street, right now, and they see us walking along together, they are likely to feel a reflexive, impulsive surge of envy, and jealousy, starting way down in the limbic part of the brain, sometimes called the reptile brain, which every man carries as the root and foundation for how he processes information. And I honestly don’t want any of the guys to start feeling jealous. Especially not because you and I are simply walking down a street, next to each other, and talking while we walk. So, it becomes a question of balance, moderation in everything, and not

giving people reasons to become actively suspicious, resentful, or whatever. Walking down a street, having a friendly conversation with you, is fine, even if it's only me and you, and no one else. But, ditching a set of people I hope to get to know well, so that I can spend time with you, instead of them, would cross a line, and fall into a different category.”

“Fine,” she answered quickly. “I get that. It was more that, I was focusing on the flattery part of what you said. Because what you said really was flattering. So, would you like to know what starting going through my head, when I heard you say something that sounded flattering? It wasn't bad. It's more funny, than bad.”

He stopped walking, to look directly at her, as a signal that she should look back at him, too. When she did, he said, “I would absolutely like to hear it, even if it was completely and totally bad. Because if it was bad, that could turn into something we could focus on, and figure out, and at least try to fix the bad part. But, since you told me it's got a funny part, to go with the bad part, now I want to hear it, even more.”

She halfway laughed, and began walking again, so they wouldn't keep staring at each other while they talked.

“Okay, here's the thing that triggered a whole set of memories, and emotions, when you said that flattering thing about me. One of my apartment mates, in college, put up two lists, on the bulletin board where we shared our schedules, requests, shopping lists, and all that. One of those lists had, at the top, an old and grainy copy of a newspaper column, by either Ann Landers, or Dear Abby. Most young people today don't even know those names, but they were two of the . . .”

“Let me cut in,” he interrupted. “I already know both of those. My mom had books with collections from both their columns. And, I ended up reading both of those books, to help me figure out at least something about how women think about, and talk about, common sense. So, go on with what you were saying.”

“Okay, anyway, at the top of that bulletin board was a copy of an old column, which listed some of the most common lines that guys used, back in those days, to try to get girls to have sex with them. And some of those lines were funny, some were pathetic, and all of them were, or at least should have been, totally transparent, to any female. So, we starting adding our own versions of lines guys had tried to use, on us. And they were every bit as funny, and in most cases as obvious and pathetic, as the lines guys had been using, decades earlier.

“But, anyway, that's not the list I started thinking about, when you made that flattering remark. Next to that list of attempted seduction lines, we had a second list, of ways to think about flattery. And when I first saw it, and began thinking about those things it said, I started to think of the things on that list, as warnings. But over time, I came to realize that there was actually some really good advice, somewhere at the core of nearly every one of those lines. It was like they were saying, ‘Don't just reject flattery, and reduce your opinion of someone who

tries to use it. Figure out the right set of filters to put on, and figure out how you can use it, and enjoy it, and how to respond to a flattering comment, in a good way. And that list really came to mind, vividly, when you said what you said.”

“Can you remember any of those lines, now?” Martin asked. “And, would you be willing to tell me any of them?”

“Oh, I could probably remember all of them, if I try hard enough,” she said. “I think I even have pictures of both of those lists, but they’re not on my cell phone any more, because I transferred all that stuff to a computer, after I finished college. I’m not going to try to remember all of them, but I could tell you some of them, if you want.”

“I would love to hear some of those,” he said, as he felt his face shifting into one of the biggest smiles he could remember making, in years.

“Okay, here’s one,” she said. “Flattery might not get you anywhere. But it *can* help you stay pointed in the right direction.”

He nodded, and smiled all over again. “That’s good. I like that.”

“Here’s another one,” she added. “Flattery might not get you anywhere, but that’s not what it’s for. Instead of being transportation, it’s like dancing. It’s fun, and good exercise, and when it’s over, you’re still in the same place where you started. But, if you know how to do it, and you do it right, you’ll have a nice memory, of a good time, doing something both of you enjoyed.’ And, by the way, speaking of going places, this is my apartment building, here. So, I need my books back, from your backpack. And thank you so much for carrying them.”

He shucked off his backpack, and fished her books out of it, but before he handed them to her, he looked directly into her face, and said, “Those comments about flattery are perfect. Absolutely perfect. And I would love it, if you would tell me one more. But only one more. Because I need to think seriously about the ones you already told me. I’ll probably dictate them into my phone, as soon as we can goodbye, and I’m going to see if I can come up with any more. They probably won’t be as good as the accumulated wisdom in your list, but hey, one of the goals is to stay pointed in the right direction. Just like you said. But, before you tell me another one, I’d like to tell you something. A while ago, back in the courtyard, you were telling me about how troubled and unhappy your family was. One of my philosophies of life is, I try hard to not judge anyone, because of the hand that he or she was dealt, in life. Instead, I pay much more attention to how they have actually played whatever hand they were dealt. Because that tells you a whole lot more about who they are, and what kind of character they have, than the question of what cards were handed to them, by some dealer, in a deal they had no control over. And I want to tell you, right now, that . . . with that absolutely genuine and sincere and wonderful and beautiful smile on your face, and the cheerfulness, and friendliness, and everything else about you, after we got past the difficult stuff about your family, you started to absolutely beam, and radiate energy. you are absolutely beaming, right now. I feel like you are

putting out so much positive energy, that some of that energy seems like it has turned, not so much into light, as into warmth. Some people claim to have an ability to see colored auras, around people. I never know whether or when to believe that kind of stuff, because most of the people who say that kind of stuff seem like they're probably the kinds of people who might make up something like that, to try to make themselves seem special, with some kind of special talent that other people don't have. When I'm around someone who seems to have a genuinely special and unusual talent, I don't start seeing colored auras. Instead, I start feeling warmth. I can literally feel an increase in warmth, on my face, and sometimes in my chest. And it feels like I'm actually being given an extra supply, or quantity, of energy, by the person I'm listening to. And, for all I know, maybe that happens because some people are able to actually trigger a surge of hormones, or neurotransmitters, or whatever, which genuinely and actually cause a listener to increase his metabolic rate, and feel warmer, as though he suddenly has more energy, just from listening to some person. And I have to say, you are beaming, and radiating warmth, and energy, to a point that is making me feel like I have more warmth, and energy. And I feel like I am so lucky, to be standing here, getting to receive and share in some of that energy. So, I need to hear that last observation, about dealing with flattery, and then I need to just quickly say goodbye, and then turn around, and go. Because I am going to be floating, somewhere above the pavement, as I walk back to my place."

She looked like she didn't know how to respond to what he had just told her. Her mouth looked like it was trying to sort of scrunch up, in a curious way, but the smile she still had wouldn't yield.

Finally, she said, "Now, *that* . . ." She almost began laughing, but then recovered, and said, "Okay, I don't know you well enough, to know what *really* just happened. So, all I can do, is ask. I'm probably going to spend the rest of the evening, and a large part of tomorrow, wondering whether . . . what you just said . . . was really sincere, or . . ." She trailed off, and was silent for several long seconds. Finally, she began again. "Okay. I'll just say it. Was it actually, and seriously, one of the most touching, reassuring, wonderful, and generous things, that anyone has ever said to me? Or . . . since we were talking about *flattery*, of all things . . . I can't help but wonder whether, maybe, just maybe . . . maybe you wanted to show me a real-time, actual example, that . . . man, oh man, do you ever know how to do it. You know how to do it right, and you just proved it. In complete seriousness, how should I interpret what you just told me, when it came in the middle of a discussion about . . . *flattery*?"

He backed up a half step, to make sure he wouldn't seem like he was crowding her. He thought about what to say, and how to answer that question, for several long seconds, and finally said, "I truly and genuinely hope that you can and will realize that it was totally and absolutely sincere, and honest, and well-meaning, rather than just being flattery. Because it was. Absolutely. For me, that feeling was so strong, I felt like I had to at least try to say it, and

share it, or I wouldn't be able to think about anything else, all night, except whether I should have said what I just said. But, now that I look back at it, it was a very, *very badly-timed* comment. For me – and this is absolutely from the heart, and totally, absolutely sincere, and not flattery at all – I said it, *not* because we were talking about flattery. I said it, because I was almost overwhelmed, by the sensation that you really were beaming. To a point of seriously and genuinely throwing off levels of warmth, that I rarely, rarely have ever experienced, at that level. I should have realized that it was bad timing, for me to say that, at that moment. Because, we were talking about flattery. But, I was so completely . . . struck . . . by what you were doing, and by feeling this incredible warmth, from just standing in front of you, and being in its pathway, that . . . I wasn't thinking anything, about the timing of what I was saying. I was just trying to come up with the best words I could, to describe what was actually happening, and what I was actually feeling, because I wanted so much to share that feeling, and those thoughts, with you. Tell you what – I loved both of the two other things you said, about flattery, so how about if you tell me a third one, and then, I really will leave. We both have a lot of reading to do, tonight, and I absolutely know I would not be able to do that, if the two of us are in the same building.”

She wasn't so much beaming, any more, as just smiling, in what looked, to him, in a guarded way.

Finally, she said, quietly, “Flattery is like perfume. It isn't meant to be drunk. You should only smell it. And, it actually smells better, if there's not too much of it.”

Instead of turning away, he kept facing her, for several long seconds, with his own expression turning into a guarded smile.

“In that case, I can't leave here, thinking and worrying that . . . you might be thinking that what I said, a little while ago, might have been flattery, and you might also be thinking that I might have made a mistake, and put on way, way, way too much. Like putting on way, way too much perfume. Or cologne, for a guy. Because that is absolutely not what I was doing. Everything I said, about not judging people by the hand they were dealt, but by how they play that hand, was absolutely true. You weren't dealt a great hand, in the family you started out in. But, you played the cards you were dealt, absolutely beautifully. Pretty much perfectly, from everything I heard. That is what I was truly seeing, and thinking, and feeling, when I said what I said, both to you, and about you. From everything I can see, I was just plain lucky, in a lot of ways, when it came to family, support systems, and all the things I had to help me grow up healthy and happy. So, I've never really had to struggle, to play the hand I was dealt. You're different. You weren't dealt get a good hand, for a kid growing up. But, you figured out how to play that hand you were dealt, absolutely brilliantly. And I respect and admire that, more than I can say.”

She kept looking at him, intently, for what seemed like a long time.

“Well, thank you for that,” she finally said. “And, by the way – that comment, about perfume, and how it smells better when there’s not too much of it? I wasn’t saying that, about you, in any way. That was just . . . the only other quote I could remember, from that old list. After what you said to me, I couldn’t keep thinking, any more. I couldn’t remember any of the others. I was just . . . almost stunned, and overwhelmed, by what you just said to me. I remember dozens of things that my all-time best and favorite teachers told me, to help me keep going, and find courage, and strength, and all that. But all of those were in the nature of, you just have to keep working, if you want to get where you want to go. They were all good and helpful things. But I don’t think I would call any of those things that they said, ‘wonderful’. And what you said, to me, a little while ago, was probably the single most . . . wonderful thing, that anyone has ever said, to me. So . . . since it can’t get any better than that, if you turn around and walk away, now, without saying anything more, that would be the perfect time, and the perfect way, to say goodbye, for today. It was very nice, indeed, to meet you. And, this evening, if you want to know . . . I’m probably going to look into a mirror, a few times, to see if I can beam, when you’re *not* there, the same way you said I was beaming, when you *were* there.”