

Chapter One

The streetlights had just snapped on when Joe rolled up to the stoplight at the corner of Main and Center streets in this quiet little town of Woodlawn, Vermont.

He looked down South Main Street and saw Carl's Bar and Grill. When his eyes met the glow of the neon sign and the unintentional flickering of the word 'Bar,' his eyes locked and his jaw tensed. He glared at the image at the end of South Main that had haunted him for most of his life. "I'm not a fuck-up," he muttered to himself.

He became entranced by the flickering light of Carl's Bar until a car horn from behind brought him back to the present. The light turned green, but he hadn't noticed. "Shit. Did it again," he cursed himself aloud. He sighed as he urged his car quickly through the green light and onto North Main Street. When did it turn green and how long had he been lost in his memories of Carl's Bar and Grill?

Woodlawn was much like the rest of America in this post war year of 1955. The homeland economy of the United States was thriving following World War II and the Korean War. Americans were once again alive with hope and enthusiasm about their country's future. Our soldiers had come home with honor and pride and the world was again at peace, and with that peace came prosperity. The resources that had been dedicated toward the massive war machine swiftly turned to domestic goods, and anyone who wanted a job could have one.

America's youth began to flock to colleges and junior colleges that were springing up across the American landscape. For once, higher education was within reach of the middle-class.

The future was never brighter for most Americans, and Joe was just one of the nation's youths who took on the challenge of a promising tomorrow and entered the state junior college at Woodlawn, Vermont. Actually, Woodlawn was his hometown until his father passed away when he was a teenager and he and his mother moved back to her hometown of Middletown, just forty miles away.

The intersection of Main and Center was the hub of the business district and a casual meeting place for the residents of Woodlawn. South Main Street was a little dingier than the north side of the Four Corners, but it still had its share of storefronts. There was Duke's Liquor Store, the Pool and Billiards Parlor, Hank's Cigarette and Cigar Store, the Castle Diner; where you were "Treated Like a King," the Atlantic Red Ball gas station, and just beyond that, Carl's. Most people never spent much time on South Main Street because the clientele of the businesses there were a little rough around the edges.

On North Main, the combination of the streetlights, neon shop signs, and brightly decorated storefronts made a much more inviting scene. The sidewalks were crowded with people, either shopping or just visiting with neighbors and friends. In a small town like Woodlawn, almost everyone knew everyone else and it wasn't hard to find a friend to stop and chat with.

It was also the favorite hangout for young lovers, especially the high school crowd. There they were free to walk and talk, hold hands, and meet up with some friends who might also be on their way to a movie at the Strand.

It was Friday night and payday for almost everyone in town, so the sidewalks were lined with people shopping at the downtown stores. As Joe drove, he saw the Strand Theater where white lights chased one another around the edge of the marquee advertising East of Eden. Further up was Crenshaw's Department Store, the Five and Dime, the Woodlawn Pub, Patti Lynn's Restaurant, and finally Rafferty's Insurance.

When he neared the Five and Dime, he saw an empty parking space but drove right on by. Nope. Too close. I don't need people watching me trying to crank this old rust bucket into that spot, especially not Kathy. He turned the corner down Middle Street and headed for the parking lot behind the building.

Joe pulled into a secluded area under a tall oak. It was a fair distance from the other spots in the lot that were closer to Main Street, but he didn't care. He wanted it that way.

He sat quietly for a moment, cleared his throat then spoke to himself. He'd played it out in his mind a million times, but he wanted to hear the words out loud one last time, hoping it would help him not screw it up when he asked Kathy out.

"Okay, this is how it's going to go. I'll say, 'Hi, Kathy. Did ya see the game today?'" He collapsed against the steering wheel with his head buried in his forearms. "Oh God, that's stupid." After a few moments, he tried it again.

"Okay, this is it. I'll order a Coke and when she comes back with it, she'll say, 'Is there anything else I can get you?' then I'll say, 'Nothing now, but how about a movie later? East of Eden is playing at the Strand.'"

His forehead wrinkled as he considered it then he nodded with an approving smile. "Perfect. That's it. Nothin' wild, nothin' crazy. Just get to the point, and let the chips fall where they may," he said, still speaking aloud to himself. He reached for the door handle but took time to glance in the rearview mirror where he looked himself squarely in the eyes. "Don't screw this up."

When he opened the door, it complained with its usual rusty squawk. "Damn car," he cursed under his breath. He took a few steps toward Main Street when an old black man came around the corner of Crenshaw's Department store. The man carried a brown paper bag and headed directly to the neat row of trash cans lined up along the building. The cans were all made of galvanized steel; some were short and squatty and some were much taller. The squatty ones had hoop-like handles that hung at the side ready to swing up when the can was carried to the street on garbage day. The taller ones with rigid side handles wouldn't be carried to the street. They'd wait for the trash man to arrive with his dump truck.

They all gleamed in the faded light of a shadeless gooseneck light fixture that hung over a door. The single bare bulb cast a yellow glow on the surrounding area.

The man's white hair and bent back spoke loudly of his age, and the mix of his white hair and the yellow light gave the impression of a golden halo surrounding his head. When he reached the first short trash can, he lifted the top and dropped the bag in. Replacing the top, he took a white cloth from his back pocket and wiped off the lid of one of the shorter cans. He wiped his brow, returned the rag to his pocket, and sat.

As Joe continued toward Main Street, he couldn't help but look at the man and wonder where his own life would lead him when he reached such a ripe old age.

Poor old bastard. A thousand years old, can't even stand up straight, and still working his ass off. I hope I do better. He took a few more steps, and the man spoke to him.

"Hey, young fella. Why'd ya park your car all the way down there when they is plenty of parking spaces right up here next to Main Street?"

Joe stopped and looked at the man with curiosity. The question didn't seem critical. It was inquisitive more than anything and his voice had a mellow tone that seemed to beg a reply. Oh, what the hell. It can't hurt to give the old guy a little respect.

"It's just an old heap and I'm kind of embarrassed by it, that's all." Even in the dim light, Joe could see a smile spread across the man's face as a soft, melodic laugh escaped from him.

"Sounds to me like you're worryin' about too much, young fella. Why don't ya come on over here, and we can talk about why that car is a-botherin' ya so?"

The man pulled the rag from his back pocket again and draped it over the top of the trash can next to him. Joe studied him and thought about the invitation. Why would I want to go over there and talk to this old man? I don't even know him and I'm on my way to see Kathy.

Nevertheless, the man's gentle demeanor and soothing voice drew Joe in and he decided it'd be okay. What's a few minutes if it makes the old guy happy?

Joe walked up to the man but didn't sit on the can covered with the rag. After all, enough was enough. He didn't have that much time to spare.

"Do you work here?" Joe asked.

"No, I just helps out around town here and there from time to time when peoples need me." The old man patted the top of the trash can. "Have a seat, young fella. It'll help ya take a load off."

Joe studied this whimsical old man and decided to join in on the playful banter. "Take a load off? You mean my worrying or my feet? Mister..."

"Riggs, son, they just calls me Riggs." Riggs motioned toward the can, but still Joe didn't sit.

"Thanks, Mr. Riggs, but—" Riggs interrupted him before he could finish the sentence.

“Just Riggs, young fella. Now tell me, what'd ya mean when you say your car's a heap?”

Joe still couldn't figure this old man, this Riggs character out, but went along with his question. “Well, it's just a beat-up old '35 Chevy that's seen better days. It's twenty years old. Everybody's got a nicer car than I do. My God, it's as old as I am!”

Riggs responded with his quiet melodious laugh and when he spoke, his voice was simple and smooth.

“Boy,” Riggs said, and instantly Joe knew it wasn't meant to be demeaning. Riggs used it as a term of friendliness. “Since you're speakin' of God,” Riggs continued, “I am sure happy he ain't taking no trade-ins 'cause this ole body of mine is more wore out than that ole car of yours.” Riggs let out a mellow sigh as he looked down on his aged and wrinkled hands.

“But that's different, Mister...I mean, Riggs. I'm talking about a hunk of steel, and you're talking about your body.”

Riggs pursed his lips, squinted his eyes, and stroked his chin, but soon relaxed with an understanding smile before he spoke. “Yep, I guess maybe so. Come on now, have a seat here and we'll talk about that. I wanna tell ya somethin' my daddy told me about the important things in life, just as my people come to know them when they was brought here years ago as slaves.”

Joe was shocked to even hear the word slave and was immediately drawn further into the conversation. Slave was a term he heard in school. It was ancient history, not really something actually spoken about any more—except maybe by someone who knew the truth.

Riggs patted the trash can and looked up to Joe with a peaceful, almost spiritual expression, and Joe felt compelled to sit. He turned and sat next to this complete stranger, somehow feeling as though he'd known him his entire life.

Once again that all-knowing, mellow laugh emanated from Riggs as Joe sat on the old dust rag atop the trash can. A smile spread across Riggs's face and Joe responded in kind, waiting for what this son of a son of a slave had to say.

“Now what do you go by, young man?”

“Joe. Joe Langdon, sir.”

“Well, it's a pleasure to meet you Joe Joe Langdon.”

“Only one Joe.”

Riggs laughed. “I know, boy. Just funnin' with ya. Now to get back to what we was talkin' about. I live my life just as my daddy did and his daddy did before him. I always go by what he called his three truths.”

“Three truths?” Joe echoed.

“Yep, three things a man can bank on whenever he finds himself lost.” Riggs paused as he looked up to the stars and then continued. “First of those truths is what we is talking about today. Don't be ashamed of what you got because they is only things. People, they can take your car, they can take your home, they can even take your freedom—by God, they can take your life, but they is only things! And...”

Joe held his hand up, stopping Riggs before he went any further. “Riggs, not to be rude, but your life isn't just a thing.”

Riggs continued, stressing the word ‘and.’ “And the Lord, he's only lettin' you use that body, that thing, till he calls you on home and you go live with him. Believe me, boy, you ain't bringing anything with you when you reach them Pearly Gates. Those things you got ain't you. You is right here.” Riggs patted his chest and continued. “And if them things ain't the prettiest, or the newest, or the shiniest, well, it don't make no never mind, 'cause they is all just things.”

Riggs paused and Joe looked at him. Riggs’s expression went distant and then came back again. When Joe caught his eye, Riggs laughed gently through that all-knowing smile.

“Now, am I makin' any sense to you at all?” Riggs asked.

Joe couldn’t hide his own smile when Riggs asked the question. He thought he intended a deeper meaning than what was apparent, and he knew Riggs was hoping he had made some sort of impact on him, but he really hadn’t. “Yeah sure, I guess so. Makes sense.” Joe didn’t want to hurt the old guy’s feelings.

Riggs nodded approvingly before he spoke. “Good, now you best be going and don't be ashamed ever again of what you got.”

Joe shifted his weight forward to his feet and looked toward Main Street, back at Riggs, and settled once more on the trash can. “What were the other truths your daddy taught you?”

Riggs beamed at Joe. “You don't want to be listening to the ramblings of some ole man, now do ya?”

Somehow Joe knew Riggs wasn’t rambling and would be more than happy to share the rest of his story. He looked at his watch and then toward Main Street. “Yeah, I kinda do. I've got some time yet.”

Riggs didn’t dispute the point and jumped right in where he had left off. “Well, all right then. The second truth my daddy told me is they'll try to take your pride, but don't ever give it to them. It's yours, and only yours, and only you can give it away. They can knock you down hard to the ground or whip ya hard with a strap, but you'll still have your pride.”

Riggs paused again with a pensive look. “You see, Joe, even if they take your freedom, they can't take your pride. Your pride is really your soul reflecting back at you from a lookin' glass. God gave you a soul, and he gave ya that reflection to see it with. When you go lookin' in a glass and into that man's eyes, there ain't no lyin' 'cause you're lookin' right back into your own soul. You can't lie to that man, Joe. Not to the man in the glass 'cause he knows your truths...all your truths. If you can look back at that man and

know you ain't done no wrong, well then, you've got your pride. They can't never take it. It's only you who's gotta give it away. If you don't like what you see in that mirror it's because you give your pride away. Didn't your daddy ever tell you about pride?"

With the question, Riggs looked at Joe, but Joe couldn't meet his eyes. "My dad and I never really talked too much."

"Pity, but someday...somehow your daddy will tell ya how proud he is of ya. Now, that's just this old man thinkin' out loud, but I suspect that'll be true someday."

Joe finally looked up at Riggs. "My dad's dead. Thing is, even if he wasn't, he probably wouldn't tell me because we never really saw eye to eye. Always seemed like I never quite measured up for him."

"Did ya ever try talkin' to him? It ain't good to hold all that sorrow and anger inside ya like that. It's time to let it go."

Joe looked into Riggs's dark soulful eyes, and their depth seemed to swallow him up. For a moment he felt like he could say anything to this old man. Instinctively, he knew Riggs would understand and accept whatever he wanted to say without question.

He wanted to tell him he'd never settled up with his dad. That their lack of closeness had left a gaping hole in his heart that never seemed to heal. That he was angry at his father for the way he treated his mother and him. He wanted to tell Riggs all these things, but he didn't. That would be too hard...too shameful to talk about, so he covered it up—as usual. "No, I never did, but I don't really want to talk about my dad. To be honest, I'd rather hear about your dad's third truth."

Riggs nodded understandingly and without so much as a blink of his eyes, he went on. "All right then, Joe. The third truth my daddy told me, well, that's the simplest one of all. They can take your things, they can try to take your pride, but they can never ever take your love. Your love is yours, Joe, to have and to hold forever and ever. They can't take it 'cause it's part of you. Your heart will always feel every bit of that love just as sure as your flesh feels the kiss of a cool springtime breeze. It'll be there to comfort you through good times and bad. You don't never have to give it up."

Riggs paused and looked at Joe and that's when Joe realized he'd been swept away with this story of truths and values that could only be understood by people who had been given very little control over their own lives. With that lack of control, they were able to distill the essence of what was really important in life, and what it all boiled down to was pride in oneself and the everlasting state of love. Simple enough, it would seem, but it had escaped him and probably everyone he knew up to this moment. Riggs finally broke the silence.

"Now, you better get goin' and meet up with that lady friend of yours."

Joe was rocked from his deep ponderings by Riggs's statement and sat up straight again. "How'd you know I was going to see a girl?"

Riggs just grinned and shook his head in amusement. "Mister Joe, ain't nobody hides they jalopy like that just 'cause of the boys!" He let his mellow laugh escape once more before Joe could respond.

"You're right. I'm going to the Five and Dime right now to see a girl, and I'd better get going before I miss her. I'll be back to pick up the old rust bucket—I mean car." He hopped off the trash can and handed Riggs the rag.

Riggs shook his head gently and put the rag back in his pocket. "I suppose one day it'll all sink in, Mister Joe. Now that jalopy of yours, do it let you down a lot?"

Joe paused and thought about the question. "Well no, I guess it's been dependable."

Riggs nodded in agreement. "Then remember what they say: Poor drivin' beats good walkin' any ole day."

Joe turned to face Riggs square on. "Thanks, Mister Riggs." Joe stressed the Mister part, wanting Riggs to understand he appreciated their chat and that he respected him and the knowledge he'd passed on without a real cause or provocation. He understood it was a simple gift given by a man much wiser than his appearance might let on. Joe extended his hand and Riggs took it gently.

"Now you best get on your way. Life and love don't wait for no man."

Joe walked up the graveled path to Main Street and when he approached, the sounds of traffic and even voices began to greet him. He turned back toward Riggs, but he was already gone.

As Joe stepped onto the sidewalk, it was as if he'd left Riggs's world of slavery and its intrinsic values behind and had magically reappeared in the twentieth century. Excitement filled the air as the town's people walked and talked and stopped to look into one of the many inviting storefronts.

A car honked its horn, and someone walking on the sidewalk threw up his hand and yelled a friendly hello. Joe walked hurriedly toward the Five and Dime, all the while still rehearsing in his mind how he would finally ask Kathy out on a date. As he approached the store, he could see the light streaming from its huge plate-glass windows onto the sidewalk. His heart raced when he reached for the long chrome door handle and he swallowed hard. With a gentle push against the chrome handle, the glass door swung open easily and then he was inside. Here goes. No turning back now.