

# THE WEAVER OF PLOTS

## PART ONE / CHAPTER ONE CHARLOTTE

Wednesday Afternoon, 4 October 1967  
Looking Back to Wednesday Afternoon, 4 June 1952  
And a Few Months Before That Day

The letter from Noah Blake arrived when she was not expecting it. The postmark and the sender's address told her that the letter had been mailed from Noah's office within the Blake and Tanner Steel and Aluminum Corporation in the Manhattan section of New York. Here, in Greenwich, Connecticut, seated in the comfortably upholstered home office where she had written many of her novels, she placed the letter on the desk before her. She did not care to open it. Whatever message Noah was sending to her, she would not enjoy reading. He had sent the letter fifteen years too late.

Instead of reading the letter, she looked out of the sun-misted panoramic window as a way of deflecting her attention. The two ancient elms stood, as usual, giant-like and apparently invincible, fifty feet in the distance. The night before, an autumn windstorm had torn away most of their russet leaves. Deprived of the vivid colors, the trees retained, nonetheless, a gnarled magnificence. To her imaginative eyes, they were rugged sentries that had, thus far, withstood the battering winds and the pelting rains and all the other adversarial elements of Time. The lessons they offered about survival lay, wordless and emphatic, within their bruised stolidity. From her fleet knowledge of trees, she knew that they could feel. She regarded them as sensate, living beings. Trees did express anger, loneliness, and pain. But their language was known mainly to themselves and to scientists and well-schooled foresters. She envied the apparent stoicism of these two elms outside her window and their disdain of any emotion-laden human language that could express their anguish and their pain.

She knew something about being stoical. The thirty-seven years that she had lived had taught her to be stoical. She had not always been so. There was a time when she rebelled against her pain and anguish. In that long-ago period, she had lashed out at the persons who had betrayed her. She had meted harsh punishment to the man who had betrayed her and to the woman who was his accomplice.

Noah Blake was that man, and Olivia Tanner was the woman. The sight of Noah's letter brought them back to her, even against her conscious will. After all these years, she still loathed the two of them. Her view of the stalwart elms, often a consolation, could not push away her new awareness that Noah and Olivia still existed. Nor could her gaze into the faraway distance at the cloud-capped horizon and the blue-green radiance of the sky dispel her wakened memory of them.

She did not need to open Noah's letter to remember who he was and how he had betrayed her. His name in the upper left corner of the envelope did that. It did more than

that. It startled her. It revived the memory of him and of Olivia that she had repressed for so many years.

Now those ill-fated years came swiftly back to her.

Only afterward, long after everything was finished between her and Noah, would she admit to herself that she did not have to carry the snub-nosed revolver inside the secret pocket of her purse. Prodded by her tattered hopes and by her stubborn belief that Noah still loved her, she had made the six-hour drive from her parents' summer home in Newport, Rhode Island, to the house in Saranac Lake, New York, where Noah was staying—without her and without even a token promise that, in spite of his overbearing father, he would stand beside her. In the uncertain days that were waiting for her, he would be her advocate. He would make things right.

She had often travelled on highways alone at night. Sometimes, she drove three hundred miles from her Pembroke College dormitory on the Brown University campus to Poughkeepsie, New York, because she needed to talk out her problems to her best friend, Laura Madison, who was a senior at Vassar. On other nights, she made her way through the four-hour drive to her aunt Eleanor's summer place on Lake Champlain in Vermont. Always, she arrived in early morning, when the glow of a new day and the loyalty of her childhood friend or of her compassionate aunt promised her refuge from her disquieted awareness of Noah's indifference.

Never before had she carried the Colt Cobra revolver that she took in secret from an inadvertently unlocked cabinet in her father's gunroom. On that night in early June of 1952, she told herself that she was taking the revolver to protect herself from the gang of drug-addicted thieves who lately had been forcing drivers off the road and robbing them of their cars, their watches and jewelry, and their cash. Carrying the revolver was the sensible thing to do. It made her feel secure. It made her believe that she was not alone. If somebody trapped her, if some thief threatened her wellbeing, the revolver would be her advocate.

She had not expected to fire the revolver. She had fired it again and again, though not at any highway thieves. Those thieves had not rampaged the highways that night. Yet she had been involved in a shooting. For years afterward, she struggled to push that scene way back into the hidden corners of her memory. Now, fifteen years later, while she sat, solitary and conflicted, in the spacious room in the south wing of her large colonial home that she used as her office, the memory of that night—and of almost everything that had happened between her and Noah before that night—broke through her resistance. Even her memory had come to steal from her. Against her struggling will, it stole her uneasy peace. It took away her makeshift security. It dispossessed her of her willfulness, her arrogance, and her malice. Sullen and reluctant, she confronted its truth without flinching. She was used to thieves. Through all of her life, they had stolen from her.

"Be careful," her father had told her only two months before she became involved in the shooting episode at Saranac Lake. "Thieves have a way of coming back."

In March of 1952, shortly before her graduation from Pembroke and as she was leaving one of the campus libraries where she had been studying, she had been robbed at gunpoint by a tall, youthful man wearing a black ski mask. He had stolen the eighty dollars that was in her purse and a diamond watch that her parents had given her on her sixteenth birthday. She had noticed the nearly imperceptible tremor in the young, awkward hands of the robber as he quickly placed inside the deep pocket of his long

black coat the cash and the watch that she had, without any resistance, held out to him. He had used his left hand to scoop the cash and the watch from her. His powerful right hand, with the slightest tremor, kept pointing the Smith-Wesson revolver at her heart. Although his face was mostly covered, she saw the intense, blue eyes peering at her from the openings in his mask and the sensual, chapped lips that suggested hunger and discomfort. She noticed, too, the silver wedding band that he wore on the fourth finger of his left hand. She remembered that, just before he hurried away, he had spoken to her. His curt voice had a raspy edge and his eyes gleamed with the desperation of a man who had never robbed before.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Her heart stirred with pity for him. She did not care about the watch or the eighty dollars. In that moment, she wished that she could have done more for him.

How remarkable it seemed to her now, so many years later, that she had felt pity for this thief. The anguished years that had pursued her soon after that night used up all of her pity for thieves and for everyone else.

Noah Blake had been the wildest of the thieves. He had stolen her heart. He had played with her obsession for him. Without ever saying the words that could intensify the bond between them, he had led her to believe that he loved her. During two of their Brown University years, they had shared each other’s life and each other’s bed. Then, after she told him that she was carrying his baby, he turned away from her. Even her most impassioned entreaties failed to move him. When she begged him to stand by her and to protect her from the disgrace that would fall upon her as an unwed mother, he closed himself off from her.

“Get rid of it,” he told her a few days after their graduation.

His husky voice sounded hard and unyielding.

He was packing for his summer stay at Saranac Lake, before he moved on to his graduate studies in London. They were in the second-floor bedroom of the townhouse that his parents had bought for him because it was located in the affluent east side of Providence and because it was near the Brown University area. His father regarded the purchase as a wise investment. His mother, with her team of interior decorators, had burnished each room with warm, earthen colors that, she said, enhanced the masculine vitality of her son’s life style.

At first, Noah’s words about terminating her pregnancy confused her. She did not want to believe that he had said those words.

Observing her confusion, Noah threw out those words again.

“Get rid of it.”

His hardheartedness frightened her. She struggled to maintain her self-control. She wanted to mollify him. She sought to guide him to the path on which she was beginning a new journey.

“Everything will be all right,” she said, “once we are married.”

He laughed at her words.

“Marriage is not in my plans.”

She was following him discreetly as he moved from room to room gathering the summer clothes and the athletic equipment that he was bringing to Saranac Lake. She kept her voice low and anchored her petition to a matter-of-fact remark.

“I thought that the baby might change your mind.”

He paused to observe her carefully. There was no love in his eyes. There was only a momentary flash of contempt. She felt her ghost hovering by her. Her breathing quickened as she struggled to maintain her composure when she heard the blunt words that her remark drew from him.

“Not in a million years,” he said. “I’ve always made my life an adventure. I’m not going to be chained to a baby.”

Though she took care to keep her voice low, she made her words sound more insistent.

“The baby is part of you—your flesh and blood. Whether it is a daughter or a son, you are the father.”

He left his packing now and placed himself before her. Gently, he clasped her shoulders and held her in his gaze. He was trying to be patient. He wanted her to understand how it was with him.

“I’m not willing to be anybody’s father. And you are not ready to be a mother.”

In that moment, the gentle touch of his hands upon her shoulders thrilled her beyond measure. She needed that gesture of his acceptance. So profound was her need, that his touch brought grateful tears to her eyes.

“I’ll be a good mother. You’ll see.”

She wanted to believe that her tears stirred him in ways that may have surprised even him. She told herself that, in that moment, his softer feelings were struggling against his ingrained hardheartedness. But, looking back now, so many years later, she had to admit that his disdain of any sentimental responses had not left him. She saw with clarified realism that her petitioning manner had appealed to his narcissism. Usually, Noah yoked his feelings to a cold detachment that gave no quarter to clinging females or to the burden of unwanted babies. But, on that afternoon, only a week before the shooting occurred at Saranac Lake, he had treated her emotion-laden words with a brief show of warmth. He hugged her and kissed her forehead, the way a father might kiss the forehead of his seven-year-old daughter who had been left disappointed by a school-friend’s betrayal.

The gesture solaced her. She would not permit herself to notice then how effortlessly he linked his next words to condescension and to indifference. Nor did she perceive his subtle arrogance.

“You are daydreaming,” he said. “You are like a child playing house with her dolls.”

She wanted to say more. She wanted to reassure him. She thought that she could change his mind.

“I’ll be a good mother because the baby is from you. I love everything that is you.”

A slight frown touched his brow.

“I don’t love you in the same way. You know that. From the beginning, I told you how it is with me. I don’t want anyone to tie me down. You have been my pal. You have been the good-natured girl that I have casually romanced. You have been a terrific bed partner, too. You are one of the girls that I may remember when I’m middle-aged and looking back.”

Still she petitioned him.

“I thought my loving you would make a difference.”

He met her gaze directly. His voice was more tense now and emphatic.

“It hasn’t.”

“Though you never told me so, you acted as though you loved me.”

“Sure, I did. I have always had a loving feeling for you. I’ve had that feeling when everything has gone right for us. Maybe, we were with my best friends at a party and you made a favorable impression. Maybe, you cheered me up when I’d had a tough day on the hockey rink. Maybe, you made me look good when we were discussing the novels of Faulkner at an afternoon tea with the university president. But I have never loved you the way that you want me to love you. I’ve never been in love with you.”

He pulled away from her. She told herself that, possibly, he was ashamed of his words. He was having a difficult time dealing with his feelings. But now, fifteen years later, while recalling what happened in that hour, she noticed what she had not then comprehended. His inability to feel deeply about anything or anyone isolated him from her dilemma. Her love for him, obsessive and prevailing, had subverted her common sense. She could not bring herself to admit that the condescending hug and the sympathetic words that he had offered her fed his vanity. On that uneasy afternoon, when she was trying to salvage their relationship, she saw his swaggering manner as a mere fault line in his life-loving and adventurous nature. She believed that, if she were submissive and loving, she could draw him to her will. He would understand that the bond they had forged with one another was valuable and even extraordinary.

With the three lovers who had been part of her life before Noah, she had never been so submissive. Her self-possession and her strong-minded nature had always anchored themselves to a steely courage and to a keen-minded awareness of her value as a woman. She was no innocent. By the time she was seventeen, she had witnessed the world’s follies with a knowing cynicism. She had withstood the often subtle and sometimes obvious tyrannies of the three men who had passed through her life during the two years that followed. They had been drawn to her enthusiasm for fast living and to her discreet sensuality. All of them had declared their love for her without understanding what authentic love required from them. They had confused their sexual desire for her with the more profound expressions of love that are generated by honesty, fidelity, and empathy. She had never loved any of them, though she had learned a great deal about men by observing the ambivalent individuality of each of her lovers.

She had also enjoyed being the object of their desires. She had played the game well. She had effectively teased their carnal dispositions. Never did she pursue these men or allow them to chip away at her self-worth or her independence. On the contrary, it was they who pursued her. She had held them in thrall to their prurient appetites. Even the most self-centered of her three lovers confessed his need of her. Such confession empowered her. She had a healthy appreciation of her success with men. Whenever she opened herself to their vigorous copulation, she enjoyed mating her body with theirs. She received the lovemaking of these men as proof of her influence over them. The rawness and the urgency of the sex brought her much pleasure, because in her relations with them apart from the bed she had maintained her autonomy. She would not permit herself to be their plaything—a puppet on strings manipulated by their devious propensities or by their brooding masculinity.

She thought herself to be very clever in her relations with men. But then, in the first week of her sophomore year at Pembroke, she fell in love with Noah. His success as a goalie on the hockey team, his superb showing for the swimming team, his Dean’s List status, and his freewheeling personality made him one of the most popular men on the Brown University campus. She did not love him first of all because he was the scion of a

wealthy family. Her own family was wealthy. Nor did she love him especially because he was extraordinarily handsome. She loved him because he chose to live on the cusp of danger and because he flouted society's lock-step conventions and got away with it. They were both rebels. They belonged to each other. But he regarded her in a different way. She was a passing fancy. She was a pal. She was a temporary sexual partner. He made passionate love with her, but he did not love her.

He stole her heart without giving her any of his love. His refusal to make an abiding commitment to their relationship goaded the anger and apprehension that, for the most part, she had quietly learned to suppress. His not loving her challenged her belief in her womanly powers. It diminished her self-worth. Against her better judgment, she became acquiescent and pliable whenever she was with him. Yet never did she tell herself that he was unattainable. She continued to believe that she could win his love. Her desire to possess all of his love became an obsession that in this very moment, as he was preparing to leave her on that June day in 1952, drove her forward with even more willful urgency.

Before he could turn from her to resume his packing, she took hold of his big, masculine hands. She pressed her lips lightly against them.

Then she implored him further.

"We still have time. Nothing need be finished with us."

He watched her fold her hands over his own. The cold-hearted resolve that had come like an ally to observe him prodded him forward.

"But we are finished, Charlotte. Those are the rules that we set for ourselves when we started living with each other. We promised that we would go our separate ways on graduation day. We said that, on that day, all promises and debts between us would be cancelled."

Her memory of that promise dismayed her. Her words grew more excited.

"They can't be cancelled. I'm going to have your baby."

He met her outburst with a firm dismissal. Yet never did he raise his voice. He merely repeated the words that she did not want to hear.

"Get rid of it. We are done, girl. We are finished."

He turned away from her and continued the packing of his suitcases.

She hovered near him. Her voice hardened. Her words were accusatory and vehement.

"Your father turned you against me. He's never liked me. He wants you to marry Olivia Tanner, because of a corporate merger."

He looked up at her and laughed.

"I'm not marrying anyone, not even Olivia Tanner."

She moved closer to him now. The words hurried out of her, incisive and condemning.

"You will marry her. You will do what your father wants you to do, because you do not want to lose your inheritance and because you will have Olivia's fortune, as well. You are a taker. Even with your father's money to back you, you are a wily hustler. You never give anything that might cost you something. Yet you always win the game."

Noah held himself still. The slight frown returned, but it touched his brow only for a moment. He would not permit himself to be angry. Instead, he anchored his reply to an amused flippancy.

“Thanks for the character reference,” he said. “I’m not sure, though, that I’ll include it in my résumé.”

She moved nearer still and caressed his handsome face. Her voice was once again soft and yielding.

“ I love you in spite of your faults. I love you for all the good things that I see in you.”

Her words did not touch him, as she had hoped. His face wore a determined expression, and his words were calm and straightforward.

“Then keep those good things in mind and walk away from me. Walk out of my life.”

A giant wave of panic was rushing to overtake her.

“Not yet, Noah,” she pleaded. “Not yet. I’m not ready to live without you.”

He resisted her new show of emotion. He wanted her to suppress her feelings. He wanted her to face the facts of her situation.

“You can’t cling to me any longer. You’ll have to make your own way without me. But you need to get rid of the baby.”

She saw no escape from her dilemma. She had to choose Noah or their baby. Desperate now, she summoned the words that might keep Noah and her together.

“What if I do get rid of it? Can we be together again, even for a little while?”

A new interest in her peered from his eyes and touched his face. He saw the tremendous sacrifice that she was willing to make for him. But he still resisted her petitioning manner.

“It’s not going to work, Charlotte. Besides, I’ll be in London.”

She hurried to say the words that would convince him of the rightness of this new plan.

“I can be there, too. I won’t get in your way. I just need to be near you.”

For a few minutes, he pondered her words. But his momentary hesitation did not alter his decision to break away from her.

“Stop believing in romantic daydreams and happy endings,” he said. “It’s over between us.”

Once more, the giant wave of panic came rushing upon her. Her breathing came faster. She felt her body swaying and suddenly she was falling to her knees. As if she were far away, she heard herself crying out to him.

“Don’t leave me, Noah! Don’t leave me!”

He grabbed her roughly and, after guiding her to a standing position, began shaking her. Tears were clouding her eyes, and her sobs were growing heavier.

“Get hold of yourself,” he said. “Let’s end everything in style.”

At that very instant, they heard two of his hockey mates barging into the first-floor entrance to help him pack his suitcases into the trunk and rear seat of his Bentley.

One of the friends yelled out to him from the bottom of the stairs.

“Hey, Noah, buddy, we are here to help you get packed for your new adventure!”

She stifled her sobs and, after wiping away her tears with a silk handkerchief that had the letter C embroidered in one of its corners, turned away to peer out the window. She heard the two friends running up to the top of the stairs. By the time they reached the threshold of the room, she had recovered her demure appearance. She turned back to Noah and joined him in greeting them.

But a tension, both palpable and urgent, stayed in the room.

The two friends, big-boned and hardy handsome, noticed her flushed appearance and Noah's tight, brooding expression.

"Are we interrupting something important?" the taller of these friends asked.

"Not at all," Noah answered him. "Charlotte has been helping me finish the packing."

If the friends saw through Noah's raspy explanation, they gave no sign. They were his hockey mates. They shared a strong bond with him. In a crisis, they helped one another. But they kept out of each other's romantic entanglements.

For the next half hour, they helped Noah finish packing and, right after that, carry the luggage into his car. She helped, too, with the less heavy items. The two friends were riding to Saranac Lake with him. Their families also had summer homes there.

Then, while his friends waited in the car, Noah came back to say "goodbye." She would be staying here in the townhouse for a few more days, before she drove on to her parents' summer home in Newport.

"We don't have to say 'goodbye,'" she said. "It doesn't have to be over for us. I won't get in your way. I promise."

He did not answer her right away. He held himself very still while he observed her, as if for the last time. Then, with no hesitation, he spoke the words that he needed to say.

"Let this be 'goodbye'," he said.

He caressed her face and kissed her lips. It was a casual kiss. It was a kiss without any profound feeling.

"Try to remember the good times that we've had."

Before she could speak, he turned and hurried away.

She followed him out through the doorway and called to him.

"This isn't 'goodbye.' I love you too much for this to be 'goodbye.' You can't walk out of my life. You can't!"

She followed him to the Bentley, but he did not pause to look back at her. Tight-lipped and dismissive, he placed himself in the driver's seat and closed the door. His two friends looked away, too embarrassed to observe her.

She began banging on the car window, while new tears clouded her eyes and deep sobs heaved up from her throat.

"You can't leave me, Noah! I won't let you! I can't live without you! I can't!"

The car hurried away, leaving her behind as she went on crying out her anguished words.

Wild with fear and anger, she chased the car along the otherwise empty street.

"Do you hear me, Noah? I won't let you leave me!"

The car quickly disappeared from her view. Yet she went on chasing it as she frantically called out his name.

"Noah! Noah! Noah!"

Other cars began hurrying along the street. Five or six pedestrians, some of them her classmates or neighbors, were milling on the sidewalk now, alarmed by her wretched cries and her air of desperation. She was still crying out Noah's name when she became vaguely aware of them and of a tall, silver-haired man with craggy features who had suddenly approached her and had grabbed her by the arm. He had hurried into the street and was pulling her out of the path of the oncoming traffic.



She recognized him as one of her neighbors. He was Roger Kenyon, a retired university professor who had shared conversations with her about Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Dostoyevsky.

“Let’s hurry onto the sidewalk, Charlotte,” he said, in a voice that was both firm and calm. “Your friends are there, waiting for you.”

Even as he guided her to the safety of the sidewalk, she kept her head turned toward the place where Noah’s car had disappeared. She went on screaming.

“I won’t let you leave me, Noah! You’ll find out! I’ll never let you go!”

Then she fell silent.

For a moment, the friends who had gathered on the sidewalk did not move toward her. Instead, they observed her carefully, as though they were awed by her and by her cries of desperation. Days afterward, she remembered their wary stillness and their complicated regard of her. She would not permit herself to imagine how she appeared to their inquiring eyes. But now, with the accuracy of self-awareness, she looked back to that afternoon and saw who she was. In that eerie scene, as she was screaming her grieving words to Noah, she was an angry woman who was calling out a dark prophecy to the lover who had spurned her.