LONG-DISTANCE ROMANCE

Three times a year, Kay went to see Ron at the penitentiary. Here, in the prison's visiting room, the couple celebrates his 46th birthday.

LOVE BEHIND BARS

How a schoolteacher and mom ended up the wife of a murderer jailed for life

by Teresa Carpenter

FREE TO LOVE

Kay, divorced and the mother of two boys, married Ron last August, just six weeks after he was paroled. For Ron, released from a life sentence, it's a first marriage.
It's a rainy evening in the rural dairy country of west-central Maryland. In the kitchen of a modest two-story house, Ron Wikberg, a tall, powerfully built man of 49, sets the table. His wife, Kay, 41, stirs-fries beef and peppers in a wok. "Great cook!" he says appreciatively. "Don't say that before dinner," she warns him, obviously pleased. Then she puts her arm around his neck and gives him an ardent kiss on the lips.

There is something both earnest and tentative in their affection, as if they are rehearsing a role that is not yet natural. "If I had to tell you how few hours we've had together in our lives," says Kay, "you'd laugh. And here we are, old, married, and happy."

In the four years since they met, Ron and Kay had been together slightly less than a month at the time they agreed to talk to Redbook. Before that, Ron Wikberg was serving a life sentence for murder.

Their strange love story has been largely obscured by a blizzard of press attention prompted last June, when Ron became, in his own words, "the first lifer for murder ever paroled in the history of the state of Louisiana."

In 1969, at 26, Ron Wikberg shot and killed the owner of a Louisiana convenience store during a holdup. He was sentenced to life at Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a maximum-security prison known as one of the nation's bloodiest. Murder among inmates was rampant; daily life was marked by emotional deprivation and physical hardship.

During the early years of his incarceration, Wikberg made a disciplined decision: Rather than succumb to de-
Kay is sensitive about what people will think of her for having fallen in love with an ex-convict. She is not, she takes pains to point out, a prison groupie. She is, in fact, a respectable teacher at a private school who teaches math to fourth through eighth graders. She was married with two young children when, four years ago, an unexpected occurrence set her on a collision course with the inmate who was to become her lover.

In February 1988, Kay opened a newspaper to an article that stunned her. A close childhood friend was on death row at Angola. She had last seen him some 20 years earlier, when he had returned from Vietnam. She had lost touch with him only to learn abruptly that he had killed a police officer and was sentenced to die in Louisiana's electric chair. Kay went to a clemency hearing hoping to offer testimony that her friend had been suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, but she was not allowed to speak. The execution was carried out.

"I was in a state of grief," she recalls. "It was a time of real complex emotions for me." In an attempt to come to grips with the situation, Kay wrote to The Angolite asking for a copy of an article her friend had written. She was also angry because a package of trifling mementos and audiotapes sent to her by the condemned man had apparently been opened and some of its contents were missing. She wanted to find the party at fault. Her letter landed on the desk of Ron Wilkberg at The Angolite office.

"She was looking for a friend," he recalls, "someone who would side with her." As a favor to Kay, he undertook an informal investigation into the pilfering and decided that inmates were most likely not at fault. He wrote Kay to explain that if the system were indeed to blame, she would never get to the bottom of the matter.

Kay wrote back, and the two became, as she puts it now, "pen pals." Exactly why they continued to correspond, both find hard to say. Ron replies simply that "the chemistry was right," that he was impressed by Kay's intelligence, sincerity, and sense of humor. "It's certainly not a friendship I would have struck up had this other sensitive thing not entered my life," Kay explains. "But I recognized that there are some pretty normal human beings in prison. It's just that there's a particular reason why they got there."

The "particular reason" Ron Wilkberg found himself serving life, she learned, was the result of a tragic mistake in his youth. The son of a machinist and a legal secretary, he had run afoul of his middle-class upbringing, dropping out of high school at 17. With his parents' consent, he enlisted in the Army. But he was, as he puts it, "too young to be footloose and fancy-free and playing with big toys like guns."

While stationed at Fort Polk, Louisiana, he fell under the influence of a staff sergeant who drew him into a scheme to rob convenience stores and escape the scene in uniform to avoid detection. The pair pulled off their first two robberies with no violence. During the third, however, the owner pulled a gun. Ron shot him in the arm, and the bullet ricocheted into his chest. Taken to a hospital, the victim bled to death eight hours later.

Kay's instinct told her that Ron, though he had committed burglary, had never meant to kill anyone. "Ron's not a violent person," she insists. "I'd never for a moment believe that he was capable of repeating that behavior." She was full of admiration for a man who had managed, through sheer force of character, to rehabilitate himself and even forge a distinguished career behind bars. Moreover, she discerned in his correspondence an effusive and generous personality. His letters radiated a warmth she found missing in her own marriage.

"Before I started corresponding with Ron," Kay recalls, "my marriage was not in good shape. My husband was real internal, quiet, very nonsocial. I lived with him for seventeen years and we didn't talk." As her affection for Ron grew, she says, "I fought it for a little bit because it was against my better judgment. You're talking to someone who honored marriage. But, I guess, when Ron came along, I was leaning against a door and it got opened."

One year after they started writing to each other, Kay took her two sons, then 8 and 11, and left her husband. After obtaining a legal separation, she flew from her Maryland home to Louisiana to visit...
her pen pal in prison. In anticipation of
her arrival, Ron lost 30 pounds and
exercised to tighten his flabby midriff.

On the day of her visit—which hap-
pened to be his forty-sixth birthday—he
catched a glimpse of her getting off the
bus. He now recalls thinking, Wow.
She's nice. As he entered the visiting
room, it was her turn to assess him. She
smiled and said, "You're all right, Wil-
berg." Ron had picked some roses from
the chapel garden and held them out to
her. She began to cry.

Kay believed she was
in love, but she was also
wary. "My feelings were at
stake because I cared a
great deal about him," she
says. "I had to convince my-
self that I wasn't being
taken." She had heard that
many convicts exploited their
girlfriends, hitting them up
for money and using them to
run errands. Ron and Kay, there-
fore, agreed to avoid this
ambiguity; she would never
give him a penny. Ron, in fact, turned
over to Kay his share of the pub-
lishing advance for Life Sen-
tences—some $9,000—which she
used to supplement her teaching salary
in order to support her boys. She also
sought character references from the
vice-chairman of the parole board and a
former warden, both of whom assured
her that Ron was so gentle, so thorough-
ly trusted, that penitentiary employees
whose families lived on prison grounds
allowed him to supervise their children.

Kay needed more reassurance. Once
she pulled aside a female correctional
officer and made a joke about all the
other women she imagined came to visit
Ron. "If she had chuckled along with
me, it would not have been good for
him," Kay observes wryly. Instead the
officer grew very serious and replied,
"You don't know Ron. He's different."

Indeed, Ron insisted that he had no
other serious women friends, although
it was not for lack of opportunity. The
prison held periodic functions that
afforded trusties—convicts such as Wik-
berg to whom special privileges are
granted—exposure to civilians. But
whenever a possibility for contact arose,
Ron says he withdrew. "I had a few
friends that came to visit me," he recalls.
"But no real relationship. I'd push them
away because relationships cause suf-
fering. You can sit next to someone at a
table. Maybe hold hands. Maybe kiss.
But in an hour or two, they're gonna
have to go. You have to go back to your
cell and experience all that pain. It's like
going to a banquet, but you can't eat."

When it came to Kay, Ron felt the
pleasure of her company—whatever the
limitations—was worth the risk of pain.
For nearly four years, they wrote to each
other daily and spoke on the phone sev-
eral times a week. Three times a year,
Kay visited Ron at Angola. Each of
these stays usually lasted four days. On
Thursday and Friday, they would sit
across a table from each other in the vis-
iting room, talking and holding hands.
Since out-of-state visitors were permit-
ted more time and contact with prison-
ers, Kay and Ron were allowed to spend
most of Saturday and Sunday together
in a park set aside for trusties. In the
hills behind the prison, they picnicked,
relatively unattended, in a gazebo.

Since the early days of their cor-
respondence, Kay knew that
Ron had only a slim chance of
ever being released and that if
she continued the affair, she
might be in for serious heartbreak. She
was sustained, however, by the belief that
a man as thoroughly rehabilitated as he
would ultimately find his way out of the
system. Her hopes grew dimmer with
each successive year as Ron applied for,
and was denied, executive clemency.

Then, by an odd twist of fate, Ron
struck up a friendship with a new inmate
who had once been a practicing lawyer.
One day, the friend asked to see Ron's
legal papers. He discovered that during
sentencing, the judge had not ruled out
the possibility of parole. This both
stunned and thrilled the frustrated lovers.
They were still disbelieving when, after
a hearing in Baton Rouge, Ron was re-
leased from prison on June 18, 1992.

This happy development, however,
presented the couple with even more
difficult decisions. The provisions of
Ron's parole would more than likely
require him to remain in Louisiana.
Because she didn't want to uproot her
children, now 12 and 14, Kay had to
decide if she and Ron should try
to carry on a long-distance affair, or
more difficult, a marriage. Was this a
relationship that (continued on page 100)
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could withstand the pressures of day-to-day living in the real world?

Contrary to expectations, the Louisiana parole board showed itself remarkably liberal in allowing Ron the prerogative to travel and relocate. A week after his release, Ron made a ten-day trip to Maryland for what he and his new fiancée termed a marriage rehearsal. This time together, they felt, would let them know if they were truly sexually compatible and if Ron could gain acceptance from Kay's two sons.

At the time of Ron's release, Kay had still not told her children all about him. "They knew that I corresponded with a person named Ron," she explains. "They knew I was in love because they could see it on my face. But they didn't know the circumstances." Kay had been deliberately vague about Ron's history to avoid prejudicing the boys against him. Announcing only that "Ron's coming to Maryland," she and her sons picked him up at the Baltimore/Washington International Airport. Soon after, they went camping on the beach. While Kay went into the trailer to get food, Ron sat the boys down on the sand. "I know all about you," he said, "but you don't know anything about me. And that's not fair.

He proceeded to tell them his life story, answering all their questions without flinching. "I let them know from the very beginning that I love their mother and I was not here to be their father. I chose to be their friend. I said I'd even consider being an uncle."

Ron recalls that neither boy appeared shocked or judgmental. The older, he says, was "open and caring," and exhibited a very just and fair grasp of the situation. The younger, whom Ron describes as more "cerebral," asked questions about criminal justice in general. "I was swed," Ron says, "by the level of understanding."

Kay then introduced Ron to her family. But gradually. The only people in whom she had early on confided the complete details of her unusual romance were her mother, brother, and sister. Only her brother had initial reservations, but these were overcome by meeting Ron in person. "I'm a pretty good judge of character," Kay announces fortuitously. "And because of that, my family backed me all the way."

She had also told a narrow circle of old friends, whose first response, she recalls, was, "Kay, are you gonna get hurt?" She had, however, withheld details from her professional associates for fear that her children might be embarrassed by gossip. Instead, she invited the whole lot of them to a Fourth of July barbecue at which she introduced them to Ron, her fiancé. Only after they had had the opportunity to speak to the engaging, outgoing fellow manning the barbecue grill did Ron confide that he was an ex-convict. Of his reception by Kay's friends, Ron says, "I have not met one moment of negativity." (Although his first meeting with his new wife's ex-husband, he concedes, was "brief and awkward.")

As for sexual compatibility, Ron and Kay simply smile. "It was," says Ron, "the best ten days I could remember in a long time." (When asked what he did for sexual release during the 23 years he was imprisoned, Ron replies, "Probably the same thing any normal man did.")

Scarcely two weeks out of prison, Ron found himself ordering a wedding cake, finding a minister, sending out invitations—doing all the things, in fact, normally done by the bride's family. "That was my way of saying good-bye to Louisiana," he explains. "I wanted to leave with a sweet taste in people's mouths. And I was very honored by the potpourri of people who attended the wedding—seven-three guests, including judges, lawyers, investigators, police officers, ex-inmates, whites, blacks, and family. I don't think a group like that would ever get in the same room at the same time again.

Bride and groom honeymooned with Kay's boys at a 200-year-old plantation in St. Francisville, Louisiana, then drove a thousand miles to Maryland. The Wikbergs say they would have preferred to begin their new life in complete anonymity. But that proved impossible when the success of Life Sentences rendered Ron a very public figure. His celebrity put a certain positive spin on their family life, Kay says. Her older son is proud of Ron's work, while the younger one is torn by loyalties to his natural father, a warehouse inventory worker who takes his sons on weekends. The younger boy demonstrates his hostility to his mother's new husband by ignoring him.

"Their father is a decent guy," Kay explains, "so this is hard for them. They have to interact with Ron, but he's not their dad. We decided to work it out by having Ron be more of an observer than anything else. I do the disciplining. We

During the weeks following his release, he encountered foods such as zucchini that were never served in prison. And he had to learn to manage newfangled apparatuses such as hand-held hair dryers and car stereos. "Freedom," he says, "is an assault on my senses."

ASKED WHETHER SHE BELIEVES HER marriage will last, Kay shrugs. She knows their union will never be viewed as ordinary, but she is irritated by suggestions that women who fall in love with prisoners do so out of neurotic need: "That doesn't fit the description of me," Kay insists. "If we decided to dissolve our relationship, I wouldn't strike up another with another inmate.

"We know about divorce rates," she continues. "But we also know about what it takes to make a relationship work. We talk each day. I sleep less now than I did in my 'former life.' Back then I went to bed at ten-thirty, maybe eleven. It's been rare that we've been to sleep before midnight. We need that time to talk and communicate.

Kay pauses to give Ron a long, steady look.

"I don't regret that I did what I did. That I divorced my husband and married an ex-convict. I don't regret that. It may sound like a youthful kind of thing," she adds, a little embarrassed, "but Ron and I are in love. He demonstrates on a regular basis that he loves and respects me. What else can I ask for?"

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