

# A FAMILY ROMANCE

A Novel

Steven Key Meyers

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Cover by Todd Engel

*For my parents, and for theirs*

What you really want to know is  
never in a book, and no one can tell you.

—Richard Jefferies, *Bevis*

Never excuse; for when the players  
are all dead, there need none to be  
blamed.

—Shakespeare,  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream*

I.

*Washington, D.C.*

## 1.

THEY HAD TO TAKE an elevator not reserved for Senators, a slow upwards haul. Nat Handler told himself he wasn't nervous—he'd been meeting famous lawmakers all day—but found his hand checking the knot of his tie as the attendant cranked open the door.

Hardy Owens, grinning from embarrassment at having to show a cub around his hallowed Capitol, and at the shiny provincial innocence of this particular cub, led the way. As for Nat, he was reminded of first days at boarding school and college. The day's one gleam thus far was a flash of fellow feeling offered by the skinny junior Senator from Massachusetts, Jack Kennedy, who bounded up into the facing seat on the Capitol subway—back then a contraption resembling the open carriages of horse-and-buggy days—and, putting out his hand with a ready smile, introduced himself.

Nat was surprised at how gaudy the Capitol was, even these inner recesses; every inch faux-marbled or stenciled, covered with fresco or mosaic, lest—he supposed—King George should crawl back in through some patch of wall left bare. If the aim was grandeur, to awe with the majesty inherent to the people of a Republic, the effect was just—

gaudy. It owed something to Rome's baroque churches, perhaps also to its bordellos.

Owens, speaking into an office, held open one of its double doors.

"*Hell, yeah,*" came the drawl from within. "Bring him on in, want to meet *him.*"

Squeezing past Owens, Nat located the speaker behind an enormous desk, virtually an aircraft carrier of mahogany: Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson.

Standing up, Johnson came around and put out both hands. A shapely secretary sat beside the desk, her notebook resting on a borrowed patch of flight deck beside a stack of papers. She looked glad of the reprieve.

"*H'wra you? Telling Hardy, glad to meet you. He taking care of you?*"

The grip was bone-crushing, but Nat withstood it, and had to look up only an inch or two. "Glad to meet you, Senator."

"Well, that's fine. Sit down, gentlemen, get to know Randy's newest fair-haired boy."

Randy Orpen, founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Orbs* magazine, was Nat's boss, and Owens'.

"Don't want to take your time, Senator," said Owens, still hanging at the door.

"Sit yourselves on down, done here in a minute. Where were we, darlin'?" he asked, falling backwards into his giant leather chair.

Nat took one of the chairs indicated and so, reluctantly, did Owens. Boxes cluttered the room; Johnson was in the process of moving his headquarters downstairs.

The young woman held up the top sheet of paper.

"This came from the Dallas Chamber." She handed it over and, without looking at it, Johnson sailed it into the air.

"No time for that shit," he barked. "Write 'em a letter."

The secretary scrambled to retrieve the sheet. She was young and blooming, and in stretching to the floor revealed the roundness of her bottom. Johnson smirked at Nat.

"Next?" he said.

"Mayor Planter of Blanco sent—"

Johnson grabbed the letter and tossed it.

"Remind Mayor *Patootie* I'm a busy man!" he thundered as she went to the floor to retrieve it. Nat half-thought that the Leader was appraising his response to his performance—not catching but following his eye. He also detected in Johnson's, watching the secretary's lithe, lunging form, a wet avidity. Her breasts knocked against each other as she came up from the floor. Owens glanced at his watch and, bored but resigned, planted his feet flat and rubbed his crew cut as he looked out the arched window behind the antic Texan, where lay the heart-stopping prospect of the National Mall, straight down to the austere fact of the Washington Monument, beige-brown in wan January sunlight.

"Midland's after you again about—"

"Let 'em know—but *nice*—that soon as the 'publicans give me a breather, I'll look into their little matter." Toss and scramble.

"The Wilbarger County Commissioners want—"

"You tell 'em—really *tell* 'em—that the way Wilbarger County voted last time, be a cold day in *hell* they see *me* again." Paper went flying and the red-faced secretary scrambled, haunches working. "Remind 'em even their fucking pipeline's puny next to what's on *my* plate."

Finally Johnson had dealt with his correspondence. After his secretary crawled, red-faced and panting, over the floor picking up every last scrap, he dismissed her with an appreciative look at her departing backside.

"Well now, sir: Welcome to Washington," he said to Nat,

and Nat suddenly was aware of undergoing the most penetrating, all-embracing survey and investigation of his person he had experienced in the 21 years since his mother's death. "They tell me you're Texas?"

"My parents, sir. I'm from New Mexico and Arizona, but Dad was raised in Commerce and my mother in Vernon—Wilbarger County."

"Don't say?" said Johnson with a half smile.

"Yes, sir. Her brother was sheriff for years, his son still is."

"That right? Look, anything I can do for you, you tell me, all'ight?"

"Yes, sir."

"Wanted to see who Randy was sending us. Welcome to Washington."

A few minutes later the orange dome of the Capitol was receding behind their cab. The cast iron, freshly daubed with Rust-Oleum, was exposed for the first time since being swung high into the heavens by steam engines during the Battle of Gettysburg.

Owens, student and worshiper of power, told Nat he'd been accorded a glimpse behind the curtain, and Nat almost said, yes, just like *The Wizard of Oz*. But he didn't; kept to himself his sense of the great man's insecurities. His colleague wouldn't understand, but only look at him with dismay. Owens did add that his western background might work out after all.

Nat could read his mind: He, Hardy Owens, was cut in the Ivy League pattern of *Orbsites*, whereas Nat was—what, exactly? University of *Colorado*? Master's work at the University of *Kansas*? *Really*? Well, maybe New York knew best. New York usually did. Or maybe Randy was slipping? That was another possibility.

On Connecticut Avenue near Dupont Circle Owens



nodded Nat out the door at the Bender Building, the District's newest, most glamorous office building. Its ground floor was occupied by Paul Young's Restaurant, office adjunct and expense-account haven whose red-walled, red-carpeted décor would be characterized at an Inaugural party two years in the future by Joseph P. Kennedy, the new President's father, as looking "like a high-class whorehouse!" Upstairs, reached by elevators whose new-fangled buttons lighted at the warmth of a hovering fingertip, was the *Orbs* bureau.

Nat passed the pretty young receptionist and found his desk in the bullpen. He greeted some colleagues, arranged a drawer, got in on a laugh about Senator Dirksen, used the men's room and descended again, to stroll to his stop and wait for a bus going out 16th Street to the District Line. Dreary green and yellow streetcars also passed, rooftop cables sparking and snapping.

A D.C. Transit bus eased to a stop. Nat boarded and found a seat. Unfolding his *Evening Star*, he read the front and editorial pages, then rested it in his lap and looked out the window. At one stop a bus headed the other way, filled with weary black women, paused across the street—maids and housecleaners going home. Nat looked around his bus: almost entirely white, almost entirely male, if also weary.

Finally it pulled up to the curb at the strip shopping center on the Maryland border. Getting out, Nat saw Viv at the wheel of their Plymouth station wagon, a 1956 model in beaten green. Jack, aged seven, slipped over the front seat to join Jimmy, five, in the backseat. Pausing at Viv's window to kiss her—*smack!*—he went around and got in. On the seat between them was a grocery sack of gin and bourbon, Tom Collins mix, tonic water and two cartons of Kent cigarettes. As they drove out, Jack was punching his brother's arm and Jimmy was howling.

Ignoring them, Nat asked, “Any luck?”

“Nothing I liked,” said Viv. She was house-hunting every day, but between the postwar boxes off Viers Mill Road and too-palatial colonials, it looked like being a long search.

A few minutes later she turned off Georgia Avenue towards the Park Silver Motel, but drove past its cantilevered entrance and parked around the corner.

“Come see,” she said. Nat looked at her with perplexity but, collecting the kids, she walked into a tiny park surrounding a gazebo roofed by a giant acorn.

Unfolding himself with a groan, Nat stood by the car gathering his trench coat. Realizing he wasn’t with them, Viv turned, and Nat walked over. He was looking more at the neighborhood than at the park—downtown Silver Spring’s blocky big-city outline of the Woodward & Lothrop and Hecht Co. department stores, a White Castle guarded by sparkly cement bears, the inviting neon sign of the Anchor Inn. Dinner there sounded good.

“This is *the* silver spring,” Viv told him. “What they named the town named for? Look: It says Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln used to come out in their carriage for picnics. Isn’t it sweet?”

“Huh,” said Nat, utterly uninterested.

## **II.**

### *Colorado*

## 20.

IN SEPTEMBER OF 1941, Nathan Micajah Handler, 17 years old, transported himself and his personal mysteries from Krux, New Mexico across the country to Ithaca, New York. Having won an engineering scholarship to Cornell University—he was still 16 when notified of it in May—Nat was off to fulfill a glorious destiny.

Krux huddled at the base of the Lakachukai Mountains on the Navajo Indian Reservation in the state's northwest corner. A mission church and a handful of houses for Indian Service personnel surrounded Krux's Trading Post and the high school that Nat's father, David Duncan Handler—*Mr. Tall Man American*, the Navajo called him—served as principal. It drew its 300 students from a territory of some 30,000 square miles.

Goodbyes had been said in a series of round-robin dinners given by teachers at the school, three years later still mourning the death of his mother, their colleague, so Nat's actual departure felt anticlimactic. After breakfast on a Wednesday morning he wandered out back to smoke a Camel. It had rained overnight, so freshness reigned in the desert. Usually its colors were muted, its sparse vegetation gray. Today, sands shone yellow below buttes and chimneys painted gaudy reds,

the shrubby mesquite and creosote were tenderly green, and tiny, intensely-colored flowers – purple clusters of verbena, the swollen golden spikes of burroweed – sparkled like glass. The scene approached the super-saturation of Kodachrome photographs in *Arizona Highways*.

Nat was seeing Krux through new eyes. Though a metropolis compared to his earlier homes – the one-room schoolhouses his parents for years manned across the Maricopa, Zuñi and Hopi Indian reservations – like them Krux was remote, drab and ramshackle, battered by sun and dust. Dogs roamed the unpaved street. Navajos waited in wagons in front of the trading post for Mr. Krux to open up, the teams stamping their feet.

Flicking the butt sizzling into a puddle, and shaking his head at the thought he'd ever lived *here*, Nat stepped back inside the bungalow. Soon he was bringing his Gladstone bag out front and helping carry the trunk to his father's ancient Plymouth sitting next to the black government Ford never used for personal trips. The tops of both were shiny with rain, sides daubed with red mud. Securing the trunk as best they could, they left for the train station in Gallup, 50 miles away.

Wrestling the car through the mire, his father declared (quite unnecessarily) how proud Nat's mother would have been of her youngest's scholarship, and Nat turned aside to the glistening landscape. Little else was said, apart from a few impatiently received paternal injunctions and sorrow expressed at the time that would pass before the following June – there was too little money to think of bringing Nat home for Christmas. His father was not looking forward to being alone. His eldest son, Junior, was off at Ohio State doing graduate work in chemistry, and the middle child, Dan, had started pre-med at the University of Colorado a week earlier; Dan and Nat were in the same grade, having first been tutored

by their mother, later by both parents, before being sent to Escalante Hall in Utah, destination of many Indian Service brats.

By the time they came down Thirteen Mile Hill into Gallup's smoke, the sun had leached the landscape of moisture, restored its dun-colored grittiness and coated the roads in dust. They were early, so had coffee on the plaza before crossing to the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway station.

The big headlight rounded promptly into view – pallid as a tin platter until, the track straightening, it smote out, blinding, even as diesel horns blared silver plumes of sound – and four locomotives painted in war-bonnet reds and yellows glided down the track. The train briefly stayed its momentum to perch shuddering beside father and son. The trunk flew into the baggage car. Where they stood a porter stepped down with a stool, Nat stepped up in his horn-rims, shiny and determined face, herringbone jacket, sharp-creased chino trousers and glossy brown shoes, his father handed up the Gladstone bag, for a moment Nat felt confused and uncertain as he looked across the low dusty town and at his father, tall in a white Stetson and smiling tightly, but already beneath his feet the train was sliding, the landscape shifting.

The porter nudging the small of his back, Nat stumbled into the car and found a seat.

# III.

*New York*

### 43.

VIV HANDLER WOKE UP in the muffled, tall-ceilinged stillness, and for a moment hugged to herself the unlikely characters and combinations of her dream. Then the clock-radio buzzed. She and Nat both reached blindly to silence it, their fingers twining each other's, familiar and dry. A modulated voice began speaking. Time and date flashed unseen: *7:15 am Thu 3-31-83*.

Opening her eyes, she registered the dimness, turned—disintegrating the last warmth of something forever irretrievable—and heaved to her feet. Her day began: *now*.

She walked through bedroom and dressing room to the bright bathroom, whose frosted windows fronted an airshaft. They hadn't renovated it; she loved it as it was, a fine chamber of white porcelain fixtures, delicately crackled, made for a race of giants in 1929, the year that endowed New York with so many confident structures. Hexagonal mosaic tiles covered the floor and brick-sized white ones went halfway up the walls.

Then out and around two corners to the kitchen. Cigarettes vied with coffee, but she made the coffee first, a drip Mr. Coffee she wasn't sure she liked: Flavor all right, but the first



cup cooler than the hot blast she craved. Standing beside the gurgling machine, she lit a Kent and breathed it in as she admired her new cabinets, new appliances, new Corian counters, new pass-through that converted the maid's room to a breakfast room.

Nat was slower. He had a head, felt logy. He was drinking too much—he knew it. Kept pouring through an evening, inured to bourbon's more pleasant effects, but somehow needing the head-hammering quality of a full evening at it as he ended his day trying to focus on his green-screened PC.

Already he'd twice updated the year-old machine, nervously snapping expansion cards onto the motherboard to achieve a massive 256 kilobytes of RAM (from the original 16kb!), and plugged in a second floppy-disk drive to boot. Coaxing its modem to communicate with *Ducats'* mainframe could, in case of success, result in a story chugging in to his study in mere minutes, and allow him to click at the keys, editing, until bedtime, while Viv watched a movie on TV or paged through magazines or read Trollope or Hillerman.

So he lay for a few minutes before deciding he might as well get up.

Coming into the kitchen, he barked, "Morning."

"Morning," she returned. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," he said. The question always annoyed him, and she always asked it.

She took coffee and cigarette out to the dining room—Nat had abruptly stopped smoking eight years earlier, thinking it silly to be still smoking at 50, and after his Herculean if invisible struggles she didn't want to inflict her smoke on him—and sat down at the head of the table. Her face slack, she looked outdoors. The cliffs of the Palisades across the river were topped with thin green beneath an overcast sky. Spring was coming, April but a day away. A tanker, rust draping its

side, worked upstream. In this day and age it seemed unlikely commerce could draw ships up the Hudson, but they passed every day.

Nat retrieved the *Times* from the elevator lobby, dropped off the *Arts* section beside her and sat down to coffee at the breakfast table. Viv got up to pour herself another cup but, deeming herself sufficiently awake, drank only half before filling a bowl with Cheerios and slicing a banana; or not Cheerios, but Fairway's house brand of toasted oats.

She was thinking of the day to come, one of the busiest of the year—a group arriving before noon, in advance of Easter weekend, to join the three that had arrived yesterday and the day before that. Four groups in town! Meldover College's itinerary was well in hand—complete, pending confirmation of one final appointment; she'd type it up, take it to the copy shop and give it to Phil, her boss. Thursday of a long weekend? Phil might want to get out of town, have her meet the group and address the kids herself. She'd done it before, and Meldover's leader, Father Donellan, was her favorite client, but—always shy—she hoped not to have to today.

What she didn't worry much about was what everyone else imagined would keep her terrorized 24 hours a day: the dreadful things that can happen to people in New York City. Classroom/New York hadn't lost one yet. Astonishing: Students—teenagers, many of them—coming to New York for five days and four nights in their groups of 12 to 25 and getting out alive! Fingers crossed. Knock on wood.

Well, there was the professor last year whose purse was yanked off her arm as she walked down Eighth Avenue, so was reviewing mugshots of known purse snatchers at the West 54th Street precinct while her group saw Zoe Caldwell in *Medea*.

Nat retired to the bathroom with the Op-Ed page. When he

returned 20 minutes later he was shaved, his hair wet. Expression was stealing into Viv's face now, but Nat's was unreadable as he put bread in the toaster and rummaged for marmalade.

Couldn't do so without remembering a regrettable episode from before they moved to town. The youngest was temporarily back in the nest, and one morning, having tried and failed to halve a frozen English muffin, Jimmy dropped it in the toaster with the knife jammed in it like the sword in the stone. The toaster of course singed and melted the handle of Nat's mother's bone-handled bread knife, one of his few relics of her. His cold anger helped Jimmy decide the next day to hitchhike west, where he'd stayed ever since.

Viv was watching crows in Riverside Park. They reminded her of northern Westchester, where, towards sunset, crows would flock up and down the treetops beneath their view. She understood this supposed mystery of Nature, why they circled and collected in trees, cawing delightedly, before dissolving and flying off, only to engage again: It was delight in being together, celebrating release and relief from the pain of being alone; for there's no place lonelier than a suburb, unless it be a city.

For some reason she thought of the coma she accidentally drank herself into one summer weekend in Katonah, unwarily mixing vodka with her doctor's sedatives.

She lit another cigarette. Here she was now, snug in her New York co-op. The saga of how they found it was a milestone in her life, not only because of the harrowing race to buy before the market could price them out, but because it brought her and Nat the closest they ever came to fighting.

They'd moved to the city in 1977, at first renting in a post-war building on Second Avenue in Kips Bay. But a few years later, finding Manhattan life convenient and interesting, they

began to contemplate buying. And woke up to the fact that the market was surging; New York's latest revival was under way.

In those days, no Manhattan residence had yet sold for so much as a million dollars—no 35-room apartment on Park Avenue, no East 60s limestone mansion, no floorthrough overlooking Central Park. But prices were rising fast. Their budget—give or take \$100,000—allowed Viv to view properties on Park and Fifth (generally overlooking Lex or Mad), Central Park West or Beekman Place. Not much was on the market at any given moment—as few as three dozen of the newly popular co-ops, which of course helped prices shoot skyward. She and her real-estate agent ransacked the island every day, Viv taking mornings or afternoons off from work, her panic such that when the actor Gig Young shot his wife and himself, her first thought was of the newly vacant two-bedroom in the Osborne.

Nat and Viv didn't fight—never had: *Never*. Instead, they had evolved (of course tacitly) a tensile arrangement that allowed them to live within a bubble of peace, even as their avoidance of conflict could fuel flames around them.

One evening she suggested that Nat, too, take time off work and accompany her to view apartments, or even go without her, as she was so busy.

"I'm busy too," he snapped.

*Fight!*

It marked an epoch. Neither said another word, but within days they put down a deposit on a two-bedroom penthouse on West End Avenue. But when their son Jack, who lived in the city, though not with them, found it poorly laid out and told them, "You don't want to live there," they looked at each other and saw it was true. They lost the deposit without regret.

So more looking while the market exploded, Viv's heart racing as though under bombardment, brought them to a

building on Riverside Drive boasting more writers than lawyers, a “classic six” that stretched out over 2,000 square feet. They bought it for \$120,000. Renovating the kitchen cost another \$17,000, but supposedly the place was already worth twice what they’d paid.

She crushed the butt into the ashtray, stood up and returned to the bathroom. After a shower, moving rapidly around the dressing room she donned a contemporary businesswoman’s ensemble, navy blue skirt and jacket with white ruffled blouse, and the sneakers made acceptable street wear for women by the 1980 subway strike; she would change shoes at the office.

In a good woolen suit of blue pinstripes from Syms, Nat had more coffee while reading the *Times*.

Viv entered the breakfast room with a step that dragged, indicating her readiness. But Nat offered her a section and she sat down and for some minutes they read in silence. Then he wiped his mouth, carried dishes to the sink, brushed his teeth, pulled up his tie, shouldered into his jacket, in the foyer helped Viv into her lined raincoat, heaved himself into his epauletted trenchcoat and picked up his briefcase (containing last evening’s work) and collapsible umbrella. He thought it looked like rain; she disagreed, but had an umbrella at the office just in case.

She opened the heavy front door. No sound came from the other apartment off the elevator. Their neighbor was an elderly English actress of distinction, still active, though seldom at this hour, just past nine in the morning. Finding the shared lobby rather dingy, Viv had suggested to their neighbor that they redo it and, reassured by her posh accent, let her choose the wallpaper. Every day now she had to endure its lurid silver blossoms.

Nat closed the door with a definitive *clunk!* They were off.



