

Ripples Through Time

A Novel by:
Lincoln Cole

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my family, who have given me all the support in the world to put this together. Without them, none of this would be possible.

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“Not forgiving is like drinking rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die.”

-Anne Lamott

Calvin Greenwood

A Modest Request

Present Day

The damned doorbell is ringing. I hate that sound, that *tink, tink, tink* it makes with high pitched tones. I hate it because it's obnoxious; but I hate it even more because Mellie loved it.

Another ring. Whoever it is, they aren't patient.

I have been expecting her to send someone to check up on me. To be honest, I'm surprised that it took this long. Little Bethany always worries, especially where I'm concerned. Hell, ever since I turned seventy-nine she seems to think I can't do *anything* on my own.

And in some cases she's right. Okay, maybe many cases. Most. My hands are arthritic. My eyes blurry. The last time I tried to open a jar I think I tore something.

But some things I can still do for myself. *Have* to do for myself. This is one of them.

I shouldn't have called. That was a mistake. That was stupid. I was rambling, thoughtless. What some psychiatrist might call: 'a plea for help.' Beth didn't take my conversation seriously, I know, but even then she couldn't ignore *that* call. That would have been remiss. And Bethany is anything but remiss.

Yet another ring rips my silent world apart.

"Hold your horses," I grumble to myself, rocking forward. It takes me a minute to get out of my chair. It's ugly and red but comfortable as hell. My knees hurt and pop as I stand. My ankles hurt. In fact, everything hurts.

"Just a minute," I say, shambling toward the door. I have to weave around the leather couches and a discarded brown blanket. I would have picked it up, before, just to make sure there was absolutely nothing Mellie could trip on. But now...

Now I'm not sure there's a point.

I push the curtain aside and peer through the window.

Nope, it's not her. Mild relief flows through me, but it's tinged with a sprinkling of sadness. I'm her father. She can't spare a few minutes of her busy day to come check on me herself?

Selfish thoughts, and I don't need them. Just proves she didn't listen to a word I said. If she had, I'm sure she would have jumped into that tiny Honda of hers and sped right over.

Instead she is still at the office, filing paperwork with the Grants and Loans Division of the State. Desperate to meet a deadline, my Bethany. Desperate, and fiercely loyal. I can forgive her for being too busy at work to come see me herself.

Yeah, sure.

Okay, maybe it hurts a little.

She's a busy woman. I'm proud of her. But I knew, without a doubt, she wouldn't take me seriously.

That's probably why I called her, come to think of it. I didn't want *anyone* to show up at my doorstep, and especially not Bethany or her husband Adam. I just wanted to give her a heads up. So she wouldn't take it personally *after*. Let her know that I love her.

That kind of thing. I'm sure everyone does at times like these. Nothing special. Nothing dramatic. It was a weak moment, and by God I'm entitled to those. At eighty-three I'm damn well entitled to anything I want!

And what I wanted was to say goodbye. In my own way. Just a quick: "It's been a good run, honey, but I'm off to see mom."

Jason's a night owl, not even awake at this hour I'm sure. I didn't want to bother him with something this trivial. I don't blame him. I'd sleep too, if I could get more than a few hours each night. And Rickie...

Well, I haven't talked to Rickie in ages.

And so it was Bethany's number I dialed. First her home phone before I remembered she was at work. But even expecting her to send *someone*, I am surprised as hell to see Edward White's lean and scruffy face through the dirty glass window. Edward is a kid. Just turned fifty. Or fifty-five. Maybe fifty-three. Hard to keep straight.

Don't get me wrong, I like the guy. His wife bakes bread at home in one of those mix-it-and-bake-it machines (that Mellie *bated*) and will drop off a loaf every couple of weeks. Sometimes it's still warm.

And the Whites were good to Mellie. Just plain old good people. God fearing people. That sort is in short order these days. They came over often, and they never once said a thing about Mellie's condition.

Mellie would perk up whenever I told her the Whites were at the door, and even though it exhausted her she would sit up and talk to them for a few minutes. Those were on her good days.

On the bad ones I led them outside to the patio. And they understood. She needed her rest, my Mellie. The Whites understood a lot, and if in a pinch I had to call someone a friend who wasn't already six feet under, it'd be Edward.

But right now I don't want to talk to him. I don't want to listen to him either.

I'm not worried that he'll talk me out of it. No one can at this point (I said my peace, and as far as I am concerned it's done and over with) but that doesn't mean I want to sit by and listen to him preach about how God would want me to act, as if the Holy Father had taken a personal interest in me.

I can't *stand* any damn sermons.

Nevertheless, I open the door to let Edward in. It's the Christian thing to do, and last I checked this is still a Christian country.

"Hi, Calvin," Edward says awkwardly. He's got a polo shirt on and tan shorts. Looks like a golfer. Slap some suntan lotion on his nose and a flat cap to cover his brown hair and the image would be complete. Funny thing is, I don't think he's ever golfed in his life.

His hands are in his pockets and he's looking at the wall behind me. I remember that look from when he was a little kid growing up in the house down the road. He's worried. Worried about me.

I snort. Beth must have passed along the gist of my message.

So much for bluffing. It's like I can't take care of my own damn self. I'm sick of all of these people deciding things for me.

"How are you?" he asks.

"Come in," I say as gruffly as possible. I want him to know not to push his luck. I eye him for a long moment and then step out of his way.

Edward hesitates. I know why. Until a few days ago I would probably have guided him out to the patio, shushing him. At this time of day Mellie would have been napping. She needed a lot of rest, and the pain...it was almost unbearable at the best of times.

But not today. Today is different.

I gesture again, but Edward is still reluctant. Times like these he reminds me of a guilty dog who knows he's in trouble for pissing on the carpet.

Oh well, outside it is. Old habits die hard, it seems. I should know. I still putter around. Cleaning. Staying quiet as possible. Preparing those same little meals of toast and honey or pickles and eggs she always liked before remembering that Mellie...

"Outside then," I agree, stepping out into the sunlight and allowing the door to swing closed behind me.

My eyes adjust to the bright glare of the mid-afternoon sun. I stretch out my back, grunting. It won't relax like it used to, and I haven't heard a good pop in months.

When I look into the mirror, I see a hunchbacked old monster, not the vibrant man I imagine myself to be. It doesn't even faze me.

Familiarity is a cruel mistress.

Edward drags two patio chairs from the lawn and sets them next to the table. He sits in one and I plop down on the other. Some time passes as we settle in, and then I turn my attention to him. His eyes are searching my face. I cross my hands over my belly, staring back.

If he wants me to speak first, he's in for a surprise. I can play the waiting game, and I can sure as hell out wait him. I went days without talking while Mellie was having her episodes and couldn't communicate. I know what it's like to live in silence.

But Edward doesn't talk. At least not right away. He is still staring at me, his eyes full of...

Hurt?

What does he have to be hurt about? I get that Bethany is upset. What daughter wouldn't be? But Edward shouldn't be. He isn't taking *this* personally is he? It's not like I am doing this because of him.

No, I decide, I will NOT be the first to talk.

"Bethany called, didn't she?" I ask. The question just slips out.

"Yep," Edward replies.

"She's worried about me."

"Uh huh."

"And she sent you here to watch me. Make sure I don't do anything."

"No," Edward says.

My eyebrows pop up. But he might be lying. Why *wouldn't* Beth send him over? Isn't she worried about me?

"Then why are you here?"

"I wanted to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine. Dandy. Jipper. What do you expect?"

"Honesty."

Honesty? No, he doesn't want honesty. He wants assurance. He wants validation, to know that he's doing the right thing. He wants an apology.

But I am not about to apologize. To him or Bethany. I said what I said when I said it and I meant what I said.

"How are you, Calvin?" Edward asks.

I grunt. It comes out a lot weaker than intended, but that makes sense. I'm eighty-four years old. The old voice box doesn't work like it should.

The grunt is a mix between a laugh and a cough. Not really a word, but it conveys what I want to say more effectively than any string of English syllables I know of could.

I'm not completely sure Edward understands. I know how much it annoys Bethany when I do that. It used to annoy Mellie too, years ago, but after a while she understood. Sometimes I just don't know the right damned words.

I never was good with them. Why talk when there's nothing that needs said?

No I take that back. Put a half a bottle of whiskey in my hand and some sour mix, and I'm the king of expression.

But I stopped that a long time ago. Funny thing is, I miss it almost as much as smoking. Sometimes my hand starts shaking.

But I don't know. Maybe I'm just old.

Damn, mind wandering again...

The point is, Mellie got it. She understood me. She never pressured me to talk when I didn't have anything to say. Edward will just have to understand too. I'm eighty-one damn years old, broken, scared, and alone for the first time in nearly sixty years. What the hell kind of question is 'how are you'? What damnable words are supposed to answer *that*?

I sigh and rub a hand across my face, feeling the rough stubble on my wrinkly skin.

A bird chirps from up by the tree, almost like music. I try to remember if I ever finished building that bird feeder Mellie asked me to put together a few years back. Probably not.

A delivery truck slides past us down the road, heading to Mrs. Polisheck's house with a package. She gets one at least every week. Her daughter likes ordering on that inter-web thing. Makes no damned sense.

"Bethany called me and said—"

"I know what she said because I told her," I interrupt, focusing back on Edward. "And I don't want to talk about it."

Edward opens his mouth again, but then closes it without a word. That is good. The truth is, I *don't* want to talk about it. I shouldn't have called Beth in the first place, and I don't want people worrying about me.

It's my life, not theirs, and they shouldn't be getting involved anyway. I've made up my mind, and as far as I am concerned there is nothing else to talk about.

I have *nothing* to apologize for.

"I'm sorry," I say. It just slips out. "I didn't mean to make you worry."

We sit in silence for a few minutes. The hummingbird drifts away, singing to itself as it goes. Cars hum in the distance, but very few are close enough to see. Instead the engines add to the scenery, like the wind.

Our neighborhood is quiet. Condos, mostly, and old fogies like me who don't really leave home. I never planned for this life. And I promised I'd never be old.

But look how that turned out. Joke's on me I guess.

Before this condo we owned a house. A big one with brick siding and two floors. That's where we raised our kids for most of their lives. It's the first and only house we ever owned. On Bradford Avenue, two floors with its creaking staircase and leaky pipes.

I always promised Mellie I would fix those pipes, plumb the damn house if I had to, but I never did. Another thing left unfinished.

Another forgotten promise.

After we sold the house they tore it down. Put up a Walmart, or something just like it. Out with the old. In with the new.

Progress, they call it.

Sometimes I'm glad that I'm old.

But this condo, small as it is, was always comfortable for us. I lived here with Mellie for the last ten years. Never once did I regret it.

"Chrissie got her promotion," Edward said, kindly changing the subject. "She was really excited about it when she called her sister. And the wedding is sneaking up on us to. My tux is going to cost a fortune."

I wrack my brain, but it won't come to me. Which one is Chrissie? The blonde or the chubby brunette? Definitely one of his wife's sisters. Or maybe a cousin. *That* much I do know.

In fairness, I'm an equal opportunity forgetter. I can't even remember the names of all my grandchildren. Sally, Susie, I think there's a Molly. Then there is Kevin, Mike—or Mack, I can never remember—and Peter. And Lucas.

I knew a Lucas growing up. Strong man, good to his family, smoked like a chimney.

I don't know the new Lucas.

I'm sure there are more. There are even a few great grandchildren. They all look alike. If there's one thing I've learned in my life, it's that all children pop out exactly the same.

Mellie could have remembered them all. She always knew the names, even when she was having one of her bad days. She was the smart one, and I never felt complete when she wasn't around...

I clear my throat: "Do you know my first thought when I woke up?" I ask.

Edward just stares at me.

I am speaking out loud, but I don't think I'm talking to him.

I don't think I'm talking to myself, either. I am just...talking. Saying something. Anything to keep from thinking.

"No," Edward says when I don't continue. He doesn't have an answer. Of course he doesn't, how could he?

But I still don't continue right away. I hold my next words, weighing them in my head. I haven't vocalized anything like this yet. Not out loud where anyone could hear. I told Bethany some of it, but not all. And I knew she wouldn't really listen. But Edward, he's deeper. He'll hear me. Really hear me.

That scares the hell out of me.

No, I won't tell him. I'll just make something up to fill the gap. I try to think of something else to say. Some story I can blab that he'll believe.

But it's no use. The words are like a fountain now in my head, threatening to bubble over. They want to be spoken. They want to be heard.

I find myself staring at the maple tree we planted when we first moved in. It's still small, but beautiful. It was barely a sapling when I stole it from some national park or other. Stole a few of them, right next to the sign that says stealing trees from a park is a federal crime. Heh.

Edward rubs his hands on his jeans the way a politician does before he's going to shake your hand. Sweaty hands. Not working hands. There is barely a blemish on them. Edward knows computers, but the boy barely knows anything about a hard day's work.

Not his fault. Just the world. Everything changes.

I adjust the potted plant on the table.

Edward runs a hand through his fading hair, graying at the sides and retreating from his forehead.

I fight the words almost a minute, hoping Edward will speak. But he doesn't say anything.

Then my mouth opens: "What I thought was: 'why am I still here?'"

"It's a beautiful day, Calvin. I'm sure God has you here for—"

"No. If God has a reason for me to be here, it's 'cause he forgot about me," I say. I fumble in my pocket for a cigarette, and then remember I don't have any. I haven't had any for four years, ever since Mellie got sick. Old habits die hard.

"Truth is that's not the first time I thought it, either. I've wondered for years now. I can't do anything except putter around. This is the first time, though, that I *meant* it."

"Beth told me what you said," Edward says softly, "but she didn't know what you meant." His voice is so soft I can barely hear him. Clearly this isn't something he wants to talk about either. I wave my hand at his concern.

"My daughter was just talking."

"She doesn't know what you're planning."

I pause, then ask: "Do you?"

Edward only stares at me, his expression strained. I look down at the table, then at the glass front door of our squat gray condo. Our condo.

For a second, only a second, I can see her face. There in the glass, her eyes wistful and tragic.

My mind drifts: it is one of those nights when Mellie felt well enough to get out of bed. She would look out that glass window to the houses beyond, as though it was the whole world. *I suppose it was, after all this time. It was the only world we had left.*

I never knew what she was staring at.

I never knew what *her* world looked like.

"She said the window was dirty. She said—" my voice cracks "—she said: 'Calvin, this window's all dirty and I can't see nothing. You should clean it.'"

I barely push the last few words out. It hurts, but not with the intensity of youth. This is a dull ache, emptiness. Loneliness. But it is tinged with relief. I hated seeing her in pain more than I hated losing her.

"That was three nights ago," I hear myself say. "And I cleaned the window. And it took me forever. Spent almost an hour scrubbing it so she could look out. But she never did."

"I'm sorry," Edward says.

"I'm not," I say. "She's not in pain now. No more crying. No more sleeping. No more waking up in agony. It's over for her, and she can rest. She's with God now, and God knows she deserves it. And now I wonder: why am I still here?"

"You were a saint," Edward says, "taking care of her all of those years."

I grunt to show what I think of *that*. There definitely aren't words to describe *that* statement. "I was *something*."

"You were there when she needed you."

It wasn't enough. Not after everything. It could never be enough.

"Edward," I say finally. I turn away, suddenly unable to look him in the eye. "I'll walk there if I have to. It's only a few miles. I can make it that far."

“You can’t do this.”

“I won’t hear none of that now,” I say, finding energy in a surge of anger. “Don’t you dare tell me what I can and can’t do. I said I’ll *walk* if I have to. But I don’t want to. It should be easier than this.” I pause. Tears are welling but I refuse to blink. “Why isn’t it easier? I shouldn’t have to beg.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I’ll walk if I have to,” I repeat, “but I would appreciate if you drove me to the cemetery. To her grave. Will you do it?”

Edward is silent for a long moment, but I can’t tell if he was seriously considering the request. Finally, he lets out a long sigh and says:

“Calvin, Emily is gone. I won’t drive you to her grave so you can kill yourself.”