

Part 1 – Nate and Lindsey

Chapter 1

Lindsey

I stare at the faded Polaroid of my mother in the arms of a tall, blond stranger, who looks vaguely familiar. Both of them are turned toward the camera with happiness from newly ignited love glowing from their faces and every nuanced curve of their entwined bodies. My opinion of love, since my divorce, is that when the passion burns out, nothing's left but cold ashes. I frown and glance at the bottom white edge of the photo where I read my mother's perfect handwriting. "The happiest day of my life. June 24, 1974."

Who is this man? Where is he now? I don't remember her ever talking about him.

I toss the photo onto the bed among the rest of the clutter I dumped from my mother's top bureau drawer. It's a jumbled mess of stuff from her life that she no longer remembers—stuff I'm attempting to sort through as I clean out her house before putting it on the market.

Because of my mother's worsening dementia, I'm the one who has to do this. She, like me, is all alone since Dad died of a sudden heart attack two years ago, and other than my brother Jonathan, who has a family and isn't as available, there's nobody else who cares.

I sigh. It's hard making decisions for a parent who is no longer able to. She deteriorated so quickly, I haven't had time to adjust to the role reversal.

I pick up the photo again. Behind the happy couple is what looks like a picnic table and the remains of lunch. My mother is wearing a long orange, green, black, and white geometric design halter dress that shows lots of cleavage. Her long dark hair, in a Cleopatra cut, frames

enormous dark eyes—eyes that I have inherited. The man, the stranger, is tall and rangy with a young Robert Redford look and a killer smile.

Hmmm. So Mom had a serious boyfriend before Dad—a handsome, blond man. I wonder what happened to him?

I look at the date again, written on the bottom of the Polaroid. June 24, 1974.

I was born March 21, 1975.

A jolt of realization takes my breath away. The stranger looks like a male version of me!

I sit down quickly on the bed amid the clutter, my mind scrambling to make sense of this.

The father I grew up with was a large, quiet man with dark, perfectly combed hair and hazel eyes that usually looked past me when he spoke to me. His face was too white and puffy, and when he smiled, which wasn't often, you saw that he had very crooked bottom teeth.

Every evening when he arrived home from work, he would say to me, "Hi there, Poppet," in a deliberate sort of way before he gave my mom a kiss. After he changed out of his suit, he would sit in the living room, watching the news on TV until supper was ready. At least that's what he did until my brother Jonathan was born.

Right before my brother was born, while he was safely tucked inside my mom's swelling belly, she let me listen to his drumbeat heart and watch the ripple of a knee or elbow go across her belly that was stretched so tight I thought a pin prick would burst it open and that's how the doctors would get him out.

He came out—not the way I had imagined—as 8.4 pounds of squalling, wrinkly redness. I had pictured him as a live baby doll, something pink and placid that I could push in my doll carriage. That, he was not.

But it wasn't just my disappointment in the reality of my baby brother—the reality of runny yellow poop and bouts of inconsolable crying. What set my mind firmly against my little brother Jonathan, at least when he was small, was the way my father acted around him.

The day after Jonathan came home from the hospital, my father became a different person.

"How's my little man?" he'd say, dancing around the room, holding Jonathan, a grub in footed pajamas.

As Jonathan grew from grub to a slightly more complex creature, my father became ecstatic over a smile, a new tooth visible through the drool, and often remarked about the thick head of fine dark hair, unlike mine, that was Jonathan's signature from day one. My straight blonde hair, which I have put into a ponytail while I'm working, is different from every other member of the family.

So that explains the barrier between my father and me! I could never make him look at me the way he looked at Jonathan, no matter how hard I tried. Although it makes sense now, I still feel in my heart the failure from all the frustrated efforts on my part to connect with him. If it hadn't been for my loving mother...

I close my eyes, my mind unable to make sense of this new information and collate it into the memories that were my reality up until now.

So—now what?

There is more sorting to do, yet my world as I knew it has just exploded. I can do nothing more today, physically or mentally. I'll go home, pour myself a glass of Pinot Grigio, and try to rearrange the pieces of my life.

As I leave the bedroom, I tuck the Polaroid into my purse.

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I'm on my second glass of wine when I remember the portable metal box that holds my mother's legal papers. It was the first thing I brought to my condo for safe keeping and has her birth certificate, marriage license, insurance information—all the important papers that she can no longer be responsible for.

Hurriedly I gulp the last swig of wine and go to the closet where I stashed her box behind my ski boots. My hands shake as I lift it out. What will I find?

My mother, like me, is not the most organized person, so all the papers are mixed together. I carefully remove them and examine each one. There's a speeding ticket—who would have guessed that my demure mother would exceed the speed limit?—an expired mortgage agreement for the house I grew up in, and yes—a marriage license!

The license is dated October 6, 1976. I was a year and a half old. Behind the license and attached with a rusted paper clip is another document—adoption papers showing that Joe adopted me as his child.

The impact of the discovery freezes my mind momentarily. This is proof of what I suspected and feared. Joe Casselton is *not* my father. My mother was knocked up by a good-looking blond man, whom she never told me about, and I was the result. Why didn't she tell me? Who is he? Where is he?

#

It isn't until the next weekend that I have the time and the courage to return to my mother's brown cedar-shake home a block from the ocean. It's a cozy, quaint little house with nooks and crannies, and it used to be my grandparents' home. I can't walk in the door without remembering the delicious terror from Poppy's bear hugs and recalling the taste of Grammy's

walnut brownies fresh from the oven. After Grammy and Poppy died, my mom and Joe moved there. I was busy with my new married life and came only for holidays. At one time, I thought I'd like to move in after my mom had to go to the nursing home, but it would have meant a long, miserable commute through heavy interstate traffic. So I live an hour away in my condo, the one I bought after my divorce.

I return to my mother's house with firm resolve to find out everything I can about the man in the Polaroid photograph. I have told no one about my find, not even Sue Ellen, my best friend from college who's like a sister to me.

It has snowed since I was here last weekend, and because no one is living in the house, I've stopped the shoveling service. I go up the front steps sideways for more traction in the two-inch accumulation of snow. Gripping the metal railing, I feel its coldness through my glove.

As I open the front door, I wonder, *What else will I find here today?*

The living room with its rounded stone fireplace has been cleared of personal items. Jonathan and I have civilly sorted through the books and knickknacks, taking what we wanted and boxing the rest to give away. We did the same with the dining room and kitchen. All that is left to be cleared are the attic and my mother's bedroom, where she slept alone for the last year she was here. I agreed to deal with my mother's things in her bedroom as Jonathan dealt with our father's personal belongings when he died. Neither of us has been in the attic since we played there on rainy days as children.

I walk into the bedroom and glance at the bed covered with dresser drawer clutter. Might there be more Polaroids? Or a memento from the mystery man?

Half of me wishes the photo had never shown up—that my life would continue running in well-worn grooves of predictability. The other half of me is intrigued and wants to learn the

truth, even though it might leave me vulnerable and unconnected to the family safety net I thought I had.

I rifle through the scattered pile of tangled jewelry, scarves, empty perfume bottles, little ceramic dishes with hand-painted flowers. There are no more photographs. Rather than sort through what is spread on the bed, I open up another dresser drawer full of underwear, nylon stockings, wool socks, pajamas, and feel into their soft depths for paper or something solid. Nothing.

The next two drawers again yield nothing of interest. I walk to the clothes closet, remembering how less than a year ago I had selected clothes from this closet that I thought my mother would wear in her new life in the Alzheimer's unit. It had not been easy then, and it wasn't easy now realizing that all those clothes so carefully chosen are no longer worn. My mom stays in bed all day now, and when I visit, she often has no idea who I am.

I stop to let the feeling of sadness flow over and past me, a common sensation I'm learning to live with. When it passes, I look up at the top shelf to a row of boxes labeled with dates. The leftmost one says "2000–2005." I pull it down and find folders with old receipts. I want a box with records from 1974, but the oldest box is "1980–1985." My father Joe was an accountant and kept meticulous records, a quality I did not, and apparently could not, inherit from him.

The attic. It's the only place left that might contain a clue.

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The attic is accessed through a small door off the upstairs hallway. Whatever is there probably hasn't been touched for years. My retired parents were not very agile, and the stairs have a narrow tread and curve sharply.

Entombed cold air with the scent of cedar assaults my nose. Surprisingly, the attic looks empty. Then I remember my mother's obsession when her parents died about getting the house ready for renters. She hired people to clean all her parents' clutter out of the attic, the clutter of old magazines and comic books, empty milk bottles, even an old spinning wheel. I look around in the dim light coming from the dusty window, nostalgic for what used to be there. It appears that the only thing in the attic is a steamer trunk that looks too new to have been my grandmother's. It's big and I can't carry it down the stairs by myself. I'll have to open it up here and get Jonathan to carry it down later.

Fortunately, the trunk is not locked and I'm able to open the snap fasteners holding it closed. As the top rises, I see clothing. Old dresses, hats, and purses from the seventies. There's even the orange, green, and black geometric dress from the Polaroid. I groan with disappointment. I was hoping for letters and documents.

"Mom!" I say like I did when I was a teenager. "What were you thinking?"

I'm about to let the top crash down to punctuate my dashed hopes when I see a red clutch leather purse. Very retro. I could use something like that with the red heels I bought on sale last month.

I take the purse out and let the trunk top fall with a satisfying crash. I don't bother to re-attach the snap fasteners.

So much for more information about my real father. Best to let the whole matter go and get on with my life.

I retrace my steps down the narrow curved stairwell. Back in my mother's bedroom, I get down to business, sorting and boxing everything. It's dark when I finally leave the house with my head full of what must be done next—call a Realtor, get the house appraised, perhaps paint

the living room a more appealing color, get estimates for updating the kitchen and bathrooms and see if it makes sense in terms of raising the value of the house.

It isn't until bedtime that I remember the red purse. I bring it to my closet to see if it matches my shoes, and it does. Perfectly! It's well made, but I can't find the label. I open it, hoping to find the name brand inside. The cream colored satin lining is in good shape, but I still don't see a label. A zippered compartment on one side bulges. I unzip it. Inside is a folded piece of letter paper that is worn on the edges. I open it slowly.

June 25, 1974

Dear Alice,

My tired body is here in the barracks after a 5-mile run, but my mind is floating with memories of our recent two days together. Mind blowing days!

Speaking of floating, I'm glad I decided to "float" on your dad's fishing boat. I saw you selling tickets and I was "sold". It was the start of the best thing that's happened to me in years! I haven't been this happy since my college basketball team won the division title!

Tomorrow I have to go to Vietnam for a year. Major bummer! The good news is that the war is as good as over and I can see the light at the end of my tunnel. The bad news is that I've been assigned to the transition team and security will be tight. You can't call me and I can't make calls either.

You are a beautiful dream and one that I will treasure until I can wake up with you in my arms again.

Please don't forget me.

Love,

Steve Nathan

After reading it through twice, my shaking hands fold the letter and put it back into the zippered compartment where it was probably kept for over 40 years.

I wonder how many times my mother read the letter. Hundreds? Thousands? I imagine the joy she felt when she read it the first time and maybe even the first twenty times. Did she write him? Did he write her back, and if so, where are his other letters?

My thoughts move from my mother to me and what I want to do next. Do I want to find out about this Steve Nathan? It seems that he is my father, and he obviously loved her. Or was it more of a “Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am?” What kind of a man was he? What have I inherited from him?

The questions flow into thoughts of my grandfather, who used his fishing boat for guided tours in the summer. My mom, who helped out during college breaks and afterwards while she was teaching elementary school, was an accomplished fisherwoman. She caught the record swordfish one of those summers. In spite of my heritage, I don’t have the patience for fishing, and rough waters make me nauseous.

My mind drifts back to what I now know about this Steve Nathan, probably my father. He was athletic. He ran five miles and was a basketball player. A good basketball player. He was a smooth talker. “You are a beautiful dream and one that I will treasure until I can wake up with you in my arms again.”

And either he really couldn’t be reached by phone after he went to Vietnam, or he knew how to tell a damn good lie.

I start to feel anger rise within me. How dare he use my mother the way he did! How cavalier and irresponsible! Just who did he think he was? God’s gift to women? Or—and this thought puts a freeze on my anger—maybe he died.

How I wish my mother could tell me more. Why didn’t she tell me when she could? Who can tell me more? I remember that my mother has a younger brother, my Uncle Bob, who lives

in Minneapolis. Apparently Uncle Bob left home right after high school and married a woman who refused to leave Minnesota to meet his family. I only met him once when he came to my grandmother's funeral. And my impression of him was that he was loud and drank too much of our booze.

I search my phone contacts to see if I have a number for Uncle Bob. I don't. My mother's old Rolodex is in one of the boxes I've stored for her. I rifle through one box then another and finally find it. Robert Groton.

I dial his number. It rings three times, and I do a mental check to see if it's a respectable time for calling someone in Minnesota. It's one hour earlier than here in New England, so yes, even though he's old, he should be awake.

"Hello," a male voice says.

"Uncle Bob? This is Lindsey. Your niece."

"Lindsey? Alice's daughter? Is she..."

"Oh, my mother is fine. Well, as fine as possible." I hesitate. I can't just jump right in demanding answers. That would be rude. "How are you doing, Uncle Bob?"

"Passably well, I think."

There's an uncomfortable pause during which I hear what sounds like the pop top of a beer can. I decide to stop playing etiquette games. "Uncle Bob. I know this call is unexpected, and I hope you don't mind that I'm calling you, but you are the only person I can think of who might be able to answer some of my questions. You see, while going through my mom's things at the house, I came across a photograph and then a letter."

Uncle Bob says, "I was wondering when I'd get a call like this."

"You did? You mean..."

“Yes. Go on. Tell me what you found.”

“A Polaroid photograph of my mother with a tall, blond stranger, dated nine months before I was born, and then a letter from someone named Steve Nathan to my mother.”

“That would be the one.”

“The one? What do you mean?”

“His name was mud in our house for a good many months! Not sure how much detail you want me to lay on you, but he sure was one unpopular guy.” Uncle Bob seems to relish telling me this as if he had been holding in the secret for decades and finally was permitted to talk about it. “Let me tell you, you almost weren’t born! Your mom fought daily with our parents over whether to have an abortion, give you up for adoption, or keep you until the golden boy returned from ‘Nam.”

The idea that I might not have been born hits me with sudden force, and I tune out of the rest of the conversation until I hear Uncle Bob say, “Then she contacted the military and found out that Steve Nathan was killed. Right at the end of the war.”

I had thought it was a possibility earlier, but really, he was killed? Steve Nathan was killed?

“Your mom could be stubborn, as I’m sure you know, so in spite of pissing off our parents, she decided to keep you, saying you were the only thing she had left from the love of her life—this Steve Nathan guy. Of course, then she met Joe Casselton when you were a baby and you know the rest.”

I am numb. My dad was killed? I’ll never get to know him?

Uncle Bob stops talking, and I am unable to say anything for several moments. Finally, I say, “Thank you,” but I’m not really thankful at all, only confused.

"Any time," Uncle Bob says. "Oh, and give my regards to your mother."

"Thank you," I say again like a robot.

Chapter 2

Nate

The first time Nate asked about his absent father was in 1979. He was four years old. He had recently enrolled in a Head Start program two blocks from their second floor walk-up apartment that was just inside the invisible wall around Little Saigon in San Jose.

"Ma," he said. "Tran has a papa. Kim has a papa. Miguel and Maria have the same papa. Where's my papa?"

His mother Mai stopped washing the rice and shook excess water from her hands over the sink full of fresh, wrinkled greens.

"My baby Nate," she said, enfolding him in her arms and touching his bowl-cut black hair with her still wet hands. "Your papa is with the ancestors. But he watches you every day."

This made no sense to Nate and, in fact, frightened him.

"Does he see me now? Why can't I see him?"

His mother sucked in her breath and was silent as she crouched, rocking him slowly. Finally, Nate wriggled out of her arms, and when he looked at her, he saw her cheeks were even wetter than her hands had been.

"I want to see him. Now!"

His mother stood slowly. "Come." She walked to the small windowless bedroom they shared and opened the highest dresser drawer, the one Nate couldn't yet reach. Whatever she wanted was right on top.

She sat on the bed and patted the space next to her. "Sit."

She held a photograph in her hands and wouldn't let him touch it. "Just look," she said. "There's your papa."

Nate saw a man dressed in baggy camouflage, like the GI Joe doll Miguel always brought to school. The man stood next to his mother who came up to the middle of his arm. His mother had a big smile that showed all her teeth. Her hair was long and shiny and hung down to her waist, not tied up in a bun like it was now. The man had his arm around her and looked at her with just a little smile. On his chest pocket was a word that Nate didn't yet know how to read, but it started with the first three letters of his name, NAT.

"Oh." Nate slid off the bed and went looking for the red fire truck he liked to push around the apartment and pretend he was the tiny little driver sitting inside.

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The next time Nate and his mother spoke of his father was several years later. Nate was going to public school now and on this particular day when he came home, he let the screen door slam behind him, something his mother hated. He set his school backpack onto the kitchen table, another thing she strongly disliked. Rather than start his homework immediately as he usually did, Nate sat staring at the red plastic flowers in the middle of the table next to the cruet of nuoc mam.

From the stove where she was already making his dinner so she could leave for work, Mai said, "What?" She said it in Vietnamese, the language they spoke at home.

Nate pushed his backpack. It bumped the flowers and made them wobble. His mother moved a sizzling pan off the burner and came to stand in front of him, arms crossed.

"What?" she said again.

Finally, Nate looked up at her. "Am I a bui doi?"

Mai sighed and pulled out a chair to sit next to her son. "Bui doi, children of the dust, is an old term for unloved children of the streets. You are not that."

"But," Nate looked up at her finally, a glistening of tears blurring his vision, "Jimmy said because of my light eyes, my father was an American who left me..."

"Your father died saving your life and mine!" Mai hissed. "He..." She couldn't speak for a moment. "He loved you even though he never saw you."

"What happened?"

Mai pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and wiped her eyes. "It's time you knew."

She stared at the worn linoleum floor, apparently seeing something else. Finally, she said, "Your father was one of the last Americans in Vietnam. I worked for him as a translator at the American Embassy. He was doing secret work for the government that had to do with the Russians and Chinese. It was dangerous work. He was a very smart man and brave."

Nate looked at his mother. *Smart? Brave? Dangerous work? Could this be bullshit like the story she used to tell him when he was a baby? The story about the fierce and wondrous dragon who gave her a baby and told her that this baby was the most precious gift she would ever receive. He used to picture the dragon with slimy green scales and nostrils blowing fire as it handed him over. He could almost feel the dragon claws curled around his small body.*

"Ma!" he said. "Tell me the truth! I don't want another dragon story."

His barb hit right on target, and he saw her wince before she regained her composure.

"You *are* the most precious gift I have ever received. That part of the dragon story is true. And this, too, is true. Your father was very smart. He was brave. He died helping me and you, not yet born, get to freedom. And that's all you need to know."

"How did he die?"

She closed her eyes and didn't say anything for a long time. "Someday I will tell you, but not now."

"Ma, tell me. Now!"

His mother turned to him with a look he knew well—the look that meant nothing he could say or do would change her mind.

Nate stood up and, after kicking the chair leg once, walked to the windowsill where his mother kept his blue plastic glass and poured himself some green tea from the pitcher his mother kept full for him.

He had a smart and brave father who loved him. Loved him so much he died so his mother and he could come to America. Actually, it was pretty cool. None of his friends could claim that. Especially the ones with living fathers.

Nate slowly drank the room temperature tea that his mother said made his heart strong and kept his brain smart. When he had drained the glass, he returned to the table, opened his backpack, and took out his homework. After his mother went back to cooking, he put the backpack on the floor where it belonged.

#

By the time Nate was a senior in high school, he was 6'2" and played guard on his high school basketball team. Things were going well. He had been accepted at UC Berkeley, and in spite of his mother's objections, he and Rosy Gonzales were an item.

"What? Are you prejudiced?" he asked his mother. "So what if Rosy is part Spanish and part Indian. I'm part Vietnamese and part Anglo Saxon. Maybe Nordic. Our children could be honorary members of the UN."

His mother looked pained, as she always did when he argued with her. "You have good life ahead of you," she said in English. And finally as she looked away, "Don't make her pregnant."

Mai was working full-time at a nearby Vietnamese restaurant known for its authentic cuisine. She was head chef and worked long hours, leaving Nate to organize his life as he saw fit. He was a responsible teenager and organized his life well. Between studying for his AP courses and playing sports, he had little time to get into trouble. His teachers loved him. His coaches loved him, citing him player of the year twice in a row. He was on a partial basketball scholarship to UC Berkeley.

Life was rosy, Nate thought and smiled at the pun. Rosy, the most popular cheerleader at the high school, was not his life, but she made it sweeter, for sure. She wanted to become a world-renowned fashion designer and was going to the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) in New York City in the fall. Nate was realistic enough to know that their paths would diverge and they'd find other partners. But for now, he was at the top of his world, and his future looked "rosy." That word again.

It hadn't always been that way. The bad times began in junior high school when a division formed between the purebred Vietnamese and the Amerasian Vietnamese. Nate was

obviously Amerasian with his green eyes and unusually tall frame. Gangs of both varieties recruited young teens, and Nate, because of his height and athleticism, was especially desirable.

Mai cut back her work hours during those years to spend more time with Nate. Once she stood blocking the apartment door with a kitchen knife in her hand when Nate said he was going out that evening to “hang out” with some new friends. He could easily have overpowered his small mother, but her fierce love, the love he had experienced his entire life, won.

In the hallways of the junior high school, the purebreds hissed, “Half breed!” to Nate. The bolder ones said, “Your mother’s a whore!”

One evening when Nate was despondent, Mai got him to talk about the insults he was hearing at school. To hide the tears that threatened to fall, he put his head on crossed arms at the kitchen table as he mumbled his woes.

When he finished, Mai stared thoughtfully into space before she said, “My mother told me a story a long time ago. It’s about a one-legged duck. It’s a story told to young children, but it has a truth in it for people of all ages.

“After Heaven completed the creation of the world, there was a duck with one leg. He could only hop, and it was very difficult to get around. He became discouraged when he saw how easily other birds and animals moved about on two or more legs.

“He decided to complain to Heaven but didn’t know where it was. He asked a rooster who knew everything, and the rooster told him that Heaven was a long distance away, too far for the duck to get to, but there was a nearby temple with a god who could convey a petition to Heaven.

“The duck eagerly hopped behind the rooster to the local temple. As they entered, they heard a loud voice asking why the temple’s incense burner had five legs instead of four and demanding that the extra leg be removed at once.

“The rooster, speaking for the duck, said, ‘Your lordship, I have come here because this duck has only one leg. He feels that Heaven has not treated him fairly, and he would like to send a petition.’

“The god roared, ‘What Heaven gives at creation is final. A petition won’t change anything.’

“The rooster turned to leave the temple, but the duck was desperate. In a trembling voice he said, ‘Your lordship, you said something as we entered the temple about removing a leg from your incense burner...’

“The god roared with laughter. Then he became silent. Finally, he said, ‘Heaven approves of those who help themselves. If you can remove the extra leg from the burner, you may have it. But it is made of pure gold and is very valuable. Guard it carefully.’

“So the duck, with the rooster’s help, removed the extra leg from the incense burner and attached the gold leg to his body. Soon, with practice, he was able to move about like the other creatures. But at night when he went to sleep, he pulled the leg up so nobody could steal it. Other ducks and birds who saw him assumed that was the proper way to sleep, so they imitated him and now they all sleep by standing on one leg.”