

A Semi-Important American Life

by David Lettis

Part 1

Lucien

1899

## Chapter 1

A light snow had begun to fall as Lucien walked behind his father and older brother atop a narrow stone wall that separated the healthy trees from the diseased. The snow was uncharacteristic for the island in general, but even more uncharacteristic for early December, and highlighted the official end of an inauspicious and lackluster olive harvest. Lucien pulled his wool jacket tighter around his chest and prayed that his hand-me-down leather boots remained waterproof despite the holes that had formed from natural wear and tear. He remembered when his brother, Erminio, had first received the boots several years earlier. Crisp and stiff, and still shiny from the polish. Lucien hoped one day he would know the feel of new boots; such lavish expenditures were now irresponsible and unrealistic.

When his father, Frano, reached the edge of their property line, Lucien looked down at the worn-down shoes and then used his foot to scuff one of the stones, just as he had done a thousand times before. The wall prevented the fertile dirt of one long row of their orchard from eroding onto another row two feet below it. Lucien's great grandfather had built the walls decades earlier, which successfully kept the rows eight feet wide and prevented the hillside from succumbing to the relentless pull of gravity. Dozens of such rows descended one after the other down the hillside of the Tomatic's property and continued unbroken onto the property of the Markovic family. The two families together shared nearly four and a half acres of arable land, which combined with the cool ocean breeze that flowed across the island of Korcula, created ideal conditions for the roughly 300 mature olive trees. During the spring, the paths would become overgrown in red wildflowers, but during the winter, the dull brown dirt created an inconspicuous canvas for the magnificence of the fruit-bearing evergreens.

Frano greeted Peter Markovic at the property boundary and they shared a melancholy handshake. Peter was joined by his four sons, including Mikel, whose heavy eyelids betrayed a night of heavy drinking, and Lucien's peer and best friend, Dominik. Dominik was looking at the falling snow

from beneath the brim of his wool hat and holding his hands out welcomingly. To the others, the snow was an inconvenience at best, a bad omen at worst. To Dominik, Lucien assumed, it signified a wonderful sales opportunity: canteens of water from the magical snows of Korcula! Peter, too, was staring at the sky, but he embodied the downtrodden-spirit shared by the rest and didn't want to look down. Peter knew that when he pulled his eyes from the sky and looked down, down at the trees and down the hill in general, he had to look at the blight that had claimed half of their century-old trees. The blight had already claimed the Lettunich property in its entirety and began to sneak onto the Markovic/Tomatic lands in mid-summer.

Now they stood at the new boundary that separated disease from health. Below them, they could all see the yellow leaves singed and dotted with brown spots, the peeling bark, and the black, cancerous growths. Just two feet higher, a healthy row. Short, twisted, gray trunks. Strong, green leaves. Beautiful green and black olives. The disease was a slow-moving death, forcing the farmers of Korcula to watch their livelihoods suffer and wilt over time. They all knew full well, though, that should they ask for support during the agricultural crisis, they would only be placing their families into the crosshairs of an the Austro-Hungarian Empire eager to find new conscripts for its growing military.

"I don't think we have a choice," Frano said in their native Croatian.

"Do you know how expensive it will be to replant and grow mature trees?" Peter responded.

"Or how long?" Mikel said, dreading the prospect of the long days.

Lucien forced himself to look at the dead and dying trees. The last day of the harvest had traditionally been a celebration. This year, it signified the beginning of a harsh acknowledgment. Even after pooling their resources when the economic downturn struck ten years earlier, the two families could hardly make ends meet when they had a healthy harvest. As olive oil prices continued to collapse, olive oil became a luxury and now half of their trees had succumbed to a rot. New trees take years to produce olives; the farms might not survive to see them to maturity.

Beyond the trees, Lucien could see the ocean on the south-side of the island. Once they completed crushing and processing the olives, Lucien would typically take a small boat down the coastline to sell the finished product. The rest would be exported deep into the Austro-Hungarian Empire, appropriately taxed, and consumed by men and women that Lucien only read about in class.

Lucien had spent all sixteen years of his life on his family's property on Korcula. He had the characteristically dark features of a Slav and up until a few years ago had grown at a rate befitting of a healthy youth. Now at sixteen he continued to fit into Erminio's clothes from when he was a thirteen-year-old. Times were tough and food was scarce.

Frano stepped off the stone wall onto the path below and plucked a yellowish leaf off of a tree. The leaf had brown-lined holes in it that looked like they had been seared with rolled tobacco. As he dropped it to the white-frosted ground below, the clomps of a horse from the Cyprus tree-lined entry path echoed in the still air. They all turned and looked toward the neighboring stone houses.

"Who in the world could that be in this weather?" Frano asked.

"We'll need to get started right away," Peter said. "If we're doing this, these trees need to be pulled and rooted by the end of January to have the time to turn the soil and plant new trees."

Lucien watched his father nod and then turn and lead the way back to the houses to meet the approaching rider. Lucien took one more moment to look at the dead trees and the large Adriatic Sea expanding out to the horizon beyond them. As he turned and followed behind the rest, he stooped and picked up an olive that evaded the harvest and must have fallen on its own accord. It had already turned black and was probably too ripe and bruised to be suitable for production, so he polished it on his shirt and popped it in his mouth.

The two houses stood in the middle of the two properties, with as many rows of olive trees above the houses that ascended the hill as the rows below the houses that descended the hill. They were basic Croatian stone houses, with two bedrooms and a central family room and kitchen. Between

the two houses was a stone plaza with a built-in stone table and benches, large enough for both families. The olive press sat underneath the Tomatic house and the processing equipment sat underneath the Markovic house. The dirt lane that led into the plaza was a simple offshoot from the cobblestone road that led into Korcula Town.

Mr. Lav Horvat had already dismounted his horse by the time Frano and Peter arrived with their sons back to the plaza. Mr. Horvat was an unnaturally tall man, which played into the air of superiority he liked to hold over the small village of Zrnovo. Rope loops that latched around small wooden bars held in place a long black coat that reached down to his knees. It didn't seem warm enough for the frigid December weather, but Mr. Horvat's skin seemed unperturbed.

"Lav," Frano said suspiciously. Visitors rarely had good reason for making the journey to their house. The local school instructor had even less of a reason to visit than most.

The abnormally tall instructor greeted Frano with a nod and then turned his attention to Erminio. "Keeping up with your studies?" he asked, as though Frano wasn't able to keep his son focused on his school work.

"Yes, sir," Erminio responded.

Mr. Horvat turned to Lucien next. "And you, son? Following in the admirable footsteps of your brother?" When Lucien made a very minimal motion with his head, the instructor turned his attention to Peter. "So, Mr. Markovic, any chance I can convince you to send your boys to my classroom in the spring?"

Peter's large mustache, which parted in the middle and dipped down over his top lip before shooting out across his cheeks, seemed to curl with his eyebrows as he displayed a menacing face of doubt.

"And let them become Hungarian stooges?" he asked. "I think you're a big enough stooge for the entire island."

Mr. Horvat expected the answer and smiled as he nodded. When he didn't speak, though, Frano stepped in. The harvest was a bust. He didn't have time for mindless banter.

"Mr. Horvat, what brings you out to Zrnovo in the middle of a snow storm?" In reality, Frano knew exactly why the village instructor—who for years had operated as a freelance ticket agent for the major shipping lines between Italy and New York—had paid their families a visit in the middle of a rare December snow storm.

Mr. Horvat placed his hand over his chest. "My apologies. I promise my intentions are pure. Might I trouble you for some coffee?"

Frano gave a curt nod and motioned for the group to follow him into his home. Company would traditionally be received at the stone table in the plaza, but the snow and the cold December winds from the Adriatic made for unpleasant outdoor accommodations. The solid stone house was drafty, but the walls retained the heat from the fire and the smells of cooking lamb simmering over the flames were an uncommon pleasure.

"Is that lamb I smell?" Mr. Horvat asked.

"Lucky you, visiting on the day after the harvest."

The two families piled into the house. It wasn't large enough to fit them all comfortably, but they were all cold enough that the cramped quarters weren't a nuisance. The men and two oldest sons sat around the small wooden table while the boys found places on the ground near the fire place. Mrs. Tomatic, a stern woman who controlled everything within those walls, shooed Lucien away so she could turn the lamb. Mrs. Markovic was busy serving cups of coffee and putting out loaves of bread and plates of olive oil. Lucien's stomach grumbled as grease dripped from the roast into the flames, so he hungrily rips off a piece of bread and soaked it in the olive oil before taking his place back by the fire.

Once the coffee began to defrost Mr. Horvat's insides and he felt comfortable enough to remove his jacket, Frano said, "Lav, your annual visits to sell our sons into indentured servitude is practically becoming a tradition."

Mr. Horvat smirked with just his lips. He squinted his eyes to see into the shadows of the house that weren't illuminated by the fire or the kerosene lanterns. Usually, the sun at this time of day would stream in through the windows and fill the house with light and ocean breeze, but the darkened skies made the house like a stone cave, ironically illuminating how few possessions the Tomatic family actually had.

"Your lack of faith in me is perhaps fair," he responded. "As I said, though, my intentions are pure. To be sure, Frano and Peter, my admiration for you both runs higher than maybe any other man on this island. You've held strong. You've raised fine families and run strong farms despite the many headwinds we have all faced. You haven't taken me up on my offers in the past, resisting urges for better lives. For some, I admit, it did not work out as advertised. For many, though, the higher wages enabled the relocation of entire families to the new world. A better life, Frano."

"Is it true you can find nuggets of gold in the streets?" Dominik asked with big eyes.

"Shut up, boy," Peter grunted.

"Don't be quick to judge," Mr. Horvat said. "Perhaps gold nuggets in the road is fanciful, but a fine metaphor it makes for true opportunity. Like I said, my admiration for you both runs high. But don't let your pride and tradition prevent you from making positive changes for this family." When neither Peter nor Frano responded, Lav ripped off a chunk of bread and dabbed it in the olive oil before placing it on his tongue. He continued, "My contracts with the shipping lines have changed. I'm no longer connecting young men with jobs. Indentured servitude, as you called it. I'm making straight transactions. Money for a ticket to a destination of your choosing."



“No job?” Mrs. Tomatic uncharacteristically averred. Frano made eyes at her, but her household duties could wait. She silently demanded an answer. Indentured servitude was one thing. Shipping their sons off to a new world to die of hunger was quite another.

Mr. Horvat opened his mouth to speak, but Frano cut him off.

“Now wait just awhile, I have to agree with my wife. If we’re just going to die of hunger, at the very least we should all stay together and starve as a family.”

“Frano, my friend, at least give me the courtesy of believing I would never send your sons off to an untenable situation, or worse, their deaths. No, I have a far superior solution.”

Peter stood and began to breathe deeply. He looked at Mrs. Tomatic and then at Frano, his long-time friend and neighbor.

“Frano, please tell this man to leave your house. Tell him to get off of our property.”

Frano hesitated. “Peter, I think we should hear him out.”

Frano and Peter had been through a lot together. They were born and raised on Korcula. Whatever politics clouded the mainland, whatever empire laid claim to their country, or whatever small pebble of Croatian independence created a ripple in the population, they lived their lives honorably. Politics didn’t come to their doorsteps. They took over the land where they were born, maintained the legacy trees, planted new trees, and finally joined their properties, cutting costs and making profits to raise their families. There were no secrets between the two men. Never, though, had one of them betrayed the other. That reality changed when Frano allowed Mr. Horvat the opportunity to make his pitch.

Peter remained standing and now viewed his friend with malice. “He wants our sons, Frano. We have to replant our farms and he wants to take away our sons. What are we going to do, hire help? This is madness.”

“I can help replant the trees,” Lucien said from his seated position by the fire. He looked at Dominik. “We can help. We can pull more weight.”

Dominik wasn't so sure, but he nodded his head in the type of blind loyalty that Peter had traditionally expected from Frano.

“You're sixteen, boy,” Peter reminded him. “You're not a man yet. Neither of you are men yet. This is hard work we have ahead of us.”

Frano's oldest son, Erminio, seated next to his father at the table, had been more quiet than usual throughout the day. He said little when they looked at the disease-riddled trees and had not yet voiced support for staying put or heading to a new land of opportunity. Perhaps he had seen the writing on the wall and knew this moment—this decision—lay before him. Lucien depended on Erminio, though, to keep the mood light while their stern father emphasized hard work and shared labor.

“He's very much a man,” Erminio said to Peter.

“Woohoo, there it is,” Mikel exclaims. Mikel, Erminio's peer in both age and position in his respective family, rarely saw eye-to-eye with Erminio. They looked nearly identical—both lankier than their other family-members, dark features, matted black hair that cover their ears from beneath their wool hats—but the similarities ended there. Mikel worked hard at his duties under the firm hand of his father, but he found great pleasure in frequenting the local pub and had no qualms feeling slightly inebriated when he began his morning chores. “I always knew you would be the one to jump ship at the first chance.”

Erminio's eyes burned with a hatred that Lucien has not seen before. Frano must have noticed it as well because he placed a hand on his son's shoulder to prevent him from jumping across the table to defend his honor.

“That's enough, all of you,” Frano said calmly. He looked at Mr. Horvat. “See the kind of duress you bring into this household?”

Mr. Horvat must have witnessed this exact conversation before in other households because he thought nothing of it. He continued to shovel the oil-covered bread into his mouth and paid scant attention to the back and forth he created. When Frano drew him back into the conversation, his mouth was nearly full, forcing him to cover his lips with his hand to show he's trying to swallow the food as quick as possible.

"Gentlemen, I must insist you allow me to finish. Frano, your crop output, how much will it drop this year?"

It was a sore subject for Frano, one he had not yet raised with the entirety of his family yet. He looked around the room at his wife and then at Lucien and then back to Lav. "We'll be down nearly fifty percent from our regular yield."

"Fifty percent. When combined with the drop in prices, you're hit even further. Who can afford to pay for a fine luxury like fresh olive oil anymore?" When no one responded, Lav continued. "I'll tell you who can afford it. Americans. In California alone, wealthy residents and fine restaurateurs are willing to pay for imported olive oil. There is no finer olive oil in the whole world over than from right here. You have told me that."

"How much we talkin'? Dominik shouted, the dollar signs once again flashing in his eyes.

Mr. Horvat appreciated Dominik's assistance in his pitch, so he smirked and said, "I've heard as much as two dollars per bottle."

Both Peter's and Frano's faces dropped. Two dollars per bottle equated to nearly ten Austro-Hungarian Kruna, twenty times the amount they could get selling the oil down the coast.

"No one in their right mind would pay that for a bottle of olive oil," Peter said.

"Imagine if we set up an import/export business from here to California. The drop in crop yields would hardly matter with that type of return. Just imagine."

“It’s a nice fantasy, I’ll give you that,” Peter replied, seeming to calm down with the new information. “But if you take away our sons, we won’t have farms to produce the product.”

Lucien saw his father nod. Lucien had begun to watch his father closely in these types of negotiations and had even used a few tricks himself when Frano allowed him to make bulk sales down the coastline in the spring. This was a standard tactic he employed. If you hear something reassuring but want more information, nod slightly. This will encourage your counterpart to divulge more information, thereby giving you the upper hand. Frano had never disclosed that fact with any sort of guiding clarity, but Lucien was wise enough to connect the dots.

“Which is why my offer does not apply to your oldest sons, Peter. Peter, Frano, your sons are registered. They have their papers, their passports. If the Empire calls on them for conscription and they aren’t present, they can take it out on your family. However, I have certain sway at the harbor. If someone has the right papers, I can ensure they aren’t examined very closely.” Mr. Horvat looked toward Lucien and Dominik huddled by the fire. The flicker from the flames seemed to illuminate their youthful innocence and ignorant exuberance. Both of their eyes lit up when Mr. Horvat, their school instructor and only mentor outside of the family, looked their direction. “Lucien and Dominik will be your ambassadors.”

## Chapter 2

Frano, Erminio, and Lucien sat around the wooden table and gnawed on some cold lamb from the night before. Mrs. Tomatic had set up an uncommon morning feast of lamb, coffee, and two fresh loaves of bread that she had woken up early to bake over the fire. The family took turns ripping chunks from one loaf and dabbing it in olive oil and then sucking the congealed fat off of pieces of lamb. In recent years, the family rarely indulged with olive oil or lamb for breakfast, but Mrs. Tomatic ignored the restraints this particular morning and Frano spoke no objections. Frano and Erminio noticeably let Lucien eat his fair share of the lamb, but there was plenty to go around and as Mrs. Tomatic topped off their coffee, they all for a moment could pretend that their lives were bountiful and Lucien was not about to embark on a journey across the world.

“Father,” Lucien began. He sipped his warm coffee and Frano allowed him the time to formulate his words. “When you went to the Arctic, were you scared?”

“Of course I was scared,” Frano said. His tone more edifying than consoling. “I was a foolhardy boy running away to see the world. You’re a young man working to save his family. What you’re doing is both brave and sacrificial. Plus, I had the luxury of failing.”

Frano didn’t finish the thought, but Lucien understood. He put his head down as tears came to his eyes. The gravity of the situation suddenly struck him directly in the heart. “Will I ever see you again?”

Frano smiled, but as he began to answer, Mrs. Tomatic bellowed, “Yes!” She walked over and dropped a potato sack on the table. Mrs. Tomatic spent the first years of her life in Austria and her Croatian was far harsher than Frano’s. Lucien knew this. Lucien knew she wasn’t angry, merely scared and speaking as delicately as possible, but it still came out as a disciplinary scolding. “Inside is a loaf of bread. It’s for you. Do not share it with the others. And there are twelve bottles of olive oil.”

“Twelve bottles?”

“Yes, son, twelve bottles.” Frano reassumed the parental mantle. “Three are for you. Get safely to California. It should be plenty. Nine are to sell and to provide samples. We have to show our product.”

Lucien eyed the sack for a minute, nodded, and put the sack on the ground. Mrs. Tomatic began crying and turned away to rush into her bedroom.

“She’ll be fine,” Frano said.

“Are you sure Erminio shouldn’t go?”

“Erminio needs to stay here. Once we get the farm back to full operations, we can discuss him joining you.”

“Really?” Erminio asked. He had not been briefed on Frano’s plans.

“Yes. You’re men. You need to take your own paths. You and I will get these trees up. Lucien, get our business up and running in California. I can’t say I’m crazy about you out there on your own... Don’t make me regret this.”

“Father, why aren’t you sending me now? What does Lucien know about setting up a business?”

Lucien might have been scared, but he was less than thrilled by Erminio’s apparent lack of confidence. He felt the need to defend himself and his capabilities. “I can do it! Father, I can do it.”

Frano clenched his jaw and gulped back his emotion. “You’re needed here, Erminio. Lucien can do it. We’re depending on you, Lucien. Mr. Horvat is mad as a bat, but his plan makes sense.”

Lucien nodded. A part of him knew this day was coming. Even at sixteen, he could see changes, he just didn’t expect them to happen overnight. And he assumed Erminio would lead the expansion. It made it easier, though, having the expectation. This conversation had begun long before Mr. Horvat

had arrived at their house the day earlier. He was just the final nudge, the spark, the reasoned instructor who pulled back the curtain on an unforgiving world.

Lucien dabbed a piece of bread in the olive oil and ate it and then sipped his coffee. "I guess I should get going."

"Well now you just wait awhile," Frano said. His tone suggested disappointment. "Lucien, this is the type of thing you must think through. Have you gotten the travel documents from Erminio?"

Lucien looked sheepishly at his father as Erminio then slid his identification and passport across the table with a wad of Kruna. Lucien picked up the documents but didn't open them. He slid them and the money into the pocket inside his wool coat.

"Will you get in trouble?" Lucien asked. He certainly hadn't expected to be the one taking the travel documents after Erminio brought them home when he turned eighteen.

"Serves him right for applying for them last year anyhow," Frano interjected. He realized he allowed past frustrations to sneak into a sentimental moment. "We already gave Mr. Horvat the money for your ticket. There's enough there for a month of food and beds where you can find them. Now you focus on your trip. You won't succeed if you're not focused. When we sail down south, do we talk about the family?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because the family is a distraction."

Lucien looked to the bedroom, wishing he could run in and hug his mother.

"Ma will be fine," Erminio said. "Come on, like you said, we should get going."

Outside in the plaza, the snow had diminished, but the cold weather remained biting and stung Lucien's face. The sun had yet to rise and the cold winds from the sea whipped across the island, abusing the olive trees on the hill and making the Cypress trees that lined the lane curve in futile

resistance. Erminio had already mounted his brown horse and held the reins of Lucien's smaller mare whose white skin was speckled with gray spots. Lucien stood with his father and looked around the property, his home and everything he knew. He wanted to tell his father he made a mistake, but he didn't. They finally looked at one another. Frano could no longer resist and he grasped his son in his arms. Lucien's growth was stunted and he had not yet reached Frano's height, so he buried his face into his father's shoulder.

"You take care of yourself, you hear me, son?" Frano said when they parted.

Lucien nodded as he always did when his father gave an order. "I will. And I'll get the business up and running as soon as possible. I know I can do it."

"I know you can, too. Just get there safely. Send word when you've arrived."

"I will."

"When you get into Korcula Town, look for Mr. Horvat, okay?" Frano looked to Erminio. "You don't leave him until he's connected with Mr. Horvat."

"Or maybe I'll sell him to the highest bidder," Erminio replied.

Lucien couldn't help but smile. Erminio's dry humor had gotten them through a lot and Lucien appreciated it now even though he knew his older brother was using his sarcastic wit to hide his emotions. Frano was still about to admonish him when they heard the front door open to the Markovic home. Lucien smiled broadly when Dominik and Mikel appeared. Dominik had a potato sack of belongings slung over his shoulder and Mikel ushered him to Frano.

"You're coming?" Lucien said. Peter had consented to his departure the day before, but reluctantly. Lucien had been convinced his friend wouldn't make the journey.

"Course I am. Not going to let you snatch up all the gold."

Frano eyed the two Markovic boys suspiciously.

"Peter really knows? He consents?"



“He knows,” Mikel said for his little brother. “He paid just like you did. Dom has my papers, but...”

He paused, making Frano even more suspicious. “But, what?”

“Pa won’t let us take the horses. He’ll have to ride with Lucien.”

Frano nodded understandingly. “You said all your goodbyes?”

When Dominik nodded and looked to his brother to make sure he gave the right answer, Mikel could barely contain his emotions. He grabbed Dominik and pulled him close, dropping his eighteen-year-old machismo to reveal the love he has for his brother. Just as quickly as he pulled him in, though, he pushed him away and affectionately slapped him on the shoulder.

“Hang on, I have something for you.”

Mikel took the potato sack and slipped a pint of whiskey and a few extra dollars in.

“Okay then,” Frano said, “let’s load up.”

Frano helped his son hop up onto the mare. Once Lucien had taken the reins from his brother, he helped Dominik up to the saddle behind him. Dominik held onto Lucien to steady himself as Mikel handed him his sack of belongings. Erminio carried Lucien’s bag and lightly kicked his horse and clicked his tongue. The two horses carried the boys down the road, leaving Frano and Mikel standing in the plaza. Lucien could sense Dominik turning around, but he kept his eyes forward. He told himself he never turned to look when he left the house for a journey to sell olive oil down the coast, and this was no different. Just another trip to sell the family’s product. In reality, if he turned around, if he saw his father and Mikel and maybe even his mother, if he saw the olive trees and the plaza where he had played and grown into a man, he wouldn’t be able to continue.

Once they left the property, they turned onto the main road that led from their town of Zrnovo to the capital of Korcula, Korcula Town. The road into town was about three and a half kilometers and

took about half an hour. Lucien had made the ride a thousand times, but every time he imagined he would be riding back.

“Ya scared?” Dominik asked about midway through the journey.

Lucien didn’t answer. Instead, Erminio looked at them both and said, “You two stick together, no kidding now. You two need to stick together.”

“Hey, Erminio,” Dominik said, “you upset you aren’t comin’ along?”

Now Erminio stopped talking.

“Of course he wants to come along.” Lucien still didn’t turn around, but his words put the conversation to rest.

After twenty minutes, the steeple of St. Mark’s Cathedral marked the initial greeting of the capital. Shortly thereafter, the red tile rooves of the town came into view, creating a fiery glow as the early-morning sun rose over Croatia and made them shine against the backdrop of the blackened sea. Soon, the dull white stone of the buildings came into view and then the ancient gray stone of Korcula Town’s wall. The citizens of Korcula were proud of their wall, even if it wasn’t as prestigious and imposing as Dubrovnik’s, but it was built to keep people from getting in. Now Lucien and Dominik were looking for a way out.

The town had yet to wake up when they arrived and the cobblestone streets had yet to feel the touch of feet, but the port was already buzzing. Erminio stopped his horse outside the port entry and dismounted. He held the reins of both horses while Dominik and Lucien dismounted.

Lucien looked at his older brother. “You’re not coming?”

“I should stop here. Wouldn’t be safe if we were seen together.”

Lucien nodded, accepting the logic. Satisfied, Erminio handed Lucien his sack of belongings and then pulled him in tight.

“San Francisco. Lucky bastard.”

Lucien laughed. "Guess I'm just braver than you."

"Nah, I just like mom's cooking."

They hugged once more and then Erminio took the horses and headed back to Zrnovo. Lucien and Dominik stood shoulder to shoulder and watched him leave. When he turned the corner and the clapping of the horses dissipated, they slowly turned to stared at the raucous activity of the bustling port still covered in shadows. They slung their bags over their shoulders and together walked onto the stone plaza. Small waves lapped up to the very edge of the plaza, the high tide covering virtually all of the small beach.

As they walked around the rounded stone fortress that was built hundreds of years prior, the crowd became thicker, so the two boys instinctively clutched to one another's pants to not get separated. Lucien gulped when he saw a three-mast ship tied to the dock with thick ropes. He had seen plenty of such ships in his sixteen years, usually at sea as the commercial vessels carved paths through the smaller fishing boats with their imposing sails. He had always dreamed of joining a crew and navigating out of the Adriatic into the great unknown, just like his father had when he joined a crew to the Arctic Circle. He never imagined how scared he would be to go aboard or to actually see a new world.

The ship grew larger as they moved closer. They were so transfixed by it that they failed to see Mr. Horvat, whose head topped out nearly a foot above the crowd. Fortunately, though, Mr. Horvat saw them. Wearing the same paper thin black coat as the day before, he pushed people aside as he made his way for them. He stopped in front of them and pointed, his face creating the impression he recognized them, but had trouble placing their faces.

"Erminio, right? Yes, Erminio." He looked to Dominik. "And Mikel. Right. Erminio and Mikel. I assume you both have your travel documents verifying your names?"

Lucien and Dominik looked at one another, their eyes silently asking the other if Mr. Horvat was correct, and then looked back at their instructor-turned-travel-agent and nodded.

“Good boys. Okay, follow me, let’s get this journey underway.”

Mr. Horvat turned so quick that the tail of his jacket swooshed through the air. He plowed a path through the crowd of people, many of whom were clamoring about coming aboard, and made sure Lucien and Dominik stayed close. They now moved so close to the ship that they could not see out to the sea.

“Giovanni! Giovanni!” Mr. Horvat waved his hands as he demanded the man’s attention.

“Giovanni! I have two more for you.”

The man apparently named Giovanni pushed away a woman and stepped toward Mr. Horvat. Giovanni was a fat Italian man, with suspenders that framed an enlarged belly underneath a half-buttoned shirt. He had a large mustache, but the rest of his face also hadn’t see a razor in several days. He looked at Lucien and Dominik and then clenched his jaw and itched his cheek as he looked back at Mr. Horvat.

“Lav,” he said in Italian, which Lucien could understand but struggled to replicate. “Your cargo keeps getting younger and younger.”

“Relax, old friend, I wouldn’t put you in a compromising position. They have travel documents and the requisite money. Boys,” Lav continued as he turned to them. He realized what he had said and then continued, “Men, this is Giovanni’s ship. You will take this to Ancona. From there, you’ll take a train to Genoa. In Genoa, you’ll be placed in a boardinghouse until the steamer heads out. You’ll be given medical exams, vaccinations...”

“Don’t forget the questionnaire,” Giovanni said.

“Ah, yes, thank you, old friend. An easy questionnaire. Answer truthfully as the two strapping young men that you are. When you arrive to New York, you’ll be greeted by my colleague and he’ll ensure you get placed on a train to San Francisco. Okay?”

Lucien and Dominik looked at their instructor as though he had just spoken a language other than the Croatian they had all been raised on.

“Okay, you two take care of yourselves. Make Korcula proud.”

Mr. Horvat didn’t wait for a response. He turned and began scanning the crowd for additional recruits.

“Alright, you two, on board. There’s no room underneath, so find a place on the deck. It’ll be cold, but it’s a short journey, little over a day. Move, before I examine those travel documents more closely.”

Lucien and Dominik hustled up the ramp and onto the ship’s deck. They weaved around crewmembers prepping the sails for the journey and made their way to the front. With dozens of people already seated—some younger, some older, some very old—they sat where they stopped.

“You bring any food?” Dominik asked.

Lucien reached into his bag and ripped off some of the bread his mother gave him. He figured that when his mother told him not to share, she didn’t mean with Dominik. Lucien, though, wasn’t hungry. While Dominik voraciously consumed the still-warm bread, Lucien looked around at the passengers and eventually made eye contact with the sixteen- or seventeen-year old girl seated directly next to him.

“Hi,” she said, extending a hand. “I’m Marija.”

“Hi, Marija. I’m... Erminio.”

“You should really call me Mary, since that’s what I’ll be called in America. I’m from Dubrovnik,” she said.

“Korcula.”

“Are you scared?”

“A little.”

“Well, don’t be. My father’s already in America. He says it’s splendid. You speak English?”

Lucien shook his head.

“Well you still have a few weeks to learn, that’s for sure. Father says you can do anything in a few weeks. I’m sure you can learn English.”

“Do you speak English?”

“Of course I do. I’m going to America.”

### Chapter 3

True to his word, Giovanni honored the agreement he had struck with Mr. Horvat and a day later funneled the passengers off of his ship and immediately directed them to the port train station for a journey across Italy to the port in Genoa. Lucien, though, could barely believe it had only been 24 hours. His clothes were damp from the white wash of a rougher-than-usual Adriatic and the cold night air had chilled him to his very bones. He heard stories from sailors talking about the frigid temperatures that could only have formed straight from the very depths of the ocean. Some men would lose their minds as the icy weather created a despair that consumed them in the blackness of the nights. No whiskey or dreams of women under the covers could fight the freezing agony. Lucien always assumed he understood when he spent nights on the boat sailing down the coast. But the coast and the middle of the Adriatic are incomparable.

Lucien's cheeks and fingertips were blue when he passed Giovanni and walked onto the solid ground in Italy. The warmth of the rising sun made his jacket steam and his body tingle with pins and needles. Regardless, he shivered and pulled his damp jacket tighter as he trudged past Giovanni, who at the moment was shouting at the port patrol agent that had the unfortunate job of keeping track of all of the foreigners coming into Italy. Lucien, Dominik, and Mary were in the middle of the large crowd at the train tracks, awaiting further instruction.

While Lucien and Mary continued to shiver, Dominik seemed unfazed by the rough overnight experience. Even as the steam from his jacket intensified, his eyes were trained on the West. "America, here we come. I can feel the gold in my fingers. Can't you feel it, Luc... Erminio? Can you feel the gold?"

"Oh brother me," Mary quipped. "You're not going to find gold in America. I hope you have a better plan than that that."

Dominik frowned. He looked to Lucien. "Who is this girl?"

"My father sent me letters every week from New York. Never talked about no gold."

"Well, maybe your father is looking in the wrong places."

Mary rolled her eyes. "How about you? You got a better plan than gold?"

Lucien looked at her from between his huddled shoulders, wondering how they were speaking so intelligibly. Why weren't they as cold as he was?

"I think this was a mistake," he finally said. "Think Giovanni will let me take the ship back with him?"

"Don't mind him," Dominik said to Mary. "His mother coddled him. He'll be fine."

Giovanni waded through the crowd and stepped up onto the landing of the train. He turned and looked at the Croatians that had paid him for the opportunity to leave their homes behind. "Okay, welcome to Italy," he said in Croatian. "I know you're all cold, but you'll be warm soon enough on the train. Your tickets are paid for and the journey should take about 24 hours. You'll get in tomorrow morning and be met by the TransAtlantic Shipping Agency. Whatever steamer you're taking, it might not be ready. Be prepared to stay in a boarding house for up to a month."

Whispers immediately began to rise from the crowd. No one expected to be stuck in a Genoa boardinghouse for a month. Giovanni raised his hands to try and calm and silence the crowd.

"It's very unlikely, I just don't want a bunch of Slavs taking the train back and demanding return passage to Croatia." He motioned to two of his crewmembers standing beside him who were holding crates of food. "When you board the train, get some salami, cheese, and bread. This should last you until you get to Genoa. You'll be served coffee on the train. Once in Genoa, the shipping company will provide you your food until you arrive in New York. Any questions?"

Several people began to clamor for more information and a few others began to position



themselves closer to the men with the food. Giovanni wasn't interested in answering any questions, though, so he said, "No? Okay, good. Thank you for choosing Giovanni's smuggling."

The majority of the people, cold and weary, began consolidating into the empty spaces of the crowd, eager to claim their food and sink into the warmth of the train car. Lucien had been on a train a few times as he and his father went deep into the countryside looking for customers, but never in Italy, and never in one so massive and grand. The train stretched as far as thirty cars down the track, far beyond Lucien's line-of-sight, and the engine was a more imposing model than the ancient chuggers that moved at a snail-like twenty kilometers an hour. At the moment, he was too cold and too exhausted to acknowledge the momentous occasion of his life. A new country, a new train, a new experience, a new life, all within forty-eight hours of a fateful visit from his school instructor. No discussion. Mr. Horvat arrived and his father shipped him out. It took all of twenty-four hours for Lucien to develop a deep resentment.

It must have been the resentment, the anger, that clouded Lucien's vision and made the air echo around him.

"Hey!" The voice thundered in his right ear. "Hey, you want your salami or not?"

Lucien stood huddled, moving incoherently with the crowd, and with the tunnel vision more aptly fitting of an eagle. He slowly turned his head to look at the man holding the white-skinned salami in his face.

"Hey, Lucien, are you alright?" Dominik asked. When Lucien didn't respond, Dominik spoke directly to the man. "Sorry, the trip over was a little long. I'll take it for him. Mine too."

Lucien watched Dominik take the two salamis and then felt his friend slide his arm around his back.

"Come on, let's get onboard before they quarantine you and throw us in the ocean."

"Hey, what about your cheese and bread?"

Dominik stopped, but his hands were full.

"I'll get them for you two." Mary said. "We have to stick together, right?"

Dominik stared at her for a moment, but then nodded once and helped Lucien onboard. The coal-powered trains in Italy in the 1890s were much more elegant than the small cattle-cars Lucien had ridden, which were built forty years earlier. These trains had wood paneling and tables in between two front-facing spacious wooden seats. Curtains covered the windows and the soft touch of carpets comforted their feet.

"Come on," Dominik said. "Come on, Lucien, move your feet. I didn't make this trip to drag you around."

They made their way up the aisle, but the booths were already filled. Mary pulled the doors open and they stepped through to the next car. About halfway up, they found one still vacant. Dominik dropped Lucien into the seat and plopped their belongings on the table. He pulled out the bread and a bottle of olive oil from Lucien's bag and then stuck both of their potato sacks in the storage above. He slid in next to Lucien, who weakly slid closer to the window and laid his head against the curtain. Mary collapsed into the seat across from them and looked at Lucien with concern.

"Give him some water," Mary demanded of Dominik.

Dominik did as directed, pouring his canteen into Lucien's mouth. Some of the water slid down his chin and disappeared into his still moist jacket.

"What is wrong with you, Lu... Erminio? Why are you acting like such a baby? We're on our way and you're ruining it."

"He's sick, you dimwit."

Dominik once again glared at her.

"That boy's got the chill," a woman said as she stopped at their booth. "Mind?" She motioned to the empty seat next to Mary. When Mary didn't object, she placed her leather bag in the storage and

removed her jacket. She held it in her lap as she sighed in relief now that she was off of her legs. The woman was different than the other passengers. She spoke Italian, but with an English accent and her clothes were of a finer quality than the old woolen rags that Lucien and Dominik wore. But then again, Mary's clothes were of a significantly finer quality as well.

"What do you mean he's got the chill?" Dominik asked.

"I mean he's got the chill. I've seen it dozens of times. They stick you on the decks of those ships and..."

"And what?"

"And you young boys ain't supposed to be sufferin' like that is all."

"We ain't young boys. And I'm not sick. Maybe he's just weak."

"Well, weak or not, I recommend you keep him warm. You all headin' to America I 'sume? Well, you best hope that fever doesn't spread to his ears. Ships don't allow passengers with infections."

"You're not heading to America?" Mary asked with sudden fascination.

"Me? Oh heavens no. Nothing there but heartache."

"That's not what my father says."

"Well, it seems what I have to say doesn't matter then. Doesn't change the fact. That boy has got the chill and if you're all his friends, you'll see to his care. Here, give him a sip of this whiskey. It'll warm his insides."

She pulled a flask out of her jacket pocket and Dominik asked no questions as he helped Lucien take a small sip. Dominik motioned if he could indulge, and the woman consented. After taking a sip and then washing it down with a quick second, he handed the flask back and she slid it back in her jacket.

After a few minutes, the train began to lurch forward one chug at a time as the engine cranked the wheels. It didn't move fast, but as the train dragged them away from the port, Giovanni's ship and

the sea itself faded from view. They were all silent as it brought them out of the city and into the countryside. Lucien had been excited to see the lush greenery and vineyards of Tuscany, but the methodic rhythm of the train lulled him to sleep and any time he awoke, a delirium overtook his senses, alternating between fits of freezing and spells of intense heat. He drifted in and out of consciousness, at one point hearing Mary ask Dominik why they insisted on calling Lucien Erminio. She was, after all, smart enough to know his name was really Lucien. By that time, the woman, whose name Lucien never heard, had departed or switched seats. Dominik had joined Mary and they were playing cards and eating salami. When Mary saw Lucien open his eyes, she quickly rose and shoved a piece of salami in his mouth. He washed it down with some water and then took advantage of the empty bench and laid down.

The rest of the trip was a blur. Lucien's fever continued to overwhelm him until hallucinations robbed him of his reality. In his dreams, he was at home, the sun was shining and the olive trees were blossoming. Smells of grease and a crackling fire came from the open-air oven on the plaza and he and Dominik were running down the hillside to go fishing off the docks before the sun set. Dark images of a Genoa boardinghouse occasionally seeped into the dream. Images of doctors and people shouting disturbed the serenity of the island. But then Mary's face would appear and the noise and the darkness would fall away and Lucien would once again be with his father and his brother, prepping for a bountiful harvest.

The next thing Lucien knew, Mary was once again looking down at him. It was no longer a dream and Lucien's eyes opened wide as he emerged from a small hole back into his body. He laid on a thin mattress over a wooden board and his head rested on a too-soft pillow. The sheets were damp and he had sweated through his clothes. Mary's face came into focus. She was holding a damp rag to his forehead. When Lucien began to move, her eyes lit up and she calmly shushed him.

"Where am I?"

“It’s okay. We’re on the steamer. We left Italy two days ago.”

Lucien’s eyes opened a little wider and saw the bottom of a mattress on top of wooden planks above him. He looked around the room, which could barely squeeze the two single-bunk-beds in among the exposed pipes. Mary was on her knees and crammed into the space between the beds and the wall. Her face was stained with dirt and soot and sweat had soaked through her dress. Only then did Lucien notice the loud buzzing of the motors powering the rotors. It filled the room and Lucien finally felt the motion of the vessel at sea cutting through the open water. As he tried to sit up, Mary held his shoulder down.

“Where are we?”

“The steamer *Aller*. We left two days ago. We’re out in the Atlantic.”

“But, we were on the train.”

“You got a fever. We spent two days in the boardinghouse. They almost wouldn’t let you on, but...”

“But what?” Lucien stared at Mary from his sweat-stained sheets. When she didn’t answer, he asked, “Where’s Dominik?”

“Dominik?” She raised an eyebrow and cocked her head to the side. “You mean Mikel, *Erminio*.”

Lucien smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, we didn’t have a choice.”

“I know. My travel papers had just come through. That’s why it took me so long. My father couldn’t afford it for nearly a year.”

Lucien sighed and looked at Mary’s face. He hadn’t taken the time to analyze it while he was on the deck of *Giovanni’s*. Now he could see how smooth it was, how her cheek bones perfectly curved from her eyes to her chin. Her hair was pulled back and even though he knew she liked to appear proper, she held no apparent qualms about the filth of steerage.

“So this is steerage, huh?” he asked.

“Lovely, isn’t it?”

He nodded while he asked, “Where *is* Dominik? Out getting drunk I assume.”

Mary smiled and dabbed his forehead with the wash cloth.

“You underestimate your friend, I think.”

As she said that, the door to the cabin burst open and a cloud of dirt and sewage filled the room as a man entered. Lucien didn’t recognize him at first, but as the man pulled his hat off and wiped the soot from his mouth with the sleeve of his blackened shirt, Lucien saw the eyes of the boy he once knew as Dominik.

“Is that fool awake yet?” Dominik declared. “I’m going to kill him.”

## Chapter 4

Lucien, Dominik, and Mary sat in the small berthing room—Mary on the floor and Lucien and Dominik leaning against the wall on the lower bunk—and listened to the hum of the engines. Dominik smoked a cigarette and in celebration broke out the bottle of whiskey his brother had slipped in his bag. He sipped it and passed it to his friend, who respectfully put it to his lips but let very little into his mouth. As the whiskey coated Lucien’s mouth and his senses began to return to normal, the stench of exhaust and sewage filled his nose.

“What is that God awful smell?”

“Our life,” Dominik replied.

“Steerage,” Mary confirmed. “That’s what we are, for now.”

“For now,” Dominik said. “Until you get back to your father that abandoned you. Then you won’t be steerage anymore. This girl. We are steerage. If there’s one thing these past few days have taught me, it’s that we’re steerage.”

Mary looked at her knees and smiled. “Maybe you are.”

Dominik shook his head and blew smoke into the air. He gave the impression that his arguments with Mary had reached a point of acceptance.

“If we’re in steerage, why are we in a cabin?” Lucien asked.

Both Mary and Dominik looked at him as he tried to fill in the gaps.

“They weren’t going to let you onboard, with your fever and all. No one wanted you around in the main quarters. I had to agree to work in the engine room to get you onboard and in a room. No big deal, really. Happy to do it. I’m working my way across, plus, I know you’ll never be able to repay this. You’re indebted for life!”

Lucien smiled. “You really did that for me?”

Dominik tried to maintain his air of masculinity but couldn't. "Of course I did. We're in this together."

"Dominik," Mary said.

"What?" he said through a drag of his cigarette.

"Tell him."

Dominik glared at her.

"Tell me what?"

Dominik glared for a second more and then looked at Lucien. "Your olive oil."

"Yeah?"

"I had to give most of it away for payment."

Lucien propped himself even more. His muscles were weak, but his livelihood had just been scuttled. He felt more aware than at any point since he had left his home in Zrnovo.

"What do you mean you gave away the olive oil?"

Dominik shrugged. "Doctor wasn't gonna sign off on you. Border police weren't going to let you leave without filling out their questionnaire. Ticket checker wasn't interested in letting someone with a fever onboard. Turns out, olive oil is in short supply in Italy. Kind of funny when you think about it. Here we are going to California, could have just shipped it all to Genoa."

"Even I understand the economics that you're missing," Mary said, continuing to dab at Lucien's forehead. Lucien tried to lean forward, but his muscles were still weakened and the stench of the room made him queasy. Mary pushed him back against the wall. "Don't exert yourself too much. My father always says you have to listen to your body."

"You and your father," Dominik said, taking another drag of the cigarette and filling the room with smoke.

"Dominik, how much did you give away?"



Dominik licked his lips and squinted his eyes in a defensive posturing. "Nine bottles."

"Nine bottles! Dominik, that's... What's the point of going to California if we don't have the olive oil? We have to show it. We have to have samples. It's like when we go on sales trips. We have to let people taste it." Lucien's words failed him and he stared at his longtime friend in silence. What would his father do in this situation? His father would persist; turn obstacles into advantages. He used to tell Lucien and Erminio stories about being stuck in the Arctic ice. Polar bears would curiously approach the wooden vessel, allowing the stranded sailors to easily pick them off for meat, oil, and fur. Had they not gotten stuck, the terrain would have been too treacherous to hunt. Getting stuck had saved their lives, even though it prolonged their voyage for over a year. What would his father do under the current set of circumstances? "So we have one bottle left?"

"Yeah. And about half of another."

Lucien rubbed his eyes, which were growing tired from the effort of seeing the world around him. He half-wondered if this were still dream; if he were hallucinating and Mary's face would once again break the agony. Could this actually be their current status?

"Okay, so we store it. Are they serving food?"

"If you can call it that," Mary said. "It should keep us alive until we arrive. We're not even allowed on the top deck to see the ocean."

"Do you think our fathers knew it would be like this?" Lucien asked Dominik.

"Mr. Horvat sure as hell did. We're thinking too small, though. This is a small price to pay to get to America. Honestly, should have made this trip years ago. Wasting time in that orchard."

"Your family's orchard?" Mary asked.

"What of it?"

“Okay, both of you stop. I’m too tired for this. We’ll have to think of a plan. We need to get that bottle to San Francisco. Seriously, Dominik, whatever big plans you have, we’re doing this for the family. We have to get some people interested in the product.”

“Okay, *Frano*. Sound like your dad, you do. Lucien, America is going to be like a giant festival. There won’t be any selling. We just show up and people will hand us money.” He started laughing in hysterics, either because he knew how ridiculous his comment was or because he had succumbed to the delusion of riches.

Lucien leaned his head back against the wall and wondered if he could convince the ship’s captain to turn around and drop him off in Genoa. He could make his way home and help his father replant the orchard. Now he was being delusional.

“It’s okay, Lucien,” Mary said. “It’ll be okay. You’ll get to California. You’ll get the business off the ground.”

“How come you’re being so nice to us?”

Mary blushed. “We all need friends. Besides, father told me to find some friends on the trip and stick together. Safer that way.”

As they all took comfort in her words, music found its way through the thin walls that even the buzz of the engines couldn’t drown out. The population at the bottom of the ship—the steerage, the shipping-line moneymaker, the people who were barred from the sight of the wealthier passengers—started to stir. Tin cups began to clink and feet began to stomp. Lucien craned his head to hear more.

“What is that?”

Dominik grinned. “The day is over, the party’s just beginning. I’m gonna wash up and I’ll come back to get you two.”

He opened the door and disappeared, momentarily allowing the noise of the festivities an unencumbered pathway to their ears. When he closed the door and left Lucien and Mary alone, Mary

sighed and said, “Interesting friend you have there. Maybe you should take a pass on tonight. We can get started on your English lessons.”

“English lessons?”

“Yeah. America, remember?”

Lucien nodded. “I’m not sure I’m up for that at the moment. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Alright then, well you must be starving, want to get some food?”

“Is it edible?”

“In your condition, anything will help.”

Mary reached under the bed and pulled out two round bowls with dented rims and two smaller cups of the same metallic-looking material. She hands Lucien a bowl and a cup and then stood up.

“What are these?”

“Our dishes. We can’t get replacements, so don’t lose them.”

Lucien slid off of the straw-filled mattress and let Mary go ahead of him out the door since there wasn’t enough space for them both to stand. His legs could barely support his weight, but his blood slowly began to flow again and color slowly seeped back into his cheeks. When he stepped out of the door of his small cabin, it didn’t take him long to realize how lucky he had it. The below-quarter deck—or the steerage compartment—had such low ceilings that men greater than six feet in height had to duck to walk around. The bunks filled nearly every inch of wall space, leaving less than a foot of space between each set. The darkened chamber smelled like a soiled bathroom and the only light came from the sporadic kerosene lamps hanging every few yards.

As his eyes adjusted, he saw bodies on the floor, but he was unsure if they were sick, sleeping, or even alive. A young man, probably no older than Lucien, leaned against the wall directly outside his door. He had strength enough to hold his head up, but his eyes were glazed over and his lips moved without speaking.

“Should we help him?”

“No.” Mary’s response was curt and cold. “We take care of ourselves.”

Lucien stood unmoving, stunned at the conditions in which he currently found himself. “How many are there?”

“Greater than eight hundred,” Mary replied, “but no one knows for sure. Come on, the cafeteria is this way. The women’s quarters are through that gap over there. Supposed to be sealed off, but no one seems to care much about the women coming to the men’s side.”

She began to lead him through the throngs of people who were filling their glasses with whiskey and congregating around a makeshift stage for the band. Some of the passengers rearranged the lanterns to bring more light to the musicians, of which there were about ten.

“Band changes every night,” Mary said. “Tonight’s pretty small.”

Lucien has never heard the melody they were currently playing, but he wasn’t even positive that it was an actual song. The band just played, with guitars and violinists and banjos taking turns playing off one another. The cafeteria was mostly empty except for a few men playing cards at one of the tables. Mary looked into the large kettles to see what was available. She scooped out some cold mush that had begun to develop a cooling crust over the top. She slopped it into Lucien’s bowl and then into her own. She found a couple of bread rolls and handed one to Lucien, who promptly knocked the hardened roll against the table.

“Like I said, it is in fact edible.” She went for the water jugs but they were empty. “We might be able to find some spare water on the deck above if we can sneak in. Otherwise there won’t be more until the morning. Come on, let’s go to the top deck to eat. It’ll be cold, but you might appreciate the fresh air.”

Lucien didn't respond. He found Mary's take-charge attitude charming. It reminded him of his mother as she ran the household. You didn't question her direction, you just acted in accordance with her wishes. Mary, Lucien decided, would someday run a very tight household.

Together, they walked up the narrow stairwell, several decks above the third-class compartment. It was farther than Lucien would have imagined, and he counted at least six separate decks. The stairwell gradually grew more spacious as it reached the upper deck and then cold ocean air washed over Lucien like the warm sun on a summer's morning in Korcula. He found himself gasping for the fresh air, even though the night in the Atlantic was frigid. Mary continued to march them onward until they found an empty bench near the bow. As the ship charged forward and cut through the water, the air swept over the railing and blew their hair behind them. Lucien closed his eyes and for the first time since leaving his home felt at peace.

"Nice, isn't it?"

"It's amazing," he said.

"I find that sitting out here makes me forget about the food we're eating."

"Does Dominik ever join you?"

Mary laughed. "No. He works all day and is up drinking all night. He is certainly enjoying himself."

"You should have met his brother."

"Mikel?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe one day I will."

"I hope so," Lucien said. He opened his eyes and looked out to black horizon. Even at night, he could see the end of the world as it curved to either side of him. "This better be worth the trip. My family needs this."

“It’ll be worth it. No matter what happens, it’ll be worth it.”

Lucien used his bread to begin scooping the mush out of his bowl. It was cold and tasted like ground up corn, but as Mary suspected, his body craved sustenance and he continued to shovel it into his mouth until he began to gnaw on the bread that was too hard to rip off in chunks.

“So what did you do in Dubrovnik?” Lucien asked her once they had finished off the food.

“I helped my mother run the house. I have seven siblings at home still. I’m the first my father sent for.”

“Why did he send for you?”

“He was worried what would happen when I come of age. Not much opportunity these days for an eighteen-year-old Croatian woman, except...”

“I understand. Do you miss them?”

“I miss my mom. It’s kind of nice to have a break from my siblings.”

Lucien laughed. He understood. He missed Erminio, but he also knew how hard some neighboring families had it with five or more children. Frano, to the chagrin of their Catholic priest, insisted on stopping at two.

“And what does your dad do in New York?”

“He works in a factory. Once I get there, he says we’re going to move on. Maybe Pennsylvania. Or maybe even California.”

“You’re going to California?” Lucien looked down at his lap when he realized how excitedly he asked the question.

“My father has big plans. He wants to save up enough money to bring the family over and then buy a farm somewhere. There’s so much land in America, you can just go claim it. You just have to get there and have enough money to get an operation started.”

“That’s a big catch, unfortunately,” Lucien said.

“My father will figure it out. He’s an amazing man.” They sat there silently, thinking about their fathers and about the journey. Mary continued, “Just like you. You’re amazing doing this journey for your family. Very brave.”

Lucien blushed but didn’t respond. He looked over at Mary who had developed a very noticeable shiver. “Come on, let’s get back down below deck before you end up like me.”

“I think I prefer the cold to the smell,” she replied.

“Just the same, come on.”

Lucien stood up and Mary followed, allowing their burgeoning relationship to fall into the traditional gender roles more natural of the 1890s. He led the way back to the stairwell and then led them down. Returning to the dank, sewage-filled air of steerage was even more overwhelming now that they had felt the freedom of fresh ocean breeze. They began to smell it when they traversed past each deck, but when Lucien opened the door from the stairwell and stepped into the compartment, he grew faint and dry-heaved into his fist.

“You’ll get used to it after a day or so,” Mary said, placing a hand on his back.

“This can’t be up to regulation.”

“It’s not, but who’s checking? Why limit capacity to eight hundred when twelve hundred want tickets?”

Lucien just nodded and once again let Mary lead the way back to their room. The music had grown louder and more people began to partake in the festivities. Men and women danced in circles and the rest sat in chairs and clapped. It was a moment of joy in a journey that put them through hell to test their resolve and desire to get to the new land. As Lucien passed through them, though, he noticed not all were so joyous, with many bodies laying in their beds, green with seasickness, pale with fever, or otherwise dying from the slow demise of living in conditions more suitable for livestock.

These people could not be Lucien's problem. He put his head down and followed Mary until they closed the door to their cabin. Dominik was inside sitting on the lower bunk. He had a cup-full of homemade whiskey and a smile on his face. The black grime had been washed from his face and he had managed to discover a pail of water.

"Figured you could use this," he said, motioning to the water.

"You do have your moments," Mary said.

Lucien had no qualms taking him up on the offer and felt the water coat his dehydrated insides.

"In return, you're coming out with me."

Lucien laughed. He began to remember the relationship they had back at home in Zrnovo. Above all else, they were best friends and attached at the hip. Once Lucien accepted his reality in steerage on the steamer *Aller*, and now that his fever had broken and he could begin to regain his strength, and now that he had a new friend and companion in Mary, he decided to go with the flow. He laughed and nodded and said to Mary, "Want to go to a party?"

For the next two weeks, Dominik worked shoveling coal in the engine room while Mary and Lucien studied English and wandered around the top deck. Lucien knew it wasn't fair, but Dominik never complained and the three of them developed a close friendship. Dominik refused to study English after work, choosing to play card games with his coworkers, but as more and more of the passengers became bedridden from seasickness and several succumbed to illness brought on by the filth of their below-deck home, they kept company almost exclusively with themselves. Just over two weeks later, they all stood on the lower deck outside of steerage—shoulder-to-shoulder with hundreds of other passengers that could still stand—as the *Aller* navigated its way down the narrows of New York Harbor. As the tip of Manhattan came into view, the Statue of Liberty cast its copper shadow across the bay, greeting the immigrants and passengers aboard the *Aller* and marking the end of one journey and the beginning of another. Lucien heard that weathering had turned the copper statue an emerald green



many years later, but he would always remember it in its true coloring, glowing brightly as the morning sun rose in the East.

## Chapter 5

Once the ship stopped in the harbor, large barges lined up to transport the passengers to Ellis Island. Lucien, Dominik, and Mary watched excitedly as port agents and medical examiners boarded the *Aller*, the most concrete sign to date that America truly existed. The officials stayed on the top deck where they made cursory inspections of the first class and cabin passengers one by one before allowing them to proceed down the walkway to the large cabins of the barge.

The frigid temperatures of early January in New York Harbor had forced some of the third-class passengers to retreat to the putrid confines of steerage, but Lucien, Dominik, and Mary chose to remain outdoors. The excitement was too great and the fresh air, though brisk, felt invigorating.

"I woulda thought the 'spections take place on land," Dominik mumbled, his native Croatian showing signs of degradation after two weeks in the darkness of steerage.

"Have you done any research at all?" Mary questioned, her eyes transfixed on the medical examiners. "We don't get inspected until Ellis Island. First class and cabin passengers get inspected here so they're not bothered."

"Because they have money," Lucien said.

Mary looked at him proudly. "At least one of you has half a brain."

Dominik shook his head in annoyance. "Can't wait for your father to take you off our hands."

"Doesn't seem right, the rich getting through like that," Lucien said.

He thought about how his father would view the situation. His father would be content. They arrived. That's all that matters. The rich people in first class, they don't know an honest day's work or earning their keep. That's what he'd say. Lucien hadn't thought about his father or his family much once he awoke on the ship. There was no point wallowing in pity or acting melancholy. No one else spoke of the people they left behind, only the people they were going to meet, like Mary and her father.

Missing family or wishing he were planting the olive trees wouldn't help. It wouldn't put food in his bowl or give him potable water to drink and bathe in. He had to stay focused. He had one bottle of olive oil and he had to get it to San Francisco. For the moment, though, he had arrived. He could swim if he had to. Once he was on land, he reasoned, he could send a quick note to let them know he arrived safely and then be on his way. It would be simple.

Several hours passed before the rustling of the crowd let the three know that their turn was up. They sat together, shoulder-to-shoulder, shivering against the outer wall of the cabin. When they heard mumbles and the crowd began to press back indoors, they all quickly stood, their muscles creaking from cold and from hunger. They stuck together as they crammed into the damp darkness of their home. The smell was no longer overpowering, but none of them felt good about the fact it had become normal.

Once inside, everyone stood impatiently while medical examiners and crewmembers pulled bagged bodies from the cold storage in the rear of the compartment. Some cried and chased after their deceased love ones. Lucien counted at least two dozen who had perished on the journey. He was still alive, he reasoned, because Mary cared for him and Dominik labored for the personal cabin space. Regardless, another week might have pushed his limits. His urine had turned a thick brownish color from the extreme dehydration and his skin had become saggy from malnutrition. Ironically, as filthy as he appeared, Dominik appeared strong and healthy, receiving extra water and rations for his work shoveling coal. He had given up washing his face and body about a week into the trip, though, and could at times only be seen by the whites of his eyes as he wandered below deck.

With the bodies removed and crying families chasing after them, the hundreds of remaining passengers filed up the round stairwell to the top deck, which with nearly a thousand souls took almost an hour. Lucien, Dominik, and Mary carried their belongings and had their travel documents and tickets ready to be inspected. Once on the top deck, they filed uninspected down a ladder and across a narrow

bridge to the top of the barge. The barge, with very little shelter to protect against the wind and the cold, felt even colder than the Aller did. The passengers all huddled together like Arctic penguins, sheltering one another from the wind. As the barge inched away from the steamer that had brought them across the Atlantic, all the eyes of the passengers turned to look at it like sunflowers following the sun. It was the first time Lucien had actually seen the ship in its entirety. From stern to bow, it easily cleared more than four hundred feet in length and the steel hull was as menacing as any ship that had come near the coast of Croatia. There were two large steam stacks in the middle that tilted slightly toward the back, which made the two wooden masts that were rigged for sails on either end of the ship seem like anachronisms from a past that refused to go quietly.

As the eyes slowly broke away from the steamer that now seemed eerily inanimate, Lucien watched a short while longer. It had become the first home he had live in outside of the farm. It was a short residency, but he had experienced a lifetime of horror and appreciation. The fight for his life and his struggle to remain alive under the depths of its many decks had changed his perspective from homesickness to striving for survival. His life had been saved on that ship. He had made a new friend and he had witnessed unspeakable horror. It was a journey of lost humanity, where the deceased were stuffed into freezers and forgotten about because the alternative was too horrific to consider. He didn't know if Mr. Horvat had known about the conditions or if it would have changed his recommendation to go to America. He didn't know if his father or Mr. Markovic knew how terrible the journey would be. In his heart, he knew they didn't fully understand, but if they did understand, Lucien reasoned, it just meant they knew how dire the situation had become at home. It meant they needed Lucien and Dominik, both sixteen and too young to know about the world, to make it to America and establish a business for their product.

Lucien finally broke his eyes away from the ship and joined the rest of the passengers in looking at the Statue of Liberty as the barge slowly passed by on its way to Ellis Island. Dominik's smile could

not have been broader. His dull yellow teeth shined through his blackened face as they seemed to literally capture the golden gleam of his imagined fortune. Mary, too, looked at the Statue of Liberty, but rolled her head to see Lucien.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she asked.

Lucien looked at her. She was as filthy as all of them, but she had pulled out a pristine white shawl to cover her hair and her positivity generated a charismatic aura that covered Lucien and instilled a sense of optimism about his future. He didn’t worry about the business or concern himself with making money. He felt at peace with his place and knew he could conquer whatever other obstacles the journey threw at him.

“It really is,” he said.

Their eyes locked. The Statue of Liberty was a very distant thought to him. An elbow to the ribs, though, quickly brought him back to the iconic image.

“You’re missing it, moron,” Dominik chided. “Look, the Statue. We always heard about the Statue and we made it. Can you believe it? We made it.” Dominik looked back at the Statue of Liberty. “Not really as impressive as I would have expected, but whatever. We’re going to make a fortune, Lucien. Just you watch.”

Dominik held his hand up and Lucien clasped it. Mary’s optimism and Dominik’s enthusiasm nearly convinced Lucien that it really was going to be that easy. There really was going to be gold in the street, just as soon as they got through customs.

After a few minutes, the barge pulled into the small channel that separated Ellis Island into two. It stopped in front of a gleaming new brick building that had several large steeples jutting toward the sky.

“You two remember what we talked about now,” Mary said. It wasn’t a question so much as a reminder of the questions they should expect to hear and the stations they should expect to stop at.

“Keep your chins high. Don’t be smart with them.”

Neither of the boys responded, but they heard her. No one was able to tell them why people were turned away, but the imposing building was a barrier that made Lucien’s heart sink. It felt like both a prison and a fortified gate blocking weary travelers. In his sixteen-year-old mind, he was as worried about getting in as he was about getting out. The three of them watched the first-class passengers shuffle off of the boat and walk straight up the covered walkway to the main customs hall. They had smiles on their faces and were admiring the building for its architectural marvel instead of the barrier to entry that it was.

When it was their turn to disembark, Lucien and Dominik helped Mary with her suitcase and forced their way to the front. The crowd was much less cordial than the first-class had appeared, as most of the people who had suffered through steerage just wanted to feel land beneath their feet. Bodies pushed against other bodies and jacketed-arms turned into bent elbows as the passengers drew closer to the single-file bridge to the dock. As he looked around, Lucien noticed that Mary wasn’t the only one who had put on cleaner clothing. Several of the men put on unsoiled suits and the women wore dresses. Anything to look like a presentable human being who wouldn’t bring in disease and crime to their new country.

Before stepping on the bridge, Lucien felt around the outside of his sack to feel the two bottles of olive oil. There was nothing he would be able to do if they were gone or broken, but knowing they were there brought him comfort; they reinforced his journey and made the pain and filth worth it.

Together, one after the other, the three of them made their way onto the bridge and used the rope railings to hold themselves upright. Dominik made the dock first followed by Mary. Both of them hugged joyously, not because they had a mutual affection, but because they had individually made it

across the Atlantic and wanted to share that feeling with the nearest person. After a few seconds, they parted and turned to Lucien, who had left a small gap. They almost made him feel like he had made a solo journey and were his family members coming to greet him. When he stepped off, Dominik threw his hands in the air and shouted jubilantly. He wrapped his arms around Lucien, which reminded Lucien of the feeling of harvesting the last tree. It was joyous. It meant they were to have a feast.

“Ok, you two, let’s go,” Mary said.

Still smiling, Lucien and Dominik parted and then joined Mary, who shook her head like a proud mother watching her sons acting foolish. They once again continued on their way until the covered walkway ended and large doors marked the entrance into the building. Men in gray uniforms ushered the passengers through, taking care not to touch anyone. One of the men stopped the three of them in their tracks. He had a large mustache and held his hand straight in the air and then began yelling in English. Lucien knew some basic words by this point, but the man was incomprehensible. Mary stepped forward, nodded, and replied in English, but Lucien could tell it was with a heavy accent. The man waved her off and yelled over his shoulder. Another man in uniform came to his side.

“Are you three together?” the second man asked in Croatian.

“Yes,” Lucien replied.

“Okay, follow me.” They complied and followed him to another uniformed-man standing in behind a table and in front of an endless pile of suitcases and trunks. “Leave your luggage with him.”

The three of them looked at him like he was crazy.

“So you can steal our things?” Dominik shouted.

“You’re all filthy,” the man replied. “Leave your things here for safe keeping until you’re disinfected and through processing. Your luggage will wait for you on the other side.”

Lucien held his bag tightly, feeling the olive oil tucked into his clothing.

“It’s okay,” Mary said. “My father told me it’s part of the process.”

She handed her suitcase to the man behind the table, who in turn gave her a receipt. Lucien and Dominik reluctantly acquiesced after her and then tucked their receipts in their pockets.

“Follow me,” the uniformed man said. He led them to a large stairwell that was separated by a railing. The stairs ominously climbed further and deeper into the building. There was no turning back, though, so the three of them obeyed, hoping Mary’s advice to stand tall and ask no questions would get them through. “Women, men.” The guard pointed to the different sides of the railing.

Mary nodded. “Okay. See you two shortly.”

They all began to climb the stairs alongside the other passengers. Some were arguing with the interpreters and guards. Others were crying as the women went their separate way. Most complied without comment. As Lucien climbed, he noticed that he was falling a few steps behind Dominik, who quickly bounded up the stairs two at a time. Lucien, though, felt winded. The journey and the sickness and the malnourishment were finally catching up to him and the stairs became a trying feat to accomplish. When he got to the top, Dominik was waiting for him with a smirk. He was about to chide his friend, but another uniformed guard stepped in between them.

“Papers,” the man said to Lucien in English, which he understood.

Lucien pulled the papers out of his jacket and handed them to him. The guard gave them a cursory glance, looked at Lucien in the eye, handed the papers back and then with a large piece of chalk wrote a large “P” on Lucien’s jacket.

“Hey,” Dominik began to object. The man shot him a look to silence him.

“Both of you, in line along the wall.”

Lucien and Dominik looked where he was pointing and saw a line of dirty passengers. They went to the end of the line and yet another guard counted them, “Fourteen, fifteen, okay, follow me.” Lucien looked at the hallway for Mary, but she was nowhere in sight. The fifteen passengers followed the man around a corner and around another corner and into a room with a long table and natty-looking



towels. The guard waited for them all to enter and then in Croatian said, "Everyone disrobe. Go to the baths through that door, go through disinfecting, and then we can take you through processing. We can't allow you through looking so filthy. Public safety is our number one objective."

A few of the men complained, but Dominik and Lucien looked at each other and smiled. It had been weeks since they bathed with fresh water. They were the first two to leave their clothes on the table and go through the door. The bathing area was one large shower with multiple nozzles. The two of them pulled the strings and luke-warm water flowed out and flowed through their hair and over their bodies. As far as Lucien was concerned, it was a magical moment. Once the other men began to straggle in and receive the same sensation, the complaining quickly ceased. Soap dispensers on the wall allowed them to wash the dirt and grime and coal dust from the skin, reminding them of the pale color that had long since disappeared. The water that flowed to the drain was as black as the coal.

A man appeared in the doorway to the shower and said, "Alright, gentlemen, everyone gets sprayed."

They all looked at the man who had a canister of blue liquid and a manual sprayer.

"What is it?" Dominik yelled.

"Disinfectant. Kill the bacteria and lice."

Dominik shrugged and was the first to allow the man to spray his hair, under his arms, and around his midsection. Dominik even pointed to his own feet and the man willingly complied. Smiling, Dominik turned back to wash the disinfectant off. "Cleanest I've ever felt. Wish Mikel could get some of this stuff. He's filthier than I am on a daily basis." Dominik cackled as the blue disinfectant dripped down his cheek. Lucien just shook his head and went to get sprayed down himself.

When they were out, they put their clothes back on and walked out of the room. The original guard was waiting and directed the next moves. When he looked at Dominik, he pointed to his right,

leading back to the Great Hall and processing. When he looked at Lucien, though, he saw the “P” on his jacket and pointed to his left.

“What?” Lucien asked. “Why?”

“You have to go through medical checks. Down the hall.”

“Wait, we’re together,” Dominik said, coming to Lucien’s defense.

“No, you go that way through processing. Your friend will be fine. He’ll see you on the other side.”

Lucien and Dominik looked at each other.

“It’s ok,” Lucien said. “Wait for me.”

Dominik nodded and watched as Lucien turned and walked alone down the hallway. There were wooden benches along the white walls and the linoleum floors were unlike anything Lucien had seen before. He looked over his shoulder, but Dominik had already turned the corner. Lucien took comfort in the feeling of clean skin. He stunk of disinfectant, but the chemicals were preferable to excrement. He looked at his hands and fingernails and began to realize how dirty he had been. Through all of his years working in the orchard, he had never grown accustomed to being dirty. After walking the length of the long hallway, he heard the hustle and commotion of a crowd. He stopped when he reached a guard.

“Papers,” the guard said, which Lucien understood. He handed them to the guard, who inspected them. He kept the papers and looked at the “P” on Lucien’s jacket. “Come with me.”

The new guard led Lucien farther down the hallway and around a bend to another hallway. They stopped at a door and waited. The door eventually opened and a boy about Lucien’s age was escorted out by another guard. The boy looked pale and had trouble walking. When they were out of the way, the guard led Lucien into the room and closed the door. A man in a tidy wool three-piece suit

sat behind a desk and didn't look up when they entered. He took a large stamp and slammed it on an open file and then set the stamp back down and looked up.

"What do we have here?" he said in English. The guard responded quickly, but Lucien didn't understand. "I see, I see. Well come, let me have a look at you."

"Go stand over there," the guard said in Croatian, to which Lucien quickly complied. "The doctor is going to examine you."

Lucien stepped to where the guard pointed and then clasped his hands together and looked at the ground. The doctor began to fill out some forms and then after a minute or two, he nodded and held out a hand for the guard to give him Lucien's papers. He reviewed them quickly and then placed the papers on his desk. He continued again with the forms using Lucien's documents for information. "Erminio," he began, "Erminio." He looked at Lucien suspiciously. "What's your real name?"

Lucien understood the question, having practiced it several times with Mary.

"Lucien," he mumbled.

"Lucien, good, Lucien. Lucien Toma, Toma... Tomato." He wrote out Lucien's name on his forms. He said the name again, "Lucien Tomato."

The doctor then stood up and grabbed Lucien by both sides of his head. He moved his head up and down and then with his thumbs peeled Lucien's eyelids up to his forehead and used both hands to pull Lucien's mouth apart. Satisfied, he moved to Lucien's body, grabbing his arms and ribs and belly.

He said something unintelligible, and then the guard said in Croatian, "Why'd you come to America?"

Lucien's mind went blank. He had practiced this with Mary, but he could not think of an answer. His father flashed in his mind. What would he say?

"To sell olive oil?"

The guard responded in English and the doctor's eyes lit up and nodded approvingly. He and the guard joked but Lucien couldn't understand. He spoke again and the guard translated.

"Do you have family here?"

"No. I'm here for my family. I'm here to help our family farm."

The guard nodded and listened to a few more instructions.

"Your ticket says you had a fever on the ship. You no longer have symptoms but have physical weakness. We don't want to send you back, so we have to quarantine you for observation. We can't allow cholera or tuberculosis in the country. Do you understand?"

"Quarantine?"

"Six weeks, maybe less. It goes fast."

Before Lucien could fully process what that meant, the doctor sat back down and the guard led Lucien out of the office and to his new home.

## Chapter 6

Lucien was escorted across the island with a group of other young men to large dormitories. He hadn't received much explanation other than he could stay in quarantine for six weeks or be sent back in steerage to Genoa. The walk across the island was short, but the frigid air and the exhausting process made Lucien sink into his jacket. He kept his hands warm by putting them in the jacket pockets, and his left hand clutched the receipt for his bag as though his life depended on it. During the walk between the buildings, he could see the skyline of Manhattan. He assumed he would be there by now, but his instinct had told him the building at Ellis Island looked like a prison, and now he was a prisoner.

The guard that led the group walked them through the first wooden door of the brick dormitories and the guard behind them ensured they all entered. Groups of twenty or so people—men, women, children—sat on wooden benches in fenced-off holding pens while they waited to be called through processing. The group stopped and the guards let them take in the mayhem.

"Alright, everyone take a seat," the guard said in English. Most didn't understand, but they all got the gist of the order and made their way for an empty bench.

"Not you," the second guard said to Lucien in Croatian. He put his hand out but made certain not to touch him.

"Why isn't he being processed?" one of the boys asked in Italian. Lucien looked at him and noticed streaks of dirt on his face. He obviously had not been bathed as Lucien had.

"He's in quarantine," the first guard said. "You're all being held for further observation. And don't ask questions!" He shouted the last sentence in English. It was loud, but it didn't frighten Lucien. He just said it loud, like Lucien's father would shout orders on the farm.

"Come along," the second guard said, leading Lucien past the crowds and through a white door.

The door led to a long hallway with other doors along the way. Paperwork sat in a plastic cubby on the wall outside many of the doors. On the other side of the hallway, windows allowed for viewing into a dormitory. From what Lucien could see, the dormitories weren't quite as opulent as the processing hall. Instead of large stone archways buttressing the roof, the ceilings in the buildings on the other side of Ellis Island were forged together with wood beams, pipes, and drywall. Underneath the ceilings, the large room was filled nearly to capacity with men and boys. It looked like steerage had been removed from the *Aller* and relocated to Ellis Island. Many of the men shouted and played cards. Most, though, simply huddled underneath blankets on their allotted padding in the tri-level wire bunkbeds. The bunks had little more than two feet between them and were crammed so tightly together that the larger men had to slither in from the foot. The kids took the top bunks, but mainly because the heavier bodies made the wire frames sink so severely that the beds curled like a hammock. Anyone underneath would have been smothered.

"Lucien Tahmatch," the guard said. Lucien broke his frightened gaze of the dormitory and turned to the guard. The guard had a slight smile and didn't appear as menacing as some of the other uniformed guards and doctors. He stood in front of an open door. "This is you."

Lucien approached and looked inside of a room not much larger than a horse stall. A small bed took up half of the space and a wooden chair and desk sat in the corner. The walls were gray except for a window that looked out over the water and towards small buildings on the shore. Lucien had become disoriented and couldn't tell if he was looking at Manhattan or the opposite direction, but it was America. In his heart, he had not yet reached it and he was beginning to think he never would.

"This is your room," the guard said. "No one else is permitted. Lights out at nine and breakfast is at seven. You are free to wander the corridor. A communal area is down the hall and the bathroom is three doors down."

Lucien gulped. His confinement was beginning to sink in. What would he tell his father? He was now a prisoner under the pretenses of a medical condition. How could he escape?

“How long do I have to stay here?” he said as he turned from the window to face the guard.

The guard shrugged. “As long as necessary. I’ve seen some released after a week or so, but don’t get your hopes up. My suggestion is to eat as much as possible. Your ship manifest said you had a fever and you look weak. You’ll get plenty of food here. Believe me, we don’t want to keep you here anymore than you want to be here.”

“But I do want to be here!” Lucien’s sudden outburst was louder than anticipated, but the guard stared deadpan at him. “I mean, America. I want to be in America. Please don’t send me back.”

“This is why we quarantine for observation. If you develop more symptoms, we’ll deport, but you should feel confident. You look healthy.” The guard hesitated, his face suggesting he was taking pity on an exhausted, undersized by on the verge of mental defeat. “Did you travel with anyone? Family? Friends?”

Lucien began to nod and then furrowed his brows. “Why?”

The guard smiled. “Just to see if I should send word.”

“Well, now, ok, just hold on awhile,” Lucien said, mimicking his father’s common refrain. “I don’t want to get anyone in any trouble.”

“Mr. Tahmatoh,” he said in English.

Lucien quickly said, “Tomatic.”

“Not here, it’s not,” the guard replied. “Give me a name and I can try and pass word.”

Lucien nodded. “Dom... Mikel Markovic.”

“Very good. And your luggage. Do you have your receipt?”

Lucien knew he shouldn’t relinquish control of the only paper that granted him rights to his own bag, but he handed it over nonetheless.

The guard looked at it and nodded. "I should be able to take care of this. You should feel lucky, you bypassed the processing lines. Could take hours. Is there anything else I can do for the moment?"

Lucien thought about it. He considered asking for freedom, but his thought turned to his family. "Do you have a piece of paper? I'd like to write my family a letter."

"There's paper in the community spaces. Leave the note on your desk and I'll send the telegram." The guard gulped and hovered near the doorway. "Lucien, you'll be ok. I was in your shoes once many years ago. It's scary. We make it that way. You'll be ok. You'll get stronger now that you're off the ship." He nodded again, held up the receipt to show Lucien he would take care of the luggage, and departed, leaving the door open.

Now alone, Lucien sat on the thin pad that sat atop the metal bedframe. He wished he could talk to Dominik and wondered how Mary had fared through the process. Knowing her, she had probably passed through without a second glance. Dominik, too, somehow. People liked Dominik, they liked his jokes. He hoped he had made it through processing the way Mary had described it and then wondered if he would ever see him again. Would Dominik wait for him? The room reminded Lucien of one of the church dormitories, purposely austere to show devotion to God. Was this God's plan for him? Questioning God made him angry. How could his father do this to him? He was too young to help plant the new trees, but his father thought he could independently expand the family's business on the other side of the world. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like a banishment. He wasn't helping the family by bringing in new business, he was helping the family by no longer being a burden. The idea that his father banished him—literally pushed him out into the ocean to drown—made Lucien's eyes grow red with anger. He was alone and angry, stuck in quarantine on Ellis Island, less than a mile from New York. Maybe Dominik could once again work some magic and convince them to let him through.



While he thought about the possibilities, he heard voices down the hall. He rose off the bed and tiptoed out the door, ensuring no guard was present to knock him back in his room. With the coast clear, he wandered down the linoleum-floored hall, past the windows that looked into the larger unruly dormitory and followed the hallway around a bend. Only one other door was open and Lucien briefly saw a doctor inspecting a man's health as he laid on the bed.

The hall eventually opened into a large community space. Two dozen men of various ages sat on wooden couches reading books or writing letters. A couple sat on chairs and looked out the window longingly. A small group sat in a circle and seemed to be learning English. Coffee was available on a table along the wall along with slices of bread and jam. The men's clothes appeared cleaner than Lucien's, but none had on suits, preferring the comfort of their wool shirts and jackets. They all had hand-rolled cigarettes and pipes, making the air hazy with smoke.

Lucien entered and took in the scene through the corners of his eyes, making sure not to upset anyone by staring directly. No one seemed to pay him much attention, so he poured himself a cup of coffee and then sat at a table with some free pens and paper. He pulled a piece in front of him and immediately began to write, feeling as though he was able to speak to his parents and brother for the first time in weeks. The anger he had felt began to melt away when he finally had his outlet to communicate with them.

At first he expressed how much he missed them and then described how he had gotten sick and Dominik had to barter away most of the olive oil for safe passage. Then he talked about meeting Mary and the conditions of the journey and the fact he was now a medical prisoner on Ellis Island. He signed it, "With love, your son, Lucien."

He read it over and felt a tear come to his eye. His current condition didn't matter. His family didn't need to know how he was failing in his mission. He crumpled the letter up and pulled another clean sheet in front of him. This time, he expressed his excitement that he had arrived, but that he was

certain Mr. Horvat had already filled them in on the ship's arrival. He hoped the orchard had been replanted and said he was beginning his journey west to San Francisco to find a new market for the olive oil. "Sincerely, Lucien."

He sipped his luke-warm coffee and read it over. Satisfied, he folded it in two and arose to make his way back to the room. As soon as he stood, though, a man from the circle rose and shouted, "Slav!" Lucien stopped and looked around. He saw the man but assumed he was speaking to someone else. After a moment, the man spoke again, but more as a question. "Slav?"

Lucien pointed to himself and the man nodded. The man held two fingers up and signaled for Lucien to join them. Lucien approached and accepted the man's invitation to take an open seat. Frano held out a cigarette for Lucien, who leaned over to accept it. The man to his right struck a match to light it for him. Lucien took a deep drag and felt the smoke coat the insides of his lungs. It reminded him of sitting around the table on the family's plaza while his father and brother smoked after a hard day's work.

"I'm Frano," the man said in English, before admonishing himself and saying, "Sorry, in America, it's Francis."

Lucien's eyes widened. "My father's name is Frano."

"In English, please," Frano said.

Lucien nodded and then repeated the words as Frano said them one by one. "My. Father's. Name. Is. Frano."

"Good!"

Frano shared a name with Lucien's father, but the similarity ended there. He had a large black beard and his stomach made the buttons strain to keep his shirt neatly tucked in. He was the leader of the group of seven men, all Slavs, as they learned the language of their new country. Lucien stayed for more than an hour as the men worked on English words and phrases, enjoying it more by the minute.

With Mary it had seemed like work, but it also could have been the environment. This was different. This was community on dry land.

Eventually, as each man peeled off to drink coffee on the couch or retire to his room, Lucien and Frano were left sitting with one another.

“So,” Frano said in Croatian, “your father, Frano, is he still in Croatia?” When Lucien nodded, he said, “And he sent you here to...”

When Lucien realized he was waiting for him to finish the sentence, he said, “To find new business for the farm.”

“Ah, yes,” he responded, understanding the hardship. “Tough times in the Empire. Escaped myself, but my sons were gone so I didn’t have much to stay for. Hard work, finding new business, though. And then shipping the product out here.”

“No, San Francisco.”

Frano laughed. “Shipping it to San Francisco! Me oh my. That is a tale. I suppose you have no contacts out there?”

Lucien shook his head.

“Well, my six weeks are up tomorrow and I am to be released to America. And you know what, I’m heading west. Not to San Francisco, though. Not to San Francisco. Watsonville. Slavs have congregated there to buy up land and run apple and apricot orchards. You know about farming?”

Lucien nodded, soaking up every word Frano said just as he would when his father spoke.

“Well, I’ll tell you what. You get out of here on your feet. Get to America and get to San Francisco. Set up your business. Try your best. If it doesn’t work out, though, *if* it doesn’t work out mind you, come south to Watsonville and look me up, ok? Ok?”

“Ok.”

“Good. Us Slavs need to stick together. We’re stronger together. Come on, time for lunch.”

Before joining the others in the dining facility further down the hall, Lucien returned to his room to drop the letter on his desk. He saw the guard walking the other direction carrying his sack of belongings. His spirits raised even further, as he had grown certain that the bag had disappeared.

“You found it,” Lucien said when they met each other outside his room.

“I did.” He handed the bag to Lucien, who noticed it was considerably heavier than before. “I also found your friend, Mikel. Mikel?”

Lucien smiled sheepishly. “Dominik.”

“It’s ok. I know lots of boys who had to use their brother’s papers to get onboard.” He hesitated. “Lucien, your friend, he made it through processing. I found him as he was going through. He’s headed to New York.”

Lucien gulped and clutched his bag. “That’s good, right? He’ll wait for me there.”

“He asked me to give this to you.”

The guard held a letter out. Lucien stared at it but couldn’t bring himself to accept.

“What is it?”

“I didn’t read it.”

Lucien nodded and plucked the letter from him, holding it delicately as though it might fade into dust.

“And that’s your letter?”

“Yes,” Lucien said. He handed the guard the note he had written to his parents. “The address is on the back.”

“I’ll be sure it gets out. You know, whatever that letter says, you’ll be alright. I’ve seen much worse, *much* worse. Just stay alive, get stronger. The whole country is yours for the taking.”

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

The guard smiled and took his hat off. "Us Slavs need to stick together." It was identical to Frano's comment a little earlier, making Lucien wonder who taught who the expression.

"Yeah."

"Don't miss lunch. Remember, get strong."

The guard walked around him to the dining hall and Lucien entered his room, closing his door behind him. He put his bag on the bed and opened it. He saw that most of the clothes had been washed and stunk like the disinfectant that had been sprayed on him in the bathhouse. He also saw eight bottles of olive oil. Stunned, he stared at the bottles and held one in his hand to see if was real. He uncorked it and dipped his finger in and stuck it in his mouth, rejoicing as it seeped into his taste buds. His eyes grew teary with nostalgia and homesickness. His memory tricked himself into tasting the burnt fat of lamb and the fresh coffee from the fire.

He recorked the bottle and placed it back with the others. He took the clothes out and hung them to dry and removed the filthy clothes from his body. He would see if they could get washed in the morning. He laid on his bed and propped his head against the wall and pulled the letter from Dominik out.

"Lucien," it said in hastily written text. "The officer says you're in quarantine and won't get out for six weeks or longer. We did it, though, we're both in America. Some of the men are talking about going to Alaska for a gold rush. I am joining them. Please don't be mad. I'll still meet you in San Francisco, only I'll have gold. I lied about the olive oil. I took it. I don't know why. I took two for myself. I did trade two for your ticket. You're my best friend, please don't be mad. I don't know what happened to Mary. She kind of annoyed me, though. Take care. I'll see you soon."

Lucien read it again and again, each time hoping to find another sentence or a hidden meaning that would convince him he wasn't actually alone. But there were none. Dominik had left him. He wasn't mad, though. Dominik got him here. He worked in the engine room. He got Lucien onboard. He

returned the oil he apparently had stolen. Lucien had never even questioned why Dominik didn't bring any oil himself. Perhaps he had no real interest in starting the business. Perhaps he just wanted to get out of Croatia.

Lucien didn't cry. He was alone, but knowing he was alone gave him a sense of serenity. He would get through these six weeks. He would get off the island. He would get to San Francisco. Maybe he would even see Dominik again. He took slow, deep, meditative breaths and stared at the plain ceiling and inhaled the chemicals of the disinfectant. A few minutes later he put his clothes back on and went down the hall to get some food.

Five weeks later, long since Frano and most of the original members of the English group had left, a doctor entered Lucien's room and cleared him for entry. His English had progressed enough to answer many of the questions directly. With the sack of clothes and olive oil over his shoulder, he walked through the processing room, looking up at the imposing stone archways, and past the men sitting in the tall wooden interrogation booths. Before leaving the island, though, he stopped to convert his money, receiving 125 American dollars for all of the Kruna he had on him, and then came to the train station where several men were hawking train tickets. Men clustered around them, shouting destinations and making quick transactions. Lucien found one off to the side who had more interest counting his money than selling tickets.

"Excuse me," Lucien said in English, "I came on the Aller."

The man looked at him from the tops of his eyes. "The Aller?" He turned and whistled and another man came running over. "Boy says he's from the Aller?"

"The Aller!" This second man had a more hyper personality. "What do you mean the Aller? Where ya been?"

"Quarantine."

“Quarantine! Well God damn. Alright then.” He pulled out a list and started checking it.

“Name? Name!”

“Tomatic.”

“Tomatic. Tomatic. Erminio?”

Lucien nodded.

“My man. Where you been? I’ve been sittin’ on your ticket. Just sittin’ on it!” He shook his head and pulled a ticket out. He handed it to Lucien. “You’re lucky old Giovanni sends so much business our way. All you Slavs bring good money. Another couple days, I woulda sold your ticket ‘stead of sittin’ on it like a fool. You’re lucky, you hear? Lucky. But I’m an honest man, and Giovanni sends me good business. You’re lucky, though, and don’t go forgettin’. All right, no harm. Here you go, next stop Oakland, California. Take the ferry to San Francisco. Platform six. Don’t be late.”

Lucien nodded and walked off. He took the ferry across the bay to the train station in New Jersey, with more hustle and bustle than even the harbor in Korcula. He had left Croatia as Lucien Tomatic, entered Ellis Island as Erminio Tomatic, and now entered New Jersey as Lucien Tahmatch. He never set foot in Manhattan. The train station was a few minutes down the road. Before Lucien could even breathe in the air of his new country, he was looking at it through the window of a train. When a bell hop walked by, he purchased some bread and wine. He pulled out a bottle of the olive oil and poured it on the bread. He was on a train in America, leaving one ocean and headed for another. Rewarding himself with some of his returned olive oil seemed reasonable.

## Chapter 7

The journey from Manhattan to Oakland started on a north-easterly trajectory. From Manhattan, Lucien looked out the window as the train lurched and chugged up the coast to Boston. Lucien's ticket didn't afford him the right to a sleeper-cabin, so he spent his time in the dining car drinking coffee and ordering bread and apples. Snow had begun to fall as mid-February brought with it a winter storm off the Atlantic, but the cars were heated and Lucien's jacket, as clean as it has ever been, kept him warm against the frosted windows. After he rejuvenated himself with some coffee and olive-oil soaked bread, he penned his second letter to his parents, using a quill, ink, and paper from the dining car bar. He came clean about his detention on Ellis Island and asked about the trees. He inquired about mother and told them that he was on a train but didn't know when he'd arrive in San Francisco. He had plenty of olive oil to provide samples and felt good about his prospects, even though he had no idea if that was true. He didn't tell them about Dominik. He asked the barman to send the letter once they arrived in Boston.

As each day passed and his home in Zrnovo felt farther and farther away, his independence propped him up. He was a man on his own in America. His fears faded even though the unknown became more apparent. He thought little of Dominik but smiled fondly when he did. He pictured him in Alaska, digging through ice to scoop out golden rocks. When he wasn't thinking about Dominik, though, he was thinking about Mary. He never got a chance to say goodbye. He assumed she had met up with her father, but she was now a short-term friend with a lasting impact. He met very few people those first few days of the trip. He was just happy to be off of Ellis Island and couldn't take his eyes off of the sprawling, ever-changing landscape.

From Boston, the train turned West and headed for Chicago, which Lucien mistakenly thought was on the coast of the Pacific. From Lake Michigan, though, he proceeded on to Lincoln, Nebraska. He slept at his table when the crowd was sparse, but at night he would try to lay out on the hallway floor to



stretch his legs and back. After nine days, Lucien had made it halfway across the country, which was more expansive and daunting than he ever could have imagined.

When the train pulled into the Lincoln Train Depot, Lucien was greeted by large white columns in front of a partial wood and partial redbrick building. He had no intention of exiting the train, but a man in a black suit with gold buttons entered his car with a gold bell telling everyone to exit. Lucien made a motion to stop him, but he continued on his way, ringing his bell and shouting the same phrase on repeat. Lucien watched him walk off of the car to the next car but assumed he hadn't heard him right.

"Storm on the Rockies," he heard in Croatian.

He quickly turned to the voice and saw the barman standing next to him.

"You speak Croatian?"

The barman nodded. "We're not going anywhere when there's a storm on the Rockies. Snow covers the tracks."

Lucien looked around and ran his hand through his hair, which had grown a couple of inches over the past couple months. "Can I just stay onboard until the tracks clear?"

The barman shook his head. "All passengers have to exit."

Lucien looked back at the white columns and nodded. Sighing, he said, "Ok. Is there a place I can stay?"

"Couple hotels in town." The barman waited for Lucien to respond. When he saw Lucien wasn't going to speak, he said, "Do you play cards?"

"Cards?"

"Bridge. You ever play bridge?" When Lucien shook his head, he said, "Want to learn?"

An hour later, Lucien and the barman, Zoran, walked past the train depot. A few automobiles with tuxedoed men in top hats rolled slowly down the road. Most vehicles on the dirt roads were horse

and buggy. Lincoln was bustling, but it was still a growing city. Lucien could see plowed fields in nearly every direction and smoke stacks made the city gray. The ocean was not in sight. For the first time in his life, Lucien could not smell sea salt in the air, but manure and smoke.

“Come on,” Zoran said. He led Lucien into a large brick building and then down the stairs into a basement where several men were sitting around tables playing cards. “Whiskey?”

Lucien shook his head. “Sure.”

Zoran reached around a counter and pulled out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. “Come on.” He led Lucien to a table where two men were sitting idly. They took seats at the table across from one another and the two men began to roust, one shuffling a deck of cards in anticipation. “English?” Zoran asked Lucien.

“A little.”

“Ok,” Zoran continued in English. “Lucien has never played.”

“That’s why he’ll play with you,” one of the men said.

Zoran brushed him off. “It’s easy, trust me.”

As he said that, there was a loud commotion across the room, which made Lucien look up. Standing in front of him and throwing his cards on a table was Dominik.

“Bullshit!” Dominik yelled.

A man across from Dominik stood and began yelling imperceptibly. He and Dominik began pushing one another until other men rose to break them up.

Lucien looked at Zoran and the other two men. “Sorry.” He picked up his bag and ran to Dominik. He grabbed Dominik’s arm and started dragging him away. Dominik was momentarily confused, but when he saw Lucien, he pretended as though it was completely normal he had run into his old friend. He picked up his money from the table, shouted a couple of more curses in English, and allowed Lucien to drag him off.

“Can you believe those guys!” Dominik declared as they walked out into the street.

“I thought you were in Alaska.” Lucien spoke slowly, calmly. It hadn’t really sunk in that he had found Dominik.

“I am going,” Dominik said defiantly.

They walked together in silence, the awkwardness beginning to sink in. Dominik led them around the corner and then Lucien stopped walking. Dominik sensed that he stopped and then stopped himself. He took a deep breath, turned, and then thrust himself at Lucien, hugging him as though he were long lost family. Lucien hugged him back, but seeing Dominik allowed him to see the betrayal more clearly. He hugged his best friend through an acceptance that he was flawed. Dominik had always been overshadowed by Mikel, his older brother, but now that he was free of the family, his true colors shined more brightly. Lucien hugged him as he might hug an old friend. He embraced him, but he barely recognized him, his mind focusing on their relationship many years ago. Now Dominik was merely a foreign face in a foreign land, his structure and expressions loosely resembling a young Croatian boy Lucien once knew.

As Lucien waited for Dominik to release him, he looked around the street of Lincoln. The air was putrid and the buildings as brown as the dirt road they stood upon. It couldn’t possibly be the America he had heard so much about. It couldn’t possibly be the land of opportunity that gave his family hope for better fortunes.

“Come on,” Dominik said as he let go of Lucien, “I have a room I’m staying in down the road. I have some food.” He began walking without apologizing.

Lucien followed and said, “Why aren’t you in Alaska?”

“I got sidetracked is all.”

“Dominik, what happened?”

They walked in silence for a couple moments when two police officers smoking pipes rounded

the corner. The two men were laughing with their chests puffed out into the air, their domed helmets as imposing as the cathedral's steeples in Korcula. Lucien and Dominik walked in silence, instinctively fearing that the authorities would deport them. Part of Lucien never thought he would make it as far as he already had.

Once safely past, Dominik led them around another corner onto a cobble-stone lane and said, "I hate this town."

"Then why are you here?"

"I gambled away my train ticket. I've been working to get more money to buy another. Some of the others have been jumping aboard and trying to avoid the ticket man, but..."

"But what?"

"Most show up a few days later. They don't look good." Dominik stopped in front of a large wooden warehouse and opened the door. Before he entered, he turned and looked down another cobblestone avenue. At the end, surrounded by cornfields, was a large house with columns out front. "State Capitol Building. Nothing like that back home."

Lucien turned from the building to the warehouse. "Nothing like any of this back home."

Dominik led them in, although Lucien was nearly as suspicious of the building as he was of Ellis Island. Inside the warehouse was a maze of hallways and rooms, partitioned by thin wooden walls and dirty glass windows. Dominik walked down the central hallway and up a flight of stairs that creaked underneath their weight. Lucien looked around dubiously. The whole structure reminded him of kindling wood. After two flights of stairs, Lucien passed three doors and then entered the fourth. It wasn't locked, but he had claimed ownership. A small bed in the corner had a couple of tussled wool blankets. His belongings were scattered across the floor and on a desk was half a loaf of bread, some jam, and a half-drunk bottle of beer.

As Dominik plopped on the bed, Lucien stood in the middle of the room, unsure what to do with himself. "What is this place?"

"Eh, home for now. Come on, take a seat. Hey! Got any of that olive oil?" Lucien sat on the edge of the bed as Dominik grabbed the bread. He pulled it out of the paper and allowed the crumbs to scatter on the blankets.

Lucien reached in his bag and pulled out the open bottle and passed it to him. He looked Dominik squarely in the eye as it exchanged hands. Dominik had a broad smile on his face, unaware of any hard feelings. When he saw Lucien's face, though, he rolled his eyes and bounced his head back and forth.

"Oh come on, I got you to America, didn't I? I gave you the olive oil back."

"Not all of it."

"Hey, I needed some for myself."

"Where's that?"

Dominik was growing tired of the interrogation. His smile faded and he poured some of the oil onto the bread and bit off a chunk. "With my ticket."

"Why'd you do it?"

"What, gamble? It's fun. I'm good, too. I think I figured it out."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"I saw an opportunity, what can I say. Besides, I figured you actually wanted to go do as you were told like a good little boy. I didn't want to take that from you. How'd you get off the island, by the way? Thought for sure they were deporting you."

They sat in silence for a moment while Dominik chewed.

"You're more like your brother than I realized."

“Damn right I am. And just like my brother, I’m going to find my way. I’m not going to go sell olive oil for a family that banished us to another country. They banished us, Lucien. Sent us here to die, or be slaves for them. And for what? No, I’m going to follow my dream.”

“Find the gold in the streets?”

“I’ll find it. It’s here. This country is ripe. It’s big and untouched.”

“How will you get to Alaska with no money and no train ticket?”

Dominik thought about this and then an idea popped in his head. He smiled and pulled a deck of cards out from under his pillow. Holding them up, he said, “I’ll show you. What game were you going to play?”

“Bridge?” Lucien said in English.

Dominik fell into hysterics. “Of course you were going to play *Bridge*. Old man’s game. No, I’m going to teach you poker. Five card draw. It’ll change your life.”

“I’m leaving in the morning,” Lucien said. “The storm over the Rockies will pass and I’m leaving, with or without you.”

Dominik nodded as he shuffled the cards. “Oh, hang on.” He hopped off the bed and ran into the hallway. When he emerged a minute later, he was carrying two bottles of beer. He handed one to Lucien. “Well you’re here now. One last hurrah between friends, huh?”

The comment sent a pain straight through Lucien’s heart. In just under three months, their friendship had disintegrated to one last hurrah. There wasn’t a second thought, a longing to once again pick up the journey together. Just one last hurrah.

“Okay,” Lucien said, accepting the beer and allowing himself to relax. “Dominik, did you see what happened to Mary?”

Dominik took a large swig of the beer, allowing it to fall over his lips. “Nope. Never saw her again. Probably found her father and then we were just a couple of poor boys she could talk about. Okay, poker. Now listen good, I have some tips. It’s all about the face.”

For the next couple of hours, Dominik taught Lucien the intricacies of poker. For a couple hours, all was forgotten. No anger and no longing or regret. Just a couple of friends playing poker in the middle of America.

That night, Dominik brought Lucien back to the card hall, which was bustling with activity and drunken debauchery. Men in overalls, men in suits, police officers, train car operators, women of different shapes and sizes, they all congregated around the card hall and a couple of ale houses around the street.

Lucien and Dominik found a poker table with five other men who spoke English. Lucien allowed himself to gamble with four dollars, but Dominik placed twenty on the table. Lucien tried to understand the conversation occurring in English, but most of it was lost in translation. He couldn’t quite remember which hands were higher, but he didn’t place much in the pot as he learned. Dominik grew more and more boisterous as the evening grew darker, shouting Croatian curses that drew more than one look of disdain.

“Why don’t you Slavs keep it down,” one of the men at the table said in Croatian.

Dominik looked amused. “Because us Slavs are proud and loud. Now deal the cards.”

The man sighed and dealt. When Lucien looked at his cards, he saw two Kings. He bet a quarter and then requested three more cards. The new cards gave him a King and two Jacks. A full house. He didn’t know much, but he knew this was a good hand. As the betting went around, Lucien bet a dollar and Dominik saw it with a dollar of his own. The dealer raised to five dollars. Lucien bit his lip and gulped, but tried to keep his face dispassionate. He placed the rest of his money in the pot, which totaled seven dollars and sixty-five cents.

Dominik laughed and threw his cards down. The dealer studied Lucien's face and then put his money in. When Lucien revealed his full house, the dealer took a deep breath and then placed his cards face down and pushed them in. Overjoyed, Dominik slapped Lucien on the back and helped him pull the chips in to his pile. Lucien had to admit, it was exhilarating. After a few more hands, though, he pushed his chair back and cashed his chips out. He bought a whiskey at the bar and watched from a stool as Dominik's pot grew larger. He sat there all night until the early hours of the morning when his yawn was greeted with a train whistle that reverberated through the city.

He quickly looked up and saw Zoran coming his way.

"Lucien," Zoran said, "you better hurry if you want to make your train."

Lucien nodded and walked to Dominik.

"Dominik, you have enough money, come buy a train ticket and come with me."

Dominik sat and mulled over the words. Finally he stood up and slapped Lucien's shoulder.

"You go, Lucien. I'll catch up. You'll see. I got a good thing going. I'm going to stay a bit longer."

"Dominik."

But Lucien's pleading was to no avail. Dominik had already returned to the table. Lucien draped his bag over his shoulder and walked out to the frigid morning air of Lincoln, Nebraska, and made his way back to the train station. He boarded the sparsely filled train and took his seat in the dining car. When Zoran entered in his uniform, he put a cup of coffee in front of him.

"Don't worry," Zoran said. "San Francisco is better than Lincoln."



## Chapter 8

From Lincoln, Lucien rode the train up and over the snow-covered Rocky Mountains, at times moving no faster than five miles per hour. The Rockies were unlike anything he could have imagined. Vast and expansive, a blanket of snow-covered mountains for as far as the eyes could see. The train tracks cut through tunnels and wound through gorges, and Lucien experienced the sensation of his ears popping for the first time in his life. As the trees grew larger and denser, he swallowed and shifted his jaw to-and-fro in order to shake out the pressure he was feeling. When the pain in his ears finally burst, he simultaneously gasped by the pop against his ear drums and rejoiced of the easing of the tension. The world suddenly sounded clearer, and along with the pristine snow and clean air of the mountains, he had to assume it was an “American thing.”

As he stuck his finger in his ears to clean out whatever was playing tricks on his hearing, Zoran came and sat across from him with a fresh cup of coffee.

“The mountains,” Zoran said.

“What?”

“The mountains. Makes your ears pop. It’s the pressure going up to such high altitudes.”

Lucien nodded. “Nothing like this back home, that’s for sure.” He looked out the window as the train climbed higher. He tried to see the top of the peaks from the canyon, but the white snow blended into the white clouds.

“Your friend wanted to stay behind?”

Lucien broke his gaze from the mountains and looked at Zoran. His initial instinct told him to defend his friend’s honor, but to what end? Dominik had decided to be Dominik. He had already assumed he would never see him again; now that he had, he felt released of the shackles of home. Now

he could go and establish his company on his own. Dominik would have held him back, always nagging him to look for gold or the quick dollar.

“He found his place. It wasn’t mine.”

Zoran nodded and sipped his own cup of coffee. “I understand. Same thing happened to me. My friend stayed in New York. Me? The train is my life. We’re always looking for good men on these cars if you want a job.”

Lucien didn’t consider beyond the value of the words. “My place isn’t on the trains, it’s in San Francisco.”

“Why?”

“Olive oil. Market for olive oil.”

“You think there’s a bigger market for olive oil in San Francisco than in other parts of the country? Sounds like someone’s pulling your leg if you ask me. But listen, if you must insist, I have some good friends out there. Us train folk, we have good places to stay. I’ll set you up for a few weeks.”

Lucien looked askance at him. He wanted to trust Zoran, but everything in his gut told him not to. Why would a stranger be so kind? Surely, in Korcula, when he and his father got stranded in a storm off of the Adriatic, they could seek shelter in the nearest home, but that was the local custom. Frano had put up more than one stranded traveler. Here, though, on the train cutting across America, the land covered in gold and good fortune, it seemed suspicious. Regardless, Lucien’s options were dwindling, and if he could survive six weeks on Ellis Island, he could survive a couple weeks fending off whatever malicious intentions Zoran had up his sleeves.

“Thank you,” he said. “I might take you up on that.”

Zoran lit up. “Great! I’ll teach you bridge like I promised. Trust me, that game will change your life.” He stood up to resume his duties manning the bar. “You know, if you’re trying to find a market for

your oil, you better get off your behind and start talking to some folks. You never know who might be on these trains.”

The dining car began to fill up as the sun rose higher in the sky and passengers emerged from their sleeper cabins. Lucien noticed the demographic changing as he moved farther from the East Coast. Fewer men in suits and larger families. Women carrying children and young men tramping across the country. From New York to Boston and Boston to Chicago, Lucien could identify the business crowd. Between Nebraska and Utah, traversing the Rockies to an entirely new country, the train was filled with travelers. Some rich, some broke, some native, some immigrant, everyone headed west.

Zoran brought some stale rolls over that had been left out during the layover and let Lucien pick through the edible parts. Lucien pulled out a bottle of olive oil and surreptitiously poured some on one of the rolls. He looked around to see if anyone was looking and then stuck the bottle back next to him on the bench and ripped off a chunk of the bread. As he chewed, Zoran appeared next to him and reached across him. Before Lucien could stop him—“Now, just you wait awhile”—Zoran grabbed the bottle and looked at it. He popped the top and stuck his finger in and then stuck it in his mouth. His eyes closed and he sucked in the flavor.

“Delicious.”

Lucien tried to reclaim it, but Zoran held on firmly. A group of men entered the dining car and claimed one of the empty booths. “Barkeep!” one of them yelled in English. Zoran looked at him over his shoulder and made a motion that requested a moment.

“High rollers,” Zoran said, his crisp white shirt and bow tie creating a glare from the morning light. He put the bottle of olive oil on the table. “This belongs here, not there, hidden behind you. You’re in a different world now. There’s no room for cowardice. Fly your flag.”

As Zoran turned to leave, Lucien stopped him and asked, “Zoran, your apartment, is there a post office nearby?”

Zoran smiled approvingly, realizing Lucien was beginning to wheel and deal.

“There is. I’ll get you the address after I get this crowd some whiskey.”

“Whiskey? It’s ten in the morning.”

“Know your customers, Lucien. Know your customers. You’re not in Croatia anymore.”

Lucien stared at Zoran as he put on a big smile and approached the booth of men. Lucien sipped his coffee and bit off another chunk of bread. His eyes moved to the bottle of olive oil sitting freely for all to see. He began to move it but then stopped. He left it, letting his Croatian flag fly.

Chewing the bread and making his first open advertisement of his product, he began to think of his family. His anger had subsided. He wasn’t angry at Dominik and he wasn’t angry at his father or at Mr. Horvat. He was on a mission. He could succeed. But he couldn’t help feeling nostalgic for fresh bread or the smell of lamb’s fat making the fire crackle. He felt a little like his father must have felt when he was stranded in the arctic, surrounded by snow and ice and in a foreign land. He wasn’t stuck in ice as his father had been, but he was stuck in the Rockies and there was no turning back. At least his father could return home. Lucien’s new home was California. He realized that one of his father’s greatest regrets was that he couldn’t share the experience with the rest of his family. He couldn’t stare in awe with Erminio at the grandeur of the mountain range that most Slavs could only read about in books.

It took nearly a week to get over the Rockies and into Utah, which was stunning in its own right. Lucien had never seen so much land without seeing the ocean, but he had also never seen land like Utah. The red landscape and the jutting rock formations looked like it had all been created as an art creation by God himself. It was as barren as a desert, as stunning as the Rockies, and as far reaching as the ocean. It seemed an impossibility to cross, but the train chugged along slowly, reaching the horizon and discovering new horizons.

As the train reached the end of Nevada, where the landscape redefined desolate, Lucien put his head out the window. The March air was cold and dry as it whipped across his face. There were no animals in sight, no horse-pulled wagons carrying families to California, not much of anything. The desert was still at a high elevation, making it pure and filling Lucien's lungs with oxygen. The breeze from the train and the quality of the air reminded him of Korcula, sitting on the hilltops with Dominik drinking whatever alcohol they could stealthily sneak from the houses.

As he pulled his head back in the window, his ever-growing hair windblown and his pubescent face showing signs of stubble, a woman stood impatiently at the wooden seat on the other side of his table. Her dress was clean and pressed with silk patterns woven into her sleeves. Her hair was pulled into a bun beneath her large round hat and her bangs were crimped across her forehead. She must have been twice Lucien's age if not more, and she had no qualms about her lack of a male escort. When Lucien met her eyes, she shook her head in annoyance and looked around. Finally, she said, "Well aren't you going to ask me to sit down?"

Lucien thought he got the gist of the questions and sat up a little straighter as he motioned with his hand for her to join him.

"Are you a mute," she said as she sat. "I'm not sure I want to be sitting with a mute. A terrible bore that would be."

"A mute?" Lucien asked.

"Oh, well now, I see you're no mute. Praise the Lord." She set her purse on the bench beside her and popped her chin in the air. "Why yes, I would like a drink."

As she averted her gaze to the Nevada landscape, Lucien tried to sit up even straighter than before. He found Zoran and awkwardly motioned him over. When Zoran approached, he said, "Good afternoon, Madam, may I offer you a beverage?"

"I don't know, can you?"

“Oh I can. A seltzer perhaps?”

She looked at him with disdain. “Whiskey, neat. I’m no lady.”

“Very good. And if I may say, he’s been denying guests all day, so you must be a lucky woman.”

His comments seemed to please her and she touched the back of her hair underneath her hat to check for strays.

“I don’t,” Lucien began in English, “speak good.”

“Oh, Lord, a foreigner. I should have known. Practically worse than a mute.” She picked up the bottle of olive oil. “What’s this?” She popped the cork and smelled it and then looked suspiciously at Lucien. “Smells delicious. Yours?”

“It’s my family’s.”

“Oh. I see. You foreigners are getting rather predictable, which is boring. Another immigrant aiming to make it big. I find your stories unexciting. But, alas, here I am. So who’s the joke on really?” She recorked the bottle and put it back on the table

Lucien missed so many words that he stopped listening. He just watched her talk. There were no women like this back home. Beautiful, well put together, a fan of whiskey. He had no idea what to do.

Zoran brought two whiskeys over and set them on the table.

“Enjoy,” he said and then lingered for a second before leaving.

“My name is Lucien,” Lucien said in his best English.

“Okay.” She sipped her drink and then, realizing she had been rude, rolled her eyes and said, “Carol. Just Carol.” She sipped her drink again. “My husband’s Sacramento, just so you know. He’s a very wealthy businessman. I just thought you should know, lest you get any ideas.” She took another sip, finishing it off. Lucien didn’t know what she had said, but he understood that she was uncomfortable. She looked around, ashamed that she had finished her drink, ashamed that she had sat

with a strange boy, suddenly uncomfortable in her surroundings. Finally, she stood up and began to walk away. She stopped when she nearly passed Lucien's seat. "Well, come along now."

Lucien certainly understood that. He quickly packed up his bag, through back his whiskey, and then followed her out of the dining car. She didn't look back as she walked, but she walked past the hallway he had typically slept in and proceeded another four or five cars until they reached the first-class sleeper cabins. She opened her door and walked in. She didn't invite Lucien in, but she also didn't close the door. Lucien entered and closed the door behind him.

He was momentarily taken aback by the luxury he had just stepped into. Fine mahogany trim, plush velvet seats, a large bed with cotton sheets. A full bar sat atop a mirrored plate. Carol went to the bar and poured two drinks. She handed one to Lucien and then quickly drank hers. She put her glass down while Lucien took his first sip and then began to undress. Lucien kept the glass at his mouth as he watched. First her dress dropped to the ground and then she removed her white slip. She pulled her hat off and let her hair drape across her shoulders. Her pale skin was as pure as the snow they had just come from. She went and laid on the bed and waited for Lucien to join her.

A minute later, Lucien was no longer a virgin from Croatia, but a man in America. An hour later, Carol had tired of him and sent him on his way. He returned to the dining car where Zoran asked no questions, he simply placed another whiskey and a barely touched plate of potatoes and creamed greens in front of him. He shrugged, slapped Lucien on the shoulder, and then burst into hysterics. Lucien had a look of bliss on his face and wished he could share the story with a friend like Dominik. But short of Dominik, he sipped on his whiskey and enjoyed the plate of food, and as the afternoon turned to night, he began to think of Mary. He wondered where she might be and hoped she was doing well. He had no doubt in his mind that she had already taken command of her community.

Once he cleaned the plate, he leaned back and felt more at home in the dining car among the drunks and the adulterers. He held his chin a little higher and proudly stuck the bottle of olive oil at the

edge of his table for all to see. Then he looked out the window as the train meandered past Reno and began the journey into the mountains.

The trek up and over the Sierra Nevada was decidedly more terrifying than the stormy Rocky Mountains as the train hugged the mountainside up and over Donner Pass. The trees were larger than anything he had seen before and the steam from the train's engine dissipated before it could reach the heights of clear sky. Every geologic barrier Lucien passed made him feel an entirely new world away. First a sea, then an ocean, then the Rocky Mountains, and now the Sierra Nevada. Every mile he passed made America seem larger and more foreign, but also open and a more welcoming adventure. His run in with Carol helped ease any nerves. It didn't take him long to figure out Carol's lesson: be present and go with the moment.

But be smart, he also told himself, lest he end up like Dominik.

There was no snow or storm in the Sierras, so the train made it up and over within the night. From there, the train continued into lower and more urban environments, finally arriving into the station at Sacramento. The demographic shifted again as the families heading to California departed and business travelers in suits once again emerged.

Lucien didn't see Carol since their encounter and didn't see her leave with her husband, but he assumed she once again resumed her life. As the train began the final leg to Oakland—just a few hours, Zoran assured him—Lucien had a smile on his face. The train had become his home over the past three weeks, just as Ellis Island had become his home for the six weeks prior. He was nervous and excited to once again resume his life on solid land. He didn't know how it would go, but he was determined to get the business off the ground and he had a solid contact in Zoran.

Once the train pulled out of Sacramento's Central Station, Lucien retook his seat in the dining car and expected Zoran to place a cup of coffee in front of him. Instead, Zoran stood with Carol and an obese man, having a frank conversation. When he saw Lucien, he immediately pointed and invited Carol



and the man to join him in going to meet him. Lucien's heart skipped a beat when he saw his lover, and though he knew his Catholic mother raised him with a purer mind, he couldn't help but picture her without clothes on.

The three approached Lucien in his booth and Zoran motioned for him to stand. Lucien rose with suspicion, assuming he was in trouble. Carol barely looked at him as she put the gold filter of her cigarette in her mouth and blew smoke at the ceiling.

"So this is him?" the obese man asked. The man's midsection made a near-perfect circle from his waste to his neck, and his head made another perfectly round ball that sat atop the larger one. He had a thin mustache and his cheeks were flushed red with darker red veins. He had a top hat and a cane—Lucien assumed for show—and barely acknowledged Carol other than as the accessory that she was.

"It is," Zoran said in English. "This is Lucien Tahmatoh. Best olive oil on this side of the Atlantic."

The fat man looked at Zoran like he knew Zoran could be pulling a ruse on him. He turned to look at Carol. "You've tried it?"

Carol didn't answer, she just raised her eye brows as though saying, "Yes, we've talked about this," and then took another drag of her cigarette. The fat man looked back at Zoran and nodded.

"Lucien," Zoran said in Croatian, "this is Benjamin Clapper, a bigtime businessman around here. He pays me to provide him with good opportunities that I hear about during my duties and I mentioned your olive oil. He wants to invest."

"Invest?" Lucien was confused. "How would that work?"

Zoran looked at Benjamin and then back at Lucien. "He would finance a small store for you. In return, you give him twenty-five percent of your profits."

"Twenty five percent?"

"It's a good deal, Lucien. You should take it."

“Alright, you two, no more of that foreign talk,” Benjamin said. “English. And what is there to talk about?” He began to work himself up and grew short of breath. Carol nonchalantly put a hand on his shoulder, which reminded him to take a deep breath. “Do we have a deal? I need a drink and it’s a short trip.”

“Lucien?” Zoran asked.

“Ten,” Lucien said in English.

“Ten!” Benjamin fumed. “Ten!” He took a deep breath. “I don’t have time for this. Fifteen, final offer.”

“Fifteen, Lucien. Take it. This is good.”

Lucien looked at his bag, the one constant in his life since he left home. Tucked safely inside was his livelihood. He hadn’t thought much about logistics, he just assumed he would figure it out as he went. Now he had a possible answer to skip the obvious obstacles.

What would his father do? He would accept a good deal.

“Okay,” Lucien said. He held his hand out and Benjamin wrapped his salami fingers around it.

“We’ll talk in San Francisco. Zoran, get me a whiskey.”

## Chapter 9

Lucien and Zoran sat across the table from Benjamin and his new mistress, Veronica. Lucien had insisted on keeping Carol at an arm's length once he went into business with Benjamin, and when she objected by informing Benjamin of their affair on the train, Benjamin decided Lucien's business was more valuable to him than Carol's offerings. He sent her back to Utah, but still asserted himself by knocking Lucien squarely across the jaw and cracking one of his molars.

Now twenty-three years old, Lucien had filled out into a healthy Croatian-American, with thick eyebrows and his cheek bones that framed dark brown eyes. His black wool suit was the standard style of San Francisco's business class, and he even had a round felt hat that he hung on a steel hook immediately inside the door.

Benjamin had managed to become even more rotund. He dabbed at his flushed and sweaty head with a handkerchief, struggling to look down at the table without choking himself on his neck fat. He clutched his cane for dear life and used it to tap the table for emphasis.

Zoran stunk of fish. He and Lucien caught the fresh fish for the market every morning, but Lucien cleansed himself each morning as the face of the business. Zoran realized he just liked to go fishing. "Trains," he would tell Lucien, "who the hell wants to spend their life on a train?"

Lucien had never actually spoken to Veronica, assuming this was Veronica. Benjamin brought lots of women by the market. Some spoke, some didn't. Benjamin introduced her as Veronica, but she wasn't shy about sipping from a bottle of laudanum and seemed less than enthusiastic about making a business call before their evening's engagements.

Benjamin wheezed as he stared at Lucien. "I'm too old for this, Lucien, too fat. I can't be making these calls any longer. I accept your deal, here and now." He tapped the table with his cane and nudged Veronica who obediently brought the contract closer to him. As he signed it, he said out loud,

“Benjamin Clapper, April 17, 1906. 1906, can you believe it? Seems just yesterday you were a scared little Slav boy who couldn’t speak no English. Now look at you. Independent business owner. I’m proud of you. Don’t you be mistaken, though, when I come by and want a bottle of olive oil or some fresh fish, you better be damn sure I’m not paying for it. Alright, doll, help me up.”

Veronica quickly rose and offered Benjamin her hand. Between her pulling and the cane pushing, Benjamin managed to emerge from his wooden chair. He grabbed the four hundred dollars in cash—which they determined to be fifteen percent of the total value—and tucked it in his jacket pocket. They then bade no goodbyes as they walked out of the store, allowing the door to shut behind them.

“So that’s that,” Zoran said in Croatian. Lucien could speak English at this point, but they always spoke Croatian between the two of them. “No more fat man.”

Lucien rose and reached around the counter to grab a bottle of olive oil and a fifth of whiskey. He poured two glasses and filled a small plate with olive oil. Zoran pulled some bread out of a cloth bag.

“No more shipments,” Lucien said, “so enjoy it.”

“Are you still going to send them money?”

Lucien considered the question. “No, I suppose not. Let’s see how the market holds up.”

“The olive oil had only been a fraction of revenue for two years now. Look at this place. Fruit, supplies, tools. You turned out to be quite the businessman.”

Lucien sighed. “I wish you could have seen the orchard. Tasted the olives straight from the tree. Tasted the oil straight from the press. Nothing like it.”

Lucien ripped off a piece of bread and dabbed it in the olive oil and rejoiced in possibly the last time he would ever taste it. Then he drowned the taste away by downing the entire glass of whiskey.

“They’ve officially sold it?”

“Last month. They haven’t even told me where they moved.”

“Are they coming here?”

Lucien shrugged. "Oh, I suppose my father would rather be homeless." He shrugged his shoulders in the air again and stared at the plate of olive oil. "I suppose it was a stupid idea anyway. After the shipping costs and then expenses to keep this place open, their profit was minimal."

"It got you out here. It got you your business. Would you have ever guessed you'd be running a fresh fish and produce market in San Francisco? I mean, you're the worst fisherman I've ever seen, but..." Zoran trailed off. "Coming out tonight? Big game over on Hyde."

"Bridge? Tonight? Ha ha, now just hang on, ha ha, no, we just made a big sale here. Ha ha, no, not tonight. Let's get out around 5:30 tomorrow morning, okay?"

Zoran nodded. They had become best friends and business partners since they had met on the train seven years earlier, and they now shared the apartment above the market they operated. Zoran had been trying to get Lucien to stop sending money back home for years, but he had accepted it as a thirty-five percent owner of the partnership. Now with his family and Benjamin out of the picture, they were now each fifty percent owners of Lucien's Market at the corner of Battery and Broadway.

When Zoran left, Lucien locked the door behind them and walked up the stairs to the private apartment. They had a relatively austere abode, devoting most of their resources to the market, but they had a table, some chairs, a radio, and two beds, more than enough for a couple of bachelors trying to make it in San Francisco. Lucien collapsed onto the green wool blanket that kept him warm against the San Francisco fog and felt the springs of the mattress creak and groan against his body weight. It wasn't as comfortable as the feather mattresses they had in Zrnovo, but his own room was a luxury he had never expected. He reached to the table beside his bed and pulled an unopened letter from underneath a library book. The return address was a postal code from Portland, Maine. He broke the seal with his thumb and pulled the letter out. It was from Dominik.

"Lucien, friend," the letter began in practically illegible handwriting that wandered between Croatian and English. "I hope you're doing well." Lucien had come to expect these letters. Dominik

sent them once every two or three months. Lucien assumed Dominik received the address from his parents, but he couldn't be sure. "I'm pleased to say that Richard is now two years of age and getting older. I would be happy if you would meet him. My business is folding and we are considering moving to Montreal. Oh, I'm married. I can't remember if I told you, but I assumed you knew because of Ricard." Lucien shook his head at the misspelling. "Her name is Lisbeth. She's nice and pretty. I would like to see you again. Can I see you? We can start the business as we planned. Have you talked to the family back home? I assume they're doing well. I don't miss them, though. They won't return my letters. How are you at poker? Lisbeth won't let me play. She can be a chore."

He didn't sign it. Lucien had become numb to these letters. This one was actually written with some sort of logical reasoning. He placed it back on the table and rested his head on the pillow. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, Lucien had packed breakfast for he and Zoran consisting of hardboiled eggs and toast with jelly and then poured two cups of coffee. At precisely 5:12 in the morning, he was carrying the two mugs of coffee to Zoran's room when the world began to shake. The first time he felt a tremor about three years prior, he was terrified. He suddenly had to question the stability of the very foundation of the world beneath his feet. Eventually, though, these tremors just became a part of San Francisco. He had felt dozens as they calmly shook the world and he now barely noticed them.

Today's was different. The tremor lasted about twenty seconds and his house shook around him. He tried to steady the coffee and moved into the doorframe of Zoran's room to ride it out. When the tremor stopped, he assumed he could continue on his way to wake Zoran (who of course slept through it). As he stepped out of the doorframe, though, the sound of a stampede made him pause. A distant rumble grew louder and he looked over his shoulder to ensure he wasn't about to get run over by Asian elephants. As the rumbling continued to get louder, Zoran popped his head off the pillow to see what was happening. And then the rumbling struck.

The crash against the house exploded like a bomb, instantly shattering the windows and knocking the plates off of the counter. Lucien struggled to stand and after a few seconds dropped the coffee mugs onto the wooden floor. He grasped the door frame as the floor began to splinter beneath his feet. Zoran flipped over and held on for dear life as his mattress bounced underneath him. After about forty-five seconds—although what seemed more like five minutes—the shaking subsided. Lucien continued to grasp the doorframe and Zoran looked as though the bed had become possessed with an evil spirit. When they both realized the earthquake had ended, they began looking around to see if the house was still standing.

The floor now had gashes where a section had moved a foot higher than the bordering section. There were no longer windows and they could immediately hear sirens and screaming from outside on Battery Street. The ceiling had begun to crumble and one of the wooden beams across the kitchen sheared off in the middle and collapsed onto the kitchen counter. After a few more moments, they both looked at each other and began to laugh. It wasn't an expression of humor so much as that shared moment when two people realize they escaped a close death and can only laugh as the adrenaline slaps any notion of expected reality from their faces.

And then the brick façade of the building collapsed to the street. Zoran shielded his head with his arms and rolled to the far side of the bed. Lucien fell to the ground as he attempted to retreat from the carnage. Once the thunder of the bricks collapsing to the road subsided and sent a thunderous roar across San Francisco, dust filled the house and clouded the air with a brown haze.

“What the hell is happening?” Zoran shouted in English.

Lucien pushed himself off the floor and waved the dust from in front of his face. He coughed and then said, “Well, I think we had an earthquake.” His English was awkward and straightforward.

Zoran rolled out of bed and grabbed a shirt through the haze and threw it over his head.

“So what the hell do we do now?”

They didn't realize it at the time, but the façade of their building was simply one note in a chorus of destruction that occurred almost simultaneously. As Zoran asked his question, the city suddenly went silent. The buildings that collapsed were now on the ground. They could hear no screams and no sirens. Just an eerie silence as the Earth settled back into its readjustment.

And then every citizen of San Francisco reacted as one and let out a scream of agony and terror. The screams made Lucien recoil. But it wasn't an entire city's scream, just one. He could hear his neighbor.

"Mrs. Johansson," he whispered. He reverted to Croatian. "Zoran, get dressed, gather everything valuable in the store."

"For what?"

"Now, just... We got to move it. There's no front to the store. The boat. Just gather it."

"Where are you going?"

They both heard Mrs. Johansson scream again. They made eyes at each other and then Lucien raced down the stairs and out the front of the building. He ran into chaos. He had to climb over the bricks of his own house to make it out to the street. Smoke billowed into the sky from every direction and piles of rubble created obstacles where none had been before. Men in suits were running down the road gripping their hats to prevent them from blowing away.

Lucien had to stop to register the scene. What had just happened? It seemed like God himself had brought his hands down and shook the city apart. He could see into Michael Arndt's shop across the street. He backed up to avoid being hit by a horse tearing down the street with an empty carriage in tow. And then he smelled gas. It hit his nostrils like an evil ghoulish waggling its fingers under his nose. He looked around to see where it could be coming from and then the explosion stunned the air around him. He looked down the street and a fireball lit up the sky as a gas line ignited and blasted a flame higher



than the buildings around it. The air crackled as the gas burned off, but the wooden structures of the neighborhood would soon be turned to ash.

He turned back to look at his store and then heard another scream. He focused in on Mrs. Johansson and then ran across the brick rubble and into her cosmetics store. All of her products had been knocked to the floor. He heard the crunch under his feet as he made his way through the store and up the wooden stairwell. He tried to open the door at the top, but it was wedged shut. He stepped back and then rushed forward with his shoulder. He immediately felt a sharp pain down his arm, but he stepped back again and repeated, crashing into the door. After four attempts, the top half of the door gave way and Lucien crashed into the room. Mrs. Johansson was huddled on a bed with her two daughters. The façade of her house had also given way, but the wall opposite her bed had lit on fire. Lucien ran to the bed and scooped up the larger of the two girls.

“Come on!”

Mrs. Johansson mustered the courage to shove herself off the bed, putting aside her modesty as her night shirt rode up her legs. She grabbed the smaller of the two girls and followed Lucien out of the room and back through the cosmetics store to the brick-covered cobblestone sidewalk. Lucien put the little girl down and looked around as the city sank further into chaos. A group of four young men in dirty brown suits came running down the road through the sooty air and began to dash in to Lucien’s fish market. He watched as the first was met with Zoran’s fist and stumbled backward. Lucien bounded over the pile of rubble and hurled himself through the air, tackling one of the men and knocking another against the carved-wooden post that demarcated the corner of Lucien’s market. Zoran stepped out onto the sidewalk and punched the first man again and then he and Lucien stood together in front of the store, ready to defend their property. Mrs. Johansson held onto her girls and watched in fear, knowing she would be defenseless. The four men gathered themselves and sized up Lucien and Zoran.

“Here,” Lucien said, picking up a paper bag full of smoked salmon that Zoran had dropped when he greeted the first looter. “Take the fish and git.”

The man with a bloody nose suspiciously picked up the bag and looked inside. “Come on, lots of other stores,” he said. “This ain’t got much no how.” His words were barely audible over the noise of the chaos. The four of them began to back away, though, and then ran past a motorized police vehicle.

Lucien and Zoran watched them flee and then looked around their once bustling neighborhood. The smoke from the fires blackened the air to the point they could barely see across the street. As the sun rose, it cast an orange pall across the sky, which through the haze made it difficult to see where the fires ended and the sun began. Down the road where the buildings shared no walls, entire Victorian structures had collapsed. Some roofs caved in, but most of the hand-carved architecture—which were typically solid pieces of wood—remained standing, creating a museum of San Francisco’s artistry among the graveyard of poor masonry. The fires would soon consume it all.

Lucien turned back into the store. He saw a pile of mainly nonperishable goods in the middle of the floor. All of the remaining olive oil in three wooden crates, nearly twenty pounds of smoked fish, spices, bread from the Tom’s Bakery down the block, and several paper bags full of rolling tobacco (which he increasingly relied on for revenue).

“Go get your things,” Lucien said. “Just what you need. We have to git out ‘fore th’ whole place comes down.” He was speaking in English for emphasis.

Zoran didn’t hesitate and ran up the stairwell. Lucien followed and began throwing his things into his potato sack that he still had from his original journey across the world. He threw in his clothes, a picture of his family that his father had sent him, the letters from Dominik, and a few books he had acquired. They both headed back downstairs and stared at the pile of goods.

“You take the first load to th’ boat,” Lucien said. “I’ll stay and guard th’ store. Put th’ supplies beneath in cargo. Nothin’ out in the open.”

“K.”

Zoran picked up a box of the olive oil, a couple of the bags of fish, and his sack of belongings and made his way for the outside. As soon as he reached the light, a loud crack stunned the air. Zoran was stopped in his tracks and stumbled backward. The fish and his belongings fell off of the box of olive oil. The box shook in his hands as he fell to his knees.

Lucien rushed over, unable to process what had just happened. Zoran’s face had gone pale and blood began seeping through his cotton shirt. Lucien’s eyes went wide. He didn’t know what to say or what to do. He knelt down and took the box from Zoran and set it down. Zoran leaned forward onto Lucien and began to hyperventilate. As Lucien embraced him, the two of them silent as Zoran’s life began to drift away, two police officers entered the market with large rifles trained on Lucien.

One of the officers circled them until he could see Lucien’s face. “Filthy looter! Let him go and stand up.”

Lucien began shaking unconsolably, partly in shock and partly in anger. “We’re not looters, you filthy swine! This is my store! We’re not looters!”

“Bullshit! Stand up.”

“This is Lucien’s Market. I’m Lucien. This is my partner. You just murdered him.” He spoke in crystal clear English, annunciating his words as carefully as possible.

The police officer looked at the other and nodded.

“Alright, sorry about the misunderstanding, just trying to prevent the filth from ruining this city.”

He circled back around Lucien and Zoran but did not lower his rifle. Lucien didn’t see them leave, but he knew they were alone.

“Hey, you’re going to be okay,” Lucien whispered. “We’re going to get out of here. We’re going to leave. Come on, let’s go.”

But Zoran didn't move. "Lucien," he mumbled. "Just remember, never trump your partner's winning hand. Bad Bridge."

Lucien couldn't help but laugh, but he stopped when he realized he was holding Zoran's lifeless body in his arms.

## Chapter 10

Lucien held Zoran in his arms for as long as his muscles allowed. When his biceps began to shake, he softly laid him on the ground. The color in Zoran's face hadn't fully left his body, but his eyes had glazed over and blood had already begun to dry from the edges of his mouth. Lucien didn't cry, but he felt a part of his body had been violently removed. The noise and chaos became a din in the background as Lucien's world just changed beyond repair. His hand remained on Zoran's chest, neither protectively nor lovingly, just merely because.

He heard a commotion outside the building and turned his head slightly. A cohort of uniformed soldiers entered. They were stationed at the Presidio and now likely sent out into the city to help retain some semblance of stability and civility.

"We heard gunshots," one of them said.

Lucien didn't answer, he just nodded with his whole body, rocking back and forth at the hip.

"Who was it? Looters?"

Lucien just kept nodding. What good would it have served to accuse the police of murdering his friend and business partner?

"Sir," the soldier said, "I'm very sorry, but we need to take him with us." Two of the soldier maneuvered around Lucien and began to drag Zoran's body out from under Lucien's hand. "He'll be at the base hospital."

Again Lucien nodded.

"I'm going to leave two guards outside your building. You won't have any more problem with looters."

Lucien finally cocked his head to the side and looked at the soldier. He couldn't have been any older than Lucien, maybe younger. They held single shot rifles and donned buttoned wool uniforms.

“Why?” Lucien asked.

“Why? Why what?”

“Smell the air. The fires will take this place.”

The soldier nodded. “Seems likely.”

“Can you help me take my things to my boat? Just off the pier.”

The soldier hesitated. They were sent out to protect, not to help move. Eventually, though, the soldier relented. “Sure. Sergeant, stand guard. You two, grab as much as you can and follow him to his boat.”

Two other soldiers now had Zoran on a stretcher and began to carry him outside. Lucien arose and watched him go. He didn’t say goodbye and he didn’t weep. It was a cold acceptance to one of life’s most unexpected incidents. Lucien wasn’t heartless, at the moment, though, crying over a lost friend would serve no purpose. Mourning could wait for another day when Lucien could honor him properly. Once Zoran’s body had been carried out of sight, Lucien began to pick up the bags of fish and other supplies. With the soldiers’ help, they were able to carry everything of value out of the store and down the road to the pier.

Lucien’s boat was a twenty-two-foot skiff with a single mast and a small cabin below deck. He had it tied about two-thirds of the way down the wooden fishing pier, a spot reserved for wealthier or more influential San Franciscans. Several of the fisherman from this particular pier had contracted the bubonic plague during the outbreak a few years earlier, which opened up multiple spots—both on the pier and in the fishing business. Lucien’s friend, Zolt, who had immigrated to San Francisco from Croatia in the early 1890s, operated the pier. He helped Lucien secure one of the nicer vessels that no longer had an owner and gave him cheap rent along the pier.

“Lucien,” Zolt yelled. It came out as a mumble because Zolt perpetually had a cigarette in his mouth.

Lucien and the two soldiers slowed as they reached Zolt who came bounding out of the pier's office as though the city were under attack. His knees were bent in a crouch and he tucked his head deep into his shoulders.

"Zolt, quick," Lucien said in Croatian. "Help me get my things to my boat."

Zolt took a couple of the bags from Lucien and then followed him down the dock.

"Are we under attack?"

"What?" Lucien asked, perplexed by the question.

"Attack! Are we under attack? Is it the Austrians? It is the Austrians, isn't it? They found us. Oh brother me, they found us."

"Shut up, Zolt! We're not under attack. It was an earthquake." Lucien stepped onto the bow of his boat and opened the storage hatch. He threw in what he had in his hands and then began taking the items from Zolt and the two soldiers. Then he slammed the storage hatch shut and locked it with a large rusted lock that he had never before had the need to use.

"Is that it, Lucien?" one of the soldiers asked.

"If we're not under attack, why are you with soldiers?" Zolt asked. "Soldiers, Lucien. Soldiers!"

Lucien stepped off the boat onto the pier. "Yes, that's it, but the owner of the store next to mine needs assistance. I'll show you."

They began to run back, but Zolt grabbed Lucien's arm. "Lucien, you're working with the soldiers? Soldiers are bad."

Lucien looked at the two young men who had just helped him and then looked back to Zolt. He put his hand on Zolt's shoulder and spoke like he was speaking to a child. "We are not in Croatia. These are our friends. Now get in your store and lock the door. The city's in trouble."

"What are you going to do?"

"I..." Lucien paused. "I'm going to go help."

“Why?”

Lucien looked him in the eye and couldn't find an answer. He had escaped Croatia, made it across the Atlantic, made it across America, and established his business. At no point, though, did he do it alone. He wanted to explain that. He wanted to describe how people helped him. But the words escaped him. He simply turned and led the soldiers off the pier and back into the smoke-filled city. From the pier, Lucien could see the chaos in its entirety. Collapsed buildings, people screaming, billowing smoke and the haze of dust and soot. It was like an image from an old history book. As he ran off the pier and onto the paved road, making his way through the buildings and weaving around horses, crying children, and crashed vehicles, the larger scene became a series of individual horrors.

When they arrived at his store, a firetruck was parked in front. It had been barely visible as the black smoke from the fire down the street clouded the air, but he recognized what it was once he was close enough to touch it. The fires had already spread and were burning a few buildings down. The firemen were between the truck and his store, standing next to four police officers and conversing with the soldiers that had stayed as guards. Mrs. Johansson held the hands of her two daughters as she screamed obscenities at them.

When Mrs. Johansson saw Lucien, she ran to him and yelled pleadingly. “Lucien! Lucien! They want to destroy our stores!”

Lucien frowned in confusion and coughed as he joined the group. When he was within the circle, he saw that two of the police officers were the same officers that took Zoran's life. Lucien could no longer compose himself. His entire body tensed as he lunged at the man who was in charge. He tackled him to the ground and began punching him wildly. He released all of his hatred and frustration. This was America, where the police protected the citizens. This wasn't the Austro-Hungarian Empire where the law enforcement could arrest you for being a Croatian. This was America, and this officer had just shattered Lucien's image of the country when he took Zoran's life.



The soldiers grabbed Lucien and pulled him off, allowing the officer to stand. The officer immediately punched Lucien across the face.

“Crazy immigrant! We’re trying to protect the city!”

“He killed Zoran!” Lucien yelled. “He killed him. You all saw!”

“He’s crazy. Come on, get on with it.”

The officer turned and walked away, but the soldiers continued to hold Lucien’s arms.

“Calm down, Lucien,” one of them said. “There’s nothing you can do.”

Lucien knew he was right, but he had lost his wits. He only returned to his senses when Mrs. Johansson shouted again. “Lucien, the stores! They’re going to take our stores.”

Her comment made Lucien shake his head and return to his confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Mr. Tomato,” one of the firemen said.

“It’s Tamahtoh.”

“Okay, MR. Tamahtoh. How’s your insurance?”

“What? Why?”

“The fire’s coming. We’re going to try to create a break.”

“A break? How?”

“By blowing up our stores!” Mrs. Johansson wailed.

“By... what?” There was too much going on. Lucien was struggling to process it. “You’re going to blow up our stores? These are...” He turned and looked inside and saw Zoran’s blood on the floor.

“You’re just trying to cover up the evidence.” He turned and tried again to go after the officer, but the soldiers constrained him.

“Lucien, I have no idea what happened, all we’re trying to do is save the city,” the fireman said.

“We need to dynamite your store, now. We’re not asking. Do you have insurance?”

“Do I... Yes, I have insurance.”

“Good, call your broker.” The fireman turned and gathered the others. “Let’s get to work.”

Lucien shrugged his arms out of the soldiers’ grasp. “It’s the right thing to do,” one of them said.

“I know it’s hard.”

Lucien felt helpless. He felt as helpless as being detained on Ellis Island, or as trying to sell his olive oil amid the tax increases.

“Lucien, you have to do something,” Mrs. Johansson said.

“What is there to do?” He stared at the road as he spoke. He had spent seven years in San Francisco. He got his store up and running, became a successful fisherman, and had a burgeoning business. Now it was gone. It was gone because of nature, and it was gone because of the government his taxes paid for. He turned away from Mrs. Johansson and began to walk slowly back to his boat.

Firemen ran past him into his store with dynamite attached to long wires. He didn’t watch to see what they planned to do. He could feel the heat of the fires from the buildings around him and knew it was all gone. All he had was his boat and his supplies. He made it a block when an explosion shook him nearly off his feet. He turned back to his store in horror as his building and store collapsed to the ground. The cloud of black smoke mushroomed to the sky, impressively standing out among the carnage. He stopped and looked at the warzone around him and—perhaps from shock—laughed. Of course his store would be ground zero for the war against the earthquake. If Zoran had been there, Lucien knew he would have laughed as well. Even Dominik would have laughed, although Lucien assumed he would be out looting.

He turned and continued back to his boat and sat in his fishing seat and watched as San Francisco burned. The dynamited-fire-breaks did not help, and in some cases made the situation worse. Over the next seventy-two hours, Lucien did not leave his boat. A few others came to their boats as well, but for the most part, Lucien and Zolt sat and watched and ate dried fish, bread, and olive oil. The

cabin underneath was not meant for long-term living and provided enough room for a thirty-six-inch-wide bed, but it was a covered bed. Zolt shared his water that continued to flow and Lucien mostly relieved himself into the San Francisco Bay. He felt as though he had come full circle from the journey across the Atlantic, living in squalor in a cabin that barely satisfied the human needs, but then as now, he survived.

It took six weeks for the smoke to stop rising and the murky air to give way to the San Francisco fog. Six weeks and about ninety percent of the city had burned to the ground. Lucien had managed to get a telegram to Benjamin, who out of the kindness of his heart—and the fact he was no longer an owner—called Lucien’s insurance company on his behalf. About ten weeks after the fire, Lucien met the insurance broker on Zolt’s pier.

“Andrew Woodside,” the insurance broker said, smiling broadly underneath his large handlebar mustache. He had on a top hat and a fine suit, seeming to find no irony in his immaculate appearance amid the ashes of San Francisco.

“Lucien Tahmatoh,” Lucien responded, accepting Brandon’s hand.

Lucien stepped off his boat onto the pier.

“Friends with Big Benjamin Clapper, hmm? Fine friend to have, fine friend indeed.” Andrew spoke with the confidence of a man who worked for a large corporation. A salesman by trade, he looked upon Lucien with an unyielding interest. He looked around Lucien at his boat and nodded approvingly and then he sized Lucien up. Lucien, who hadn’t shaved in weeks and smelled of fish, looked more like a homeless vagrant than a former business owner looking for an insurance payout. “Very fine friend to have. Now then, let’s get down to brass tacks, shall we? Mr. Clapper discussed your store in great detail. Sounds like a very pleasant establishment. Now then, seeing as I can’t see it in person, and I’m well aware that the city had to take measures in its destruction, Mutual Insurance is prepared to offer you a sum of \$1800. Now, naturally, as a sixty percent owner, you’ll receive \$1,080.

Your business partner is scheduled to receive \$450, however, since he passed away, his money will be placed in escrow until we can find a next of kin. Mr. Clapper will receive the other \$270.”

“Excuse me? Now, now, just wait, I’m the owner. I bought Mr. Clapper out and I had the insurance paperwork updated to reflect that.”

“You did? I wasn’t aware. When did that happen?”

Lucien stepped back and looked at the flattened city immersed in fog. “April seventeenth.”

“The seventeenth? The day before the quake? Well now, there you go. No post would have gotten out of the city. No paperwork would have been filed with the city. The transfer never happened.”

“But I paid him. I have the signed sale.”

“You do? May I see it?”

Lucien hesitated. He hadn’t thought about the papers that granted him ownership of his business. They were on the desk in his room. They no longer existed.

“They were destroyed in the fire.”

Andrew nodded understandingly. “Terrible thing. Terrible thing. But you can understand the pickle I’m in, naturally? I’m afraid you’ll have to take it up with Mr. Clapper. I can delay payment, if you like.”

Lucien looked at him and saw the glint in his eye. Once he left the pier, Andrew Woodside would not be returning.

“Have you made lots of these visits to business owners in the city?”

Andrew smiled. “Naturally.”

Lucien sighed. “I’ll take my money.”

When Andrew Woodside left, Lucien was left standing on the pier with a wad of nine hundred dollars in cash. Every dollar of it made him feel dirty inside and he couldn’t help but think of ways to get

to Sacramento to personally get the other nine hundred from Benjamin. Zolt came to join him and together they stood looking at the bustling city beginning to pick up and rebuild.

“Who was that?”

“Insurance.”

“Insurance? You can’t trust insurance. Bad people. Get any money?”

“Some.”

“What’re you gonna do with it?”

Lucien looked at Zolt, who Lucien knew would never leave his place on the pier. It sounded nice. But Lucien’s love for the city that brought him in had been irreparably damaged. His trust in law enforcement could not be fixed. He could not in good conscience put his resources back into the rebuilding of a city that took everything from him.

“I’m leaving.”

“You’re leaving? Where ya goin’?”

In the ten weeks since the fire, Lucien hadn’t considered leaving. He never thought he’d leave San Francisco. It had been the end of the line, the end of his story, not the beginning. Where could he go? He thought about different options. He thought about what he could do. He could open a new store. The supply of olive oil had run dry and he had no idea where his parents were. Now they had no way of reaching him. He’d have to tell the post office to hold his mail. What were his skills other than fishing and selling goods? Then a thought occurred to him. Trees. He knew how to grow trees. He thought about his brief encounter with Frano from Ellis Island and had heard about a growing Slav population about an hour south of San Francisco where the open land and the breeze off the ocean made ideal growing locations for orchards.

“Watsonville,” he heard himself say. “I’m going to go to Watsonville.”

## Chapter 11

Getting to Watsonville from San Francisco in 1906 was a challenging endeavor. When Zolt helped Lucien shove off from the dock, the two waved solemnly. Lucien was only heading about sixty miles south, but it might as well have been across the Atlantic. He didn't anticipate feeling the same dread he felt when leaving Croatia, but San Francisco had become his home, and Zolt was the closest family he had left now that Zoran had been killed.

Lucien raised the jib to slowly steer the boat into the open waters and foggy skies of the San Francisco Bay. He used the wind to weave through the tied-up boats that littered the entrance to the harbor. Most were simply large fishing boats that had been tied to secured anchors. As he looked back, the pier looked like a relic of once flourishing city. It reminded him of the wall that surrounded Korcula City, an imposing construction that no longer served a purpose. The fog was thicker than usual on that particular morning in early July and the city's destruction faded into its grip before Lucien could even raise the main sail. It was a sudden and symbolic goodbye, tossing aside any hint of a drawn-out farewell. This time, Lucien wasn't forced out because of political and economic hardship or to buy his family a little more time to rescue their orchard, but simply because nature provided an end to his story of olive oil. The family farm was gone, taken by the greed of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and now the store that provided an outlet for foreign sales had been consumed by fire. The police officers took his friend's life and the fire fighters took away his business.

Now he began a new journey. It wasn't across the world, but merely down the coast to a simpler location. As he raised the main sale, he steered the boat to the right, beginning a low tac south through the bay. He would have preferred to turn left and head out to the open waters of the Pacific, but his small fishing vessel would have been consumed by the power of the tides and large waves off the coast. Had he been able to go down the coast, he would have been able to sail all the way to Santa Cruz

and the Monterey Bay. By going down the Bay, he would dock in the Alviso Boat Harbor near San Jose and try to find a ride over the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Lucien and Zoran had explored most of the north of the San Francisco Bay over the past couple years, staying in between San Francisco to the south and Marin to the north. He had never ventured lower than South San Francisco, so the adrenaline felt akin to the trips down the Croatian coast with his father. Seeing new lands and new developments, feeling the wind in his hair as it blasted past him and onto land, it all created the sense of a high stakes adventure.

Lucien locked the sail at full mast and shifted the boom to the alternate side of the boat as the wind sent him careening down the Bay. He never would have guessed that the Bay went so far inland and to the south, but he tacked back and forth and saw the Alviso Boat Harbor slowly grow bigger in his vision. The job of tacking was undeniably easier with two people, as he now knew through his experiences with his father and with Zoran. He made due, though, holding the lever underneath his knee as he cranked the rope to shift the boom. The sail got tangled once or twice, but he eventually found a rhythm and made his way down the Bay in less than three hours. The task of maneuvering the sailboat on his own lessened the depression of leaving and all it entailed, but he couldn't help feel a sadness that he was leaving San Francisco. He never saw Zoran's body once it had been carried off, so a part of him assumed it was all a myth, a practical joke gone wrong, and Zoran would actually be waiting for him in San Jose with a smile on his face and a game of Bridge lined up. He knew, though, that that fantasy was just that, a fantasy. His shop was gone, Zoran was gone, all contact with family was gone, and a new life waited for him. He barely even remembered what the faces of his family looked like, aside from the old picture his mother had sent him. Even that, though, resembled a magazine storyline, a photo of an unrecognizable family that looked like his family, but was actually just a group of morose individuals trying to get by in a cruel world. He knew he would never see them again when he left. By

now, they were little more than a letter in the mail that occasionally sent boxes of olive oil. Tomorrow, they'd be a dream.

The earthquake had caused damage up and down the Bay. Lucien could see smoke from recurring fires rising from Oakland to the East and all the way down the western shore of San Mateo County. Large ships and ferries were busy shuttling supplies to the rebuilding communities and familiar fishing boat captains raised their hands in confusion when they saw Lucien sailing by with no lines or nets in the water. Lucien ignored it all and continued south, although his plan didn't extend much further beyond that.

After several hours, the bustling port and train depot of Alviso, San Jose came into view. Fancy sailboats were anchored outside the canal, which itself had been dredged to allow larger ships to dock inland. It was a different feel than the free-for-all feel of the San Francisco piers. The whole operation seemed more systematic, with ships docking, offloading, and then getting tugged out to the deeper waters of the Bay. Regardless, the earthquake had shaken San Jose nearly as bad as San Francisco and Lucien could feel a palpable sense of urgency to get the supplies to the people who needed them. As Lucien sailed deeper into the canal, the large brown harbor house came into view, which sat in the cul-de-sac of the canal. Personal sailboats glided around the U-turn of the canal is stretched around the harbor house and under walking bridge to the lively entrance to the city.

Lucien maneuvered his boat to a small dock built out from the grassy knoll aside the canal. A young man grabbed the rope tied to the front of the boat and secured it by wrapping a figure-8 around the steel "ox-horns" that had been bolted into the wood.

"That'll be a nickel for the day," the boy mumbled. He couldn't have been older than thirteen or fourteen and reminded Lucien of himself when he and Dominik tried to make a few extra cents by assisting the local fishermen.

Lucien handed him a dime and said, "I'm looking to sell the boat. Know anyone?"



“What for, mister? Looks like a nice sloop. People be itchin’ for one of these, what with the damage and all.”

“Good, should be easy to sell. Know anyone?”

“Sure do. Go talk to Mr. Baster in the harbor house. He’ll be sure to set you up. Gotta whole list of folks just achin’ to get their hands on one of these. Comin’ from the city?”

“I am. Mr. Baster, you said.”

“Yep, be no problem at all.”

“Good. I don’t need change, just watch my things, will ya?”

“Sure!”

“What’s your name?”

“Dominik, mister. The name’s Dominik.”

The word hit Lucien squarely in the gut. Dominik. The boy’s name was Dominik. What were the odds? His mother would say it was a sign that he was on the right path; there are no such things as coincidences, just signs to follow. He would have given it all up to see his mother at that moment. His mother, his father, his brother. He hoped they were doing alright. He would send a telegram from Watsonville to Korcula City and hope that someone would know the fate of his family and deliver the message.

Lucien learned that the Dominik from San Jose knew what he was talking about. Mr. Baster, with a curly-Q mustache and large pipe, had an odd monopoly on San Jose boat sails and had no qualms about donning a freshly pressed tuxedo at the harbor house.

“Dress to impress, I like to say,” he said after shaking hands with Lucien. “I know times are tough, though. Tough times indeed. Course my pappy used to say that times are always tough, so no excuses to not dress to impress.”

Lucien couldn't be certain if Mr. Baster was finished or if he had just insulted him, so he shrugged off the small talk and came out with it. "Need to sell my boat for fair dollar and I hear you're the man to do it."

"Am I ever! You've come to the right place. What kind a boat we talking about?"

Mr. Baster popped his pipe into his mouth and followed Lucien's finger out the window to the fishing sloop. "Need seventy-five for it, not a penny less."

"Seventy-five? Could be tough. San Francisco this is not."

"Well, maybe I came to the wrong man then. I'm sure I can look around."

"Now, now, now, just wait awhile. Just wait awhile, will you? Seventy-five you said? Alright, alright, let me see who might be buying."

Mr. Baster pulled out a list of contacts and nodded and shrugged and "ah ha-ed" and "mm-hmmed" as he looked them over.

"And I need a ride to Watsonville," Lucien said. "Today."

Mr. Baster looked at him over the rims of his glasses but by and large ignored the new request.

An hour later, Mr. Baster handed Lucien seventy-five dollars in cash and introduced him to the Furlong family, consisting of a young father and his three sons. The eyes of the three boys were filled with wonder, but the Mr. Furlong was all business.

"It's a steep price," he said in a deep baritone, "but been promising my boys we'll start our business."

"I'll be taking twenty-five percent until the debt is repaid," Mr. Baster said. "Every Friday. Don't make me come looking for you now."

"I've raised my boys to live by their word. You've got mine." He then looked at Lucien. "I hear you need a ride to Watsonville. Know a couple chinks headin' down the way. They'll treat you fair."

Lucien nodded once and they shook again.

Mr. Furlong turned to his boys and said, "Help him with his things."

Lucien and the three Furlong boys unloaded his belongings—which consisted of clothing, books, and food supplies—and carried it all across the harbor and past the train depot until they reached a small neighborhood about a half mile from the water that seemed to house the majority of San Jose's Chinese population. Chinese men and women packed into the streets like sardines, parting and then rejoining to allow as horse-drawn wagons and the occasional automobile to move down the dirt roads. Lucien could see the visible signs of damage from the earthquake, but unlike San Francisco, the wood structures didn't catch fire and the stone buildings looked practically untouched.

The oldest Furlong Boy led them off the main drag down an alley where two Chinese men were readying horses in front of a wagon. He went and spoke with them and pointed to Lucien. One of the men nodded and approached Lucien.

"Wassonvul?" he said in a heavy Chinese accent.

"Yeah, yes, Watsonville. I need a ride."

"Yeah, Wassonvul. I take."

"Well, okay, how much for the ride?"

The Chinese man looked at the oldest son who shrugged. "Figh dolla."

"Five dollars!" Lucien feigned exasperation, even though he figured it'd cost that or more. "No, not five. One dollar."

The man raised his eyebrows and leaned back to look down the street. "Three dolla."

"Two," Lucien said, holding up two fingers. "And we leave today."

The Chinese man rocked his head back and forth and then held up both hands to consent to his defeat. He motioned for the other man to come over and they began packing Lucien's belongings atop the wagon. As soon as the Furlong boys unloaded the supplies, they began to walk away without a word. Their chore was complete and they wanted to see their boat. Lucien patted his chest to make

sure he had the insurance payout safely stuffed on his person and then he climbed aboard the wagon and sat on the wooden bench. He didn't know why he was in such a rush, but he had spent seven years building a store and a life, trying to keep his family in business halfway across the world, and now it was gone. He spent six weeks wallowing in his loss and he couldn't do it anymore. He needed to get away. He needed to start fresh. He couldn't wait around or take the time to reconsider. He had to go.

Within the hour, after three more passengers paid their fare and climbed aboard, the wagon was on its way. Lucien had arrived in San Jose, sold his boat, and got a ride to Watsonville all within two hours. The passengers mostly kept to themselves, which suited Lucien just fine. He was in no mood to chat. Sitting next to strangers and forging ahead into a new territory caused a great deal of anxiety in Lucien, something he hadn't felt since climbing atop a horse at his family's property. He was scared and he didn't want to talk about it. If only he had Zoran with him, or Dominik, it would have been an adventure. Now he just felt alone and afraid.

The trip from San Jose to Watsonville was not yet an established and well-trafficked path. A paved highway wouldn't emerge for nearly forty more years and the path was cobbled together with connected dirt roads and side streets. The Chinese drivers seemed to know the path, though, and weaved in and out of the forested mountain path that blocked the San Francisco Bay Area from the Monterey Bay County cities. The wagon at times followed the path of the railroad, and at times it veered deep into the forest until it picked up the tracks once again. The mountain was bigger than Lucien could have expected, and near the top, the winds blasted across the path so violently that Lucien was concerned the wagon would get knocked over. But the drivers did not relent and eventually the horses began pulling the wagon downhill. The increased speed made the trip bumpy and now Lucien was worried the wheels were going to fall off. Lucien closed his eyes and had one hand on the bench and the other on the wooden frame of the wagon. He had learned a lot in his seven years away from home, and the key lesson was to persevere. The struggles and misery would end. And then the

bumpiness ceased and the downward slant of the wagon flattened out and winds were replaced with sunshine.

Lucien stuck his head out the wagon and in the distance saw the beauty of the Pacific Ocean reaching down the coast. On the other side of the wagon were orchards. Row upon row of orchards extending up the hills and inland as far as he could see. At first he saw apples, and then peaches and apricots. Large mature trees that reminded him of the olive trees he helped prune and harvest. Whereas in Korcula the orchards were restricted to the island, though, these orchards had all of California's central valley. Lucien had never seen so many fruit trees in all of his life.

Once on flatter ground, the wagon veered to the left to hug the coastline, leaving behind the train tracks that continued into Santa Cruz.

"Isn't Watsonville next to Santa Cruz?" Lucien asked as he continued to look out the wagon. He didn't direct the question to anyone in general, but he received an answer regardless.

"Santa Cruz County," the man across from him said in a heavy Slavic accent. Lucien looked at the man, who had been hidden by the lowered rim of a crumpled cowboy hat. "Slav?"

"Croatian," Lucien responded in Croatian.

The man nodded and proceeded to speak to him in Croatian. "Lots of us in these parts."

"You have a farm in Watsonville?"

The man shook his head. "Aptos. We're about to pass through. Short ride from Watsonville. If you ever come up, come on by and my wife will cook you a nice meal. You don't look like you have much family, if you don't mind my saying."

"That's very kind," Lucien said, debating if he had been insulted or not. He diverted his eyes back to the landscape. He had been around Slavs in San Francisco, but it had been several years since he had been greeted by good ole' fashioned Slavic manners. It wasn't rude, just direct and honest.

The wagon continued several more miles until the orchards gave way to a small town. The wagon slowed as it entered the main street and eventually stopped in front of the Aptos Cash Store, painted white with a red roof. Everyone stepped out of the wagon and stretched their stiff muscles that had endured a long, tough ride over a mountain while sitting on a wooden plank. Lucien reach his hands up to the sky and then pushed into his hips and thrust his abdomen out in front of him. After cracking his neck back and forth, the man from the wagon approached and handed him a slip of paper.

“That’s my address. The name’s Tom Lonich. I’m serious about coming over for a meal. We take care of our own around here.”

Lucien held the slip up and nodded. “Thank you. I’m not sure what my plans are, but, I was told Watsonville is a good place to buy some land and start a crop.”

“It is, it is. Course you want to be around Slavs, Aptos is a good place. Won’t hear much English in these parts.”

“Well, I appreciate the advice.”

Lucien began to walk away and approached the two drivers who were shouting in Chinese and pointing at the back wheel.

“Excuse me, sirs, when do you think we’ll continue on our way?”

The Chinese driver who had negotiated the price earlier in the day shook his head. “No more travel. Wheel need replacing. We leave tomorrow.”

Lucien’s shoulder slumped. His momentum suddenly hit a wall. “Tomorrow! I need to go today.”

“No. No today. Repair today. Leave fuss ting mornin’. Fuss ting.”

Lucien could try to object, but to what end? “Watch my bags.” It wasn’t a question so much as a demand. He turned and walked toward the Aptos Cash Store. The store was nothing like Lucien’s in San Francisco. Lucien’s had supplies, but it was mainly a single room. The Aptos store had finely crafted

white shelves up the walls and attached to an overhang over the cash registers. Two men stood behind the glass counter that contained little knick-knacks, arrowheads, and matches.

“Morning, Sailor,” one of the men said. He was wearing a plaid vest over a white button-up shirt and tie. “What can I do you for?”

“I need a place to stay,” Lucien said.

“Well I hope you’re staying longer than a night! Greatest people in America, right here in Aptos.”

“I think just a hotel will do, thank you.”

“You sure, Sailor? I just received word this morning that packing plant and two hundred acres are up for sail. Finest land in the country. Arable, good sun, good breeze, finest people in the world. Any interest?”

Lucien began to dismiss the sales pitch but reconsidered. “Two hundred acres?”

“Yes, Sir, two hundred. Mighty fine seller, too. Wants to sell the land to help pay to renovate the Aptos City Hall.”

“Is that right?”

“It is.”

Lucien smiled and began patting the glass counter as he thought about the opportunity. He wanted to get to Watsonville. He wanted to meet up with Frano. His father always told him that the first offer is rarely the best offer. But this sounded good. As he stood there contemplating, the door opened.

“Peter, give me some good news! Have you sold my land yet?”

Lucien turned to look at the man that entered and then saw the younger woman beside him. It was Mary. She had aged over the past seven years, but in a way that matured her into a respectable woman. Her dress was clean and pressed and her face was serious. Her smile had faded and her

cheekbones had become more defined. When she entered, she immediately began looking at the freshly baked loaves of bread. While she looked, Lucien took several steps toward her. When she realized a man was approaching her, she looked up and made eye contact with him. Her face immediately melted into tears and—holding a loaf of bread—ran to Lucien and leapt off her feet into his arms. He caught her and wrapped his arms around her waist and they kissed. Mary’s father approached and sought to break them up, but Mary pulled Lucien tighter.

When they both came to their senses and Lucien helped lower her to her feet, he said, “I’ve been wanting to do that for seven years.”

“Me too,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m buying your father’s property. I’m moving to Aptos. I want to marry you.”



Part 2

1935

## Chapter 12

Lloyd Tahmatoh kneeled in a catcher's stance and held a worn-down mitt in front of his knees. His older brother, John—lean and lanky as though born to be a Major League pitcher—wound up and threw a fastball that made a whipping sound through the air before popping into Lloyd's glove. Lloyd effortlessly caught it, rocked forward onto his knees, and lobbed the ball back to his brother. Lloyd wasn't nearly as athletic as John, who had just graduated high school and had led the Watsonville High School baseball team into the Santa Cruz County championship (only to lose when Mitchell Bryant allowed one of John's devastating curves to skip off his glove to the backstop, permitting the game winning run to score; John didn't speak for two months thereafter and only snapped out of it after winning his first game in Spring ball). But Lloyd could routinely catch the ball and return it without too many errant throws and was just happy that his older brothers let him join in the fun.

The oldest of the three brothers, George, was sitting on the front deck of the orchard's packing shed. George had graduated high school four years earlier and was preparing to begin medical school in San Francisco the following day, but every summer since he had gone to college he had dutifully returned home to help his father tend to the family's apple orchard. All three brothers had inherited the prominent cheek bones and thick, dark eyebrows of their father, but George in particular had received Lucien's stern demeanor. The three brothers had finished their daily chores of propping up branches and digging out drainage ditches and now waited for their father to send the seasonal pickers home so they could call it a day.

As John fired another fastball into Lloyd's glove, a black pick-up truck pulled up the driveway and onto the dirt parking area, stopping just short of Lucien, who was hammering a nail into the wooden frame of an outer wall for what appeared to be a small house. Two men, both younger than Lucien but who had been tackling small jobs around the orchard for nearly a decade, held the wall in place. When

the truck pulled to a stop, Lucien turned his head suspiciously and then continued to hammer one more nail into the top corner. He signaled for the two men to let it go to ensure it was secure, nodded his head, and then walked toward the truck as the two men walked the other direction.

The truck, which had long rounded fenders around the front wheels and two seats contained in a small boxed cabin, belonged to Frank Gavrich. Frank opened the door and stepped out of the cabin to meet and shake hands with Lucien, and then a smaller boy, maybe Lloyd's age, exited out the other door and joined his father.

"Say, who's that with father?" George asked in English. Lucien insisted they speak English outside of their home.

John caught the return throw from Lloyd and then turned to look. "That's Frank Gavrich and his son, Peter. Lloydie knows him, don't you, Lloydie?"

"Ah, yeah, I s'pose I do," Lloyd said in a slow drawl. "Got band practice with him during the school year. Plays trumpet, if I recall correctly."

"Any good?" George asked.

"Better than Lloydie, that's for sure," John said to George's amusement.

"Well, now, hang on, he, ah, hell, yeah I s'pose he's better than me." Lloyd shrugged his shoulder and made an accepting facial expression.

"You should stick to baseball, Lloydie," John said. "Least you might have a future there."

"Baseball?" George asked. "Baseball? Nah, Lloydie needs to stick to his chores. He'll be runnin' this place some day when Pa's too old."

Lloyd looked at the hundreds of apple trees that surrounded him. They were mature trees and had initially been planted in rows, but as Lucien expanded his property and added trees, he planted them wherever they might fit. The packing shed, dirt parking lot, and house under construction was the central hub of the two-hundred-acre orchard. Every other patch of dirt had been filled with apple trees.

“Well, I don’t really wanna run this place.”

“Best not let Pa hear you say that,” George said. “He’s counting on you.” He looked back at Lucien speaking with Frank. “What you s’pose they talkin’ about?”

John shook his head. “Jobs, ya idiot. You been gone at school too long. They lost their apricot farm about a year back. As though Pa doesn’t have to worry bout all the Okies askin’ for jobs, has to worry about the Slavs now too.”

“Lloyd!” Lucien yelled across the parking lot. His voice carried in the wind that blew across the orchard and sounded menacing. He raised a hand and motioned for Lloyd to come over.

“Ah, hell,” Lloyd said.

“Ha!” John bellowed.

“Go on then, Lloydie, don’t keep Pa waiting,” George said.

Lloyd looked at George and began to protest but thought better of it. He threw his catcher’s glove on the deck and began to meander over, his slow pace offering the only form of protest he could muster.

Lucien had started his orchard a year after running into Mary and her father in Aptos. Either out of respect or comfort, he had begun with a few dozen olive trees, and at one point, added a large section of pears, but as soon as he planted some apples, he knew he had found his cash crop. The apples grew better than the others and to win contracts, he needed bulk, so he began to focus solely on apples and within five years or so had made a name for himself among the Croatian community as a quality farmer and a man whose character was beyond reproach.

“Lloyd, hurry along now,” Lucien said. Lucien had aged gracefully since he had left San Francisco, but twenty-five years—a quarter of a century—had taken a toll on his face and body, which had begun to show signs of wear and tear. “Lloyd, this is Frank and I believe you know his son, Peter.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Frank and Peter are going to be helping us out around the orchard for the next few weeks. Tomorrow morning, I want you to take Peter up to the northside and begin proppin’ those branches, ya hear?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good boy.”

“Lucien, that’s,” Frank began as he got choked up. “I’ve heard about your decency, but sometimes it still catches me off guard.”

“Well, now, just wait awhile,” Lucien said as Lloyd looked on in wonderment at his dad. Lloyd hoped one day men would gaze upon him the way they gazed upon his father. “I know that you gave Dick Gregoravich a job a few years back and I know you’d be doing the same for me if you could and our circumstances were switched.”

Frank nodded.

“All right, that’s enough then for the day. You two meet me back here in the morning and we’ll get you set up.”

Frank nodded again and then shook Lucien’s hand before taking his son and departing in the pick-up. An hour later, Lucien and his boys did the same, with Lloyd and John sitting in the bed of their own pick-up. Lucien drove the fifteen minutes to their house in Watsonville, where apricot orchards still dominated the scenery. They all got out when Lucien pulled the truck into the short, paved driveway and entered their three-bedroom ranch. They all took off their dusty shoes and sweat-stained long-sleeve shirts and headed to the kitchen where Mary was preparing the food and sixteen-year-old Mirna was setting the table.

“Well well, if it isn’t the most handsome boys in Watsonville,” Mary said in Slavonian. While Lucien insisted on English outside the house, Mary insisted on Slavonian inside the house. So much so

that ever since she and Lucien had George twenty-two years earlier, she had practically forgotten English altogether.

“Hello, my beautiful wife, we are home,” Lucien replied, dipping her as he planted a kiss on her lips.

“Oh!” Mary gasped. When Lucien let her back up, she was beaming from ear to ear and playfully slapped him on the shoulder. “You vile man, kissing me without showering. I’m trying to raise a lady here.”

“I am positively the luckiest man in the world. You hear that, Lloyd?” He accepted a bottle of beer from Lloyd and took a sip. He wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and then said, “Had I not been forced out of my country, I never would have met your mother. Had I not nearly died from a fever, your mother never would have had to take care of me. Had an earthquake not destroyed my business, I never would have found her again. Sometimes you make your own luck, sometimes the world makes it for you.”

“And maybe if an earthquake hadn’t destroyed your business, I would have married a man that brought home apples when he said he would. Sorry, kids, no dessert tonight. Blame your father.” She took Lucien by the chin so he couldn’t look away sheepishly. “Why don’t you go get the pig out of the oven and make it up to me.”

“Pig? What’s the occasion?”

“Your oldest son is going to medical school tomorrow. We’re celebrating.”

Lucien’s face shifted from joy to irritation. “The world has enough doctors. It needs farmers.”

“It doesn’t have doctors like your son,” Mary said.

Lucien against felt sheepish, but he still didn’t like the idea of the family breaking apart. He heard through a chance encounter with a man he once knew as a boy in Korcula that both of his parents had passed away and his brother had been drafted and forced to fight in the Great War. He thought he

had survived and possibly married a woman in Dubrovnik, but he couldn't be certain. Lucien never made the effort to track him down.

"You're right, as always," he replied.

"Everyone to the table," Mary commanded.

The three brothers and their sister, Mirna, took their designated spots that hadn't changed in years while Lucien took the pig's head out of the oven and brought it to the table. Mary followed with the wine and the nightly newspaper that she placed beside Lucien's plate. In addition to the pig, there were rolls and potatoes and green beans, a true feast that Lloyd would talk about to friends on the street. Only the apple crisp was missing, which fell squarely on the shoulders of a forgetful apple farmer.

"Lloyd, do the honors," Lucien said, handing the fork and knife to his youngest son.

Lloyd's face lit up. "Really?"

Lucien nodded once. "Who do you serve first?"

"The women."

"Good man."

Lucien pulled out the newspaper while Lloyd began to carve away at the pig's head. As he read, Mary said, "Maybe we can all play some bridge afterward." When Lucien didn't respond, she said, "Daddy, bridge?"

Lucien slowly stood up as he continued to read. His eyes widened and he turned away from the table.

"What is it, Lucien?" Mary asked.

When he didn't respond, George stood and asked, "Pa, what's going on?"

Lucien didn't turn back. He looked into the kitchen and took deep, methodic breaths. "The Brits devalued the pound."

"What?" George asked. "By how much?"

“Half. They devalued it by half.”

They all remained silent for a moment. A majority of Lucien’s business consisted of shipping apples to Great Britain.

With a knife and fork inside the pig, Lloyd asked, “Now, wait, wait awhile, what does that mean?”

“It means we lost half of our profits,” Mirna said.

Lloyd looked at his sister who had a much clearer understanding of the business and economics of the orchard. He didn’t know why the devaluing affected their profits. He had never actually thought about the customer before or how they pay for the apples.

“So what do we do?” George asked as Lloyd slid the knife out of the pig and put it on the table.

“I have no idea,” Lucien responded. It was the first time Lloyd had ever heard his father express uncertainty and did not have the answer.

“Ok,” George said assertively. “Ok, I’ll take the quarter off. I’ll start late or take the year off.”

“You’ll do no such thing!” Mary declared. “Lucien, tell him.”

Lucien looked at his wife and had no intention of telling his son to pursue his dreams. He needed his eldest son. The farm was in trouble. The family was in trouble. Is this the decision his father had to make so many years ago?

“No, George, you go to school. We’ll figure it out.”

The family ate the rest of the meal in silence and called it an early night. Mary and Mirna took care of the dishes and Lucien sat outside smoking a rolled tobacco cigarette. The three brothers retired to their bedroom, tired from the day’s labor and uncertain how to help their father. They all laid awake in their single beds and looked at the ceiling, which was illuminated by the moon’s light. Lloyd had his eyes closed and didn’t open them when he heard his brothers begin to speak.

“George, you’re heading to the bus tomorrow morning?” John asked.



"I suppose. I'm not sure what I could do here."

John props himself up on an elbow. "I'm going to go with you."

Lloyd's eyes cracked and his head rolled to look at his brothers talking. Were they both going to leave him alone? The thought terrified him. George had left already, but John had always been around.

George remained on his pillow, but rolled his head. "Go with me? Where? Why?"

John reached under his pillow and pulled out a letter. He handed it to George who opened it and read it under the light of the moon. He was still reading the letter when he began to smile. "John, this is a baseball scholarship to St. Mary's!"

"Yeah. Came about a month ago."

"You're going to college?"

"I told you those classes were for suckers."

They're silent for a moment, then George said, "Don't tell Lloydie."

"Ha, that little stinkbug will be here his whole life."

"Have you told father?"

"Of course not. You know he wouldn't approve."

George's excitement subsided and he finally pushed himself up. He sat upright and crossed his legs. "John, we can't both leave. You know what's happening."

John pushed himself all the way up as well and looked back at his older brother. Lloyd remained perfectly still, not wanting them to stop talking.

"You think I'm going to pass up this opportunity?"

"John, father needs you. The orchard needs you."

"Well, then you should stick around. You are the oldest, after all."

"John, that's so selfish of you."

John nearly exploded off the bed, but he took a deep breath and gathered his thoughts.

“Selfish of me? No, you have been gone for four years already. You’re selfish.” They both fell silent until John continued with, “I’m going. I’m just telling you.” Once he had said his peace, he pushed his legs back out and put his head on the pillow to resume staring at the ceiling.

“Okay,” George said. “Well, you need to do what’s best for you. I can appreciate that. You’re not going to say goodbye?”

“No,” John said. “Absolutely not.”

## Chapter 13

Myrtle Enis looked behind her as her father, Stanley, drove the family's 1929 Chevy sedan in between the two wooden posts that demarcated the end of their land and the beginning of California's public property. The posts didn't hold up a gate yet, but Stanley had painted *Private Property* on old pieces of wood and nailed the signs to the posts. (The sign actually had *Privet* crossed out and replaced with *Private* after Myrtle very delicately corrected her father's spelling.) It would at least let drifters know that they were entering land off limits to their drifting. Wouldn't stop much until Stanley could get a fence up around the fifty acres he had recently purchased, but it would give him peace of mind to know he at least let the world know.

The car bounced along the dirt road as the wood posts faded from sight and Myrtle turned back to look out the dingy front windshield. She was eight when her father came home with the Chevy, brand new and paid for with a promotion bonus from Standard Oil, and now the windshield lacked the shiny gleam when compared to the new side and rear windows Stanley recently had installed for the long drives out to the new land.

"So, what do you two angels think?" Stanley asked, struggling to keep his eyes on the road because he wanted to see their enthusiastic reaction. "Nice, right?"

"Super nice, Papa," Myrtle said. "Can I help you build the fence?"

"Fifty acres of land. All that whiskey's finally got to your head. What do we need fifty acres of land for? Fifty acres of land fifty miles from our home. Now our daughter wants to build fences. It's not proper, you hear me? It's not proper."

"Oh, brother me, Gertrude, you can be a pill, you know that? Myrtle is a modern woman. Who says she can't build a fence?"

"Well, I'll tell you, society, that's who. Like we're raising a little boy. Building fences. What do

we need that land for, anyhow?" Gertrude shook her head. "Now we have to drive all the way home. I have no groceries. Me and Myrtle need to prepare dinner. You have plenty to do in the yard, mind you."

"Oh, that may be true, but we have our own land now. Hot damn, I'll tell you what. Our own land. We can escape the hustle and bustle, escape the damn oil fumes, cook weenies over the open fire. Eventually, may even have an operating farm. How does that sound, Myrtle? Move there permanently?"

"That'd be wonderful, Papa. I have my studies, though."

"And she's in school," Gertrude said as though remembering an additional transgression. She crossed herself. "God have mercy. We're raising a boy."

"I'm not a boy, Mama," Myrtle said. "I just want to experience more than..." She trailed off.

"More than what? Supporting a family? Keeping a home running? Sewing clothes for your daughter and husband?"

Myrtle didn't respond.

"Oh, Gertrude, be reasonable. The land is a gift. Who would have thought we'd own our own farm? You know, Myrtle, your ancestors came over on the Mayflower. The first Americans. You trace your lineage to the original American settlers. And you know why they came? To escape persecution, sure, but more importantly, for land they can tend to freely and without interruption. Land, Myrtle. We are following in the footsteps of giants."

"That's precisely what I'm talking about," Gertrude said. Her admonishing tone was nothing out of the ordinary. "You keep filling our daughter's mind with nonsense. You know why those *giants* succeeded in settling this land of ours? Because their women kept them hardy. They weren't out building fences. Fences."

“Oh, that may be true. May be true. It also may be that they kept their men satisfied at night, but we certainly aren’t raising Myrtle to follow in that most honorable of roles, are we?”

“You are a devious man, Stanley Enis. A devious man.” Gertrude crossed herself again. “I’m raising our daughter to resist a man’s temptations, much as I’ll resist them tonight.”

Stanley bellowed out a laugh from deep in his belly. Myrtle loved the laugh. It would fill a room with lightness and sincerity. Myrtle also loved how much her father loved her mother. The way he would look at her. The way he would accept her admonishments. The line wasn’t as rigid as her mother liked to believe. Her parents lived in lockstep along a flexible path of give and take. Her father might step out of line and her mother would shove him away, but they would always naturally bounce back into their rhythm and flow. Myrtle longed for the day that a man looked at her in that manner, but she wouldn’t dare say that to her mother.

They drove the remainder of the fifty miles mostly in silence, past the oil derricks that littered the landscape, through the small downtown, and finally pulled into the driveway of their small two-bedroom home in Taft, California. Myrtle waved to a few of her friends down the street and then listened to her father talk to Mr. Jones, who lived next door and worked with her father repairing the derricks when they broke down. Once Mr. Jones returned to his house next door, Stanley unloaded the car while Gertrude and Myrtle walked to the local grocery and prepared a dinner of pork rinds and potatoes.

After dinner, as the sun sank toward the coast, the Enis family assumed their Sunday night positions. Gertrude sat in her maroon sofa chair in the corner of the carpeted living room and knitted. Myrtle and Stanley sat together at the kitchen table. Myrtle had her books and studies sprawled out. Stanley was poring over the family finances. In the background, the radio softly played the nightly news.

Stanley began to shake his head and leaned back in his chair, using his tongue to remove a lingering pork rind from behind his teeth. He picked up his glass of whiskey and took a small sip, just enough to wet his mouth. "Times are going to be tight."

Gertrude didn't look up, but said, "You mean because you spent out entire savings on land fifty miles away?"

Stanley laughed. "That would seem to contribute. We'll be fine. Hear me out now, Myrtle, always extend yourself to the very edge of your comfort zone. Put yourself in a position that forces you to succeed."

"Okay, Papa, I will," Myrtle said.

"What are you studying?" Stanley asked.

"Biology."

"Biology? God almighty, I'm raising a genius."

"A genius," Gertrude said, now finding reason to cease her knitting. "Biology. It's not proper, a girl like Myrtle studying sciences."

"We don't want her growing up to be an Okie do we? Pay no attention to your mother, Myrtle. Have you put any more thought into the scholarships?"

"Papa, I'm not filling out those applications. They don't award them to girls."

Stanley couldn't hide his disappointment. "Well, you'll never know if you don't try."

"You know, Stanley, it's one thing to encourage your daughter, it's quite another to set her up for failure."

Stanley sighed. "I suppose you have time. Finish up, best way to start the week?"

"Is with a good night sleep," Myrtle said.

"That's right."

“Myrtle, don’t forget to put some logs in the furnace,” Gertrude said as she returned to her knitting.

“Oh, and that’s ladylike?” Stanley mused.

Gertrude ignored him. “And make sure you close and lock that furnace door when you’re finished. Don’t need this house burning down. Lord knows we can’t afford another one.”

Myrtle smiled. She loved Sunday nights at home. Her parents’ endless banter and the warmth of the furnace as the breezes of fall turned into the winds of winter; the nights at the table with her father; the lasting smells of her mother’s cookies as the oven cooled. She longed to see the world and try new things, but she loved home. And above all, she loved going to school.

The following morning, she woke up early to help her mother prepare lunches for the day and then showered and put on a light blue dress with long sleeves. She had a thick wool coat to combat the chills of the open-aired school bus, but her mother forbade her from wearing it indoors.

As she and her father prepared to leave the house together, Stanley said, “Are you going to have a good day at school?”

“Of course, Papa. Are you going to have a good day at work?”

“Of course, my beautiful daughter. You know why we’re going to have great days? Because we rose early, we’re going to work hard, we’re going to take no prisoners, and most importantly...” Stanley trailed off, waiting for Myrtle to complete the family motto.

“We’re going to strike oil!”

“That’s right. You have a test today?”

“Biology.”

“You ready?”

“Of course.”

“Good, biology will look good on your scholarship applications.”

Myrtle looked down. "Papa..." But she couldn't finish before they heard the horn of the school bus. Myrtle just looked at him and giggled, her mother's realistic assessment of her world outweighing her father's optimistic antics. Her father put his thick canvas gloves into one hand as he reached to open the front door. "Have a good day, Papa."

"I always do."

Myrtle scurried out the front door and toward the school bus. The school bus was outdated even for the mid-1930s. Built in the early twenties, it had a wooden frame and no windows, and the tires weren't much larger than the tires on her father's sedan. Kids were hanging out the windows, bundled in jackets and fur hats, struggling between wanting to cause mischief and remaining warm against the biting wind that flowed through the windows. There was no door, so when Myrtle approached, she stood at the foot of the two stairs that led to the aisle and looked at the bus driver, Lewis Brown.

"Well well, Myrtle Enis," Lewis said. Lewis was a black man in a white city, and loved every minute of it. His parents, Dierdre and Charlie Cumbers, had traveled from Atlanta when he was just a boy in the hopes of finding work on the farms, but whatever jobs there were went to all the white migrants from the dust bowl. His parents traveled north until they settled in Taft. Charlie worked as a fry cook at a local diner and died in a grease fire; Dierdre soon settled as a maid for the wife of Mr. Joffrey Brown, the director of Standard Oil's operations in Taft. Mrs. Brown took a liking to Dierdre and her son, and insisted he go to the same school as her children. She legally adopted Lewis after Dierdre disappeared, leaving a note behind telling him to work hard and make something of himself. Joffrey Brown had no intention of having a black boy as a son, so after Lewis took his adopted last name of Brown, Joffrey sent him to shuttle workers between oil derricks on an old wooden flattop, which gave him the qualifications to pursue his current job of driving a school bus to Taft High School.

"Good morning, Mr. Brown," Myrtle said.



“Your daddy gonna strike oil on this fine morn?”

“Says he is. Wants me to apply for college scholarships. How bout you?”

“Me? Well, between you and me, I’ve decided to run for town mayor.”

“Mayor? How’s a bus driver going to become mayor?”

Lewis guffawed and dropped a hand from the wheel to better turn and look at Myrtle.

“Same way a little girl like you gets into college. You just go on and turn your nose down at me.

All the inspiration I need.”

Myrtle furrowed her brow in confusion. She was confused how a little girl from Taft like herself was supposed to get into college, and she was confused how she was inspiring Lewis Brown to run for mayor.

Lewis baled her out. “All right now, you just go find a seat on the bus so we can to school.”

Myrtle nodded politely and hopped up the two steps while Lewis turned back to the windshield. Myrtle found an empty seat near the front and slid in, pulling her jacket tighter in preparation. As the bus made its way through town, though, Myrtle found herself sticking her nose through the pane-less window to look at the oil workers begin to tend to the derricks in the distance. As the wooden derricks rose and descended in perpetuity, digging ever deeper into the Earth in hopes of tapping into an oil well, they reminded Myrtle of her father’s boasting—which Myrtle heard as a warning—that they only operated with such consistency because of the constant tending to and hard work of him and his colleagues. Myrtle had come to realize that that meant fixing wooden machines that were broke while digging for oil. It meant her father engaged in exceptionally dangerous conditions, and even if his crew struck oil, a gusher was no laughing matter.

She peeled her eyes away from the scenery and looked down into her lap until the bus pulled into the parking lot of Taft Union High School. The high school was a freestanding structure, built for the

growing families of oil workers. Derricks were visible in all directions, but the high school stood as a palace, white and clean and majestic among the endless view of earthly destruction.

Once inside, Myrtle was relieved to be focusing on her biology exam instead of worrying about her father. Mr. Semore presided over the room, nodding approvingly as he meandered through the desks and looked over the shoulder of his students. He stopped walking, though, when a slow rumble began to shake the room. The rumble grew, sounding like a stampede of bulls charging forward from the horizon. Student after student began to notice the commotion and looked up. They first looked to Mr. Semore, who was nervous himself, and then they looked out the window. Only one thing, other than an earthquake, could shake the school. The rumbling grew ever louder until it reached a boiling point and then the expected explosion shook the very foundation of the school. Once the shaking stopped and everyone looked around to ensure they were all right, they all jumped to look out the window.

“Okay, class, okay, settle down,” Mr. Semore said as he himself looked above them out the window.

Sure enough, in the distance about a mile away, oil soared a hundred feet into the air, blackening the land around it. Myrtle remained seated, focusing intently on her exam.

“Okay, class, settle down!” Mr. Semore said with more authority. “We’ve all seen a gusher before. Be proud we struck oil. Come on now, back to your seats.”

As the students began to return to the seats around Myrtle, she allowed her eyes to glance out the window. Sure as day she could see the oil. She knew it was the direction her father worked. Perhaps he had struck oil. Or perhaps he had been killed. She shook the thought away, bit her lip and tried not to cry, and looked down to finish her answers.

When she got home, she ran off the bus and into the house.

“Papa!” she cried out. “Papa! Mama!”

Her mother came running from the kitchen. "Myrtle? What's wrong? What is it?"

"Papa. Is he okay?"

"Oh for heaven's sake, you scared me half to death. Your father's fine. Rang earlier to let me know. Big strike today. Good grief. What happened to you being a lady?"

Myrtle sighed in relief. "Just scared me is all."

"You scared me. Now get changed so you can help me make a pie."

Later that night after her father had returned and after dinner, they found themselves in their nightly positions. Gertrude continued to work on her knitting and Myrtle on her classwork. The radio had a baseball game on that had Stanley's rapt attention. In between innings, Stanley rose in frustration and walked into his bedroom, whispering, "God almighty, sure as hell don't bust my ass on the oil fields to listen to such nonsensical ball. Trying to steal with two outs. God almighty."

Myrtle smiled and watched him disappear and then she looked back down at her studies.

Stanley emerged a minute later and took his seat across from her. He laid a piece of paper in front of her.

Myrtle picked it up. "What's this?"

"Read it."

"Berkeley Alumni Association of Taft. Scholarship application." She put it on the table. "Papa."

"Keep reading."

Without picking it up, she read, "Female applicants encouraged to apply."

"Oh, ho hum," she heard Gertrude mutter.

"Please, fill it out for me," Stanley said, ignoring his wife. "The worst that can happen is you don't get it. You'll find a nice boy around here and make pies with your mother."

"And what's so bad about that scenario?" Gertrude asked.

“Please,” Stanley said, imploringly. “You’re qualified. I don’t want you to have live in worry that your husband will get injured on the oil fields. You’re too special for that. Your future is too bright.”

Myrtle nodded. “Okay, I’ll fill it out this weekend.”

“After your chores,” Gertrude said. “You can indulge your father, but you’ll continue to pull your weight around here.”

“Yes, Mama.” She sighed. “Okay, I’m going to get cleaned up for bed.”

“The furnace, Myrtle, don’t forget. It’s going to be a cold one.”

“I’ll do it right now,” Myrtle said.

Myrtle stood and filled the furnace with fuel before cleaning up and heading to bed. Her room was chilly, but she pulled the covers up to her chin and slept soundly. She dreamt of running through open fields and looking out at the world from the top of a mountain. She dreamt of traveling the world and seeing new things. She dreamt of smoke...

Myrtle awoke abruptly when smoke began to fill her room. She coughed and could barely breathe. She stood quickly, not noticing the frigid temperature. She felt her door, which was too hot to touch. Then she heard her father’s voice.

“Myrtle! Myrtle!”

It wasn’t from inside the house. It was coming from outside. She ran to the window and saw her father trying to open her window. She unlocked it and helped him slide it up.

“Come on, climb out,” he said. “I’ll help you.”

She asked no questions. Dressed in just a night gown, she put her torso out of the window and let her father drag her out. Once her feet were on the ground, they ran to the front yard where her mother was standing on the lawn in tears. Mr. Jones was running from next door to assist.

When they all converged around Gertrude, Myrtle looked at the house and could see flames rising out of windows and burning through the roof. The house was aflame and going quickly.

Stanley put an arm around her. "It's okay. We're going to be okay." As he said that, he instinctively used his right hand to grab his left bicep and his body tensed.

"Papa," Myrtle said, noticing the change in his demeanor. She stepped aside and diverted her attention to her now ailing father. "Papa! What's wrong?"

"Stanley?" Gertrude asked, sniffing through the tears.

As Stanley fell to the ground, Mr. Jones caught him and set him on the lawn. In the background, they could hear sirens wailing.

## Chapter 14

The packing plant was never Lloyd's favorite place. The loud conveyor belts, the sorting, the boxing, the shaking of the train, it all felt stuffy and confined. He preferred to tend to the trees, under the warm sun and cool breeze, propping up branches and picking the apples to be packed and shipped. He didn't enjoy being called in to help when the hired help fell behind, and it never felt quite right to toss aside perfectly good apples because a worker spotted a worm hole or something of the sort. The whole process felt inefficient and purposefully restrictive. The packing plant was the one part of the apple and pear business that he could do without. That didn't mean, though, that he didn't appreciate its significance. Lucien bought apples and pears from all the other orchards and delivered them to Mills Shipping for international distribution or to local grocery stores. The packing plant was a major source of revenue, but that was before bankruptcy.

Now standing outside the shipping dock where thousands of crates had been packed into rail cars, Lloyd stared at the train tracks while his father padlocked the door. His father had negotiated with the rail company to have the tracks laid directly outside the back of the packing plant, enabling locally grown apples and pears to be shipped anywhere in the country, as far as New York where they could then be sent by ship to Europe. The tracks hadn't been used in over a year and a half. The devalued pound tanked the European market, and the country's appetite for fresh produce never returned to full health following the Depression. As such, Lucien's two packing plants became relics practically overnight.

"What's going to happen to it?" Lloyd, now nineteen, asked in English.

Lucien shook the chain to ensure the padlock was secure and then joined his son in looking at the tracks.

“Bank will take ownership.” He responded in Croatian, but he understood Lloyd just fine.

“Another distributor will purchase it. One less cost for us to concern ourselves with. Never much liked this place.”

“What about our apples? We’ll pack exclusively out of the shed?”

“Oh I suppose so. Won’t be so bad. Heck, pack right off the trees if we have to. I remember picking olives on my father’s farm and tossing them onto a blanket that we’d just carry to the press. No packing required.” He started laughing fondly. “Once I dropped the blanket and sent olives stampeding down the hill. My father whooped me good.” He thought a moment. “Course my father was never a distributor. We’ll take a hit.”

“You know, I’d like to go to Croatia at some point. Seems like a really interesting place.”

“Someday, son. Now, you just need to focus on your responsibilities. Won’t be traveling if we don’t have a successful farm. Have I ever told you about my store in San Francisco?”

Lloyd smiled. “Oh, ha ha, yes, ha ha, yes. Yes, father.”

“I did? Well, now you just hold on a while. I told you about the earthquake?”

“Ha ha, yes, father.”

“Hard times, what I went through, hard times. We’ve hit a bit of a rough patch, a lot like then. Nothing we can’t overcome. This is government-driven, though, you understand that, right, son?”

Lloyd twisted his lips back and forth, considering the question. As he matured into a man, his dark Croatian features became more pronounced, with thick eye brows and high cheek bones. His calloused fingers had perpetual dirt under the fingernails, and he rivaled Lucien in size, although his sun-worn skin lacked the permanently dark pigment-spots of an old ranch hand.

“Yeah I suppose so.”

“The government is no friend of ours, son. When I left Croatia, I thought it would be different... Ah, forget it. No need to get into that, I suppose. Just feeling bad for myself. We’ll get back. We still

have the apple orchard. It's what started this all, you know. That one orchard led to the first packing shed, and then your mother's father set me up with the pear orchard. Then we expanded to the Mulrich property, you remember? But it all started with the orchard. We won't lose that. It'll keep us going and get us back. And it will be yours someday."

Lucien and Lloyd looked at one another awkwardly. They didn't share many moments of sentimentality, and while this wasn't technically sentimental, Lloyd considered it as such.

"I'm going to miss the pear orchard." It was all Lloyd could think to say.

"You like the apples too."

Lloyd twisted his face. "You know you really oughtta leave the apples to John or George. They're much better farmers."

"Now you just hold on awhile. Your brothers left, Lloyd. They're not like you. They're..." Lucien looked down. The wounds of his sons leaving were still deep and unhealed. "It's important to continue the family business. I'm proud of you."

They stood in silence analyzing the train tracks.

"You know, I've been thinking, though, I've been thinking that maybe I could go to college myself." The intonation of his voice stressed *myself*. He continued to twist his mouth back and forth and shrugged his shoulders. "I just thought maybe."

Lucien looked at him for the briefest of moments before bellowing out in laughter. "Oh, son, I admire you, but a man has to know who he is. George is smart, I'll hand him that, makes for a fine doctor. John is dumb as a doornail, but the boy can pitch. You, well, you're a farmer. There's no shame in that. When my dad sent me to America to continue the family business, it's because he knew I could do it. He didn't send my brother. He knew it had to be me. This, this has to be you."

Lloyd stood on the deck of the packing plant and looked up at the blue sky. It was a warm morning in late May and Lloyd wondered how many times he had stood in that exact spot and stared at



the sky. Too many to count. He felt a sense of sorrow that he probably never would again. Those moments would have to come from the apple orchard. "I thought you were escaping."

"Ah, hell, would you look at that?" Lucien said, ignoring the comment. He took two large steps across the deck and propped up a piece of the railing that had rotted through the screw and fallen to the floor. "Come on, get my tools. Let's pop this back on."

"Why?"

"What do you mean why?" Lucien turned to him, stunned his son would ask such a nonsensical question.

"The bank is taking ownership. Why do you want to fix it?"

Lucien opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He slowly rested the piece of wood atop the railing. He continued to grip it with his hand, reluctant to let it go. "Seems wrong not to fix it."

"Come on, father. Mother wants us home for breakfast."

Lucien continued to stare at the broken piece of wood, rotten and hollow and barely worth throwing into a fire. Even the termites had abandoned it.

"Just wasn't supposed to happen like this. Not here. My father," he gulped and didn't finish. He took a deep breath, purposely pushing the air out of his nose. Then his sullen expression turned to a smile. "Come on, you know how your mother gets if we're late to the table."

Lloyd nodded. "Yeah I know it."

Lucien didn't look back at the packing plant as he pulled the truck out of the driveway and onto the two-lane highway that connected the packing plant to downtown Aptos, but Lloyd couldn't help himself. He turned and watched it fade from sight as he had done when they signed over the first packing plant and when they sold off the majority of Lucien's farms. When it disappeared behind the trees and dropped below the horizon, Lloyd tried to maintain his composure. He didn't understand the economics of the situation. He didn't know why people who had emerged from the Depression didn't

want to buy more apples and pears, and he didn't understand how the pound's depreciation affected their orchards. Perhaps his father was right. Lloyd was a simple man. He belonged among the trees, not behind a desk.

Once they drove through town, Lucien veered the pickup to the left and they traversed a narrow dirt road into the hills to the apple orchard. When they drove up to the gate, Lloyd hopped out of the car and unlatched a single chain that blocked the path. Once his father pulled the truck through, Lloyd went to reattach the chain. Before he could, though, another vehicle drove up and forced Lloyd to take a quick step backward as it zoomed past and followed Lucien in the pickup. Lloyd then reattached the chain and walked up the dirt driveway in a cloud of dust kicked up from the two cars. Lucien stopped the pickup in its parking spot directly next to the concrete walkway that connected the parking lot to the small white cottage. The second car stopped directly behind him, seemingly boxing him in.

The orchard was buzzing with extra workers—Slavs, all of them—as Lucien took more men on during the downturn. Lloyd ignored all of them as he quickly but calmly joined his father, who was now waiting for the driver to exit the vehicle. A few of the men with undying loyalty to Lucien stopped and waited as well, prepared to step in as necessary. After a minute, the door opened and a man in a suit stepped out carrying a briefcase. He had a long handlebar mustache and a bowler hat that sat too far back on his head. His gut suggested he was well-fed, and his black leather shoes were polished daily, barely concealing the layer of dirt above the soles acquired from walking on too many dirt driveways. Before closing the door, he looked around the orchard, sizing up the space and assessing its value. He nodded approvingly and then shut his door and approached Lucien.

“Lucien, uh, Lucien...” he paused and pulled a note out of his pocket, reviewed it, and continued walking as he put it back in his pocket. “Lucien Tomato?”

“Tahmatoh,” Lucien corrected.

“Tahmatoh? Huh. What kind of name is Tahmatoh?”

“Slavic.”

“Ah, yes, Slavic. Well, Mr. Tah-ma-toh, valuable property you have here. What is it, about fifty acres?”

“Fifty-five.”

“Fifty-five? Valuable property indeed. Unfortunately haven’t been making your payments.”

The man held out an official-looking document, but Lucien would not accept it. He peered at it for a moment and then cocked his head to the side. “And your name is?”

“Ah, apologies.” He placed his hand over his heart and bowed. “I’m Edmond Burke. I work for San Francisco Union Bank. At your service.”

“My service? What happened to Mr. Semore? Been working with him closely.”

“Ah, well, Mr. Semore has been placed onto other, more appropriate, assignments.”

“Well Mr. Burke, your bank has taken my pear farm, it’s taken my apricot farm, it’s taken my packing plants, and it’s taken my house, but this here is a homestead. We’ll make our payments as we can, but you can’t take this land.”

Edmond’s smug smile faded slightly. “A homestead? That’s a big word, Mr. Tah-ma-toh. A big word. Mr. Semore, you said?”

“Mr. Semore is aware of our situation.”

“Ah, well, the bank doesn’t take too kindly to missed payments. So unfortunately...”

“According to California law, a homesteaded orchard cannot be claimed by a bank for defaulting on a payment. I have the paperwork inside if you’d like me to go over it with you.”

A few workers in the crowd, which had grown to well over a dozen people, snickered at Lucien’s overt arrogance. Edmond seemed less amused.

“You God-damned immigrants will think of anything, won’t you? Come into our country of decent Americans and take, take, take. This isn’t over, you hear me?”

Edmond waved a large finger in front of Lucien's face, but Lucien calmly smiled. "I do. Thank you for coming out. My apologies for your inconvenience."

Edmond wanted to shout obscenities, but he had run out of further arguments. He turned on a toe and got back in his car. The car again spit up dust as the tires spun in place before catching their grip and veering out in reverse. Lucien looked to his side to get someone's attention, but a man was already running toward the entrance. He unsnapped the chain and let it fall to the ground just as Edmond's car reached it. The man jumped out of the way as Edmond zipped past.

Lucien shook his head. In Croatian, he shouted, "All right, back to work!" The crowd separated and disappeared into the trees or into the new wooden shed that Lucien had erected to continue packing operations. Once they dispersed, Lucien put his arm around Lloyd and led him down the walkway to the house. "Lloyd, I don't want to raise you to despise the government. You need to make your own choices. But sometimes it seems like they're out to get me. It's hard not to..." He paused and gulped. "It's why I'm so insistent on you taking over the orchard someday. We can't allow them to take it from us."

Lloyd didn't respond. He had listened to his father speak about the ills of government his entire life, but never had it hit so close to home. Lloyd chewed on his bottom lip as they approached the house. Lucien reached for the small wooden doorknob attached to the green wooden frame of the screen door. Lloyd stepped inside and walked along the linoleum hallway, past the two small bedrooms and into the kitchen. As soon as he entered the doorway, he immediately crashed into his mother, who spilled a bottle of milk.

"Mergatroid!" she bellowed. She stood over the spilt milk and looked past Lloyd's shoulder to Lucien. "This house is too small! I can't live like this."

Lloyd stood motionless as Lucien gently walked past. He stopped in front of Mary and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Marija," he said, "you are the most beautiful woman in the entire world. Beautiful and magical. The only house we need is one where you and I and our kids are."

"That're true." She kissed him. "Doesn't mean I don't want a house with enough bedrooms for my kids. A house where you can leave work. A kitchen big enough to cook and eat in."

"This is temporary."

"Is it?"

"We'll get back. It'll take some time. We've always made it back. Isn't that right, Lloyd?"

Lloyd nodded from the entrance and then said, "I'm starving."

Lucien laughed and moved to kiss Mary, who "pfffed" and playfully shook him away. She shook her head and walked to tend to the bacon that was spattering on the stove. Lucien continued to the kitchen table that Mirna was setting. He picked up the newspaper, pulled off the rubber band, and shook it out as he did before sitting for breakfast every day since moving to the orchard. Unlike other days, though, the frontpage headline read, "Tahmatoh Files For Bankruptcy!" He stared at it silently, his muscles remaining perfectly still.

"What is it, Father?" Lloyd asked.

Lucien folded the paper up and handed it to him. "Get rid of that. Apparently it's not enough to take away a man's land, it has to be aired across the county."

Lucien unrolled it and read it quickly. He crushed it back up within a few seconds and threw it in the trash. He and Lucien sat at the table as Mirna began placing fried eggs and toast on their plate.

"So the packing shed is no more?" Mary asked.

"We don't need it," Lucien responded.

"Perhaps. When will they figure out how to kick us off of this land?"

Lucien looked at Mirna.

“I’m scheduled to drive to San Francisco on Monday to deliver the late payments to the bank,” Mirna said.

“Good girl,” Lucien responded. “We make our payments, get square with the bank. And until then, seems like the homestead plan is working.”

“You shouldn’t be sending your daughter to San Francisco,” Mary said.

“Your father sent you across the Atlantic.”

Mary turned from the bacon. She paused. “That was different. You can send Lloyd. Or wire George.”

“George is busy. And Lloyd... Lloyd belongs here.”

They ate the rest of their meal in silence and then Lloyd finished off his daily chores in the orchard. When Lucien went into town to play Bridge with his friends, Lloyd and Mirna huddled at the desk in her bedroom. Mirna stared down at a College English 101 textbook. Lloyd, though, looked at the window.

“Lloyd, you have to study for this test,” Mirna said with exasperation. “You want to go to college but you don’t study anything but math.”

“Ah, I know it,” Lloyd responded. “I know it. You know, I really think I’m good, though.”

“You think you’re ready?”

Lloyd nodded.

“And then what?” Mirna asked.

“Well, I was hoping you could give me a ride.”

“A ride?”

“To Berkeley. When you go to San Francisco.”

Mirna looked down at the textbook and tapped it with her finger. “Cal Berkeley?”

“Yes.”

“Lloyd, don’t be ridiculous. You’re not going to Berkeley. To do what?”

Lloyd looked down at the textbook. “Well, ha ha, I was thinking I might enroll at the university. You know. I was just thinking.”

“You were just thinking? You haven’t even taken your finals of your first year of junior college, Lloyd. You weren’t thinking.”

“Yeah, I know it. I know this stuff, though. It’s not really that hard once you look at it. I’ve been thinking, I need to go.”

“You haven’t told Dad?”

“No.”

“It’ll kill him,” Mirna said. She didn’t say it to Lloyd. She whispered it to herself as though it were a foregone conclusion.

“I’m not a farmer. At least not right now.”

Mirna nodded. “Okay then. Let’s keep studying.” Mirna flipped a page but then looked up. “But tell George. Maybe he can help you. He’ll understand.”

## Chapter 15

Myrtle pulled the family's truck up to the curb about half a block from the entrance to Standard Oil and waited. In a moment, the workers would come streaming out with black faces and soiled clothing after a long day manning the rigs. Among those oil-stained faces would be one clean face belonging to her father. Myrtle had gotten the timing down pat over the past few months, ending class at three in the afternoon, studying in the library until 4:45, and then arriving promptly at 5 o'clock. Two minutes later the first faces would emerge. Sure enough, this day was no different than the rest.

The first man turned down the sidewalk with a lunch pail and sauntered past Myrtle in her car. At first, the image of her driving was a sight too far for many of the men. Most gave her double or even triple takes. One tapped on her window to ask if everything was all right. Eventually, though, as the days passed and Myrtle showed up with her truck, the stares faded until they disappeared altogether. Myrtle watched as more faces emerged. After a few minutes, she saw her father. His face was clean and his suit was pressed, although it was about three sizes too big since it belonged to Mr. Jones. They lost everything in the fire and Stanley had not yet had the time or inclination to repurchase entire wardrobes for the family. So he wore Mr. Jones' suits—on loan, of course—but he was four or five inches taller than Stanley.

Today, unexpectedly, her father was grinning and walking alongside his old coworkers. As they approached the truck, one of the men pretended to wipe his dirty hand on Stanley's suit, to which Stanley feigned a look of horror. When they left him, Stanley opened the passenger-side door and slid inside.

"Hello, my daughter."

"Hello, my father."



“You know what I’m not cutout for?”

“A desk job?”

“A desk job.”

Myrtle laughed and looked out the window before stepping on the accelerator and pulling the truck out into the road. She had gotten accustomed to driving, even though she didn’t have an official license. The first few weeks were tough, but she found it far more enjoyable to be driving the car than sitting along for the ride.

“Think we’ll make it by six?”

“Always the optimist. Your mother’s going to be pissed.”

“I don’t think she likes the farm as much as we do,” Myrtle said coyly.

Stanley laughed. “I think she’d rather be in the German trenches.” He looked down at his suit as the truck slowly chugged along the highway and headed east. “Look at me in this suit. I belong out in the field, not behind a desk.”

“It’ll happen soon enough, Papa. Any update from the doctor?”

“What does the doc know? Not much, seems like.”

“What’d he say?”

“Said I’m lucky to have a daughter that is able to drive.” He laughed, refusing to let his condition drop his spirits. He sighed to strike a serious note. “The doc said it’s too soon. My heart needs to heal up before I can put it into action.”

“And it’s a big heart, so lots to heal.”

“You know, Myrtle, I’ve been mighty proud of you these past few months, helping out with the driving and helping out on the farm. I know it hasn’t been easy, I just hope you know it’s appreciated. We couldn’t have made it through all this without you.”

Myrtle nodded. He had said that to her routinely since they relocated to the farm where they now lived while they waited for the insurance company to deal with cleaning up the ashes of their burnt-down house. Stanley's co-workers drove out each weekend to help them erect a small house on the land, but to date only a foundation and frame stood; the Enis family was living out of tents and tarps in the meantime.

"Course probably wouldn't have happened if not for me as well, so, ho hum."

"Don't you say that, young lady!"

"Papa, your heart."

"Don't you mind my heart. You're my heart and don't you say that again. This was not your fault. This was the fault of a crummy furnace that I should have had replaced years ago. This was the fault of the Lord Almighty, and you need to accept that."

Myrtle hadn't seen him get so worked up. With shaking hands, he reached into his suit pocket and pulled out a box of cigarettes and matches. He put one in his mouth and lit it, blowing the smoke out the window. Myrtle watched him with intrigue. She knew he smoked, but he usually kept it at work on his breaks. On occasion he would sneak one in the backyard, but her mother didn't care for them.

"Can I have one?" she asked.

"A cigarette? Don't be ridiculous. Your mother would kill me."

"I can drive you but I can't smoke?"

"Don't be smart."

As they drove the fifty miles to the farm, the sun got lower in the sky, not quite setting but not shining enough light to comfortably see the road. Stanley had three cigarettes along the way, loosening his tie and resting his eyes as the cool air washed across him.

Myrtle turned into the private drive, now blocked by a newly constructed wood gate. She hopped out and pushed the gate open and then let the car roll through before hopping back out to latch

the gate shut. She took the car up the dirt path to the tent compound. The compound consisted of two large tents serving as bedrooms and a canvas-covered living space. A fire pit surrounded by wooden chairs was a short distance away. Beyond it all was the wooden frame of a house and a temporary outhouse for their bathroom needs. Myrtle showered in the locker rooms at school, but helped her mother haul water from the nearby creek every morning for drinking and cooking.

Myrtle parked the car and turned off the ignition. She and Stanley sat together in silence and watched Gertrude put a black pot on the makeshift stove over the open flames of the fire. She looked at the car and lifted her eyebrows. It wasn't a "hello" so much as a "move it along."

"I'm beginning to believe you're right about your mother not liking it here so much," Stanley said.

Myrtle laughed. "She hates it. And she hates when I'm not around to help her."

"I forgot to ask, how was school today?"

Myrtle nodded silently. "It was fine."

She didn't wait for Stanley to inquire further. She opened the door and walked toward her mother. She loved the air at the farm. Away from the city and far from the oilfields. It felt more like the way she was intended to live her life. Her mother hated the farm, but Myrtle could see herself living there forever. Running water would be nice, but out among the stars, the fresh air and the open space, far from the mayhem and close to her family, Myrtle was at peace.

"Good evening, Mama," she said.

"Hmm, is it?" Gertrude replied, pouring spices into the pot. "I imagine school went well. Young girl learning science instead of helping her mother prepare dinner. It's not right."

"I know, Mama."

"Stop nagging the girl, will ya?" Stanley said as he strutted up and plopped into one of the chairs. "Myrtle, grab me a beer."

“And driving her father to work. Unbelievable. Move us out here and then leave me all day. You know, this isn’t pleasant for me, trying to run a farm like a household. Alone. It’s not right.”

“Oh, brother me, you are a chore, you know that? But I love you. Myrtle, how can that be? How can I love someone so much who is such a chore?”

“Don’t be mean to Mama, Papa,” Myrtle said as she handed him a beer. “And this is your only beer. Doctor’s orders.”

“What do doctors know?”

“Enough to convince you to let your daughter drive you to work.”

Stanley laughed and shook his head. “You have to admit, it is very peaceful out here. I’m thinking we should just stay here forever.”

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?!”

Stanley laughed again as Myrtle took over the task of stirring the stew. “Myrtle, you were saying about school. What does *fine* mean?”

Myrtle demurred. “Oh, well, I’ve been meaning to tell you both, I’m thinking of dropping out.”

“It’s about time,” Gertrude said while Stanley simultaneously responded with, “You’ll do no such thing!”

Myrtle looked back and forth between her parents, waiting for them to settle this for her.

“Stanley, this dream has to end,” Gertrude said. She wandered to the makeshift kitchen and begin seasoning chunks of beef. “We have no home. Standard Oil is taking mercy on you. What happens if you don’t make it back all the way? You’re no good to them moving files around. We just got out of a depression, if you don’t recall. You’re lucky to have a job at all. We can’t have Myrtle believing she can go be a college student. She belongs at home, with me, where she can find a nice boy, and she can take care of us. Lord knows, it doesn’t seem you will.”

“Gertrude,” Stanley responded in a calm voice, “Myrtle will be more than a house wife. She will get a college degree. She will be whatever she wants to be.” He smiled. “Why don’t you show her the gift you got her.”

“What gift?” Myrtle asked. “I don’t need no gift.”

“And no daughter of mine will speak like an Okie,” Gertrude said. “Use proper English.”

Myrtle furrowed her brows and raised the grill to move the stew farther from the flames. “But isn’t school where I’d learn proper English?”

“Excellent point,” Stanley said.

“I speak properly and I didn’t attend school past third grade. It’s about good parenting.”

“Gertrude, show her the gift.”

Gertrude hesitated and rolled her eyes. “I didn’t want to give this to you willy nilly, but I suppose to prove my point.”

Gertrude disappeared into her tent and emerged with a book. She walked to Myrtle and stopped. “Stanley, stir for a minute.” Stanley did as directed and once her hands were free, Myrtle accepted the book from her mother.

“Selected Poems from the Nineteenth Century.” Myrtle’s eyes lit up. “Mother, this is wonderful! Where did you get this?”

“It was my grandmother’s. We used to read them together. It survived the fire in storage under the house. Frankly, I forgot I had it, but, do with it as you will.”

Myrtle threw her hands around her mother. “This is so thoughtful. Can we read some together?”

“Well, I personally find poetry to be for fools, but, I suppose if it helps straighten out your English. Course you’ll have to be around to read them together.”

Myrtle looked at the book, with its faded maroon cover and broken spine. She flipped it open and saw the serif font of an old block-stamped printing press. The press used too much ink, which made the letters blurry. To Myrtle, it all added to the wonderment of the words themselves. The stories that these poems told and the stories of the poets themselves, all captured within the pages of this old tome, like a real-life treasure that just waited to be discovered each day. It was the nicest thing Gertrude had ever given to her daughter, or at least that's how Myrtle viewed it. And the fact it belonged to her grandmother meant her mother was entrusting her with a family keepsake, which under the circumstances of Myrtle's overpowering guilt from her involvement in the fire was a gesture that she would never forget.

"Well are you going to read it now or are you going to help me cook?"

"Of course, Mama. Sorry." Myrtle scurried off to put the book in her tent, keeping it on a tall stool she kept inside to avoid any potential water damage.

When she returned, her father had retaken his seat and had pulled out the daily newspaper. Her mother was stirring the stew and was grilling the beef over the open flames. The smell of grease boiling into the fire made Myrtle's stomach growl. She brought a long fork to begin sticking the cooked beef into the stew where it would take on the taste of the spices her mother was so adept at adding. "Lessons our family has taken down the generations since cooking America's first meals in Jamestown," she would often say.

Once all the ingredients had been tossed in, all three of them took the opportunity to relax before dinner. Myrtle pulled out her homework and began making some notes.

"I thought you weren't going to school anymore," Stanley said.

"Oh. Well, I mean, I have to drive you into town and pick you up anyway. I might as well go to school."

"Makes sense," Stanley said with a curt nod, returning to his paper.

Myrtle smiled and glanced at her mother, who shook her head as she began to knit. Myrtle didn't mind. She could spend every night under the stars, food over the fire, living each day with her family. It was heaven.

The next morning, before the sun rose and with a light frost on the dirt of the farm, she helped her mother prepare breakfast and then packed lunches for her and her father. As the sun began to peak over the hills, Myrtle and Stanley climbed in the cabin of the truck and Myrtle pulled it out of the gate and onto the road. She had mittens on her fingers to grip the frozen steering wheel. Once the engine warmed, though, it provided enough residual heat to keep them toasty against the elements of the morning, even with the strong winds that blew across the plains from Bakersfield to San Luis Obispo on the coast.

After completing the fifty miles mostly in silence, she came to a stop in her spot half a block from the entrance. Men in Levi's jeans and thick wool coats were trudging past to start the day. Stanley watched them and smoothed out his tie.

"You'll be back out there soon, Papa."

"Yeah, but soon enough isn't a very concrete term."

Myrtle laughed. She loved when he talked like that. "Soon enough is soon enough."

"Yeah." He leaned over. "Okay, my daughter." He kissed her on the forehead. "Are you going to pick up the post before school begins?"

"It's my next stop."

He nodded, proud as ever, and hopped out of the truck to join the masses streaming to work. He stuck out like a sore thumb until he turned the corner and disappeared.

The post office was only a few blocks farther down the street in the middle of town. She parked directly out front of the modest square brick building, which had *Kern County Post Office* emblazoned in

an arc over the doorway in large block letters. An American flag flew off of the corner and the green lawn in the front was as stark a contrast to the golden hills surrounding Taft as were the oil derricks.

Myrtle exited her truck and walked the short distance to the entrance. She pulled open the wooden door and walked to the front of the empty line.

“Well well, Ms. Enis,” the man behind the counter said. The man, Tyler Morehound, had orange hair and bright freckles that dotted his face. He was only a few years older than Myrtle, but with the professional job came a healthy dose of arrogance. “Shouldn’t you be in school, young lady?”

“I’m on my way. Just picking up the mail.”

“Ah, well, nice girl like you, probably should be helping out around the house, don’t you agree?”

“My house burned down. Can I have my mail please?”

“Manners, missus. It’s what got me to where I am today.” He turned and pulled out a stack of letters bound with twine. “Say, who do you know from the University of California?”

Myrtle’s eyes widened, but she didn’t speak. She took the stack of mail and turned and walked out. She thought she heard Tyler scolding her for not giving a proper hello, but appeasing Tyler’s needs wasn’t her concern at the moment. Once safely back in the car, she threw the stack of mail in the passenger seat and held the letter from Berkeley in front of her face. She tore the envelope open and pulled the letter out.

“Dear Ms. Myrtle Enis,” it read, “Congratulations on your acceptance to the University of California at Berkeley. The Berkeley Alumni Association of Taft is proud to offer you a full academic scholarship.” Myrtle skipped ahead to the end, which said, “Welcome to the class of 1943.”



## Chapter 16

Lloyd drove the pickup through the trees and stopped at a collection point. Twenty boxes sat neatly stacked, filled to the top with fresh apples. Lloyd put the truck in park and leaned out the open window. He tapped the outside of his door and two men who had been smoking cigarettes under a tree quickly jumped into action. As they began placing the boxes in the back of the truck, Lloyd opened the door and stepped out. He walked under the branches of the nearest apple tree and pulled a branch down.

The apple trees on Lucien's orchard were fully mature, with branches growing into a large green sphere that reached twenty feet into the air. The branches were thick and twisted and could often not support the weight of the abundance of apples they grew. One of Lloyd's first jobs on the orchard was to bolster these bumper crop branches with long two-by-two wooden beams. Now he held onto one of these beams—called props—as he extended his arm and pulled off a ripe Red Delicious apple. He polished it between his two hands and then put it to his nose, taking in the scent of the fruit that gave his family its livelihood. He loved the smell of apples, more than pears and apricots. The apples evoked a nostalgia of childhood and a reminder of the fond memories he had growing up among the trees; trapping gophers, picking the fruit, picnics over open fires, playing tag or baseball with his brothers, learning to be a farmer and a man.

He pulled a pocket knife out of his pocket and sliced the apple into two halves. He looked for any sign of worms or rot, but all he saw was a moist white center, perfectly shaped and contained within the red and green skin. He bit into it and felt the juices roll down his chin. He took another bite, feeling the meat of the fruit between his teeth.

"You really heading out, Lloyd?" one of the men asked.

Lloyd turned. "Ah, well, yeah, you know I think it's just the best thing."

"College. What you gonna do with all that schoolin?"

“Well they say college is the best way to make a good living. At least that’s what they say, ha ha.”

“They do go sayin’ a lot, don’t they? Well, shucks, Lloyd, we’re gonna miss you, you know?”

“It’s not like I’m dying, ha ha. I’m not dying. Here, have this apple here.”

Lloyd handed him the other half of the apple he hadn’t bitten into. The man obligingly accepted.

“You’re a good man, Lloyd Tahmatch, like your pops. You be on your way now. Don’t come back without no college dee-gree.”

“Now, now, wait awhile. You finished loading the truck? Ha ha, ah, would you look at that. Well, all right then. I should be gettin’.”

Lloyd slid back into the driver seat and continued clunking along the dirt paths between the trees. The tires had formed grooves in the soil over the years, so it almost felt like he was on a track. Rogue branches sticking out in his path clanged against the windshield, but after a few minutes, he drove into the clearing of the dirt parking lot and stopped the truck in front of the shed.

When he got out, he saw his father ignoring him as he gave instructions to a group of four or five men. Mirna and his mother were discussing bags on the concrete walkway. When the men broke away from Lucien, he strolled toward Lloyd and the truck.

“All right, help me unload these,” he said.

“He can’t!” Mirna shouted. She walked over as Lucien strained his eyes to look across the parking lot. “We have to go. Lloyd, come on.”

“What?” Lucien said, turning. Lloyd couldn’t tell if his father was upset or smirking. “Lloyd has his chores to do. He can’t just up and leave without a care.”

“Oh, honey, you just stifle up,” Mary said in English.

Lucien looked at her and then back at the crates of apples. He began to tap his finger against his thigh. He didn't look at his son as he said, "You're lucky you have such a beautiful mother."

"Oh for Pete's sake, honey, you left home when you were sixteen."

"I was *escaping!*" he bellowed. "We had nothing left. No options."

"And you were escaping for opportunity," Mary said calmly as though she had used these exact words in the past. "Now you've given your son more opportunity. You can't hold him here forever, daddy."

"I made this for him," he said, speaking to his wife without acknowledging Lloyd's presence. "He needs to take this orchard over. This is the last one. If he doesn't take it over, what good is it?"

"I don't need to go," Lloyd said suddenly. "You know, I just thought it was a good idea. But I don't need to go."

Mary smiled charmingly at her husband and popped an eyebrow. "No, Lloyd, you're going. Do you know, Lucien, that your son has been going to junior college for the past year? Done remarkably well, too. You might be proud if you'd pay attention."

Lucien put his hands on a crate. He clenched his jaw and fought a smile as he yanked the crate off the back of the truck. "No, Lloyd, your mother's right. You run on now. Mirna has a bag of apples for you to take. I'm sorry I can't offer much more."

Lloyd stepped toward him and held a hand out. Lucien acknowledged the hand but brushed it off and pulled his son in for a hug.

"You take care of yourself, you hear?" he said in Croatian. "You go straight to the admissions office when you get there. Don't leave until they let you in."

"Yes, Father," Lloyd said.

They ended the embrace but Lucien kept a hand on his shoulder. "George is in the city. Maybe send him a telegram. I'm sure he'd like to know you're close. John, well, who knows with that boy." He looked at Mirna. "You have the deposit?"

"Yes, Father."

"Good. You know, I haven't been back in the big city since..." He trailed off. "Once that deposit is made, we'll be in good shape. Get your brother to Berkeley safely."

That was all Lucien could muster. He picked up a crate of apples and disappeared into the shed.

"Pay him no mind," Mary said. "No father wants to see his son leave. You be good. Meet a nice girl and bring her back to me."

Lloyd smiled. Meeting a nice girl had never been high on his list of priorities. The idea actually made him blush.

"That'll be the day," Mirna said. "Come on, I need to get there before the bank closes."

Lloyd hugged Mary and then followed his older sister into the family truck. The drive over the Santa Cruz mountains in 1938 was not yet a paved, connected highway as currently exists. The patchwork of sideroads that were mish-mashed together alongside the railroad allowed free passage, but it took time and patience to endure the inevitable wrong turns. It wasn't as treacherous as when Lucien made the passage south from San Jose—at least, it wasn't as treacherous and didn't require the apparent derring-do of the journey that is currently inscribed in the folklore of Lucien's memory—but it also wasn't easy. Lloyd certainly had no interest in being behind the wheel. Mirna, though, had made the drive dozens of times as Lucien's official financial representative when his bank loans got transferred to San Francisco Union Bank. She had dropped off George when he first moved away for medical school and even drove out to pick up John when his first season ended and he couldn't afford the summer dormitory payments at St. Mary's. She knew the roads well enough that she didn't need a map and had

developed a formidable habit of blaring the horn at fast-moving male drivers who didn't show her the proper respect or space.

"Lloydie, how did you decide you want to go to college?" Mirna asked after they reached the peak and began descending into Saratoga. "You never liked school."

"Oh, I know it, ha ha. Yeah, I know it. I don't know, I just, seems like college opens up some doors for guys like me." He sat silently for a moment and then looked at his sister. He let out a laugh from deep in his belly. "Ha ha ha."

"You and that laugh," Mirna said, shaking her head and giggling. "How the heck did you end up with that laugh? Don't let the girls hear it or they'll know you're a farm boy for sure. Now tell me, how much money do you have on you?"

"Oh, I don't know, maybe twenty dollars or so."

"Twenty dollars?" She sighed. "You should have come to me earlier. Twenty dollars won't get you far, Lloydie, for crying out loud. I had a feeling you'd be unprepared so I sent George a telegram already. I think he might be willing to help you out."

"Ah, now what'd you go and do a thing like that for anyhow? I can find a job."

"Lloydie, don't be dense. I didn't say you can't find a job. You need to be focusing on your studies if you're going to university. Don't let father down. Or mother. Don't let her down neither."

They drove the rest of the distance in relative silence. All in all, it took two stops for gasoline and a total of five hours of driving time, but by mid-afternoon, Mirna pulled the truck down Shattuck Avenue in downtown Berkeley. Berkeley was the largest bustling town that Lloyd had ever seen. Cars and people everywhere; nothing like Aptos and the orchards. Large oak trees filled every inch of undeveloped air and golden hills rose up from behind the buildings.

"Just drop me off here," Lloyd said, pointing to the street corner.

Mirna asked no questions as she pulled the truck over and put it in park. "Here?"

“This seems like a good spot.”

“I suppose it is. Admissions will be right on the other side of these buildings in the quad area. Just ask around. Don’t be a stubborn ass, you hear?”

Lloyd nodded and stepped out of the car. He grabbed a potato sack full of clothes and a smaller bag full of apples out of the back seat and slung them over his shoulder. He closed both doors and then saw that Mirna had gotten out to see him off.

“Oh, ha ha, hi, Mirna.”

“What, were you seriously just going to walk off? Lloydie, do you even have emotions? Good grief. Come give me a hug.”

Mirna threw her arms around him. It was the first time Lloyd could remember hugging his sister and it had a feeling of closure to it.

“I’m not going to be all that far you know, ha ha.”

“You take care of yourself, Lloydie. This is a big scary world. This ain’t Aptos no more. People won’t be speakin’ Croatian and people ain’t farmers up here. They don’t much like folks like you. This is a war town. Berkeley has its hands in all the weapons around the country. I’ve been readin’ the papers. Berkeley is a war town. Don’t go gettin’ mixed up in war politics, you hear? You come back now. You hear me, Lloydie?”

“Yeah, Mirna, I hear you.”

Mirna nodded her head rapidly, accepting Lloyd’s acknowledgment. She wiped a tear away and then turned and walked around the truck. She had never turned it off, so she simply shifted into first gear and merged back into traffic, leaving Lloyd on the sidewalk with his bags. Lloyd watched her go and then found an alley to walk through the buildings to the Berkeley campus. Like the city itself, the Berkeley campus was a new world for Lloyd. It almost reminded him of an orchard, but instead of trees, there were students, and instead of sheds, there were large white buildings. Everything was pristinely

maintained and the air seemed cleaner, more prestigious. It was then that he realized how much he stuck out like a sore thumb. The men walking by with books all had on nice suits; the women had on dresses, their hair done up in bows. Lloyd looked down at his dirty Levi's jeans and his sweat-stained flannel shirt that he rolled up past the elbows. His eyebrows were thicker and blacker than anyone else and even his tanned skin complexion and dark features stood out from the relatively white population.

"Excuse me," he asked one man as he passed.

"Yes?" the man responded in an oddly friendly manner. Most men on the orchard would have responded with some kind of curse.

"I was hoping to sign up for some classes."

The man looked Lloyd up and down. "Okay."

"Where might I do that?"

"You mean admissions? Across the quad. Can't miss it."

"Thank you. Oh, would you like an apple?" Lloyd quickly opened the bag and offered it to the man. "I have a lot, as you can see."

The man looked in the bag like a man being offered a bag of snakes. When he saw it was just apples, he shrugged. "Sure, why not?" He reached in and took one out, held it up to say thanks, and then continued on his way. Lloyd watched him take a bite of the apple and then stop to examine it. He turned back to Lloyd and held it up again as if to say, "That's incredible."

Lloyd again threw the bags over his shoulder and proceeded to walk across the immense quad until he found himself in line at the admissions office. He was the only one with a potato sack full of clothes and the only one in jeans. The line was intimidating. Several women sat behind individual desks and many were engaged in heated exchanges with the students. Lloyd questioned his decision to try to enter such a prestigious university. It wasn't too late to step out of the line and quietly walk out the

door. In a way, it felt a little like he'd imagine signing up for the military would feel. Wait in a long line and then sign away your fate.

"You also get a telegram saying there's a problem with your tuition?" the man in front of Lloyd asked as he turned.

"Now, now, now wait awhile. Tuition?"

"Yeah, you get a telegram."

"I can't say that I did. I'm just hoping to enroll."

The man looked at Lloyd as though he had spoken gibberish.

"You haven't enrolled yet?"

"No."

"So why are you here?"

"To enroll."

"Did you apply?"

"No. That's why I'm here."

The man nodded, finally wrapping his head around Lloyd's position. He looked him up and down again and saw Lloyd for what he was, a farm boy with no clue what he just walked into.

"All right then," he said. "Well, my name's Johnson. Alex Johnson."

Alex extended a hand, which Lloyd accepted. Alex had on a sport coat and slacks, and had let the peach fuzz of his mustache grow into stringy hair that extended just over the edge of his top lip. He was about Lloyd's height, but his hands lacked the callouses that Lloyd's had and his shoulders didn't fill out the shirt in any sort of noticeable manner.

"Lloyd," Lloyd said, getting confused about having to say the last name first. "Lloyd Tahmatch."

"Tomato? You from Ohio?"

"No. Aptos."



Alex had never met someone like Lloyd before, but he was intrigued.

“All right, Lloyd Tomato from Aptos, what major are you going to study?”

“Major?”

“Yeah. What classes are you going to take?”

“Well, I suppose at Cabrillo College I took farm management. But I was thinking about law.

Study land use rights.”

“Land use? Farm, what? No, that’s not a thing. What subject you good at?”

“Good at?” Lloyd considered and then said, “Oh, I guess math.”

“Math? Well hell, boy like you, engineering. Get a degree in engineering and you’ll be employed for life.”

They both turned when they heard, “Next!” shouted from an admissions receptionist.

“That’s me,” Alex said. “Nice to meet you, Tomato. Don’t be a stranger.”

As Alex wandered off and took a seat at a booth, Lloyd heard another, “Next!” He quickly tried to track down the source and then scurried to take a seat for fear of being thrown out of the building if he delayed too long. He set his bags next to the chair and then sat as upright as possible. Lloyd stared at the woman across the desk, who stared blankly back. The woman was slight in stature, but her horn-rimmed glasses and tight ponytail were imposing and her age made him pay her the same deference he might give his own mother.

“How can I help you?” she inquired when she realized Lloyd wasn’t going to speak first.

“Hi, I’m Lloyd Tahmatoh. I’d like to enroll as a student.”

“May I see your acceptance and enrollment papers?”

“Acceptance letter?”

The woman didn’t fully understand the question.

“You have been accepted to attend this university, correct?”

“I suppose not. I was hoping you could help me with that.”

The woman sighed. “Well the only option for late enrollment is if you have the requisite courses from a junior college. Since you likely do not have...”

“Now, wait awhile, I have those right here.”

Lloyd fished his transcripts out of his bag and passed them to her. She reluctantly accepted it and reviewed the classes.

“Well I’ll be damned.” She put the paper down and began to pull out documents. “You know, I think it’s criminal they let you Okies enroll like this. But who am I? Just a woman who dutifully follows university policies. Start filling these out. How do you propose paying for your tuition?”

“Tuition?”

“You have to pay to attend college here. This is a world-class institution. You can’t just attend for free. You youngsters these days, think you can have things for free. Don’t have to work for it and earn it like your parents did.”

“How much is tuition?”

“Twenty-five dollars a term. Plus room and board.”

Lloyd began to chew on his lower lip and nodded as he considered the prices.

“Having a change of mind, are we?” she asked.

“No, Ma’am.” He pulled his wallet out and began counting out the money.

“Just give that to me when you turn in your paperwork. Next!”

“Oh, Ma’am, is there a place I can find work?”

She sighed again. Student jobs are posted in the student center. Probably find something washing dishes or something. Course won’t make enough to pay the bills, but it should help.”

Lloyd nodded and rose. He walked to the wall where there were standing desks so he could fill out his paperwork. He got past step one, but he'd have to find a job as soon as possible or his college experiment would only last one semester.

## Chapter 17

“Poetry?” Judith Ezra asked Myrtle as she applied a fresh coat of red lipstick. “What kind of a field of study is that?”

“Oh, ho hum,” Myrtle responded, her nose remaining directed toward her paper. “Those who rule this world do so by dazzling us with eloquence and well-spoken verse.”

Judith shook her head. She had voiced her discontentment with her roommate’s choice of studies from the day they first met, but had ceased amusing her by laughing at Myrtle’s short quips. “Well, why you’re busy trying to rule the world, I’ll be wooing Keith Anderson at the dance tonight.”

That did get Myrtle to break away. She rotated on her seat and looked at Judith, who was inspecting her lips a few inches from the small vanity mirror they put up in their room. “Keith Anderson? That boy has no honest intentions, and you know that.”

Judith turned and smiled broadly. She began to bat her eye lashes and crooned. “Who said anything about honest intentions? Myrtle, we need to have a serious conversation. You’re at a university. You’re out on your own. I’m worried if you spend so much time in those books, studying *poetry* no less, you’re going to miss the whole experience.”

“I didn’t get a scholarship to cavort around town with unscrupulous men. I need to focus.”

“You and that scholarship,” Judith said, returning to her preening. “I doubt the Alumni Association intended for you to join a sorority either, but here we are.” Judith put the lipstick away and pulled out her blush. “My color has been absolutely wretched these days. What are you doing today? There are no Saturday classes, so don’t even try to make that claim.”

“Oh, brother me. No classes, but I have to finish this poem and then I need to study for my mathematics examination.”

“Exams aren’t for another week.” Judith reached for her cigarettes and took one out. She struck a match and lit it, blowing the smoke out like a Raleigh’s cigarette advertisement.

“If I don’t get a good score, I could lose my scholarship.”

“You should be careful. If you let it out that you’re a well-spoken scribe who can add and subtract, the military might offer your services to France to help in the war against the Krauts.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call them that.”

“What? Krauts? The Nazis are horrific. You watch, Roosevelt is crazy enough that he’ll figure a way to get us involved. My father always told me the Great War wouldn’t bring lasting peace. Now the Nazis are marching across Europe. You aren’t concerned about that?”

This again got Myrtle’s interest. “You think America will get involved? What would we do a thing like that for? This is Europe’s war.”

“Oh, Myrtle, don’t be so naïve. You mean to tell me you haven’t thought about this. Soon all our men will get shipped off to fight in the trenches again and then you’ll be begging for a man like Keith. This is why poetry does you no good. Teaches you to speak fine, sure, but doesn’t teach you to think. There’s a big world calling, Myrtle. Much bigger than Shaft, or Thraft, or wherever it is you’re from.”

“Taft.”

“Whatever. Now get over here and let me do you up. I’ll even share Keith with you. There’ll be plenty to go around tonight.”

Myrtle began to blush and then smiled and joined Judith at the mirror. “Do with me what you will.”

“Really?” Judith’s eyes got wide and she began to bounce on her toes. “You’ll let me make you up? Oh, Myrtle, I’ll make you so beautiful. That hair, though, let me start on your hair. Oh, this is so exciting. Mary Lou!” She looked to the door and waited before shouting again. “Mary Lou! Beverly!”

After a second, two young women ran in the room, one with curlers in her hair. “What is it?”

“Mary Lou, Beverly, Myrtle has agreed to let us make her up.”

Myrtle waited for the comment to sink in and then watched as all three women got giddy with excitement and began jumping up and down together.

“Let me go get my extra curlers,” Mary Lou said.

“Is this for the dance? I have the perfect dress!” Beverly followed Mary Lou out the door.

Judith looked at Myrtle in the mirror. “You’re in the minority, dear.”

“Once we’re done, you’re going to go to the library with me.”

Judith brushed her comment off with a flip of her hand and took out another cigarette and placed it in Myrtle’s mouth. She lit it and watched as Myrtle fumbled with the inhale and then coughed out the smoke. Laughing, Judith began applying blush to Myrtle’s cheeks. As Myrtle watched her work, she couldn’t help but feel guilty. Her father was back tending to the oil rigs and her mother had to keep up the house on her own. And what was Myrtle doing with her free tuition and room and board? She was getting made up to go to a party. Over the past year and a half, she and Judith had become best friends, first meeting as roommates in a dormitory and then joining the same sorority a year later. She envied Judith in many ways. Her care free approach to life. Her priority of having fun over succeeding at classwork. Her wealthy parents from San Francisco. Judith was raised in a more sophisticated culture than Myrtle’s upbringing, attending galas and mastering the decorum of being a lady at a young age. Whereas Myrtle was expected to be a housewife—bucking her town’s tradition when she left for college—Judith came from a world where she was expected to obtain a higher education and know how to discuss things like war and politics.

“Judith,” Myrtle said, “when you’re finished with Berkeley, where will you go?”

“You mean, which wealthy man will I marry? Or what will I do if I don’t find a wealthy man to marry?”

After a moment of feigned seriousness, Judith laughed and Myrtle said, “Oh, never mind you.”

“Well now I’m serious,” Judith countered. “I have no expectation of working. I want to find a man to take care of me, but I want to cast an educated vote and have meaningful conversation with him.”

“You mean... after?” Myrtle smirked.

“Hopefully we won’t be able to talk afterward!”

The two women broke into hysterics. When they settled down, they both took drags of their cigarettes and Judith asked, “How about you?”

“I don’t want to be a housewife. I want to be... something. A professor, maybe. Or the mayor of Taft. Or, I don’t know, something. I sure as heavens hope we don’t get dragged into another war, though.”

Before Judith could answer, Mary Lou and Beverly entered with their supplies and the three ladies began to transform Myrtle into a modern female.

Later that night, before the four of them left for the Honor’s Ball, they sat together for dinner in the sorority’s dining area. The dining room was just past the building’s foyer and doubled as the sorority’s social area. It was currently set up—as it was every morning and every night—with six large brown table covered in white table cloths, twenty or so young women eating and laughing, and a house attendant who helped prepare the food and clear the dishes.

Myrtle, Judith, Beverly, and Mary Lou were sitting together poking delicately at their servings of meat loaf and carrots. Their faces were fastidiously prepared with makeup and their hair no longer had curlers. Other than the fact they were dressed in their white dinner dresses, they were prepared for the ball.

“I think Myrtle should ask Keith Anderson to dance,” Judith quipped, before pushing her plate away and lighting another cigarette.

“Me?” Myrtle asked. “You said you wanted to dance with him.”

“Eh, I’ve decided otherwise.”

“It’ll change six more times before we even leave,” Beverly joked.

“As is my right.”

“Myrtle, you should feel right at home,” Mary Lou said. “All the men should be top notch, being invited to the Honors Ball and all.”

“Very good point,” Judith said in happy agreement. “Very good point indeed. Myrtle, you should have no qualms about taking home two or three of them.”

As they all laughed, a young man approached the table. The young man—the house attendant—was a college student himself, but wasn’t as fortunate to have wealthy parents or a prestigious scholarship. He had to work to pay for his schooling, which meant he had to keep the sorority house clean and the women well-fed.

“May I take your plate?” he asked Judith.

“Do you not see that I pushed it out of the way?”

“Ma’am,” he said. He had grown accustomed to the abuse and took the plate with no further question. In fact, he looked numb to it all. “And you, miss?” He directed the question to Myrtle. Their eyes locked for a moment until Myrtle nervously looked at her plate.

“I’m finished. Thank you.”

The man, who some of the women knew as Lloyd, took the two plates and hurried away to drop them in the kitchen. Myrtle watched him go out of the corner of her eyes, ensuring her friends saw no trace of a budding attraction.



Lloyd picked up the two plates and began making his way back to the kitchen. As he walked through the doorway, he paused and looked back at Myrtle, even though he didn't know her name, yet. Per regulations of the job, Lloyd was prohibited from fraternizing with the girls of the sorority. He couldn't help himself from growing fond of Myrtle, though, and he tried to eavesdrop on conversations to hear what she may like or figure out what her name could be. He imagined her as a Mary, like his mother, or a Veronica. Whatever it may be, she was beautiful. Not as prim and proper as the other girls of the house who put more time into their appearance, but naturally pretty. She was polite as well, always thanking Lloyd for his services and never haranguing him for missing a spot on the carpet or taking too long to clear away dishes. She reminded him of a girl he might have met back at the orchard, a girl he could bring back home and proudly present to his parents. She had dark features as though she were of the same eastern European heritage as his family, and her low-key demeanor reminded him of someone with a rural upbringing as opposed to the big city girls she associated with.

As he turned the corner, he thought he might have seen her looking his direction, but he had to hurry into the kitchen to offload the dishes before pulling out the next two meat loafs for the later crowds. He shook her out of his mind. By the time he returned to the floor, she would have departed.

"Tomato!" he heard from the kitchen. "More meat loaf!"

The voice belonged to Mrs. Marjorel. She was the house mother and ran the house with an iron fist. Lloyd's best friend, Alex Johnson, liked to call her a Nazi, even though Lloyd didn't fully understand what that reference meant. When he dropped the two plates in the sink to soak in the soapy water, he said, "Ah hell, I suppose I should pull those out of the oven now."

"Mrs. Marjorel."

"Yes, Ma'am." They stared at each other for a moment before Lloyd said, "Should I pull them out, or did you have something to say? Ha ha."

Mrs. Marjorel huffed in exasperation, rolled her eyes, and walked out. Lloyd assumed that meant he should continue with his duties, so he moved to the oven. Lloyd didn't find the work very difficult—not nearly as difficult as running the apple orchard—but he missed being outside. He still wasn't convinced he'd be able to make the tuition payments after barely squeaking by for the first three terms, but he was enjoying life away from his family and away from the orchard.

A few hours later, once his responsibilities were complete and every girl of the sorority had eaten her fill, he wandered out the front door and followed a path the house. He turned down an alley and took concrete steps to a door that led to a small apartment in the basement. The apartment had no direct access to the house and Lloyd was not given a key that worked for the deadbolt to the front door of the sorority, locked promptly at eight every night.

He never locked his door—very few people even knew the secretive door existed—so he wasn't surprised to find Alex laying on his bed eating an apple and flipping through an engineering book.

“Lloydie, seriously, these apples, top notch.”

“Now, wait awhile, ha ha, those were sent for me.”

Lloyd saw the wooden box of apples on his desk. It was late for an apple shipment, but the Pink Lady and Fuji varieties could stay ripe on the trees into December. This must have been some of the remaining few that Lucien found hidden behind leaves.

“I gave myself a commission for bringing the box in before anyone stole them. You have some post as well. On the desk.”

Lloyd looked at the letters and collapsed into his desk chair. He began flipping through them and settled on one with a return address from San Francisco. It was from his brother, George. He tore it open and pulled the letter out. Out of the trifold, he removed five crisp ten-dollar bills.

“Hello,” Alex said. “Looks like someone's buying tonight.”

Lloyd opened the letter and read it. **Lloydie, how are you? How are your studies? I would like to come see you. Let me know when. I know you have been struggling with money. Mirna telegraphed me. Don't drop out. Father is fine. Here is \$50. I will send it to you every month until you graduate. I'm proud of you. Don't argue. Your brother - George.**

Lloyd refolded the letter and held the cash in his hand, fanning out the ten-dollar bills to feel the paper and ensure there were no tricks involved. He had refused to ask George for help, but feeling the cash in his fingers nearly brought tears to his eyes. He felt conflicted between Mirna's betrayal and George's gratitude. Everything his father taught him told him he should return the money, but he wanted to finish college, as selfish as that may have been.

He opened his desk drawer and pulled out a small shoe box. He removed the lid and pulled out a brown notebook and an envelope. He flipped to the page in the notebook where he had been working on his finances. Next semester's tuition was going to cost him \$125. He quickly counted the money he had saved up in the envelope and—as expected since he counted it every night before bed—he had seventy-five dollars and forty cents. The fifty dollars meant he would be able to attend for another semester. Not only that, if he accepted the fifty dollars every month, he could cut back his hours and focus more exclusively on his studies.

“Good Lord, Lloyd, you mean to tell me you keep all of your cash in your desk drawer and you don't even lock your door? Remind me on Monday and I'll take you to my banker.”

“I can afford next semester's tuition now,” Lloyd said out loud. He was saying it to himself, but Alex assumed it was meant for him.

“Hey, that's fantastic! I was worried I'd be left all alone in this bleak city.”

Lloyd turned to him. “I even have sixty cents left over.”

Alex laughed. “Whoa, big spender. Okay, fine, I'll pay for tonight.”

Lloyd put the cash in the envelope and pulled out sixty cents. He put the coins in his pocket and then carefully stashed away the envelope and notebook in the box, and placed the box in the drawer.

“Although I don’t know why you’d want to stick around here and study this God-awful topic. Seriously, Lloyd, what are you going to do with an engineering degree? Don’t answer, because I’ll tell you. You’re going to get sucked into the war. Military’s always looking for engineers. Now, go into business and you’re no longer desirable. Go into business and you’re suddenly of more benefit to the economy than to the military. You have to think these things through, Lloyd.”

Lloyd looked at his friend laying on his bed in his standard slacks and jacket and laughed.

“Now, wait awhile, you’re the one that told me to go into engineering.”

“I told you that? I never would have told you that.”

“Ha ha, well we were in the same classes our first term. But then I suppose you switched to business. Ha ha, now why would you go and do a thing like that?”

“Because I want to make money, Lloyd. Stock broker. You hear me? That’s the ticket to a bright future. Invest in stocks and retire on the dividends. You heard it from me first.”

“Oh I suppose that would be smart. I don’t know much about stocks, though. Turns out I’m pretty good at this engineering. Who woulda thought? Ah, hell, what do I know.”

Lloyd took an apple from the box and took a bite. The taste never got old. It immediately transported him back to the orchard. He was never sure if his dad sent him the apples through his own goodwill or if his mother coerced him into sending them, but he liked to think his father was watching out for him and wishing him the best.

“Besides,” Lloyd said through his chomping, “we’re not in a war, so the military won’t be bothering us.”

“Cheers to that, friend. Now, for the real reason I stopped by.” Alex stood up and walked to the bathroom. He emerged with a suit. “I know you have no suit, but tonight we’re going to the Honors Ball and I can’t have you looking like you grew up on a farm.”

## Chapter 18

The Berkeley Honor's Ball was a gala that had the campus abuzz. The finest students of the university coming together before Christmas to dance and laugh and drink. Lloyd was taken aback when he learned he had made the list—and thus, received an invitation—even though Mrs. Marjorel was loathe to deliver him the letter. “Don’t go dancing with my girls,” she had said. “Rules are still rules and you aren’t to fraternize with my girls, you hear?” As she walked away, she mumbled, “Must not take much to make the Honor Roll these days.”

“You look sharp, my Croatian farmer friend,” Alex said as they stood outside the gymnasium. “Sharp indeed. A suit, I’m sorry to say, suits you.”

Lloyd smiled abashedly. “I don’t really know how to dance.” He put the emphasis on dance, shrugging his shoulders as though having a conversation with himself.

“Don’t worry, Lloyd, as long as you’re moving no one much cares. Come on.”

They walked into the gymnasium and were greeted with name tags and punch. Free punch. Lloyd took two. The party was already hopping by the time they arrived. A band was playing swing music and Lloyd was awe-struck at how everyone moved on the dance floor. Had they choreographed their dance moves? How did they not run into one another when they were swinging around the floor?

“Now, wait awhile,” he said.

“Relax, Lloyd,” Alex said, cutting him off. “Even you can find a nice lady to take home in a place like this.”

But Lloyd didn’t want to take home any nice lady. He had one in mind. He didn’t know her name, but he knew her face. He scanned the floor but didn’t find who he was looking for.

“Okay, Lloyd, looks like it’s my turn,” Alex said, slapping him on the chest. “Wish me luck.” Lloyd watched as Alex sauntered off into the crowd and tapped a girl on the shoulder. They began to dance immediately.

Lloyd watched in innocent wonderment. His father had told him about escaping an Empire and his journey to America. He had told him about his grandfather’s adventure to the Arctic. He told him about surviving the earthquake and watching his store get dynamited. But at no point had he described the art of asking a woman out. And to discover it was as easy as tapping them on the shoulder?

Lloyd’s eyes continued to scan until they settled on the only woman he wanted to see.

As Keith twirled her around the floor, Myrtle tried to enjoy herself. He had come to her. He had bypassed Judith and all the others and came to her. Now he was swinging her to and fro and Myrtle couldn’t hide the smile on her face. She didn’t find anything about Keith particularly inspiring or attractive, but she enjoyed dancing and the music was fun and it was worth the look on Judith’s face when Keith asked her to dance instead of her.

When the music stopped, Myrtle laughed and said, “Thank you. That was just fine.”

“Well hold on there,” Keith said in a surprisingly burly voice. It didn’t match his body and Myrtle couldn’t determine if his body had yet caught up with his voice or if he purposely lowered his voice to sound manlier. Her father used to do that when he would playfully seduce her mother. It was a joke, though. “I had hoped for more than just one dance.”

As he said that, the band dialed it down a notch and started playing a slower tune. Men and women paired off and began to sway together. Some women dropped their curled hair onto their men’s shoulders. Myrtle gulped and nodded obligingly. Keith tried not to look eager as he placed his hand on Myrtle’s hip and took her other hand to begin slowly spinning her backward.

They had only taken a couple of steps when Myrtle felt a tap on her shoulder. They both stopped and looked at the culprit. Myrtle knew the face, but had never seen it out of context.

“May we help you?” Keith asked.

“Oh, ha ha, well I wanted to ask this lady if she’d dance with me?”

“She’s spoken for.”

“No, that’ll be fine,” Myrtle heard herself saying, staring at the face. She dropped Keith’s hand and rotated away from him. She looked at the face, the face of the man who served her at mealtimes and cleaned up after her sorority sisters. “I know you.”

“Well yes I imagine you do.”

“I didn’t realize you were a student.”

“Ah well, I’m not much of one.”

They continued to look at one another. Myrtle had never taken the time to look at him closely before. He had stark dark features and large eyebrows. He was taller than her, but not too tall, and she could tell the suit he was wearing didn’t belong to him.

“You’re at the Honor’s Ball. You must be as much of one as the rest of us. Doesn’t seem right knowing you serve us our food, but, here we are. Ho hum.”

The man didn’t ask her to dance, he simply stepped closer to her and awkwardly took her hand in his. He placed his hand delicately on her hip, gulping as the guilt on his face suggested he thought he was doing something wrong. They began to sway back and forth. The man didn’t rotate her, he just held her lightly, like he might break her if he squeezed too tightly.

“You can twist me, you know?”

“Can I twist you?”



“Yes.”

The man held his hand out and Myrtle circled around slowly before placing her hand back on his shoulder.

“I’m not much of a dancer really.”

“I think you’re doing fine.”

After a few more seconds, the man said, “Would you like to go for a walk with me?”

“Now?”

Myrtle had never been asked to leave a dance so quickly. She twisted her head and noticed her friends staring at her, almost certainly wondering why she was dancing with the help. Judith was now dancing with Keith and both watched Myrtle closely, either for entertainment or to quickly move in when the strange man did something strange.

“It’s a nice night. I like walking when it’s nice out.”

“Okay,” Myrtle said. She thought about her father in that moment. She thought about the advice he would give her. *Strike oil!* That’s what he would say. “I like walking when it’s nice out as well.”

As Lloyd led the lady from the dance floor, he saw Alex look at him as though something were wrong. Alex was dancing with the same woman—it had only been a couple minutes—and assumed something was wrong since Lloyd was leaving. Lloyd paid him no attention. Still holding the lady’s hand, he led her from the crowd and out of the gymnasium into the cold December air.

“Oh, you should really take my jacket.”

He quickly slipped his jacket off and draped it around her shoulders.

“Thank you. I left my shawl inside.”

They walked in silence for a moment down the sidewalk going nowhere in particular.

“I’m Myrtle, by the way. You never asked for my name. I’m Myrtle.”

“Oh, ha ha, can you believe that? I’ll be damned. I never asked for your name. I just assumed I knew it, really. Myrtle. That’s a nice name. I’m Lloyd.”

“Lloyd. Now I know. I had been wondering.”

Lloyd considered her comment as they walked. She had been wondering? Meaning, she had noticed him in the sorority?

“So, Lloyd, what is it you would like to do with me? Just walk?”

“I hadn’t really thought that far ahead. A walk just sounded nice.”

“Well, there’s a picture showing at the theater just down the street if you’d care to see it. Gone with the Wind.”

“A picture?” Lloyd again considered her comment. A picture. A picture cost twenty-five cents per ticket. He had sixty cents. He could afford to take her. He wasn’t so sure it was wise to spend the only disposable money he currently had to take a woman he scarcely knew to a picture, but he didn’t want to be wise at the moment. He wanted to take Myrtle to see Gone with the Wind. “I would actually really enjoy that.”

They walked the few blocks to the theater learning a bit more about each other. Myrtle from Taft. Lloyd from Aptos. Lloyd an apple farmer. Myrtle’s father an oil-man. They never stopped holding hands, but Myrtle’s free hand remained firmly behind her back, a lesson her mother taught her to improve her posture.

When they arrived at the box office, Lloyd said through the glass, “Two for Gone with the Wind.”

“One dollar,” the attendant said.

Lloyd’s heart sank. One dollar? That couldn’t be right. “One dollar?”

"Yep, a dollar. Long movie. Two reels."

Lloyd bit his lip and turned to Myrtle. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't have the money for that."

"Lloyd, it's 1940. I can buy my own ticket. How about you buy yours, and I'll buy mine?"

Lloyd gulped. He was embarrassed, but what could he do. He nodded, ashamed. "It's just the rest of my money is set aside for next term's tuition."

"What'll it be?" the attendant asked. "You're seeing the picture or not?"

"One for me," Myrtle said.

"And one for me," Lloyd said.

They both placed fifty cents on the counter and accepted their tickets and then entered the theater. Lloyd quickly scanned the concession. Coca-Colas still cost five cents each. That would clear him out. He looked at her. She was even more beautiful up close. Her lipstick highlighted her perfectly formed lips and dark-brown hair curled around her perfect ears, framing the face of a petite body. He guessed her dress didn't belong to her, but the mint-green gown lightly batted her tiny ankles and made Lloyd crazy as he focused on being a gentleman. Her hips made it more of a struggle than he'd imagined.

"I've never heard of a picture that cost more than twenty-five cents. Isn't that something?"

"Let's hope it's worth the price of admission."

Lloyd laughed. "I certainly hope that. Can I buy you a Coca-Cola?"

"I was going to suggest I buy one for you, but since you asked first, that'd be just fine."

The movie let out well past one in the morning, blowing past Myrtle's midnight curfew. She didn't mind, though. She also didn't mind buying them popcorn during the intermission. There was something charming about a man who couldn't afford the date on his own, whose money was tied up in paying for

university. Lloyd was different than the other men she had met and wouldn't have even registered on Judith's list of suitors.

Judith. Throughout the entire picture, holding hands with Lloyd and eating sharing popcorn, she hadn't thought about Judith's impending reaction. It would be swift and fast. But not as swift and fast as Mrs. Marjorel's.

"Mrs. Marjorel must be worried sick about you," Lloyd said as he started to walk Myrtle back to the sorority house.

"Oh, I suppose she is. You know, I've been so good, never had one transgression. I think she'll give me a slap on the wrist. How about you?"

"Me? Oh, ha ha, no, I don't have a curfew."

"I don't mean a curfew. What happens when Mrs. Marjorel finds out about..."

Myrtle stopped herself. Was she being too presumptuous?

"Yeah I suppose I've been told not to fraternize with the girls. Ah hell, the hell with it. You know, I really enjoy fraternizing with you, so, I think I'm just going to continue with doing that."

"You'd like to see me again?"

"Oh, was I being presumptuous. Ha ha, sometimes I get presumptuous."

His laugh made her blush. He had a slow, drawn out laugh as though he was still talking. It was pure and genuine and made Myrtle weak at the knees.

"It's not presumptuous. I'd like that. I'm just worried about you is all. I don't want you losing your job on my account."

"Well, to tell you the truth, it's not the greatest job in the world. My brother George just sent post over to help with tuition so I can focus more on my studies. So other than a place to stay, I don't much need the job. I think I'd rather see you, if that's all right."

"It's definitely all right."

“Did you like the picture?” he asked.

“I loved it! The romance, the war. There’s something about Scarlett O’Hara. She’s so independent, so strong. I appreciate that.”

“Ha ha, you know I didn’t consider that. That’s a good point.” He again put the emphasis on the last word, as though he wanted to say something further, but he simply sat on it, considering the point he found so good. “That’s a really good point.”

As they walked, Myrtle’s hand slowly drifted up his arm until she clasped it and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

“I wanted to tell you,” he said, “I think you look really nice in that dress.”

Myrtle laughed. “It’s not mine. I think I look silly. I prefer jeans.”

They walked until they reached the front steps of the sorority.

“Okay then,” she said. “I had a really nice time.”

“I’d like to see you again,” he replied.

“I’d like that. Perhaps you’d like to come in for breakfast tomorrow. We’re allowed to have visitors for breakfast.”

Lloyd nodded and Myrtle realized she had put him in an uncomfortable decision.

“Sorry,” she said. “You probably need more time to work out the details and make arrangements.”

“No, I don’t need any time,” he said. “I’ll be there for breakfast.”

As he said that, the front door opened and Mrs. Marjorel walked out. “Yes you will be here for breakfast, serving the ladies as usual. And you, Myrtle, get straight to bed. We’ll discuss your punishment in the morning.”

“Mrs. Marjorel,” Lloyd said. “I’m deeply sorry, but I won’t be able to work tomorrow morning. I have a date.”

Myrtle again blushed and waved as she walked into the house.

## Chapter 19

“My father thinks it’s crazy,” Alex said, reading the paper with rapt attention at the kitchen table.

“Unbelievable. Trade embargoes on the Japs. You know, Lloyd, George Washington specifically advocated staying out of foreign affairs. Did you know that? Yet here we are, dabbling in disputes thousands of miles away. It’s madness. Who gives a shit if the Japs torture a bunch of Chinks? There’s a billion of ‘em.”

“Now, wait awhile, I’m not sure that’s right,” Lloyd said. Since moving into an apartment together after being removed from the sorority, Lloyd had taken to cradling his chin between his thumb and pointer finger as they engaged in deep philosophical conversations. At the moment, he nodded his head, but his chin remained firmly entrenched. “I would argue that America has a moral imperative to step in.”

“Against the Japs and the Krauts? Nazis are running over Europe. I have to believe you feel even stronger about joining that fight.”

“Ha ha, well, yeah, I suppose it’d be two fronts. That would be tough.” Lloyd’s eyes bounced back and forth as he considered these factors.

“Tough? We’re not prepared. Roosevelt wants to keep our military weak for just that reason, so we can’t get ourselves caught up in this mess. Then he goes and throws a trade embargo into the fray just for the hell of it. Man is out to lunch. My father says so every day and I’m inclined to believe him.”

“I don’t necessarily think we should get involved with the war,” Lloyd said.

“What does your father think?” Myrtle asked as she cleared away Lloyd’s breakfast.

“My father? Oh, ha ha, I haven’t really *talked* to him about it. I suppose he’d want to stay as far away as necessary.”

“Even with Yugoslavia involved?” Myrtle asked. Myrtle frequently had to remind Lloyd of the various moving pieces of the growing global conflict. “Must be difficult for him to understand.”

“I know it. I know it. My father hated the government then and probably hates the government even more now. He’d probably encourage a complete overthrow of the current regime.”

The three sat silently as a family. Alex read the paper, Myrtle did the dishes, and Lloyd sipped his coffee. The war had begun to permeate every conversation they had and every conversation they heard around campus. A new alert system had been installed and tested a few times, blaring warnings to seek cover. Cal Berkeley was in the thick of new weapon research and had already begun gathering world-class engineers and even a couple of physicists. Lloyd had even taken Myrtle to a couple of presentations on new technology.

“Do you want anymore?” Myrtle asked.

“Hmmm?” Lloyd asked.

“No, thanks, honey,” Alex said quickly without a hint of irony.

“Ha ha, she was asking me. No, I’m full.”

Myrtle tossed the dish rag on the counter. “Honey,” she said, “Lloyd, we have bridge club and then I need you to carry my books to class. We can talk about the break.”

“Bridge club?” Alex asked. “God you two are old. You two heading home?”

“Yes, she’s going to meet my parents,” Lloyd said.

“Your parents? Wow, big step. How do you think that will go?”

“Not well,” Lloyd said. “My father won’t be happy I’m bringing home a girl that isn’t a Slav.”

Myrtle laughed. “Ah, well, ho hum. It’ll be fine. I’ve been in more uncomfortable situations than that. Certainly not marrying a man without meeting his parents first. I don’t care how much they might despise me. I’m a good, decent American woman.”

Now Lloyd laughed. “I think that might be the problem.”



“Speaking of family, another letter from George arrived,” Alex said, losing interest in the family drama. “Can’t believe you’re still getting money from him.”

“Your father’s paying your entire tuition,” Myrtle said, reminding Alex he shouldn’t judge Lloyd.

“And the rent of your fiancée,” Alex replied. “Lest you forget.”

“I’m just saying, a bit disingenuous in my taste to be giving him a hard time for accepting help from family. Lloyd, let’s go.”

Alex shook his head with a devious smirk, taking great joy in riling up Myrtle. Lloyd stood up and pushed his chair in and followed Myrtle out of the kitchen. She put her coat on while Lloyd gathered up their books. They walked out together and into the frigid December air. It was a cold morning in Berkeley and the student body was beginning to dress for winter. The mood was somber, as though the university was a microcosm of the country in general. War seemed imminent, but Roosevelt continued to keep the United States on the sidelines.

“Did your father serve in the Great War?” Myrtle asked as they entered the quad.

“My father? Oh, no, he wouldn’t do a thing like that. I would never tell Alex, but he supports the trade embargoes. Says the Japs are as bad as the old Austro-Hungarian empire.”

“So he’d support the U.S. getting involved.”

“No, not directly I don’t think. You know, these Oak trees are really fascinating. Some of the biggest roots among trees. I’ve always liked that about Berkeley. You don’t get many of these down in Aptos. They grow on the orchard, but never very big. I suppose it’s because my father has them bulldozed, ha ha. I guess I hadn’t considered that.”

“Lloyd, honey, don’t change the subject.”

“Oh, am I changing the subject? Ha ha. Sorry. Well, you know, I don’t think we’re going to get involved in this war. It’s across two oceans. I don’t think we’ll get involved. And if Roosevelt says we are getting involved, we can just go stay on the orchard. No one will come look in Aptos for soldiers.”

“Lloyd, I do love you, but you are as simpleminded as my father. Unreasonably optimistic.”

Lloyd shifted their books into one hand so he could hold her hand in the other. “I think it’s better to be optimistic. A year ago I was working at your sorority house and you didn’t know I existed. Now we’re engaged. I like being optimistic.”

“Ah well, you are the best thing that ever happened to me. That’s why I get so nervous about this. If we go to war, you could get drafted. I would have to return to Taft. And if you don’t get drafted, your father will never accept me.”

“Oh I don’t know about that. And what about what you were saying to Alex?”

“I was just trying to shut that boy up.”

“He’ll accept you. He won’t have a choice. And once he gets to know you, he’ll know how wonderful you are.”

“I’m not Croatian.”

“Neither am I, Myrtle. I was born right here.”

“You know what I mean, Lloyd.”

They were in the middle of the quad, making their way to Myrtle’s advanced poetry workshop, when the air-raid siren suddenly began to blare. They both flinched as the sound reverberated among the buildings. Students everywhere stopped in their tracks and looked to the sky.

“Ah hell, that alarm is a nuisance to high hell.”

As the siren continued to blare, though, Lloyd and Myrtle noticed a difference. There was no voice shouting above the alarm that this was a drill.

“Oh my God,” Myrtle said. “This isn’t a drill.”

“I know it,” Lloyd responded. “Come on.”

The students around them began to come to the same conclusion and the screams soon mixed in with the sirens, creating a chaotic scene of fear. Lloyd took Myrtle's hand and they started to run back the way they came.

"What do you think is happening?" Myrtle shouted? They instinctively kept their heads low.

"Must be some kind of attack!"

They ran all the way home until Myrtle was gasping for air and Lloyd was sweating through his flannel shirt. They entered the apartment and found Alex sitting in front of the large wooden radio. He didn't turn when they opened the door and looked ashen when Lloyd and Myrtle sat next to him.

"Pearl Harbor is under attack!" the radio personality declared. "This is not a drill! Pearl Harbor, the Pacific hub of the United States' Navy, is under attack in a brazen and cowardly Jap attack. Casualties are mounting, that's the latest bulletin this station has received. Pearl Harbor is under attack. Wait, what's this, yes, U.S. sailors are returning fire against the Jap planes. There is a fire fight in Hawaii! Again, Pearl Harbor is under attack! What does this mean? Where else will the Japanese Empire strike at the United States? Will this be the final straw that draws America into this global conflict?"

Alex switched off the radio, unable to listen any longer.

"They hit us, Lloyd, you hear that? They hit us. The God damn Japs hit us."

"Maybe it's just a warning for us to stay out," Myrtle said, her voice hopeful.

"Don't be so naïve, Myrtle. This is why war is a man's profession. They knew we were coming in and wanted to take us out first. God damn Roosevelt. How'd he allow this?"

"Well now wait awhile, I don't think this is Roosevelt's fault," Lloyd said. "This was a surprise attack."

"Jesus Christ, Lloyd."

They all turned when there was a knock at the door. Lloyd and Alex looked at one another as they both had thoughts that the attack had come all the way to the door of their apartment. They remained absolutely silent until a second knocking made them all jump.

“Alex! Lloyd, you in there?”

The voice belonged to Jack Matron, the building’s superintendent.

Alex walked to the door and answered it. Lloyd couldn’t hear what they were discussing, but he saw Alex nod and softly close the door. Alex then flipped off the lights. It was only about noon so there was plenty of sunlight, but Alex closed the blinds and began to gather lanterns and candles.

“What’re you doing?” Myrtle asked.

“The whole campus is going dark so we aren’t targets,” Alex said. “Jack just told me.”

“Are we targets?”

“The University of Berkeley? Absolutely. If they could hit Pearl Harbor, they’ll know about our work for the military. We’re a target.”

Lloyd had never seen this side of Alex. Alex was habitually cool, never under duress. And yet, he was panicking. Lloyd and Myrtle continued to sit near the radio while Alex sat at the table, looking at the supplies he had gathered.

“We should get some rations,” he said. “In case they attack, we should have some rations. My dad is always talking about being prepared. Food, toilet paper. Do you two have all your medications?”

“Okay, Alex, ha ha, you’re, you know, I think you might be panicking. We are not under attack. The Japs could never hit us in California, especially now that we’ll be on high alert.”

“If the entire Pacific Fleet is destroyed, nothing is standing in their way.”

“We don’t know the entire fleet was destroyed,” Myrtle said. “And if it’s so dangerous here, Lloyd, maybe we should go to your parents’ house. You can show me the orchard. At least until this is sorted out.”

“You know, that’s not such a bad idea. I wonder what my father is thinking. He probably hasn’t heard yet. I wonder what George is thinking.”

“What about final exams, though? We can’t leave yet.”

“Final exams!?” Alex exclaimed in exasperation. “There won’t be final exams. My father is probably going to pull me out of school. God damn Japs.”

They all sat—mostly in silence—and listened to the story of the attack on the radio. As the sun went down, Myrtle lit candles and they used lanterns to move around. Lloyd peaked through the blinds and saw darkness. The street lamps had been shut off. No cars were on the road. Berkeley was dark. Around seven, Myrtle cooked them all spaghetti, using whatever she could find in the cupboards. Final exams were indeed cancelled. Myrtle had to send a telegram to her sorority letting them know she was hunkering down with her fiancée. The three remained together and locked in the darkness for the next four days.

The declaration of war against Japan on December 8 shocked no one, but the December 11 declaration of war against Nazi Germany sunk the Berkeley campus even further into a shuttered melancholia. No one seemed to suffer from this new reality more than Alex.

On that night, when Lloyd and Myrtle were lying awake in their bed, the single candle providing light was flickering and slowly dying. Alex, unshaven and needing a shower, entered Lloyd’s bedroom without knocking. He didn’t apologize for the intrusion. Lloyd didn’t know why the Pearl Harbor attack and subsequent lockdown of the university was taking such a toll on his friend, but he hadn’t spoken much since the pronouncement of war with Germany.

“Alex?” Lloyd said softly when he saw Alex sitting at the desk. Lloyd propped himself onto an elbow.

After a second, Alex said, “Lloyd, when my father telephoned this morning, he told me he insisted that I enlist.”

“What?” Lloyd said. He looked at Myrtle, who pulled the covers up to her chin and rolled the other direction to let the two friends speak. As he propped himself up further, he said, “Why would he do a thing like that?”

“He wants me to go into politics, Lloyd. Says I can’t go anywhere if I don’t join the war effort. And if it’s like the Great War, we’ll get drafted and then thrown in the trenches.”

Lloyd thought about this. The trenches. “So what are you going to do?”

Alex’s head sunk into his lap. His words failed him. No one knew what the war effort would entail, but the war machine was revving up and would be fought on two fronts across two oceans. Many wouldn’t be returning if this were like the Great War.

“I’m going to enlist.” He sat silently as the words reverberated around the room along with the candle light. “Lloyd, I want you to enlist with me. I want to do this together.”

Lloyd didn’t know what to say, but Myrtle turned, no longer willing to give the friends their privacy. “That’s a death sentence,” she said. “Both of you need to stay as far away from this nonsense as possible. Lloyd, tell him that’s crazy.”

Lloyd didn’t say a word. He sat with his head against the wall and contemplated what it would mean to enlist. The war in Europe and the chaos in Asia had been abstract, nearly mythical. This suddenly made it concrete.

“I need to sleep,” Lloyd finally said. He didn’t look at Myrtle or Alex as he slid back down and placed his head on his pillow. He closed his eyes, feeling Alex and Myrtle staring at him. Eventually, Alex stood and walked out, closing the door behind him. Then Myrtle kissed him and slid down next to him, resting her head on his shoulder.

“I have to do it,” Lloyd whispered.

“I know,” Myrtle said back.

A week later, after Alex had departed to go work out the details of his life with his father, Lloyd and Myrtle took the four-hour bus ride to Aptos. Along with Lloyd's parents and Mirna, George and John had returned, making the small cottage on the orchard over-populated. Lloyd slept on the couch while Myrtle shared a bed with Mirna.

That night as they all sat around the dinner table, Lloyd broke the news of his decision.

"Father, family," Lloyd said, "I've decided to enlist in the Army Air Force. I'm going to finish my final term in the Spring and then join."

The table was as silent as Lloyd was when Alex first asked him to join alongside him.

Eventually, his mother said, "What about the wedding?"

"We'll wed after the term finishes," Myrtle said. "I can't be married for my scholarship."

After more silence, George said, "Well damn, Lloydie, I'm honored. What a man you've become. I think my investment in family had paid off."

George and John both grabbed his shoulders. Mirna smiled from across the table. The three siblings looked upon their younger brother who struggled in school and spoke slowly, but became a refined and educated soldier with a beautiful wife.

"And an engineer, no less," Mirna said. "To Lloyd and his future wife, Myrtle, a poet and someone I'm proud to call sister."

Everyone raised their wine glasses, but Lucien said, "And you chose to tell us about both at the same time." He threw his dinner roll on the table and took a gulp of wine as he rubbed his eyebrows in disgust. "Which one are you hiding? The fact you're going to go die for the government? Or the fact you're marrying an American?"

"Lucien Tahmatoh!" Mary said. "Of all the vile things you have said over the years. Who have you become?"

"I'm the same man escaping tyranny," Lucien said calmly. "Tyranny that claimed my family. Now my son willingly gives his life away for the same tyranny."

"Father, if this is like the first war, I'm going to get drafted. I'm an engineer and the right age. If I get drafted, I'll be on the ground. I'll be in the trenches. I'm enlisting in the Army Air Force. I'll be in the air."

"What do you know about flying? You'll die. You'll die for America."

"He'd fight for freedom," Mary said. "He'd fight tyranny."

"Don't be so naïve. He'd give his life for a foreign country. He wouldn't be fighting for his own country."

"Yes I would, father," Lloyd said defiantly. "I might come from Croatian blood, but I'm an American. And America has treated me well. I am an American and I will go fight. I'm sorry if that disappoints you."

"It doesn't disappoint me, Lloyd. You disappoint me." Lucien looked at Myrtle once more and then stood and walked out of the room.



## Chapter 20

Myrtle could hardly concentrate. Her last final as a student of the University of California at Berkeley and her mind was elsewhere. As her family was arriving into Berkeley, having made the long trek from Taft, she was writing a comparative analysis of German and English poetry produced during the Great War. She had already done enough to receive a high grade in the class, her overall GPA ensured that she'd be graduating with honors. She didn't have it in her to turn in poor work, though—that's not who her father raised—so she used the majority of the two-hour time limit to make a well-thought-out argument that the poetry showed the shared fear of the trenches. Germans and English alike were scared of dying, most had no interest in killing their alleged enemies.

When she finished, she rushed to the front of the room and placed her paper on the professor's desk.

"Finished?" the professor asked her.

"Yes, sir," she responded.

He looked at the class and then looked at Myrtle and whispered, "I hope you've considered my offer. You'd make a great associate professor."

"I'm still considering it," she said. The idea of being a professor certainly flattered her. She had other things on her mind, though, and began inching toward the door.

"Please do. But don't wait too long, these opportunities don't come along too often for girls like you." She wasn't processing the words and was already making her way to the door when he once again became her professor and said, "I imagine your final will be as strong as your other..." She disappeared out the door before he could finish. She began to walk as fast as possible down the hallway without actually running, a couple of times skipping for extra speed. The day was timed to the minute, and Myrtle had no intention of missing any more of her wedding day than she already had to.

By the time she reached the door, she reached an all out run. She made her way across the quad and down the hill off of campus. It was a pleasant day in late May and the flowers and trees were in full bloom. The campus had calmed down from the initial fear of attack. Lights were now on into the night and life was again bustling as the weather turned warmer. War had still taken over every aspect of society, though, and more and more of Lloyd and Myrtle's friends had left university early to enlist in the effort.

Lloyd and Alex both worked out an agreement with the Army that they be allowed to finish their degree requirements before reporting to boot camp. Myrtle's only requirement before her fiancée ran off to war was that they get married.

Myrtle ran into her apartment and found Judith, Mary Lou, and Beverly in her bedroom as they were smoothing out the modest wedding gown. They were already dressed and made up in preparation of getting Myrtle ready for the ceremony, which would occur in less than hour.

"Only you would actually take your final exam on the day of your wedding," Judith said. She shook her head in annoyed exasperation. She had already stated her displeasure with Myrtle's decisions over the past few months—marrying a man like Lloyd was at the top of her stated horrors—but she still had to take one last dig at Myrtle for her unbecoming dedication to her schooling.

"Oh ho hum," Myrtle said. "It's over. I can't believe it's over."

"Well come on, don't just stand there reminiscing about your poetry," Judith said. "Come step in. Take your clothes off. Let's get this on you."

Myrtle did as she was told and removed her clothes down to just her slip. She stepped in front of a mirror and allowed Judith and Mary Lou to slide the gown over her head. As soon it sat on her shoulders, Beverly began applying makeup.

"Little Myrtle, all grown up," Mary Lou said. "First of us to get married."

"To the house boy!" Judith bellowed.

They all laughed, but Beverly said, "All the same, she and Lloyd make a fine fit, if I should say so."

"Lloyd Tahmatch," Judith said, making sure everyone understood. "The house boy."

"Myrtle's husband," Beverly corrected.

They all smiled and said together, "Myrtle's husband."

In half an hour, the girls had transformed Myrtle from a college student into a bride. Myrtle was still thinking about her poetry final when they whisked her out of the apartment and down the street to St. Mary's catholic church. They were so rushed that Myrtle didn't have the time to panic or concern herself with the gravity of the day. She stepped into the church and into a side room without a thought of how she'd feel in another hour.

In the side room, though, Myrtle found her parents. The four girls stopped in their tracks, their giggling and chatter coming to an abrupt halt.

As the six of them stared at one another, Judith stepped forward with an outstretched hand.

"Mr. and Mrs. Enis, I presume?" she asked. "I'm Judith, your daughter's best friend."

Stanley smiled and took her hand. "Pleasure to meet you. Thank you for helping out my Myrtle all these years."

Judith beamed. "My pleasure." She turned to Gertrude. "Mrs. Enis."

"You run along now and let me speak with my daughter," Gertrude said.

She left no room for debate. Judith nodded once and led Mary Lou and Beverly out of the room, leaving Myrtle with her parents.

"Hot damn, Myrtle," Stanley said. "Look at the woman you have become, God almighty! Can you believe it, Gertrude? Our daughter. A college degree and gettin' married. I am proud, let me tell you."

“Thanks, Papa.” They hugged, but Myrtle wasn’t concerned with her father. When they broke their embrace, she looked at her mother. “Mama, are you going to say something?”

“I knew this happen, sending you off to some fancy city and high-priced university. I knew it. I knew you’d find a man and never come home. I knew it.”

“Mama, I’ll still come home. Heck, Lloyd is heading off to war after this. Where do you think I’m going to go?”

“Heading off to war. Of course you’d find a man who won’t even be around. You’re marrying this man, and what’s he going to do? Take care of you? No. Abandon you. Likely die out there in the trenches.”

“Ah hell, Gertrude, you’ll find a reason to criticize God himself. ‘Sides, there are no trenches in this war. This is a tank war. An air war. Nasty stuff.”

“And he’s probably going to die.”

The three of them sighed together and looked at the ground. Myrtle didn’t like to think about her soon-to-be-husband immediately dying in the war, but she had grown proud of him for enlisting. He was a man of conviction and principle and Myrtle wouldn’t let her mother take that away from him.

“Lloyd is a find man, Mama. I’m sorry if you don’t see that. I sure hope he doesn’t die in this horrible war, but he’s going to keep us safe from the Japs and Nazis. I’m proud of him.”

Myrtle could see that her mother felt bad about her comments. “Well,” Gertrude said, “I suppose I’m happy to see that you didn’t grow up to be the little boy your father hoped you’d be. If this will make you happy, to marry a man that...” she stopped. “Well, if this will make you happy, then I suppose I’ll be happy for you.”

Myrtle smiled and threw her arms around her mother’s neck. “Thank you, Mama.”

“Alright now, Stanley, we need to get to our seats. Ceremony’s about to start.”

Before they walked out, Stanley said, “Hey, Myrtle, been talking to Mr. Davies over at the public library. He said he can get you a job as a librarian if you’re interested. Supposing you move home, that is.”

Myrtle nodded. “That sounds nice, Papa. That’d be a good fit for me.”

“Mighty proud of you.”

Once they left, Judith poked her head in and quickly touched up Myrtle’s makeup. She gave her a once over and then nodded her approval. “Okay,” she said, “I’ll tell them you’re ready.”

Myrtle took a moment to look at herself in the mirror. She flattened the dress along her belly and pulled her veil over her face. She didn’t know what would come after she married Lloyd, she just knew she wanted to marry him. She wanted him and she wanted to find a good job. She didn’t want to be a librarian. A professor, though. She could be a professor. And what? Get pregnant and miss an entire school year? She sighed and smiled, happy to have found a great man. Her foolish ambitions would need to take a back seat to her burgeoning family.

Stanley was waiting outside the door and walked her down the aisle. There was no music and the crowd was sparse, but it was as magical as she ever imagined it would be. She watched Lloyd shake her father’s hand. Stanley grabbed Lloyd by the shoulder and whispered something in his ear, but Myrtle couldn’t hear. Lloyd nodded and they shook again before he took Myrtle’s hand.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello,” Myrtle said.

“You know, you look really pretty.”

Myrtle laughed, which turned into a deep breath. She sighed. She couldn’t help but notice that he looked very handsome in his suit. “Well, thank you. Ho hum. Do you have on a new suit?”

“I bought it. Or, well, George *bought* it for me.” They both turned and saw George sitting in the front pew. “But it’s new.”

They smiled at each other and then turned to the priest.

Lloyd lay quietly next to Myrtle, his wife, and stroked her dark black hair. They had only been married for a few hours, but after a quick lunch between their two families, Lloyd was eager to consummate the marriage.

“You know, I think I wouldn’t mind if we stayed here forever, ha ha,” he said, breathing in her scent.

“Ah, well, that’s out of your control now,” she said. Myrtle was in love, but she would not hold back on her words of tough love. “You go on and be a soldier, you just come back to me, okay?”

“Yeah, I suppose that’s true.”

They laid together in silence, youthful and naked and married for eternity.

“What’d my father whisper in your ear?” she asked after several minutes.

“Your father? Oh, ha ha, your father. Well, you know, he said I need to take care of you. He said I need to do my duty, but don’t forget my real duty.”

“Which is?”

“You know, I don’t know, ha ha.”

Myrtle playfully slapped him on the chest.

“What will you do?” he asked her.

“I suppose I’ll return to my parents and work at the library. I’d like to come join you when I can.”

“That’ll be good. I’ll send for you when I get through boot camp, when I get my long-term posting. I think you’d make a very nice librarian in the meantime.”

Myrtle propped herself up on an elbow. "And what happens if your long-term post is in Europe? Or the Pacific?"

Lloyd sighed. "I suppose that could happen. But it'll be temporary. Long-term will be a post in the U.S. Plus, I might not even deploy. I'll be part of the engineering corps. A lot of the work is here on bases. At least that's what Alex says."

"Alex is a first-class idiot, Lloyd Tahmatoh. Don't go following that fool's advice when you're at war." Myrtle put her head on Lloyd's chest and hugged his body. Lloyd embraced her back. Never in his wildest dreams did he think he would find a woman as amazing as Myrtle, but he did and she loved him as much as he loved her. And now he was willingly going to fight in the second great war. "It's approaching eight o'clock."

Lloyd craned his neck to look at the clock. At eight, he and Alex would take a taxi to the Oakland train station and begin the long journey to Miami Beach Eastern Technical Training Center in Florida for basic training. The war was only beginning and the Army had not yet built the infrastructure for such rapid expansion in men and resources. There was no training center in California yet. The Army would not pay the costs for their travel, though, so the two would have to purchase tickets once they got to the station to make the journey. That killed off another half hour Lloyd could have spent with Myrtle.

He leaned down and kissed Myrtle on the top of the head. He could sense her beginning to cry, but there was nothing he could do.

"It'd be nice if you could spend a couple extra days."

"I know it," he said. "It's already cutting it close trying to get there. I don't want to be a deserter before I even begin, ha ha. I wanted to marry you, though. I wanted to marry you and make sure you kept your scholarship. And I was hoping your father would like me, so now you're a graduate, you're married, and I can make boot camp."

"Well you're leaving your wife," she said. "Don't be too happy."

He kissed her again. "I'm not happy. We'll be together soon."

They heard a rap on the door. "Lloyd." Alex was whispering as loud as possible. He didn't want to disturb them, but it was time to go.

"You know," Myrtle said, "when we're together again, I want to live alone. Alex isn't invited."

Lloyd laughed. When he stopped, the tension settled around them like a knife. It slashed at them and their reality. They had known this was coming, but now the moment had come. Lloyd was heading to the second great war. Lloyd felt panicked and he could feel Myrtle squeeze him tighter.

Neither of them shed any tears.

"Okay," he said. "Alex is right. It's time."

A few minutes later, Lloyd and Alex slid into a taxi. Lloyd looked out the window at his wife, standing there in the night on a Berkeley sidewalk. He saw her gulp and wave. He never had a moment of getting out and running away. He had signed a contract and he knew in his heart they'd see each other again.

"Ballsy," Alex said. "Very ballsy, Tahmatch. Leaving your wife on your wedding night."

Lloyd turned and looked at Alex when Myrtle faded from view. Alex looked pale. He looked like he was about to be sick. Lloyd realized Alex was talking to himself when he made his comments.

"Remember the first time we met, Tahmatch?" he asked.

"Yes, I remember. At the registrar's."

"Yeah. You were such a farm boy. Had no idea what you were getting yourself into."

"Now, wait a while," Lloyd said. He laughed, lost in nostalgia. "Yeah, I suppose that was true."

"Yeah."

Alex didn't speak any further and Lloyd didn't press him on the point he was attempting to make. Perhaps the two had come far from the boys they had been; perhaps that was the point. Or perhaps Alex suddenly remembered that day. Either way, here they were, in a taxi and headed to war.



Fifteen minutes later, Lloyd and Alex exited the cab, each took their single duffle bag, and wandered through the train station. Crowds swarmed the entrances to the platforms and moved hurriedly in every direction. Lloyd and Alex both craned their necks to look up at the board of departures. White numbers flickered next to city names. After a moment, Lloyd saw New Orleans flash at the top. His eyes followed the line and saw that it was scheduled to leave from platform six in twelve minutes.

“Ah hell, we’re going to miss it!” Lloyd said.

He slung his duffle bag over his shoulder and took off running. He sensed Alex close behind him. He bumped several people, shouting apologies as he went.

“I thought we had another half hour!” Alex shouted, trying to keep up with Lloyd. “Lloyd, we can’t get on the train without buying tickets first! Lloyd, we don’t have tickets!”

Lloyd didn’t respond. As they got closer to the platform, the crowd grew denser. Many people were seeing off family members, others were businessmen smoking pipes. Paper boys were hawking the nightly news and preying on passengers by selling them black market cigarettes at twice the value of the permanent newsstands that lined the walls.

As they reached the platform, pushing their way through the wall of people, Lloyd could see the massive steam engine in the distance as it began to spout clouds of smoke. The brakes popped and wheels began to screech and squeal on the iron train tracks.

“We missed it,” Alex said, the defeat in his voice masked by the apparent relief.

“Now, now wait awhile,” Lloyd said, “we can’t miss the train.”

Lloyd took off running again as the train picked up momentum. He didn’t have to move as fast as when he ran through the crowds, but he grabbed the railing around the outside of the back walkout and began to pull himself up. The door to the walkout opened and a black porter in a service uniform stepped out. He looked down at Lloyd as he tried to jump on.

“Toss me your bag!” he shouted.

Lloyd flipped his duffle over his head, which landed in the porter’s arms. The porter set it down and extended a hand to Lloyd. Lloyd accepted it and stepped up, throwing a leg over the railing and landing on both of his feet. He immediately turned to look for Alex. The porter had already taken possession of Alex’s bag. Lloyd reached for Alex, who was not as accustomed to manual labor. He clumsily wrapped an arm around the railing and put a foot on the railing. Lloyd and the porter both yanked him by his clothes onto the walkout, where he landed with a thud on his side.

Safely onboard as the train officially left the train yard, Lloyd took a step back and relaxed against the railing. The porter assisted Alex to his feet. Alex tried to catch his breath, and once he realized he was safe, he smiled at the excitement. The smile quickly faded.

“Lloyd,” Alex said, breathing heavily. “Lloyd, we don’t have tickets.”

“I know it,” Lloyd replied, looking through the window at the seats filled to capacity with passengers. “I know it.”

They both looked at the porter, wondering if he would begin throwing them back over.

“Where ya both headed?” he asked in a mild tone.

“Trying to get to Miami. Both just enlisted.”

“Listed?” the porter asked. “Why they sendin’ ya to Flo’da if you list in Cal’fonia?”

“Ha ha,” Lloyd said. “I know it. It’s early, I suppose. No boot camps set up in this state. So we have to get to Florida.”

“Well, I thank ya all fa your suhvice. Don’t worry none bout the tickets. I can least get ya to Nah’lins. Have ya sit in the porta lounge off fuss class till the conducta comes through. Come on.”

The porter turned and opened the door. He picked up both of their bags and led them onto the train.

## Chapter 21

“Just wait in here,” the porter said.

The porter stood in front of the open door. Lloyd looked past him and saw chests of luggage. The chests were large and made of leather with fancy nameplates plastered on the front.

“Now, wait awhile,” Lloyd said, “I don’t think we should be in here. What is this place?”

“This is first class storage, Tahmatoh,” Alex said, regaining his confidence. “It’s pefect for a journey across this great country.”

“Doubles as the portas’ lounge,” the porter said. “Conducta won’t come he-uh. Some benches ya all can use. Should be comfable nuff.”

“Now, wait awhile,” Lloyd said again. “We’re going to be in here all the way to New Orleans?”

“No, Suh, just till the conducta comes through. Then I’ll send message. You can roam the train. Few seats available in fuss class. Can get sem fine food ya sit up he-uh.”

“That sounds like some royal treatment, eh, Tahmatoh?” Alex said. “Say, what’s your name, my good man?”

“Name’s Pierre.”

“Pierre? What kind of name is Pierre?”

“It’s French. From Nah-luns. We all French.”

Alex smiled and nodded. He shook Pierre’s hand while Lloyd looked dubiously into the luggage car. “You’re a good man, Pierre from New Orleans. This here is Lloyd, and I’m Alex. Lloyd was petrified about this train ride, but see here, Tahmatoh, God sent us an angel from Louisiana. I’ll tell you what, Pierre, when we get to New Orleans, I’m taking you out for a drink. How about it?”

Pierre looked at Alex like he had spoken blasphemy. He waited for Alex to deliver the punchline, but when no punch line came, he nodded suspiciously. "Ya two gents take cay now. I'll send word when ya can move bout."

Pierre gave them one more look, trying to gather the game they were playing, and then he closed the door as they departed. Alex smiled at Lloyd.

"First class, eh, Tahmatoh," Alex said. He wandered farther into the luggage car and tossed his duffle atop the chests. "I knew we'd be traveling in style. Wouldn't have it any other way."

Lloyd carefully hoisted his duffle beside Alex's and looked around the quarters. Space was limited, but there were plenty of wooden seats and benches. Cigar smoke from first class wafted through the cracks in the door, giving the space a debonair feel.

"Well, you know, I'm awfully tired. I might lay on one of these benches and close my eyes. Hopefully the conductor won't come in here."

"Sleep!? Don't be ridiculous, Tahmatoh." Alex took a seat and pulled a flask out of his jacket pocket. He unscrewed the top and took a sip, cringing at the taste. "I've never been such a brigand before. Stowaways. My father would piss himself. I wonder if all war will be this exciting." He took another sip and then held the flask out for Lloyd.

"You seem to be in a better mood," Lloyd said.

He accepted the flask that Alex held out for him. He took a small sip and handed it back.

"I have to say, Tahmatoh, not many men can leave their wives on their wedding night to run off to war. My hat's off to you. You are a patriot. Or something."

As he said that, he leaned his head back. The whiskey had gone to his head and the adrenaline wore off. He began snoring as he drifted off to sleep.

Lloyd nodded as the words sunk in. He had left Myrtle; he had left his wife. He wondered what she was doing at this very moment. He would write to her from New Orleans and try to call her at her

parents. He would tell her how he missed her and how much he loved her. He would tell her about New Orleans, the first city outside of California that he would ever set foot in. He would reassure her that they would be together sooner rather than later.

He sunk his head and walked around the luggage. He sat on a long wooden bench and laid down, resting his head on the railing. Leaving Myrtle had consumed him, but he was also leaving his family, possibly forever. He hadn't put much thought into the idea he wouldn't see his father or mother or siblings again, but as he drifted off to sleep, images of each of them appeared rolling through his mind. The thought he was taking a train to war, to a place he could die, forced itself into his consciousness, making him open his eyes in fear. Eventually, though, he let the gravity of the situation seep out of him, letting the meditative rhythm of the train soothe him as it chugged along the track and out of California.

He awoke to laughter and cigarette smoke. He sucked in a deep breath and looked around in a start, forcing himself to remember why his bed was moving beneath him. He grabbed at the crick in his neck that had developed from the bench railing and sat up. The sight of luggage brought him back to the situation.

He sat up and continued to rub his neck. His breath was stale and smelled like dry whiskey. His eyelids were crusted with sleep and his muscles ached. He was still on the train. The luggage room had no windows, but he couldn't see any light seeping in from under the door. He heard more laughter. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked at his watch, which told him it was two in the morning. He considered putting his head back down, but he instead stood. Alex was no longer sitting where Lloyd had left him, so Lloyd walked the other direction, farther into the car. He weaved around some more chests and came upon two porters he didn't recognize playing dominos. Alex was sitting and watching them, smoking a cigarette and holding his flask.

When Alex saw Lloyd, his eyes lit up. "Tahmatch! Rise and shine. I doze off for one minute and I catch you sawing logs. My Lord. Must be how they do it down on the farm."

"Well, you know, I think it's good we get some sleep."

"Nonsense, Tahmatch. This here, this is a man's game, not like your Bridge. I'm too smart to get involved in a game like this. These fellas here, they're the type that just sit and prey on a coupla ignoramuses like you and me."

Lloyd wiped the whiskers on his chin as he watched one of the porters put down a domino. It didn't look that hard. "Ah, hell, I'm too tired for this. Do we know if the conductor came through yet?"

"Came by coupla hours 'go," one of the porters said. "Won't be back till after Nah-luns."

"These gents here, Tahmatch, tell me first class has a food cart just for those rich folks. They all happen to be asleep if you're hungry."

Despite the hour, Lloyd was hungry. He nodded and indicated he was going to look around. Alex smiled and sipped his whiskey, but continued to watch the game. Lloyd wandered back through the car and cautiously opened the exit door. He peered out into the first-class cabin. Velvet seats with fine wood lined the aisle. The seats were more spacious than on the rest of the train, but there were no women. The car was about half full with men in suits. Some had bow ties and a couple had top hats. One man was awake toward the front, but he was smoking a pipe and reading the paper. Lloyd stepped out and softly closed the door. The food cart was near the center. There no attendant at this hour, but there were muffins and steaming coffee, as well as some dried jerky and salted nuts. Lloyd helped himself to the food and poured himself some coffee. A bottle of brandy with clean glasses sat on top of the cart, so Lloyd poured some into his coffee mug. He didn't want to push his luck, though, so he stuffed some jerky and an extra muffin into his pants and then returned to the luggage car.

For three days Lloyd and Alex lived in such a manner. On the second night, Alex convinced Pierre to take some money and purchase them all dinners of corned beef and mashed potatoes, but

Pierre thought it raised their profile and recommended against it on the third night. It was no matter. The train soon pulled into the New Orleans train station and as promised, Lloyd and Alex left their luggage aboard in order to take Pierre out for a drink.

“We don’t have much time now,” Pierre had said.

“Nonsense,” Alex said. “There’s plenty of time for you to take us to a fine local establishment.”

“Really don’t think tha’ sech a good idea. I’ll be sure ta watch yeh things. Ya all be back in a hour.”

After a few minutes of back and forth, Alex finally relented. He and Lloyd joined the crowd and exited the train. They followed Pierre’s instructions and made their way out of the train station and onto a main thoroughfare lined with restaurants.

New Orleans in 1942 was unlike anything either of them had ever seen. They had expected to see a different world by enlisting to go fight America’s enemies, but they hadn’t expected to see such a different world within their own country. The gothic architecture painted an exotic picture of a clash of cultures, with mixes of French, American, and Creole. Men wore suits with pant bottoms hiked up to their knees and women wore large dresses with necklaces that honored voodoo deities. Groups of black men played brass instruments on the street corners and white women in college dresses giggled as they wandered in and out of barrooms.

“Wow,” Alex said, once again retreating from the confident façade he typically wore. Lloyd half-expected him to turn around and take shelter on the train, but Alex recovered and said, “Come on, time is short.”

Lloyd again rubbed the whiskers on his chin and nodded. The shock faded and was replaced by fascination. Aptos to Berkeley was jarring, but this was an entirely new reality.

“You know, this is really very interesting,” he said, although Alex had already begun walking into the crowd of freaks, strangers, and oddities.

He accepted that what he had known as normal ended in California. He didn't need to travel across an ocean and go fight in a war to see exotic locales, they were right here in America. He took a few quick steps to catch up to Alex, who was making a beeline to the nearest bar. The bar had a large balcony over the entrance where people shouted and smiled at passersby. Two large men in suits barred the entrance, determining who could enter and who could not. A large sign on the window read, "No Coloreds Allowed!"

"Now, now wait awhile," Lloyd said as they approached the men and saw the sign. "Why aren't coloreds allowed?"

"The hell you talking about?" one of the men said. "We don't want no coloreds up in here. You crazy or something?"

"Well, I really don't see why not," Lloyd responded. He had never seen signs of the sort. Berkeley didn't have signs dictating where coloreds could go. Aptos didn't have any signs to begin with.

"Just drop it, Lloyd," Alex said, seeming to accept it was better not to disturb the issue. "We can try another one."

"Won't find no establishments on this street that allow coloreds," the man said. "These are fine establishments, meant for high-class people. You want a colored bar, head on out of town. Don't want your type around here."

Alex and Lloyd were both speechless, but as they walked slowly down the sidewalk, they saw that the man had spoken the truth. Similar signs lined every window. Only white folks were allowed inside.

"You know," Lloyd said, "I don't really *need* a drink." He threw his hands at the street, dismissing their plan.

"I guess I understand why Pierre didn't want to come," Alex said.



Lloyd nodded solemnly, his first foray into the world outside of the Bay Area a crushing blow to his hopes of seeing new and exciting places.

"I suppose we're here to join the military, not have fun," Lloyd said. Lloyd didn't understand. No coloreds allowed. He enlisted in the Army Air Force to fight for his country. The Army wouldn't pay for his passage to report for duty across the country, and now he saw firsthand the true values that he was about to fight for. He was fighting for freedom, and he now realized that that freedom meant one group of Americans could openly repress other groups of Americans. Why would he want to fight for that? He had read about Sam Crow and segregation, he had just never seen it firsthand, had never tasted it in his mouth or felt it in his veins.

They didn't speak as they made their way back to the train, and when they arrived, they saw Pierre standing outside with a group of porters, smoking and laughing. When Alex and Lloyd approached, Pierre blew the smoke out of mouth and smirked.

"How was't?"

"Very interesting," Alex said.

"Get your drink?"

Alex looked at the ground and shook his head.

"You know, I just didn't like it," Lloyd said.

Pierre shook his head. "Just as well. Ya all didn't half the time ta see real nah-luns. Nes time, mebbe."

They all stood silently as noise from the bustling crowd in the station serenading their solitude with raucous laughter and conversations. Pierre handed both of them cigarettes. Lloyd didn't smoke, but he accepted and he allowed another porter to light it. He had smoked before, so it didn't burn his lungs. He never enjoyed it before, but today it felt cleansing.

As he blew it out, he said, "Myrtle would have liked to have seen this. I want to bring her back here someday."

"Is Myrtle yer wife?" Pierre asked.

"Sure is!" Alex bellowed through the smoke. "Lloyd here left her on their wedding day. Now we're off to war. Can you believe that? Left her on their wedding day."

Lloyd knew what Alex was doing. He wasn't trying to be insensitive, he just needed to make fun of Lloyd to take his mind off of what he had seen. Lloyd didn't mind.

Regardless, Pierre said, "Must have been tough."

Lloyd nodded. "It still is, you know. She would have liked to have seen this city."

They all let the words sink in. Lloyd wasn't alone. They were all men and Lloyd realized most of them had a woman somewhere, whether that be in New Orleans or another city along the train route. They all left their women at home.

"Porters!" Lloyd suddenly heard from behind him. He turned and saw a man in a black uniform—he guessed the conductor—hanging out the door and staring at the group. "Get on board and get things ready. Passengers coming soon."

Pierre and the other porters wasted no time. They all dropped their cigarettes and began walking toward the train. Lloyd and Alex instinctively followed. The conductor had already retreated to the engine, so Lloyd and Alex boarded without a second glance, just a couple of porters out of uniform.

As soon as Lloyd reentered the luggage car, he walked to the back and sat at the table where the porters had been playing dominoes. He pulled out a piece of paper and pen and began to write his first letter to his wife, who he missed terribly. He explained what he had seen and how upset it had made him. He had never even realized he had feelings about equality before, but now that it was present before his eyes, he felt ashamed and he told her that he knew she would understand. He

finished the letter by writing, "I love you, my wife. I'll write the second half of this letter when I get to Florida. I cannot send it right now anyway."

He folded it in half and stuck it in his jacket pocket. He didn't even notice Alex had come and sat next to him, quietly contemplating their brief excursion.

"Writing to Myrtle?" he asked.

"You know, I am. I just feel like I should *write* to her, ha ha."

Alex smiled. "Yeah. You're lucky. It's nice to have someone to write to."

The two friends left it at that.

The journey from New Orleans to Miami took nearly five days, mainly because there were multiple stops along the southern border. Alex and Lloyd stuck to their routine, stealing food from first class and occasionally getting Pierre to buy them a dinner. As the train began to head south down Florida and Pierre informed them there were no more stops, Lloyd—unshowered and stinking—left Alex sleeping on the bench and sauntered out to the first-class cabin. He sat in a plush velvet seat and ran his fingers along the smooth mahogany. The car was less than a quarter full of passengers and most looked at the young man who didn't belong. No one said anything, though, when they accepted he wasn't going to upset their lifestyle and returned to their morning smokes and papers.

As Lloyd leaned his head back and looked out the window, enjoying the sun upon his face and allowing his vitamin D deficiency to recalibrate, a man approached and stood over his seat.

"Enjoying the view, son?" the man said.

Lloyd immediately sat up and straightened his back, upset with himself for letting his guard down. Not when he was this close to his goal. He looked at the man and before answering noticed he was in a military uniform. He had two stars on his chest and a fresh haircut.

"Sorry, sir, am I in your seat?"

The man looked him up and down and then took the seat opposite him. He was holding a cup of coffee and set it on the table separating the seats. He pulled out a pipe and packed it, lighting it and blowing out the smoke before responding.

“Where are you headed?”

“Miami, sir.”

“Miami, huh? What for?”

“Um, well, sir, my friend and I enlisted in the Army Air Force and we’re trying to report to our duty station.”

The man with two stars on his chest analyzed him, searching for the truth.

“You enlisted?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where are you coming from?”

“California, sir.”

“California?” The man looked impressed. “Long journey. I suppose they don’t have their bases established for your training.”

“Yes, sir, that’s right.”

They looked at each other. Lloyd was convinced the man was about to toss him off the train.

“Damn shame what they do to you young fellas. I bet they didn’t even pay for you to make this trip. Why you’re sitting up here in first class like a tramp. Damn shame. You get any coffee, son?”

“Um, no sir, not this morning.”

“My name’s General Todd Mackenzie, I have good reason to believe you’re on your way to my base.” He didn’t say whether or not Lloyd should go get some coffee. “I’m very impressed you’ve managed to make it as far as you did. Mind if I ask how you pulled it off.”

“Just found nice people along the way, I guess. Just knew where I needed to get.”

“Finding nice people is important. What’s your plan for getting from the train station to the base?”

Lloyd looked at the table. “I guess I hadn’t planned that far out.”

“Well, no problem. Go get yourself some coffee and find that friend you’re traveling with. You’ll be traveling with me now. As good a time as any to start your training. Get me a muffin before you come back as well.”

Lloyd again sat up straight. His eyes grew large. “Yes, sir,” he said. “Yes, sir.” He got up and hurried off to find Alex. He didn’t look, but he could swear he heard the general chuckling.

## Chapter 22

“Did I hear it right, Tahmatch? You got a lieutenant’s house so you can live with your wife?”

Lloyd looked up and saw Dick Pollard pointing a fork at him from across the mess hall. Since graduating boot camp eleven months ago, the engineering unit had sat listlessly at the United States Army Air Forces Eastern Technical Training Command, the exception being a four-month stationing at Harvard to learn about radar technology. Lloyd joined the Army Air Force to stay off the ground, but most of the command was trained primarily to service vehicles mainly on the ground. Lloyd’s unit—including Dick Pollard and Nathaniel Bunson—specialized in new radar technology. It seemed futuristic, but while most of the command was immediately shipped off to Africa, Lloyd’s unit stayed behind. The Army deployed the technology sparingly. Most of the work happened behind the scenes; there was no need to deploy. Myrtle expressed her happiness through her letters, but Lloyd couldn’t help but feel a sense of disappointment. They didn’t enlist and go to boot camp to remain at the training facility. They wanted to deploy and see action. The whole unit wanted to deploy. Sitting at the base, they grew restless. They were a tight unit, but they ragged on one another. There was no easier target than Lloyd, despite his status. Lloyd’s unit of sixteen people was just one of three units of a battalion. Lloyd had been assigned as his unit’s enlisted commander.

“Yeah, ha ha, yeah you heard right. It’s a nice little place.”

“Must be nice to be the general’s pet,” Dick said. “You all remember that? Rolling in with the C.O. Conquering fool first gets sent to Harvard for four months and now he gets conjugal visits.”

“You went to Harvard too, you dumb ox,” Alex shouted as he carried his tray to sit next to Lloyd.

“Uh oh, contracts in the house,” Nathaniel said.

“Man, I thought you were out in Africa or something,” Dick continued.

“For a stint. Someone has to help win this war we’re in. I didn’t enlist to go to Harvard, like all you high and mighty fellas.” Alex and Lloyd had grown apart after boot camp once they got placed in different career fields, but now that Lloyd was back from Harvard and Alex was back from forward deployment, they fell right back into their friendship. Alex had a tight haircut, not like Lloyd and the others who had grown theirs out to fit in with the Harvard crowd.

“Oh, boy, you were in London, all snug in HQ,” Nathaniel said.

“I flew to Africa!” His feigned exasperation quickly faded into a smirk. “Had to make sure you engineer folks didn’t trade all the equipment I acquired for you for smokes.” He looked at Lloyd. “Talk to me, Tahmatoh. How’s Myrtle?”

“Now, wait awhile,” Lloyd said.

“Now, wait awhile,” all three said mockingly. Through more laughter, Nathaniel squawked, “Now, now, now wait awhile. Lloyd, why in God’s green Earth do you say that?”

“Oh, ha ha, you know, I just say it.” Lloyd saw Alex make a sour face and then fork some sausage off of Lloyd’s plate to his own. “And you saw Myrtle last night. We had you over for dinner.”

“Was that just last night? I’ll be. Well, I happened to have a date afterward and she kept me up all night, you know?”

“You were with a girl last night?” Dick asked. “Bull.”

“No lyin’,” Alex said. “Scout’s honor. A husky gal. Works in the machine shop building pipes. I’m telling you, gents, these women now, doing manual labor, mm mm mm. She just had her way with me and I enjoyed the ride. Oh, but dinner was great, Tahmatoh.”

Nathaniel and Dick burst out laughing and even Lloyd let out a chuckle.

“So you saw Lloyd’s palace, huh?” Dick asked.

“Hell, this boy rolled in with the C.O. right next to Lloyd. He’s got a place right next door.”

“How’s that possible? You ain’t got no wife.”

“Fellas, remember this, and I always tell Lloyd, I tell him, money talks. I control the money. I get the house. You all might be smart and making big fancy future machines, but I’m the one who makes sure you have the equipment and the parts. Money talks, and I get the house.”

It started as a joke, but Alex spoke the truth. He wasted no time making the right connections and working his way to get the things he wanted. This for a time meant straying from Lloyd, who never had the ambition or conniving instinct of his college roommate. Lloyd actually admired that about his friend. Regardless, they viewed each other as brothers, and even when one brother moves to see the world, he always returns, as Alex had. Lloyd was grateful they went through boot camp together, but the stint at Harvard had been a challenge. Now he had Myrtle and his best friend back. He had for a time longed to see the world and even got sent to the Philippines for two weeks, but now he was settling into life as a married soldier supporting the war effort from the homeland. The scary prospect of war dissipated and his life was suddenly sweet.

“Tahmatoh!” The voice boomed across the mess. Lloyd and the others tensed and looked toward the entrance. Lieutenant Drexel meandered through the tables looking for Lloyd. Drexel was Colonel Wessler’s personal aide, but while Colonel Wessler was a professor from MIT who joined the Army to support America’s competitive superiority in technology, Drexel was a stocky high school dropout who barely knew how to spell technology. “Tahmatoh! Where’s Tahmatoh?” Lloyd saw people begin to point his direction. Drexel followed the fingers and spotted him, moving down the aisles as he inadvertently elbowed other soldiers in the head.

“You’ve gone and done it now, Lloyd,” Dick said. “Not even the general can save you now.”

“Ah hell, what does that fool want?”

“Hell, Tahmatoh, when I call for you, you come,” Drexel shouted. “Now let’s go. Colonel Wessler wants to see you. All you spit wads, get up, eat later. You too, contracts, this can’t wait.”



The whole table looked at Drexel and then waited for Lloyd. "Well, I suppose we should go and say hello, you know," Lloyd finally said. He stood and everyone followed.

"Keeping Wessler's shoes nice and shiny?" Nathaniel asked.

"The colonel's shoes are none of your business," Drexel said.

"Wow, now I see how climbed all the way to lieutenant in sixteen years."

Drexel fumed, but had to keep rallying the troops. "All you rejects, too, let's go," he yelled, looking at the next table. Drexel was calling them all, but had begun with Lloyd. "Don't you forget Tahmatch, guard duty tonight."

"Yes, sir," Lloyd said out of a sense of duty.

Lloyd led them all in bussing their trays and then followed Drexel through the base to a briefing room. Colonel Wessler was waiting. Wessler was everything Drexel wasn't. Tall, lean, smart, and distinguished, he cared only about the advancement of technology, not about the mission of defeating the Nazis. The Army, he had told Lloyd in confidence, offers limitless resources to do just that. His contacts were the catalyst for Lloyd learning about radar technology at Harvard.

Lloyd sat in the front of the briefing room, flanked by Nathaniel and Alex.

"Gentlemen," Wessler said, pacing in front of them. He stopped, his hands clasped behind his back. He looked tired, as though he had been up all night. "Gentlemen, I know you're all antsy. I know you want to get out there, but I don't have anything to offer right now. Radars are the future, but the market is small. Eisenhower just doesn't understand..." He stopped himself, realizing he was about to act insubordinate. He composed himself. "Makes no difference. Makes no difference when we're called, we will be ready. In the meantime, we have the best engineers in the whole damn Army sittin' on our thumbs. So I want to bring something to your attention. What I'm about to tell you is classified, so Alex, don't go running your mouth."

Everyone in the room laughed as Alex feigned innocence.

“There’s a project currently taking place. Starting in Berkeley, possibly heading over to New Mexico. A big project. A big need for engineers. If I play my cards right, I just might be able to get this battalion reassigned to take part.”

Wessler waited for a response. Unlike Drexel, he had a more informal style with the men. He encouraged questions and cross talk.

“Sir,” Lloyd finally said. “Now, what does this project entail? You know, I think we’d like to *know* if you’re trying to get us assigned to New Mexico, ha ha.”

Lloyd’s laughter eased the mood of the room, which had soured at the thought of going farther into the United States instead of to Africa or Europe.

“Well, Tahmatch, I know you all might not understand what this means, but there are currently experiments underway to split an atom.” Wessler’s eyes widened in excitement. “I know that might not sound too exciting to all of you, but gentlemen, if I know anything about anything, that sort of thing changes the war.” He smiled and looked at each of them, settling on Lloyd. “You’re from Berkeley, aren’t you Tahmatch?”

“Well, I’m actually from *Aptos*.” He shrugged as he said this, showing that he considered it close enough.

“Aptos? What’d you do in Aptos?”

“My father owns an apple orchard.”

“An apple orchard?”

“Yes, sir. We grow apples.”

“Right. Well how about you help this country make an atomic bomb?”

Miami wasn't what Myrtle had expected it to be. Lloyd's letters spoke of the ocean and the sunsets, but while Lloyd had discovered a gift for mathematics at Berkeley, his English never improved past the abilities learned in a predominantly Croatian-speaking household. She had expected paradise but got humidity and a poorly constructed house. She preferred living in a tent on her papa's farm, or in the sorority house, or in a small apartment with Lloyd and Alex.

But she was in Miami. At least she was reunited with Lloyd.

"So, Myrtle, is it true Lloyd left on your wedding day and you didn't see him until four months ago?" Myrtle turned and saw Ruby Milford slathering frosting on a cupcake and looking at her with wonder.

Myrtle laughed. "Oh, ho hum, yes I suppose that's true."

"And that's all it took, huh?"

Myrtle rubbed her belly. "Life is full of surprises. Army wasn't going to move me out until Lloyd mentioned I was with child." She laughed again and let out a slow, "Awww, well."

"Quite a story." Ruby finished one cupcake and slid it onto a plate to begin another. Myrtle delicately arranged the cupcake and then fixed Ruby's haphazard frosting work. "Willie and I never left Miami before. I mean, till of course he got shipped out. Last I heard he was in North Africa somewhere." Myrtle saw the reality of her husband's mortality make Ruby's hand quiver, sending the knife full of frosting to the counter. "Oh my, you'll have to pardon me."

"Oh that's quite all right. Here let me finish."

Myrtle took the knife from Ruby and calmly finished the cupcake, something she had grown accustomed to living with her parents for the previous year. She would have to mention that she assumed similar chores in her next letter to her father. She slid it onto the platter and then slid the knife into the sink. Ruby had turned and was straightening out her dress and cupping her bangs with her palm.

“Shall we bring these out to the ladies?” Myrtle asked.

Ruby turned with a smile. “We shall.”

The two carried the platter of cupcakes into the family room, where eleven other women were seated on couches and fold out chairs. They were sipping tea and eating crackers.

“Aw,” one of the women said. “Dessert.”

“Calm yourself, ladies, calm yourselves,” another woman said. Myrtle looked at this woman, who was standing in front of the room. She had introduced herself to Myrtle as Sharon, but unlike the other women did not mention a husband. She was taller than the others, her muscles well defined. Her hair was pulled back into a bun and she wore pants with a blue jacket. Sharon continued, “We should discuss some business before we indulge our sweet tooth.”

The women giggled.

“First,” Sharon said as Myrtle set the cupcakes down and took a seat, “let me thank Myrtle, our newest member, for welcoming us into her home.” The women clapped. “Now listen, it’s time that we accept it’s a new day, a new age. Women are no longer stay-at-home wives. We don’t have to be stricken to the kitchen and the bedroom. Some of us are working in the factories. Some of us are simply taking over the chores of our men. Regardless, we are proving that suffrage was a starting point, not a finish line.”

Myrtle looked around at the women. Some were entranced. Others were uncomfortable. She was confused. She joined the group to make some friends, but she found most of them insufferable. Ruby reminded her of her old sorority sisters, but Sharon was angry. Myrtle didn’t understand what for. She fought for women’s rights, but Myrtle had been an empowered woman all her life.

“What do you propose we do?” Ruby asked.

“What do I propose we do?” Sharon asked in a huff. “I propose we demand our rights. I propose we organize and get out there and convince other women to vote. I propose we establish our

own principles and stop kowtowing to these men. Take Myrtle here.” All the women turned to Myrtle. “She worked at an oil rig, didn’t you? A strong woman, working the fields. Now you trek across the country to be with your man. It isn’t right.”

Myrtle looked pale. She had never thought of it like that. She didn’t view her decision to come to Miami as acquiescing to her husband, she just wanted to be with Lloyd and was happy he hadn’t been shipped off and killed.

Sharon looked around, hoping for more support. When no one spoke up, Myrtle said, “Well, that is a fine idea. How about we have some dessert to help it sink in.”

The women looked relieved as they dug in. Sharon looked at Myrtle as though she had been betrayed. Myrtle had never met a woman like Sharon and didn’t know what to expect. She braced herself when Sharon began to open her mouth, but the commotion ceased when there was a knock at the door. Everyone looked at Myrtle.

“Expecting someone else?” Sharon asked.

“I don’t believe so. Ho hum.”

Myrtle rose and walked to the door. Unexpected visitors were an unwelcome sight for military wives. The fear of a “telegram” weighed on all of them, particularly for those whose husbands had actually shipped off overseas.

“Relax, ladies,” Ruby said, “Myrtle’s husband is here on base.”

Sure enough, though, when Myrtle answered the door, a postman in a blue uniform stood anxiously. Myrtle looked at him curiously. Mail was always delivered to the box, so a hand-delivered note could really only mean one thing. But how could something happen to Lloyd in the safety of the base?

“Myrtle... Tomato?”

“Tahmatch.”

“Um, no, let me see hear,” the man said, sifting through his letters. “No, I’m pretty sure, oh, here, oh yes. Tah-ma-toh. Ha, you know, I saw it and I read tomato.”

Myrtle stared at him blankly.

“Well, here you go,” he said.

The postman handed the telegram over and then walked away. Myrtle held the letter in her hand and looked at it as she closed the door. The women all looked on in eager and frightened suspense. This could be any of them on any day. The war was claiming more and more men as the fronts widened.

Ruby stood and walked to Myrtle. They had only been friends for a few weeks, but they were all united in their fear.

“It’s okay,” Ruby said. “It will be okay.”

“Well, this can’t be Lloyd, for crying out loud.”

Myrtle opened it and read. She was right. It wasn’t about Lloyd.

The telegram was brief. There weren’t many words, but that was to be expected. Her mother didn’t say much, and she said even less in her letters. Myrtle reread the note three times, hoping—praying—she was reading it wrong. She finally let her hand drop and leaned into Ruby.

“What is it?” Sharon asked across the room.

Myrtle looked up and tried to compose herself. “My father died.”

## Chapter 23

“Lloyd, ain’t that your wife?” Dick asked, looking off in the distance.

“Now, wait awhile, what’s that?” Lloyd asked.

“Your wife. Ain’t that her?”

Lloyd turned from his post and looked into the base. Sure enough, Myrtle and one of her new friends—Lloyd couldn’t for the life of him remember her name—came walking arm-in-arm down the sidewalk toward the guard post.

“Oh, ha ha, that *is* my wife.”

Lloyd slung his rifle around his back and slid through the gate and began to walk toward her. Dick quickly grabbed for him and stopped him from going any farther.

“You crazy, Tahmatch? The lieutenant finds out you abandoned your post and he’ll have your ass for sure.”

Lloyd stopped and continued to watch Myrtle walk toward him. He waved and stepped back through the gate, but he kept his eye on her. As she came closer, he could sense something was amiss. Myrtle hadn’t been overjoyed with Miami—perhaps his letters exaggerated a bit—but she had kept a smile on her face since she arrived and quickly got involved with the wives’ club. He had convinced the C.O. to open a library for the families, and Myrtle would soon be participating in curating the book collection.

“I think she might be upset,” Lloyd said.

“You’re real observant, Tahmatch. It’s no wonder you found yourself a wife, being so observant and all.”

Lloyd didn’t understand the joke, but he looked with concern as Myrtle and her friend approached the gate. Myrtle slipped through, but her friend simply made eye contact with Lloyd,

signaling the hand off was complete. She solemnly turned and began to walk away. Lloyd held a hand to help Myrtle through. The sun had begun to sink beyond the land horizon, something Lloyd still wasn't used to. In California, the sun set on the ocean, but in Florida, it rose over the ocean. It never seemed right.

"Hello, Myrtle," Lloyd said.

"Hello, Lloyd," she said back.

They continued to hold hands.

"Now, what are you doing way out here?"

"Lloyd, my father passed away. I received a telegram from my mother. He died."

Lloyd didn't know what to say. He gripped her hand tighter and split his lips, which had dried and now stuck together.

"I'm so sorry," he finally said. "What happened?"

"On the oil fields. A truck lost its brakes, supposedly. Crushed him against a derrick."

"Oh holy hell," Lloyd said. He didn't mean it to lack sentiment. He saw Myrtle nod.

"Lloyd, I should be there with my mother. She's alone now."

"Now, wait awhile, she's in Taft. That's back across the country."

"I know. I need to go back, though. I'd like you to come with me. Can you ask for a leave of absence?"

"Yes, I suppose I can."

"Not right now," Dick said from the other side of the gate. "You can't leave your post. I'm real sorry for your loss, Myrtle, but you two shouldn't be holdin' hands neither."

Lloyd looked down at their hands. It felt right to hold onto it. He couldn't let it go.

"Oh, I know it, but I think we can just *stand* here together. She is my wife after all."



Lloyd turned and assumed his position, but continued to hold Myrtle's hand. Myrtle stepped closer to him and stood post with him. This lasted for a few minutes until the first Jeep approached the gate. Dick moved to open the gate, but it stopped and the driver-side door opened. To Lloyd's horror, Lieutenant Drexel stepped out.

"What in the name of Jesus Christ do you think you're doing, Tahmatoh?"

He walked around the Jeep and stopped a foot from Lloyd.

"Well, Sir, my wife recently heard her father passed away, so I'm holding her hand to comfort her. I don't see what's wrong with that."

Drexel was taken aback momentarily and swallowed. He didn't want to berate Lloyd in front of a grieving wife, but he couldn't help himself.

"You don't see? You don't see? No, you don't see shit, Tahmatoh. I've been waiting for this day, let me tell you. I've been waiting to catch you in an act unbecoming of a soldier and now it has finally happened. I'm going to take you to the C.O. myself and watch him deal with you once and for all. Now get in the Jeep."

Lloyd refused to leave Myrtle, so the two of them climbed into the back of Drexel's Jeep and soon found themselves sitting across from one another, holding hands and silently weeping. Myrtle moved into the middle seat and rested her head on Lloyd's shoulder. Dick opened the gate and allowed the Jeep to enter the base. Drexel said nothing as he drove down the street, the sun sinking lower by the minute. He pulled to a stop a few minutes later in front of General Mackenzie's headquarters.

"Let's go, Tahmatoh," Drexel said. He turned around. "I encourage you to stay in the Jeep, Ma'am."

"I'll do no such thing," Myrtle responded, sniffing away her tears. "I personally want to see your boss respond when you tell him you're punishing my Lloyd for comforting his wife."

Drexel gulped. "Let's go."

They all got out and walked into the building. The general's office was austere. Most of the staff had deployed, leaving the deputy, an aide-de-camp, the Sergeant Major, and a small staff of support. Colonel Wessler had an office next door.

Lieutenant Drexel marched Lloyd and Myrtle past the aide-de-camp and directly into the commanding officer's office. General Mackenzie looked up from his desk, taken aback by the abrupt entrance.

"General Mackenzie, Sir, pardon my interruption," Drexel said.

"It is certainly that," Mackenzie said in return, making Drexel stutter his next word.

"Suh, sir, um, sir, it's just, I saw a behavior that demanded your immediate attention."

"A behavior?" Mackenzie looked at Lloyd and then back to Drexel. "And you're bringing this to me instead of the Sergeant Major because, why?"

"Sir, it's just, I figured you would want to be the first to hear about it."

Mackenzie sighed and took his glasses off and leaned back in his chair. "Okay, let's have it."

"Sir, just a short time ago, I approached the base entrance, where Sergeant Tahmatoh was standing guard."

"Sergeant Tahmatoh," Mackenzie said.

"Yes, Sir."

"You have a college degree, do you not, Lloyd?"

"Oh, um, yes, ha ha, yes I do," Lloyd said.

"Then why are you not an officer?"

"Oh, ha ha, you know I didn't *think* about that."

"Sir, if you don't mind," Drexel said, flustered. "When I approached, I saw Lloyd holding hands with his wife, a major breach of protocol."

"What protocol?" Mackenzie asked.

“Sir, unbecoming of an officer, to begin with.”

“We just established Lloyd is not an officer,” Mackenzie continued. “So what protocol did he breach? Can you show me in our guide book of proper behavior?”

“Sir,” Drexel said, growing more and more flustered. “Sir, this is clearly a breach of the uniform.”

Mackenzie shook his head. “Lloyd, assuming this is not typical behavior, why were you holding hands with your wife while you were on guard duty?”

“Sir, Myrtle, my wife, just found out her father was killed in an accident. She told me just before Drexel approached us.”

“Jesus Christ,” Mackenzie said, looking at Myrtle, “Ma’am, I am so sorry to hear that.” He looked at Drexel. “Are you fucking kidding me? You march these two into my office in search of punishment when she just lost her father? Drexel, you’ve been on this base too long, we need to figure out how to get you overseas. Take a hike before I knock you down a rank for gross incompetence.”

Drexel stood at attention, nodded curtly, and then exited the room, looking sheepishly at the floor. Mackenzie stood and motioned for Lloyd and Myrtle to sit. They did and continued to hold hands and Mackenzie retook his seat.

“Where did your father live, Ma’am?” Mackenzie asked.

Myrtle cleared her throat. “Taft, Sir. That’s in the middle of California.”

“Good Lord. I suppose you’ll want to be escorting her home, right, Lloyd?”

“Sir, that would be my hope.”

Mackenzie nodded and sighed again. “Very well. California, huh?” Lloyd and Myrtle watched as he worked through his thoughts. Suddenly, he stood and leaned toward the door. “Wessler, get in here!”

Colonel Wessler appeared a few seconds later. “Yes, Sir?”

“Wessler, these boys deploying anytime soon?”

Wessler looked at Mackenzie, as though looking for more guidance. Satisfied, he said, “Nope, not unless there’s a dramatic shift in the need for radar.”

“California, though. Might Lloyd have some worth out that direction?”

Wessler smiled. “I might be able to conjure up a few ideas. Heading out that direction, Tahmatoh?”

“Yes, Sir. For a little bit.”

“Okay, well take care of your business then. Send notice when you’re available and we’ll set you up with your assignment.”

“I won’t be returning to Miami, Sir?” Lloyd directed the comment to Mackenzie.

Mackenzie replied, “Lloyd, you remember the first time we met?”

Lloyd chuckled and nodded as he looked at the ground. “Yes, yes, Sir, I do.”

“You’ve always impressed me, Tahmatoh.” That was all Mackenzie said on the topic. Lloyd didn’t know why he said it or what he intended. “If we suddenly get an order to ship out, I’ll send for you. Army will even pay your way across the country this time. With that said, what’s this war for if not for preserving our good Christian way of life? You get home and take care of your family.” He looked at Myrtle and began to speak, but stopped. He nodded his sentiments and then to Lloyd said, “That’ll be all.”

Lloyd looked at General Mackenzie—his commanding officer—and Colonel Wessler—his mentor and teacher—and then stood and led Myrtle out of the room. They had no ride back, so they walked the mile to their house, holding hands while Myrtle cried. They had no dinner, they simply went to bed and held each other. Lloyd didn’t know what to say, so he held her while she cried.

The next day, Lloyd stood in his uniform holding Myrtle's hand as the train pulled into the station. Alex, Dick, and Nathaniel stood behind them holding their luggage. When they were allowed to board, Lloyd sent Myrtle with a porter and then turned to his friends. They looked at him solemnly, all wondering if they'd ever see each other again.

"You come back to us now," Dick said.

"Fuck that, Tahmatoh, you just got a free ride to abandon ship," Nathaniel said. "Take it. Seriously. Take it, you dumb bastard."

When the porter took the luggage, Dick and Nathaniel hugged Lloyd and then left him alone with Alex. Alex smiled, his look distant. He eyed the train like an opportunity that he couldn't take. Still looking at the train, he took Lloyd by the shoulder and then looked at him.

"You lucky asshole," he said.

"You know, I'll be back."

"No, you won't be back. Mackenzie wouldn't send you to California and expect you to return. Sure would be nice to join you, I'll tell you what."

"Well, come with me."

"I can't come with you. You know that."

"You know, I really don't know what you're talking about. I'm planning to come back as soon as the funeral is over."

"Yeah," Alex said. "Yeah. Even so, I sure would love to come with you. We came out here together, it would be quite the fairy tale to return together."

"We will," Lloyd said. "I'll come back and when the war ends, we'll return together."

"Yeah," Alex said again. His look was even more distant than before. Lloyd was leaving him. "Don't forget, stocks. That's the ticket. Buy United Technologies. It's a good starter stock. Mark my word."

That's all they said. The two hugged, slapped each other on the back with the appropriate level of masculinity, and then Lloyd boarded the train without looking back. He hadn't noticed the Miami humidity had made him sweat through his uniform until the train's fans made him shiver. He looked around and saw Myrtle discussing the luggage with the porter and a man in a blue suit.

Lloyd approached. "It's chilly in here. We should probably do something with this luggage, right?"

"Lloyd," Myrtle said, before being cut off by the man in the suit.

"Excuse me, Sir. Ma'am. Sir, it's an honor to have you aboard our train. Defending our freedom against the Nazi scourge. We would like to offer you and your wife a cabin in the first-class compartment, all the way to California."

The man had a broad smile and his mustache extended past his lips until it curved down to his chin. He didn't blink as he stared adoringly at the American soldier.

"Now, now wait awhile," Lloyd said. "You want to give us a cabin in first-class? Ha ha, now why would you do a thing like that?"

"Because we want to do our part while you're doing yours. It is an honor to have you aboard and it'd be an honor to have you travel in style."

"You know, I sure would like to show you first-class," Lloyd said to Myrtle.

"First class?" Myrtle said as she sighed. "Ho hum, what are a couple of people like you and me going to do in first class? But, I suppose if you insist."

"All right then!" the man said. "Richard, get their belongings to first class. You two are in for a treat."

Richard, the porter, took Lloyd and Myrtle through the train, marching them proudly through the third-class compartments, the restaurant car, the sleeper cars, and finally into the partially filled first class cabins. Lloyd continued into the first class restaurant car. It was almost exactly as he

remembered. He wandered in, leaving Myrtle in awe in the doorway, and ran his fingers along the mahogany seats and maroon felt curtains. He peered toward the end and saw the entrance to the luggage compartment and then looked at the offering at the whiskey and coffee cart.

When he returned to Myrtle, Richard was showing them into their private cabin. She looked tired and seemed to relish the padded seats. Lloyd shook Richard's hand and the slid in across from her.

"Can I get you some coffee, Myrtle?"

"No, thank you. I'll just sit for a few moments."

"I remember that cabin," Lloyd said. "I rode it all the way across America in the luggage compartment. Me and Alex."

"I know, honey, you've told me the story."

"Oh, have I told you the story, ha ha, well, it was quite the experience."

Despite the reminder, Lloyd told Myrtle the story again. Then she told him some stories about her father and her childhood in Taft. Then he told her about his time at Harvard and then told her more stories about the train ride with Alex. It was strange, having so much time to talk to his wife. Even though she had relocated, they hadn't spent a lot of time together, and they hadn't realized that they needed to get to know each other once again. Lloyd had forgotten that she received a scholarship and she smiled affectionately as he told his long-winded stories. They talked for nearly three straight days—a quicker ride than Lloyd remembered—until they pulled into New Orleans.

Lloyd had zero interest in exploring the city that exposed him to the rifts of America's racial divides, but Myrtle hadn't gotten the chance on her way to Miami. When they walked out of the station—Richard assured them their luggage was in good hands—they were holding hands, Lloyd in his uniform and Myrtle in a simple blue dress. Lloyd clenched his jaw in anticipation of again seeing the naked hatred that resided in the country, but in just over a year, the city had changed.

As they walked down the sidewalk, people stepped aside for the man in uniform. Men tipped their caps and women curtsied. Several men grabbed Lloyd's hand, shaking it vigorously while their other hand cupped Lloyd's to emphasize their deep-seated affection. Lloyd found it hard not to get caught up in it. The people were as strange and eclectic as ever, but the recognition masked the inequality.

"Certainly not what I was expecting," Myrtle said.

Lloyd gripped her hand. "It's not what I remember, I'll say that." He shook the hand of another man, who immediately wiped his nose and coughed into the wind. Lloyd responded to his cough as he did when heard anybody cough by saying, "God bless you."

"Thank you, young man," the man said gleefully, coughing yet again. "Thank you very much. And thank you for your service! Can I offer you and your pretty wife two tickets to a show?"

Lloyd smiled and looked up at the building beside them. "Oh would you look at that, Myrtle? Want to see a moving picture?"

"Oh, Lloyd, don't be silly. Come along now."

Lloyd and Myrtle continued and the man tipped his cap, coughing yet again.

They walked together for an hour, accepting a coffee at a street café. When they returned to the train, Richard was waiting for them and showed them aboard. A lunch platter of croissants and sardines sat waiting on the table in their cabin.

"Oh would you look at that?" Lloyd said. He chuckled, which ended with a sounded-out, "Ha ha."

"I don't know, Mr. Tahmatch," Myrtle said, shaking her head. "Sure seems like that uniform is going to your head. Ho hum." As she said that, she picked up a sardine and popped it in her mouth. "I suppose I can live with it, though."



They both sat around the table and began to eat the complimentary meal. Neither of them had ever been treated with such high-class and respect.

"I suppose I shouldn't tell them I haven't spent time on the front lines." Lloyd looked out the window, ashamed at the realization.

"That's neither here nor there," Myrtle responded. "You're alive, you're my husband, and we're heading to my father's funeral together. You'll return, but I pray to God you never get sent to the front lines. Barbaric and foolish, all of it."

The comment finished the conversation. They sat together in silence as the train departed. The silence was not awkward. They were content to be together. It took an additional four days to get to Los Angeles, and then another day to get over the pass to Taft.

By the time they arrived, Lloyd had developed a slight cough and was shivering from a fever. Myrtle hugged her mother, but forbid Lloyd from touching her. She sent him straight to bed in the newly built home; the room where her old bedroom used to be. Lloyd attended the funeral, but didn't remember much, other than Myrtle's mother crying as she spoke. He sat in the back of the church, apart from Myrtle and apart from the crowd. He didn't attend the post-funeral party. He went to bed, shivering as he pulled the knitted quilt up to his chin.

The hallucinations began the next day and the cough made his lungs burn. He had memories of Myrtle placing wet wash cloths on his forehead and had out-of-body experiences as he watched Myrtle and her mother bicker with one another.

When he finally awoke with a clear head, he recognized his surroundings, but it wasn't Myrtle's home in Taft. He was in his childhood bedroom. His sheets were covered in sweat and Myrtle sat on the bed beside him. He saw his mother and father and a man he had never met before.

"Well hello there," the man said. "I'm Doctor Grayson. Looks like that fever finally broke."

"Fever?" Lloyd asked, his voice soft.

“Yes, Lloyd,” Myrtle said, gripping his hand. “You’ve been suffering from whooping cough. You’ve had a fever for nearly a month. Welcome back.”

## Chapter 24

Lucien squeezed Mary's hand and felt tears come to his eyes as he looked at Lloyd laying in a pool of sweat. He had already lost his son once when America sent Lloyd off to war. He then had to watch for nearly a month as his son slowly slipped into death. But now he saw renewed life. Lloyd still looked gaunt, having barely eaten in weeks since Myrtle dragged him through their front door, and he still had a filmy layer of residue across his eyes, but his fever finally broke.

"Well, Mr. Tahmatch, looks like your boy is going to pull through."

Lucien looked at Dr. Grayson and nodded. For two weeks, he had to listen to this so-called doctor explain Lloyd's dire health conditions. The doctor touted his military credentials, as though they were to make Lucien more sympathetic. A military doctor? A government-sponsored agent *caring* for his son? This would be the first time since Dr. Grayson appeared that Lucien didn't view him with suspicion.

"That is certainly good news," Lucien responded. Mary nudged him to say, "Thank you doctor. Thank you for saving my son."

Mary and Myrtle both broke into tears at the comment and Lloyd's head sprang off the pillow as his lungs fired off a series of long, whooping coughs.

"Don't thank me just yet," Dr. Grayson said. "He's not out of the woods. His fever broke, that's good news. But the cough can linger, as we have seen, and it'll be months before his strength is back."

Lloyd groaned and tried to press himself off the mattress, but Myrtle stopped him. Once he relaxed, he said, "You know, doctor, I need to get back to my unit. I just don't feel that *good*, though."

Dr. Grayson laughed. "I'll bet you don't. Damn near worst case of whooping cough I've seen. You're tough, though, I'll hand you that, Lloyd. And your wife here, never left your side. Where most good men get their strength, right there. Consider yourself lucky." He nodded as he looked awkwardly

at Lucien and Mary, and then to Myrtle and finally to Lloyd. “Well, my business here is just about finished. Must be an important man to the military, if you don’t mind my saying. Got direct orders from General Mackenzie to watch over you. Don’t much know why neither, seeing as your unit shipped off last week.”

Lucien saw his son’s face drop as he again tried to prop himself up, coughing at the exertion.

“They shipped out?” Lloyd asked, wheezing and hacking through the words. “They, they shipped? Now, now wait awhile, no no, now, now wait, just wait awhile.”

Myrtle soothed him and pushed him back on the bed as Lloyd’s coughing made him seize up.

“Yes they did, two weeks ago,” Dr. Grayson said. When he saw that this was news to everyone, he cleared his throat and said, “Well, that’s at least what I heard, but, I’m all the way out here in California. Don’t know much about troop movements to the front. So, Lloyd, I need you to continue to rest up. I can’t clear you back for service until you’re one hundred percent, and based on looking at you, it won’t be for a while. Your fever broke, though, so that’s good news. Now, I’ll be back in a week unless I hear from you.”

At this, he tipped his cap and turned to head for the exit. Lucien and Mary walked him toward the front door of their home, leaving Lloyd and Myrtle to share a moment in private.

“Well, Doctor, I can’t say I trusted your good faith when you first showed up,” Lucien began.

“Oh will you knock it off, Lucien?” Mary said in Croatian. And then in English, “Thank you, Dr. Grayson, thank you. I just couldn’t imagine... well, thank you.”

“As I was going to say,” Lucien continued, “but I can’t deny you helped my son.” Lucien sighed and held out his hand. “Never much trusted you government fellas.”

Dr. Grayson smiled and shook Lucien’s hand. “I hear your oldest son is a doctor.”

Lucien smiled. “He is. A surgeon, actually. Said it’d be better to have a doctor come. Medicine doctor, that is.”

“Well, I’m just glad it worked out. Course with your boy’s unit shipping, not sure where he’ll be heading.”

Dr. Grayson opened the door and stopped.

“Say, Dr. Grayson, what’s a well-educated doctor doing serving in the military?”

Dr. Grayson smiled and looked out the door. The sky was blue and the weather mild. Birds chirped from an electrical wire. Dr. Grayson seemed to take it in before turning to look back at Lucien and Mary. “We all have a role to play, you know what I mean, Mr. Tahmatch? My boy’s somewhere in Africa I believe, or maybe southern Spain. Not too sure. Regardless, I couldn’t much just sit back and do nothing, you know?” Dr. Grayson looked at them both as he considered the situation. He nodded his head and said, “You both have a nice day. Looks like it’s shaping up to be a nice one.”

When he stepped out, Lucien closed the door behind him. Mary threw her arms around him and began to weep. Lucien brought his hand to her head and began to stroke her hair. They had both aged and Mary’s hair had begun to turn into gray curls, but Lucien ran his leathery, wrinkled fingers through it and was reminded of the first time he had seen her on the ship leaving Korcula. Had they stayed in Croatia, they likely never would have met and might both be dead, forced into a war or unbearable working conditions.

“Come on,” he finally said, “let’s check on our son.”

He led her back into the bedroom where they found Lloyd and Myrtle in a nearly identical position. Lloyd had propped himself up and stroking the hair of a sobbing Myrtle. He looked at his parents and weakly smiled.

Lloyd spent three more days in bed and finally began to regain some of his strength a week later. Lucien helped walk him around the orchard and noticed that Myrtle had fallen into a routine of helping Mary in

the kitchen. She hadn't had such help since Lloyd's sister married and moved away. Myrtle's belly was growing larger by the day, giving Lucien the hope that he'd get to meet his grandson before the war once again took Lloyd away.

Three weeks after Lloyd's fever broke, Lucien drove Lloyd deeper into the apple orchard, the first time Lloyd had driven through the trees in nearly a year and a half.

"Wow," Lloyd said as he walked out into a row of Red Delicious apple trees. "It hasn't changed much."

"That's the beauty of trees," Lucien replied. "Every year they come back and are the same as they were before." He stopped to think about the comment he just made. "Well, usually."

The two walked down the row, examining the trees out of habit. Lloyd's strength had almost entirely returned, but his endurance needed to catch up. He expected to make several pit stops to say hi to old faces, but he recognized none of the workers. In the place of the men he once knew, he saw brown faces speaking Spanish to one another.

"Where'd everyone go?" he asked.

"The war," Lucien quickly said. "Apparently you aren't the only Slav to support his new country."

"Where'd they come from?" Lloyd asked, ignoring the comment.

"They just started showing up. Some came from Salinas. Some don't even speak English yet. I think they came ashore in Santa Cruz. Who knows. They work hard, though. They do work hard. My father would have given a limb just to have one man help out. Here I am with a whole orchard of Mexicans."

"You know, you've been talking about your *dad* a lot, ha ha, you know," Lloyd said. The fruit wasn't yet ripe, but Lloyd reached up and rubbed his fingers around a young green apple.

“Yeah, I guess having you home has made me think about him. You haven’t talked much about the war since you’ve been home. Kinda surprising to me.”

“Ah I know it. Not much to talk about really. Didn’t spend much time overseas. Besides, didn’t think you’d want to talk about it.”

“Shouldn’t have been so hard on you for going to war. It wasn’t right.” Lucien paused to think about what he wanted to say next. “My father, he saved my life when I was a kid. Sent me to America and I never saw him again. I guess it seemed wrong to be sending my son back to the land I was escaping, and I damn sure was worried I’d never seen you again.”

The two walked together in silence. Mexicans tipped their caps as they passed.

“You know, Lloyd,” Lucien continued, “I’ve made mistakes in my life, but I think I’ve lived a good life. Maybe not an important life, but at least a semi-important life. And that’s because when all is said and done, I’ve given lots of men jobs and I’ve raised good kids. It’s a lonely house, with all of you having moved out, but it’s been nice having you around. And now with Myrtle pregnant, it changes you, having a kid. I’d think long and hard before signing up to go to war again. Just my two cents.”

Lucien saw Lloyd thinking. When his son began to think hard on a topic, he furrowed his brow and didn’t talk until he knew the answer. He wasn’t like his other kids—certainly not like John, who only cared about baseball—but after treading water through high school, Lucien never thought Lloyd would become the wise one. Lloyd was a simple man who appreciated the things he was supposed to appreciate, laughed at the things he was supposed to laugh at, and disliked the things he was supposed to dislike. He didn’t overthink anything, which made him brilliant in his own unique way. His brilliance had captured the attention of the military, which is why Lucien was terrified about what the coming days would bring.

"I'm still not sure what the doctor meant when he said my unit shipped out," Lloyd said. It wasn't an answer to any of Lucien's comments in particular, but it answered them all in Lloyd's simple-minded brilliance.

Lucien nodded. "You know the reason my father sent me here is because I was his favorite. I'm sorry to say it, but it's true. Don't tell your brothers or sister, but you're kind of my favorite." He paused and chuckled. "Got a letter that you have telegrams waiting at the post office. I didn't want to tell you until you were stronger, but maybe we can stop by and pick them up on the way home."

Lloyd stopped. "Now, now wait awhile, I have telegrams. Holy smokes. The Army must think I went AWOL."

Lucien looked at Lloyd with dismay. Maybe not so brilliant. "Oh, Lloyd, just relax. The Army has had a doctor watching over you. They know you ain't no good for them. Now come on, I want to talk to you about something, unless you think I brought you down here just to go on a nice walk."

"No, ha ha, no I didn't *think* that."

Lucien continued to walk and then stopped at a tree with a branch that hung to the ground. "Help me, Lloyd. I'm getting old. Help me prop this branch."

Lucien knew Lloyd was weak, likely too weak to take the two-by-two that had fallen to the ground and use it to push the apple-heavy branch high into the air. Lloyd didn't hesitate. He grabbed the wood plank and expertly stuck it under the branch. He pushed, but the branch barely budged. Lucien joined and together they got the branch to an acceptable height and then anchored the beam into the dirt.

"Perfect," Lucien said. "Hell of a lot harder caring for apple trees than olive trees."

"I missed this. I like the orchard."

Lucien smirked and saw his chance.

"You know, Lloyd, we just had a big sale. Could really keep us afloat for a while."



“A big sale?”

“Martinelli’s. Just signed the contract. Shipping all of our extra apples straight to their production facility. All those small apples that get sorted out. The wasted apples on the ground. We can flip them all for good cash. It’s a good deal for us.”

“Father, that’s really fantastic. Ha ha, that’s *really* fantastic.”

“It is, course now we have to box all these apples. The Mexicans help. Not quite as good as the Slavs, but they’re keeping us running. I could use some help, though, I guess is what I’m saying. I could use some help managing this. I’m not getting any younger and I always dreamed of leaving this to you.”

Lucien looked at his son. As Lloyd got older, he looked more and more like the memory of his father, with big eyebrows and soulful eyes. He knew the conversation would make Lloyd uncomfortable, he just didn’t know if he’d have another opportunity.

“Before you answer,” Lucien said, “I want to show you something.”

He led his son back to the truck and pulled an item out from under his seat. It was wrapped in a rotten-looking rag; Lloyd guessed the brown material might have been part of an old potato sack. Twine kept the raga round the item. Lucien approached Lloyd and held it out.

“What is this?” Lloyd asked.

“Open it.”

Lloyd pulled lose the knotted twine and slid off the rag, revealing an aged glass bottle with a yellow substance. “Is this olive oil?”

“That’s the last remaining bottle of olive oil from my father’s olive orchard in Croatia. He started a business to bring his family’s olive oil to the American market. When his store in San Francisco burned down, the business collapsed. He kept this, though, and gave it to me. I want you to have it.”

“Holy smokes, this is...” Lloyd searched for the words. “This is really special. I don’t know if I should have this.”

“You’re the only person that should have it. This is our history. It’s important for you to feel it, to be able to put your fingers on it. My dad was a farmer. I’m a farmer. You’re a farmer. This is in your blood.”

Lucien knew he was laying it on thick, but he needed his son to understand. Without Lloyd, he would lose the orchard. He’d be too old to tend to the trees, too tired to deal with the business. He watched as Lloyd stare at the bottle, taking deep breaths as though inhaling the history.

Finally, he looked up. “Father, I don’t know if I want it, the orchard, the pressure to carry on the business. Besides, I’m still in the Army. I need to get to my unit, wherever they are.”

Lucien nodded. He expected the answer, but he had at least said his peace. He had literally handed off the family keepsake that labeled their existence as men of the soil. “I know, I know. Just something to think about. Come on, I’ll drive you to the Post Office.”

Lucien waved to a few of the new workers and then told one to finish propping the trees along the row they had walked down. Lucien slid into the driver’s seat of the truck, but noticed Lloyd open the door and hesitate. Lloyd stood outside and looked toward the house that they used as a homestead. It was Lloyd’s childhood home, the memories could never be taken away. He looked back at the trees and up the hill. He looked up at the sky and closed his eyes. After a deep breath he slid in next to his father and closed the door. He held the bottle tightly in his lap. Lucien didn’t say anything, he simply turned on the motor and drove to the parking lot and out of the driveway. Lucien no longer used a chain to block the driveway during the day.

They made the short trip from Aptos to Watsonville and Lucien pulled the truck to a stop in front of the post office.

“Want me to come with ya?” he asked his son.

“No, I’ll just be a minute.” Lloyd set the bottle next to him and then stepped out of the truck.

Lucien waited in the truck as Lloyd disappeared into the post office. It was strange seeing his son as a man. He had seen him grow and seen him make a decision to go to college. He had seen him get married and go off to war. But seeing him here now, heading into the post office on his own, felt as much of a send off to manhood as Lucien had ever felt. His son no longer needed him, not even now in a moment of potential life-altering news.

A few minutes later, Lloyd emerged and slid back into the truck. He held the telegrams in his hand and looked stony-faced.

“What do they say?” Lucien asked in Croatian.

Lloyd shook his head. “Haven’t opened them yet.”

Lucien didn’t ask why. He nodded and popped the truck into gear, pulling the truck out onto road to head back out of town. They drove in silence as they looked at the orchards along the sides of the road. Watsonville was a boomtown of Croatian-owned orchards, but the prevalence of Mexican labor was a stark contrast to the orchards Lloyd had left behind just a few years earlier.

“This war has changed things,” Lucien said, reading Lloyd’s mind.

“I know it.”

When Lucien pulled the truck back into their apple orchard parking lot and turned off the motor, Lloyd sighed as though the idea of further walking seemed a daunting task. Lucien had one more thing to discuss with his son, but before he could speak, Lloyd swung the door open and gingerly stepped out. Lucien sat in the truck and again watched Lloyd disappear, this time into the house.

A few minutes later, Lucien followed him. Lloyd was nowhere to be found, but Myrtle and Mary sat at the kitchen table reading the telegrams. Lucien walked past them and poured himself a glass of water in a new hard-plastic cup and then joined them.

“What’s wrong? Where’s Lloyd?”

Myrtle closed one of the telegrams and set it down. “Oh, ho hum. There’s no such thing as

good news from this war. This war. I just really hate this war.” She sighed. “Perhaps this is for the best, though. We may be sticking around a bit longer.”

Lucien furrowed his brow and picked up the telegrams. His English reading skills weren't great, but he could get the gist.

The first telegram explained that Lloyd's battalion had been shipped out on three airplanes. Two of those airplanes never made it to the destination and had not been located.

The second telegram was a personal letter from General Mackenzie and explained how sorry he was that Alex was on one of the planes. He knew Alex was a good friend.

The third telegram was from the U.S. Army Bureau of Personnel. Lloyd had received an honorable discharge based on his illness and subsequent weakened state. Because of his engineering skills, the Army had set up an employment opportunity with Lenkurt in Mountain View so he could continue working on radar technology. The one issue, the telegram said, was that the programs were becoming classified, and Lloyd's father was not an American citizen. In fact, the Army had no record of his father entering the country.

When he put the third telegram down, Myrtle asked, “How come there's no record of you entering the country?”

“Because I came on my brother's passport,” Lucien responded. He picked up the telegram and read it once more. “For Lloyd to stick around, I need to become an American citizen.”

“Are you okay with that?” Mary asked.

Lucien nodded. “I was telling Lloyd earlier that I had lived what I consider a semi-important life.”

Mary laughed. “Of course you did. Very subtle.”

Lucien ignored her. "I should have said I've lived a semi-important American life. If it keeps him in the area, if it keeps Myrtle and my grandson around here, I can become an American. I already am an American. Might as well make it official."

## Chapter 25

The drive from Redwood City to Mountain View was typically a nightmare. Redwood City, where Lenkurt built its headquarters, was only fifteen miles or so from Mountain View, where Lloyd and Myrtle had purchased their home shortly after the war ended. The two-lane highway that linked the two towns, called Alameda de las Pulgas, hadn't been built for the crush of traffic that resulted from the post-war economic boom. Lloyd had watched with a tinge of pain as orchards across the South Bay Area were bulldozed, the land sold to housing developers and business interests.

The drive to and from work had become the worst parts of Lloyd's day. Stuck behind the wheel of an old Chevy pick-up truck, he felt his soul being crushed as horns blared while he moved a few feet at a time. He longed for the weekends and the evenings when he could work at the orchard and play with his four kids. Ironically, his ire over his commute was the whole reason he chose to come into work on Christmas Eve. Who else would go into the office on Christmas Eve? It should have been smooth sailing, especially considering he was leaving at two in the afternoon.

Now here he was, the winter rains painting his truck in sheets of water, and a four-car pileup completely blocked Alameda. He could taste the turkey that Myrtle would be cooking in the oven, the turkey that he would be carving if he could only get home. Lloyd and Myrtle had hosted the Christmas Eve feast since purchasing their home in '46, and it had become a tradition for the Tahmatoh family. The whole family would gather. Myrtle and her mother would put on a feast. Lloyd's mother, Mary, would make apple pies and apple sauce. The days of eating pigs' heads were over. The Christmas Eve dinner was the best meal of the year. And Lloyd was stuck in traffic.

He sat despondent in the driver's seat. A few cars had pulled off to the side and were driving backward to get to the nearest exit. Lloyd followed their lead and began heading in reverse, taking an exit in Palo Alto. He didn't have a map and was unfamiliar with the area, but he figured if he continued

to wind his way south, he could bypass the accident and be on his way. As he turned at lights and weaved his way deeper into Palo Alto, he eventually found himself in a downtown area and stuck behind a busy intersection. Frustrated, he pulled the truck off the road and parked. He'd have to call Myrtle and tell her he would be late. Perhaps his father could carve the turkey.

He stepped out of the truck and ran to the overhang of the nearest building. He didn't look at the sign as he opened the door, but stopped on the welcome mat as the water dripped from his clothes.

"Merry Christmas, friend," a voice said from inside the store.

Lloyd sniffled and looked up. A series of gray metal desks lined the two walls. The desks sat empty except for one man in a light brown suit with a thick black mustache. The man stood and approached Lloyd with an outstretched hand.

"Welcome to California Financial," the man said. "My name's Tony Browning. Looks like you got caught in a good ole fashioned Christmas storm!"

Lloyd looked down as he dripped on the man's carpet and then laughed and shook his hand. "Ha ha, yeah, you know, I suppose I did. Are you a bank?"

"Stockbroker. Hey, the market's still open. How about I set you up with some great end-of-year trades. Set you and your wife up for the new year. What do you say?"

"Oh, ha ha, you know, I really just want to use a phone."

Tony looked disappointed. "Well, it's Christmas and all. You can use the phone on my desk."

Lloyd nodded and walked across the linoleum floor to the desk. He picked up the phone and spun the dial. Myrtle answered. Hearing her voice nearly brought tears to his eyes. He just wanted to be home for Christmas. He could practically smell the turkey through the receiver. He explained the situation and Myrtle of course understood, reminding him that she would be there no matter when he returned. Before he hang up, she said, "Now don't go wasting our money on stocks as some sort of tribute to Alex."

Alex. He hadn't thought of his old friend for years. Alex the stockbroker. "Just buy stocks!" Alex would say. Knowing how to play the stock market certainly didn't prevent Alex from dying in a plane crash. The fact Lloyd got sick and sent home was just plain, dumb luck. Myrtle insisted General Mackenzie knew about the deployment but wanted to keep Lloyd safe.

Lloyd kept his hand on the phone as he looked at Tony's desk. Sitting on the top of a stack of papers was a brochure for United Technologies.

"United Technologies," Lloyd said out loud. Lloyd knew the name well. It was the last recommendation Alex had made to him.

It was the opening Tony needed. He was standing next to Lloyd before he could take his hand off the phone. Tony picked the brochure up and held it in front of Lloyd.

"Now listen here, Sir, I know the type. Work hard, play it safe, return to your wife's home cooking. This here is the stock for you. Now the Korean War created volatility, and savvy investors took advantage. However, other investors simply buy safe, reliable companies. The war also gave rise to some of the finest technology companies in the world, and those are safe and reliable, just like you. This here stock, you can't go wrong. Best damn way to start a portfolio. You want to build wealth, it starts right here."

Lloyd looked at the brochure. "How much for one?"

"One? One what?"

"Just one."

"You mean one share!?" Tony began to laugh. "No no, Sir. You buy ten, or hell, be bold, buy a hundred."

"Ha ha, a hundred." Lloyd continued to look at the brochure. "No, I'll buy one share."

Tony looked confused, but when he realized Lloyd was serious, he nodded professionally and sat at his desk to begin drawing up the order.



An hour later, Lloyd was back on the road with a stock certificate sitting on the passenger seat. Myrtle would almost certainly be angry that he threw money away at a piece of paper. His father would call him downright stupid. But it felt right to Lloyd. He couldn't take care of his family working at Lenkurt and picking apples. He needed a financial future. One share of United Technologies seemed like a reasonable first step.

The rains had lightened up and the crash was cleared by the time Lloyd found his way back to Alameda de las Pulgas. He continued to drive south, enjoying the light traffic he had expected to find when he left that morning. From Alameda, he turned East into Mountain View, taking side roads through the remaining apricot orchards and looking at the new construction. His street, which had been all apricot orchards when he first purchased the home for \$25,000 (his father gave him a small loan and Lenkurt provided a signing bonus), was now filled with little ranch-style houses. The orchards were still prevalent, but his street had become a community practically overnight.

He pulled into his driveway and parked next to his father's truck. He picked up his briefcase and his stock certificate and stepped out of his vehicle. He held the certificate in his hand and took a deep breath of air. He smelled the fresh rain and the scent of turkey hovering over the house. Kids were running around the street, going house-to-house for Christmas treats. He had made it home for the Christmas Eve feast. He put the stock certificate against his mouth and felt awash with excitement for the future. He didn't have any specific reason for the feeling, he just felt like his life was pretty good.

Myrtle pulled the turkey out of the oven and set the black enamel roasting pan on top of two silver trivets. The smell filled the kitchen and made her stomach grumble. She pulled out a thermometer and plunged it into the juicy breast of the bird and waited for the gauge to let her know if it had cooked through.

“You know,” Gertrude said from behind her, “when I cook poultry, I use my good sense when it’s cooked. Never had to use those fancy contraptions you use nowadays.”

“Oh ho hum, mama,” Myrtle said. She then chuckled. “You tell me every year. Maybe I’ll buy you one so you can see how useful they are.”

“And now I need my daughter buying me my kitchen utensils? I’m just fine.”

“One hundred and sixty. Perfect.”

As Myrtle pulled the thermometer out, they heard a ruckus in the front room as several kids charged in the house and raided the caramel apple slices that Myrtle had set out.

“Oh!” Gertrude bellowed. “How do you get used to that?”

“Oh, Mama, it’s a nice tradition.”

“It’s a Slav tradition, Myrtle. It’s weird. Don’t forget you come from a nice and proper upbringing. Straight from the Mayflower.”

“The Mayflower!?” John shouted in shock as he walked in the kitchen. “How old are you!?” John walked up behind Gertrude and picked her up from the waist. As Gertrude screamed, Myrtle and John laughed. He set her down and she turned and slapped him on the shoulder before straightening out her dress. “Gertrude, do we have to do this every year? When will you admit your love for me?”

“You’re a foul man, Mr. Tahmatch.”

“Mr. Tahmatch? Now I’m Mr. Tahmatch?”

“Relax, Mama, he’s just having fun,” Myrtle said.

Her voice was drowned out by Lucien. “John, that’s enough.” John immediately rolled his eyes and began to walk out of the kitchen, but Lucien stopped him. “Hey, get over here and talk to us about the orchard.” Then he turned his attention to Gertrude. “Sorry, Gertrude. I think his mother might have had some fun with the Greek milkman about nine months before he was born.”

Gertrude didn't understand the joke, but George laughed and even Myrtle cracked a smile. Lucien and his two oldest sons walked toward the backyard, weaving their way past the mess of kids that were playing around the Christmas tree. Mirna, currently holding a young baby and watching over the rest of the children, stood from the couch and walked to the kitchen.

"Anything I can do to help, Myrtle?"

"Believe me, holding little William is enough."

"Four kids," Gertrude said. "It's not right. How you figure you're going to support a family of this size?"

"Lloyd's working," Mirna said, inadvertently coming to Myrtle's defense. "My brother has a good job. Plus, we always have the orchard. Keeps food on the table."

Gertrude didn't know if she could argue with Mirna, so she simply looked at Myrtle and said, "I'm just glad you've accepted your place in the world. Your *boy* phase nearly killed me. College and jobs, traveling cross country by yourself. Just happy you straightened out."

Myrtle began pulling the dressing out of the turkey and nodded. "Yes, Mama."

"I wouldn't say she's settling down, Gertrude," Mirna said, seemingly appalled at the notion. "She hosts the local elections in her garage and is head of the PTA."

Before Gertrude could respond, they heard the front door open and heavy footsteps walk into the hallway. Lloyd Jr. came running from the living room.

"Is that Father?" Lloyd Jr. asked.

"Well I sure hope so or we have an intruder," Myrtle responded to her oldest son. "Now get Greg and go greet him. Lord knows we don't want your grandfather massacring our dinner."

When Lloyd entered the house, it was bedlam. Kids from the neighborhood were in the front room eating caramel-apple slices, greedily taking hand-fuls before running off to the next house. Treats for the neighborhood children at Christmastime stemmed back to Lucien's childhood in Korcula. Families opened their households to share good tidings with the children. Lloyd hadn't intended on moving into a predominantly Slavic community, but one new neighbor after another had Croatian blood.

Apparently, Croatian-Americans stuck together, either by preference or through some mysterious force that drew them together. Knowing his neighbors hailed from Croatian lineage certainly helped soothe Lucien's heartache about helping them with a down payment for such an exorbitantly expensive house. A few of his nephews were among the hoard of kids, but didn't notice their uncle enter the house.

Lloyd walked past the kids who paid him no mind and then saw Lloyd Jr. and James come barreling toward him. They both hurled themselves through the air, forcing Lloyd to catch them.

"Merry Christmas!" Lloyd Jr. said as Lloyd set them down.

Lloyd Jr. shared Lloyd's dark features and bushy eyebrows, but James took the physical qualities from Myrtle and was already a spitting image of Stanley. Despite being two years younger, James was three inches taller than Lloyd Jr. and had already overcome him in athletic capabilities.

"Now, wait awhile, is it Christmas?" Lloyd asked. "Huh, you know I had forgotten. Go get me an egg nog to put me in the spirit."

The two ran off as Lloyd walked farther into the house.

"Ha ha," Lloyd said out loud as he saw the extent of the family gathering. "Holy smokes, would you look at this. I think this gets bigger every year." He walked into the kitchen to greet Myrtle. "Hello, my wife. Can you believe I hit traffic on a day like today?"

"Of course I can believe it," Myrtle said without looking at him. "I told you this morning that you were bound to hit traffic and you should just stay home. But why listen to me? I'm just your wife."

Lloyd smiled and kissed her. Some family-members made "ooh" and "aww" sounds.

“But now you’re home, so you better sharpen that knife and get to carving.”

“Ha, I know it. Look, I bought a stock.”

Lloyd held the certificate up. He beamed proudly, but couldn’t hide his concern that his wife wouldn’t share in his enthusiasm. Myrtle confirmed his intuition.

“You spent our money on a piece of paper? We’ll talk about this later. Start carving.”

Lloyd shoved the certificate into his shirt and dutifully carved up the turkey, placing each piece of meat delicately on a serving platter. He framed it all with the two legs and two wings, separated the white and dark meat, and then explained that the bird provided too much meat, so he has to eat a few of the slices. When he finished, he washed his hands, took a sip of egg nog, and then took a moment to enjoy his family and the smells and the moment.

As Myrtle carried a stack of dishes to the table, she said, “Your father and brothers are outside. I’m sure they want to talk to you.”

Lloyd nodded and sipped his eggnog. Two kids he didn’t know ran into the living room, realized they didn’t know anyone, and turned and ran out. Lloyd smiled at their youthful innocence and then began to walk toward the back door. Before he stepped out, he heard Myrtle shout, “Not too long! Dinner’s nearly ready.”

Lloyd didn’t respond and walked out onto the new wood deck that he built with his father. Because Lucien had helped build it, any chance he could get without fail he would stomp on it and nod his approval.

“Lloydie,” George said, “be honest, how much of this did you build and how much did father build?”

“Ah hell,” Lloyd responded. “Least he could do after we helped him build the orchard house.”

They all laughed. As Lloyd approached them, Lucien said, “Least it gives this yard some sort of purpose. Don’t know what you’re doing with all this private land.”

They all looked confused. John said, "Shit, father, you're the one who always insists on us working on your ridiculous orchard. Bought up land like a madman."

Lucien shook his head and tsked. "Been sniffing baseball chalk again. That was working land. Made us money. This here is private land. For what? Doesn't make money. Hell, Lloyd has to pay to keep it up. Pay taxes on it. And what're all these?"

He turned and pointed to the fruit trees Lloyd had planted.

"It's my own orchard," Lloyd said. "Got some good trees here."

"Your own orchard. Hell, we own and operate over fifty acres of apple trees. The hell you need some of your own?"

The three boys laughed. Lucien had gotten more irritable and grouchier over the past few years—George would say since he became an official American citizen—but his outbursts just made people laugh.

John pulled out a cigarette and lit it, blowing the smoke above their heads.

"Probably why you can't play anymore," George said.

"These are Marlboros," John retorted. "Doctor recommended."

"Not this doctor."

"Give me one of those," Lucien said. He took a cigarette and let John light it. After several drags, he said, "Seriously, Lloyd, you don't even like working the orchard, and then you come home and work on fruit trees. All my boys are going crazy. You boys don't even know how good you have it. Where I come from—Croatia—not that you boys would know anything about that, you don't have private trees. You have working land. Don't know how good you have it."

"I'm going to resign from Lenkurt," Lloyd said suddenly, as though the words were burning his lips.

Lucien, John, and George all looked at him as though they were expecting him to continue with another comment. Lucien started to rub his shoulder and grunted, old age catching up with him as his muscles tightened.

“I became a citizen for you to get that job,” Lucien said.

“I know it.”

“The hell you giving up a good paying job for?”

“I want to work the orchard fulltime. I want to take it over.”

Lucien nodded approvingly. “I can live with that. You tell Myrtle yet?”

“Not yet.”

“You should tell her. It’s an important decision.”

“Okay, I’ll tell her.”

“You boys don’t even know how lucky you have it. You have a choice. You have good jobs and can give them up for other jobs because of your preference. Don’t even know how good you have it. Wish you all could go see it someday. Korcula. I miss it. I really miss it.” Lucien looked off in the distance as he thought about his childhood. When he came back to reality, he looked at Lloyd and said, “This is good. I’m proud of you.”

They all heard the back door open and Lloyd’s five-year-old daughter Rachel poked her head out. “Dad,” she said, “Mom says you need to come in for dinner.”

“Oh, ha ha, did she say that?”

Lloyd walked to her and picked her up and all five of them walked in the house. Once indoors, Mirna approached and handed William to Lucien. “Here, Dad,” she said, “get to know your newest grandson. As Lucien reached for him, he suddenly grabbed his left shoulder again. He groaned in agony and began to shake. Lloyd heard his sister scream as their father fell to his knees. He rolled onto his back as his whole body tensed. Lloyd had heard of this before. His father was having a heart attack.





Part 3

1972

## Chapter 26

William Tahmatch, now twenty-years-old, ran his fingers through his long, dark brown beard. Where the beard ended and his haircut began wasn't immediately apparent to the outside observer, but he parsed the two apart while he sat in the flimsy metal chair. He had spent a considerable amount of time in that chair and he never understood why no one tightened the screws that attached the legs to the seat. Outside the office window, the hum of a forklift whirled by, followed by a shout and the sound of two pallets banging together. He thought he could hear Grier slicing open the plastic wrap to start unloading engine parts behind the wall.

"So, Bill, you love her?"

Bill looked at Frank Leonsis sitting on the opposite side of the desk. Frank had a cigarette dangling from his mouth and held open a pornographic magazine atop his oversized belly. His blue coveralls were unzipped, revealing a tobacco-stained white T-shirt.

"Yes, Sir, I do."

Frank closed the magazine and tossed it onto the loose papers on his desk.

"You been with the Teamsters for what, two years now?"

"Just under two years," Bill said.

"Just under two years. Still a student fulltime at S.J. State, correct?" He didn't let Bill answer.

"And on top of that, Brenda tells me you work your father's orchard all weekend. That's a full schedule, if you ask me."

Bill wasn't sure if Frank meant the last comment as a question.

"You're a good worker, Bill. You work hard. You're honest. You put your head down and get the job done." He paused. "How do you propose you fit my daughter into that schedule, Tomato?"

Bill scratched his cheek, tussling his straight flowing beard. "We seem to manage, Sir."

Frank took his cigarette and flicked the ash onto the ground. "Bill, listen to me. Being a Teamster, it's a way of life. You're going to have to make a decision soon. College won't pay your bills, especially if you've been failing your classes the way Brenda says. What's it getting you? Bill, listen to me, join up fulltime. I can put you on a management track."

Bill nodded ever-so-slightly with his entire body from his hips and averted his eyes from Frank's gaze. Frank smiled and squinted, taking a drag from his cigarette and blowing the smoke so that it enveloped Bill. Bill tapped his fingers on his knees.

"Excellent," Bill said. It wasn't an exclamation so much as a reply. "That sounds like a good opportunity for me. When you consider the current economic situation, the recession, it seems like a great opportunity for someone like me to have secure, well-paying job."

Frank furrowed his eyebrows, looking at Bill in a new light. He couldn't tell if the kid was messing with him or if he was being sincere.

"Right, well, at any rate, this would make me happy. And if you want to have a future with my daughter, you want me to be happy. Now, Bill, I don't typically let some low-life Teamster date my daughter, but you, well, you seem like a good guy. You understand?"

Bill nodded but then stopped. "No, actually, I don't think I do."

"If you hurt her, I'll melt your body in a vat of engine oil and a small part of you will be driven out of this warehouse every time an Oldsmobile leaves the lot."

Bill smiled at first, but when he saw Frank's stern expression, he realized the man was being serious. He had never intended to date the boss's daughter—indeed, when Lloyd found out his son was dating a Teamster union boss's daughter, he asked Bill if he wanted to get buried in concrete—but he and Brenda had hit it off over a shared love of the San Francisco Giants and the Rolling Stones. Brenda still lived with her father out in Stockton and they commuted to the Oldsmobile warehouse in Dublin every morning. Bill drove up from San Jose State before class for a few hours or after class for the night

shift. When Brenda started going with Bill back to his dormitory, Frank started asking uncomfortable questions. Brenda wisely advised Bill to bring her father a pack of Camels and a bottle of whiskey, and they had been dating with father's approval ever since. Bill's fellow Teamsters couldn't believe the farmer from Mountain View was screwing the boss's gorgeous daughter, but he had managed to earn a level of respect that usually took several years to acquire.

Now during the summer, Bill had been working fulltime in the warehouse and he and Brenda rented a small apartment in Dublin a few blocks off the 580/680 interchange. Over the weekend, he still worked the orchard and stayed in his old bedroom in Mountain View. He had two years of college under his belt, but he had failed enough classes that he barely had a year's-worth of college credit. He didn't much care for college and San Jose State wouldn't object if he walked away. He had a beautiful girlfriend, a good job, a solid group of friends, and a thick beard. Life was good and college was a nuisance. Before he left, Frank said, "Bill, let me know when you officially drop out."

Bill nodded and rose. Now he just had to worry about telling his father.

A few weeks later toward the end of August—just a few days before the semester began at San Jose State—Bill tiptoed along the banks of the American River in the Sierra Nevada, pushing through the thick brush to get to a suitable location upstream. He had located an ideal fishing hole and didn't want to scare off the morning trout. His brothers never understood why he tiptoed, but Bill knew that the fish could feel the vibrations of his steps and sense the changing shadows of a predator. Any fish worth catching had made it this far through life because they learned to sense danger. Fish weren't stupid, but Bill had learned how to calm them into a false sense of safety. It was early in the morning—maybe 6:30—and the sun was only beginning to provide a little direct light. It had not yet warmed the cold mountain air, and Bill's fingers were beginning to tingle.

When he came to a clearing, he knelt and cast the line from the reel into the middle of the river, dropping the lure into the rushing water. The water snagged it and carried it downstream until Bill turned the reel to lock the line. He began to reel in the lure, pulling it into the small side-current that deposited into the still waters of the deep fishing hole. He slowly brought the spinning lure across the still water and watched as it suddenly disappeared. He stood and snagged the fish by yanking back on the rod, spinning the reel as fast as he could. After a few seconds, he stopped and let the fish swim off with the drag. Then he started again, pulling the fish in a little but farther. Five minutes later, Bill sat on the bank and admired the eighteen-inch rainbow trout. He pulled the lure out of the mouth and then stuck his thumb in its mouth and snapped the head back until the neck broke. He then stuck the dead fish into a basket that contained two smaller fish. It was a solid morning session that would provide breakfast for the family.

Satisfied, he began the hike back to the campsite where his mother would probably be grinding the coffee beans and his father would be starting the morning fire. Rachel, his older sister, would be nervously awaiting Bill's return—so much can happen in the dark mountains, Rachel hated that Bill went out on his own. Brenda, he hoped, would be impressed with his fishing acumen.

When Bill came to the final ridge before their campsite, he sat on a large granite boulder. He typically would use the occasion to smoke a celebratory joint. He had caught enough fish for the family and he could now commune with nature. This morning was not the time to lose his faculties, though. He was set to make a big announcement and didn't want to give his father more fodder for admonishment.

He felt one of the fish wriggle in his basket, snapping him out of his bliss. He took one last breath of the pine-needle infused air and stood up. He picked up his basket and his belongings and walked the final half mile to his campsite.

He could smell and see the smoke from the campfire before he arrived. As expected, his father was sitting and reading an investment newsletter by the warmth of the flames and his mother was scrambling eggs in a skillet. Bill's parents had begun to show signs of aging, with Lloyd's sideburns turning white to create a stark contrast with his stringy black hair and Myrtle's curls showing streaks of gray, but they remained active and hadn't slowed down a step into their sixties. Brenda was helping Myrtle prepare the breakfast. She had never been camping before, and her bell-bottom jeans pulled up high over her hips and her brown vest pulled tight over her chest made her look like she was ready to go out on the town. Her hair was pulled back under a bandana and she smiled as she helped Myrtle. Bill had to stop and take in the sight. Even in the Sierra Nevada, Bill's favorite place in the world, Brenda's beauty stood out like a vibrant light illuminating the pine trees.

"You know, the guy that writes this newsletter," Lloyd said to no one in particular, "his name's Charles Schwab, he really is a *smart* guy. Says the recession is going to get worse before it gets better. Says one more major geopolitical event could make the whole stock market crash. Wouldn't be good."

"Who's Charles Schwab?" Myrtle asked, although she wasn't really interested.

This made Brenda laugh. One thing Bill appreciated about Brenda is that she in turn appreciated his parents and their back and forth bickering.

"It's Tony's partner. They're starting a stock trading firm together. Really smart guys."

"Well I'm glad he's giving you advice," Myrtle said. "I hope you heed it."

Rachel, who had recently graduated from Santa Clara State College, stepped out of her tent and asked, "Dad, why are you talking about Charles Schwab? We're on our camping trip." When she saw her brother emerge from the woods and walk up, she then said, "Oh good grief, Bill. You look like a bear with your hair so long. Why don't you cut it or something?"

Bill smiled. "Why would I do a thing like that?"

"I like the shag," Brenda said, making Rachel roll her eyes. Rachel had made her feelings known about the intrusion on their family camping trip, so she rolled her eyes frequently at Brenda's comments.

"Took you long enough," Myrtle said. "Did you bring me some fish?"

"I did. Got some beauties."

Bill handed the fish to his mother, who handed off scrambling duties to Rachel. Myrtle plopped the fish on a cutting board and began to clean them.

"When Greg used to fish, he'd actually clean the fish, Bill," Rachel said, taking the opportunity to assert her dominance over her younger brother.

"Greg never caught any fish," Bill responded.

"Ha ha," Lloyd said without looking up from his book. "You know, that's actually *true*. Greg never caught any fish. Or he'd want to sell them in town."

"Well, it doesn't seem right that Lloyd Jr. and Greg aren't here. Since when do they not come on the family camping trip?"

"Oh, Rachel," Myrtle said, ripping the guts out of Bill's most recent catch. "They're off living their lives. Lloyd's a professor, he can't just go off on camping trips. And Greg, well..." Myrtle trailed off and sighed. "Greg is being Greg."

Rachel pulled the skillet off of the flames and placed it on an old tree stump. "Excuses, Mother. That's all you ever do is make excuses for them. Thank God for this tree stump. I at least know it'll be here each year. Pretty soon you'll be making excuses for Bill dropping out of college like a bum."

Bill sat next to his father and listened to the conversation, feeling an almost out-of-body as the words came into his consciousness. Did Rachel just out him in front of his parents? How did she even know about his intentions? Bill looked toward her in disbelief, but Rachel made no visible apologies

about her statement. He then looked to Brenda, who looked mortified. She must have given away his secret during one of their arguments.

Bill swallowed and turned to Lloyd, who had dropped the newsletter to his lap. "Now, wait awhile," he said. "You're dropping out of college?"

The mountains became eerily silent as the family waited for a response.

"I've decided not to go back this semester," Bill said in as bold a voice as he could muster. "I'm going to work fulltime at the warehouse."

Lloyd sighed. "Bill, I don't think that's a very good *idea*."

"Well, it's done."

"Who cares?" Rachel asked. "Bill was flunking all his courses anyway. Waste of money if you ask me."

"No one asked you," Bill said.

"Lloyd, it's a great opportunity for Bill at the warehouse," Brenda said. "My father can start him on a management track. It's good money. Very secure employment."

"There's certainly something to be said about that," Myrtle said as she placed the three breaded trout over the fire. Rachel poured Bill a cup of coffee and they all sat and listened to the wind blow through the trees and the fish pop as the skin blackened and curled. Brenda reached over and took Bill's hand as the awkward silence consumed them.

"You know, Bill," Lloyd finally said, "you really are a good fisherman."

It was a standalone comment, not meant for a response or to stoke conversation. He said it as a passing thought, a proud father speaking of a son's accomplishments. It also created a point of entry into a more difficult conversation, because a few minutes later, he said, "I sure wish you'd use those talents for something more useful, like college."



Bill realized he couldn't just smile this comment away. He leaned his head forward and took a sip of coffee, ignoring his stomach's groans for food.

"Oh, Dad, stifle up. I'm just enjoying life."

"Ha ha, ha ha, yeah, yeah I suppose enjoying life *is* important. Your grandfather would have told you that he didn't risk life and death to come to America so you could just enjoy things, though."

"Dad, it's the seventies. Life is too short to worry about life and death."

"Well, now wait awhile, you need to worry about those things. Hell, we're in the middle of a war..."

"An illegal war," Brenda quickly corrected.

"A war is a war, Brenda, and this war has a draft. Bill unfortunately is in good health." He thought for a moment. "Of course you won't be if you keep smoking that garbage. The only way to avoid the draft is to go to college, and I think you're just a fool for not recognizing that."

"Maybe I want to go see the world," Bill said, trying to get under his father's skin. "I hear Vietnam is beautiful this time of year."

"Oh hell, Bill, will you knock it off! This isn't some joking matter. War is not seeing the world. War gets you killed. Amazing to me how you young folks these days don't see that."

"Dad, you went to war," Rachel said, coming to her brother's defense. She shook her head in confusion, wondering why her father was being so obtuse.

"I was defending this country."

"And Vietnam is preventing the spread of communism throughout Asia."

Bill laughed. "Looks like LBJ's propaganda machine has finally trickled down to you, sister. Maybe you should go sign up for the draft."

“Bill,” Myrtle said, plopping a plate of trout and eggs in his lap, “when are you going to cut that hair? I tell all my friend’s that you’re the most handsome of my sons, but they can never see your face. Men don’t wear hair like that.”

“It’s the style, Mom. And where do you think I got this style? In college. Besides, Brenda likes it.”

“Before you failed out?” Rachel asked. “Glad to see you thinking for yourself.”

“I prefer conscientious objector of class.”

“Bill, you’re just an idiot,” Rachel said. “If Lloyd Jr. were here, he’d tell you that.”

Bill looked appalled. “Lloyd’s the biggest hippie of anyone! He’s stuck in the sixties, living in Berkeley.”

They all sighed as a family and began to eat.

“I’ll still work the orchard on the weekends,” Bill finally said as he threw his food scraps into the fire. Birds began to chirp as the sun reached higher into sky and other families began to make fires of their own at nearby campsites.

“Bill, I don’t want you going to Vietnam,” Lloyd said. “But more importantly than that, your grandfather came here so that future generations could prosper. We need good working land. That’s how his family fell into ruin in Croatia. If you’re going to drop out, come work the orchard fulltime. At least that’s what I think.”

Bill raised both of his hands. He had spent two years at San Jose State, and the one characteristic he had picked up—other than an aggressive marijuana habit—was to organize his thoughts by listing off his points into his palm. “First of all,” he said, sticking his index finger into his palm, “he came here, set up an orchard and made sure you took it over, and you always resented him for that. Secondly,” he now stuck his index and middle finger into his palm, “you literally raised us with the expectation of bigger and better things. Now I want to do it and you’re giving me hell about it.”

“Okay, that’s quite enough,” Myrtle said. “We don’t argue on our camping trips. Bill, if you get drafted, don’t come crying to us. Now come on, let’s pack things up. We have to head out early to stop and see your Uncle George. He’s back in the hospital.”

“Oh for crying out loud,” Lloyd said, “is he back in the hospital?”

“You know he is, honey.”

“That man’s in the hospital more than I can keep track of. What’s wrong with him this time?”

“Same thing as always. Another bout of pneumonia. Doctors aren’t sure what’s causing it.”

“How come Uncle George never got married?” Rachel asked.

“Ha ha, ha ha,” Lloyd said. “Ha ha, George? George never liked women much.”

“George was a fairy?” Bill asked.

“You know I never asked exactly what was going on. Didn’t seem like my business.”

“Well now he’s in the hospital again, so we need to go see him,” Myrtle said. “You know I wouldn’t have met your father if not for George’s help. Least we can do is show him we care. Now get up. I want this site clean within the hour.”

At Myrtle’s direction, all conversation stopped. The site was cleaned and packed—as requested—within the hour. Exactly one hour later, Lloyd was pulling the wood-paneled Station Wagon down the dirt road and eventually onto the highway. The vacation was over; the family had to get back to reality.

## Chapter 27

Lloyd and Bill sat in the sterilized hospital room and looked at George. The fluorescent lighting buzzed above their heads and the hard-plastic chairs creaked beneath their weight. George looked the way Lloyd imagined death would look if it could take a human form, the way Lloyd's father told him he had looked when he had whooping cough. George was barely into his sixties, but his skin hung off his bones and he resembled a man of ninety. Large welts spotted his face and the pneumonia had caused a harsh wheeze in his lungs.

"Three days," George began before coughing up phlegm. "Three days in a row." Even his voice had changed. It sounded like someone had taken the vocal chords and crunched them together.

"I know it," Lloyd said, his manner of speaking becoming slower as he got older. He put his hands in the air and then dropped them for emphasis as he said, "Just thought we'd stop *by*. Myrtle couldn't make it up today. She made you an apple pie."

All three looked at the wrapped apple pie sitting on the dresser under the window.

"Apples," George said. "I love Myrtle, but I'm so sick of apples." He paused and looked his youngest brother up and down. "Must mean you think it's bad this time."

"Ha ha," Lloyd said as he began to rub his chin in circumspection, "well, it doesn't seem good. It doesn't seem too good."

George's head remained on the pillow, but he tilted it back to look at the ceiling. He breathed in the stale air as though he knew it would be the last air his lungs would ever experience.

"A virus, they call it. I've been a doctor my whole life and you know how many times I've had to tell patients we don't know what they're suffering from? Zero." He took another deep breath and then looked at Bill. "Billy boy, I can't even tell if that's really you with all that facial hair."

"It's me," Bill said.

“Yeah. Did your father ever tell you how I paid his way through Cal Berkeley?”

Bill smiled and nodded. “Once or twice.”

“That’s it? Of course. Lloydie never appreciated my help. Wanted to do it himself. Has he guilted you to working the orchard? Don’t blame him if he has. Your Uncle John and I, we always convinced him it had to be him. Lloydie, I never apologized about that.” He paused again, a man considering his life and his actions as he takes some of his final breaths. “And now I’m on my death bed and John spent his whole life as a high school baseball coach.” He laughed. “Lloyd takes over the orchard and then gets rich off the stock market. Unbelievable. You were always good at math, Lloydie. Always good. Are you good at math, Bill?”

Bill had to fight back tears. He had never seen a man dying and reliving his life. “Yes, I’ve always been good at math.”

“Ah, your father’s son.”

“And good at English,” Lloyd said.

“Ah, Myrtle’s son. Good combination.”

“Of course, he failed out of college,” Lloyd said, extending a couple of fingers off of his chin. He breathed audibly out of his nose.

George smiled and began to chuckle, which led to hacking coughs from deep within his chest. Once he settled, he said, “You left college, Bill? I can appreciate someone having some fun. Hell, your Uncle John only lasted two years before the baseball team tossed him for drinking too damn much.”

Bill sighed and readjusted himself in his seat. “I just want to work at the warehouse. College isn’t putting money in my pocket.”

“The warehouse?” George looked at him as though expecting a punchline. When none came, he cocked his head to the side and formed his lips into an upside-down smile. “Well, I guess you’re a true Tomatic, denying your true destiny. We’re farmers, Billy. Unless, of course, you’re not.”

“Now, now just wait awhile,” Lloyd said. “Father came here to be a farmer.”

“Oh, Lloydie, don’t be ridiculous.” He turned again to Bill. “Live your life, Bill. If you want to be a farmer, be a farmer. If you want to be a soldier like your father, be a soldier. If you want to be a banker and become a millionaire, go be a banker.” He turned to Lloyd. “That’s why father came here, Lloydie. Opportunity. Progress. An American life. You’ve embraced it and you don’t even realize it.”

“Or to become a doctor,” Bill said with a smirk.

“Yeah, a doctor that dies from a mysterious illness, go figure,” George responded, again looking at the ceiling. “Gave me a good life. Mind you, I spent eight years in college to get it.”

They all laughed and sat in silence. Lloyd found himself putting his hand on his older brother’s shoulder. They weren’t affectionate people, but George accepted the gesture and closed his eyes, realizing it could be the last human touch he felt.

“So,” he said, opening his eyes, “how about some of that pie?”

About an hour later, Lloyd and Bill were back in the car driving south once again. It would be the last time either of them spoke to George, who passed away later that night. Lloyd would find out later that he was an early victim of a little-known virus called AIDS.

“I need to make another stop,” Lloyd said as he drove.

Bill didn’t question him. He looked out the window and watched the world of a Saturday afternoon drift by. Lloyd turned the radio on and they listened to reports of a possible oil embargo and then news of new attacks in Vietnam.

A few minutes later, Lloyd turned off the highway and headed into Palo Alto. He pulled his car into the parking lot of Commander Industries.

“Commander Industries?” Bill asked.

“Stock broker.”

Lloyd didn't explain further as he stepped out of the car. He knew in his heart that his brother was declining rapidly and he didn't have the energy to explain stocks or his stock broker or the idea of buying stocks. He couldn't explain that he bought his first stock the day his father died or that he had made enough money in the past two decades to completely move on from owning an orchard. He had spent years wondering if his father and his great grandfather would want to own an orchard if they had enough money to survive. Regardless, he didn't want to lose everything he had made and the recession was getting worse.

He heard Bill step out of the car and jog after him. They entered the brokerage firm's building together. It had expanded since the first time Lloyd visited, now with several floors and several associates. A receptionist greeted him.

“Mr. Tahmatoh, what a pleasant surprise,” the woman behind the desk said. The woman had a plaid dress on and a head band that pulled her brown hair out of her eyes.

“Hello, Margaret,” Lloyd said.

Margaret walked around the corner and hugged him. “You're looking very handsome! Oh, and who's this?”

“Bill,” Bill said quickly.

“Very groovy. I'll bet you look a lot like your father underneath that beard.” She turned back to Lloyd. “I assumed you're here for Tony. I called ahead when I saw you walking in.”

Lloyd felt strange being catered to and didn't like going through an overly friendly receptionist, but at least she was efficient. A minute later, Margaret had led Bill and Lloyd into Tony's new office overlooking downtown Palo Alto.

“Lloyd Tahmatch!” Tony said as he stood. “My number one customer.” They shook hands. “And this must be your son. Bill, right?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “Bill, listen to your old man here. He has a knack for value. So, Lloyd, what can I do for you today?”

“Well, ha ha, I want to sell everything.”

They continued to shake hands as the air left Tony’s stomach and his jaw dropped.

“Lloyd,” he said, “let’s not be rash. You don’t sell on a downturn.”

“You’re not reading your new partner’s newsletter,” Lloyd said. “It’s going to get worse. Sell it all. I’m just not in the mood to be told otherwise.”

Tony nodded. He had gotten to know Lloyd fairly well over the years. When he made a decision, there was no use trying to convince him otherwise. A couple of hours later, Lloyd and Bill walked out of the office with a handful of sales certificates. Once in the car, Lloyd handed them to Bill, who started to flip through them.

“Dad,” Bill said.

Lloyd cut him off before he could finish his thought. “Bill, if you want to leave college and work at some car shop warehouse, that’s fine. I just don’t *care* anymore. Just be happy. Take pride in yourself and be happy.” Lloyd’s intentions were pure, but he sensed that Bill read into them with a negative connotation. “You just failed out of college,” Lloyd continued, but he cringed as soon as the words came out of his mouth. It’s true, Greg had been prodding him to let him take it over, but Greg took the football scholarship and when he actually came home he treated the trees like inanimate objects that produced money. He never took the interest in the trees the way Bill did. Bill treated them as individual souls; he cherished them. Greg had viewed them all as dollar signs. That’s why Lloyd never viewed Greg as the son to inherit the business. Bill had the passion, the heart; Greg just wanted to make money. Thinking about Greg and about the business-side of the orchard, Lloyd heard himself blurt out, “I cancelled our contract with Martinelli’s. I haven’t told your mother yet.”



Bill remained silent while he thought about the words. "Holy Toledo, Dad, you cancelled Martinelli's? What the hell for? Those apples are trash. We take them from the floor." He tsked his lips and slumped his head to the side.

"They dropped their prices to twenty dollars a ton. Doesn't matter if the apples are trash. Costs more to pay the God-damn workers to pick them up. We just can't keep up with these commercial farms."

"We still have Libby's for the good apples. And Mill's, too."

"I suppose we do. Dropping their prices as well. Ha ha, hell, I don't *know*, you know? We just need to keep plugging away. Sure would be nice if you could take some time to help me out."

"You know I'll keep helping. Sure as hell prefer the orchard to college. I need a good-paying job, though. You can understand that."

"Yeah, I know it. We'll be all right. Sometimes things just go badly. We still have the land, and that's important. Land is valuable. I know stocks and I know that land is valuable. I don't know how the orchard is going to survive, though, ha ha."

Bill laughed.

"I guess I was hoping you would take it over. I just don't know how realistic that is at this point."

Bill flipped through the receipts of sales again. Lloyd took the pick-up truck onto the offramp of the highway to begin the winding road into Aptos. George's illness, Martinelli's pulling out, the stock market crashing, none of it meant they could stop tending to the trees and the fruit. Lloyd saw Bill looking at the receipts.

"It'll go back up, but I don't think it's bottomed out yet. I'll buy back in when once it hits the floor."

Bill nodded and then opened the glove compartment. He pulled out a new pair of work gloves and shoved the receipts in their place. He closed the box and tried on the stiff gloves, opening and closing his fingers to stretch them out.

“Best part of picking apples,” Bill said, “the new gloves you get me.”

When Lloyd pulled the truck into the orchard parking lot, he had to drive through several Mexican workers standing on the road. Once on the parking lot, he noticed three vehicles he had never seen before. Three white men stepped out to greet him. Bill had never seen them before, but they had the dark features and thick eyebrows of Slavs. Lloyd parked the truck and stepped out to greet them. After a few minutes, he called Bill over.

“Bill, get these three set up with some props. Have them work on the branches along the east fence.”

“Thank you, Lloyd,” one of them said, and the other two nodded gratefully.

“There’s some gloves in the shed,” Bill said. “I’ll meet you guys over there in a few minutes.” When the three walked off, Bill turned to his father and said, “I don’t get you, Dad. You keep giving jobs to your Croatian friends but you could hire the Mexicans for a fraction of the price.”

“Oh, I know it,” Lloyd said as he turned to walk to the house. “I just think it’s important to support our community. Don’t forget to plow the rows. Getting out of hand.”

Bill stood and watched Lloyd walk to the house and then he turned to the shed where the three men waited. Once he set them on their way, he yanked open the bigger shed door and stepped into the seat of the tracked-tractor. The orchard had two tractors: one with tracks and one with wheels. The one on tracks sat significantly lower to the ground and could plow underneath low-hanging tree branches. The tractor had a long circular plow hooked to the back that turned and churned up the soil

and weeds as the machine worked its way down the rows of the orchard and through the trees. Bill enjoyed working with the tractor. He had spent the spring planting new trees and all summer propping the largest branches, so some easier work was appreciated.

Before turning on the engine, Bill took the grease can and lubed the main joints and rotors. His brothers had never bothered to go to such lengths. Once it was greased to his satisfaction, he took the key and powered up the engine. Once he felt the hum of the machine underneath him, he shifted into gear and allowed it to slowly pull forward and out of the shed. He turned along the parking lot and headed for the nearest row. The weeds had grown to several feet in length and would soon begin suffocating the trees. He felt the plow begin to grind the weeds into pulp as he spun the tractor around the first tree. He had to be careful as he did this. The plow was wider than the tractor, so he had to know when to turn in order to avoid running the plow into the trunk and leaving a nasty scar. Bill took great care to avoid harming the trees. When Greg plowed, he would carve off the sides of trunks and speed recklessly to save time, but not Bill. Over the years, Bill had become so adept at plowing the fields that he could get the plow within an inch of the tree trunk and still be able to make a sharp enough turn to cut back into the next tree. He made long weaving zags for hundreds of yards before making a straight pass down the row. Then he moved onto the next row. He found the process cathartic.

After the rows were plowed, Bill pulled the tractor back into the shed. In a couple of weeks, he'd have to go through the process of removing the plow and cleaning the bits, but he'd be back out next weekend re-plowing the rows. For the time being, he simply removed any weeds from the axles and then hung the keys on the hook inside the shed door. His jeans and flannel shirt were covered in the dust that the plow churned and spewed into the air, and he could feel the dirt caked against his cheeks. No matter, as he'd take a shower before dinner.

He walked out of the shed and slammed the sliding wooden door shut. He reengaged the lock and then walked along the wooden porch and down the stairs to the parking lot. He didn't stop to talk

to the workers finishing out their day. He didn't stop to look for his father. He walked across the parking lot and passed by the house, turning left around a particularly gnarly Golden Delicious apple tree. He walked up the row that was now nicely plowed and then proceeded up the hill that jutted into the middle of the property. It wasn't a large hill, but it extended beyond the electric wires that cut across the land and provided a hideaway from the activity below.

Bill found his favorite seat against an old oak tree that overlooked the Santa Cruz Valley and plopped into the dirt. He took a deep breath and felt his eyes roll into the back of his head as the world settled down around him. To help in the process, he pulled a joint out of his pocket and lit it with a match, inhaling the marijuana smoke before dispelling it out into the pristine air. He took a deep breath as he watched the smoke dissipate and then he smoked some more. He knew his father disapproved of marijuana, and he knew it didn't help him in his college course work, but it made him feel good. Completely stoned, he tossed the remaining butt of the joint into the dirt and leaned his head into the bark of the oak, letting the setting sun warm his cheeks. He closed his eyes and wondered why he couldn't just live on that hill permanently. He could build a house and smoke all the pot he could get his hands on, just enjoy the ride as the world turned beneath his feet.

## Chapter 28

When Bill and Lloyd arrived back home later that evening, a recognizable car sat in the driveway. The brand new 1972 Dodge Charger, white as the snow of the Sierra Nevada, stood out in stark contrast to the rest of the neighborhood the way a vibrant white cloud might stand out in a dull blue sky.

“That’s a *fancy* car,” Lloyd said. “Ha ha, would you look at that car?”

“Yeah,” Bill said casually. He wasn’t as high as he had been on the hill, but he still felt relaxed.

“Brenda likes her cars.”

They both sat in the pickup truck and stared at it. “Must not have thought much of the Station Wagon, ha ha. I didn’t know she was coming over tonight.”

“Neither did I. And she loves the Station Wagon. Just likes her muscle cars too.”

“Her dad must be doing well with the Teamsters to afford a car like that.”

“She bought it herself, not her dad. She works. And it’s a good job, Dad.”

“She bought it herself?! Well, you know that’s awfully *impressive*. Looks like an expensive car.”

As he said that, rain drops started to fall on the windshield. “Oh for crying out loud, would you look at that? How am I supposed to barbecue in the rain? Ah, hell, come on. I’m sure Mommy’s waiting.”

They got out together and strolled across the driveway. They didn’t use the garage, which was now strictly for storage, so Lloyd unlocked the wooden doorknob of the green front door. When they stepped in the house, Myrtle and Brenda were in the front living room admiring the display case of pictures and memorabilia. Sitting on the top shelf of the display case, presented as the pinnacle of the case’s belongings, was an old bottle that appeared to be filled with olive oil.

Myrtle and Brenda both turned when the men entered.

“Hey,” Bill said quickly. “I didn’t know you were coming.”

“Got the day off tomorrow. Thought I’d surprise you.” She looked back at the display case. “Your mom was explaining this bottle of olive oil. Such an unbelievable story. Have you ever tasted any?”

“Of the olive oil?” Bill asked. “No. Never crossed my mind, actually.”

“It never crossed your mind?! Bill, how is that possible?”

“Ha ha, ha ha,” Lloyd laughed. “None of us have tasted it. It’s the last bottle of its kind. Straight from Croatia. My father brought it when he came to this country.”

“That’s so fascinating,” Brenda said, putting her fingers up to the glass. “Bill never talks about these things. He’s so serious all the time.”

“Ha ha, ha ha, except when he goes to school,” Lloyd said.

“Oh, Daddy, hush now,” Myrtle said.

“Oh, should I hush now?”

“Yes.” Myrtle stepped next to Brenda and sighed. “Bill has always been serious, yes. But he’s special. Between you and me, he’s always been my favorite of the kids.”

Brenda started to laugh. “I think all your kids are great. But I see where they get it. Bill, look how stylish your mom is?”

Bill looked at his mom, who had on a fur coat and perfectly curled hair. Her lips were red with lipstick and her pants flared at the cuffs. Bill always thought it was weird when his mother got dressed up and didn’t know what to say, so he just smiled shyly and nodded.

“Yes,” Myrtle said. “If only my sorority sisters could see me now. They’d be so proud that they rubbed off on me.” As she spoke, Lloyd started to walk away and began to unbutton his shirt, but Myrtle said, “Daddy, shower quick, the chicken is ready to put on the grill.”

Lloyd stopped and turned. “The grill? It’s raining out.”

“Put the hibachi in the fireplace. We always grill for Bridge night.”

Bill sighed and shook his head and led her into the house. Even though he was staying at the house, it still felt weird being in his childhood home. His parents had made some renovations—new shag carpeting and the kitchen counters were now a nice laminate—but every corner had a memory. He could show Brenda in the dining room where he had spilled wine trying to sneak a glass from his dad, or the stain on the kitchen floor where he bled from slicing his finger trying to carve a turkey. Outside he could show her where he burned a hole in the walnut tree after trying to send a parachute into the air with a candle. Memories everywhere, but memories from what he felt like was a past life. He didn't necessarily want it to be a past life, but as every day went by, he knew they were becoming numbered.

As they walked into the back family room, Lloyd emerged from his bedroom in a clean shirt. "Come on, Bill, help me get the grill set up in the fire place."

"Wait," Brenda said, "you're going to barbecue in the fire place?"

"Why not?" Bill responded. "There's a chimney."

"I love it. That's totally righteous. You never told me your parents were so hip, Bill." Brenda now stepped in front of Bill to look at the fireplace and then sat at one of the card tables that had been set up. "So, Myrtle, how long have you hosted Bridge nights?"

"Oh, ho hum," Myrtle said as she walked into the kitchen. She laughed. "It's been years. My father always told me that Bridge and crosswords keep your mind sharp."

"And a good set of curlers and barbeque small enough to fit in the fireplace," Brenda responded.

"Ah, yes, well, we like our entertaining. And I need to look my best." Myrtle primped her curled haired with her hand. "Gives me an excuse to dress up."

"Maybe Lloyd should take you out on the town. I'd love to have you up to Dublin some time. But only if you wear your finest dress."

Myrtle laughed. "Lloyd's taking me to Spain next year. Maybe I'll pick up a dress or two when I'm there." She smiled wistfully. "Both of our fathers learned Bridge when they were kids and both taught us growing up. One of Lloyd and my first dates was to the Bridge club."

"That's so romantic."

"Give it a rest, Mom," Bill said. "Brenda doesn't need to hear about you and dad."

Bill took the hibachi and placed it in the fireplace. Lloyd followed behind him with some charcoal and lighter fluid. A few minutes later, the whole house was smoky and smelled like chemicals, but as soon as Lloyd opened a window, the chimney began to suck it into the flue. Myrtle placed packs of cigarettes on each of the tables next to decks of cards and pads of paper for keeping score.

"Are you two staying for dinner?" Myrtle asked.

"And eat with your weird Bridge friends?" Bill asked. "Absolutely not. I'm meeting the guys at Danny's to watch the game." Bill realized he hadn't asked Brenda if she had any interest in drinking beer and watching the Giants game with his friends, so he quickly asked, "I assume you're okay with that."

"Sounds great. It'd be good to remind your friends that they can get a girl too someday."

"Not likely," Bill said, rubbing his beard.

Brenda smiled seductively at him and then led him around the corner and out of view of his parents. She immediately began to kiss him, but Bill pulled away. "We can't do that here."

"Oh, Bill, they don't care! Your parents love me."

"Let's just go to the bar, okay?"

"Fine," she said, pulling away in disappointment. "Can we actually drive home afterward? You spend too many nights at your parents' house."

"If we have the day off, I need to work the orchard, you know that." Bill looked awkwardly at the ground. "Oh, Brenda, come on, stifle up. Let's go have some fun."

"Okay," Brenda said.



A half hour later, right as the Bridge night participants began to arrive at the house, Bill and Brenda found themselves sitting at a cramped table with six of Bill's high school friends. Dave Schwartz, who grew up with Bill in the house across the street, drove with them because he had never been in a Dodge Charger before. Danny's Pub, one of the only bars in Mountain View that showed the San Francisco Giants games, catered to men who had little education and bad jobs. Men rarely brought women with them, and until he sat at the table with Brenda, Bill never realized how sticky everything was. His hands stuck to the table and he had to force his beer glass off the surface. His feet stuck to the ground and he could feel his shirt stick to the wooden booth. Even then, Bill didn't find it inappropriate to bring his girlfriend. It was, after all, Bill's local bar and he was raised to appreciate tradition. Only when Kevin Alexander, a man who was a year older in high school, said, "Christ, Tahmatch, are you trying to get dumped?" did Bill realize Brenda might not be as keen to his local establishment as he had become.

"Oh, sorry," he said to Brenda. "We can go somewhere else."

"Don't be ridiculous, Bill. And leave all your friends? I love places like this. They have character."

"Damn right," Dave said, peeling his glass off the table to toast the air.

The eight of them all watched as the Giants beat the dodgers, their cheers growing louder as they went through several rounds of beer.

At one point, Bill said, "Unbelievable, that's the sixth time this umpire has called that outside pitch a ball on the Giants. Not once has he called it on the Dodgers."

"Six times?" Brenda asked. "Are you actually keeping track or is that just an exaggeration."

"Don't mess with Bill's concentration," Dave said.

Kevin followed that up with, "I'm surprised he even remembers you're sitting next to him."

Bill, of course, heard none of the comments because he was so focused on the game.

“I think that’s why my father likes him so much,” Brenda said. “Isn’t that right, Billy?” She waited for a response. “Bill. Bill!”

Bill suddenly snapped out of it. “What? Oh, sorry. This team is pretty special.”

“I was saying my father likes you because of your concentration.”

“Oh, yeah, I try to work hard.”

“How come you’ve never brought me here, Billy? Hiding me from your friends?”

Bill wasn’t accustomed to talking about real issues during game nights at Danny’s. There wasn’t any specific reason he hadn’t brought Brenda before, this was just his Sunday night routine with the boys. It was an escape and Bill loved it.

“You’re just never here on Sunday nights.”

It created an awkward silence and several eyes drifted back to the game. Brenda picked up her beer and said, “Cheers to Bill’s awkwardness! Let’s do shots!”

When the game ended and the waiter delivered the final round to the four of them that stuck around, Kevin slid next to Bill and said, “Bill, I don’t know how you manage to nab a major babe like Brenda...”

“Cheers to that,” Brenda said.

“... but, we need to go have some fun. I want to talk to you guys about this deal I’m trying to work in Tahoe.”

“Oh Lord,” Dave said, partially slurring his words. “Here comes the next great idea. Brenda, if you didn’t know this about Kevin here, he always has the very best ideas. That’s why he’s still in Mountain View living at home.”

As they all giggled, Brenda said, “Now Dave, aren’t you living at home too? In fact, seems like Bill is the only one who managed to move on out.”

“And where are you staying tonight?”

"I'm driving Billy home," Brenda said, but she, too, had begun to slur and bumped her beer as she reached for it.

"The hell you are," Dave said. "You're going right back to Bill's parents'. Catch the end of Bridge night." Dave slapped Bill across the chest.

"So what's this great idea?" Bill asked slowly. He held his beer and lifted it up and down ever so slightly, tapping the bottom against the table. His head began to droop and he looked into the glass.

"Billy's drunk," Brenda said, rubbing her hand through Bill's hair. "You all think he's serious, he's just another Teamster drunk. Trust me, I know the type."

"Okay, hear me out," Kevin said, beginning to grow impatient as the night came to a close. "I found this cabin up on the North Shore. My old man's partner owns it and busted up his back or some shit, says he won't be using it all winter. He's looking to rent it out. It has five bedrooms. Dave, Bill, you'd each have your own room. Find two more guys. We stay all winter. Get jobs at the ski resorts. Be ski bums for six months. Tell me it's not the greatest idea you've ever heard. It's like this golden opportunity just laid out for us."

"That's an amazing idea!" Dave said. "You finally got one right."

"You know I'm sitting here, right?" Brenda asked.

"That's the beauty of it!" Kevin said, letting Dave fuel his fire. "You could come up every weekend. Stay for a week. It screams romance."

"You really understand women, don't you?"

"I've been told."

The waiter came by and said, "Ten minutes guys, then we're closing up."

The table ignored him. Brenda smirked and fidgeted in her seat to lean toward Kevin. "I'm pulling rank here. Billy's out."

“What?!” Bill suddenly said, twisting his head from his beer to look at Brenda. “I’m out? It sounds like *fun!*”

“Bill, my father just gave you a fulltime job. It’s a good job. You can’t do that to him. Or to me. You can’t do that to me. You get that, right?”

“I could work the four-day swing. Spend three days in Tahoe.”

Bill looked back at his beer. He was drunk, but the drunkenness just brought him clarity. He didn’t want to be a Teamster. Why couldn’t he just work on the orchard? Why couldn’t he go be a ski bum? Hell, his great grandfather sailed to the arctic. His grandfather told him stories of gambling his way across America. Even his dad ran off. And what did Bill do? He ran off to be a Teamster and move car parts from one side of a warehouse to another side. He wanted to tell Brenda that she shouldn’t hold him back from a good opportunity.

Brenda sighed. ““We need to go home.”

She moved to start getting up, but Kevin persisted. “Bill, think about it. Once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Brenda,” Bill said. “Once in a lifetime opportunity.”

“Oh, once in a lifetime? Well then of course you should go.”

“Wait, Brenda, I’m serious. You don’t think this would be fun?”

Brenda hesitated. She smiled like a shy girl feeling exposed for the first time. “Bill,” she said, “we’re both drunk, but if you need to run off to Tahoe with your friends, who am I to stop you?”

Bill didn’t understand the tone. He didn’t understand that Brenda wanted him to settle down and start a family with her. He didn’t understand that he shouldn’t have brought her to the bar in the first place. All he heard was consent.

As his eyes grew heavier, he tapped the glass against the table and said, "Well then I'm in. Let's talk in the morning." He slid out of the booth and wobbled until his knees locked into place. Brenda laughed and helped him walk out the door.

## Chapter 29

Karen Steinberg blended seamlessly into the crowd at Temple Beth El in Cupertino. She was in a long-sleeved floral print dress and had covered her lips in maroon lipstick, a habit that her mother instilled in her as a young lady raised to keep up appearances. Her olive-colored skin and dark brown hair stamped her identity as Jewish by blood, but as her father liked to say, “You can tell a Jew by their look, but you can tell an Ashkenazi Jew by their attitude.” Karen hated the comment, but she never had a good quip in response, which led her to believe she was not actually an Ashkenazi Jew. In fact, she wondered if she were really Jewish at all—or hoped she wasn’t—but she never denied that she was a spitting image of her mother and was fairly certain her mother was too neurotic to have an affair on her father. Basic logic and deduction meant she was actually her parents’ daughter, and that made her an Ashkenazi Jew.

“I think she’s on next,” her father said. Her father, Warren, had a horseshoe of brown hair around an otherwise bald skull—currently covered by his white silk yarmulke (why else do you think God mandated we wear these ridiculous things, Warren liked to say)—and thick black glasses that framed a comedically large nose. “Yes, see, see here, the program says she’s on next. Bev, don’t you think she’s on next?”

He asked his wife, Beverly, as though she were sitting next to him, when in fact she sat two seats away. Karen sat in the middle, thanking the Lord himself that none of her friends from high school were Jewish. Not that it mattered much, seeing as Karen had lost touch with most of them after going to St. Mary’s College a few months prior—pretty much every one of them except Fiona—but she didn’t return home for Winter Break to look like a loser.

“Be quiet, Dad,” she whispered.

Karen was already annoyed she would be forced to go to Temple two days in a row—Thursday night for the Winter Talent Show and then Friday for the Sabbath—but she still didn't need her father to make a scene, Ashkenazi Jew or not.

"Ask your mother if you think she's on next," Warren said as he came to the realization that Bev wasn't in her customary spot next to him.

Karen rolled her eyes and sighed. "Mom, is Tracy on next?"

Beverly sat with her legs crossed, her red lips jutting out into the air as her head sunk back into her shoulders. Beverly had a knack for tuning out the world and was currently fighting heavy eyelids. Karen at least felt good that her mother looked well put-together. They had gone shopping together at the Paper Doll Dress Shop the day before when Beverly showed her the horrifically dated pink dress suit that she was planning to wear. Karen had learned a thing or two in her time away at college and actually had a penchant for good fashion. Her mother had been skeptical—and still was as they left the house two hours earlier—but reluctantly trusted her eldest daughter's judgment when Warren reassured her that Karen was a very smart young woman with the best of intentions for her mother.

"Mom?" Karen whispered a bit louder.

"Hmm?" Beverly asked, getting pulled out of her trance.

"Is Tracy on next?"

"How would I know? Ask your father."

Karen shook her head. "She says to ask you."

"Me?" Warren asked. "Well of course she's on next. It says it right here in the program. What would you go asking your mother for? She hasn't kept a schedule since the first time she laughed at one of my jokes."

Karen ignored him. She had heard the story. She knew her father simply liked to make Beverly feel important by asking her questions he already knew the answer to. She had still fallen for the trap.

She either had grown ignorant in her time away at college, or she had had it in her heart to amuse her father and make her mother feel important. She sighed, realizing it was the latter.

“And for the next act,” the associate rabbi said in front of the crowd. He flipped a note card and read, “Tracy Steinberg on the cello.”

The audience clapped meekly as the rabbi stepped off the stage and the curtain opened.

“See, I told you she was on next,” Warren said in one of Karen’s ears, which was followed by Beverly whispering in her other ear, “Tell you father Tracy’s on,” which was then followed again by Warren saying, “Make sure your mother knows Tracy’s on. She won’t want to miss this.”

Tracy, Karen’s younger sister by three years, couldn’t have been more of an opposite from her older sister. While Karen’s dark brown hair screamed Jewish woman to the world, Tracy’s light brown hair—which she personally cut down to her ears—and carefree nature made her look more like a San Francisco love child. While Karen put great care into her appearance, Tracy hadn’t combed her hair in days and she had ripped out the shoulder pads of the hand-me-down she currently wore. The fact she wore a dress at all was a victory and one that took the prodding of her cello teacher, but had Tracy had her way, she’d be barefoot in a pair of ripped Levi’s with a loose turtle neck rolled up to her elbows.

As Tracy stroked her first chord, Karen saw her close her eyes. The fingers of her left hand shimmered as they danced across the neck of the cello prodding the strings into sweet, melodic notes. Tracy had a natural talent for all instruments, but had a passionate love for the cello, practicing for hours each day at the expense of Karen’s sanity. The best part of going to college had been escaping the weekday afternoon cello sessions.

And now she had to sit through a recital?

Tracy worked through her opening section and then began to stroke the strings with more emotion as the notes progressed into a darker and more elaborate tone. The audience stared in awe and wonder at how this small high school girl with a goofy hair cut could create such passionate sounds.



Even Karen stared. She had known her sister was a genius with the cello, but Tracy had really matured into a virtuoso over the past semester.

Karen watched the recital and found herself forgetting about the past animosity toward her younger sibling. She got momentarily lost in the music as Tracy's fingers moved effortlessly, as though extensions of the cello itself.

"Karen," Beverly asked, turning to look at her less-musically inclined daughter, "how come you never got into the cello?"

"What? Mom, this is not the time."

"Tracy is just so great with instruments; it makes me very proud." She turned to watch as Tracy finished her piece. "You had such a nice singing voice. Why didn't you continue with it? Tracy continued, and now look at her."

"Mom, please stop," Karen whispered. "If you're so proud, then finish watching."

Beverly sighed. "You know, she gets her talent from my side of the family, not your father's. You're stubborn. *That* you get from your father."

Karen closed her eyes and remained seated as the crowd stood to applaud Tracy's work. It was a moment that summed up her childhood. Everyone cheered for Tracy. Everyone loved Tracy. Everyone looked over Karen to see Tracy. What was it about Tracy? Why did everyone fall over themselves to be with Tracy? Perfect Tracy. Even Karen's high school boyfriend loved Tracy more than her.

As the crowd filed out of the synagogue's auditorium, the four Steinbergs walked to the family Station Wagon in proud silence. Tracy gave the dominant performance of the talent show, but it would be rude to make an ordeal of it. Warren placed the cello in the trunk and then they all opened their respective doors to their seats and climbed in. When they closed the doors, Warren smiled. "Tracy, you were fantastic. Wasn't she fantastic, Karen?"

“Mmm,” Karen said, refusing to allow herself to say a single kind word of encouragement.

Tracy looked smugly at her sister. “Can we please go home? I want to get out of this dress.”

“Really fantastic. I always knew you would be a star. Hard work, practice, and a natural ability. Just fantastic. Isn’t that right, Karen?”

Before she could respond, Beverly said, “You know she gets her talent from my side of the family, right Warren.”

“Oh, Beverly, all of the great things in our daughters came from your side of the family.” He looked in the rearview mirror and saw the tension between his daughters. He then looked at Beverly who was shaking her head and looking out the window. “Oh, I heard a great joke. Five Jewish women go to a restaurant. The waiter approaches. He looks nervous. He takes a moment to collect himself and says, Ladies, is anything okay?”

Warren began to laugh hysterically and then even Beverly began to laugh.

“Is anything okay,” Beverly repeated. “Oh, Warren, you’re always saying such random jokes. What even made you think about that?”

Warren sighed. “Nothing, I just like to make you laugh. You know that’s why I married your mother, right, girls? Because she laughs at all my jokes.”

Once at home, Karen was sorting through clothes hanging in her closet. She scoffed at a few dresses, shocked she would wear something so out of style as recently as a year ago, but she also pulled out a few that could still pass as fashionable. She nodded at one and held it in front of her while she looked in a mirror. She began to examine her face more closely. She had lost some color at college and would need to go to a tanning salon in the next day or two. As she looked at herself in the mirror, the door to her room burst open and Tracy entered.

“It’s the turkey, isn’t it?”

“Excuse me?” Karen asked, trying to maintain her composure before violently throwing Tracy out of her room. “What turkey?”

“The turkey. From Thanksgiving. It’s why you don’t like me. I’ve been thinking a lot about this and Michael agrees. When I explain it to him, it all started with the turkey. You never forgave me for it and you know what? It’s time you apologized.”

“The turkey?” Karen asked again, incredulous at the allegation. “As in, the Thanksgiving turkey that you peed on when you were seven?”

They stared at each other for a few seconds. There was, of course, some truth to the statement. Karen was ten years old and had helped her mother prepare the Thanksgiving turkey for the first time in her life. An eighteen-pound beauty, golden skinned with browned appendages. The smell made Karen’s eyes water and stomach growl to this day. It was the first thing she was ever proud of, and the last time she could remember that Beverly bragged about one of her accomplishments to guests. And were there guests! Twenty-two family and friends, all gathered in their house to eat Karen’s turkey. Tracy did not appreciate the added attention that Karen stole from her, so in a desperate act of rebellion, she climbed on the counter, pulled up her dress, and peed on it. Beverly fainted and Warren ran as fast as possible to pull his urinating-daughter off of their dinner, which led to a fountain of sorts spraying the kitchen and its occupants. Because of Warren’s quick response, Tracy didn’t have the opportunity to paint the whole turkey with her pee, so they managed to salvage half of it. Karen is convinced that her dark meat still tasted like Tracy’s piss, though.

Yes, she was mad about the turkey. No, that was not why she despised Tracy.

“Yes, you’re incapable of forgiving me, even though I was like four years old.”

“You were seven!” Karen screamed. “And I could care less about the fucking turkey! I hate you because even when you pissed all over my turkey, mom and dad still didn’t get mad at you. You pissed on the turkey, and they still managed to get mad at me that night! Little perfect Tracy can’t do anything

wrong, even when you pee on the turkey! And that still isn't why I fucking hate you! Think about what you just said. You said even Michael agrees. Michael. My boyfriend that you stole from me. I don't give a fucking damn about the turkey. You stole my boyfriend from me!"

Karen couldn't stop herself. She charged. Warren stepped into the room in the nick of time and scooped Karen into the air while simultaneously shoving Tracy out of the room.

"What is going on?!" he yelled as Karen flailed in his arms.

"She is evil!"

"Settle down, Karen," Warren said as he himself settled down. His tone had already relaxed and he now spoke through a long sigh. He put Karen on her feet. She was breathing hard and looking at the door. Warren looked onto the bed where Karen had begun to gather her piles of dresses. "What is this? An early spring cleaning?"

The question distracted Karen out of her anger and she turned her head to look at the dresses. Her breathing began to slow, but was still longwinded from her chest. She shook her head, trying to focus her thoughts. "I just thought I could donate some of the old dresses I don't wear anymore when we go to Temple tomorrow."

Warren beamed proudly. "My Lord of the Universe, you are a special woman. Where did you get such a big heart? Definitely not from me. Must be from your mother. What's the other pile?"

Karen began to speak but stopped, reluctant to reveal her plans. "They're the ones I'm taking with me. I'm moving out of the dorms and in with some sisters."

Warren turned serious, possibly even hurt. "Ah, that certainly sounds like a big decision you could have discussed with me."

"Well, I already decided, and like you said, I'm a woman. I can make my own decisions."

"True. This is true." He sat on the edge of the bed and patted the comforter next to him.

"Come on. Talk to me. What's happening between you and your sister?"

Karen sat as told and looked into her lap. Her outer comforter wasn't nearly as comfortable as the one underneath. The rough stitching looked beautiful but it was not meant for sleeping. Tracy never understood. Actually, no one in the family understood. Why place a second comforter on your bed just for style? It matched her entire room, though. Whereas Tracy had posters of the Beatles and pictures of faraway locales, Karen has designed her room with classy artwork and dried flowers. "I hate her. I think she's the devil."

Warren laughed. "Imagine that. Our whole lives living under the same roof with the devil. Sounds like a book."

"Don't laugh at me. You and mom always laugh at me. You never laugh at Tracy."

"Oh come on, Karen, that's not true."

"It is true. All you do is support Tracy. Tracy's so amazing. Tracy can't do anything wrong. Tracy..."

"Needs the extra support and encouragement. Karen, why do you think that is? You have always been a strong, independent woman ready to conquer the world. You don't need cuddles and kisses, you need direction. Your sister, well, your sister needs a bit more. We need to be proud parents for her to give her some motivation."

"That doesn't make it fair. Or right."

"I agree. Karen, ever since you were a little girl, you have been more mature and ready to be an adult than your mother was. You practically kept this household running. Sometimes it was easy for us to forget that you were still a girl. For that I'm sorry. But as the mature one, I expect more. You shouldn't take it out on your sister for my behavior."

Karen looked sullenly at her lap, refusing to let her father off the hook. "Regardless, she stole my boyfriend."

Warren laughed. "No she did not. You liked Michael. Michael liked your sister. Unrequited love is not a boyfriend. Now come on, Tracy means well."

"Tracy's a nightmare. And Michael more than liked me. We were..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

Warren stood and looked around the room. "So what now?"

"I'm going to Tahoe. Fiona is picking me up on Saturday."

Warren shook his head again. "A bunch of women going to Lake Tahoe on their own. It's a new world, Karen. Try not to leave a wake."

## Chapter 30

Karen had been to Lake Tahoe on a number of occasions, but always with her family. Beverly and Tracy would whine and complain for days—Karen remembers the complaining lasting for weeks—but would always willingly get in the car. Her father would drive the Station Wagon up late after work on a Thursday and Beverly would fall asleep while listening to classical music. The pine trees would gradually grow taller along the way until they blotted out the sky. Karen would count off the elevation signs—2000 feet, then 3000, and up to 6000—knowing that the turn off to their cabin rental occurred once they were above six thousand feet above sea level. Tracy pouted the entire drive up but ultimately enjoyed playing with their mother in the snow.

Karen never complained, but she didn't exactly enjoy the snow and the cold. It was just an opportunity for her to have some alone time with her father. During the days, Warren and Karen would go skiing in Squaw Valley. Warren would have already rented skis for the entire family, but Beverly and Tracy never used them. Only Karen would accompany him to the slopes. What she lacked in natural athletic ability, she made up for in good technique. She would effortlessly carve turns down the groomed runs, following her father who, also lacking natural athletic ability, would plow straight down the mountain. Karen never understood why he didn't take the time to properly carve out nice turns, but Warren would dismiss her question and say that the thrill of "bombing" down the hill made him feel as alive as he did when he was a technician in World War Two.

They'd have a nice lunch in the ski lodge, ski throughout the afternoon and then return to the cabin. Beverly would usually be asleep in front of the television and Tracy would be writing music or stealing wine while Beverly snoozed. Warren would make a fire to fight off the cold night and they would snuggle into the couch to read or play a board game or watch a movie. Always, though, whether

driving up the mountain or skiing down the mountain or riding out a snow storm in the cabin, her father's presence made her feel safe.

This current trip had a decidedly different feel. Fiona, her best friend from high school who had taken a semester at some junior college before dropping out and moving in with her boyfriend's parents in Mountain View, didn't quite exude the same safety net as her father. The back tires of her Pontiac swerved on the icy road and she spent more time fiddling with the stereo than concentrating on the road. Regardless, after a week with her family, Karen was happy to be in the company of someone who understood her; someone who not only understood her, but appreciated who she was.

"Oh my God!" Fiona cried. "Karen, I love your family. They're all so crazy. It's no wonder you turned out to be such a nut." Fiona had straightened her naturally curly dark hair, so it now fell over her purple button up shirt and matching sweater. Karen wondered why she wore brown bellbottoms with the purple top, but the clash of colors summed Fiona up in a nutshell.

"I think they mean well," Karen said.

"There you go, always sticking up for them."

Karen felt herself getting defensive. Crazy or not, they were still her family.

"Hey, everyone has their own problems. Don't forget that." Realizing she had sapped the mood, she quickly said, "Like you, for instance, living with your boyfriend's *parents*."

Fiona burst out laughing. "Hey, babe, it's free rent. Besides, Kevin's been up here for the past two months."

"So you're really living with his parents!"

Fiona laughed again. "My *point* is, now he lives up here and I think I'm moving in with him."

"To Tahoe? I thought you said he was living with some of his friends."

"Oh, he is, but it's his cabin." They drove in silence for a few seconds, not sure where to take the conversation. Finally, Fiona said, "Karen, I'm so excited you came with me. It makes it so much



easier. I mean, fun! It makes it so much fun! But, easier, at the same time. You're really doing me a solid here."

"Of course. You know I'm going for myself, though, right? I want to have fun."

"Oh relax, Karen. It's just nice to have a friend with you to help you through big things, you know?"

"You said I'll have my own room, though, right?"

"Karen, seriously, will you just relax. Don't be such a spaz. I told you you would. I mean, someone's living there, one of Kevin's friends, but I guess he's gone for a couple weeks, so it's all yours."

"Wait, what? Someone's living there?"

"Karen, this is getting ridiculous. We talked about the situation."

"You're unbelievable, you know that?"

They drove again in silence. Karen looked as they passed an elevation sign, climbing past three-thousand feet. Her ears popped and the trees began to reach out of sight into the darkness above. She leaned her head back against the headrest and wished her dad was the one driving the car. But he wasn't. When Karen rolled her head to the side, Fiona still sat with her hands on the steering wheel, smiling as she glanced at Karen from the corner of her eye.

"I missed you," she said to Karen. "I love having a Jewish best friend. Who else could come spend Christmas with me in Lake Tahoe?"

Karen laughed like she was in high school, a deep laugh from her belly in a sequence of four hysterical exhales followed by a deep inhale. They drove the rest of the distance high into the Sierra Nevada in a long line of oversized vehicles. Traffic had begun to pick up into this burgeoning destination spot—thank you 1960 Winter Olympics—and the heavy, oversized automobiles rambled slowly along, one after the other taking perilous corners around snowbanks and ledges. It didn't help that they chose to come on a Friday night before Christmas.

“You’ve been up to the cabin before, right?” Karen asked.

“Twice! It’s so nice. You’re going to love it. We’ll ski all day and drink wine all night. And, you know...”

“No,” Karen said quickly. “I don’t know. What? What are you up to?”

“Well, Kevin has several friends up there. Maybe you can, you know.... I mean, come on, you’re not going to want to be a third wheel for two weeks with me and Kevin!”

“Oh that’s really nice, Fiona, thanks.”

“No! I don’t mean... I would love it if you were with me the entire time. It’s why I wanted you to come! But, I also want you to have a good time is all and, well, Kevin has some cute friends.”

“My love life is fine, thank you.”

“Oh it is? Well pardon my evil intentions, Ms. Floozy. How many kind young gentlemen did you give the pleasure of allowing in your bed last year.”

“Just put a lid on it.”

“Okay, here’s the turn off,” Fiona said, ignoring Karen’s reprimand.

She turned the car off the highway and drove for a mile into a dark neighborhood. Snow lined the streets and covered the front yards, but had fallen or been cleared off of the rooves. No snow had fallen for several days, but storms in November and December had created enough of a base to cover front yards with a white blanket.

Fiona leaned forward, straining her eyes to see the addresses.

“Oh, I can never remember which one it is.” The car slowed to roll while she attempted to figure out where she was, but she suddenly perked up and bellowed, “That’s it!”

Karen looked at the brown log cabin with a green roof and instantly began to wonder if she had made a mistake and how she could cut this trip short. The cabin didn’t look out of place or anything, it just struck her as foreign and strange. She had placed her trust in Fiona—who, as Karen had come to

realize over the past year, was as unreliable as Tracy—and now felt a bit like a prisoner with no way to escape.

Fiona pulled the car into the driveway and excitedly hopped out. Karen sighed and followed her lead. “What about the luggage?” she yelled out.

“Oh, Karen, we’ll get it later!”

Fiona didn’t knock on the front door. She simply bounded up the steps and let herself inside. Karen, of course, took that to mean that the house had been unlocked. Would it be left unlocked all night?

She left her bags, as Fiona had told her to, but snagged her purse. Her purse had her wallet and her make up, so she could at least get by in the event someone stole the car. She walked begrudgingly up the stairs and suspiciously poked her head in the door. The night air was freezing—literally—so she hugged her body and shivered. Regardless, even though Fiona had entered, she still felt like she should ring the buzzer. For all she knew, Fiona had gotten the wrong address and had just broken into a stranger’s house.

When she looked inside, she took momentary comfort when she saw a taller man swinging Fiona around in circles while they embraced. Fiona screamed and laughed in joy as her legs twirled underneath her. When the man saw Karen, he put Fiona down and approached her with his arms wide in preparation for an embrace.

“You must be Karen,” he said.

Karen stepped inside and then felt the arms lash around her like a giant squid attacking a submarine. She let out a sharp yelp when her feet were lifted fully off the floor. He put her down and laughed and returned to Fiona.

“Karen’s frail!” Fiona yelled. “Be gentle with her.”

“Karen’s a total babe is what she is. Come on, I’ve been waiting for you two. I have just the thing to warm your bellies and get things started off properly.”

While Karen straightened out her sweater, she noticed the dark brown shag carpet and the hanging pictures of ski resorts that adorned the wood-paneled walls. On shelves near the ceilings were old skis and one shelf was dedicated to a variety of unique empty beer bottles. The whole place smelled like fireplace smoke with a hint of marijuana. She heard laughing and saw two other men sitting on the couch watching a basketball game on the television.

Kevin reappeared with three shot glasses of something. He handed one to Karen and one to Fiona, keeping one for himself. “It’s a rite of passage to stay in the house.”

“Woooo!” Fiona shouted. She clinked glasses with Kevin and then grimaced as they threw them down their throats. “So good. Karen, go!”

Karen demurred but knew she had little choice. She took a deep breath and then slowly let the liquid seep into her mouth. Kevin shouted, “Go! Go! Go!” It burned instantly and she gagged by the time she finished.

She squeezed her eyes to avoid crying. When she opened them, Kevin had his arm around Fiona. “Welcome to Lake Tahoe. Fire’s warm, whiskey’s flowing. Okay, Fiona, show her Bill’s room at the end of the hall. Per your demand, I changed the sheets. Karen, best room in the house. You’ll love it. I’m going to get your luggage. And then, we’ll have some fun.”

He turned and bounded out the door and down the steps. Karen wasn’t even sure if he had any shoes on. Fiona took her arm and began to lead her down the hallway.

“Okay, this is you,” she said.

They both stood in front of an open door and looked into the bedroom. Kevin had made up the bed, but hadn’t put in the time to tuck everything in, giving it a recently used appearance. A large bong sat on the dresser, and dirty clothes were piled in the corner.

“Relax,” Fiona said, “at least it’s your own room. I have to share with Kevin.”

“I’m sure you’re so disappointed about that. This better have a lock on it.”

“Ladies,” Kevin said, arriving behind them with two suitcases.

“Put Karen’s in her room. Karen, get settled in. I brought a bottle of wine for you.”

Kevin tossed the suitcase through the open door and then led Fiona away. Karen stepped inside and sat on the bed. To her surprise, it was firm yet comfortable. The air, though, felt stale and her first instinct was to spray down the surfaces. She wished she had brought some dry flowers or potpourri. She stood and opened a dresser drawer only to find a second bong and an additional pipe. The drawer below it had t-shirts and white underwear. A flannel shirt and thick jacket hung on a bar that had been installed between the corner of two walls.

She sat back down and sighed, resigned to her vacation circumstances. She thought to herself, *At least I can always lock the door.*

Bill pulled back on the shift and saw the pallet slowly rise into the air. Once it cleared the stack, he moved the forklift forward and slid the pallet of brake pads into storage. The pads would sit for a week or so until the assembly line needed them, and then Bill would pull them down and drive them across the plant where Mike and John would unload them. It was tedious work and seemed even more tedious on this particular day because it was the first of ten consecutive working days. Ten days over the Christmas holiday when he would work at the plant and then work on the orchard and then work at the plant some more. Ten days before he could get back to the cabin and spend his days skiing.

He set the pallet down and then pulled the forklift back. His shift was coming to an end and Frank had mentioned he needed a word before he left for the day. He began to drive the lift over the shiny concrete floors to its parking space so he could charge it overnight. He passed aisle three and

looked for any wisps of smoke which would indicate his pals were smoking a joint, but they hadn't gotten high since the foreman—walking atop the pallets—caught them and sent them packing. Bill would have been sent packing as well, but his friends got caught on a Monday, and Bill spent Saturday through Monday in Tahoe.

Seeing no smoke, which just depressed him further, he continued on his way, plugged in the forklift, and made his way for Frank's office. Lights were being shut off as workers went home for the night. He knocked on the window on the door—the office now a beacon of light in the warehouse—and heard, "Yeah!" Bill entered and found Frank with a hand resting on his large belly and a cigarette drooping from his lips. The whole office was hotboxed with cigarette smoke, which only made Bill long for a joint with his friends.

"Hey, Frank," he said quickly. He then saw Brenda sitting in the corner, so he said more slowly, "Oh, hey, Brenda. Didn't realize you were here."

"Tomato, sit down, stop hitting on my daughter."

"Oh, Dad, Jesus," Brenda said. She stood up and walked to Frank. She kissed him on his cheek. "Be nice to Bill. He's important to me."

She walked toward the door and squeezed Bill's shoulder. "I'll be waiting by the car."

When she was gone, Frank said, "Tomato, want a cigarette?" He didn't wait for Bill to answer. He pulled out his pack of Marlboro's, replaced the stub that was hanging out of his mouth, and stuffed them back in his pocket. "I'm going to cut to the bottom line. Are you in or are you out?"

"Excuse me, Sir?"

"Bill, you dropped out of college. I have it on good authority that the draft board looks favorably on Teamsters. So are you in or are you out?"

"Did I do something wrong? I'm working my hours. I don't miss shifts."

“No, no you don’t miss shifts. You barely have any shifts, considering you’re a full-time management trainee, but no, you don’t miss the shifts you have.”

Bill started tapping his heels against the floor as he thought about the connotation of the comment. When he didn’t answer—since, to be fair, there wasn’t a question—Frank continued to speak. “I want you here. I want you to marry my daughter, as much as that pains me. But I won’t have some two-bit loser into my family and running my show around here. Are you a two-bit loser, Tomato?”

“No, of course not.”

“Good, so starting next week, you’re going to normal hours, fulltime, and we’ll put this Tahoe nonsense behind us.”

And there it was. Bill finally understood what Frank was trying to get at. He knew the puppeteer running this inquisition, though. Brenda didn’t hide her feelings about Bill staying in Tahoe for half the week. She’d drink with him into the early morning and go on road trips and take him to concerts, but she didn’t want him spending his time with a bunch of guys in Lake Tahoe. She at first had put on a nice face about the whole situation, but when she realized it was lasting longer than a week, it occurred to her that she was losing him to the draw of being a ski bum.

“I’m sorry, Frank, I can’t do that.” Now his fingers started tapping on his knees out of rhythm with his heels. “I mean, I can next week. I’m here for two weeks over the holidays. But, no, I’m sorry, I have the cabin through May and I need to honor that commitment.”

“Honor that commitment? What the fuck are you talking about? You’re a bunch of ski bums. I’m offering you a chance here, Tomato. A chance to make something of yourself. Unless, of course, you want to go off to Vietnam, or worse, turn into some farmer picking apples off trees. Now I have to put an end to this nonsense. Fulltime, Monday through Friday. You’re here. And I better not catch you smoking reefer with any of those rejects behind the pallets. I know you were back there with them.”

Bill stopped listening when Frank insulted his father and the profession of apple picking. Being a Teamster paid well, sure, but he wasn't going to do this forever. He could be skiing. He stood up. He felt the words bubbling up in his head. He had a whole speech that he wanted to scream.

Instead, a far simpler expression escaped his lips. "Frank, I quit."

Bill could see Frank's cheeks turning a fiery red and his head tilt back as though he was sizing Bill up. People didn't tell Frank they quit. Frank fired people. Before he could lash out in a rage, though, Bill promptly stood and walked out the door. He walked through the dark warehouse, clocked his timecard, and stepped out through the metal door to the parking lot. Brenda was waiting for him, sitting on the hood of her Charger. She stood with a smile when she saw him and began to walk to him.

"That was fast. I take it you agreed to go fulltime? Bill, this is so great. We can start a life to..."

"I quit, Brenda," he blurted out, interrupting her before she could discuss their future.

Her face dropped. "Excuse me? You quit? You can't... Bill, you can't just... This isn't some summertime, part-time gig. You can't quit!"

She turned and began pacing.

"I thought you of all people would understand."

She turned, her mouth agape. "Understand? Bill, I wanted to start a life with you. Now you have no job. And worse, you showed up my father. I have to pick sides now, Bill."

"Oh, Brenda, stifle up. No you don't." He brushed it off with a flick of his hands and an eyeroll. He began walking to his car. "Come on, let's go to Tahoe. Blow off work this week. We can have fun together. We can talk about where to go from here."

"Tahoe? Bill, I'm not going to Tahoe. Unlike you, I'm working. I have a job and I'm sticking with it. Like an adult! You're just like your brother. You say you aren't like your brother, but you're just like him."

"Who, Lloyd?"



“Yes! Teaching at Berkeley and protesting the war like a worthless hippie. He’s going to find himself in prison, Bill, prison. Is that what you want for yourself?”

“Oh, Brenda,” he said again. “He’s not going to prison. He’s standing up for his beliefs.”

“His beliefs? And what are your beliefs, Bill? Being a bum? Having no job?”

“I’m still working the orchard.”

“Yes, on the weekends!” she screamed. “We had such a nice thing going. You worked the union job. You worked with your father on the weekends. We had fun. I have Zeppelin tickets, remember?”

“Of course I remember.” He stepped to her and took her hand. As he did, he thought about her choice of words. “What do you mean we had a nice thing going. We still do.”

“No, Bill, I’m sorry, it doesn’t work like that. You either work for my father and make money to support the life we want, or you don’t, and then you’re no longer part of the life I want.”

“Brenda.” He cocked his head to the side and slumped his shoulders. “This doesn’t have to end us. I can be my own person, my own man. There are lots of jobs I can pursue. I don’t have to be your father.”

“Let’s go back in, Bill,” she said ignoring him. “We’ll talk to my father. We can work this out.”

She turned and began leading him back inside, but he held firm, his feet refusing to budge. “I’m sorry, Brenda, this is not for me. I thought it was, I did, but...”

He didn’t finish his thought and she didn’t wait for him to find his words. “Pack your things. I’ll give you a couple hours.”

She continued to walk into the warehouse and left Bill in the rapidly darkening parking lot. He itched his chin and ran his fingers through his beard. He considered going after her and begging her and her father for forgiveness, but he ultimately said out loud, “Fuck it.” He turned and thought to himself, *I’m going skiing.*

## Chapter 31

It was nearly two in the morning before Bill pulled his Datsun sedan into the cabin's driveway. He was grateful that Tahoe hadn't seen snow for several days and the temperature had remained below freezing during the day so there was little snow melt to freeze over, meaning the roads weren't as slick as they otherwise could have been. He would usually never take his Datsun over Donner Pass at this time of night, but Brenda told him to get out of the apartment, and he had little interest in driving to his parents' house. He figured if he got caught in a storm or the Datsun stalled out on the Pass, he could pull over and sleep until the sun came up. Fortunately, his planning was for naught. The weather was cool, the roads were clear, and the Datsun performed admirably.

He spent the whole drive thinking about Brenda and if he should go back for her. Every mile he put in between them, though, the easier it had been to put that thought to the side. Brenda was great, she would make a man very happy someday, but she wanted Bill to be something he wasn't. Bill was not a Teamster. He wasn't sure what he was, but he wasn't going to find it being locked in a warehouse and living in Dublin. He needed to restart from rock bottom and decide what his life would ultimately become.

Bill didn't have a ton of belongings. Most of his possessions remained in his childhood room, so all he had were a few duffle bags of clothes, some books, and a few gardening tools that he had taken from his father to plant some tomatoes on the small patch of dirt along the side of the apartment complex. Regardless, those duffle bags filled the small Datsun to the brim and Bill had little interest in unpacking it all in the dead of a freezing night. He didn't even have his jacket or gloves with him—they were in his room at the cabin—and the Datsun's heater kept Bill from freezing to death but little more. His fingers were stiff and pale white by the time he pulled into the driveway. It would have been agony to carry his bags inside.

He got out of the car, wondered who the extra cars in the driveway belonged to and who would be passed out on the couch, and then ran inside. The cabin was warm, thank God, but dark. It seemed slightly odd that it would be dark at two in the morning, but Bill assumed Kevin and the others had called it an early night to hit the slopes early.

He didn't turn on the light as he wandered down the hallway to his bedroom. His bedroom. He liked having a room that belonged to him and no one else. He didn't care what art adorned the walls or the design of the linens, but he liked having his own space. Brenda had initially been lenient with him, allowing him to leave his clothes strewn about and his pipes left out on the desk, but she had gradually grown more and more strict with him. He spent so much time worrying about what he had left out that he cut completely loose at the cabin. His room was a pigsty and he would have it no other way.

He reached his door and reached for the handle, but it wouldn't turn. Was it locked? He shook his head. What did Kevin do? He tried the handle again, louder to create a commotion, and then he banged on the door with his open palm and shouted, "Hey! You're in my room!"

No response. No response of any kind. No light flickering on. No one yelling back. No snores or jostling. Whoever it was must have been passed out drunk. Bill tried again, banging louder. In the dark, silent house, the banging echoed between the wooden walls.

Finally, tired and frustrated, he stepped back to try kicking the door down, but the door to Kevin's room popped open. Bill turned and saw the shape of Kevin's penis staring back at him.

"Bill?" Kevin asked, half asleep. "The fuck you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? Someone's in my room. And put some fucking clothes on."

"Yeah, I told you, man, Fiona's friend is staying here."

"What? You never told me that. You can't just rent out my room, man. This is my room. I'm paying for it."

"You're not supposed to be here! Why aren't you down the hill? Where's Brenda?"

Suddenly, Fiona appeared next to Kevin and flicked on the hall light. She was wrapped in a sheet. “Billy? Oh God, you must have scared Karen half to death, Bill! What’s the matter with you?” Fiona stepped past him and lightly tapped on the door. She whispered, “Karen? Karen are you up? It’s okay. It’s just Bill.”

No response.

“Come on, Bill,” Kevin said. “Let’s have a drink.”

Kevin didn’t bother to put any clothes on. He had told Bill earlier that in his house, no one should tell him what he can or can’t wear. Still, this seemed a little cavalier, even for him.

“Will you please put some clothes on?”

Kevin laughed but continued to walk to the kitchen. As Bill followed, he heard the door to his bedroom creak open. He stopped and turned to see who had robbed him of his privacy. All he could see was a petite face peeking out of a small opening. Whoever it was seemed to be on high alert.

“Oh, Karen, will you knock it off?” Fiona said. She forced the door open.

“You said no one was staying here,” the woman—apparently named Karen—said.

“Um, you’re the one sleeping in *my* room,” Bill said.

Kevin showed up with a beer. “Settle down, Bill,” he said. “I never took you to be the type to be upset about a female being in your bed.”

“I’m not *in* his bed!” Karen said, starting to appear as though she realized the danger had passed.

Bill sighed and took the beer. His hands were still stiff from the cold, so the cold beer barely registered in his senses. He popped the top and took a long sip.

“There you go, buddy,” Kevin said. “Come on, come tell me why you’re here. Girls, go to bed. Bill, you’re on the couch tonight. We’ll figure out the rest in the morning.”

Bill and Kevin sat on the couch and drank their beer while Bill told him what had happened. Kevin nodded, rarely interjecting with any sort of wisdom. At the end of Bill's story, though, he said, "Well, fuck her. I never really liked her anyway. Besides, who wants to be a Teamster? I'd rather get drafted than work in that shitty job." He then pulled out a pipe and packed it with marijuana. Bill laid back and let the smoke fill his lungs. They opened another beer and then smoked another bowl. By the time Kevin headed off to bed, the clock read 4:13. Bill didn't even lay down. He stayed seated with his head on the headrest. He drifted off as Kevin said, "Get some sleep. We'll hit the slopes in the morning and all will be right in the world."

Karen had laid awake for hours listening to Kevin and Bill talking and drinking. Even after she heard Kevin go to bed, though, she couldn't sleep. She knew Fiona would put her in this situation. She knew something would go wrong. Bill wasn't a threat, not with Kevin and the others around. But this was his room, after all. How long would he sit idly by while a stranger slept in his bed. Her mind wandered far and fast, coming up with all the scenarios for the next two weeks. None ended well. She wondered if she should just convince Fiona to drive her back down the mountain. What would happen if Bill decided he didn't want someone sleeping in his bed? Would he kick her out to the couch? Maybe she and Fiona could share Kevin's bed and make him sleep on the couch. She would have better luck convincing Fiona to just let her take the car home.

She last saw the clock strike 4:30 in the morning, and now at 6:04 was awake and ready to take action. She couldn't hide in the room forever and she wasn't going to be pushed around. She slid out of her bed and hugged her chest and put her ear against the door. Nothing. She had never taken her sweats off before climbing back into bed, so she opened the door and peered out. Still nothing. She courageously wandered down the hall and craned her neck as far as she could go to look into the family

room. Then she saw him. He was in a seated position in a flannel shirt and jeans. A few drops of drool had seeped into his long beard and his long hair was crunched together behind his neck.

Karen took another step but stopped immediately when the floor creaked. The creaking made Bill stir and he let out a large snort as he readjusted. Karen stood paralyzed, her eyes wide. What would happen if he woke up and she was standing there? Oddly, Karen found herself wondering what Tracy would do in this situation. Tracy would probably pee on the bed and mark her territory. The thought made Karen smile and pulled her out of her petrified fear. She had a better idea than marking the bed. She walked to the kitchen and began preparing a pot of coffee.

The beans were pre-ground and the filters sat next to the coffee-maker, making her mission relatively simple. For all of her newfound courage, though, she didn't leave the kitchen, choosing to wait for the coffee to brew first. Five minutes later, she found two mugs and poured two cups. She walked delicately to the family room and set one cup on the table in front of Bill. As she began to back up, Bill awoke with a jolt, snorting again. Karen jumped, spilling some of her coffee onto the carpet.

"Sorry," she instinctively said.

Bill was too out of it to fully comprehend who she was let alone why she was apologizing, but he leaned forward and rubbed his eyes.

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Almost 6:30."

"Christ."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"No, it's good. I'm late. Slopes open soon." He stopped rubbing his eyes and saw the coffee in front of him. "Is that for me?"

"Yes. It was the least I could do for stealing your room."

Bill laughed. "You think giving me a cup of my own coffee is the answer to stealing my room?"

Karen snapped, stung by what she perceived as a cruel insult of her character. "You know what, you're a real asshole, you know that? I'm trying to apologize and do the right thing."

Bill held both of his hands up and sighed. He reached for the coffee and took a sip. "Thank you for making the coffee." He thought about it. "It's a first for me. I usually make the coffee."

Karen watched him take a few sips and saw color return to his cheeks. They stayed in silence, Karen staring at him and he focusing on his coffee.

"Is that it?" she finally asked.

"Is there something you wanted me to say?"

"Well, yeah." She laughed to herself and shook her head, amazed at how obtuse he was acting. "We have to decide what to do. I'm going to be here for the next two weeks and would like to sleep in a bed."

"I literally don't care anymore," he said. "I'm tired. I feel like shit. Oh, I'm also jobless because I quit for no good reason. I have no girlfriend anymore, doesn't matter that we planned to get married. Oh, hey, my father owns an orchard, though. Woopedy fucking doo, I can go prop trees and eat apples. My life is just wonderful. Do you think I give a shit where I sleep tonight, or tomorrow night? The couch is fine. Enjoy my room."

He sighed and leaned back against the couch and closed his eyes. He sipped his coffee and then rested it in his lap, which made Karen nervous. It was hot coffee and would leave quite the burn if it spilled. Not to mention, no one wanted a large coffee stain on a couch.

"Do you want me to put your coffee on the table for you?" she asked.

Bill opened his eyes. "Are you being serious right now?"

Karen wasn't sure if she should say yes or no, so she said, "Okay," and walked away.

"Thanks for the coffee," Bill said.

A couple hours later, the six of them, including Kevin's friends Dave and Thomas, were standing at the bottom of Squaw Creek. It was a Saturday and the crowds would be big, so Kevin and Bill insisted on arriving as soon as the chair lifts fired up. Karen hadn't worn skis since last season, so it took her a few minutes to get the boots just right and the skis on properly. She bobbed up and down and moved her legs forward and back. By the time she was satisfied, the other five were watching with confused entertainment. All except Bill, who was annoyed.

"Are you good?" Kevin asked. "I can adjust them if you need me to."

"No, I'm good I think. There's a little pressure on my feet, but I'll give it a shot." She looked at Fiona who shook her head. "I'm sorry! I just want to be comfortable."

Now they all gathered at the front of the line until Kevin and Fiona moved into position and the chair scooped them off the ground and up the mountain. Dave and Thomas went next so they could smoke a bowl together on the way up. Bill would have preferred to go up alone, but Karen said, "I guess we're going together."

Bill smiled and nodded and then slid into position. Karen struggled, though, and began to panic that she wouldn't make it in time. Bill reached behind him and grabbed her arm and yanked her beside him. The chair hit the back of her knees and she squealed as she fell back. Bill held onto his poles with one hand and held onto her for dear life until she signaled that she was alright.

"Not really the outdoorsy-type, huh?" Bill asked.

"I happen to love the outdoors, thank you very much. I just get... flustered sometimes. And you know what? Those chairs come way too fast."

Bill laughed. "Yeah."

"Thank you for helping me, though."

"You're welcome."



They rode up the mountain and Karen began to shiver as they moved into the shadows, the sun still too low to reach over the tops of the mountains.

"It'll warm up in a couple hours," Bill said. "And you'll be skiing."

"So you're a good skier?" Karen asked.

"I can hold my own."

"So where does this lift go?"

"There'll be some nice groomed runs for you and Fiona. And Thomas probably. Kevin and I will probably head to the backside for a bit."

"You're not coming with us?" She said it quickly, almost urgently. Did she want Bill to come with her? Embarrassed by her outburst, she said, "The trees out here are so pretty."

"Jeffrey Pine," Bill said casually.

"Excuse me?"

"These are Jeffrey Pines. I took a forestry class when I was in college. For some reason it stuck with me."

Karen looked at him and found herself looking a few seconds longer than she was comfortable with. His beard and shaggy long hair—now that he had showered—didn't look quite so monstrous as when he was banging on her door in the middle of the night or drooling on himself in the morning. In fact, she almost found him kind of cute. She quickly turned away and forced herself to ask a question. Any question. What question?

She came up with, "You're not in college anymore?"

"I dropped it after a year. Why?"

"No reason. You're not worried about the draft?"

He sighed. I suppose I am. At least it'd be something to do. I'm sorry, by the way, about my little outburst this morning."

"That's okay. Your dad owns an orchard?"

"Yep. Just a bunch of farmers, my family. I guess that's where I'll end up. It's not too bad.

Great, really. Working the trees in the sun."

Karen wasn't so convinced. Bill trailed off and looked lost.

"You could always go back to college. Sounds like you enjoyed forestry. I'm sure there are some good programs in California somewhere."

"For what? What will that get me? I need a job."

"That's why you go to college, to get a job."

"What job?"

"Any job. Jesus, Bill, it's the seventies for Christ sake. Do what makes you happy. You're not locked into anything anymore. Go to college and follow a passion. At least that's what my dad always tells me."

"Something tells me a career in forestry isn't very lucrative."

"Then get an MBA. Go into business. I go to St. Mary's, great program."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"Well, I appreciate the pep talk, but I don't think college is in my future. My destiny is the orchard."

Karen looked at him again and suddenly felt bad for him. Had this girl beaten him down to such a point that he no longer had any ambition or dreams?

"Well, that's a shame then," she said.

"What is?"

"Well, I actually find you quite attractive, but I can't date a college drop out, and I certainly can't bring home an apple farmer." The words spilled out of her mouth as though she had known Bill for

years, as though they were in a relationship and she was trying to get him back on track. She was mortified. She stared out at the trees and refused to look his direction for the rest of the ride.

Neither of them spoke again as the chair reached the top and their skis touched the packed snow. Bill put his hand on her back and helped push her up and together they effortlessly slid down the landing to where their friends were waiting.

“Sorry,” Fiona whispered when Karen stopped next to her. “I’ll totally ride with you from now on. You won’t be stuck with him again.”

Karen didn’t have time to answer before Kevin said, “Okay, Billy Tomato, let’s hit the backside, you girls can stick on these runs and we’ll meet at the lodge for lunch. You two dumbasses can do what you want.”

“Actually,” Bill said, “we can stick with the girls.” He looked at Karen, who still refused to look up. “I mean, so you can ski with Fiona a bit.”

“Really?” Kevin asked. “Well, okay, maybe for a few runs.”

As they started to ski toward the first run, Karen looked behind her at Bill and smiled.

## Chapter 32

Life still had a way of making Lloyd laugh. Not much seemed strange to him anymore, or even all that unpredictable, but he laughed at all of it. He laughed that the Vietnam War ended but the government continued to prosecute Lloyd Jr. for breaking some windows during a late-night protest. He laughed that Myrtle wanted to travel to foreign countries while they were still able-bodied. And he laughed that he found tennis to be an enjoyable game after all these years. He laughed and laughed until Myrtle told him it was time to stop laughing, at which point he'd say, "Oh, is it time to stop laughing now?" The fact of the matter was, Lloyd didn't feel like he was getting older despite the fact he was getting older, nearly sixty in 1977.

Perhaps most funny of all, though, was that Rachel had married an orthodox Jewish man and Bill was soon-to-be-married to a Jewish woman with orthodox Jewish parents. Lloyd hadn't known many Jews in his day, but he couldn't help but chuckle that he now had two Jewish children-in-law and soon to have a bunch of Jewish grandchildren. He didn't have any problem with Jewish people, he just never considered the possibility he would have so much Jewish influence at his big family events like Christmas.

"You know, your brother is just so stupid," he said as he drove with Bill through the orchard. He laughed. "You know the city is going to push charges against him? Can you believe that? All because he had to throw bricks at a recruiting center. Now, ha ha, ha ha, now he can't get a security clearance because he has an arrest record, can you believe that?"

"They won't give him a clearance?"

"Not yet, can you believe it? I'm not even sure what he'd be doing, some sort of secret stuff. Your brother's funny, protesting the war but wanting to work at a nuclear laboratory, ha ha."

“It’d be a good job for him. Besides, weren’t you going to work on the nuclear program?” Bill asked.

“Oh, I know it. For a time, then I got sick.”

“It’s different than going to war, dad. He’s helping keep nukes safe I think.”

“Well, now, just wait awhile now. You know, I just don’t *get* it, you know? And you.”

“And me?”

Bill looked at him, waiting for him to finish his thought. Bill had shaved off his beard at Karen’s behest a couple years back, but his hair still hung to his shoulders. He didn’t make it out to the orchard very often. Lloyd encouraged him to follow Karen to St. Mary’s to go after his MBA, but he had hoped Bill would use it to take over the orchard. Karen had other plans and worked at Nordstrom’s in Oakland to support Bill finishing up his schooling. She had no interest in moving to Watsonville to tend the apples, so whatever dream Lloyd had that Bill would take over the orchard ended when Bill got down on a knee for Karen.

“Oh, forget it,” Lloyd said.

“No, tell me.”

“I just thought you’d use your big degree to carry on the orchard, but I guess I’ll just have to be disappointed.”

Bill turned and looked out the windshield of the Jeep. “You know, you’re the one that wanted me to go to college so bad. Okay, so I went to college and got an MBA and I’m thinking about going for a PhD and all you can say is you’re disappointed in me? Holy Toledo, Dad, it’d be nice if you could just tell me you’re proud of me.”

Lloyd was proud of him, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it. It’s not proper for a father to tell his son he’s proud of him when all he’s doing is progressing through life. At least that’s how he felt about it anyhow.

Instead, he said, “Ha ha, yeah I know it. Ah, just forget about.”

“Well I won’t forget it, because in one sentence you compared Lloyd Jr. and his arrest record to my college success. So, no, I won’t forget it.”

“You know, Bill, I didn’t think you’d actually go to college. So that makes me happy. The fact you went to college. That makes me happy.” He let out a deep sigh. “You know your grandfather never had a chance to go to college. Grew up on an olive tree farm in Croatia, just like this one. Had to come here to help his family and started up the orchard. Never got to go to college.”

“I know the story, dad.”

“Oh, you know the story?”

Lloyd turned the Jeep at the end of a row and headed up the hill in the middle of the orchard. Bill told him he had an idea he wanted to propose and he wanted to have a view of the land. Lloyd didn’t get it, but he liked being at the orchard and if it got Bill to come out with him, so be it. When they arrived at the top, they both got out and walked to the front of the Jeep. Before them they could see the house where Lloyd’s parents once lived and the large wooden sheds that housed the old packing machinery and the tractors. Trees sprawled out all the way to the road along the western edge of the orchard and as far as the eye could see to the south.

“The trees look good, Dad,” Bill said.

“Oh, I know it. They’re growing really well.”

“So, look, I think we need to talk about the future of this orchard.”

“The future? Okay, let’s talk about the future.”

Bill held up his hands and began listing his points, counting one finger at a time into his palm. “These big corporate farms that are sprouting up are going to squeeze us for business. I took a class in big agriculture and land rights in the state, and it’s crazy, Dad, these companies are just buying up land. So one, we need to squeeze every inch out of the orchard, get as many apples as we can. There’s some

great new technology available. We can get a plane to fly overhead and take aerial footage and we can begin to test the soil for mineral content. We can..."

"Ha ha, ha ha," Lloyd said, cutting Bill off as he turned to walk to the other side of the hill.

"I'm serious, Dad," Bill said, following after him. "I love this orchard and I think we can make it viable into the future."

"Who?" Lloyd asked him.

"Excuse me?"

"Who's going to make it viable? Are you going to come incorporate all these changes? Are you going to pay up to have some plane take photos of the land?"

"Well, I can certainly help! I can come out on the weekends."

"Bill, the orchard needs tending to fulltime. I'm getting old. Five years maybe. Ten years. I don't want to do this anymore. Hell, I don't even need to do it. This isn't giving much money anymore..."

"That's what I'm talking about! I think we can get it back to making money."

"Who, Bill? Who?"

"Well, if we have a plan, I might be able to convince Karen that we should move down here. I can work it fulltime, or at least fulltime hours, and we can stay in Grandpa's old house. It can use some life, that's for sure."

Lloyd sighed. "Bill, I moved across the country and dragged your mommy with me to go off to war. Dragged her off and she missed her daddy dying. I did that to her. If you've talked to Karen about this and she doesn't want to move to Watsonville and live on an orchard, then you better listen to her. Besides, you know, I just don't want to *do* this anymore. I'm old and tired. A single orchard just doesn't cut it anymore, even if you're right and we can push out more apples. If we had all of my father's orchards and the packing plants still, maybe, but we don't. My father had to give those up and this

orchard just isn't a viable business any longer. I've accepted that. I still dream, of course, about you taking it over, but you know, Bill, I don't think that's what you want. You're getting married now and it's time for you to act like a man getting married."

"I know I'm getting married, Dad, thank you." Bill sighed. It was the last of his dreams, to save the orchard. But a dream sometimes is just that, a dream. Not a dream of desire, but a dream of a different reality. Bill told himself he'd love the life of working the orchard, but he knew it was never meant to be and he knew it wasn't even what he wanted. He wanted something bigger, something greater. He wanted the bigger house and a cabin in Lake Tahoe. He wanted a fancy car and the ability to buy Karen nice things. He looked out at the trees. He still knew many of them individually. He remembered the ones he planted and the ones he cared for.

Lloyd seemed to be thinking the same thing. "Bill, the orchard breaks even. It's not for profits any longer. It keeps me young. It gets me out of the house and lets me give a few people some seasonal jobs, but it's mostly a hobby now. Greg came to me a while back, asked me to give it to him." Lloyd began rubbing his chin and then threw his hand in the air and left it for a few seconds, as though the fleeting thought got stuck leaving his mind. "But I don't want to give it to Greg. Greg would just raze it for the pennies he could scrape out of it. Now you, if you want it, by all means, you can come down here and take it over, but that's not what you want and that's not what I'm going to ask of you. So let's just leave it at that."

Bill sucked in a deep breath that he knew only from the orchard. The smell of apples and leaves and dirt and oak.

"That's the problem, Dad, you can't just give one of us the land. That'd tear our family apart. If you pass it on, it has to be to all four of us equally."



“Then what the hell will happen to all this land?” Lloyd asked. He began rubbing his chin again and then laughed. “Ha ha, ha ha, ah hell, I don’t know. I don’t care. Come on, your mommy wants us home early to get things ready for Karen’s parents.”

Lloyd walked back to the Jeep and got in and waited for Bill. When Bill climbed in after him, they drove slowly back through the trees and into the shed. Bill closed the large wooden door and they walked across the dirt parking lot to the Oldsmobile that sat in front of the homestead house. Once Lloyd’s parents passed away, he stopped keeping it up to date. He had discussed tearing it down and putting up a more modern cottage, but Myrtle told him what he knew, that he didn’t want to get rid of it. The house reminded him of the hard times, but also of all the friends he made putting the house up. All the people whose lives his father saved by giving them jobs when the economy cratered. He remembered huddling in the home and trying to understand why they had to give their house up. He couldn’t leave the memories behind.

When they got back to Lloyd’s house in Mountain View, Myrtle was busy in the kitchen. Karen’s parents were coming over and it would be the first time they all saw one another since Bill and Karen got engaged.

“Honey!” Myrtle shouted when they walked in. “Honey!”

“Yes?” Lloyd asked.

“Take the steak out of the oven in five minutes. I need to put on my face and take out my curlers. Do you want Bill’s new mother-in-law to think I look like a farmer?”

Myrtle scrambled out of kitchen and into the bedroom. Bill knew she rarely got dressed up anymore, but Karen would have put a great deal of time into her appearance and her mother’s, so Myrtle felt inclined to do the same.

“So, Bill, would you like a beer? Ha ha, I suppose I should get you a beer.”

“Sure, Dad, I’d love one.”

Two hours later, the six sat around the dining room table with large slabs of Salisbury steaks on their plates. The smell of apple pies baking in the oven wafted from the kitchen. In fact, Beverly found the smells so overwhelming that every five or ten minutes she'd quip, "Oh, I really shouldn't have brought the See's Candy and cookies. I just thought they looked so good."

"Oh, ho hum, it's fine," Myrtle said. "You can never have too much dessert, my father liked to say."

"Yes, I suppose that's true," Beverly said, her anxiety and insecurity getting the best of her conversational skills.

"I'm just happy we got out of the store with only the two desserts to bring," Warren said. "You know what they say, worries go down better with dessert than without. And let me tell you something, my wife is a bit of a worrier."

"Soup, Dad," Karen said, "the saying is worries go down better with soup."

"Karen, I know Jewish quotes, and it's definitely dessert."

"Ha ha, ha ha," Lloyd said before breaking into a wholehearted laugh. "That's a pretty good quote."

"Lloyd, Bill says you two are travelers. We should go on a trip somewhere. You know what, the four of us should visit Israel. I mean, we're practically family at this point."

"Israel?" Lloyd said. All Lloyd knew of Israel was what he read in the papers and it sounded dangerous.

Myrtle laughed. "Oh, Lloyd in Israel would be a sight to see. I've heard it's dangerous."

"Dangerous? Nonsense."

Beverly reached for her glass of wine but accidentally knocked it over.

“Ooooh,” she cried. “Oh no, oh no, I’m so, oh, oh I...”

“It’s okay, Mom,” Karen said while Warren laughed.

“Oh, Bev,” he said. “That’s why we drink white wine.”

“It’s quite all right,” Myrtle said, getting up to get rags.

While they worked on cleaning the spill, Warren asked Bill, “So, Bill, you’re marrying my daughter. What are you doing for work?”

“Dad!” Karen yelled above the commotion of the wine. “Please?”

“Well, now, ha ha,” Lloyd said, “I actually think that’s a good *question*.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Bill said.

“Have you considered real estate?” Warren asked. “Real estate and land and property, that’s where the money is. Get in now.”

“You mean buy a house?”

“Sure, one option. I have a good friend at a real estate firm up in Oakland. Let me put you in touch. You’re a smart boy. Have an MBA. Real estate development. You heard it here first.”

“Yeah,” Bill said, nodding to himself. “Yeah, that’d be great, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I mind you trying to support my daughter with no job, is what I mind. Okay, enough of this talk of business. Lloyd, Israel, what do you say?”

“Ha ha, well, now, now wait awhile, yeah I’d like to go to Israel. There’s a lot of places I’d like to go. Where I really want to go is Yugoslavia.”

Warren stared at him dead pan. “Sure, Lloyd, because that’s much safer than Israel.”

## Chapter 33

“Why can’t we just go home?”

David had taken his headphones off and looked out the window. It was an abnormally warm July and the whole Tahmatoh family was melting, even at five in the afternoon. David, at seven years old, was tired, and even his ten-year-old sister, Samantha, had passed out as soon as she clicked her seat belt.

Bill looked at him in the rearview mirror of his Ford Explorer. “Stifle up, David,” he said. “I want to show you the orchard. This is important stuff. This is your history.”

“My history?”

“This is what makes you who you are.”

“Bill,” Karen said, “let’s just take them to your parents.”

Bill already felt guilty enough that he had never taken his two children to the orchard, but he was rarely home these days. As the West Regional Development Manager, he spent weeks at a time traveling the coast, seeking out new opportunities and checking in on large projects. He had even spent time in Japan and China, pitching plans to potential investors. He finally had a weekend at home and thought a trip to Santa Cruz followed by a visit to the old orchard would be a fun day out as a family.

“My parents are gone,” Bill said. “They’re visiting Bali I think.”

“God they’re amazing,” Karen said, forever impressed at the vivacity of Bill’s parents. Warren had been in hospice for the past year with congenital heart failure and Beverly struggled to keep up the household, so the energy and health of Bill’s parents were even more apparent to her than usual.

Bill pulled the SUV onto the dirt driveway of the orchard and stopped at the single chain dangling across the entrance.

“You see this, David? Every day when I was your age, I’d get out of the car and open the chain and let my dad drive the truck in. Come on, come help me, it’ll be fun.”

“What?” David asked, appalled at the suggestion. Even at seven, he knew a scam when he saw one. “What would I get out of this?”

“You won’t get anything out of it. You’re just helping me. Now come on.”

Bill didn’t wait for David to say anything. He unbuckled his seat belt and heard David groan as he stepped out into the warm afternoon air. As he took a deep breath of the air, David joined him and together they walked to the wooden post that held up the chain. He unlatched it and handed it to his son.

“Okay, carry this to the other side, and when I drive through, latch it back. Then meet us in the parking lot.”

David accepted the chain with a confused look. “What do you mean meet you. Like, walk?”

“You can walk, David. Greginy Christmas.”

David sighed and slowly walked to the other side. The chain looked big in his hand and he seemed to struggle as it dragged across the dirt, but Bill just smiled. Somewhere deep inside of him, he hoped David would come to love the orchard as much as he had as a kid. Who knows, maybe he’ll even want to take it over some day.

Bill got back in the car and drove it onto the parking lot. Once parked, they looked at the trees through the windows.

“Yikes,” Karen said. “Not how I remember it.”

“No,” Bill responded. “My dad doesn’t come much anymore. He doesn’t take care of the trees anymore.”

When they got out, Bill could see the windows did not create any sort of illusion. If anything, the trees looked even more decrepit than before. The branches had grown long and heavy, drooping

from the weight of the apples until they rested on the dirt. Some had simply snapped off, leaving trees with dead, rotting limbs. Some of the trunks had grown mangled, likely from diseases that would typically have been beaten back with the proper attention. Large knots formed like cancerous growths. The trees that Bill had spent so much time caring for were now wild and gnarled.

“This place is creepy,” David said as he walked up. “Can we go home?”

Bill ignored him and Karen allowed him to wallow in silence.

“He just let it go,” Bill finally said. Samantha was still asleep in the backseat, but Bill looked at David and said, “my brothers and I would walk up these rows and dig hole after hole and then my father would put in new trees. I probably planted half of these trees.”

David didn’t respond. He walked to Karen and put his head on her hip. David had the slender build that Bill had, but he never developed the harsher Eastern European features like Lloyd. He softer cheekbones and smaller eyebrows had more in common with Karen’s side of the family, and his nose already began to jut out like Warren’s. Karen draped her arm around her son. Together they watched Bill in his nostalgia.

Bill knelt and picked up dirt in his hand. He began to silently mutter to himself, quietly castigating himself for not stepping in and rescuing the orchard. The trees still grew apples, but years of neglect had made them all but impossible to recoup and send off to commercial producers. For any sort of apple future, the trees would have to be ripped out and replanted. He stood up and looked at the large wooden sheds.

“Come on,” he said, “let me at least show you the tractors I used to use out here.”

Tractors got David’s attention and he bounded after Bill with a bit more enthusiasm than before. Karen smiled after them and walked to the car to wake Samantha, realizing they’d be here for too long a period to be sleeping in a hot car.

As Bill and David walked, though, a soft rumbling began to move the world before beneath their feet.

“Whoa,” Bill said, stopping and grabbing David’s shoulder.

The rumbling grew stronger until Bill could hear the sound of a stampede rushing toward them. The sound reached a crescendo until it blasted through the parking lot and carried on farther south. The waves of the earthquake could be seen in the road, as the pavement rolled like a set of ocean swells. Bill grabbed David tighter as the commotion grew louder. Suddenly, the larger of the wood sheds tore into two, a large gash rupturing the walls and the roof. The smaller of the sheds slid off of its foundations and crumbled in on itself.

Bill picked up his son and began running toward the car and away from spewing dust from the destruction. He could see Karen holding onto the car and hear Samantha screaming from inside of it. Beyond the car, the old white house swayed back and forth until the beams holding up the roof of the front patio snapped in two. A window shattered as the house condensed on one side. None of the structure had been built to sustain a large earthquake. It was only by the grace of God that they weren’t inside of one of them.

And then as soon as the rumbling began, damaging everything in its path, it stopped. The world was as still as the morning ocean following a storm. There was no sound, except for the soft cries from Samantha.

“I think we just had an earthquake,” Bill said, stating the obvious for lack of anything better to say. “Everyone okay?”

He saw Karen nod and pull Samantha out of the car. They all hugged.

“Wow,” Karen said. “That was scary.”

They all turned and looked at the two wooden sheds, which were now partially destroyed and too dangerous to approach. The realization that he and David could have been standing inside struck Bill squarely in the chest. He kneeled and grabbed his son.

“Wow,” he said, echoing his wife. “That was close. Look at those sheds. Holy smokes.”

“Where are we?” Samantha finally said, having missed the conversations about the orchard.

“I don’t know anymore,” Bill replied. “I could use a beer, though. Maybe we should go to my parents’ house. It’s closer. The power’s likely to be out. We can sleep there.”

Karen nodded and gulped. “That was a big one.”

Bill nodded and looked out at the dying orchard, now complete with buildings more suitable for a warzone. He centered himself, allowing him to be happy that they were all unharmed despite seeing his childhood literally crumble before him. He helped David into the car and then pulled out of the orchard, getting out and removing the chain himself.

Later that night, as Bill and Karen lay in his childhood bed, they both stared at the ceiling unable to fall asleep.

“What are you thinking about?” Bill asked.

“That I’m grateful the kids are alright. That was scary.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“I called my parents and they barely felt it.” She laughed. “They’re not in great shape, that’s for sure. What are you thinking about?”

Bill tapped his fingers on his chest. “I’m thinking those sheds are no longer usable and the trees are too much to care for at this point.”

Bill could hear Karen roll to look at him. “Okay. So what are you thinking?”

“That the orchard may have run its path.”



“Oh, Bill, don’t say that. Your father loves the orchard. You love the orchard. You’ll never get rid of it.”

“We’ll never get rid of the land, that’s for sure. That’s valuable land.”

“Spoken like a true developer.”

“You made me this way, don’t you forget.”

She laughed and draped an arm across his chest. Long ago were the days that he had a beard, but his smooth cheeks and short haircut just highlighted how skinny he was. Bill could feel her arm on his ribs, pressing hard with every breath he took.

“I just knew you were something more than a farmer.”

“Yep.” Bill nodded, but his head remained on the pillow. “You did. You always did. I need to call my folks tomorrow.”

“About the earthquake?”

“For starters. It’s time we actually do something about the orchard I guess.” He thought about it some more. As the ideas stewed in his head, he felt himself getting more and more excited. “You know, I could really do something with that land. It really is valuable land.”

A few weeks later, Bill stood with his parents and his siblings looking at the damaged sheds. His father, Lloyd, had been devastated when he first saw the damages, but he ultimately came to laugh about it, saying, “You know, they really weren’t very nice sheds to begin with, ha ha, ha ha.”

“Christ, Dad,” Bill’s older brother, Greg, said. Greg had moved his family to Oregon the year before, but came down to discuss the future of the orchard. Greg was like Bill and had spent a lot of time working the orchard, but ever since Lloyd told him he wasn’t going to pass it on to him, Greg

abandoned it as a bad memory. It had been years since he stepped foot on the property. “How could you let this place go like this? Now Bill wants to raze it.”

“Well, you know, I’m an old man. I just didn’t *want* to take care of the trees anymore.”

“Oh, ho hum,” Myrtle said. “Never took you to be a man that up and quits, but, it is what it is. Long as you can still bring me some apples for my pies.”

“Look, we can’t ignore this anymore,” Bill said, frustrated by the digression. “Silicon Valley is booming. Housing is booming. Dad, I know you’ve read about this. The housing market in the Bay Area is going to explode. This is the time, before it takes off. The way I see it, we have fifty-five acres. We can split it into half-acre lots, and build a hundred houses.”

“You mean a hundred and ten,” Lloyd Jr. said. “Jesus, Bill, I would have thought working in development would have improved your math skills.”

“What?” Bill said, shaking his hand. He lifted up his hands to begin checking off his points, but his oldest brother’s jab broke his train of thought. “Lloyd, I’m excellent at Math, just like you.”

“Well, no, not like me.”

Bill opened his mouth to argue, but decided not to and moved on. “Okay, yes, I realize it’s only a hundred. I figured we could keep ten acres and have an apple orchard for the community. Be a nice touch I think.”

“I don’t know why we’d do that,” Greg said. “If we’re just going to raze it and build houses, why would we give up that money. Christ, Bill, you don’t think sometimes.”

“You know, I just don’t know why you’re all so eager to bulldoze the ranch and sell it off for houses,” Rachel finally said. Rachel had been oddly silent up until that point but could no longer bite her tongue. “This is Mom and Dad’s orchard. Doesn’t that mean anything to any of you? We grew up here.” She started laughing as she finished, utterly perplexed by the sheer lunacy of her siblings.

“Stifle up, Rachel,” Bill said. “The orchard means more to me than any of you, but this is an opportunity and I don’t think we can pass it up. Dad, I’ve already discussed this with my company and we have several investors that’d be interested. Mom, you could both retire happy and we’d all make a killing. We’d be set up. Rachel, the only thing that’s crazy would be passing this up.”

“Oh, ha ha, ha ha, I don’t know about that, Bill. If the area continues to take off, seems like we could make more money by waiting.”

“Dad,” Bill said. He put his hands on his hips and sunk his head in defeat. He had to have his dad’s support or no one would go along with it. “You don’t know that. The whole area could just as easily collapse. Let’s get in while the fire’s hot. Hell, you don’t want to worry about this place. Go travel. You have your stocks. Visit with your grandkids.”

Lloyd sighed and put his hands up in the air. He cocked his head to the side and shrugged his shoulders. “Well, you know, all of you moved too far away, except Rachel.”

“I still count, Dad,” Rachel said, growing more and more agitated.

“Oh, I know you count,” Lloyd said. “Point is, I thought you’d all hang around and run this place. If turning it into a development would get you more interested and spend more time here, then so be it.” He turned and took Myrtle’s hand. “Come on, Mommy, let’s go have some lunch in the house before Bill knocks it down.”

“You can’t, Dad, it’s condemned. It’s not safe.”

“Oh,” Lloyd said. “Oh that’s right. That’s okay. We can go to the sandwich spot down the road.”

The four of them watched Lloyd and Myrtle walk away, and then Greg and Lloyd followed closely behind them.

“You’re an asshole,” Rachel said when they were all out of earshot.

“But I’m right.”

Part 4

2008

## Chapter 34

“I really hate you, Bill, I just want you to know that.” Rachel shook her head in disgust. Her brown hair was long and stiff, as though it hadn’t been moisturized in years. Her shirt was baggy on her slender frame and she had pulled her light blue jeans up past her belly button. As she calmly admonished her little brother, who was now fifty-five years old in 2008, she expressed her anger through the whites of her eyes. “I hope you’re happy. You took our family legacy and sold it to the highest bidder.”

David watched his father roll his eyes, but his mother laughed when she heard Rachel reprimand her husband. The four of them were standing in the orchard where the big hill had once been and looked out at the last five acres of remaining trees, perfectly maintained for the community that surrounded them. Bulldozers and backhoes had leveled the hill in the late 1990s. Once the large sheds went down and the packing equipment and old tractors sold off for scrap, the hill went next. The bulldozers chipped away at it for weeks, large trucks full of earth hauling it away a little at a time. Finally flat and with Lloyd and Myrtle traveling through Brazil, Bill ordered his grandparents’ house torn down and pavement poured over the dirt parking lot. Rachel insisted she be there for the demolition and cried the entire time.

Then went the trees. That had been the only hard part for Bill. Watching them ripped from the ground and piled into a mangled mess of kindling before being lit on fire had nearly destroyed his soul. The white smoke of the wet wood created a column that reached for miles. Hundreds of trees, some with apples that hadn’t been picked, burned into ash to cleanse the land of life. Not even Rachel could bring herself to watch the carnage. But Bill did. Bill watched, wondering if he somehow made a mistake, if he should shut everything down and instead work on rebuilding the orchard.

But to what end? The orchard was no longer profitable. A single orchard of apple trees simply couldn’t compete any longer. Fifty-five acres outside of Silicon Valley had better uses. And he was right.

By the time the first twenty houses had been built, the property values had nearly doubled. By the time the whole host of a hundred were complete, the last houses sold for almost five times the original value. The last one sold in 2004. Now in 2008, nearly half stood empty. Most foreclosed upon. Others simply abandoned. The families that remained had their mortgages paid off, which didn't mean much when the property values tanked as the Great Recession cast a shadow across homes of rural developments.

Ironically, the last five acres of apple trees were probably the most valuable asset of the property.

"You signed the papers too," Bill said. "You made a lot of money."

"Well that's great. Dad won't even come to the property anymore, but I'm glad you got your money."

"We," Bill said. "We got our money."

When the silence reached a crescendo, David couldn't handle it any longer. He said, perhaps foolishly, "The trees look good."

"Dave, come on," Karen said to him.

"What? I just mean, you know, they look good. I still think it's weird you guys were farmers. Like, you actually worked on the trees?"

No one answered until Bill said, "Yep, I grew up working these trees. I'd carefully plow the fields and prop up the branches. Best time of my life. Come on, you know that."

"I knew that?" David asked. "I didn't know that. You never brought me here."

"Oh Bill," Karen said. "You view history with rose-colored glasses." She looked at Rachel. "You both do. You both just like the tradition. Neither of you wanted the orchard."

Rachel scoffed, but before she could say something to Karen, Bill said, "Still would have liked David to spend some time here."

“Well you didn’t bring him,” Karen said. “That’s what you do, always think of how great everything else is other than your life. You’re not a farmer, Bill. You didn’t want to be a farmer. You didn’t want your son to be a farmer. Get over it.”

David, now twenty-six years old, turned and began walking away. His parents had begun fighting before he went off to college, but they had really been at one another’s throat since he had returned six months ago. He realized that moving back in with them—not at all unusual for people his age in the 2000s—had created a strain on their relationship. He wanted to get out, to move into his own place, but he couldn’t even afford to pay rent since he lost his job as a reporter at the San Francisco Chronicle. His mother offered to help with the payments—Lord knows, the development had set them up for life—but his father frowned on such charity.

“Where are you going?” Karen yelled after him.

“I’m driving to Grammy and Grandpa’s,” he yelled back.

He didn’t listen for a response. He stepped into his three-year-old Jeep Cherokee that his parents bought him as a college graduation gift. It was his single place of comfort where he felt like an independent human being. He took a deep breath. He always thought the stories of the apple orchard were bizarre, and seeing the last remaining trees along with the half-empty housing development just affirmed his feelings.

He pulled his car out of the visitor parking lot, and took the main thoroughfare that led directly to an onramp for highway 1. There was fortunately no traffic, a result of so many people being laid off and it being eleven in the morning on a Tuesday, but he still hit a slow down as he merged onto 85 from highway 17 that brought him over the Santa Cruz mountains. Mountain View wasn’t nearly as impacted by the recession as Aptos and Watsonville had been; new technology firms were popping up left and right. Traffic was becoming a fact of life in Silicon Valley.

He drove through the Mountain View back streets without giving much thought to street names. He knew them like he knew his own street. He had been coming to his grandparents' house since he was a kid, the annual Christmas Eve celebration being one of the great memories of his childhood.

He pulled into the driveway of the house and stepped out. He walked across the lawn and entered the house without knocking, shouting, "Hello!" to announce his arrival. No response. He didn't expect one because his grandparents lost most of their hearing by the time they reached seventy-five. Now in their late-eighties, they rarely heard a word unless they knew they were being spoken to.

He wandered through the house and saw both of them sitting on the back porch reading books. He slid open the glass door and again yelled, "Hello!"

He saw his grandfather snap his head to the side without moving the book, taking a few moments to process who had just intruded their serenity. When Lloyd realized it was his grandson, his face changed into a smile and he rested the book on the table. Myrtle, sitting across the table, didn't say hi, but she also set her book on the table and watched as Lloyd rose to greet him.

"Ha ha, ha ha," Lloyd said as he pushed himself out of his chair. Now eighty-eight years old, Lloyd and Myrtle hadn't slowed down a bit, but their bodies aged each day and began to struggle to keep up. Myrtle's hair was now snowy white and Lloyd had a few strands of dark hair that he combed over his otherwise bald head. "Hi, David. It's good to see you."

They embraced and David was surprised to feel how solid his grandfather still felt. Once they parted, David walked around the table and hugged his grandmother in her seat. She smiled and said, "Hiii. We were wondering if you were ever coming over."

David rolled his eyes and took the chair next to her.

"Christ, Grammy, I've been busy."

"Well, I've gotten old. You don't know how much longer you'll have the opportunity."

David rolled his eyes again as Lloyd took his seat again.



“Lloyd,” she said. When he didn’t respond, she said more firmly, “Honey!”

Lloyd’s eyes opened wider as though in surprise. “What’s that?”

“Honey, get David a beer.”

“Oh, ha ha, ha ha, I suppose I should get us some beers.”

He began to push himself up before David could object. A few minutes later, Lloyd, returned and handed David one of two opened Sierra Nevadas. They clinked bottles and then both took sips. After setting it down, David looked around the yard and saw two wood piles on opposite ends of the yard and a filled wheelbarrow halfway between them.

“What’s with all the wood?” David asked.

“Oh, I know it,” Lloyd responded. “The big oak died so we had it cut down. I was just tired of looking at all the wood so I was moving it behind the shed.”

“Christ, Grandpa, you’re eighty-eight. You shouldn’t be doing that.”

“Ha ha, ha ha, I know it. Your Grammy said the same thing.”

“Well, after I finish this, I’ll try to tackle it.”

After a few seconds, Myrtle asked, “How’s your writing coming along?”

David smiled sheepishly. “Well, the Chronicle let me go.”

“Ah, yeah, we heard. Ho hum. Doesn’t mean you can’t write.”

“No, just means I can’t write for money. Tough times for writers. Suppose it wasn’t the best choice for a college degree.”

“The English language is important. The written word is a dying art. We need people like you to keep it going. When I met your grandfather, he could barely speak English. Spoke Croatian at home.”

“Really?” David asked in genuine intrigue. He looked at Lloyd. “You spoke Croatian at home growing up.”

“Ha ha, ha ha, now, wait awhile, oh yeah, yeah I suppose I did. Yeah that’s right.”

“But you were born here, right?”

David was surprised at how little he knew about his grandparents.

“Yeah, I was born here, but my parents came over from Croatia and never liked English much. My mother insisted on speaking Croatian at home.”

“That’s so interesting. I never knew that. So have you ever been to Croatia in all your travels?”

“Can you believe it?” Lloyd asked. “I’ve been to six continents and seventy-four countries, but we’ve never made it to Croatia. My father never returned either. Kind of a shame.”

David nodded in agreement. “How come you never visited?”

Lloyd shrugged his shoulders and kept them locked in that position for a few seconds. Finally, he said, “I don’t really know, ha ha. Mommy, how come we never visited Croatia?”

“Oh, ho hum,” Myrtle responded. “Because we wanted to visit other places.”

Lloyd laughed. “I suppose that’s true. Have you ever been to Bali, David? I think that was my favorite place.”

David laughed with his grandfather. “No, I’ve never been to Bali. I do want to go to Croatia, though.”

Lloyd perked up. “You want to visit Croatia?”

“Of course I do. I’ve heard it’s beautiful.”

“Have I ever shown you the bottle of olive oil from my grandfather’s farm?”

David shook his head, not to say no, but in exasperation. He sipped his beer and then said, “Of course, Grandpa. It’s in your display case as soon as you walk in the house.”

“Oh, ha ha, I suppose that’s true. I think it’s really *neat*, though, you know? Our history in a bottle.”

“Why don’t you go visit the old farm out in Croatia?” David asked. “You could bring that old bottle back and bring it all full circle.”

Lloyd shrugged again. "Yeah, I suppose that would be something I'd like to see. I'm getting pretty old, though. You know, actually, someone claiming to be my second cousin or third cousin or something contacted me. Still living out there. Wants to meet me."

"Wait, are you serious? You, or we, have family in Croatia and they tracked you down?"

"Yeah. Sent me a letter."

"What'd you say?"

"Oh, hell, I didn't respond. I don't even know..." He trailed off.

When he didn't finish his thought, David said, "Well I think that's pretty cool. I think you should follow up with him. Or her. Whoever it was. That's crazy. I wonder how they found you."

They talked for another half an hour and then Lloyd stood and watched David haul the rest of the wood across the yard and pile it neatly behind the shed. Now sweaty and exhausted, his Grandpa walked him back through the house.

"Are you sure you don't want any lunch?" Lloyd asked.

"No, thank you."

"You know, it was good *seeing* you," Lloyd said. He laughed. "I feel like I don't see my grandkids much anymore."

"I know, but I don't have a whole lot to do at the moment, so I'll try to come out more often."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Hell if I know. Look for a job. Got any hot stock tips?"

Lloyd swiped at the air. "I don't think we've hit bottom yet, but I'm going to buy Ford if it drops under a dollar a share. A dollar a share." Lloyd shook his head and rubbed his chin. Then something popped in his mind and he said, "Maybe your sister can get you a job in the city."

"She's a doctor, Grandpa. I don't think it's quite that easy."

Lloyd laughed. "I suppose that's true. You know, my brother was doctor."

David shook his head. "I didn't know that. I feel like I don't know anything about you."

"Well, come on back over. I'd be happy to tell you more."

"I'll do that."

Before he left, David looked at the old bottle of olive oil in the display cabinet. The bottle had browned from age and the sun, but the yellow liquid was clear as day.

Then they hugged and David left. He walked out to his car that his parents had bought for him and started the drive back to Lafayette, where his parents moved from Oakland. He hoped he had left early enough to beat rush hour traffic, but it ultimately didn't really matter because he had nowhere he needed to be. A new song he never heard came on the radio, but he flipped it off and rolled down his window to smell the air and let the warm wind fall on his face. It took him well over an hour to get back to the house. He pulled into the parking lot and sat in the parked car for several minutes after shutting off the engine. He walked up the stairs to the house he had grown up in and could already hear his parents yelling at one another. He really wished he had a place of his own. He really wished he didn't have to stay here. He just didn't have any other options.

## Chapter 35

A couple days later when David left the house to go see some friends, his mother and father were shouting at one another. He didn't hear what they were yelling about—it sounded more like white noise at this point—but it did seem that his mother was angrier than usual. He hadn't spoken to them much since he returned home from his grandparents' house, but all of their fights had been variations of the same topics. "This house is horrible, why'd we leave Oakland?" "Don't blame me that you didn't become a farmer." "Why don't we move to a house with a bigger yard." "Oh, Karen, just stifle up." But even white noise became distracting. He needed to get out.

He hadn't seen any of his friends since the Chronicle laid him off six months ago. He told himself—and anyone that called him—that he couldn't afford to go out without a paycheck, but he knew that wasn't true. Being a reporter had given him bragging rights. He mixed it up with the leaders of San Francisco. His name was in print across the internet. Now what was he? Jobless. No girlfriend. No home. Living with his parents. As his former colleagues continued to write stories about how the recession is impacting the Bay Area, he became one of the statistics they wrote about. He was one of the college graduates living at home with no job. He was part of the first generation that would be worse off than his parents. He was the guy that secretly allowed his grandfather to slip a twenty-dollar bill into his wallet for helping move wood across the yard. He knew his grandpa had done it and he said nothing. His grandparents were a consistent source of pocket change since he began realizing birthday cards were really a vehicle for birthday money. When his grandparents came to visit him at the University of Colorado one year, before leaving, Lloyd took out an envelope of cash and said, "Oh, I suppose I should give you some money." David gratefully accepted.

He used the most recent cash infusion to pay for a cab ride to a BART station and a train ticket into the city. Six months was long enough, and now his cousin, Max, was flying in from Los Angeles and

his old roommate from Colorado, Saeed, had an interview in Palo Alto, so he figured it was as good a time as any to show his face once again.

“Dude, it’s so damn good to see you,” Saeed said to him as they sat together at Savanna Jazz in the San Francisco Mission District. Several store fronts were boarded up along mission Street, but Savanna Jazz, which opened in 2003, was still going strong. Saeed’s curly black hair and dark, week-old facial growth took on a red hue from the red lights that illuminated the walls. The Golden Gate Jazz Quartet was playing softly on the stage, with the trumpeter giving room to the pianist to carry a few of the songs.

“Been way to long,” David agreed. “Sorry I never make it back out to Colorado.”

“Hopefully that’ll be a moot point.”

“So you’re interviewing with Apple?” Max asked. David just wanted to catch up with Saeed, but Max was only interested in Saeed’s pending interview.

“Yep, to be a software engineer,” Saeed said.

“A software engineer,” David said. He didn’t have a point to saying it out loud, he just had to vocalize the job title to wrap his head around what that meant.

“Hey, I tried to get you into programming at C.U., but you were all hellbent on being a journalist. How’d that work out for you?”

They all laughed. David took a sip of his Bud Light, the cheapest drink on the menu.

“Math has never been my strong suit. I think I’d rather be unemployed than be a software engineer.”

Saeed laughed. “So what the hell happened?”

“It’s a dying industry, what can I say?”

“Not like all these tech companies,” Max quickly jumped in. “Talk about recession proof. They’re still scooping up programmers as fast as they can find them.”

“I hope so. It’d be fun to be out here in Cali.”

“Dude, that’d be amazing. I need a couch to crash on other than my mom’s.”

They all sat silently and listened to the music. Savanna Jazz wasn’t quite at capacity—David could see a few empty tables in the back—but it was a good crowd for a Thursday night. He used to come here with his colleagues after long days at the office. He interviewed a city supervisor here after she won her seat in the most recent election. She, of course, still had her job.

“So, Max, what do you do?” Saeed asked as the trumpet picked back up.

“I’m doing some consulting,” he said, “to start ups.” Max had on capris and white leather sandals. His silk shirt was a size too small, which strained the buttons.

Saeed nodded at the seemingly impressive resume required to be a paid consultant.

“What makes you qualified for that?”

Max shifted confidently in his seat. He had an air of confidence about his unemployed status that David couldn’t muster up. But Max always had that quality. He had come out of the closet in the eighth grade—in front of his eighth-grade class for a “Me Report” project—at which point his mother, Rachel, had to explain to the Palo Alto school board that her son was simply precocious. He found his place in the world when he went to UCLA and joined the LGBT Entrepreneurs where he met and began dating Jason Gutenfriend. Smitten with his hot German boyfriend, he dropped out of UCLA his sophomore year to help Jason pursue his tech start-up idea, Scan, which connected patients with medical device sales. When Jason lost his scholarship funding and failed to secure any angel investors, he went back to Germany. Max, refusing to admit defeat, continued to develop the business, convinced Rachel to invest some of her money from the real estate development, and then used that investment to convince a minority owner of the Los Angeles Dodgers to give the company a million dollars. He sold the business a year later for twelve million dollars to a firm on the East Coast, and then watched as the company unraveled when the recession prevented home purchases of medical devices. Regardless, he

walked away with nearly ten million dollars and the arrogance to begin selling himself as a consultant to tech startups, which is exactly what he told Saeed.

“Wow, you walked away with ten mil?” Saeed asked.

“Initially,” Max said, “but the consultant work is really proving to be lucrative.

David rolled his eyes.

“Well damn, Dave,” Saeed said, “your cousin’s rollin’ large and you’re an out-of-work journalist.

Why don’t you guys put your heads together and start something new?”

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” David said.

“Why not?” Max asked, his interest piqued. “I’ve got the brains, and the cash, I just need an idea.”

“You mean your brains aren’t giving you any ideas?”

Max laughed and shook his head.

“Davey’s too smart for his own good,” he said flamboyantly, stressing the “good.”

Saeed laughed and they clinked their glasses together at David’s expense.

“But in all seriousness, I could use those types of smarts, Davey. I mean, what are you young, average American folks looking for these days?”

“Us young, average American folks? What are you two years older than me?”

“It’s a lifetime. You’ll understand when you’re a little older. Plus, I roll with the crazy LA crowds. We’re just soooo out of touch, you know?”

“I do, yes. Well, let’s see. How about something to help us find jobs.”

Saeed and Max both laughed, and then all three of them watched the band as the trumpet again commanded the room. David noticed it conveniently let them both ignore his suggestion.



“Hey, have you two heard of this new company that maps your DNA?” Saeed asked, still watching the band. “You like spit in a vial or something and send it in and they send back all these details about the diseases you carry and your heritage.”

“Ew,” David said. “That’s just weird.”

“No, I’ve heard of that,” Max confirmed, refusing to admit that he didn’t already have the insider gossip of the tech start up industry. “The guy who started Google, his wife started it. Super crazy stuff.”

“And that’s the kind of thing making people rich these days?” David asked. “Duping people to mail in their spit so you convince them they have diseases?”

“Ye of little faith, my little Jewish friend,” Saeed said. “These are the ideas that are changing the world. Just watch, companies like that are what’s going to pull this country out of the recession. Why do you think I want to move out here? Dude, this is where it’s at. The new world thrives on information, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering. It’s all happening, and I am going to get in on it.”

“Genetically modified foods?” David asked.

“Oooh, hell yes,” Max said, pursing his lips to either purposely or inadvertently show off his femininity. “It is all the rage.”

“Max, do you know how blasphemous that is for our family?”

“Oh please, this is a dog-eat-dog world. No small-time farmer is going to make it in California any more. Plus, what’s wrong with feeding the poor? There’s nothing wrong with the food.”

“He’s right,” Saeed said.

“Well, jeez, you two have convinced me. Bring me some irradiated apple pie.”

Saeed laughed. “Dude, I missed you. What do you think about me moving out here, in all seriousness?”

“I’m being serious, I’d love it. It’s just getting expensive.”

“I know, so I was thinking we could get a place together down near San Jose.”

“San Jose? You gotta stay up here in the city.”

“Nah, the action is down there. That’s what I’m hearing.” When David didn’t respond, Saeed continued, “Well, let me see how tomorrow goes and we’ll talk about it.”

“Oh come on, you got this in the bag.” When he said it, he realized how bitter he was that his friend was coming into his neighborhood and getting a job while he was sleeping at his parents’ house. Friend or not, here was a transplant taking a job and transforming the area into something unrecognizable from his youth.

“Let’s get another round,” Saeed said. “This is on me.”

He was just being nice, but the charity just made David even more bitter. He didn’t say anything inappropriate or act out in a manner he’d regret, but he simply regretted coming at all. He would have preferred staying home and listening to his parents fight.

After another hour, Max’s words began slurring. He drunkenly grabbed David’s shoulder and shook him.

“Davey,” he said, “no more messing around. Let’s do this. Let’s really do this. It’ll be fabulous, I promise.”

David laughed. “Yeah yeah, once you tell me what it is that will be fabulous, I’m in.”

“You’re in!”

“I’m in.”

“Yaaaas. Gentlemen,” he said, rocking backward into his seat, “gentlemen. Mmmm, I’d like some gentlemen. I really need to move back to this city. Hey, I know this great place...”

“No!” David and Saeed shouted together.

“Whatever,” Max howled. “What’re you boys scared of? Liking it?”

Max was still laughing when he stood up and walked out. Saeed shook his head and then said his good byes as well. His interview was at nine thirty, he explained, he shouldn't be hungover. David had no such qualms about the next day, but he walked Saeed back to his small motel and hugged his old friend goodbye.

"Tomorrow night?" Saeed asked. "Celebrate with me."

"Fine, but you're coming to Lafayette."

"Done."

David and Saeed parted ways and then David rode BART back to Lafayette. From BART he took a taxi several miles into the golden hills of his town. Whereas in the Mission District of San Francisco he smelled urine and heard the bustling of life, in Lafayette, he could smell the fresh air of the oak trees and hear the scurrying of racoons. From the hills, he could hear a coyote howling and one of his neighbors was having a pool party.

He wandered up the steps and opened the front door, which was perpetually left unlocked during hours of being awake. The house was dark except for a faint light from the family room. He walked in and found his dad watching the recorded 49ers preseason game from the weekend.

"Hey, Dad," he said, plopping on the couch.

Bill remained silent, apparently ignorant of his son's presence. He tapped his heels against the ground in concentration as he watched the last play—a run up the middle. He shook his head. "Every time," he said to himself. Then he began counting into his palm with his fingers. "Twice in the first quarter on first down, now four times in the second quarter. Unbelievable."

"Dad!" David said with more authority.

Bill snapped his head around, startled by the interruption. He reached for the remote and paused the action. "Hey, David."

"This the Niner game from the weekend?"

“Yeah, your mom doesn’t like me watching them anymore.”

David laughed to himself. “I’ll bet.”

“How was your night?”

“Good. I saw Max. And Saeed’s in town.”

“Saeed? You mean from college?”

“Yeah, he has a job interview with Apple tomorrow.”

“Oh good for him! You know, you should consider one of those big tech companies. You’d be great for them.”

“I don’t think it’s that easy. They want programmers.”

“Everyone needs good writers and communicators. A big tech company in particular.”

“Yeah maybe.”

They sat in silence and then Bill reached for a beer from the coffee table. It made him think of something. “You want a beer? There’s some in the fridge.”

“Nah, that’s alright. I’m just going to hit the sack.”

“K.”

The awkward tension of a man and his grown son who had lost the ability to talk to one another was palpable. David didn’t make it any more awkward than it needed to be, and his dad helped as well by turning back to the television and flipping the game back on.

David walked to his room and closed the door. He sat at his desk in his darkened room and flipped on his computer. He opened Google and stared at the blank search screen. While he thought about it, he opened a desk drawer and pulled out a half-full bottle of rum. He took a sip and let the alcohol burn his throat. When he set the open bottle on his desk, he typed in: **23 and Me**.

He clicked on the website and read about the new technology. He could learn about his genes and what diseases he was prone to have. More importantly, he could learn about his heritage. Where

did he come from? Where were his ancestors from? The site needed more users. The more users, the more specific the results. \$99, he saw was the price. \$99 that he didn't have and shouldn't be spending on crack pot money-making schemes. He took another sip of the rum, though, and ordered a kit. It would arrive in a few weeks.

With heritage on his mind, he typed in Croatia. It was really the only heritage he knew. His grandfather and his father always talked about their Croatian heritage. His last name, Tahmatch, was actually derived from a Croatian name, Tomatic. His great grandfather came over by boat, fleeing the Austrian Empire. The stories had become legend. All David really knew is that he was of Croatian blood, and apparently, according to his grandfather, he still had relatives that lived out there.

He typed Croatia into Google. Pictures emerged of beautiful beaches and ancient stone walls. Red tile roofs and long cobble-stone streets. He saw vineyards and olive tree orchards. Sites blaring out vacation packages. He had never considered going on vacation to Croatia. As he sat there alone, though, getting drunk on cheap rum, jobless, with no place in the world as he knew it, nothing made more sense to him than packing his bags and going to find his relatives. Who knows, maybe they'd have an inside track on a job in Europe.

## Chapter 36

David awoke in a good mood for the first time since getting laid off. He had forgotten the feeling of rising for the day with a purpose, like a young reporter hot on the trail of a story. It was exciting, a life given meaning.

Now, as he stood naked in the bathroom, the smell of bacon wafting from under the door as his mother made him breakfast, he understood that his excitement was more indicative of how far his life had fallen. He was not tracking down a source for a groundbreaking news story and he wasn't going to a great new job interview. But it was also oddly similar. No, he wasn't tracking down a source, but he was tracking down family. He had decided to go to Croatia on an on-the-cheap back-packers vacation in order to find this mysterious cousin that sent his grandfather a letter. It meant doing something, anything, instead of waking up with nothing but the wind to guide him.

He put on some jeans and a T-shirt and wandered out to the kitchen where his father was reading the Chronicle and his mother was making waffles and bacon.

"Good morning," he said. Before anyone could answer, he plopped into a chair at the table and pulled out the Sporting Green section. "You know, some people might be offended that you flaunt their old employer in their face."

Bill crumbled the paper down in front of him. He tapped his heels on the floor as he thought of a proper response, apparently missing the humor. "A guy's got to get the news. Besides, I was actually thinking that you're a better writer than most of these reporters. Seems like they fired some of the editors too."

"Copy editors were the first to go."

Karen appeared with a plate of waffles and bacon and plopped it in front of him.

"Thanks, Mom. What's this for? It's not Sunday."

"A mom can make breakfast for her son. I figured you might not be feeling great after last night."

She sat down next to him.

"Last night? Did I seem drunk? I didn't even see you."

"No, but you know, you went out, and I'm happy you're moving on. Plus, now I get to be the one that made you breakfast while your father forces you to watch him *read the Chronicle!*"

"Oh, Karen, stifle up," Bill responded. Bill never ate breakfast, but you he took a sip of his coffee. "Holy Toledo, Lehman Brothers is officially filing for bankruptcy. Jesus Christ."

"The only thing that's surprising is that these things are still surprising you," Karen said.

"What a crazy time."

David picked up a piece of bacon and started scanning the baseball scores.

"Oh, by the way, your Aunt Tracy is coming to stay with us for a little while," Karen said.

This got Bill's attention.

"What? Tracy is coming to stay here? When?"

"Bill, we talked about this. Her building in New Orleans is getting renovated and she needs a place to stay. We talked about this. You never listen to me."

"Wacky Tracy's coming?" David asked. "That'll be fun. Jesus, she's never going to leave."

"Oh will you two listen to yourselves? She's my sister. I love Tracy. It'll be nice to have some female support in this house again." Karen tended to get defensive of her sister, particularly since her father passed away.

David changed the subject by saying, "Waffles are great, Mom, thanks."

"Good. There's a lot more so eat up. So, what do you have going on today?"

"Actually, I was going to drive back down to Grammy and Grandpa's."

"Really? God, I thought you would have had your fill since you were just there."

“Well, I was thinking last night, I’m going to use some of my savings and go on a long trip through Croatia. Grandpa and Dad are always talking about it. I want to go see it. And grandpa said an old relative contacted him, so I’m going to track him down. And I mean, this seems like the perfect time. I literally have no job or nothing to do.”

This also got Bill’s attention and David knew from both of their reactions that they were not supportive of his idea.

“David,” his father said. David knew this tone. It wasn’t said as a question, or in a manner suggesting he had follow-on words. It was a one-word phrase, meant to convey a specific meaning. Within that one word was a magnum opus of disappointment. He had used it all of David’s life, and it meant that Bill was upset at who David had become and the decisions he had made.

“Father,” David responded, using the same one-word response he had learned to use over the years. Whereas Bill’s conveyed disappointment, David’s conveyed a mocking sarcasm, which in itself suggested a disappointment at who his father had become.

But then Bill said something different than in the past, which caught not just David but Karen by surprise. He folded up the newspaper, smiled, and said, “Excellent!”

“Excuse me?” David said.

“Yeah, what?” Karen said on cue.

“I think that’s a great idea. Seriously, you have the time and you might not ever have time like this in your entire life. Entirely free time, no responsibility. You have savings I hope.”

“Who are you?” Karen asked.

“What? Karen, think about where we met? I was jobless living in Tahoe. This could be Dave’s Tahoe, right?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Karen said, clearly not liking that her husband was taking the high road in the conversation. “I just... do you really think that’s the best idea? I mean, you *do* need to find a job, Dave.”



"I know," David said, feeling even more confident than before now that he had his father's support. "And to be honest, maybe this will help." When he saw his mom wasn't buying his not entirely obvious logic, he added, "Mom, I'm feeling a little lost. I need to get away. I'll even throw the self-discovery card on the table."

"Hey," Bill said, showing genuine intrigue in the idea, "you could even write about it. Try to sell a travel article. Hell, then the whole thing could be a tax write off."

They all sat silently for a minute. Karen began tapping a finger as she considered the possibility. "I'm just not crazy about you traveling around Croatia on your own. These are dangerous places."

"Oh, Karen," Bill said. "Croatia isn't dangerous. It's become a tourist country."

"When would you even go?"

"Honestly, as soon as possible. I mean, I was reading about it last night and tourist season is ending. Everything says the best time to go is in the next month or so."

"Excellent," Bill said again. "You know, you'll be the first Tahmatoh to return. God, grandpa's going to be jealous. Hell, I'm going to be jealous."

"Really?" Karen asked in dismay. "You're going to be jealous?"

"Absolutely. And a relative contacted Grandpa? He never told me that."

"Well then why don't you go too," she said, partly in jest. "I can just hang out with Tracy. I think we'd all be happier."

"I can't tell, are you serious?"

"Why not? You talk about it enough. It's positively ludicrous you've never been. I think it'd be good. You talk about it like it's heaven on Earth, so maybe it'd be good to go remember why your grandfather left to come here in the first place."

Karen shook her head in disgust. She got up and walked into the kitchen to begin cleaning the dishes. David got up and followed her, carrying his dish to the sink.

“Mom, what do you think?”

She sighed. “If this is what you need to do, then you should do it.”

“Why do you seem so opposed to this? I’ve always done everything by the book, I just want to go explore.”

She turned, keeping her hand on the waffle iron. She didn’t say anything as she tapped her finger on the top. David tried to see through her eyes and glean what she was thinking. He obviously didn’t need her permission. He could go and never look back; he could go and never even return. What would she think of that? But he didn’t want to go and never return. He wanted to go, have a good time, find a part of himself he never knew—the part that would lead him to the future—and then return home. Maybe he would return and have a new great idea and even move into a place of his own again. But his mother had always been his biggest supporter. Something about this decision needed her approval. It needed more than her approval, it needed her unwavering blessing.

“That family,” she said. “You know, my family has a story too, a history. We come from Russia and Poland. I don’t hear you saying you want to visit Moscow.” She paused. David had no response. He looked ashamed even, which of course made Karen feel ashamed. “But I suppose you are your father’s son.”

“And my mother’s,” he said. “But I’m not hearing of any of your relatives contacting us from Russia.”

“Ha, true. Yes, and your mother’s. Go to Croatia. Just don’t go finding some Croatian wife. I think I’d kill myself.” She smiled. Something about the trip seemed final, like going off to college and getting a job in the city were simply apprenticeship stepping stones on the journey to independent adulthood. Only, in this case, that adulthood would come with a chaperone. “But seriously, take your father with you, I could use the break. Plus, then he can help you pay for it.”

An hour later, David and Bill drove to Lloyd and Myrtle's house in Mountain View. Lloyd, even at eighty-eight years old, had just returned from playing tennis with a physician he had befriended at the monthly Stanford Speakers Series. Myrtle spent her morning swimming at the YMCA and was now preparing a lasagna for a dinner party they were hosting.

"Mom!" Bill shouted as he walked in. "Dad!" They walked through the house, but before they found Lloyd sitting at the kitchen table reading the newspaper, he shouted a little louder, "Dad!"

Over the years, Bill spoke to his parents in an ever-louder voice, much the way an ignorant native speaker might speak more loudly to a person who doesn't speak their language. It made no difference the volume, the person wouldn't understand you regardless.

"Huh?" they both heard. "Bill?"

They turned the corner into the kitchen area and found Lloyd putting his hearing aids in and turning up the volume.

"Hey, Dad," Bill said in a chipper voice.

"Bill? Ha ha, ha ha, now wait awhile. What in the heck are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to talk to you both. Mom. Hey, Mom! Come join us."

"Oh, Bill," Myrtle said in her scratchy voice. "Oh, brother me, your daddy and I haven't yet put on our faces. Look at him, all sweaty at the kitchen table."

Myrtle, opinionated but agreeable to circumstances, walked out of the kitchen and sat in her chair at the kitchen table.

"Mom, Dad," Bill said, "David wants to go to Croatia and he wants to get your advice on what he should do."

"Dad, I can talk," David said. "It's my idea."

"Oh, sorry."

“Well, you already said it, so, yeah, Grandpa, I’m going to Croatia.”

“Ha ha, ha ha, now wait awhile, you’re going to Croatia? Mommy, did you hear that?”

“Yes I heard it, Lloyd, I’m sitting right here.”

“Oh, ha ha, that’s right.”

“So, yeah, what do you think about that?” David asked.

“Well, you know,” Lloyd said, “I think that’s pretty *neat*. I’ve never been. I’ve always wanted to go. Have I ever told you that?”

“Yes, Grandpa, we just talked about it a couple days ago.”

“Oh that’s right. So what are you going to do there?”

“That’s what I want you to tell me. I think my dad is planning to go with me.”

Lloyd’s eyes opened wide. It wasn’t shock or dismay, just the processing of an additional piece of interesting information.

“Bill is going with you?”

“Yeah, Dad,” Bill said.

Lloyd began rubbing his chin as he thought about the trip. “Hmm. Well, you know, you should really go to Korcula. That’s where the family’s from. Although the letter came from Dubrovnik now.” He continued to think about it and rub his chin. He laughed. “So maybe you should go to Dubrovnik.”

“Dad, how come you didn’t tell me you get letters from family in Dubrovnik?”

“Oh, ho hum,” Myrtle said, “it was just the one.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that?”

Lloyd shrugged his shoulders and froze as they were raised. He finally relaxed back into the chair, “I didn’t think you’d care. I think they’re very poor.”

“Well I’d like to go to both places,” David said. “How come you’ve never gone yourself, Grandpa?”

Lloyd sighed. "You know, by the time that was even possible, there were other places I've wanted to go to. I don't really know what I'd see there, or if I want to see what I'd see." They sat silently, and then Lloyd asked David, "Why do you want to go?"

David didn't hesitate. "I want to go meet this relative." Then he laughed. "Or because I have nothing to do and am looking for any possible opportunity to make a change in my life."

"Well that's an interesting irony," Myrtle said. "Jobless and returning to where it all began." That got a laugh out of the table. "Of course, if you need a job and something to do, we own a few dozen oil derricks on our land in Taft. Go work those and feel what it's like to do a good day's labor. We use our hands in this family."

David laughed and shook his head. His grandparents were nothing if not honest.

"Thanks, Grammy, but I think I'll go on vacation to Croatia. Besides, I just moved all that wood for you! Actually, why don't you two come with us? Sometime in the next couple months. I'll plan the whole thing. Just give me some contacts for the family and some addresses or things you want to see. You know what, maybe I can track down the old farm. There can't be that many on Korcula."

Lloyd again rubbed his chin in thought. Grammy began rocking back and forth in her chair. She remained silent, but she sighed, which seemed to hold more meaning than a simple sigh.

"Croatia, huh?" Lloyd asked. "You know, I *would* really like to go."

"Dad, tell them that's a great idea," David said.

"It is a great idea. You both should go while you're still able."

"So how do you propose you find the old farm?" Lloyd asked.

"Do you have the letter or does the bottle have any documentation?"

Lloyd shook his head. "Not with the details. Dubrovnik is all I know."

David smiled. "Then we start with the family and go from there. It'll be an adventure. We'll find it when we're there. Hey, you know, if we pack it right, we could bring the bottle. Show it around. Maybe someone will have an idea."

Lloyd shook his head approvingly. "What do you think, Mommy?"

"Oh, ho hum. I guess if it's planned out, we might as well see it."

"Well, okay then," Lloyd said. "Let's go to Croatia."

## Chapter 37

Dubrovnik crowds in December were noticeably lighter than the hordes of tourists that visit in June and July. Most families take their trips to Croatia within a brief four-month window, taking advantage of the school and work vacations to enjoy Croatia's white sand beaches on the Adriatic. Dubrovnik, of course, has no beaches, but tourists insist on stopping at the historic city all-the-same, thereby creating a mob of sweaty, angry people crammed together within the stone walls of the city. At least, that's what the taxi driver said as he drove David, Bill, Lloyd, and Myrtle up the hillside and away from the historic old town.

"Typically," he explained, "I only drive tourists up the hillside during the summer to escape the crowds or because the only places they can rent were small apartments several miles away. Very unusual during the winter. Who wants to go up the hill if you don't have to? Very unusual. It's good, though, it's good. See real Dubrovnik."

"Hopefully it's warmer," David said, sitting in the front seat.

"Warmer? No. Windier."

"Great."

They all sat huddled in thick jackets and scarves. Body heat of five people in the small car helped warm them up, and it definitely helped to be protected from the wind, but the car's heater didn't work. "I'm saving up to get it repaired," the driver said. "It's not a problem over the summer."

Planning for the big trip had taken longer than David hoped. October seemed ideal, but between organizing schedules and researching places to visit, they didn't get on a plane until December 1st. He threatened to just go on his own, but Bill promised to pay for the whole trip, and he had actually been excited to do this with his grandparents.

The four of them flew directly into Dubrovnik and stayed in two rooms of a newly renovated hotel near the middle of the old town. They had spent two days recuperating from the jet lag while they explored the cobble-stone streets and old churches, and the next day were planning to take a ferry to Korcula Town. Ironically, as the trip planning got underway, meeting old relatives became an afterthought, but they still wanted to meet in person. Lloyd didn't know exactly where on the family tree they came from, just that a Tomatic who had sent him a letter.

Now in Croatia, David felt the vigor of tracking down a source. The letter had an address—Lloyd just forgot—and David responded back to them describing their visit. He received a response a couple weeks later, which included an email address, and David remained in communication with a man named Bozo. Together, they scheduled an early dinner at the man's father's house, who would have been Lloyd's cousin.

The cab driver inched his way up the hillside and took a sharp turn around a concrete wall onto a tree-lined single-lane road. He began looking for street signs and after a few seconds made a sharp left down a narrow alleyway that carved through several apartment buildings. The alley opened up into a larger street, at which point the driver abruptly pulled the car over and pointed. David followed the path of the finger and looked up at a white-washed building with stone steps leading to the entrance. The roof didn't have the red tile that most of the buildings had, but rather a brown asphalt that covered the top in between old stonework. The closer David looked, the more he could see that the building was built upon ruins, with a stone base and sections of the wall that retained the original construction. The white walls and the asphalt roof merely filled in the gaps.

"Is this it?"

"This is it."

Bill held some cash out for the driver to take and said, "Excellent. Let's go."



David opened the door, which creaked and groaned and then bounced on its hinges, and stepped out. The wind whipped down the street, making David pull his jacket tighter. There was no one outside at the moment, and few of the buildings had windows with open shutters. David had his doubts and could have been just as happy getting back in the cab and heading back down the hill, but his grandparents were already out of the car and heading for the front door.

“My friend,” the driver called out. He held a piece of paper through the window. “Here’s my cell. Call and I’ll come get you. I’ll be up here for a few hours.”

David held the paper up in acknowledgment and then followed his family toward the building.

“Are you ready, Dad?” Bill asked.

Lloyd sighed. “Oh, ha ha, I suppose I am.”

“Well, honey, ring the bell, I’m freezing,” Myrtle said.

Bill stepped forward and knocked on the door. He hadn’t finished when the door opened and a young boy with dark hair and one long, conjoined eyebrow threw his hands in the air and shouted, “Welcome, family!” The loud welcome was followed by laughter and cheers from fifteen to twenty people, with one older gentleman standing front and center.

The outburst startled Myrtle, who grasped at her heart and said, “Oh me oh my.”

“Come in, come in,” the older man said with a harsh Croatian accent. He spun his hand in the air, urging them inside. “Welcome to my home. Don’t mind Nicky. Nicky, get out of the way and let them inside. You all must be freezing.”

The four of them entered and were consumed by smiling faces.

“Hi,” Lloyd said, allowing the “i” to carry.

Once David was inside, the man softly shut the door. He put his hand on David’s shoulder. And you are?”

“I’m David. This is my father Bill. And this is Lloyd and his wife Myrtle.”

“David. A Jewish name, yes?”

“Um, yes, yes it is.”

“Ah. We love Jews! Bill,” he said extending his hand. They shook and he cupped the handshake with a second hand. “A real pleasure. And Myrtle, welcome to Croatia.” He turned to Lloyd. “Cousin.” He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Lloyd.

“Ha ha, now wait a while.”

He stepped away. “Years. Years I’ve been waiting. My father, Erminio, your father’s brother, tried to track you down. Been very hard.”

“Erminio?” Lloyd said. “Erminio. Now, I thought he died in the war.”

“Erminio? No. Fought, yes. Fought for the Empire. But he survived. A changed man. My father met his wife in Korcula Town the same morning he saw your father off.”

“Is that right?” Lloyd said. “I’ll be damned. How come word passed he died?”

“Your father saved the orchard for many years. He knew if he asked, Lucien would have returned and tried to help restore it. But then he would have had to fight. So the family cut ties.”

Lloyd brought his hand to his chin and began to rub it. “You know, I think he would have liked to have seen you all again.”

“But we don’t live in the past. Am I right?” He had a broad smile.

“Dad,” a younger man said in much cleaner English.

“Ah, my manners. I am Pero. This is my house.”

“It’s a fine home,” Myrtle said.

“You are too kind. We’ve been in this house since 1914. Nearly a hundred years. It got bombed out in the war, but my father and I rebuilt it. Ah, and this fine young man is Bozo, my son. I believe he has been the one that sent you a letter. And this beautiful woman is Marija, and their son Nicky, you’ve all met. And over here is my other son, Nino, and his wife, Marija, and their son Bozo. And over here

are my brothers, Ivo and Stana, and their wives, Marina and Mira. And this is Ivo's daughter, Ave, who is married to Ivo, and their sons, Pero, and Stana. Stana's son, over here, is also Ivo, who is married to Stankica, and their sons are Bozo and Ivo, and their daughter, Marija."

He looked at the family proudly.

"Ha ha, ha ha," Lloyd said, "you all have the same names."

"Ah, my American cousin, we keep names close. Why change good things, right?"

"Are they all here for us?" Myrtle asked.

"We're family. Of course."

"It's a real honor," the first Bozo said. "It's amazing to have more family."

"And we hope you're hungry," his wife, Marija, said. "Because we made you a feast."

"I could eat," Lloyd said.

"So could I," David said.

"I wouldn't mind getting a tour," Bill said. "Can you see the fort from here?"

Pero's eyes gleamed. "A historian!"

"I just appreciate good real estate."

"Come, come, let me show you."

Pero led the four of them through the house, followed closely by the entire family. The main floor was relatively humble, with wood floors and a sofa that sat in front of a boxed television. The kitchen had an arching stone hearth over the stove and cloves of garlicks hung in the windowsill. Through the main floor, the space opened into an outdoor sitting area. Pero led them outside and placed his hands on the railing. From the balcony, they could see the wide expanse of red rooves and the stone walls of old town. The large guard towers cast a shadow on the harbor and then the view opened to the ocean.

"Wow," David said.

“How about that, huh, Dave?” Bill asked.

“Dubrovnik is very beautiful,” Pero confirmed ensuring they all agreed as they stared at the beautiful view. He turned around and pointed up the hill. “Mr. Bill, the fortress.”

They all turned to see the great fortress overlooking the house.

“Ha ha, ha ha,” Lloyd said, “you see that, honey? This is a *nice* view.”

“Of course I see it, honey,” Myrtle said. “I’m standing right here.”

“Okay,” Pero said, “now let me show you downstairs, and then we can enjoy some fine Croatian wine.”

As they all went back into the house, David started walking next to Pero’s son, Bozo. Bozo was quite literally a younger version of Pero, but had twenty or so extra pounds added around his midsection and beneath his chin. This was slightly masked by his facial and neck hair, which wasn’t so much a beard as it was a failure to shave in a couple weeks. He had an air of confidence about him, as though he led the family when Pero wasn’t around.

“Bozo, right?” David asked.

“Yes. And you’re David, Bill’s son.”

“Nice to finally meet you in person. Amazing you tracked us down.”

“Ah,” he laughed, “I had help. We received the Internet and a computer a few years ago, and we discovered ancestry.com. That’s how I found your grandfather.”

Now David laughed. “Through ancestry.com?”

Bozo understood the humor, so he clarified, “During the war, many Croats fled the region. My brother has been missing for nearly ten years.” He changed his tone to a whisper. “He’s probably dead, killed by the Serbs, but we hold out hope. So I started doing research, and it led me to your grandfather. Imagine our surprise when we discovered we had a whole side of the family living in America!”

“Probably about as surprised as we were when we found out about all of you.”

While Bozo laughed, they walked down the stairs and emerged into the cellar. The whole bottom floor was a large stone arch, probably once used for storage. The strength of the arch preserved the foundation, even while the rest of the structure took severe damage.

“Holy smokes,” Bill said.

The family had turned it into a large family room and entertaining area. It was naturally cooler than the floors above, but a wood fire burned in the fireplace and fought off the drafty air. Pero walked directly to the fireplace and stopped. He pointed at a picture and said, “This is my fourth son, Frano. He went missing in the war, but he’ll turn up.” Then he pointed at two urns. “And these are our grandparents, Lloyd.”

Lloyd began to rub his chin. David saw tears form in his eyes. He nodded and sniffled. “That’s, you know, that’s really something.”

“I sure do hope your son returns soon,” Myrtle said.

“I’m certain he will,” Pero said in a response he has used so many times that it came across as disingenuous.

“Honey,” Myrtle said, “maybe this would be a good time to give them your gift.”

“Oh, is this a good time?” Lloyds asked. “Ha ha, ha ha, okay.”

“A gift? For us?” Pero asked. “Oh, that is very unnecessary. We aren’t very wealthy people, my cousin, but we don’t need charity.”

The family crowded around regardless. Lloyd dug into a backpack that Bill carried and pulled out an item wrapped in cloth.

“I wouldn’t call it charity,” Lloyd said. “It’s just something that should be returned to its home.”

Pero unwrapped the item and pulled out the old bottle of olive oil. He stared at it with an intensity David had only seen in his father when Bill would watch a sports game. Pero continued to hold the bottle as he turned, walking as he meditated on the meaning of the gift.

“What is it, Dad?” Bozo asked.

“Now just hold on one second,” Pero said, “just hold on one second. Is this what I think it is?”

“Well, yes, probably,” Lloyd responded, chuckling as he said it. “My father moved to America to sell olive oil from the old olive farm.”

“He used my father’s passport,” Pero confirmed.

“Well, *yes*,” Lloyd said. “And that’s the last bottle he had. An original bottle from the farm. I’m not sure if you have any others, but I’ve carried that with me my entire life. I would really like to return it.”

“Return it?” Marija—Bozo’s wife—asked. “It wasn’t ours to begin with.”

“This is really something else,” Pero said. “Really something else. You know, this must be worth a fortune. I’ll bet one of the museums would pay a good price for this.”

His comment drew some concurring head nods and whispers from his family.

“Sell it?” Bill asked incredulously. “No no, we don’t want to sell it. Your father had a major role in shipping this out to my grandfather. It’s meant a lot to us over the years. We thought maybe it’d mean a lot to you as well.”

Pero cupped the bottle with both hands, swaddling it like a delicate baby. Finally, he nodded and wrapped it back in the cloth. He handed it to Lloyd.

“Now, wait awhile,” Lloyd said, “I brought this for you. It’s a *gift*.”

“And I appreciate that, cousin. We may be poor people, but we are proud. We don’t accept charity.”

“Father,” Bozo said. “I don’t think this is charity. It’s just a gift. We could add it to our family history.”

“This is not our family’s history. This is their family’s history. My father worked to give his little brother a better life. You should keep this as a remembrance, so you don’t forget the sacrifice.”

Lloyd accepted it, confused that his overture had been so resoundingly rejected. He handed it to Bill, who placed it back in the backpack. That was when David realized that Pero’s large smile and warm welcome had masked the uglier truth of the Tomatic reality. Little Nicky had on jeans that had probably been through three or four owners before him. Most of the men had some form of visible scars, and the women’s cheekbones weren’t a sign of beauty, but of a sparse existence.

“Now,” Pero said, “now that we’ve got that little mishap out of the way, let’s eat. I must tell you about my shop in old town.” He placed his arm around Lloyd and began walking him up the stairs. Bozo and one of the other men helped Myrtle up the stairs. David heard Pero say, “My sons now run it as I’m an old man. But I still keep the books. You know, your father opened a store when he got to San Francisco. I don’t know if you knew that. It was short-lived, though, not like mine. It takes a lot of skill to keep a shop open. A lot of skill.”

David, Bill, Myrtle, and Lloyd were ushered to a dining room on the main floor where several tables had been set up. Everyone began taking seats while Bozo, Marija, and Nino began to serve smoking dishes of lamb and bread and various dipping sauces. There were several bottles of wine that had been produced in the northern part of the country and bowls of olives and cucumbers. Whole fish that Ivo and Stana—Pero’s brothers—had caught that morning were sizzling on platters.

“This is too much,” Lloyd said. “Ha ha, this is just too much.”

“Nonsense,” Pero said from the head of the table. “You’re family, and you deserve the finest.”

And so they ate and they drank. Pero told of his shop and of Nicky’s entrepreneurial spirit that netted him large tips to show tourists around old town. Lloyd told of the apple orchard and the real

estate development. David, of course, had to mention that he was a reporter, but currently out of work because of the economy. This drew a great deal of confusion. How could an American be unemployed? In a way, it gave David a rite of passage with the family.

Finally, Bozo asked, "So what do you know of the old olive orchard?"

"Well, I suppose my father didn't talk much about it," Lloyd said

Before the groans could grow any louder, David said, "But we're here to learn more about it.

We'd like to go see it in Korcula tomorrow."

Pero started laughing. "See what? The orchard? Long gone. Ruins."

"So you've been?" David asked.

Pero's smile faded. "My grandfather sold it shortly after I was born. My father drove me past when I was young."

"Ha ha, ha ha," Lloyd said, "you mean you've never been?"

"You've never been either," Pero said. "How is that any different?"

"Well, I suppose that's true."

"Well we're here to see it," David said. "I've had trouble finding the exact location, so if you know where it is, we'd appreciate it."

There was a moment of silence while everyone chewed their latest bite or sipped their wine. Bill nudged David and gave him a proud head nod.

Pero looked at Bozo, who in turn looked to Marija. It was Marija who finally said, "We've actually been meaning to take little Nicky. We can show you the way. Or at least, what we think is the way. Tomorrow."

"Tonight, though, we drink," Bozo said. He raised his glass. "Zivjeli. Cheers."



## Chapter 38

The sun had not yet risen when David and Bill met Lloyd and Myrtle in front of their hotel in Dubrovnik, but a storm brewing in the distance would have blotted it out even if they had met later in the morning. A strong wind blew in from the sea and the storm clouds made the dark night sky even blacker than usual.

A travel service arranged to have their bags portered to their hotel in Korcula, so they were simply responsible for boarding the ferry in the Dubrovnik Harbor. Fortunately, the hotel was only a few blocks away, so even with the cold wind and stormy weather, the four of them opted to walk the short distance, stopping for coffees along the way.

Myrtle clung onto Lloyd's arm as they walked; Bill held her coffee for her until she requested it. Lloyd's legs remained sturdy as ever, but Myrtle had found her balance slightly wobblier in recent years than in the past.

They found Bozo and Marija waiting near the ferry entrance, wrapped in thick military jackets. They had smiles on their faces and brown bags of unknown objects in their hands.

"Good morning, Tahmatoh family," Bozo shouted through the wind. "Beautiful day for a boat ride!"

"Hiiii," Myrtle said with a laugh.

"Where's Nicky?" Bill asked.

"We sent him onboard to warm up," Marija said.

They both were in higher spirits than the day prior, and they looked genuinely excited to take the journey to their neighboring island. As they stepped aside, welcoming them onboard, David looked at the massive ferry. It was a catamaran with a dark blue hull. David didn't frequently go on sea

voyages, and thus did not have a good sense of how big the boat was, but he estimated it to be well over a hundred feet.

He produced the four tickets that the travel agency provided him and then helped his two grandparents across the wooden bridge and into the main cabin. The main cabin was primarily seats, with a bar near the back and poles for the standing-room crowd in the front and center. You could walk out to the front or to the roof if you so chose, but given the frigid temperature, most people remained warmly inside.

They found Nicky talking to a younger couple—almost certainly tourists—and pointing out the window to the harbor while he explained something.

Bozo laughed and shook his head as he and Marija took their seats in front of the Tahmatohs. “Always trying to make a buck. Good boy.”

They laughed when the male tourist handed Nicky some cash and then watched him come bounding over. He plopped in the seat next to Marija, who wrapped her arms around him and squeezed him tight. “My little salesman.”

“Mom!” he cried out. He pushed himself away from her and then looked around for other potential targets. Marija brought his attention back and said, “Hey, why don’t you play tour guide for our guests. Give your business a rest for the day.”

“Ha ha, ha ha,” Lloyd said. “We’ve been known to pay for good tour guides.”

“Absolutely not,” Bozo said. “You’re our guests.” He said something indiscernible in Croatian to Nicky, and then said, “Speaking of which, we brought you breakfast and more coffee.”

“Dad, do you still understand Croatian?” Bill asked.

“Me? Ha ha, no, I don’t know it anymore. I used to growing up.”

“You knew Croatian?” Bozo asked.

“A long time ago.”

Marija started handing out pastries. "I baked these fresh for our trip. It should take a couple hours, but with the rough weather, they might go slower than usual."

"Yes," Bozo concurred, "I hope you all took sea-sickness pills."

"Oh, we absolutely did," Bill said.

Marija's hypothesis turned out to be prescient. The ferry departed a few minutes after they boarded and they were immediately greeted with large rolling waves as they left the safety of the harbor. The ferry would groan as a wave hit the side, would crack as it cut up and over the breakers, and then crash back down into the water. On numerous occasions, the captain warned over the loud speaker to remain seated, advice that one brave man failed to adhere to, leading him to go face first into the ground as the boat sunk from underneath his feet. About a quarter of the passengers ended up vomiting overboard because they refused to believe a ferry ride would be so turbulent. The integrity of the boat was sound, though, and it powered through the rough seas to bring its passengers to Korcula.

"Okay, Dave," Bill said as they exited the ferry and stepped into the stone plaza of the Korcula Harbor, "this is your show. Now what?"

"The travel agency said the hotel is just a few blocks away, although we can't check in yet. From there we can grab taxis, although I don't know where we're going."

They all turned to Bozo. "I can arrange for the taxis."

Korcula was essentially a smaller version of Dubrovnik, with a large stone wall surrounding a charming old town.

"This is where my dad met my mom," Bozo said, playing the role of tour guide. "Lloyd, this is where your father departed."

Lloyd, who still had his hand out for Myrtle, looked around. "Well, you know, this is really pretty interesting to see."

"So you don't come here much?" David asked.

“To Korcula? Never. Not since I was a kid. Too expensive. But, we’ve been meaning to take Nicky and, well, this is a good reason.”

After finding the hotel—nothing special, but recently remodeled like the hotel in Dubrovnik—and warming up in the lobby, Bozo had two taxis waiting outside. David and Bill rode in the first with Bozo, while Marija and Nicky rode with Lloyd and Myrtle.

The taxis wound through the stone buildings of Korcula Town and then departed onto a paved highway that took them up into the tree-covered hills. Stone houses littered the landscape and rows of olive trees created organized clearings.

“So pretty,” David said.

“There’s a reason it’s becoming such a tourist destination,” Bill said.

“That’s exactly right,” Bozo said from the front seat.

After just a few minutes, he spoke to the driver in Croatian, which likely said something along the lines of, “Slow down,” because they came to a near crawl as they looked at the street signs of practically nonexistent side streets. Bozo had a piece of paper in his hand that must have had directions, because he continued to refer to it as he read off the street signs. Finally, the driver read off a street sign and Bozo said, “Yes, that’s it,” in English. The driver made a slow left turn onto an overgrown dirt street. The ride became bumpier as they transitioned from the paved road to the forgotten lane, which reminded David of driving into the mountains when he was a kid to go on camping trips .

The road came to a dead end at an even smaller road, and then finally the two taxis arrived at a stone-covered clearing that had become overgrown with weeds and debris.

Bozo and the driver both looked at the piece of paper and then confirmed the markings.

“Okay,” Bozo said, “we’re here.”

Bozo said something again in Croatian and the driver shut off the engine. They all got out and then David and Bill helped Myrtle from the second car. The two taxi drivers came together and started speaking with Bozo. They pointed down the road and shook their heads and shrugged. Bozo turned and walked back to the family.

“They say they’ve never seen anyone come down this way for at least twenty years.”

They all took the information for what it was worth and then looked at the main structures. There were two main stone compounds connected to a central courtyard. The courtyard had a built-in table near the back, bordering a retaining wall for the hill, but the front half of the wall had broken away and crumbled into the courtyard, partially covering a built-in stone table. As with the driveway, it was all overgrown, but as David and Bill walked to the edge, they could see that the retaining wall was just one of a series of sectioned off rows that made steps all the way down the hillside.

“Look at that, Dave,” Bill said, admiring the craftsmanship of the walls. “These must have taken years to construct.”

They turned back and joined the group as they all walked to the first compound, but found that roof had caved in.

“This must have been the home of the other family,” Bozo said. “My father said our grandfather shared the land with another family.”

“Can we go inside?” Nicky asked.

They looked at Nicky, who Marija had wrapped in her arms. He was shivering as the cold winds from the sea blasted up the hill. Light flecks of snow began to fall and stuck to their hair.

“Snow,” Bozo said.

“Would you believe that?” Lloyd said. “Does it snow here very often?”

“Never.” He looked at Nicky. “We can’t go in there. Too dangerous. Maybe the next house.”

They walked carefully across the courtyard separating the two houses. The stone table was partially covered by the dirt, and the corners had eroded away, with small chunks falling onto the bench. Birds had created nests in the roof and animal droppings suggested the land had been returned to the wilderness, even if it resided among other functioning orchards.

“Holy smokes,” Bill said, “Dad, this must have been your dad’s old house.”

“Yeah I know it,” Lloyd said. Even as the snow fell, Lloyd stopped and observed the building and its surroundings. He rubbed his chin in deep introspection, which meant Myrtle stopped with him.

“Honey,” she said, “let’s go in the house.”

“Oh, should we go in the house? Ha ha, okay, let’s go in the house.”

Bozo yanked the wooden door open and was consumed by a cloudy mixture of snow and dust. The door hadn’t been open for years, if not decades. He set foot inside and then called out, “Okay, I think it’s safe.”

They all followed and Nicky immediately began to explore. Marija ran after him, shouting, “Nicky! Be careful!”

David entered the dark stone house, the only light streaming in from the windows. Bill opened the shutters on one and despite the storm, received enough light to see the corners of the house. “So this is where grandpa grew up,” Bill said. “David, are you seeing this? This is your history.” He looked at Bozo. “And yours too.”

The house was small and cold. The storm didn’t make it so, just the damp stones and musty odors that would be more fitting of a cave. It seemed hardly big enough for a single person, let alone an entire family of farmers.

“It’s so small,” David finally said.

“They didn’t need much,” Bozo said. “Just a bed and a stove.”

“You hear that, Dave?” Bill asked. “How’s that for some perspective?”

David didn't answer. He poked his head into a bedroom, which was hardly big enough for the straw bed that sat on the floor. There was no apparent bathroom, so somewhere on the property must have been an outhouse.

"What exactly do you think happened here?" Lloyd asked.

"My dad said they had to abandon it during the first World War," Bozo said.

"That's long after the shop burned down in the '06 earthquake," Lloyd said. "My dad told me they had already stopped shipping out olive oil."

"That's what they told him," Bozo said. "Probably ran for another ten years."

They continued to poke around, picking up old trinkets that were now hundred-year-old antiques. David found a silver spoon in a drawer, and Nicky appeared from one of the bedrooms with an ancient-looking pair of leather boots, worn straight through the soles.

"Seems like they left in a hurry," David said. "So I don't understand, whose land is this?"

Everyone remained silent. Finally, Myrtle said, "If it's like America, I imagine it stays in the family."

"If you can prove it," Bozo said. "This is from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. What are the chances of tracking those records down?"

"Probably worth a shot," David said.

"It'd cost a fortune to hire a lawyer and file the proper paperwork," Marija said. "Your dad would never allow it."

"Ha ha, ha ha, now, now just wait awhile," Lloyd said. "Why does Pero have to approve of it?"

Bozo and Marija looked down. It wasn't a look of shame, just a look that encapsulated the cultural rift that now existed between two sides of the same family that were raised on different sides of the planet.

“We do things differently than you Americans,” Bozo said. “Family is very important. Our father, he decides.”

At that, Bozo took Marija’s hand, who clasped onto Nicky, and they walked out of the house. David and Bill followed, but Lloyd and Myrtle remained inside, taking one last look and breath of the house where Lloyd’s family once lived.

“Dad,” David said, “let’s go look at the trees. I want to look at the rock walls again.”

They approached the edge of one of the walls and began to walk along the top of it. The snow continued to fall, but they were warm inside of their nice winter jackets. The wall remained a sturdy structure, continuing to serve its purpose of keeping the hill securely in place above the row below. They stopped at a tree branch that had collapsed onto the wall, blocking their path. There weren’t many trees remaining along the hillside, but the ones that persisted had grown into thick curving trunks with branches that extended and sunk into other rows.

There were no edible olives, but with no one harvesting the fruit, some remained on the tree shriveled and in need of picking. Bill instinctively went to work, yanking off the olives or any new branches that sprouted from the trunk. After a few minutes, Bozo and his family and Lloyd and Myrtle stood by and watched. When Bill saw Lloyd, he stopped and said, “Dad, you know, the trees that are left have good growth. Just need to be pruned back.”

“Looks like the rows could be plowed,” Lloyd said. “Have to do it all by hand. No tractor could fit in there.”

“Yep. Must have been a big job. It’d be fun, you know,” Bill said as he stepped back onto the wall. “Get his place running again. You could even have tourists come help with the harvest. It’d be a good set up.” He turned and looked out toward the ocean. The wind whipped at his face and the snow grew heavier, but he could still smell the saltwater and could see out to the horizon. “I mean, look how beautiful this place is.”



“Croatia is very beautiful,” Bozo said. “That’s why we all fought for it.”

One of the taxi drivers approached and spoke in Croatian. Bozo acknowledged and waved at him.

“He says we have to head back or we won’t be able to get out of here,” Bozo told the group.

“But I want to look around,” Nicky said pleadingly.

“I know,” Bozo said. “We’ll have to come back.”

“We can bring your father next time,” Marija said.

Bozo laughed. “That man is stubborn like an ass. He’ll never come.”

They all walked back to the taxis and began the journey back to the town. They warmed themselves on the heaters, but spoke very little.

Once at the hotel, Bozo got him and his family a room since the remaining ferries had been cancelled. They had dinner at a small restaurant next door, empty except for their party.

“So what will happen to the land?” David asked.

“It’ll go on sitting there until someone claims it,” Bozo responded.

“And you really don’t want it?”

“David,” Bill said, a rare admonishment of his adult son.

“I’m just saying. Maybe we should consider tracking the paper work down and paying off any back taxes. Seems pretty valuable. Prime vacation real estate. I’d expect you to appreciate that, *Dad*.”

Bill laughed. They all laughed.

“It’s expensive, David,” Bozo said. “We do not have a lot of money.”

“Sell the olive oil,” David said. “Grandpa, do you have it with you?”

“Yeah,” Lloyd said. “I have it.”

Lloyd reached into a backpack he carried and pulled out the wrapped bottle.

“Here,” he said, offering it to Bozo. “I know Pero said no, but, you should have it. It’s been in my family for a long time.”

Bozo accepted it and unwrapped it. He held it in his hands and smiled.

“I have a better idea, if you don’t object.”

Bozo pulled out a bowl and uncorked the bottle. The cork crumbled as it came out, but the seal remained intact and made a popping sound as it let in air for the first time in over a hundred years.

Bozo poured it into the bowl and then set it down in front of Lloyd. Lloyd stared at the golden liquid that had sat in a bottle on his shelf for most of his life. It had once been sacred, but was now part of their dinner.

He ripped off a chunk of bread and dipped it into the oil. He set it on his tongue and then laughed. “Ha ha, ha ha, that is really *good*.”

Myrtle and Marija went next and then David and Nicky, and then Bill and finally Bozo.

As Bozo chewed, he said, “The thing is, David, we’re not farmers and we have no interest in being farmers. What would we do with all that land if not be farmers? Let someone else have it. We’re happy where we are.”

David nodded and took another chunk of bread. He never thought his grandpa would part with the bottle, let alone consume it. And now that they were busy dipping bread into the oil, it became just that, a bottle of oil.

Still, it wasn’t every day you could enjoy a hundred-year-old bottle of olive oil with long lost family members. So David dipped his bread again and then looked at the menu so he could order his main course.

## Chapter 39

Bozo, Marija, and Nicky spent the next day touring Korcula Town with David, Bill, Lloyd, and Myrtle. The storm had passed and the air, though crisp, was crystal clear beneath a blue sky. They parted ways late in the afternoon having made promises to one another that they'd stay in touch. Bozo even joked that he would come visit them in California. Not one of them took it as truth. The extra time spent with distant relatives gave them all a better understanding that Pero seemed to have from the beginning. It was a pleasant visit to Croatia, but this was no longer the same family. That line broke when Lucien left for America in the late-1800s. It was a reality that would have been better left unsaid, but it could not at this point be undone.

They all waved as the three Tomatic family members boarded the ferry and then laughed as they watched Nicky proposition some tourists to be their tour guide. It had been a long few days and Myrtle needed to lay down, so they all turned and walked back to the hotel, where they were scheduled to stay for two more nights.

"So what do you think, Dad?" Bill asked. "Should we try to track down the paperwork and get that orchard up and running again?"

He said it in jest, but as a farmer turned real estate developer, the words were at least partly grounded in ambition.

"Oh hell, Bill, why would we go and do a thing like that?" Lloyd said.

"We have too much land as it is," Myrtle said. She laughed, which ended in a long-winded sigh. "Your daddy and I need to rest. No more of this nonsense about buying up that land."

"Mom, this is the first time I brought it up," Bill protested.

"Regardless, I saw you with that tree. I knew the comment was coming."

Bill laughed. "Okay. Are you two at least happy you saw it? David put a lot of effort into planning this out."

“Never would have found it, though,” David replied, chuckling to himself. “Thank God Bozo showed us the way.”

“Ha ha, ha ha, yeah, that helped,” Lloyd said. “Ah, hell, I don’t know. It was good to see. It really is very interesting to know where you come from, you know? Course, don’t think it told me very much. We were farmers here and the orchard went to hell. Then we become farmers over there and the orchard goes to hell. I suppose I’m just glad Bill did something with our land. Don’t really see why they wouldn’t try to claim this orchard. They could probably make some money.”

“That’s my point,” Bill said.

“I’m too old Bill. And I don’t think we should get reconnected in such a way. I just don’t think it would be a good thing.”

They all understood and that ended the conversation.

“Trip’s not over, though,” David said. “Got a fun couple of weeks planned for you.”

As promised, over the next two weeks, David brought his father and his grandparents north along the Croatian coast until they rented a car and drove inland to Zagreb. After leaving Korcula, the trip felt more like a vacation. Lloyd and Myrtle slept in late and read the newspapers from the hotels. They saw beaches and drank good wine. They heard stories of the war with Serbia from people with scars—both mental and physical—that had yet to heal. And at night after dinner, they taught David how to play bridge.

It wasn’t the trip David had planned for himself, the trip to rediscover himself, but he spent more quality time with his father and grandparents than he had in his entire life up to that point. More interesting to David, though, and he thought about this as he boarded the plane out of Zagreb, is he felt little to no connection to Croatia, his apparent heritage. This wasn’t his land and it wasn’t his people. He wondered if his grandfather felt something similar, but it was a question he would never ask. He

knew with near certainty that the Croatian Tomatic family felt no connection to them, even if Bozo had tracked them down.

Lloyd had bought them all first-class tickets for the plane. “You know, I’m just too *old* for coach,” he had said. “And it doesn’t seem fair to make you sit back there.” David had become accustomed to first class. He was unemployed—and when he was employed, a poorly paid journalist—but his parents were wealthy and raised him to appreciate the finer things. The four of them took up an entire row of first class, each with their own compartment. It felt like attending a spa to relax after a long journey that taxed the body. Flight attendants brought them champagne and bowls of berries. They had hot towels and fresh blankets. It was created to indulge guests of wealth, to pamper you as you cross an ocean; send you off in a lap of luxury and comfort to start your life fresh as you return from the exhausting experiences of vacation.

Before David maneuvered his seat into a complete recline, he leaned over and tapped Lloyd on the shoulder. “Grandpa, what do you think? Happy you finally visited Croatia?”

“Oh I suppose,” he said nodding his head. “Not what I expected. You know, David, I’ve traveled all over the world, and sometimes the best part of traveling is just going back home to Mountain View. Ha ha, isn’t that something?”

“That’s a good thing, though, it means you’re happy in your life.”

Lloyd smiled, but didn’t say anything. His smile said a lot, though.

“Sorry that we drank your bottle of olive oil,” David finally said, snapping Lloyd out of his day dream.

“Ha ha, you know, I wanted to *give* it to him, and he just *drank* it.” He shrugged his shoulders and froze them as he considered the events. “I guess it’s just a bottle of olive oil.”

“No, it’s not just a bottle of olive oil, Grandpa. It’s a memory. I took the empty bottle if you want it back.”

“You took the bottle? You have it with you?”

“Yep.”

“Isn’t that something. No, you keep it. Or, hell, I don’t know, recycle it.”

David laughed as they both nodded and then laid their heads back. Then Bill tapped David on the shoulder. He was holding a glass of champagne. David clinked glasses with his own and took a sip.

“So what do *you* think?”

“About what?” David asked.

“Well, you went on your trip. We’re heading home. What’s your plan?”

“Shit, Dad, I don’t know. This wasn’t exactly what I thought about when I said I wanted to travel.”

“Yeah. You want to go find yourself. Get a little lost. Well, you’ve got savings. You’ve got a place to stay. Who says it has to end. Go travel. Go to Brazil. Or China. Or Paris.”

“You don’t think I should get a job?”

An announcement came over the cabin, asking passengers to take their seats. They listened, and when it stopped, Bill said, “You’ll have lots of time to get a job. Go spend the winter in Tahoe. Or like I said, travel. Maybe you’ll want to go back to school. I don’t know.” He took another sip of his champagne. “First class isn’t a bad life. Hey, that reminds me, I told Brian, you know Brian, from work, about this trip, and he said he wanted to talk to you about helping him plan an ancestry-type trip for his parents. They’re originally from Ireland.”

“An ancestry trip?” David thought about this. “You mean, like, pay me to help plan it?”

“Sounded like it. You’d probably be able to be a chaperone if you wanted to.”

“I mean, that obviously sounds amazing.”

“K, I’ll let him know you’re interested. I’ll set up a phone call.”

David curled the corners of his mouth as a manner of shrugging. It wasn't solid, by any means, but it was at least an idea. He could talk to Max and Saeed about how to go about it. Build an app maybe. Or a website. He'd need developers. He'd need funding. He'd need... He sighed. He'd need to think about how he wanted to spend the rest of his life. Planning trips for other people? Or taking his own trips?

He reached into the magazine compartment and pulled out a travel magazine. On the front was a picture of San Sebastien in Spain. He held it up for his dad to see. "This looks nice."

"San Sebastien? Go there. Then travel through the South of France. You know, a lot of writers go there. I said Tahoe, but why don't you go get a little bungalow in San Sebastien or something? Work on your writing?"

"My writing?"

"You used to write a lot, before becoming a journalist."

"Took the fun out of it."

"Well, it's important to have fun, Dave. If you're not having fun, it's not the right job for you."

Bill finished off his champagne and held the glass up for a refill. When the flight attendant filled it, he pulled out his laptop and began going through emails.

David did the same, but opened up a blank Word document. He started clacking away, describing in detail how he tracked down his relatives and shared a bottle of hundred-year-old olive oil. Maybe he could even submit it as an article to the airline travel magazine.

Karen was waiting in the family room when the cab dropped Bill and David off. She had had her fun with Tracy at first, watching bad television and going out to some shows in San Francisco, but the house eventually felt empty. Nights in Lafayette, particularly in the hills where they lived, got dark and quiet.

Her daughter, Samantha, now living in Virginia to attend medical school, had visited for a few days. But her visits almost made the house feel even emptier because of her inevitable departure. Karen always cried when Samantha left. Now she was gone and Tracy was asleep upstairs and Karen was ready to have her men back.

She rushed to the door and opened it, waving as Bill paid for the cab.

“Hiiiiii!” she yelled.

“Hey, Mom,” David shouted back.

“How was it?”

“The flight was amazing,” he said.

“Ha! The trip I mean. How was the trip?”

“It was fun. I think it was a lot on Grammy and Grandpa.”

“It was definitely hard on them,” Bill said, lugging his suitcase up the stairs. “They’re almost ninety.”

“They’re incredible,” Karen said.

Bill and Karen hugged and kissed and then held each other for a moment while they stared at one another.

“I missed you,” she said.

“Ew,” David said. “Get a room.”

“Okay,” Karen said, pulling Bill in again.

“Here, Croatian wine,” David said, handing a bag of six bottles to his mom.

“Yum! Let’s go try one.”

They all went in the house and dropped their bags in the foyer and then went into the kitchen.

Karen poured them all glasses of wine and they sat around the kitchen table.

“I want to hear everything,” Karen said.



“Well, I want to do some more travelling.”

Karen smiled. “That’s a great idea. Where?”

“You don’t think I should get a job?”

“Oh, I thought about it, and Tracy had some good points. Go be young. You’re only twenty-six.”

David shrugged and sipped his wine. “I was thinking Spain.”

“Spain? Okay. That could be fun. Oh, speaking of which, I think your results came back.”

“My results?”

Karen got up and brought an envelope back. She handed it to David. “Your 23 and Me results.”

“Oh, awesome.” David tore the envelope open and pulled the papers out. He analyzed them for a minute before he found what he was looking for. His eyes grew wide in surprise. “Holy shit.”

“What?” Bill asked.

“These results say I’m only eleven percent Croatian. I’m fifty percent Ashkenazi Jew. What does that even mean?”

“Ha, see, I told you,” Karen said. “That means Russian, and Polish.”

David looked up at his dad. “How is that possible? I thought I was Croatian.”

“Huh,” Bill said, taking the papers and examining them. “I guess that just means the line has been mixed over the generations and you’ve gotten more of your mom’s genes.”

David smiled and looked at his mom. “This must be a big moment for you.”

“The biggest. So, maybe go travel to Russia.”

David thought about it and nodded. “Eh, I just want to go Spain.”

They all clinked their glasses again and took sips of the Croatian wine. David continued to read about his genome and his ancestry, and Bill told Karen about drinking the olive oil and seeing the old orchard. After a couple hours, David went into his bedroom and pulled his computer out. He wanted to finish the article to submit to the travel magazine and he wanted to email Max and Saeed about the

business idea. Most of all, he wanted to plan his next trip because he didn't have anything else to do for the foreseeable future.