

When Innocence Died

Prologue — A Nation at the Crossroads

The world Greg and Kristine were born into was one of sharp contradictions: a land of promise and possibility, yet also a place where dark, old hatreds lingered in the shadows of bright hopes. The 1950s and 60s in America were an age of polished optimism and simmering unrest—an era when black-and-white televisions beamed images of smiling families into living rooms even as police dogs were unleashed on children marching for basic rights.

In small towns like Española, New Mexico, these contradictions were as stark as the mesas that split the horizon. The sunbaked adobe walls of homes carried generations of stories—of Pueblo ancestors, Spanish conquistadors, and Catholic priests whose statues still stood in every plaza. Yet beneath these layers of faith and culture, something newer and more insidious had taken root: the illusion that segregation and racism were only southern problems, not the quiet poisons that shaped every glance, every conversation, every opportunity.

By the time Kristine Sinclair arrived at McCurdy Mission School in the early 1960s, the seeds of the civil rights movement were already breaking through the hard, cracked soil of America's conscience. Rosa Parks had refused to give up her seat in Montgomery. Nine Black teenagers had walked into Little Rock's Central High under the glare of bayonets. On dusty roads in Mississippi, Freedom Riders tested the country's promises of equality, risking beatings and bombings simply to prove that Black and white Americans deserved the same seats, the same rights, the same dignity.

McCurdy Mission School itself was born of a struggle for power and souls. In the first decades of the 20th century, Protestant missionaries from Ohio arrived in northern New Mexico determined to break Catholic dominance. They saw the valley's adobe churches, saints' statues, and candlelit vigils as evidence of superstition, not devotion. They built McCurdy with a dual mission: to teach reading and arithmetic, yes—but also to instill a different faith, one they believed purer than the centuries-old traditions woven into every fiber of the valley's life.

By Kristine's time, the school had grown into a sprawling campus of whitewashed buildings and dark wooden beams, a place where hymns floated from classrooms each morning, where mission teachers prayed over lunches of meatloaf and red chile stew. Yet McCurdy was also a beacon for families—especially Hispanic and Native American parents desperate for their children to have better than what they had been given.

It was into this complicated tapestry that Greg Jackson arrived. His father, James Jackson, was a Black educator who had spent years working for the Jicarilla Apache educational system up north in Dulce. His mother, Mary, was a teacher whose love for books matched her fierce hope that Greg might one day go to college. When they enrolled him at McCurdy, they knew they were sending him into an overwhelmingly white, Hispanic, and Native community. They hoped the mission school's promise of academic excellence and moral guidance would open doors they had fought so hard to reach.

But they also knew what it meant to be the only Black student in a town with only one black family.

As Greg and Kristine moved through their childhoods, the country they would inherit seethed with contradictions. While families tuned into “Leave It to Beaver,” images of lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro played on the nightly news. Newspapers in Española carried stories of beatings and bombings across the South, but the same editions filled their pages with recipes, quilting circles, and Cub Scout awards, as if those horrors were happening on another planet.

The Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* had declared segregation unconstitutional, but in towns across America, white resistance was fierce. “Massive resistance” became the rallying cry of southern governors and school boards, even as Black families braved jeers and threats to send their children into classrooms guarded by soldiers.

In New Mexico, segregation wasn’t codified as it was in the South—but it lived in housing patterns, in unspoken rules about where Black families could live or dine, in the stares that met couples who dared cross racial lines. It lived in schools like McCurdy, where teachers believed themselves enlightened but still passed silent judgment on a Black boy and a white girl who lingered too long in each other’s gaze.

Greg’s childhood carried the legacy of centuries of violence and resilience. His grandparents had fled the Jim Crow South for jobs in New Mexico’s mines and rail yards. His father taught him stories of Reconstruction’s broken promises, of Tulsa’s ashes, of Emmett Till’s open casket—the photos of his beaten face seared into the conscience of Black America. Even as Greg ran sprints on the basketball court or laughed over cafeteria trays, that history pressed down on him, a quiet warning that his place in the world was neither safe nor certain.

Kristine’s family history was different, but also tangled in America’s contradictions. Her father’s forebears had been farmers and ranchers since before New Mexico became a state. Her mother’s family claimed Spanish roots stretching back to colonial times, proud of traditions that intertwined Catholic saints with ancient Native customs. Kristine grew up lighting candles on Christmas Eve, but also hearing sermons about “heathens” from missionaries who saw even their neighbors as souls needing salvation.

She learned early that faith and prejudice could walk hand in hand, that a kind smile could hide a closed mind, and that a girl’s future could be quietly narrowed by what others whispered behind her back.

By the time Greg and Kristine fell in love, the civil rights movement had shifted from cautious demands to bold action. The March on Washington in 1963 drew hundreds of thousands to the National Mall, where Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream rang out in words that even reached the quiet mesas of New Mexico. When four Black girls were killed by a bomb planted in Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church, Kristine’s mother wept at the kitchen table, and Greg’s father sat silently staring at the newspaper.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed segregation in public spaces, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act forced open polling booths long closed to Black citizens. Yet violence persisted: marchers were beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge; cities like Watts erupted in flames. Each step forward was met with bitter resistance, a country locked in a war with itself.

In that world, the bond between Greg and Kristine was more than a teenage romance—it was an act of quiet defiance, though neither of them realized it. Each note they passed, each lunch shared, each dance in a darkened gym was a statement that the barriers of race, faith, and fear could not contain the simple, stubborn truth of their love.

Yet every glance, every rumor, every teacher’s uneasy silence reminded them that the world did not want them to exist together. Friends who once giggled at Kristine’s jokes grew quiet. Boys who admired Greg’s effortless moves on the court now watched him with wary eyes.

When Greg traveled to Houston for a summer with relatives, he saw a South where hatred was open, raw, and deadly. He heard stories of Emmett Till not as distant history, but as a warning. Kristine, waiting in New Mexico, struggled to understand the darkness Greg had glimpsed—and the shadow it cast on what they dreamed.

Their love reached its breaking point before the world caught up. In June 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down a decision that changed history: *Loving v. Virginia*. Richard and Mildred Loving, an interracial couple exiled from their home state for the crime of loving each other, had sued Virginia. The Court’s unanimous decision declared laws banning interracial marriage unconstitutional, striking down legal barriers to love in 16 states.

For millions, Loving was a turning point—a confirmation that love across racial lines was not only natural, but protected by the Constitution. But for Greg and Kristine, it came too late. They were already at separate schools, their letters growing fewer, their dreams fraying under the weight of whispers, stares, and fears passed from generation to generation.

When Innocence Died is not just the story of Greg and Kristine. It is a story of a country wrestling with its promise and its failures, of a community that reflected America’s most beautiful diversity and its most painful divisions. It is a reminder that every whisper of prejudice, every subtle cruelty, every unjust law leaves marks on real people—and that every act of love, every stubborn refusal to accept hate, plants seeds for a better world.

In these pages, you will follow two young souls who dared to believe love could be stronger than the forces arrayed against it. You will walk with them through moments of quiet joy and piercing heartbreak. And you will see how even when love is forced to break, its memory can outlast the walls built to keep it apart.

Because the story of Greg and Kristine is America’s story—of innocence lost and wisdom gained, of a nation learning that love, in all its forms, is worth fighting for.

Chapter 1—A New Face

The high desert sun burned down on the adobe walls of McCurdy Mission School, casting sharp shadows along the cracked sidewalks that cut through the dusty campus. September in northern New Mexico was always a paradox of golden light and biting mornings, and on the first day of seventh grade, Kristine Sinclair felt both the excitement of a new year and the lingering chill of dawn beneath her thin cotton blouse.

McCurdy Mission School sat on the edge of Española, a town of sunbaked adobe homes and larger haciendas ringed by mesas that glowed red at sunset. The school itself was mostly a cluster of simple, low-slung buildings painted white, with dark wooden beams supporting wide overhangs meant to shield students from the relentless New Mexico sun. However, the main classroom building was a two-story wood framed building built over a basement gymnasium that smelled of floor wax, chalk dust, and the faint tang of green chile drifting in from the cafeteria.

The school had been founded decades earlier by a group of evangelical missionaries from Ohio, determined to bring what they believed was the “true gospel” to the children of northern New Mexico. They saw the region’s heavy Roman Catholic influence as a challenge—one they answered with money, manpower, and fervent prayers. Indeed, McCurdy Mission School’s campus was not just a collection of aging classrooms, but a monument to an old, ongoing struggle. When Protestant missionaries first arrived in northern New Mexico at the turn of the 20th century, they found villages filled with adobe churches, flickering votive candles, and processions honoring saints. Catholic priests had dominated the region since the days of the Spanish conquistadors. To the missionaries from Ohio, this Catholic stronghold was a mission field ripe for conversion.

They built the school on land donated by a sympathetic rancher, raising funds through revival meetings across the Midwest. Volunteers from evangelical congregations in Ohio poured into Española, convinced they were waging a holy battle against the “superstitions” of Catholicism. By the 1950s, McCurdy had grown into a K-12 campus with dormitories for boarding students, a cafeteria that doubled as a community center, and a small chapel where students were expected to attend morning devotions.

Students came from across the region—Hispanic, Native American, Anglo, but no Black families until 1950 when a family of six moved to town after which their children began attending McCurdy. The families were drawn to McCurdy by the promise of a better education or, for some parents, the hope of steering children away from what they saw as the strict, ritual-bound teachings of the Catholic Church. Others simply needed the boarding option when they lived in far-flung Hispanic communities, pueblos or reservations.

The school taught reading, writing, and arithmetic with the same zeal it applied to Bible study. Teachers led hymns each morning, prayed over lunches, and assigned essays about Old Testament heroes. Still, for all their pious intentions, the missionaries were often oblivious to the complex cultural tapestry of northern New Mexico. Generations of students navigated a quiet tension between ancestral traditions and the demands of evangelical doctrine.

By the time Kristine attended, McCurdy had become a fixture in the community, both respected and resented: a private Protestant enclave in a valley where saints' statues and roadside shrines to the Virgin dotted every village. In the first-floor hallway, Kristine moved with a practiced confidence, waving at friends she'd known since first grade, nodding politely to the teachers who lined the walls, calling roll and directing traffic like drill sergeants. She had grown tall early, her legs long and athletic, her taupe-colored sun-streaked hair cut into a straight, chin-length bob that swung with cleopatra bangs around her freckled cheeks when she laughed. Her eyes were hazel, more on the golden-brown side than green. They were wide and alert, the kind that caught every nuance in a room.

Though only twelve, Kristine carried herself with a mature boldness, tempered by the awkwardness of adolescence. She wore a new skirt and top her mother bought at the only department store in town, and felt as good as was possible given her age. Recess had been her favorite time since she could run faster than most boys, but in junior high, she was expected to act like a young lady.

She stepped into Room 7A, where the scent of old textbooks and new erasers made her heart race with the possibilities of a fresh year. Her friends filled the rows of wooden desks, gossiping about who would "go around" with whom—a game of brief, awkward courtships that involved passing folded notes with "Do you like me? Yes or No?" scrawled in pencil.

At the front of the classroom, their teacher, Mr. VanEssen, a tall but stout man with a perpetual look of mild surprise emerging through his horn-rimmed glasses, shuffled a stack of index cards. His glasses slipped down his nose as he surveyed the room, and he coughed into his hand before beginning attendance. His sandy hair, parted with military precision, framed a wide, chubby face softened only by his kind eyes.

Mr. VanEssen, fresh from a small Christian college in Ohio, embodied McCurdy's mission: earnest, idealistic, and painfully unprepared for the realities of a roomful of mischievous twelve-year-olds. He'd been assigned to McCurdy by the mission board with the promise of saving souls and raising scholars, but by mid-September, it was clear to everyone that the students ran the classroom more than he did.

As the room settled into restless silence, the door opened again, drawing every eye. In stepped the new boy, his presence immediately commanding the kind of attention Kristine knew could only mean one thing: everything was about to change.

Gregory "Greg" Jackson stood a full head taller than any boy in the room, his slender frame stretched into angles softened only by the shyness of his smile. His skin was a rich, warm brown, with undertones of gold that glowed in the filtered sunlight spilling through the tall classroom windows. His hair, cropped close and edged neatly, framed a smooth forehead above striking dark eyes that flicked nervously across the sea of unfamiliar faces.

Greg wore a crisp white shirt tucked into dark slacks, his backpack slung over one narrow shoulder. He paused in the doorway, shifting from foot to foot. Though he tried to hide it, the

fear of being the new kid radiated from him. Kristine knew that feeling—she could almost taste it on the dry morning air.

Mr. VanEssen cleared his throat. “Class, we have a new student joining us today,” he said, gesturing for Greg to step forward. “This is Gregory Jackson. He’s just come from Dulce, where his parents work for the Jicarilla Apache educational system. He’ll be a boarding student this year.”

A ripple of curiosity passed through the room. Kristine watched Greg’s eyes dart to hers and quickly away, his gaze lingering for only a second—just long enough to send a thrill down her spine.

Greg’s father, James Jackson, had served as principal of a small reservation school in Dulce, a town hours to the north and far more isolated than Española. His mother, Mary, taught first grade, and together they’d decided to send Greg to McCurdy as soon as he was old enough for boarding. They believed he needed the broader academic opportunities of the mission school—and the firm moral foundation the evangelical missionaries claimed to offer.

As Greg took a seat two rows over from Kristine, she found herself staring openly. She’d seen new kids come and go before, but something about him—his careful movements, the quiet intensity behind his eyes—drew her in. He looked like someone who carried entire stories inside him, stories of places and people she couldn’t even imagine.

As new teachers do, Mr. VanEssen stumbled through the first lesson of the day: a review of animal classification. His thin voice cracked as he tried to explain the differences between reptiles and amphibians, but most of the class ignored him, stealing glances at Greg. A group of boys at the back snickered and pointed, whispering jokes Kristine couldn’t hear. She felt a surge of anger at their cruelty.

The bell rang, signaling recess. In the dusty courtyard outside the main building, kids erupted into a flurry of motion—kicking soccer balls, chasing each other, or congregating on the splintered wooden benches scattered beneath ancient cottonwoods. The sweet, sharp smell of cottonwood leaves mixed with the red dust kicked up by their games.

Kristine stood near the basketball hoop, twisting a strand of hair around her finger as she watched Greg. He stood alone at the edge of the courtyard, clutching his backpack strap and scanning the crowd. The boys who had mocked him inside now tossed a basketball between themselves, and after a few tense moments, they called Greg over. He hesitated, then joined them, and soon the ball sailed through the air toward him. He caught it cleanly, pivoted, and sunk an effortless jump shot.

A cheer went up, and even the boys who’d jeered seemed impressed. Greg smiled shyly, and Kristine’s heart squeezed in her chest. Here he was, the boy who could move like poetry on a cracked concrete court.

She edged closer, listening to the easy banter. One of the boys, Troy, passed her and called out, “Hey Kristine, wanna play?” She shook her head, eyes fixed on Greg. He noticed and offered a tentative smile—small, but enough to send a flutter of heat through her.

The school bell rang again, pulling them back to class like marionettes. Inside, Kristine slipped into her seat and felt the weight of eyes on her. When she looked up, Greg was staring directly at her. She blushed, shifting in her chair. From that moment, an unspoken connection sparked between them.

One day late in the fall, after Greg had settled into the class and been accepted by the other students, Mr. VanEssen decided to assign them a group project. He divided the class into teams to research animals, assigning each group to choose a species to study. Kristine ended up with her closest friends, and across the room, Greg found himself surrounded by boys who alternated between curiosity and thinly veiled admiration for his athletic skills.

She overheard one of them say, “We should pick an animal that’s just like her,” nodding subtly in Kristine’s direction. She felt a blush creep up her neck, unsure if it was meant as an insult or a compliment.

Greg glanced up and caught her gaze. There was a mischievous glint in his eyes. “I’m thinking gazelle,” he said, his voice calm but carrying across the room.

Kristine’s eyes widened, surprised—and then, delighted—by the playful challenge. “Oh, yeah?” she called back, trying to hide her smile. “I was going to choose the giraffe because it reminds me of you!”

The class erupted into laughter. Even Mr. VanEssen, who struggled to keep order, chuckled. The teacher’s attempt at control dissolved completely as Greg and Kristine traded good-natured barbs, igniting a rivalry that left everyone in stitches.

For the rest of that day, Kristine found herself stealing glances at Greg. His presence unsettled and excited her. She wondered what it would feel like to know him beyond the playful insults and daring looks. He seemed different from the other boys—more thoughtful, more aware, as if he carried an entire world within him.

By winter Kristine felt a new, electric current coursing through the familiar halls of McCurdy. One day as she slipped out the front doors into the sharp afternoon light, the whitewashed adobe walls glowing orange as the sun sank toward the mountains, she heard voices echoing across the courtyard.

Her heart began pounding as she saw Greg standing near the dormitory steps, backpack slung over his shoulder, head tilted as if deeply interested in those around him. Even though he was engaged in a conversation, he directed his attention to Kristine. As their eyes met, and Kristine knew—beyond the childish crushes of the past—that her life had just changed forever.

Chapter 2—Unspoken Words

Winter laid a quiet claim over the Española Valley, draping the mesas in frost each morning and turning the Rio Grande into a winding ribbon of icy mist. By December, the sun barely climbed above the rooftops, its pale light doing little to warm the cracked asphalt of McCurdy Mission School's parking lot. Each morning, Kristine stepped out of her father's truck, breath curling in front of her face, and hurried into the school's main building. She told herself it was routine, but in truth, she arrived early hoping to see Greg.

Since the day of the animal project, something had changed. The teasing looks they once shared had turned into glances that lingered. When their eyes met, Kristine felt a flutter in her chest, an unfamiliar warmth that stayed with her through each lesson. She found herself drifting through the school day in anticipation of the moments when they would stand close, when time seemed to slow and the rest of the world slipped away.

the entire school year passed into the summer break, and upon returning to school in the fall, Greg and Kristine continued where they left off. Every day felt like an adventure for them both, as they began each morning in close proximity.

Early mornings at McCurdy were hushed, the halls echoing with the distant clatter of locker doors and the soft hum of the janitor's broom as he swept grit from the stairwells. Frost rimed the tall cottonwoods by the parking lot, and the old mission bell in the chapel tower hung silent against a pale sky.

Kristine loved the quiet before the day began. Sometimes, she saw Greg walking slowly across the courtyard from the dormitory, hands deep in his pockets, his breath white in the frozen air. Other times, she found him leaning against the chapel's adobe wall, eyes fixed on the Sangre de Cristo Mountains glowing pink in the sunrise.

One morning, she gathered her courage and walked straight up to him. He looked up with surprise, then smiled—a small, shy smile that made her heart skip.

“You like the mornings too?” she asked, shifting her backpack on her shoulder.

He nodded. “It's the only time it's really quiet.”

Kristine glanced up at the streaks of dawn spreading across the sky. “It's like everything's holding its breath,” she said softly.

Greg turned to her, his dark eyes searching hers as though he wanted to memorize every detail of her face. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Exactly like that.”

Their connection deepened with each passing day. During recess, Kristine watched the basketball games that erupted behind the cafeteria. Greg's talent was undeniable; he moved with a quickness that drew cheers from even the older boys. Kristine saw that he was fearless, darting between players, light on his feet. Greg loved the way the ball felt under his fingertips, the thrill

of racing down the cracked concrete court, the burst of laughter when someone missed an easy shot.

Sometimes, when the P.E. teacher merged the boys and girls together, Kristine's team faced Greg's. They played like they were the only two on the court. When he tried to steal the ball, she twisted away, her hair whipping behind her. Each time she took a shot, he leapt to block it, their eyes locking in a mix of challenge and delight.

They didn't need words; the game was their language. The back-and-forth teased out smiles and quiet moments of awe at each other's skill. By the time the bell rang, they left the court breathless and grinning, each carrying the thrill of their private contest into the next class.

Lunchtime became their sanctuary. Kristine began skipping the noisy cafeteria, instead slipping behind the science building where a few old benches were tucked under a stand of cottonwoods. One afternoon, toward the end of their 8th grade year, she found Greg already there, his sandwich in one hand, a library book balanced on his knee.

Their eyes met, and he shifted, making space for her. She settled beside him, pulling out her lunch bag. From that day forward, the bench became theirs. They ate together most days, trading bites of sandwiches and swapping stories.

Kristine told Greg about her family's Saturday trips to the market, how her mother made sweet rolls on Sundays, how she'd once climbed the cottonwood in her front yard just to see the whole valley. Greg spoke of his summers in Dulce, nights camping with his cousins when they visited, his father's stories of constellations and ancient rivers. He showed her a cherished silver sandcast charm his Apache friend made for him when he left for McCurdy.

They lingered long after they finished eating, their conversation meandering from favorite songs on the radio to the strangest dreams they'd ever had. Kristine was surprised by how easy it was to talk to Greg, how quickly she forgot the time. When the warning bell rang, they'd jump to their feet, laughing as they hurried back to class.

The first snow came just days before Christmas break. Kristine woke to find the world transformed: rooftops dusted in white, fences softened by drifting snow, the sharp scent of cedar smoke curling from chimneys. At school, the courtyard was a wonderland of powdery snow, students slipping and giggling as they chased each other between classes.

That morning, Greg caught Kristine's eye as she stepped onto the playground. Without a word, he scooped a handful of snow and lobbed it gently toward her, the ball bursting against the ground near her feet. She gasped, then laughed, gathering her own snowball.

What followed was a flurry of running, ducking, and laughing, their breath mixing with the rising steam of the melting snow. Greg's eyes sparkled, his cheeks flushed with cold. Kristine felt alive in a way she never had before, as if every part of her was tuned to the joy of the moment.

Their friends joined in, and soon the playground became a battleground of shrieks and snowballs. Kristine and Greg found themselves on the same team, their coordination seamless. She realized they had learned each other's rhythms without even trying.

As winter eased into spring, they began leaving notes for each other in their desks or tucked into books left in the classroom. Greg's handwriting was neat and small, his words spare but meaningful:

"The sky was amazing this morning. Did you see it?" or "Can't wait for recess."

Kristine's notes were loops of hurried script, filled with small jokes and tiny sketches of snowflakes or hearts. She felt both giddy and exposed each time she slipped one into his desk, and her heart lifted when she found his replies.

By the end of their 8th grade year their secret exchange turned the ordinary hours of school into something electric. A quick glance across the room could send heat rushing to Kristine's cheeks, the promise of another note buzzing between them.

Because Kristine lived in Española and wasn't a boarder, her father or sometimes her older brother came to pick her up each afternoon. But she lingered on the front steps as long as possible, waiting for Greg to emerge from the dorm or finish his chores. When she saw him coming, backpack slung over one shoulder, she would stand and wave, unable to hide her grin.

Sometimes they walked together to the far end of the parking lot, careful not to touch but close enough that their shoulders almost brushed. They talked quietly, voices low. They laughed about the boys in their class who pretended to know everything, or the girls who fussed over their hair between every bell.

Once, Greg paused by the school's old stone well, turning to face her fully. "Kristine," he began, his voice soft and serious, "I... I'm glad you're here."

She swallowed, feeling the rush of warmth that spread through her chest. "Me too," she whispered.

A car horn honked in the distance, and she jumped. Her father's pickup idled at the curb, exhaust puffing into the cold air. Kristine looked back at Greg, her eyes lingering. Neither wanted the moment to end.

During one lunch break, Greg surprised Kristine by taking her hand and leading her to a spot behind the chapel where a crumbling adobe wall shielded them from view. There, he pulled a small cassette player from his coat pocket.

"My uncle gave it to me," he explained, his eyes shy. "Want to hear my favorite song? It reminds me of you."

Kristine nodded, heart thudding. Greg pressed the play button and began moving his lips as the temptation's sang a memorable chorus to a simple tune that drifted across the courtyard like a secret carried on the breeze. "I guess you'd say, what can make me feel that way? My girl... Talking about my girl." The notes were sweet and loving, filling the spring air with a melancholy beauty.

When it finished, Kristine clapped softly, eyes shining. "That was beautiful," she whispered.

Greg looked down, smiling shyly," he said. "I wanted you to hear it and know it's how I feel."

She reached out, her fingers brushing his arm. In that moment, the air between them felt fragile and precious, as if a single wrong move could shatter it.

As the days ticked down to summer break, Greg and Kristine began walking to class together. Kristine began noticing how some classmates looked at them. A girl she'd known since first grade hesitated before saying hello. A boy who used to joke with Greg now stayed silent, his eyes sliding away when they approached together. Even teachers sometimes paused mid-sentence, their gazes flickering over the pair with an expression Kristine couldn't quite name.

She pushed the discomfort aside. No one had said anything outright. Surely it was just her imagination. After all, they hadn't done anything wrong.

Yet in quiet moments, doubt crept in. She wondered if Greg felt it too—the weight of the glances, the silence that fell when they entered a room together.

On the last day before the summer vacation, Kristine found Greg waiting for her near the front steps as dusk settled over the campus. Few blossoms still clung to the lilac bushes with the others blanketing the sidewalk smashing under her shoes as she approached.

They stood together without speaking, the afternoon light casting their shadows into complete harmony. Kristine wanted to tell him everything she felt, but the words caught in her throat.

Greg broke the silence first. "I wish we didn't have to go," he murmured.

Kristine swallowed hard. "Me too," she said. "I'll miss you."

He hesitated, then reached into his coat pocket and pulled out another note, folded and warm from his hand. He pressed it into hers. "For you," he said. "So you know how I feel and that I'm thinking of you."

Kristine closed her fingers around the note, feeling its edges settle into her palm like a frame. "I'll keep it with all the others," she promised. "And I'll write back soon."

Greg's smile was quiet but full of light. "I will write too."

A horn blared from the street—her father’s truck idling at the curb. Kristine turned, then looked back one last time. They were going to be freshmen in high school when they returned. No more recesses, and a shift into a whole new grown up world. Greg stood in the shadows, tall and still, and she knew that no matter what happened next, this moment was theirs alone.

Chapter 3—The First Fall

The first day of ninth grade dawned clear and cool, the kind of late August morning when the air still hinted at summer even as school buses rattled down quiet streets. Kristine pressed her forehead to the truck’s passenger window as her father turned into McCurdy Mission School’s long gravel drive. She watched the chapel’s white cross rise over the cottonwoods, her heart beating fast. She was back—and so was Greg.

The high school wing of McCurdy loomed larger than the cozy junior high halls they’d left behind. Everything felt sharper, older, more charged with possibilities she couldn’t quite name. As she stepped from the truck, she spotted Greg across the courtyard. He was taller than he’d been in May, his shoulders broader, his hair neatly trimmed above dark, watchful eyes. He carried himself like he was ready for whatever the world could throw at him, and for a moment Kristine simply stood, taking him in.

When their eyes met, they both smiled, wide and relieved, as if the months apart had been a test they’d just passed.

The high school building smelled of fresh paint and old textbooks. Students moved in tight clusters, their voices bouncing off tiled floors. Kristine walked beside Greg down the main corridor, and she felt the newness of everything—the rows of tall lockers, the upperclassmen lounging against doorframes, the low hum of rumors waiting to take flight.

As they passed, eyes tracked them openly. Unlike last year, when whispers were quiet and hidden, this time Kristine felt the attention on their backs, heavy and unfiltered. A pair of sophomore girls giggled when Greg brushed Kristine’s shoulder. A senior boy muttered something under his breath, too low for her to catch but enough to make Greg stiffen at her side.

Kristine kept her head high, determined not to let it show. “They’re just curious,” she murmured as they turned into their homeroom.

Greg nodded, but his jaw was tight.

Classes started in a blur of introductions and syllabi. Kristine found herself in English with Mr. VanEssen again, surprised and pleased to see his familiar kind eyes and nervous energy as he passed out books. She glanced around the room—Greg sat diagonally behind her, and when their eyes met, they shared a smile that steadied her in the swirl of new faces.

At lunch, she found him waiting at their old spot behind the science building. The cottonwoods had lost some of their green, yellowing leaves spinning down around them as they settled onto

the bench. Greg pulled a peanut butter sandwich from his backpack; Kristine unwrapped a tamale her mother had packed in foil. They ate with their knees brushing, the silence between them comfortable.

“Feels different, doesn’t it?” Greg said after a while, his voice low.

Kristine nodded. “Everything’s bigger. Louder. Like everyone’s watching.”

He sighed, tearing small pieces of crust from his sandwich. “They are.”

The days fell into a pattern. Each morning, Kristine sought Greg in the courtyard, where they stood close enough to see each other’s breath in the cool dawn. Between classes, they walked together through the halls, acutely aware of every glance, every voice that dropped to a whisper as they passed. But they also discovered the quiet joys of the new year: the challenge of algebra proofs scribbled side by side in the library, their fingers brushing when they both reached for the same pencil; the shared jokes they kept only for each other.

They didn’t talk about what their relationship was, or what it meant. Neither dared. But each time Greg tucked a note into Kristine’s math book or she slipped one into the pocket of his backpack, it felt like a vow: **I see you. I choose you.**

Their favorite refuge became a grove of piñon trees at the edge of the school grounds, where the land dipped into a small arroyo. Few students ventured that far during free periods, and Kristine and Greg claimed it as their own. The piñons’ thick boughs offered shade and a hushed stillness broken only by the whir of cicadas.

One afternoon, they lay side by side on the soft ground, their shoulders touching as they watched drifting clouds. A raven called overhead, its dark wings slicing the bright sky.

“Do you think...” Kristine began, then stopped, unsure how to ask the question coiled in her chest.

Greg turned his head toward her. “Do I think what?”

“That this could ever... work. Us.”

His eyes searched hers, his face serious in the slanting light. “I want it to,” he said simply.

She swallowed, wanting to reach for his hand but afraid of what it might mean. Instead, she pressed her palm into the earth between them, feeling its warmth seep into her skin. “Me too.”

As weeks passed, it became clear they were no longer kids playing at love. The hush in the halls turned from curiosity to caution. Friends who once waved now offered curt nods. One morning, Kristine’s lab partner in biology hesitated before joining her at their table, glancing at Greg across the room. When she finally sat, she avoided Kristine’s eyes.

Kristine told herself it didn't matter. But at night, staring at her bedroom ceiling, the doubts crept in. She replayed every conversation, every look. She wondered if the stares were in her head or if the walls around them were really closing in.

Amid the uncertainty, moments of light kept them going. One crisp October morning, Greg showed up early with a paper cup of hot chocolate from the school cafeteria. He offered it to Kristine on the steps of the chapel, his smile shy.

"Thought you might be cold," he said.

She laughed softly, accepting the warm cup. "Thank you," she murmured, her fingers brushing his. For a few precious minutes, they sat shoulder to shoulder, sipping and watching the sky turn pale blue.

By November, the whispers grew louder. Kristine heard her name paired with Greg's in conversations that cut off when she approached. Girls she'd known for years now averted their eyes in the halls. Greg's roommates grew curt, offering half-hearted greetings before drifting away.

One afternoon in gym, Kristine overheard two boys joking about her and Greg as they changed into uniforms. Their words were crude, their laughter sharp as knives. She slammed her locker shut, rage and humiliation roiling in her chest. That night, she wrote Greg a long letter, pouring out her hurt, her anger, and her fierce refusal to give up on what they had.

The next morning, she found a note tucked into her history book:

They don't know us. But I do. And I'm not going anywhere. – Greg

As fall deepened, McCurdy buzzed with preparations for the annual homecoming game and dance. Posters covered the walls, promising a night of music, dancing, and crowning the freshman prince and princess. Kristine felt both excitement and dread. Would Greg ask her? Could he? Did she want him to, knowing what it would mean?

They didn't talk about it directly, but their stolen conversations circled the question like cautious dancers. During lunch in their arroyo hideaway, Kristine finally blurted, "Are you going to the dance?"

Greg's eyes met hers, dark and searching. "If you'll go with me."

She exhaled, her breath shaking. "I want to."

His grin was wide and relieved. "Then we'll go."

On homecoming night, the gym gleamed with streamers and twinkle lights. Families and classmates packed the stands as McCurdy's team stormed the court. Kristine cheered herself hoarse when Greg sank a three-pointer, his movements quick and graceful, his joy infectious.

Every time he glanced toward the bleachers, his eyes found hers, and she felt seen, chosen, unstoppable.

When the buzzer ended the game with McCurdy victorious, students spilled onto the court, hugging and shouting. The energy crackled with anticipation as volunteers transformed the gym for the dance.

Kristine changed into her dress in the girls' locker room, her hands trembling. Her mother had helped her pick it: simple, pale yellow, with a soft skirt that brushed her knees. She smoothed it down, took a deep breath, and stepped into the gym.

Greg was waiting, dressed in a pressed navy suit that made him look older, surer. His eyes lit up when he saw her, and he crossed the dance floor, ignoring the stares and mutters that parted around him like a wave.

“Hi,” he said, his voice rough with awe.

“Hi,” she whispered.

They stepped into the music's sway. The lights sparkled above them, soft Motown playing from the record player. Their hands found each other, fitting perfectly, and they began to dance.

For a few songs, they moved together as if they were the only ones in the world. Kristine rested her cheek against Greg's chest, his warmth anchoring her. She could feel his heart racing under her palm.

Whispers floated on the edges of the music, but Kristine shut them out. All she saw was Greg's eyes, the light in them when he looked at her.

They spun slowly as the final notes of “My Girl” faded. Around them, the gym hushed, the room caught between disbelief and something like wonder. For a moment, Kristine thought maybe—just maybe—they had made their own space in a world that wanted to keep them apart.

Chapter 4 — A Growing Bond

The morning light of sophomore year spread across McCurdy Mission School like liquid gold, filling the cracked sidewalks and dusty courtyards with a bright, crisp promise. A thin frost still clung to the cottonwood branches as Kristine stepped from her father's truck, her breath hanging in the air like a whispered secret. She scanned the campus, searching for him—and there he was: Greg, taller than before, his broad shoulders squared with quiet determination as he jogged across the lot, helmet dangling from one hand.

Football season was in full swing, and Greg had exploded into the year like a comet. His feet moved with the same easy grace Kristine remembered from their basketball games, but now his raw speed and unshakable balance marked him as the Mustangs' brightest hope. Each Friday

night, under the glaring stadium lights, Greg became unstoppable: slipping tackles, spinning past defenders, launching down the field like the wind itself.

One home game, Kristine snapped a photo just as Greg twisted out of a linebacker's grasp, his eyes focused on the end zone, legs pumping in a blur. She developed the image in the school darkroom, heart racing as the black-and-white lines of his body appeared on the paper like magic. She printed three copies: one for the paper, one for herself, and one she slipped into Greg's locker with a note: *You looked like you were flying.*

Friday nights felt electric. Kristine sat in the press box, camera at the ready, surrounded by the sharp scent of spilled hot chocolate and the roar of a hundred cheering voices. She clicked away as Greg caught passes, broke tackles, and dove over goal lines. Even when the Mustangs lost, Greg's feats gave the fans something to talk about for weeks afterward.

Once, during a tight game against Las Vegas Robertson, Greg caught a slant pass on third down and leapt between two defenders, landing on his feet to sprint thirty more yards. The bleachers erupted; Kristine nearly dropped her camera. Later, as the team boarded the bus, Greg caught her eye through the window. He lifted his helmet in a small salute, his grin wide and unguarded.

Back at school, Kristine's photos began appearing more regularly in *The McCurdy Times*, the student paper. But her advisor, Mrs. Lopez, soon urged her to add stories to go with them. At first, Kristine resisted. She loved her camera's silence, the way it let her hide behind the lens. Writing felt too exposed, like laying her heart bare. But Mrs. Lopez was persistent.

"Kristine," she said one afternoon, standing in the darkroom's faint red light, "you see things other people don't. Let your words show them what you see."

So Kristine tried. Her first article was a simple game recap, but she poured herself into the details: the sharp crunch of helmets, the gasps of the crowd, the way Greg's eyes never left the goal line. When Mrs. Lopez handed the piece back, it was covered in red ink—but at the top, she'd scrawled: *This is alive. Keep going.*

Winter deepened, and basketball season began. Greg's game translated beautifully from the football field to the court; he sprinted coast to coast, snatched rebounds from bigger players, and drove into the key with fearless energy. His points lifted McCurdy's team through close contests against Taos and Española Valley, each victory feeding the legend that Greg Jackson wasn't just a good player—he was something special.

Kristine's role as photographer grew. She rode the bus to away games, wedged between the tangle of duffel bags and jostling boys. Out the frosted windows, they watched red mesas drift by under wide skies. The trips lasted hours, stretching late into the night, the darkness outside so complete it felt like they were floating through space.

In those shadowed bus rides, Kristine's heart felt raw with possibility. She recorded everything: Troy snoring with his head against the window, Coach Morales scribbling plays on the back of a

receipt, Greg's steady profile as he watched the stars wheel above the desert. Their eyes would meet sometimes in the dark, a silent acknowledgment of what they shared.

Kristine's weekends disappeared into the darkroom. She grew expert at measuring chemicals and timing exposures, the process soothing her restless energy. She watched Greg's fierce determination bloom on photo paper: his muscles tensed mid-jump shot, his feet inches off the court, the net snapping in perfect clarity. Each image felt like a secret only she understood.

But photos weren't enough. She began jotting notes during games, first in the margins of her math homework, then in a small leather-bound notebook. She described the scent of old varnish on the gym floor, the shrill squeal of referees' whistles, the hush that fell before a critical free throw. The words came alive under her pen.

Back on campus, Kristine and Greg sought each other every spare moment. Their favorite place became a patch of cottonwoods beyond the athletic fields, where dead leaves crunched like brittle paper under their shoes. They sprawled on the ground, sunlight flickering through bare branches, their breath white in the cold.

Greg told stories of his father's years teaching on the reservation, of Apache friends in Dulce who taught him to track deer in the snow. Kristine shared stories of growing up in Española, her first bike crash, the way her mother hummed old lullabies while cooking.

Sometimes they lay side by side, watching clouds drift overhead, hands nearly touching. When they spoke of the future, their words were unguarded: Kristine dreamed of writing for *Life* magazine, sending dispatches from far-flung places; Greg wanted a football scholarship to Arizona State, or maybe to play for the Lobos in Albuquerque. They promised they'd always find a way back to each other, no matter what.

The turning point came in early February when Kristine's profile of Greg—*“McCurdy's Two-Sport Star”—*appeared on the front page of the school paper. Mrs. Lopez handed her a copy, and Kristine nearly cried seeing her name printed so large. Greg walked her to class that day, his grin unstoppable.

“They got your good side,” he teased, tapping her shoulder with the rolled-up paper.

“Shut up,” she shot back, cheeks flushed with pride. “They only printed it because of you.”

“Because of us,” he corrected softly.

That evening, her father found her reading the article over and over in her room. He ruffled her hair, eyes lingering on the photograph of Greg mid-dunk, but said nothing.

As the sun began to climb higher and cottonwoods budded with pale green leaves, Greg's late evening phone calls became a ritual. Kristine waited by the kitchen wall phone, the cord stretching across the linoleum as she curled into a ball at the bottom of the stairs.

Some nights, they barely spoke—just breathing together, reassured by each other’s presence. Other nights, they whispered dreams, fears, and silly jokes until they fell asleep with the receiver warm against their cheeks.

One night, Greg confessed, voice husky with exhaustion, “You’re the only person who makes me feel like I belong anywhere.”

Kristine blinked back tears. “That’s because you’re where I belong.”

Word of Greg’s performances spread beyond McCurdy. Small newspapers started printing his stats, local radio stations mentioned his name after Friday games. College scouts showed up at the gym, folding arms across suits as they watched him drill jump shots with the same intensity he brought to fourth-quarter breakaways.

But with the attention came rumors, the murmurs of what it meant for a Black boy and a white girl to walk so close together. Kristine heard it in the halls, felt it in the sudden hush when she and Greg passed. But neither backed down. If anything, their bond tightened, their stolen smiles more defiant.

As spring deepened, McCurdy hosted the sports banquet. Kristine wore a pale blue dress with a lace collar, camera swinging from her neck as she darted among tables snapping photos of smiling players and proud parents. Greg appeared in a new suit, his presence commanding every room he entered.

When the music started, he crossed the floor to her without hesitation, extending his hand. Heads turned. Whispers rose. But Kristine took his hand, heart pounding, and together they stepped into the soft sway of Sam Cooke playing over the loudspeakers.

Their classmates’ voices faded into a gentle hush. Under the glow of fairy lights strung across the gym ceiling, they moved as one, each step a promise, each turn a quiet rebellion. Kristine felt his hands on her waist, warm and steady, and let the world dissolve around them.

The next morning Greg told Kristine that his father wanted him to spend the summer in Houston with relatives. He seemed a little concerned about the change and for some reason, an ominous feeling hovered over Kristine as well. But she brushed it aside and told Greg that he might really enjoy his time there and he should treat it like an adventure.

On the last day before summer break, Kristine met Greg by the chapel as the setting sun stained the sky rose and gold. The air was warm with the promise of summer, the scent of lilacs heavy and sweet.

Greg pressed the cherished, silver sandcast charm his friend from the Dulce reservation made and gave to him when he left for boarding school. “So you’ll have something of me that I treasure,” he said softly.

She gave him a photo that was taken of them laughing on the bus, its edges creased from being carried everywhere. “So you don’t forget,” she said, her voice breaking.

They held each other for a long time, the space around them hushed except for the soft whisper of cottonwood leaves. When they finally pulled apart, the world felt colder, the clouds gathering around them.

Chapter 5 — Houston Heat

The bus roared south under a blazing sun, the asphalt shimmering like a river of melted glass stretching into Texas. Greg pressed his forehead to the window as endless miles of scrub and dying grass slipped by. His father had hugged him that morning with a stern, unspoken warning in his eyes; his mother had clung to him as if trying to anchor him in New Mexico. But now, alone among strangers and truckers headed to Houston, he felt untethered, drifting into a world he couldn’t yet imagine.

When the bus finally pulled into Houston’s Greyhound station, the air hit him like a wall: hot, thick, and humming with a thousand overlapping sounds. Horns blared. Voices rose and fell in unfamiliar cadences. The scent of exhaust mixed with fried food and the heavy perfume of blooming magnolias. Greg stepped off the bus and scanned the crowd until he saw his uncle Elijah—a tall, broad-shouldered man with deep lines around his eyes and a voice like gravel.

Elijah enveloped him in a hug. “Welcome to Houston, Greg,” he said, voice low but warm. “You’ve got a lot to learn this summer.”

The ride to his uncle’s house took them through neighborhoods unlike anything Greg had known. Ramshackle homes leaned against each other on potholed streets, while grand, tree-lined boulevards in the white parts of town glowed with tidy lawns and sprinklers ticking in the afternoon heat.

“Don’t forget where you are now,” Elijah said as they passed a diner with a sign reading “Whites Only.” His voice was calm, but his knuckles whitened around the steering wheel. “People down here don’t pretend to play nice like in New Mexico.”

Greg looked out the window, feeling the reality of those words settle into his bones.

At his aunt and uncle’s small house, nights were spent around a chipped wooden table beneath a slow-turning ceiling fan. Over plates of black-eyed peas and cornbread, Greg’s cousins talked about school, jobs, and friends. But the adults’ conversations always turned darker when they thought the children weren’t listening.

One evening, Uncle Elijah leaned back in his chair, eyes shadowed. “Boy, you think you know something about this world? You don’t know fear until you’ve driven across Mississippi after dark.”

He told Greg the story of Emmett Till—a boy not much younger than him, murdered for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Elijah’s voice was low, trembling with a rage he had carried for years. “They beat that child until he was unrecognizable,” he said. “Then they threw him in the river like trash.”

Greg’s heart pounded so hard he thought his ribs might crack. He pictured Kristine’s laughing eyes, the way her hand brushed his, and felt a cold wave of dread wash over him.

Each day, Greg helped his uncle with odd jobs: fixing roofs, hauling trash, painting fences in the sweltering heat. Sweat poured down his back as he labored under a punishing sun, the cicadas’ endless song like a needle drilling into his skull.

The work itself wasn’t hard. What broke him were the stares. White men who watched him with narrowed eyes. Women who crossed the street rather than share the sidewalk. Signs over diners, movie theaters, and restrooms that reminded him every hour of his place.

One afternoon, while waiting outside a corner store, Greg watched a young Black man approached by two white policemen. Their hands rested casually on their nightsticks as they questioned him, their voices lazy but menacing. The man kept his head bowed, “Yes, sir” and “No, sir” dropping from his lips like a prayer. When the police moved on, the man stood frozen for a long moment, then vanished into an alley.

That night, Greg couldn’t sleep. He stared at the ceiling fan slicing the darkness above him, the fear that had settled in his chest spreading like ice.

One Sunday, Elijah spread a newspaper across the table and pointed to a grainy photograph of Emmett Till’s mutilated face—black eyes swollen shut, features barely human. Greg’s stomach lurched. His aunt shook her head, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“This is what they do to boys like you who don’t know their place,” Elijah said. His voice was quiet, but the words cracked like thunder in Greg’s head.

In the first weeks, Greg wrote to Kristine nearly every day, pouring out his awe and fear. But as the stories he heard grew darker, his letters changed. He found himself tearing up page after page, unable to explain what he was learning without sounding like he’d lost hope.

What if telling her only frightened her away? What if it made what they had impossible?

So instead of mailing the letters, he stuffed them into his suitcase, watching the pile of unsent words grow.

Late one evening, Greg’s older cousin took him to a bar on the Black side of town to hear a Motown cover band. The place pulsed with life—women in bright dresses swayed to the beat, men slapped backs and hollered. For a few hours, Greg felt light again, laughing as the saxophone’s wail tangled with the smoky air.

But on the walk home, they turned a corner and nearly collided with a white couple stepping from a fancy restaurant. The man's eyes snapped to Greg's dark face, then to his cousin's. His lips curled.

"You boys better scurry on back where you belong," he drawled. The woman beside him giggled nervously.

Greg felt rage boil up in his chest, so sharp it made him dizzy. His cousin's hand clamped on his arm like iron. "Don't," he whispered. "It's not worth dying for."

They kept walking, but Greg's world had changed. Every laugh with Kristine replayed in his mind, every shared note and stolen smile now tinged with danger.

When the bus rolled into Española at the end of August, the light of New Mexico looked different. The cottonwoods were still green, the air still carried the faint scent of red dust, but Greg felt like he was seeing it all through someone else's eyes.

Kristine was waiting in the parking lot, sun glinting off her hair. She ran to him, arms open, her laugh bright as birdsong. He caught her, lifting her off her feet, but the moment their eyes met, she saw it: a darkness behind his smile.

They walked to the chapel steps, their hands brushing but never quite holding. Kristine rattled off questions—how was Houston, did he miss her, did he get her letters? He answered in soft, careful words, afraid of what he might spill if he spoke too freely.

Finally, she fell quiet, searching his face. "You're different," she whispered. "What happened?"

He hesitated. The stories swirled inside him, but all he managed was, "It's not like here. Not even close."

Over the next week, Greg shared what he'd learned in slow, halting pieces. Sitting under the cottonwoods, he told her about Emmett Till, the "Whites Only" signs, the way his uncle's eyes darted nervously in broad daylight.

Kristine's face grew pale. "But... that's there. Here, it's not like that."

Greg looked away, his voice low. "How long do you think it will stay that way?"

Kristine refused to believe fear could steal what they'd built. She found him before class, pulled him into corners to whisper jokes and stories. At lunch, she scribbled him notes filled with hearts and silly sketches. But Greg's laughter came slower now, his smiles shadowed.

He still played with breathtaking fire on the field, racking up touchdowns as McCurdy's season rocketed toward the championship. Each run felt desperate, like he was outrunning something only he could see.

Kristine’s camera captured every moment—Greg leaping past defenders, arms stretched wide, sweat glistening on his brow—but each print showed more than triumph. They showed a young man carrying a storm.

When McCurdy made the state finals and Kristine was named homecoming queen, the tension finally snapped. Tradition called for the team captain to crown the queen. Greg had earned that right on the field—and everyone knew it.

But the day of the ceremony, Principal Andrews took Greg aside. His words were polite, but final: “We think it’s best if Troy does the honors this year.”

Greg stood at the edge of the football field holding his helmet at his side as the crowning ceremony took place. Everything bustled around him, the cheers of the crowd rising. Kristine waited beside the microphone in her gold-colored suit, eyes scanning the crowd for him. When Troy appeared with the crown, her face crumpled.

Greg watched from the sidelines, fists clenched at his sides.

After the game Kristine found Greg behind the gym, sitting with his head in his hands. She ran to him, pulling him close.

“I don’t care what they think,” Kristine said fiercely. “I don’t care what they want.”

Greg’s voice was raw. “But they do. And they’re the ones who can stop us.”

They sat until long after the music from the gym faded, the night around them heavy with loss. Above, the stars burned cold and silent.

Chapter 6 — Forbidden Love

Fall descended on the Española Valley with a hush that felt like the world holding its breath. The cottonwoods shimmered in amber light as cool winds rustled the brittle leaves. McCurdy Mission School buzzed with homecoming celebrations and the start of basketball season, but for Greg and Kristine, each day felt like a fragile victory stolen from the shadows. Every smile was a risk; every glance felt like it could shatter what they’d fought so hard to keep.

Rumors spread faster than the changing leaves. After homecoming night’s humiliating snub, Kristine and Greg found themselves under a microscope. Whispers filled the halls, not just from students but from teachers who once looked at Kristine with kindly eyes, now clouded with suspicion or worse—pity. She heard her name spoken in hushed tones alongside Greg’s, punctuated by sharp, disapproving sighs.

They still met behind the science building or slipped into their arroyo hideaway when they could, but those moments were fewer. Teachers loitered in the halls long after the bell, eyes sweeping the grounds for signs of the couple. Greg began slipping Kristine notes tucked into her locker—scraps of lined paper scribbled with short, urgent messages:

Meet me after last period. I miss you.

I need to hear your voice. Tonight, 11 p.m., payphone.

I'm scared they'll take this from us.

Each note was a lifeline; Kristine kept them folded in the bottom of her backpack, pulling them out at night when the world felt dark and small.

Nights were the only time they could speak freely. Kristine would sneak the phone from the kitchen wall to her room, stretching the cord under the door, the plastic receiver warm against her cheek. Greg's voice on the other end was soft and tired, but hearing it made the world feel right again.

"Today was bad," he admitted one night. "Coach told me you're distracting me from the game. He says if I want to go to college, I need to focus."

Kristine clenched the phone, her heart racing. "That's not fair. They can't blame me for... for this."

"They do," Greg sighed. "I think they always will."

Silence crackled across the line, filled with the muted hum of cicadas outside Kristine's window. They stayed on the line until the first birds began to call, until Kristine's father's footsteps creaked in the hall.

By November, the pressure became relentless. Greg's coaches pulled him aside almost daily. In the boys' locker room, their voices rose above the clatter of lockers and the hiss of showers.

"You have a chance to go somewhere, Jackson," Coach Morales barked, eyes cold and hard. "Don't throw it away chasing a girl who will never be accepted in your world."

Greg swallowed hard. "She's not a distraction. She's the reason I work harder."

The coach slammed a clipboard on the bench. "You think colleges want to see this? You think recruiters want to deal with your... situation?"

Meanwhile, Kristine faced her own barrage. Friends who used to giggle about boys with her now fell silent when she sat down. Teachers praised her writing in class but pulled her aside afterward with awkward warnings.

"I worry you're not thinking clearly about your future," Mrs. Lopez said one afternoon, eyes darting toward the doorway as if someone might hear. "You have talent, Kristine. Don't waste it."

Unable to be together as often, they poured themselves into letters. Kristine wrote at night by the soft light of her desk lamp, her words sprawling across pages:

I hate this. I hate how they look at us, like we're doing something dirty. I wish we could just run away.

Greg's letters came less frequently, each one a precious gift. He wrote about his games, about how the air felt different in the gym now that she wasn't there to cheer him on. He confessed his fear that every good thing he had could vanish because of what they were to each other.

On a cold Friday afternoon, Kristine's father dropped her off early for the game. She slipped into the gym as Greg was finishing warm-ups. For a moment, it felt like old times: his grin, the quick nod they exchanged, the way her heart raced when he dribbled across the court.

The game was electric. Greg wove through defenders with breathtaking agility, each basket lifting the crowd into wild cheers. Kristine snapped photos from the sidelines, each frame a stolen moment of triumph. When the final buzzer rang, McCurdy had won by a single point, the gym a cacophony of whoops and applause.

Kristine rushed to the edge of the court. Their eyes locked, and for a heartbeat, the world disappeared. But before they could close the distance, Coach Morales stepped between them, face stormy. "Jackson," he growled, "locker room. Now."

Greg hesitated, eyes lingering on Kristine, but the spell was broken. The coach's hand landed hard on Greg's shoulder, steering him away.

Over the next weeks, the separation deepened. Kristine caught Greg glancing her way during classes, his eyes full of longing and pain. Between classes, they tried to steal moments—a word here, a touch there—but someone was always watching.

The tension twisted Kristine into knots. At night, she woke with her heart hammering, nightmares of Greg hurt or gone flooding her mind. At school, she felt eyes on her constantly, the weight of their stares pressing her down.

One afternoon, Kristine overheard a group of parents outside the chapel. Their voices were low, but each word felt like a slap: "It's a shame... so talented, but he's ruining his chances... that girl doesn't know what she's doing to him..."

The night before Christmas break, Kristine sat on her bedroom floor, Greg's letters spread around her like autumn leaves. Her mother knocked softly, stepping inside with a worried look.

"You're so sad lately," she said, kneeling beside Kristine. "Your father and I... we think maybe you'd be happier at Los Alamos High."

Kristine's breath caught. The words felt like a betrayal—and a lifeline.

That night, she called Greg. His voice was quiet, strained. She told him everything: the pressure from school, the rumors, the way even teachers looked at them now. “I thought... maybe if I wasn’t here, things would get easier for you,” she whispered.

Silence stretched across the line like an open wound. Then Greg’s voice came sharp and pained. “You think leaving will make this right? You think I can just forget you?”

“I don’t know,” she cried. “I just want you to be safe. I want you to have your scholarship.”

His breath was ragged. “Don’t do this.”

But in her heart, Kristine knew she had already decided.

The next day, Greg slammed his locker so hard it rattled the hallway. His teammates stepped back as he stalked into the coach’s office. “This is your fault,” he shouted, voice cracking. “You made her think she has to leave.”

Coach Morales rose from his chair, face red with fury. “Sit down, Jackson.”

But Greg couldn’t. His fists shook. “You don’t care about me. You don’t care about her. You just want your trophies.”

When he stormed out, heads turned, whispers swirling like dust devils in his wake.

Kristine spent her last week at McCurdy walking through the halls like a ghost. Each classroom felt smaller, each locker clanged louder, every word she spoke tasted like goodbye.

Greg found her under the cottonwoods after the final bell. They stood in silence, snow beginning to fall in soft, cold flakes.

“I hate this,” she whispered.

“Me too,” he said, voice hoarse.

He reached for her, and their hands met in the cold air. They stood forehead to forehead as snow gathered in Kristine’s hair and melted on Greg’s warm cheeks.

“When we’re older,” Kristine began, but Greg shook his head, eyes fierce.

“We’ll find a way,” he said. “Somehow.”

Over Christmas, Greg’s parents decided to transfer him too. St. Michael’s, an all-boys Catholic school in Santa Fe, offered him a scholarship. His father said it was an answer to prayer. His mother hugged him tightly, whispering that it was the only way to protect him.

Kristine's parents told her she'd start at Los Alamos High after the break. "It's a better school," her father insisted. "A fresh start."

But Kristine knew the truth: it wasn't about academics. It was about fear.

On New Year's Eve, they met one final time at the stone well near the chapel. The school was dark and silent around them. Frost glistened under the crescent moon, turning the campus into a world of silver and shadow.

They stood in the moonlight, hands clasped, tears sliding down their cheeks.

"I love you," Kristine said, her voice breaking.

"I love you more," Greg replied, pulling her into a fierce, desperate hug.

When they finally parted, the night felt empty. The soft hush of falling snow was the only sound left as each walked away in opposite directions, their steps the last echoes of a love neither wanted to surrender.

Chapter 7 — Separate Paths

January brought bitter cold to the Española Valley. Snow blew in restless drifts across Highway 84, dusting the cottonwoods around McCurdy Mission School in a blanket of pale silence. But Kristine wasn't there to see it. She drove early each morning to Los Alamos, the atomic city perched high above the valley, where the air felt thinner, colder, sharper—just like everything else in her life since she'd left Greg behind.

At Los Alamos High, Kristine's days passed in a blur of new teachers, unfamiliar halls, and the constant ache of absence. She felt it most in the quiet moments: a cafeteria lunch with strangers, a history lecture when her mind drifted to the way Greg used to doodle in the margins of his notes. Her camera hung unused at the bottom of her backpack, too heavy to carry without him there to catch in its lens.

Her new classmates were polite, curious, even friendly—but none knew the girl she had been. They saw only a transfer student with quick answers and sad eyes. When boys flirted, she smiled out of habit, but her heart felt like it belonged to another life.

In Santa Fe, Greg felt as if the walls of St. Michael's School pressed closer every day. The Catholic brothers who ran the campus believed discipline was the path to salvation; their rigid schedules and barked orders left no room for joy. The stone chapel loomed over the dormitories, casting long shadows on the icy courtyards.

Greg moved through the hallways like a ghost, tall and silent. He poured himself into his studies and football drills, working harder than ever but feeling less like himself with each passing week. Nights were the worst: he lay awake in the dark, picturing Kristine's face, the feel of her hand slipping into his. He heard her laugh in his dreams and woke with a hollow ache in his chest.

In January, they wrote almost daily. Each envelope arrived at Kristine's mailbox bearing Greg's careful handwriting; each page smelled faintly of the library where he penned them late at night. His letters described the gray halls of St. Michael's, his frustration with teachers who treated him like a threat, his rage at the silence that fell whenever he walked into the gym.

Kristine answered with stories of Los Alamos: the sterile classrooms where students never raised their voices, the constant hum of secret work happening behind high fences. She told him how alone she felt in a place filled with secrets.

For weeks, their letters kept them alive. But as winter turned to spring, they became less frequent. Greg's words grew shorter, more guarded. Kristine found herself waiting longer and longer by the mailbox. The spaces between their thoughts filled with fear and resignation.

In April, Kristine sat in her bedroom as the radio crackled with news of Martin Luther King Jr. leading marches in Chicago. She pressed her ear close, hearing chants for freedom, seeing in her mind images of peaceful protesters beaten back by police. Her parents watched from the kitchen, their faces drawn.

That same night, Greg wrote about a heated discussion with a Black classmate who had older brothers marching in Selma two years earlier. "He says the world's changing faster than anyone can keep up," Greg scrawled. "He says someday they won't be able to stop us from loving whoever we want."

Kristine hugged the letter to her chest, daring to believe it might be true.

In May, Kristine's final letter to Greg was eight pages long. She poured every dream, every fear, every memory of their stolen moments beneath the cottonwoods into those sheets. She wrote of the nights she fell asleep whispering his name, of the way his eyes made her feel seen, of her terror that he would disappear from her life forever.

She dropped it in the mailbox with shaking hands, praying he would answer.

Greg's reply arrived two weeks later. It was shorter than any he had sent before—barely a page. The words were spare, careful, edged with a quiet pain:

I can't stop loving you. But every day I see how much they want to break us. I wish I could promise we'd find our way back. But I don't know how. I'm sorry. I'll never forget you.

Kristine read it under the covers with a flashlight, tears dripping onto the page until the ink blurred.

May arrived, hot and dry. Kristine graduated from Los Alamos High in a ceremony filled with polite applause and polite goodbyes. She posed for photos with classmates she barely knew, her smile practiced, empty.

That same week, Greg graduated from St. Michael's, his name called in the echoing gym as parents clapped. His father shook his hand afterward, pride warring with a sadness they both refused to name.

Neither was there to celebrate with the other. They each stepped into adulthood feeling the hollow space where the other should have been.

On June 12, 1967, Kristine woke to the radio announcing the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Loving v. Virginia*. The voices of news anchors, edged with disbelief, explained that the Court had unanimously struck down state laws banning interracial marriage. "Under our Constitution," the Chief Justice read, "the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual and cannot be infringed by the State."

Kristine sat on the edge of her bed, shaking. She turned the dial, flipping stations as each repeated the news: love could no longer be a crime. The words felt electric, a vindication of every secret touch, every whispered vow.

That afternoon, in Santa Fe, Greg heard the same broadcast. He was working at a summer job hauling lumber for a construction crew when the foreman's radio blared the decision across the dusty site. Greg stood frozen as the words sank in.

One of the older workers spat in the dirt. "Damned courts don't know what they're doing," he muttered.

Greg felt his heart pounding. For a moment, he imagined Kristine standing in the sun somewhere, hearing the same words. He wanted to run to her, to tell her they had been right all along.

That night, Kristine lay awake staring at the ceiling, replaying every memory of Greg: the way he grinned across the basketball court, the warmth of his hands on hers, the letters that smelled like old paper and hope. She wanted to call him, to find him, to make him believe they still had a chance.

Greg lay in his room at home, fingers tracing the lines of a photo Kristine had sent him months before. His mother knocked gently, peeking in with worried eyes. "You heard the news?" she asked.

He nodded, voice thick. "Yes, ma'am."

She sat beside him, laying a hand on his back. "You and that girl... you were brave. Don't ever forget that."

The *Loving* case had begun in 1958, when Richard Loving, a white man, and Mildred Jeter, a Black woman, married in Washington D.C., then returned to their home in Virginia—where they were promptly arrested for violating the state's Racial Integrity Act. Facing a year in prison or

exile, the couple chose exile, moving to D.C. But they missed their families, their home. In 1964, they sued Virginia, and the case rose through the courts.

By June 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously in *Loving v. Virginia* that laws banning interracial marriage violated the 14th Amendment's Equal Protection and Due Process clauses. The decision struck down anti-miscegenation laws in 16 states, freeing millions to love and marry across racial lines.

Kristine reread the newspaper's words until they blurred. This was what they had prayed for, what they had dreamed might someday happen. But now, Greg was miles away, their paths split by fear and pressure and months apart.

She stood on her porch that evening, warm winds whispering through the cottonwoods. In the stars overhead, she searched for the patterns Greg once traced with his finger. Tears slid down her cheeks as she whispered, "It should have been sooner."

Greg sat on his back steps, the smell of rain on the breeze, wondering if Kristine felt the same pull in her chest. He clenched his fists until they ached. The law had caught up to what they'd known in their hearts, but it had come too late for them.

Through that summer, Kristine and Greg each took tentative steps into adulthood—Kristine preparing for college classes in Albuquerque, Greg training for tryouts at Adam's State College in Colorado. They carried the memory of each other like a quiet flame, but neither reached out again.

For Kristine, the Loving decision was both a promise and a wound: proof they had never been wrong, and a reminder that the world had stolen precious years they would never get back.

For Greg, it became a silent mantra: *Love should never be a crime*. He let it fuel his determination to succeed, even as the ache of Kristine's absence remained.

Chapter 8 — A Voice from Yesterday

The call came on a bright spring afternoon, the kind of day when the air smelled of new leaves and the sun cut sharp, clean lines across Kristine's desk. She was grading essays in her classroom—freshman papers on *To Kill a Mockingbird*—when the phone rang. The old black rotary on her bookshelf rattled softly with each ring. She considered letting it go, but something in the steady, insistent tone pulled her hand to the receiver.

"Kristine Sinclair," she answered, her voice still carrying the calm authority she'd honed in a decade of teaching.

There was silence on the line, the faint hum of static stretching between them like a held breath. Then a voice she hadn't heard in years, low and warm but edged with something rougher than she remembered, said her name.

“Kristine.”

Her pen fell from her fingers, clattering across the linoleum floor. She closed her eyes, pressing the receiver tighter. “Greg?”

His soft laugh crackled over the line. “I wondered if you’d know me.”

She sank into her chair, her knees trembling. “Of course I know you. I could never forget your voice.”

For a moment, they just listened to each other breathe, suspended in the fragile wonder of finding what they had both thought lost forever. Then Kristine, her voice trembling with awe, asked the question burning through the shock: “How did you find me, Greg?”

His laugh came again, warm but tinged with nerves. “I thought about trying for years,” he admitted. “I’d pick up the phone, then hang up before dialing. I didn’t want to bring the past crashing into your life.”

He paused, collecting his thoughts. “Then, a few months ago, one of my old teammates called me out of the blue. He’d been driving through Española for work and picked up a copy of the *Rio Grande Sun*. He told me he’d read an article about a teacher named Kristine Sinclair who’d won an award for helping students start a newspaper.”

Greg explained how he’d spent weeks calling schools in the Española Valley, each conversation a tightrope walk between hope and disappointment. “Finally, a kind receptionist at Española Valley High put me through to your classroom. When you answered…” His voice caught, low and raw. “I knew I couldn’t hang up.”

Kristine pressed her free hand to her chest, feeling her heart pounding. “You really called every school?”

“I would’ve called every school in the state if I had to,” he said, his voice firm, fierce. “I couldn’t let it end without hearing you again.”

Their conversation drifted to what had filled the years apart. Kristine described her life teaching English, building a student newspaper that gave kids a voice, fighting to keep them engaged in a world that often felt stacked against them. She told him about her husband, a kind man who understood there were parts of her heart he could never reach, and the stepdaughter she loved as her own.

Greg shared his journey: a football scholarship that carried him to Adams State College, then Denver, where he coached high school football and taught history. He told her about his wife, a nurse he’d met in Albuquerque, and his two children who made him laugh and reminded him of everything good left in the world.

As the minutes turned to hours, they traded memories like delicate glass: afternoons behind the science building, letters slipped into books, slow dances under gym lights. They remembered each stolen moment at McCurdy, every breathless kiss and whispered plan.

Greg's voice grew husky as he recalled the night they learned of *Loving v. Virginia*. "I almost drove straight to Los Alamos that night," he confessed. "I wanted to find you, to tell you the law finally caught up to what we already knew."

Kristine's breath shuddered. "I prayed you would. I waited by the phone, night after night."

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I thought you deserved peace."

They fell into easy conversation, sharing what had given them hope since. Kristine spoke of students who came to her broken by poverty and racism, who left believing they could change the world. Greg told her about coaching boys who looked like him and girls who reminded him of her—teaching them their worth in a world that tried to diminish them.

Their voices carried stories of heartbreak and joy, each confession weaving them back together, if only for the afternoon.

As the hours slipped by, their words slowed, silences growing longer. Kristine's voice trembled as she asked the question that had haunted her since she left him at McCurdy: "Do you ever wish we'd run? That we'd stayed?"

Greg exhaled. "Every day for a long time. But I don't anymore. We made each other stronger. I wouldn't be the man I am if we'd hidden. And you... you helped more kids than I can imagine."

Tears filled Kristine's eyes. She could almost see him as he must look now—older, his hair dusted with gray, his eyes still sharp and kind. "I wouldn't trade what we had," she whispered.

"Neither would I," he replied.

They marveled together at how far the world had come, remembering how their own children—now in college and high school—moved through schools and cities where interracial couples were no longer scandalous. How teenagers fell in love across lines once carved in stone. How laws once wielded like knives had been stripped of their power.

Greg's voice grew quiet. "Sometimes I watch kids holding hands on the street—Black and white, brown and Asian—and I think: we helped make that possible."

Kristine nodded, even though he couldn't see. "We did."

Dusk gathered outside Kristine's classroom window, the sky streaked pink and gold. The phone cord twisted around her wrist as they lingered in silence.

"I thought hearing you would break me," Greg said at last. "But it feels like healing."

Kristine wiped tears from her cheeks. “It does. Thank you for finding me.”

“I’ll always be glad I did.”

They paused, each listening to the other breathe, the years folding in on themselves until the space between them felt almost small.

“Goodbye, Kristine,” Greg whispered.

“Goodbye, Greg,” she answered, her voice shaking.

She held the receiver to her ear until the dial tone hummed, soft and final. Setting it down, she stepped onto her porch. The cottonwoods rustled overhead, and in the sky, the first stars blinked awake. She tilted her face upward, remembering nights when they lay beneath those stars, believing anything was possible.

Epilogue — A Better Tomorrow

Years slipped past like pages fluttering in the wind, each one marked by quiet milestones: Kristine’s retirement from teaching, Greg’s final season coaching before moving into school administration. They kept their promise to never forget each other, but they also honored the lives they built separately—families they loved, communities they served, and the steady work of making the world a little kinder than they’d found it.

Sometimes, Kristine found herself standing on her porch as twilight gathered over the valley, the same cottonwoods casting long shadows across her yard. In those moments, she remembered Greg’s hands on hers, their whispered vows of forever beneath the stars, and the days they believed they could outrun the world’s judgments. Though life had carried them down different roads, the echoes of what they shared reminded her of who she was and who she still aspired to be.

Kristine and Greg’s paths never crossed again in person, but they watched the world transform through the eyes of their children. Kristine’s stepdaughter married a man whose roots traced back to Mexico and the Philippines; Greg’s son fell in love with a woman whose grandparents came from Ireland and Kenya. The families they raised were woven together from threads once torn apart by law, custom, and fear.

The Loving decision that once seemed too late for Greg and Kristine’s young hearts became the foundation for these new stories—lives lived openly, love that didn’t need to hide. And while Kristine still mourned what might have been, she took comfort knowing their love wasn’t in vain; it had been a quiet defiance that helped crack open doors for generations who came after.

In the years following Kristine and Greg’s separation, America churned with change. The March on Washington, the Civil Rights Act, and the Voting Rights Act became turning points where courage met conscience. Activists stood in the face of fire hoses and billy clubs so that others

might walk freely. Leaders gave their lives—Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X—each one a reminder that the path to justice demands sacrifice.

The battles for equality that swept through cities and countryside alike had always felt personal to Greg and Kristine. They understood viscerally what it meant to want something the world said was forbidden. Each speech broadcast on crackling radios, each newspaper headline announcing new victories, felt like a small healing of the wound they carried from their teenage years.

A decade after their final phone call, Kristine traveled to Washington D.C. with her husband. They spent a quiet afternoon at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial, the towering granite figure framed by blooming cherry trees. She traced her fingers along the carved words: *“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”*

Standing there, she thought of Greg, of their secret dances in the McCurdy gym, the nights they fell asleep whispering dreams of a world that could not yet exist. She whispered a prayer of gratitude: for his love, for the courage they had found together, and for the thousands of souls who had carried the movement forward so that today, children who looked like them could hold hands without fear.

Kristine taught her students that progress is never a straight line. She told them stories of the bravery of young people who staged sit-ins, of families who risked everything to integrate schools, of ordinary citizens who refused to accept that the world must remain as it was.

She reminded them that while the Loving case and civil rights victories dismantled many legal barriers, hatred and injustice still found ways to twist themselves into new shapes. Redlining, mass incarceration, voter suppression—each proof that the struggle did not end with the stroke of a judge’s pen. It continued with every generation’s refusal to accept cruelty and inequality.

In the final years of her life, Kristine mentored young teachers. She shared how love had taught her the power of empathy, how heartbreak had taught her perseverance, and how history had taught her that lasting change requires both righteous anger and relentless hope.

Greg retired to a small town outside Denver, where he volunteered at local schools and told students about the Loving decision, about Emmett Till, about the heroes of the movement who changed America’s laws and hearts. His stories planted seeds in young minds, reminding them that the freedoms they enjoyed were bought with blood, courage, and love.

On the anniversary of the Loving v. Virginia decision each year, Kristine lit a candle on her windowsill. She thought of Greg, wondering if he stood somewhere under the same stars, remembering the girl who once slipped notes into his locker. She hoped he knew that what they had wasn’t lost—it was transformed into something larger: a legacy of quiet resistance and the belief that love, even when thwarted, can shape the world.

In the end, Greg and Kristine’s story was not a tragedy, nor a fairytale. It was a testament to the quiet power of two hearts brave enough to reach across lines drawn in fear. They taught each other that love’s greatest gift is not always a happily-ever-after, but the courage to see the world

as it is, to imagine what it could be, and to work so that someday, others might walk freely where they could not.

Kristine once told her students: “Our country’s promise has always been that all are created equal—but promises alone don’t build a just society. It takes each of us, with all our flaws and fears, choosing again and again to stand up for what’s right.”

And so, in their love and in their loss, in the paths they forged and the lives they touched, Kristine and Greg’s story became part of a larger truth: that only through struggle, only by refusing to let hate win, can a society grow closer to the ideals it claims to cherish.