



*Leonard Gentine's high school photo*

## **Chapter 1**

# **Out of the Blue**

**1933**

SEVEN SECONDS. In the same amount of time it took nineteen-year-old Leonard Gentine to comb his hair as he prepared to leave the house, fate jolted his life, leaving behind a palpable air of uncertainty and unease.

Much the same as any other Saturday morning, he had arranged to spend the day with Dolores Becker, a woman five years his senior, who lived with her parents in Milwaukee. Navigating over lightly traveled roads, his thoughts had wandered, forsaking careful attention to his driving.

It was 1933, a time when President Franklin Delano Roosevelt introduced the New Deal, a time when the nation still reeled under the weight of the Great Depression, a time when the anemic economy and paltry wages made the purchase of gasoline a luxury. Families often relegated their cars to garages in deference to public transportation.

The car Leonard drove — and older vehicle with an annoying rattle, a stiff steering wheel, and doors that groaned when swung on their hinges — belonged to his parents, Louis and Anna Gentine. Their agreement had been simple. If he paid for the gas from his wages working at an industrial equipment manufacturer, they allowed him the use of their car.

Driving that morning, Leonard thrust his hand out the window, feeling the pressure of the air as he sped down the streets. Two men, sitting on a porch, had turned their heads as he rattled by. Leonard had barely noticed them. Absorbed in thought, he automatically turned right, spinning quickly around a corner.

It was then that fate played its card, waiting for this exact moment. From the midst of reverie, Leonard suddenly grew aware of the slow-moving vehicle — one that appeared to have dropped out of the blue — directly in front of him.

Seven seconds compressed into a single stroke of time. He stomped on the brake pedal. Tires squealed. He spun the steering wheel hard to the right.

Then, as if in slow motion, his car stuttered across loose gravel on an irrevocable path into the rear of the vehicle ahead.

The crash, so sudden, so startling, threw Leonard into the unforgiving rim of the steering wheel. A cacophony of senses consumed him: pressure on his lungs, impact to the head, crunching of metal, shattering of glass.

An odd stillness followed. The world had stopped, briefly, giving him time to collect his wits. With his long fingers barely looped over the top of the steering wheel, Leonard squeezed out his breath.

He surveyed for injuries: His ribs hurt. His left shoulder ached. His forehead sported a small lump. He could see no traces of blood. OK. He breathed easier. *I'm fine*, he remembered thinking. *Just a few bumps*. The car had suffered the brunt of the collision.

Then panic gripped him. His parents' car!

Leonard's knuckles whitened as he gripped the steering wheel. Ahead, the door slowly yawned open, and a finely polished shoe stepped onto the running board followed by its wearer, a sturdy, balding man in his mid-thirties. The man, freed from his vehicle, strode back to the point of impact.

Creaking open the door of his car, Leonard stepped out to offer his apologies and to study the damage. There was no anger, no shouting. The man, dressed in a somber suit and tie, examined the crumpled black metal and frowned. He then looked squarely into Leonard's face. "Son, you're going to have to pay for this."

Leonard's stomach clenched. He hadn't considered the expense of the other vehicle. Where would he find the money for that? Not from his parents. He knew they couldn't afford it. Leonard met the man's eyes and merely nodded agreement.

Then an image of the crash — just moments before the impact — flashed back to him. Could that be right? Leonard inched backward to gain a better perspective of the other vehicle. Yes, it was true. That's exactly what he had seen.

Now, standing mid-street, his mind racing, he made a quick assessment and chose the only recourse he could imagine.