We Are All Prisoners of War

By

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PROLOG

I WAS BORN and raised in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Scranton was settled at the time of the Revolutionary War. It grew when the Scranton brothers began to manufacture steel in the mid-1800s, and it became Pennsylvania's third largest city after Philadelphia and Pittsburgh on the shoulders of anthracite coal. Anthracite's heydays were at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, and most of the immigrants who came to the area were drawn by the fortunes that they believed could be made because of the coal, and pushed by wars, poverty, famine, and discrimination in the places from which they came. My fraternal grandparents came from a town in Campagna, Italy in the 1890s and established themselves in the Bellevue section of Scranton. My fraternal grandfather was a shoemaker. My maternal grandparents left their village in Umbria for the coal region of Luxembourg during the first decade of the 20th century, and then fled to America in 1914-15 at the start of the First World War when the Germans rode through Luxembourg on their way to France. My grandfather decided that he did not want to fight in either the German or Italian armies. They built a home in Old Forge, a borough of Scranton, and my grandfather worked as a coal miner until he retired in 1951.

My father was born in the same neighborhood where I spent the first thirteen years of my life, and, except for the three years he was in

the Army during WWII, he had lived there all his life. When he returned from the War, he and my mother moved into a house my father's father had bought for them across the street from his home and shoemaker shop. My sister and I attended the same grade school my father and his siblings had attended. Downtown Scranton was a ten-minute walk across a bridge over the heavily polluted Lackawanna River, past the Scranton Gas Works, and through the fruit and vegetable wholesale block. When I was twelve, in 1959, the street on which we lived subsided when the mines below collapsed. All the families and businesses along the street had to move and all the buildings were demolished. Families moved to wherever they could find places to live. My parents found a house a few blocks away from the high school my sister and I attended.

I wrote this book to understand the effects of wars on our lives. I graduated from high school in 1965 and I took that year as the starting point of my story. For boys born in the few years following the end of the Second World War, 1965 was our first collective life and death moment, like 1941 for our fathers or 1914-1917 for their fathers. President Lyndon B. Johnson told us in the summer of '65 that we were going to beat the Viet Cong, and as many able-bodied men as the country could muster would go over to Vietnam to make sure we did.

Boys turning eighteen had to register for U.S. Selective Service, the draft, one month before their birthday. I turned eighteen in July of 1965. We had six alternatives for how we could respond to this requirement. We could enlist in one of the five branches of the military and hope we weren't sent to Vietnam—unless we wanted to go to Vietnam to prove something to ourselves or someone else, and then we could request to go to Vietnam. I had friends who did that. We could apply for a deferment, including for attending college or having dependent children or parents. I was accepted to a college, so I had a deferment—but when we arrived at college in the autumn of 1965, all

freshman in the entire country had to take what was called a War Board Test, which would determine if we truly belonged in college. I don't know anyone who took the test and failed. We could take the physical, and if we passed, we might be sent to Vietnam or sent anywhere else there were military bases, unless we were accepted in a state's National Guard. Being accepted in a state's National Guard did not mean you were not sent to Vietnam, since 7,000 National Guardsmen served in Vietnam, but the chances were much lower. Many of my high school classmates were in this category. We could take the physical and if we failed, we could still be called up until we reached the age of thirty-five, and then we would have to take the physical again. We could apply for conscientious objector status, but that wasn't a very successful path to take because conscientious objector status was only granted to those who could demonstrate "sincerity of belief in religious teachings combined with a profound moral aversion to war." Or we could become 'draft dodgers' and head to Canada, Sweden or somewhere else where we might be given sanctuary. I didn't know any draft dodgers, but I met several much later in life who fled to Sweden and stayed there.

When I graduated from college in 1969, I was called up for my physical, which I failed because of injuries I incurred playing football in high school and college. My third concussion in my junior year of college ended my varsity football activities. One of my college classmates and football teammates died of a concussion he suffered during pre-season training the year before my third concussion, so the team physicians were very careful. I never had to decide what I would have done had I passed. I cannot say for sure, but I would probably have done what most of my friends and cousins did: volunteer for the Navy or Air Force or tried to join the National Guard. Going to Vietnam in 1969 would have been my last choice. With my deferral, I spent the next three years in graduate school, lived and worked in

London for a year, then eighteen in the Boston area, two in Florida, and since 1993, have lived in Sweden with my wife, Britt Marie.

The characters in this book are fictional, but the events they are experiencing are very real. The town which is the setting for the story, Drake's Crossing, is fictional, but it could be any town anywhere in the country in 1965. Any similarities to real people and real places are purely coincidental.

Michael L. Sena
Vadstena, Sweden
26 March 2024

Dedication

To my Scranton breakfast club buddies and oldest friends, Jim, Dan, and George, and written in the hope that one day wars will no longer be necessary.

Chapter 1

THE LAST WORLD WAR

So long ago, I thought, as I looked through my Jeep's rain-drenched window at the empty lumberyard. It was a usual Sunday, like it's been for the past year since Connie died. Up early for breakfast of two scrambled eggs and a slice of my bread, toasted and buttered, with a couple of slivers of provolone. Ma used to bake bread for everyone on Saturdays using Nonna Selia's recipe. Everyone got a loaf. Connie took over the baking when Ma passed away, and now I do it. Our daughter Ellen is with me most of the time to help so I can pass the baking pans over to her when it's time. Then I dress for the weather to go to the cemetery, come back, shower and shave and dress for mass. After mass, I stop by Dunkin' Donuts in town for coffee and a glazed cruller, and then it's dinner at one with Ellen's and my son Carmen's families, brother-in-law Tony and Jenny Malatesta and their twins, and sister-in-law Annie and Guy Donnatelli. Later in the afternoon, I make a stop at the VFW Post. There are a few of us left from 'Nam. Most of them are from Dessert Storm, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

At the cemetery, I visit with Connie last because I spend most of the time with her and with fixing around her grave. I always go to Nonno and Nonna Serra first, then Nonno and Nonna Fabriano, then Ma and Pa, then over to Zio and Helen and Charlie. Our stone is next to theirs. Connie and I had picked out the stone together, after she was told that there wasn't anything more to do for the cancer. Contessa Helena Malatesta Fabriano – October 8, 1948 – December 17, 2021. She wanted all her names on the stone. My name's already there. Nickolas Carmen Fabriano – July 28, 1947 - .

I wish we had more than those six, short months from the time she learned she was going to die, that there was no point in continuing with the treatments. We made the best of those months. I'm ready to go

anytime. I want to make myself believe in an afterlife, that Connie's up there waiting for me in the place she's picked out and furnished for us, with a view over the clouds from a big porch. I don't. We had a good, long life together. I can't ask for more. I miss her. Every minute we spent together was a joy. Every day, I think of our first kiss, when we sealed our promise to go steady, and our last. I sat beside her on our bed. We had moved it down to the living room when she came home from the hospital. On that last day, almost one year ago, she had been moving in and out of sleep. Everyone was there. She woke up and reached for my hand. "Come close, Nicky. I want us to have one last kiss," she said. I placed my lips on hers and we kissed. It was like all our kisses, from the very first. When it ended, she smiled, and then the most wonderful women who ever lived was gone.

Rain in early November, after the leaves have all dropped from their trees, always seems to fall more softly, like the drops know they don't need to work extra hard to reach the ground, to first bend down the leaves. I hadn't driven past the yard for a while. It looks almost the same as it did on my first day of work in the summer of '65, the day I met Connie. The stacks have been empty for thirty years, ever since they closed the place. They're all gone now, the Guados. Livia was last. She tried to sell it before she died, but there were no takers. None of the ten kids in the three families were interested. Except for the four that moved out of town, they all live around Carl's Summit on the other side of West Mountain. We never saw much of them on The Orchard after they left for college, except at the holidays.

I always sit in the same pew in church where Connie and I sat, which is the same pew I sat in all my life. There are Sundays when I walk into church and think, "Maybe I'll sit on the other side of the church, or a few pews back," but then I figure the Rosatis in the pew in front and the Notaris in the pew behind would think I was sick, or worse, skipped mass, so I give up any idea of adding spice to the mass and dutifully walk to my own pew. I almost nodded off a few times during Father Giordano's sermon this morning. Connie wasn't there to give me a poke to wake me up, so I did my best to keep my eyes open, even though my

thoughts wandered. I was sure he would stop talking about abortion after the Court decided to leave it up to the states, but the Church seems to have doubled down even more now to make sure every state makes laws to limit it. Connie said that if the state ever made a law prohibiting abortion, she would never sit as a judge in a case against a woman accused of having one. When she told me that, I tried to imagine arresting a woman charged with having an abortion. Could I do that? We talked about it, like we talked about everything. I guess I knew from our first walk that there would be nothing we wouldn't discuss. Connie was really good at seeing the different sides of complicated things, like pulling down statues of Confederate generals in the south and letting kids under the age of eighteen change their sex. What would I do if Carmy came down one morning dressed in one of Connie's dresses and wearing a pair of her high heels, or if Ellen told us she was becoming a Muslim and moving to Iran? Connie and I would talk about it and then we would do what Connie thought was best for Carmy or Ellen.

Dinner today was at Ellen's, right next door. I wonder if Nonno Berto enjoyed being a grandfather to me as much as I enjoy Nicky and Joey, and Carmen's and Mary's daughter Annamaria. They grew up so fast, faster than Carmen and Ellen, maybe because life moves faster when we get older. Days seemed to last forever when I was a kid. I'd look at the clock in the classroom and it never moved. It was the same when I was in 'Nam, when each day felt like a week or even a month. Now, I have breakfast and the next thing I know I'm brushing my teeth to go to bed.

Annamaria moved into Connie's chair on the first Sunday after Connie died, and she has never given it up. She reminds me so much of Connie. She has the same hair and eyes. She even sounds like Connie when she talks.

"I'm going to be a judge just like Grandma Connie," she announced one Sunday at dinner, just as matter-of-factly as Connie had done almost sixty years earlier.

"Why not President?" I asked. "Your grandmother would have been President if they let her move the White House to The Orchard. Did you know that?"

"She could have been President," pitched in Nicky.

"I'll vote for you when you run, Annamaria," said Joey.

"I'll vote for you too," I said, "if I'm still around when you get nominated."

"Grandpa, we wish you would always be here," said Annamaria, "but we know you can't make that promise."

She has Connie's wisdom as well.

"But I don't drink coffee, Johnny," I complained. I was a head taller than the yard foreman, Johnny Grozinski, but I wouldn't want to go toe to toe with him. What Johnny didn't have in size he made up in spades with wiry strength and a will that has the forces of nature behind it. He could probably have taken me down in a wrestling match in a few seconds or knocked me out with a quick punch to my nose, but Johnny wasn't a fighter. You would have to look for a very long time, maybe a lifetime, to find a person with Johnny's kind disposition. And he was married to one of the smartest and best-looking teachers at the high school, so there was a lot more going on upstairs in Johnny's head than his job might let on. Our first coffee break was finished and Big Jim, the boss, had gone upstairs. Johnny stood at the bottom of the stairs blocking our way.

"No, ya didn't drink coffee, Nicky, before ya becum a lumberyard boy," replied Johnny. "Yuz two," he said pointing to Franky and then me, "are under my thumb during your little summer vacation here, from eight in da morning 'till four in da afternoon. I gotta make sure yuz don't cut off a finger or git a two-by-four in the head. Big Jim buys the coffee and doughnuts in the morning, and yuzz'er gonna eat at least two doughnuts and down that coffee. Franky ain't got no problem with it, right Franky?" He didn't wait for an answer. "If ya don't drink the coffee

and eat the doughnuts, he ain't gonna keep buying them, and then wadda we gonna do when you two hotshots take off? We'll be left high and dry, bring'in our own termoses and buyin' our own doughnuts. So, ya see why ya gotta pitch in and help us keep what we fought so hard ta get, right?"

"Just put a lot of sugar in it, Nicky, and you won't mind the taste," said Franky. Franky's Nonno Renzo tried to get him to drink coffee when he was a little kid. It was somebody's birthday party, and I was there with my family. Franky made a really funny face when his nonno put his coffee cup close to Franky's face, and his nonno laughed. It was a really big laugh, and everybody stopped what they were doing and looked at Renzo. He never laughed. The best he ever managed was a smile with a twinkle in his eyes, but never a laugh. Franky's funny face had made his nonno laugh, and from that day on, it was something they repeated. "*Bevi il caffè*, Franky," his nonno would say. Franky would make his funny face, and Nonno Renzo would laugh. Franky told me he was at his nonno's bedside during his final hours, and the last thing his Nonno Renzo said before he passed away was "*Bevi il caffè*, Franky". Franky made his face, and his nonno died with a big smile on his face. What a way to go.

"How 'bout if I just don't take the break."

"Dat's even worse, Nicky! Day'll take away the, coffee, doughnuts AND da break. What da hell is wrong with drinkin' the coffee? Christ, it won't kill ya. Ya tink der gonna serve ya chocolate milk when ya git in da army? Like Franky says, just put a lotta sugar in it."

At this point, I did what I always do when I know I've lost an argument. I was looking up at the ceiling and saying nothing. Johnny wasn't waiting for an answer.

"So, we start wid dis tomorrow morning, right?" he said with a big smile.

"Okay, Johnny," I answered. What was the point of putting off drinking coffee any longer? I have to start some time, right, especially if I get drafted and go to Vietnam.

"Now git ta work! Last one up turn off da lights."

We followed Johnny up the stairs from the basement where we had our coffee breaks. Jim said we could eat our lunches down there too if the weather was lousy. It was only a little space, maybe fifteen by fifteen, with filing cabinets along all the walls and a big table in the middle. Above was the hardware store, a big space. Why didn't they make a basement for the whole place? Saving money, probably. There were six bar stools around the table, one each on the short ends, and two each on the long ends. 'Big Jim' Guado always sat at one of the long ends, and nobody sat at the other one. That was where Paulie sat when he came down. Paulie was the boss. Big Jim was Paulie's first cousin, the son of Paulie's father's second youngest brother. Paulie was out of the yard most of the time at building sites or filing papers for new projects. Big Jim ran the yard. Their cousin Livia kept the books for both businesses. Olivia Guado Navaro was another first cousin, daughter of Paulie's father's youngest brother. She never came downstairs when we were there, but all those filing cabinets were hers. She locked them up and had the keys. The three of them ran a tight ship, which showed in the weekly pay checks. Working construction paid more, but it was tough work with Paulie always right there, making sure he was getting a hundred percent of your back for what you were getting paid. I guess if Paulie's father's oldest brother hadn't been killed in the First World War and he had kids, they'd be involved in the business as well.

Livia smiled and waved at us as we walked in a line through the store and out the side door. She was a looker. Her husband, Danny Navaro, had been a football star in high school and Livia was the drum major, taller than all the other girls in the class and as tall as Danny. If you bought a car in town, you bought it from Danny.

"Nicky, you git back to the boxcar with Tony and keep unloading da cement. Franky, you come wid me and we'll stack the two-by-sixes that jist came in. You got the gloves I gave ya?"

"Yeah, right here."

"Put 'em on. I don't want ya losing a finger on the first day." I never thought about the dangers of working in a lumber yard when Ma suggested that it would be a good way to spend the summer. It turned out that Franky's mother had the same idea, and each one of them had talked to Paulie before they brought it up to us. I didn't know that Franky would be working here too until we both showed up at the same time a week before we started to sign papers. Big Jim had talked to each of us, and we learned how much we were going to be making. "It's between you and me," Jim had said.

The side rail and the loading dock were across the street from the yard, along what was the Jersey Central right-of-way, and freight service was still in operation in the summer of '65 when I worked at the yard. The rails and all traces of the loading dock are long gone, gradually removed after the line closed its operations in Pennsylvania around 1970. Everything came to the yard in flatbeds after that, and the Guados finally bought a front-end loader with a pallet fork, but that was several years after our summer there. I remember seeing it crossing the road as I passed by in my car and making a special stop to congratulate them on saving the backs of the new lumberyard boys. The passenger station, just a hundred yards away, hadn't been used since the line stopped carrying passengers in the mid-1950s. It's still there, having served a dozen masters over the past seventy years.

Tony and the cement car at the loading dock were waiting for me on that first morning of work at the lumberyard. It was nine-thirty, and I could already feel that the day was going to be a scorcher. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, just the grey haze that always covered the blue back then, like a dirty lace curtain, before all the coal burning disappeared. I knew there was blue behind the dirty lace because I saw it when we took the train to New York City through the Poconos, or when we drove through Tunkhannock to get to where Pa and Zio took me to fish for bass on the Susquehanna at Wyalusing, or when we hunted deer just outside of Towanda. If you've never been out of the valley, like Tony, you think the real color of the sky is hazy grey and the air everywhere has traces of ammonia from the sulfur oozing out of the water in the mines

and the burning culm dumps turning to piles of ash. I remember wondering what color the sky is in 'Nam and what the air smells like there. They said it rains a lot.

"It's a hot one," I said as I came into the boxcar where Tony was loading cement bags onto a hand truck. It felt ten degrees hotter in the car. All through the coffee break I kept thinking about what I would say when Tony and I were finally alone together. We hadn't exchanged more than a couple of words with each other in thirteen years, since he and his family moved from The Orchard. Before that, we were like brothers, inseparable. When I look at the photo albums, he and his two sisters and brother and mother are always there up to the time when we started grade school. He was a chubby little kid. Everybody's smiling. Then, they're gone. We were in the same class when we started grade school, but then he was kept back.

He wasn't smiling when I came in, and he wasn't chubby anymore. He looked older than his seventeen years, soon to be eighteen like me. We were about the same height. His muscles came from real work; mine came from the weights I lifted to build up my strength for football. His hair was clipped short, and he didn't wear a hat or gloves.

"I got a question," he said, without a comment on the weather or so much as a howdy-do. "How much are you guys making an hour? I hope ta hell it ain't more than me 'cause then I'm gonna be pissed. I might even quit on the spot."

Dammit, I thought! I didn't want to have this conversation with Tony. Big Jim gave me and Franky our hourly wage separately, and he told us both that we weren't to tell anyone what it is. If we did, that was the end of the job. I didn't know why it was so important to keep it a secret, and I didn't care. Whatever I made was going into my car fund. I guessed it was more important for Tony, but that wasn't my business.

"Look, Tony," I said, "Big Jim told me that what I am earning is between the company and me and he said I am not supposed to talk about it. If I tell you and it's more than you're making, you quit and I'm fired 'cause they'll know I told. If I tell you and it's less than what you're

making, sooner or later you're going to blurt it out, and even if it's after I'm gone from here, there's gonna be bad feelings between the Guados and the Fabrianos. I don't want that. So, drop it. If you're not satisfied with what you're making, take it up with Big Jim or Livia, or talk to Johnny and ask him to help you out. But leave me the hell out of it, okay?"

"Can you tell me whether you're makin' the minimum wage?"

"No."

"No, you can't tell me or no you're not makin' the minimum wage?"

"No, I can't tell you, so drop it!"

"Yeah, okay. Sorry. You're right. Forget it."

I was glad we settled that. I hoped he meant it and wasn't going to keep harping on it for the rest of the summer. I asked for the minimum wage, a buck-and-a-quarter, when I talked with Paulie about the job. He said they couldn't pay the minimum wage to part-time workers, and I'd have to be satisfied with less, a lot less. Tony must have been making the minimum. If he wasn't, there must be other jobs he could take. Maybe not. He had been there for three years.

"Come on, I'll show you how to load the hand truck and where to pile the bags in the shed. Did you bring a handkerchief?"

"Yeah, Jim told me to bring a big bandana, but he didn't say what I needed if for."

"Make like a bandit and put it over your nose and mouth."

"How come you don't have one on?"

"My lungs are already full of the shit. There ain't no more room for any more."

I took the big, red bandana out of the back pocket of my jeans, folded it into a triangle, and tied the two ends behind my head, over the ears so it didn't fall down. I had done this many times before when I was a young kid and we played cowboys and Indians. I picked up the other hand truck and started loading it up with the bags of cement. An hour

passed. It got hotter and all the moving around with the cement bags filled the air inside both the boxcar and the storage shed with cement dust. Breathing was hard. I couldn't imagine how Tony was doing this without some sort of mouth covering. Then, Franky came into the shed as we were both unloading our hand trucks and placing the cement bags on wooden pallets. He was pushing another hand truck, a bigger one than the ones we were using, and the white tee shirt he had decided to wear on his first day of work was soaked through with sweat and covered with dirt.

There wasn't a big difference between city kids and country kids in our neck of the woods, not like the difference between kids from New York City and kids from almost anywhere else. Joey Giordanno on The Orchard had a cousin from Brooklyn who came in to spend two weeks with his family during the summer. He was a real wise guy, acting like he knew everything, and we were all just country hicks. Franky may have grown up in the city, but he was one of us. He was already bigger by a half than all of us when he was eight, and at six feet five now, he towered over most of us. If he was a little more coordinated, he could have been a quarterback and set scoring records. Even as a kid, he could outrun everyone, even kids who were in high school. His high school coach decided he would be an end because he already had a decent quarterback who could deliver the ball to Franky, and then Franky would do the rest. He set receiving and scoring records for the county for the three years he was on the varsity.

"I thought you two would have finished unloading this shit already," said Franky as he poked his head inside the boxcar.

"You still got all your fingers?" asked Tony.

"So far," answered Franky. "Johnny says we have to finish unloading this car by two 'cause they're coming to pick it up. There's an hour 'till lunch. If it doesn't look like we can finish it, we can't take a lunch break. We'll need to work through lunch and eat after."

"Get used to this game, guys," offered Tony. "They're always picking up the cars just after lunch, and there'll be something that also needs

to happen after we've finished so that you'll be eating your lunch sandwiches when you get home from work."

"First day and we're already working our asses off. Football practice was a dream compared to this," I said.

"I'll bet you won't be saying that in a month when we start practice for the Dream Game," quipped Franky. "All you guys from the other schools will get to see what we've had to practice on while you were running around on grass. Our practice field's a mixture of dirt and coal dust, and when it's dry like it usually is in early August when we start practice, you're going to wish you were wearing a gas mask."

We finished unloading the car at one-thirty, and then headed to the staff washroom to get the dust off our faces and hands. It was too hot to eat outside. As we crossed the street, we saw a girl standing on the sidewalk, in the shade of the building. Tony left us and walked over to her. Franky and I hesitated for a second, then Tony turned around and said, "It's my sister, Connie." We followed him and he introduced us. Then Connie said, "That was a great touchdown you made in the last game, Nicky."

"Thanks. It was probably my last unless I get lucky in the Dream Game."

"We'll be there cheering you on," said Connie, and she smiled while she looked straight at me.

My eyes fastened on her hazel blue eyes. They were large and round with high, round eyebrows faintly visible because of her light reddish blonde hair color. Her complexion was light. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail so that all her facial features were in full sight. They were uncomplicated, not moviestarish like her sister Annie's, the gorgeous waitress at Donnatelli's. There was no make-up that I could see. She was slightly shorter than Tony. She was slim, but not skinny, with a small waist and broad shoulders. She wasn't endowed with the breasts of her sister, but they were ample. She had on a white t-shirt

tucked into a pair of pink and white seersucker shorts, white socks, and white low-cut Converse sneakers. I had seen her in the school corridors and thought she was pretty. There was never anyone to ask if they knew her. Now she was standing in front of me, and I could see was pretty, really pretty, and she was Tony's sister!

"Thanks," I said, after what Tony and Franky must have thought was a very long pause.

"I made some chocolate chip cookies for you to share with your new workmates," said Connie, as she handed over a paper bag to her brother. "See you later. I'm going uptown." Then she turned and walked toward Main Street. I watched her walking, thinking that something had just happened. "Let's eat," said Franky, bringing me back to where we were a few minutes before.

Without a word, Tony led us into the basement. The cool basement was a relief from the heat, and we dug into our lunches. There were Cokes and Seven-Ups in the fridge for a nickel apiece. We had half an hour to finish our lunches. Johnny hadn't said what we would be doing after lunch. I had a salami and Swiss cheese with mayo on Mom's homemade bread, a pack of Twinkies, and a small carton of milk. That's what I had eaten for lunch for the past six years, substituting boiled ham for salami or maybe sliced cold chicken, sausage, or meatballs from Sunday dinner. Franky had made himself an everything-in-it-and-on-it hoagie on a big submarine bun, and he had a quart of chocolate milk to wash it down. Big boy, big appetite. Tony had three peanut butter and jelly sandwiches on white bread. He dropped a nickel into the jar next to the fridge and took out a Coke. He tore the bag of cookies and placed it open on the table. There were six of them.

"I wonder how it would feel to be rich," said Tony. "If you star at Penn State and get a signing bonus with an NFL or AFL club, you're going to find out, Franky."

"Mom always says Nonna taught her that people who have a lot of money stole it," said Franky.

"I think everybody feels that way who lived in Italy where the peasants had nothing and the Church and the landowners took everything for themselves," said Tony. "But now their kids, like the Guado family, are making money and paying us kids peanuts."

"My girlfriend, Donna, wants me to make sure I study and graduate, just in case the football thing doesn't work out."

"That's good advice. You never know what can happen in sports," offered Tony.

"Do you guys have a day for your physical?" asked Franky after he had taken a few large bites of his hoagie and downed half the milk.

"It's on August 4th," answered Tony. "That's a Tuesday. At the Armory in town."

"Yeah, mine too," I said. "At the Armory. It's a week-and-a-half before the Dream Game."

"I plan to stay off the drink for a couple of days before and get a good night's sleep. I want to pass with flying colors," added Tony.

"I guess you have your reasons, but if I didn't have the college deferment, I would be thinking about heading for Canada," said Franky.

"I don't think you would do that," I said. "Maybe your dad doesn't want you to go through what he had to go through during the war, but he served his country when he was called up to do it. We haven't gotten to the point where we can vote for the wars the country decides to fight. Anyway, not everybody goes to Vietnam."

"Not yet, but it looks like that might change. Dad never talks about the fighting or the shooting when he was in the war," said Franky, "but ever since I can remember, at least once a week, he wakes up the house with his bad dreams. He doesn't talk about them either, but from the time I was little, Mom would come in to us and tell us that Dad was having a bad dream about the war. All I know for sure is that he was at the Battle of the Bulge. That was his first experience of war. It was Christmas of '44. I read about it. It was cold as hell, and the battle lasted

for almost a month. A lot of men were killed on both sides. We won that battle, but it must have been awful. Dad can't seem to get it out of his head. He says the last thing he wants for me is to go through the same thing. Dad never even let me play with toy guns, but I did anyway when he couldn't see me."

"So, if you don't screw up with your grades, Franky, you got four years for us to finish the war or the 'Cong to finish us before you have to go there too," said Tony.

"What happens with your scholarship if you break a leg?" I asked.

"I'll get red-shirted for a year."

"That ain't gonna help you to stay out'a the Army, Franky," said Tony. "I heard on the radio the other day that if you're out'a college for any reason, you get drafted. They specifically mentioned college football players getting red-shirted."

"I didn't hear that," said Franky. He had a worried look on his face. "Maybe I'll get married."

"Johnson said there's been a lot of criticism about the fairness of the draft, with rich kids finding ways to avoid it and stay out of 'Nam," answered Tony, "so he's changing the laws to make sure that everyone's treated the same way. That ain't gonna make no difference whatsoever to the bigwig kids, 'cause they're gonna find a way to stay out of 'Nam, but it will affect guys like you. There's a rumor that he's eliminating the marriage deferral."

"Shit," said Franky. "I'd better make sure I don't get hurt, and if I do, that it isn't so bad that I get red-shirted."

I wasn't paying too much attention to what was happening over in Vietnam until March, and then everything changed. The words "Operation Rolling Thunder" were all over the newspapers, on the TV and radio. Then the first combat troops were sent over. A couple of the guys on The Orchard who had been drafted before March were over there already, and the first casualties from the area started showing up in the newspaper in June.

"Pa went in through Sicily in the middle of '43 and then up through Italy," I said. "He talks mostly about how the Italian people were so happy that the Allies were there, getting rid of the Germans and the Fascists. He never talks about the fighting either, but he doesn't have nightmares, at least not any that wake up the house. He says he hopes I fail my physical, but if I pass, I should be proud to serve my country."

"You sound like a real patriot, Nicky," said Tony. "I'll bet my dad said stuff like that. Mom says he was a really gung-ho Marine. He made it through the War fighting in the Pacific, came home in '46, stayed at home long enough for me and the two youngest to pop out, and then he reenlisted to fight in Korea. What the hell for? I ask myself that every day. What the hell for? Now we're doing the same thing in Vietnam. Same story all over again."

All I knew was that Tony's pa, Ricco, was killed in Korea. It wasn't long after that happened that Tony's family moved from The Orchard.

"And you're letting yourself get drafted so that you can go over there and maybe get killed like your dad?" said Franky. "Why?"

"Maybe to find out why he thought it was a way to solve his problems, whatever they were. Anyway, it's a ticket outta here. I'm work'n this shit job, make'n shit pay 'cause I ain't got a piece of paper say'n I spent twelve years sit'in on a school bench listening to somebody who got another piece'a paper tell me why George Washington beat the British. Every damn year the history lesson starts with Egypt, goes to Greece then Rome, crosses the Atlantic with Columbus and finishes up with the end of the fucking Revolutionary War. What the hell was happening everywhere else? What went on between Rome falling and Ferdinand and Isabella, the time they call the Dark Ages? Why was that French guy, Lafayette, over here helping us out? That's what I wanted to know when I was in school. I learned about Washington in the third grade. Give me something new to think about."

"Geez, Tony," said Franky. "It sounds like you were actually paying attention to the history lessons."

"You guys got any idea why we were fighting in Korea? You know why we're over there in 'Nam now? Any idea?"

"It's something to do with dominoes," said Franky.

"Yeah, it's the domino theory," I chimed in. "If one domino falls into the next, the whole row of dominoes falls over. We have to stop the first one from falling because if we don't it'll be too late to stop the rest from falling. The dominoes are countries, and 'falling' means going over to the Communists. We learned that in social studies class, but we didn't get much farther with what it really meant."

"Before I quit school, I asked the librarian to help me look it up," said Tony. "She found it in the WORLD BOOK ENCYCLOPEDIA YEAR BOOK for 1954. It was President Eisenhower who used it. The only problem was that by 1954 it was too late. The domino numero uno in Europe was the Soviet Union, and after the War they took all the eastern European countries. The first domino in Asia was China. The Communists won in China in 1949 and North Koreans invaded the South Koreans in 1950. How Korea got divided into North and South is the real story. The dominos were already falling. We didn't win in Korea, mainly because the North Koreans had a lot of help from China. It's still a stalemate."

Tony stopped talking and looked at us. "Do you guys know any of this stuff? Am I boring you?"

"No. No. It's interesting, Tony," I said, "but our lunch time is over. Can we pick this up again tomorrow? I'd like to hear more."

"Yeah, me too," said Franky. "I have no idea about how either Korea or Vietnam got to be divided into two parts. Where did you learn this shit, Tony?"

"The barber shop. Ya just need to hang out at the barber shop and look at the magazines. Lots'a pictures and not too much text. There's more there than POPULAR MECHANICS. Look up South Korea in your encyclopedias tonight."

We said we would, finished our lunches along with the cookies and walked back up the stairs, through the store and out into the yard. Johnny was standing talking to Big Jim.

"It's your big day, boys," said Johnny. "While you were having your martinis and T-bone steaks in the cellar restaurant, another box car arrived. This one's carrying plaster. You know the drill, Tony. Take over the new recruits."

"Thank your ma for the cookies, Tony," said Franky.

"And thank your sister for bringing them," I said. Tony looked at me and just smiled.

The three of us walked out of the yard together at the end of that first day. Tony headed in one direction, and Franky and I went in the other, towards where his car was parked. Donna Keegan, his girlfriend, drove it to pick him up. Donna doesn't look like someone with a name like Keegan. You might expect her to be a red head with freckles and on the short side. She is almost as tall as Franky with long black hair in a ponytail, dark brown eyes, and a very nice smile. She looks like a photo model, not a movie star like Annie, but very attractive. She was leaning up against the driver's side door, a two-door, three-tone *'53 Chevy* convertible that Franky took over from his dad.

"I didn't remember to bring a big towel to cover the seat," said Franky as we crossed the street.

"Hi, Nicky. Franky, what have they done to you! Are you sure you want to get into the car with those filthy clothes?"

"I guess I'll be doing some car cleanup after dinner."

"I start my job tomorrow at the bank, so you'll be riding home alone."

"I've decided I'm going to take the bus. It'll save me the trouble of cleaning up the car. Want a ride, Nicky?"

"Thanks, Franky, but it's only a short walk. See you tomorrow. Good luck on your first day handing out money, Donna."

Then they drove off. As I got to the corner of The Orchard, another convertible was coming out onto Main Street. It was Gino Luccatella in his flaming red *Alpha Romeo Giulia TZ2*, his graduation present. He was the last person I wanted to see.

"Hey, Fabby," he yelled. "You look like you' been diggin' ditches all day. Or maybe you' been puttin' in time on the Guado slave gang." He always had something stupid to say, and he insisted on calling me by his nickname that he and his gangster friends used. It's what his father called my father. The only reason for Gino to be on the street was to buy bread at Constantino's bakery at the end of the block.

"Hi, Genaro," I said as I approached his car. He hated being called by his full name, which is why I always called him Genaro. "It's always such a treat to see you. I thought you might be up at the lake having fun with all your friends instead of being here in town where most people have to work. Did you come down to collect your allowance? It looks like you got a nice, new haircut." I could see that he had a big bag full of bread loaves and a couple of cases of beer on the back seat.

"Heading to the lake right now, Fabby. Any time you want a job that pays money instead of peanuts, give me a call. We can get you out of the draft too. No use wasting a good runner on gook bullets."

One day this kid is going to wind up with a bullet right between his eyes, I thought, but before he gets it, he's going to try to ruin as many lives as he can, just like his father, and from what I hear, just like his grandfather. "Thanks, Genaro, but no thanks. Drive carefully. It would be too bad to mess up your shiny, new car and muss up your hair."

He laid rubber on the pavement as he sped away. I continued my walk home thinking about Gino. He never did any homework, and he was out about half of the days. He didn't play any sports or take part in a single school activity. He was a flabby weakling, but he made sure everybody knew he carried a knife and that he was able to use it. He wore expensive clothes and hung out at his Uncle Eddie's grocery store,

which was the front for the family's criminal business. Eddie was Lucca's younger brother, and he had a son named Ricky, a year younger than Gino, who was cut from the same cloth as everyone else in the family. Gino and Ricky passed from class to class without doing any work because the teachers were all afraid of what would happen to them if they gave them failing grades, and now Gino's got a high school diploma which he didn't do a thing to earn.

I could see that Nonno was painting the fence as I got close to the house. "*Ciao, Nonno. Come stai*? The fence looks great."

"*Bene, bene, Nicco*. It's a good fence. Built to last. Your Pa helped me build this fence when he was twelve. He already had his eye on your mother. But you heard that story a hundred times already."

Maybe it was a thousand times. Nonno Berto never tired of telling it. He loved my father like the son he never had, and my father loved him back. It didn't mean Pa loved Nonno Nicco any less. Both Ma and Pa seemed to have an endless supply of love, for each other, for me, for everyone. I didn't know yet if I inherited that from them. I never had a girlfriend. I had a crush on Julie Rizzoli in fifth grade, but she was only interested in the guys in sixth and seventh grades. I skipped the senior prom.

"How was your first day at the lumberyard? You look like somebody dropped a bag of plaster over you this morning and your sweat turned you into a statue during the day."

"That's almost what happened. We unloaded two boxcars, one with cement and the other with plaster. I hope we won't be doing that every day."

"You could have stayed here all day and painted the fence, and I would have paid you more than you probably got from the Guados."

"But then I'd be taking money from inside the family. This way, I bring in money from outside so you can use your money to buy the grapes for this year's wine."

"Just like your mother. She always has an answer for me."

I heard a faint rumble in the southern sky. I looked back and I could see that dark grey storm clouds were heading our way. "I hope Ma didn't forget her umbrella this morning."

"It won't do her any good. When this rain comes the wind that comes with it will be blowing straight at her. She's probably gone to the station and will come home with your Pa."

"I have a question, Nonno."

"Okay, what's your question?"

"Why did Helen Malatesta take her four kids and move from The Orchard after her husband died in Korea?"

"Why are you thinking about that now?"

"Tony Malatesta is working at the lumberyard. He's been working there since he quit school three years ago."

"What makes you think there was any special reason for them moving? Maybe she just wanted to get a new start without all the memories."

"They moved to the worst place in town when they had a nice house here."

"Tony's nonno, Antonio, bought it for Ricco and Helena when they got married. It was one of the oldest on The Orchard, built around 1900."

"It's still there. The Aldinos have fixed it up real nice. It's got some of the oldest apple and pear trees."

"It wasn't in great shape when Ricco and Helena moved in, and Ricco didn't do much with it after that. He worked in the mines, went into the Marines, fought in the Pacific, came home, worked in the mines, started drinking and gambling, ran up debts, went to Korea and that was the end of him. It's a shame. He was a really good kid until the war."

"What was Helen like?"

"Have you ever seen her?"

"I have some faint memories of her from when I was small and they lived on The Orchard, but I haven't seen her in a long time."

"She was a real beauty. Helena d'Assissi. She lived with her parents on the other side of town and worked at the Dutchess. They met at a dance. Ricco was a good-looking guy and a great dancer. I guess he swept her off her feet. She was five years younger than Ricco. They got married before Pearl Harbor, and had the one daughter, Anna, who was born just before Ricco shipped out in April '43. She got the best looks from both of them."

"Yeah, it's pretty hard to concentrate on eating at Donnatelli's when she's waitressing there."

"Well, the men who were left on The Orchard during the War felt the same way about Helena, and when Ricco went off to Korea, there were even more men who had a hard time keeping their eyes off her. It wasn't Helena's fault. She never encouraged the attention, but there was always someone who wanted to help with a leaky drainpipe or to shovel the snow. Except for your mother, the women were all green with jealousy. It came to a head about six months after Ricco's funeral, when there was a steady stream of men coming around asking if there was anything they could do. One of them was Luccatella. He owned Ricco's gambling debts, and I guess he thought he could take payment from Helena, either in money or in some other way. She talked to your ma about it. She said she told him to leave her alone and that she'd pay all of Ricco's debts when she got the money from the government."

"What happened then?"

"Father Croce paid a visit. I don't know what he said to her, but within a few weeks she had bought a house on the flats and put her house on The Orchard up for sale. Not a single man on The Orchard, except your pa and zio, volunteered to help her move. They were either scared of their wives or of Luccatella. Your pa and Alberto loaded up the old Chevy truck. You helped too. Your ma was over there for a week helping Helena to get settled."

"Is that where one of the boxes of cookies Ma packs every Christmas and Pa delivers goes?"

"Yes, and your pa and zio have kept that old jalopy of theirs running for the past ten years. My daughter's a saint, and she married a saint."

"I guess they were both raised right, Nonno."

I remember this conversation like it was yesterday. He smiled, and I could see a tear forming at the corners of his eyes. Jesus, how had I missed all of that? It took me a while to understand that kids, up until the time we are on our own and have to do things for ourselves, are mostly operating on automatic pilot. Food turns up when we're hungry. Money turns up when we need to buy something. Clean laundry can be found in the drawers. The house is warm in the winter and the electricity works. I had more questions for Nonno that day, but I felt like I needed to take a shower, eat supper, and turn in. I couldn't remember ever having been that tired, even after our heaviest football practices before the start of the season. I helped Nonno gather up his brushes, paint and drop cloth. As we walked toward the shed in the back, the first drops of rain began to fall. And then the sky opened up and I imagined Pa, Ma, and Zio coming home in an ark.

It turned out not to be a quick dinner, and it was my fault.

"Ma, what was Ricco Malatesta like when he was growing up?" I asked as we settled into dinner.

"You're still there on Ricco Malatesta," interjected Nonno.

"Where does that question come from?" asked Ma.

"I'm working at the lumberyard with Tony, his son. Tony dropped out of school when he was fifteen. He's been working at the lumberyard since then, but I think he's smarter than anyone I've ever met. So, I just wonder what his father was like."

"Your mother had a crush on him. That's why she's blushing."

"Every girl did, and he knew it. But he wasn't stuck up or anything. He always had a smile on his face. He was real good about helping the older people."

"His pa was the same way," added Pa. "He was the first one to show up when anybody needed help fixing a roof or building a garage."

"All the girls on The Orchard were real disappointed when they heard he had met a girl from the other side of town," said Ma, "and the first time he brought her home to meet his parents, the word got around and everyone suddenly had to go out to get some fresh air to wait for them to come out when he walked her home. When we saw Helen, we knew that was the end of any dreams we had about hooking up with Ricco."

"But what happened? Something must have gone wrong somewhere?" I asked.

"The War," said Pa. "Not the one in Korea. He was already finished by the time he went over there. It was the time during the Second World War that did him in. When he came back, he was a different person. He never smiled. He went back to his job in the mine, and he drank and gambled. He stopped going to church. He had been an altar boy as a kid and an usher. He was the head of the Holy Name Society just before the War. All of that ended when he came back. If he went to a wedding, he ended up getting drunk and Helen would have to drive them home."

"Where did he see action?"

"The Pacific. Ricco would never talk about it. He was never taken prisoner, so he didn't go through the hell of being tortured. A lot of things happen during a war, not only to the people fighting in it but to the people who are left behind."

"Why didn't bad things happen to you, Pa?"

"That's a hard question to answer, Nicky. I did what I was told to do, but I didn't take any unnecessary risks. Your mother and I promised each other to write every day and to always tell the truth about what we

did, so I never did anything I would be ashamed of later. I trusted your mother and she trusted me. I said a rosary every night before falling asleep, and when I woke up, I told myself that I wasn't afraid of dying because I didn't have any sins that would send me to hell."

"Tell me again where you were, Pa."

"Italy. I was part of the Fifth Army under General Clark. We went into Salerno in September of '43, landing in boats. The Italians had surrendered the day before the invasion, but there were enough Germans there waiting for us to make it a tough fight. We almost lost it, but we took it and then we started up towards Naples. The Germans gave up the city, but the big battle was waiting for us at Monte Cassino. It went on from January to May in '44. I try not to think about it, but images from that time pop into my head like someone just handed me a snapshot."

"Can you tell me what happened?" I asked.

"Monte Cassino is a rocky hill southeast of Rome," said Pa. "It was the site of a Roman town, and a Benedictine abbey was built there. The town of Monte Cassino is a mile away from the Abbey. We took the Abbey but paid a big price. We had 55,000 killed and wounded, twice as many as the Germans who were defending it. The Allies bombed the Abbey and the town, killing over two thousand civilians living in the town and 230 civilians who were in the Abbey. The Italian civilians were hiding in the Abbey to escape the bombings of the village. Only forty of the civilians who were in there survived."

"Why did the Allies bomb the town if the battle was for Monte Cassino?" I asked.

"Things like that happen in wars, Nicky. The Germans were telling the Allies they weren't in the Abbey so they shouldn't bomb it. British intelligence was saying that the Germans were using the Abbey for reconnaissance, so it should be bombed. In the end, the Allies decided to bomb the heck out of everything. There were no Germans killed inside the monastery, but they moved into the rubble when the bombing stopped. From the time of the bombing of the Abbey in February until

the Polish forces finally captured the hill in May, Germans used the Abbey's rubble to keep us from capturing the hill. The Pope sent a letter to the President telling him that our bombing was huge blunder and really stupid, or something like that. I still think about all those innocent people we killed."

"Franky says his pa has nightmares about the war and wakes up the house, at least one a week," I said.

"I know," Pa said. "Mike and I had a long talk a couple of years after the War was over. He said there were two dreams that kept coming back. They were both from when he saw his first action, at the Battle of the Bulge. In one of them, he's digging a fox hole when his unit's advance gets stopped by a German gunner in a bunker. He's digging as fast as he can while one after the other the soldiers around him are shot. The bullets keep flying, and the soldiers keep dropping. His hole is almost deep enough for him to get inside, and he's digging faster and faster. He's the only one left, and now all the bullets are aimed at him. Then he wakes up. It's always the same, he said."

"What was the other one," I asked.

"He's alone at a guard post, and he sees one soldier walking right toward him. He's behind a stone wall with his gun resting on a hole in the wall, so he knows the soldier can't see him. The soldier keeps walking, getting closer. He knows he has to pull the trigger, but he can't do it. He keeps thinking that if he doesn't pull the trigger, the soldier will climb over the wall and kill him. When the soldier is almost about to start to climb over the wall, he wakes up."

"Did this really happen?" I asked. "Did he shoot the soldier?"

"Yes, and every time he goes to confession, he tells the priest that he killed someone in the War, and the priest absolves his sin."

"Did you ever have to shoot someone, Pa?"

"Most of us had to, Nicky, otherwise we wouldn't have won the War, I'd be long gone, and you wouldn't be here. And that's what we carry around with us for the rest of our lives. Some of us have dreams,

like Mike Antonelli. Some of us get lost in our thoughts when people around us think we're just enjoying the sound of birds in the trees or watching TV. Your ma knows when I am having happy daydreams and when I am thinking about the bad things that happened during the War."

"Ma, did you ever think that Pa wasn't going to come home?"

"No, I never did. I knew that God intended that we should have a child. Your father had to come home, and he did."

Chapter 2

AFTER KOREA

Two weeks had passed. My body was gradually getting used to being pushed to the limit every day picking up bags of cement and tar paper and moving lumber and plywood. We got the chance to pick up where we left off with Korea on the first day, but today the plan was to have lunch with Johnny, who had served in Korea before the Korean War started. Today, I was going to make my first long delivery, outside of town.

"Nicky, you go wid Tony ta take a load up ta West Mountain," instructed Johnny as we were leaving the basement after coffee break. "Franky, help'em load da truck and then come over ta da back yard. We gotta move wood piles today."

Somebody had ordered a truckload of material for a renovation. There was no name on the order, just the address. "Who's it for?" I asked.

"You writin' a book?" snapped Johnny. "Dat load's paid fer. Da address is on da order. Jist make sure ya put it on da driveway on da right road and wid da right number."

"I got an idea who the load's for," said Tony as we went to the truck to drive it into the yard to start loading it, "and why Johnny's so sensitive about it. We'll talk about it on the way up. I'll drive up and you can drive back. Double clutching on the steep hills can get tricky."

The truck was a *'51 Chevy Model 3809* medium duty with six wheels and wooden platform gates.

"Pa taught me how to drive one of these babies when I was fourteen. He used it when he had to pick up tires and parts. Now he uses it for spare parts. So, I got the double clutching motions down. But back is fine with me. No point in losing the load on my first tour of duty."

It took us an hour to get the truck loaded. Franky was almost twice as big as Tony, but Tony loaded twice as much as the two of us together. His experience showed in everything he did. He let the material's weight and size work for him. Turning the two-by-tens on their short side and sliding them meant less friction. He let the plywood and sheetrock swing themselves onto the truck with a minimum of effort.

"We should be back before lunch," said Tony as we climbed into the truck.

"I'll wait for you, but if you're late your lunch pails might be empty when you get here," laughed Franky.

Tony took the back road out to the West Mountain Road rather than driving through town. He looked over in the direction of his house which was visible in the flood plain, a sad looking little two-story structure that hadn't seen a coat of paint since it was built maybe fifty years earlier. There were no other houses close by. They had all been washed away in the flood or were so damaged they had to be demolished. Tony and his family had moved to what had been a neighborhood in '54, the year before the flood. That was after his pa got killed in Korea. Why their house was the only one left standing is still a mystery. They all got pulled from the porch roof by a helicopter.

Until last week, when Nonno told me the story, I never understood why they moved. I remember asking Ma, but she didn't answer me. It was one of those things she didn't want to talk about. Pa said something about them being better off on their own. At the time, I wasn't old enough to understand the real reason.

"Ma thinks I should apply for a family deferment," said Tony breaking the silence. "She says that Pa dying in Korea should be enough deaths in the family from fighting in a war. We do okay with Ma working at the dress factory and me and Annie bringing in money. Then there's also Pa's Social Security, which ain't much, and a monthly death benefit. We ain't never starved even before Annie and me were old enough to start working, so that money must be enough to live on. Ma

also got a one-time payment when Pa died. She's never told us how much it was. I know she used some of that to buy the house."

"So, you don't think she needs the money you're bringing home?"

"I'm guessing she's saving the money she gets from me and Annie for something, maybe if there's another flood or the house catches on fire. I'm pretty sure the house ain't insured. Anyway, I want to get the hell outta here, and the Army's the only way I know how."

"I get your point, Tony, but you can see why your mother isn't too happy about seeing you go off to fight in another war somewhere in Asia where your pa got killed."

"Yeah, but sooner or later I gotta live my own life."

I changed the subject. "Who's the load for?"

"Luccatella."

"Luccatella! Since when did he have a place up here?"

"Since he had a girlfriend who needed a place to live."

"How do you know this? You running a detective bureau on the side?"

"Annie. She had a feeling something was up when the new receptionist showed up for work at the restaurant and Guido, you know, the owner, introduced her to the staff. She's not from town. She comes from Philly. Her name's Ginger, with flaming red hair."

"I thought Luccatella's wife was the receptionist."

"She was. Annie said she hadn't been at the restaurant for a couple of weeks before the red head showed up. The next time Annie saw her she was driving a new Cadillac, and when she came into the restaurant, she had on a bigger diamond ring."

"Do you know what the story is with the restaurant's manager having to have a connection to Lucca?"

"Yeah. Annie asked the cook when she first started working there. Lucca made it a part of the rental agreement with Donnatelli after he bought the property from Old Man Lewandowski. It said that he got to pick the person welcoming the guests, and he wanted it to be his wife, Phyllis. Donnatelli told him he wanted his wife to be what's called the maître d' because she had a big stake in seeing to it that the guests are happy. Luccatella then said he wanted a share of the profits so his wife would also have a stake in making the guests happy. Donnatelli was ready to walk away, but Lucca took out the profit clause. They agreed that they'd see how Phyllis worked out, and that's how it started."

"How'd it work out?"

"Everybody seemed happy, especially Phyllis to be out from under Lucca's thumb all the time. She's a decent person, says Annie. But if she's decent, why the hell did she marry that *stronzo*? It's not like it was a secret that he was part of the mob. If she's got any good qualities, none of them have rubbed off on that shit brain of a son they have. I guess she did something to piss off Lucca, so he had her replaced. By the way, how come your pa got mixed up with that guy?"

"Pa asks himself that question every day. He started working as a car mechanic at Old Man Lewandowski's even before he graduated from high school. It was a steady job all through the Depression. When he was drafted, Lewandowski told him his job would be waiting for him when he got back, and they would talk about him taking over the business. The old guy never married so he didn't have any kids. Well, when Pa got home, Old Man Lewandowski had kicked the bucket, and the executor of his estate, the crooked lawyer who still works for Luccatella, Gus Stucciano, had sold the place to Luccatella. The place had been boarded up for a year by that time. Pa talked with Luccatella and they came to an agreement. Pa would get a salary and they would split the profits after all the costs were paid. Pa got to put his name on the sign. He had been thinking of what he would call it all those months he was overseas. He decided it would be called CARS, Inc., Carmen's Auto Repair Service. He even had a motto: 'It's run by real car men'."

"I always thought that was pretty clever of your pa. Luccatella only wanted the garage because it was on the same property as the bar and the dry cleaner's," said Tony. "There's been talk for years that he wants to tear them all down and put up a strip mall, but so far it hasn't happened."

"Pa's got a plan for the day that it does, or maybe sooner."

I wouldn't tell Tony or anybody else about Pa's plan. Pa wants to stay right where he is. It's a good spot in the middle of town and he has his steady clientele as well as the drop-ins. But he said he can never count on Luccatella doing right by him. Since their old agreement ran out years ago, Pa has been paying rent and Luccatella keeps raising it, not by a lot, but enough to make a difference in how much he takes home at the end of the year. Five years ago, Pa went into the Borough Hall to pay his business operator's license, and he decided to have a look at the taxes on the property that has his shop, the restaurant and the dry cleaning store. What he found made for a long dinner discussion, and we were all sworn to secrecy.

The whole property, all three businesses, are in the name of someone who lives in Jersey, a town called Piscataway. Taxes hadn't been paid on the property for over fifteen years, just about when Old Man Lewandowski died. The total owed was close to $6,000. Pa said he knew well enough to not ask any questions, like why the town wasn't doing anything to collect the taxes owed, but he wrote down the name and address of the guy who was the owner. It was a slow day, so he decided to drive into the County Court House and look up the deed. This was even more interesting. The property owned by Lewandowski had been sold to the guy in Piscataway for one dollar after the date that Lewandowski died, and then a trust was set up with Luccatella's wife, Phyllis, as the single trustee. When he got back to the shop, he called the city offices in Piscataway and asked if he could have information about the guy, and they told him he had been dead for over thirty years.

Pa has been holding on to this information for the past five years. He says he wrote it all down, put it in an envelope and put the envelope

in the bank's safe deposit box that only he and Ma have a key to. He also put a copy of the rental agreement he signed with Luccatella in the box.

I wonder if Tony knows about the connection between his pa and Luccatella, and that his ma paid off his father's gambling debts. Maybe they could have afforded to find a better place if they didn't have to shell out a pile of money to him. How come Annie decided to work in a place owned by him? Maybe folks ask the same question about Pa. I know they do; Tony just asked me.

We arrived at the renovation site and we started emptying the load on the side of the driveway. There was a red *'65 Thunderbird* convertible parked near the entrance. The house looked like it needed a lot of work. When we were almost finished, we heard a woman's voice calling. "Hi boys." We turned to see a woman in tight red pedal pushers, a white blouse with red polka dots, orange red hair piled up on top of her head and wearing deep red, high heel shoes. She wiggled toward us with a big smile on her face holding a pitcher of something that looked like lemonade in one hand and plastic glasses in the other. Balancing on her toes to keep her spiked heels from sinking into the sandy driveway put an extra wiggle into her walk. "I thought you might need something to drink after all your hard work. I'm Ginger. What are your names?"

"I'm Tony Malatesta and this is Nicky Fabriano. We were just getting ready to cover up the load with the tarps and then head back to the yard."

"Malatesta. Are you related to Annie Malatesta?"

"She's my sister."

"She's your sister! Well, she's the one bringing in all the guests just to be able to be in the same room with her. I've never seen anyone so good-looking handle all the attention like she does."

"Our mom taught her good. Thank you for the offer of lemonade, Miss Ginger, but we need to be getting back to the yard. Our boss keeps us on a tight leash."

"You've got a few minutes to have a glass of lemonade I just made especially for you, don't you?"

"Well, sure," I said, "since you went to all the trouble. Thank you."

"We'll need to drink up quickly," added Tony.

"I've heard that the Guados run a tight ship," she said. "I've been meaning to pay visit to see for myself." We took the cups from her hand, and she poured the lemonade into them. There was plenty of ice. The sun was already high, and we were both sweating heavily. Drinking the lemonade felt like walking into an air-conditioned room. We downed it quickly, and she filled our glasses again.

After we finished the second glass, we thanked her, handed her back the glasses and got into the truck. I drove. I made sure I kept the truck well under a safe speed. I didn't want us to wind up in a ditch on my first delivery run.

"Can you keep a secret?" asked Tony as we slowly descended along West Mountain Road.

"It depends on whether it's the kind of secret I'll be tortured to tell."

"It's more like the kind of secret that you might get wacked for if you do tell."

"Does it involve Luccatella?"

"Yeah."

"Is it the kind of secret that my pa would already know?"

"Probably."

"Okay, then tell me."

"After the flood, Luccatella bought up most of the land around our house from the Borough. It had gotten money from the feds to pay all the people who lost their homes and who didn't want to move back, which was just about everybody except us. Lucca got the land for a song."

"Is it where the tall, metal fences are?"

"That area's just a small part of it. The fence is around the place where the old mine entrance was. He owns the whole area, but the secret has to do with the fenced-in area."

"So, what's the secret?"

"Every night, vans, and small trucks drive in and out of the fenced area. From our attic, I have a clear line of sight to the area. The trucks come in after dark and leave before first light. When there's enough moonlight, I can see them unloading boxes at the entrance to the mine, putting them on a wagon pulled by a tractor, and taking them into the mine. Then they take boxes out of the mine on the wagon and load them into the trucks."

"What's in the boxes?" I asked.

"Drugs, I guess. They must take it in in bulk and divide it into bags they can sell. I'm not sure, but it can't be something legit. They've got dogs in there, so if you get close to the fence, they start barking and growling."

"You think the police know anything about it?"

"It ain't unusual that I see a patrol car drive in there at night, so somebody on the force knows what's going on."

When we got back to the yard, Franky was still moving lumber. Johnny was in the stacks making sure the piles were even.

"Missed us?" joked Tony.

"Like a horse misses his flies," answered Franky.

"Did'ja make it widout droppin' the load 'long the way?" questioned Johnny.

"Yes, Chief," replied Tony. "We were rewarded with ice cold lemonade by the new manager of Donnatelli's. Her name is Ginger. She invited us in for something stronger, but we said our friend and our boss were waiting on us for lunch."

"The part about the lemonade is true. The other part is one of Tony's dreams. I'm hungry as a horse, with or without flies," I said as we went down to the basement. We had gotten used to the routine. Everyone had the same lunch every day. Tony dropped in his five cents for a Coke.

"So did you guys ever look up the dominoes in your WORLD BOOK and BRITANNICA?" asked Tony.

How did he know which encyclopedia sets we had? "I was so tired after dinner on my first day of work I only got through the first page and then I fell asleep," I said. "I don't remember much of what I read."

"That was two weeks ago," said Franky. "It slipped my mind, but I did remember to bring the map." He pulled a big world map that was rolled up inside a plastic tube, and we spread it out on the table, keeping it in place with coffee mugs at the corners.

"Johnny was there up to the time the war between the North and South started," said Tony, "so he's gonna tell us how it began."

"Why du'ya kids wanna know wad wuz go'in on in Korea? Dat's ancient history," Johnny said.

"We're trying to understand how all the trouble started there and in Vietnam if we're going to be drafted and have to fight," I answered.

"The less yuz know, the less yuz have ta tink about, and the less yuz tink, the better off yuz'er gonna be if they ship yer asses off to Veetnam. But, okay, I'll talk witch'ya about it. I can git yuz up ta when da fightin' starts, but then yuz need ta talk ta Nicky's uncle Al. How much ya know 'bout K'reea's history?"

"Zero," said Franky.

"Less than zero," I added. "All I know is that North Korea crossed the 38th parallel line and invaded South Korea on the 25th of June 1950. That's what I got out of what I read two weeks ago before I fell asleep. But I brought the encyclopedia with me."

"I didn't know shit 'bout K'reea before I went there. I didn't even know it was a country. I shipped out on June da first, 1947. I just had my twent'uth birthday. I cum home in June '49 'long wid ever'body else. I wuz a'signed ta da U.S. Army Military Gover'ment in K'reea. Day turned the letters 'round and made it USMAGIK. We wuz gonna make magic in that pen'sula. We didn't do such a good job. Da Asshole in Chief, General John Hodge, pissed off ever'body. We had da job'a carr'in out Baker 40. Dat was what day called da Field Order for the ok'u'payshon a'da K'rean pen'sula. Hodge treated da K'reens like shit from day one. Der was a lotta K'reean folks who liked the idea of commonisem, but not many folks knew what the hell cap'tolisem was. Hodge figered he had one job. Stop the commies. Ever'ting else cum second."

"Was there only one Korea then," asked Franky, "when you went there?"

"They wuz two even before the Jap'nese surrendered."

There was one Korea from approximately six hundred years after Christ. Just like in China, they called the periods 'dynasties' after the emperors and their families. The last one ended in 1910 when Korea became a Japanese colony. It happened in two steps. First, in 1876, Japan forced Korea to sign a treaty that gave Japan trading rights with Korea and open businesses in Korea. Japan had a much stronger military and navy at the time, so Korea didn't have much choice. Korea had been closer to China before this, but the treaty started to pull Korea into Japan's net. Then there was a war between China and Japan which Japan won in 1895. They were fighting over which one of them should control Korea. Japan won Taiwan as well as part of the peace agreement. There was another treaty in 1905 which made Korea what they call a protectorate of Japan. In 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea and made it part of Japan. From that point until the end of the Second World War it was called Chosen.

There was a conference in Egypt in 1943 where Roosevelt, Churchill and the official leader of China, Chiang Kai-shek, met and decided that Japan would have to give up all the territories it took by force, including those it had before the War. Roosevelt said the U.S. would be willing to administer all the territories, but the other two didn't agree. Roosevelt then went on to meet with Stalin, and

he told Stalin that America could manage all of Japan's former territories, but like Churchill and Chiang, Stalin did not accept this offer. What Stalin did do was promise to join in the Pacific War as soon as Germany capitulated. Two days after the United States dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, he declared war on Japan. The first thing Stalin did was to send the Soviet army with its tanks into Korea, crossing the very narrow stretch of land between the two countries. Russia had fought a war with Japan in 1904 and 1905, and Japan did the same thing to them that it did to China. Japan defeated Russia, both on the land and the sea. It was time for Russia to take revenge. On the 8th of August 1945, Russia crossed the border into Korea. There was no resistance. As soon as the U.S. heard of this, they understood it was Russia's intention to take over the whole country.

Dean Rusk, who at the time of Russia's invasion of Korea was an Army officer, and Charles Bonesteel were given the job of defining the American occupation zone in Korea on the 10th of August 1945. They chose the 38th parallel. They decided that it divided the country approximately in half, between Seoul and Pyongyang. The Soviets went along with the U.S. proposal without even suggesting a negotiation. It became official on the 15th of August 1945. That was the date General MacArthur issued the order for Japan's surrender all over Asia, and he stated at the time that the U.S. and the Soviet Union would jointly accept the surrender of Korea, with the U.S. doing it in the South and the Soviets doing it in the North. By the 24th of August, there were Russian troops in Pyongyang and most of the rest of what became North Korea.

Before the Soviet Union and America decided to split their country in two, the people of Korea had looked forward to the return of their entire country to be ruled as they wished. The influential families set up a committee to organize a new government. They created what they called The People's Republic of Korea, and they named one of their politicians, Syngman Rhee, who was living in exile in the U.S., to be president. Rhee was an anti-Communist, but what the committee was proposing for their new country looked a lot like what existed in Russia and China. The U.S. did not think the Koreans were ready to be independent, and most of all they didn't want it leaning into communism. So, the U.S. set up an interim government south of the 38th parallel and the Soviets did the same north of the line. A general named John Hodge was put in charge in the South. He got one message from MacArthur, which was to treat the people of Korea as a

liberated people, say, like the people in France after they kicked the Nazis out and executed all the collaborators, and another message from Washington, which was to create a government that was in line with U.S. policies. He ignored MacArthur's message and interpreted the second as meaning he should treat the Koreans as defeated enemies. He went further. He had leaflets distributed telling the Koreans to keep obeying the Japanese authorities because he found it easier to work with the Japanese, who were organized, than with the Koreans, who were not.

Hodge kept the Japanese in charge of the police. He left the running of the government in the hands of the Japanese colonial rulers under the direction of the former Japanese governor. When Hodge finally let Koreans take over after the people started to revolt, he asked the Japanese for names of Koreans who could be trusted. Of course, he got all collaborators. This would be like the Nazi puppet government in France taking over control of France after liberation instead of de Gaulle. That's what happened in South Korea.

In the North, the Soviets did the opposite to what the U.S. allowed Hodge to do in the South. They deported to the South all the collaborators, landowners, businessmen and anyone who had had anything to do with the Japanese. They brought back from Russia all the anti-Japanese activists and soldiers who had fled Korea. Then they began building both an army and a government around them. One of them was Kim II Sung, who became the first leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. He was still there in 1965. The country was set up as a one-party state along the lines of the Soviet Union. All businesses and land holdings were nationalized."

In November 1947, the U.S. asked the United Nations to sponsor elections on both sides of the 38th parallel for a single government over all of Korea. The UN adopted a resolution calling for those elections, but the Soviets who controlled the North refused to let the North take part. So, the UN adopted a new resolution to have elections where their people could have access, and that was in the South which was controlled by the U.S. Army. In December of 1948, the UN recognized the Republic of Korea in the South as the only legal government of the Korean peninsula, and between 1948 and 1950, the U.S. oversaw land reform in the

South, keeping the right to private property. They took back all land that the Japanese had confiscated and redistributed it to Koreans. Then they broke up big farms owned by Koreans and redistributed those as well.

"I remember dat time real well," said Johnny. "First da people would vote for what day called da 'sembly in May '48, and then the 'sembly would vote for a pres'dent in July. Da 'sembly picked Syngman Rhee as pres'dent, and the Republic of Korea was 'stablished on August 15th. It was the only gover'ment reck'nized by the U.N. as da oh'ficial gover'ment of K'reea. I guess ya didn't get ta da part in yer 'cyclopedia 'bout wad happened bafore 'lections wuz held in May '48 fer da constitutional 'sembly. Der was a lotta trouble in da South from da South K'reen Workers' Party. Day wanted a commonist gover'ment. Day was strongest on da island off da tip'a the pen'sula called Jeju. Da Workers' Party and hangers-on attacked police stations on da island, killed people and burned da vot'in centers. Da 'lections went ahead, bud after da new gover'ment cum in wid Snygman Rhee as President, it decided to wipe out da commies. Da K'reen army and police killed 'round 30,000 people on da island and leveled most of da villages. South K'reen sojers had a hard time decid'in which side day wuz on. In da middle of a fight, day could switch over. Hodge shipped out at da end'a August. Weez'all said good riddance.

"The North was run by the commies. No 'lections and Russia called the shots, bud ya couldn't really call what they had in da South a democracy. Da U.S. was in charge until weez shipped out. Rhee ruled, an' anybody who dis'greed wid 'im might end up dead. The magic mission ended in June'a '49 an' we wuz all real glad to get da 'ell outta der."

"What happened after we left?" asked Franky.

"We give Rhee a whole bunch a money so dat da South could git der shit ta'getter and take over da North. Da North made it pretty clear dat day wuz gonna invade da South one way er t'other. Dat came on da twentifi'th'a June 1950. Da U.S. went back in, bud we had fi'theen udder countries as wad day called da United Nations Command. Dis'ziz when

yer pa went in, Tony. I remember like id wuz yesta'day when we giv him a pardy before he shipped out.

"The date his ship left from New York was September 21st, 1950," added Tony.

"Yer zio went over a month later, Nicky. Da North K'reens killed ever'body day saw, mostly ci'vilons. Da Sov'yets gave dem ever'ting day had, and da North K'reens used dem. One ting ya gotta remember. Da Sov'yets had set off der first atom bomb, so day wuz feel'in preddy cocky. Da U.S. wuz gett'n used to not be'in at war. We di'nt do nuthin to stop the Chinese commies from tak'in control in China, you know that Mao guy. So, Stalin figered they cud wals inta da south and take it over preddy quick."

"I read that the Soviets cracked the U.S. communications codes with its embassy in Moscow," added Tony, "and they decided that the U.S. wouldn't do anything if the North attacked the South. I also read that Stalin convinced Mao to help the North with troops in return for military and economic aid. Mao agreed."

"Stalin wuz wrong, and he di'nt figer on da U.N. Dat wuz all new ta'im. When da U.S. and its allies cum in, day pushed da North K'reens back, but den in '51 the Chinese piled in. MacArthur wanted ta nuke the North K'reens and Chinese. Truman fired his ass in April. Mac wanted ta run ever'ting his way. He was in Tokyo da whole time. Never wen'ta K'reea. Can yuz 'magine dat?"

"They told us that Pa was killed in a battle with the Chinese in June of '51 during the counteroffensive to push the Chinese out of the South. His position took a direct hit by a mortar. Ma never saw his remains. There wasn't anything to see."

"Da only ting dat war 'complished was ta lower the pop'lation. Nobody got no'thin, an' no'thin's happened since. Sons'a bitches. Day signed an arm'stiss in '53 in Panmunjeom. Rhee was a corrupt asshole. He tried ever'thing to turn hisself inta a dictator."

"So, what do we learn from this?" I asked. "Anything we can take going into Vietnam?"

"Dat's da sixty-four tousan dollar question. As I seez it, we didn't learn a damn ting. We backed a shit-ass in K'reea, and we're do'in da same damn ting in 'Nam. Okay. Time to wrap up da his'tree class, boys, an' git back to work. By da way, you guys wanna git Paulie ta taak ta yuz 'bout how tings got started in 'Nam. He wuz in what day called da Office of Strategic Services. Dats what becum da CIA. Paulie wuz in China durrin da war, an' I noz he keeps hisself pretty up-ta-date on what goes on ova dare."

In 1952, when the war was still going on, Rhee decided he wanted to change the constitution to make the president directly elected by the voters instead of by the Assembly. He didn't have enough votes to push it through, so he declared martial law and arrested all the members of the parliament who he thought would vote against his change of the law. It worked, and he won the next election by a big margin. Then he pushed through another constitutional amendment to make himself exempt from the eight-year term limit. By the time the 1960 elections came, with Rhee still holding on to the office, union and student demonstrations in March set off what was called the April Revolution. When a student was found dead floating in the harbor, the protests spread to Seoul and the rest of the country. Rhee was forced to resign on April 26th.

There was an interim government under Heo Jeong. Then there was a new parliamentary election in July 1960, and the Democratic Party that had been in opposition to Rhee won. They changed the constitution so that the form of government was a parliamentary cabinet with the President in a less powerful role and the Prime Minister as the head of parliament is the head of the government. Chang Myon became the Prime Minister.

It was the Communists and students who were mainly responsible for overthrowing Rhee, and now they felt they could keep getting what they wanted. There were two thousand protests during an eight-month period. They wanted the Chang government to get rid of all the military and police officials who they said were against democracy and who were corrupt. The government agreed and

passed a law putting 40,000 under investigation. Over two thousand government officials and four thousand police officers were thrown out of their jobs. They even considered cutting the army by 100,000 but didn't go through with it.

Chang's government lasted for eleven months. South Korea's economy collapsed. Its currency, the Hwan, lost half of its value between the fall of 1960 and the spring of 1961. The military fought back and staged a coup in May 1961. It was led by Major General Park Chung-hee. The military claimed that the Communist forces inside South Korea were collaborating with the North Koreans to take over the country. They looked at how Japan's economy was rapidly improving and blamed what they called "liberal aristocrats" for holding back South Korea's economy. Park set up what was called the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction. He gradually positioned himself as a dictator, but the U.S. pushed for a return to civilian rule. Elections were held in October 1963, which Park won. He is still the president in 1965.

"I worked with Johnny here for over two years, and I never knew he was in Korea," said Tony, mostly to himself. He headed toward the truck, and Franky and I walked toward the rail siding. We were going to spend the afternoon unloading a flatcar of cedar framing lumber.

"There's something I definitely don't get about Tony," said Franky. "He's a walking encyclopedia with a memory like steel trap, but he never got out of the ninth grade."

"I never met anyone like him," I said. "What do you think is going on with him? Is there some kind of genius locked up inside that high school dropout body?"

"I think there's more to him than his teachers ever saw," answered Franky.

Pa was in the middle of putting the finishing touches on a new exhaust pipe and muffler on a *'58 Chevy Impala* when I came in after work. Franky had walked with me up to the bus terminal in the middle of town, half a block from Pa's shop. Pa said Zio Al was out testing a car he had been working on. It was Zio Al I wanted to talk to.

"Pa, do you think Zio Al would mind if I asked him some questions about the war, the one in Korea?"

"Why do you want to ask him questions?"

"We've been talking at the yard, on our lunch break, about maybe having to go to Vietnam, and were trying to understand how it all got started, and somehow we got back to Korea where Tony's pa was killed."

"Sounds like you kids have been doing more talking than working. I'm not sure Zio Al would be all that willing to answer questions. He likes to tell stories. You heard most of them. But the stories are always about something funny."

"Did he ever tell you how he lost his leg and the sight in one eye?"

"Sure, but he doesn't like to talk about it, so don't ask him. If he wants to tell you one day, he will."

"Will you tell me? Did he sign up or was he drafted? Was he in the Second World War? When I think about it, I don't know very much at all about Zio."

"Your Zio has always been very shy and quiet. He was the youngest. He was born when I was two, the same year my brother Joey died. They had lost Susie three years before. Ma and Pa treated little Alberto like he was a gift they had to be very careful with, like it was their last chance. If he was a different person their love would have smothered him, but he took it in stride. He seemed to understand it all from a very early age. He was drafted in '43. I had been in for a year. He never shipped out overseas. He was stationed in Jersey, at Monmouth, and he stayed there through the War. He mustered out in '46 and came to work with me at the shop. When Korea started, he decided to sign up again. He never explained why, it was just something he felt he had to do. I thought it would kill Ma and Pa. He was in the motor pool, so not in combat, but one day after he had finished servicing a jeep and was driving it alone back to division headquarters, a mortar shell hit the front of the jeep. He was lucky to survive. Shrapnel hit the left side of his face.

That's how he lost his left eye. The lower half of his left leg was taken off in the explosion. That's the story."

"Gosh, Pa, that's tough. How does he manage to be such a positive and happy person?"

"He had enough love growing up to last for a couple of lives. We try our best to fill up the glass when it's getting low. I wish he could just meet a good woman who could smooth out the little bumps when they come along. I have an idea about who that woman would be, but I've kept it to myself. He has to find her himself."

Zio came back, and they closed up the shop. It was Zio's turn to drive that day. He had picked Pa up in his fun car, his red and white *'57 Corvette* with only two seats. So, Pa and Zio drove home in their loner car, the *'60 Dodge Dart*, and I got to drive the 'vette'.

We were nearing the end of our third week at the lumberyard. Five-and-a-half days, including Saturday morning, forty-four hours, times $0.92 per hour. It adds up to $40.48 for the week. If I did this for a real job, I'd be taking home $2,105 for the year. I couldn't do much with that. Even making the minimum wage doesn't get you much farther. I can understand why people like the Luccatellas go into the crime business. At least I had gotten into the swing of drinking coffee. I can't say that I liked it, but I figured I could get through a tour of duty in Vietnam without too much trouble.

I decided I had to talk to Zio Al about his time in Korea. After dinner, I told Ma and Pa that I was going to visit him. He was sitting on his porch reading the newspaper when I walked up the steps and sat down in one of the four rocking chairs.

"Hi, Zio."

"Hi Nicky. I figured you'd be coming by. Your pa told me to expect a visit. He said you wanted to know what it was like getting my leg blown off and my eye knocked out." He smiled when he said this, and I wasn't sure whether I should smile as well.

"Pa said you volunteered to go to Korea."

"It was a different time back then, Nicky. We were the first generation of Italian-Americans born in America. We learned to speak English in school, and our parents, especially our mothers, never learned to really speak the language. Carmy and I had to go with Ma to the bank or post office after they passed the language laws so they wouldn't get in trouble for speaking Italian."

"What were the language laws?"

"After Pearl Harbor, the Congress passed a law saying it was illegal to speak German, Japanese, or Italian in public. Japanese and Italians were put in detention camps. Joe DiMaggio's father was put in a camp. We had to prove something, to ourselves and high-and-mightys who thought they were the only Americans."

"But you served in the war, Zio. Why did you want to sign up for Korea?"

"I didn't see any action like your pa and most of the others. But I went into Korea with my eyes wide open. I had seen friends and relatives coming home from Europe and the Pacific in boxes, or with parts of their bodies blown off. I knew the score. I managed to get out of Korea without being taken prisoner. From the stories I heard, that was worse than death. If you go to Vietnam, Nicky, stay out of planes and helicopters because they get shot down and you're a sitting duck if you parachute out. Don't drive any vehicles 'cause there'll be mines everywhere and you're an easy target for a mortar shell. That's what got me. And don't volunteer for anything."

"That's what Pa told me."

"He told me that, too. I should have listened. I volunteered to drive the jeep back to headquarters after we finished fixing it."

Chapter 3

BEFORE OUR WAR

I WENT TO the cemetery after mass every Sunday with Ma, Pa, and Nonno Berto. Zio Al didn't go to church, and when he visited the cemetery, he went on his own. Ma's sister, Zia Lina, came every Sunday when she and her family visited with us. This was the cemetery originally for everybody on The Orchard who bought plots in 1915. It wasn't the first cemetery in town for Italian immigrants. There was one closer to the church, near the center of town, but the men on The Orchard wanted to have a cemetery where the ones who didn't go to church could be buried. Nonno Nicco Fabriano was one of them. As it turned out, everyone on The Orchard decided to be buried here, whether they went to church or not, and the church decided they might as well do the burying.

Now, on a Saturday, a week after the 4th of July, we were all here to bury Franky's Nonna Rosa. It seemed like all the families on The Orchard were in church for the funeral service and we had all driven to the cemetery behind the hearse. It was an unusually cool day for July. There had been a heavy rain during the night, with thunder and lighting. The heavy, hot air that had made any activity involving moving during the past few days verge on the edge of being downright painful had been first exploded by the lightning and then blown away by the winds. It was still now, with a clear, blue sky, and the temperature was certainly under seventy. All the men were wearing dark suits, and the women dark dresses. I imagined how much we would all be sweating if the weather hadn't changed.

There were no individual names on the face of the stone, just the family name Acrobaleno. On the base were the names of Franky's Nonno Lorenzo and a son, Roberto, who died when he was only three. Rosa's name was not yet there. The grave was open with the dirt piled along one side. There was enough space between the edge of the grave

and the dirt pile to let the pallbearers on each side of the casket walk along the edge and lower the casket into the grave using the heavy straps placed underneath it. Pa, Paulie, and Big Jim were three of the pallbearers. Rosa's casket was sitting on a metal frame that had been placed over the hole and would be removed before the casket was lowered into the grave.

Monsignor Croce and Father Salvatore were both there. Monsignor Croce said prayers in Italian and Father Salvatore finished the prayers in English. We were still not used to priests speaking English at masses and services. It had only been a year since the mass started to be held in English. Monsignor refused to go along with it, so instead of saying the mass in Latin, he switched to Italian. When the prayers were finished, the pall bearers lowered the casket into the grave, and then we each passed by with a flower and let the flower, a daffodil, drop into the grave. We walked by and paid our last respects to Mary, her brother Giuliano, and Larry and his sister Rosemary. Franky, his father Mike, and other family members were also in the line. Ma had helped Mary to get everything ready for the lunch that she would be giving in the Arcobaleno homestead where she had grown up. Her father had built the house with the help of my Nonno Berto and Nonno Nikola, Tony's Nonno, Antonio Malatesta, and most of the other men on The Orchard. That's where everyone was going now that the service at the grave was finished.

Nonno Berto and Zio Al went ahead of us. We were close to the car when I heard Ma say, "Hello, Helen." I turned and saw Tony with his mother, his sisters Annie and Connie, and a boy who I guessed was their younger brother, Charlie. They all must have been way in the back because I had not seen them before this. We walked over to them. They were standing near the Malatesta gravestone where Tony's father was buried. There were two stones with the name Malatesta, a large one and a smaller one. In front of the smaller one there were roses, tulips, and other flowers planted in the ground, and they were blooming. In front of the larger stone there was a pot with geraniums. I could see that the smaller stone was Ricco's.

"Hi, Gina, Carmy," said Helen. "It's nice to see you. You know Anna and Anthony. Contessa and Celeste have grown since you saw them last."

"I wouldn't have recognized them," said Pa.

"They answer to Connie and Charlie," said Tony, and he was given sneers from his younger siblings for his attempt at humor. Connie wore a simple, black skirt and a fitted white blouse buttoned to the neck with short sleeves. She looked at me and smiled and I smiled back.

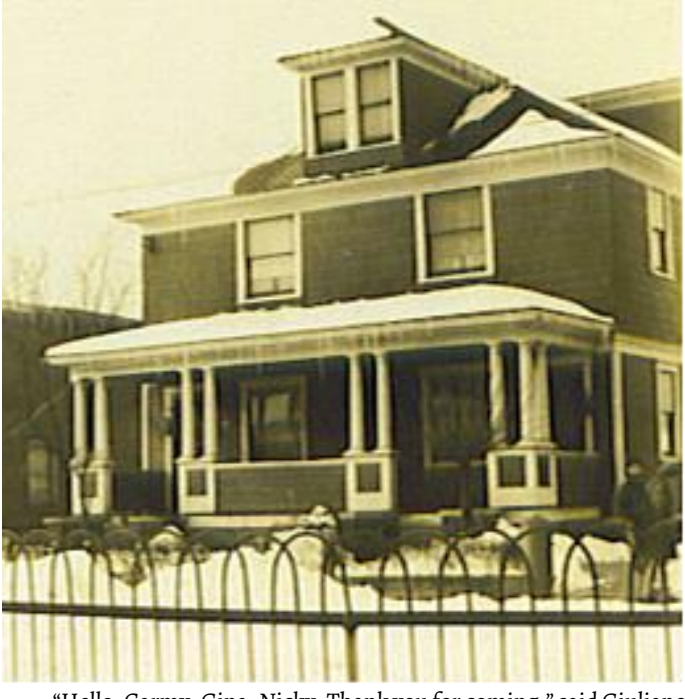
"This is Nickolas," said Ma, breaking the spell that had come over me. "He's also grown since you last saw him. Are you all going over to the Arcobaleno's?"

"All except me," replied Annie. "I have a shift at the restaurant."

"Well, let's all get over there and we can talk more then," said Ma. "It's been too long since we last met, Helen."

There were cars parked on both sides of Orchard Street almost to Main Street. We pulled into our driveway and walked up to the Arcobaleno homestead. All the houses on the street are different. The older ones, like ours that Nonno Berto built, and the Arcobaleno's, are two storeys and side-by-side duplexes. Nonno Nicco and Nonna Jenny decided not to build a duplex but a two-storey, single-family house with four bedrooms. The Arcobaleno's house, where we were now, has big dormers on four sides of the attic with windows that can be opened according to the prevailing winds to cure the *prosciutti* that Renzo made every year when he slaughtered their pig. Stretching across the entire front of the house is a wide porch with triple columns at the corners and double columns framing each of the two entries. This was where the older men on the street used to gather on summer evenings. When they had been there for a few hours, the cloud of Parodi cigar and pipe tobacco smoke filled the air on the porch. Anyone passing by would think that there was a fire smoldering under the porch's floorboards. Most of the older men on The Orchard who are still alive gave up smoking many years ago.

Mary's brother, Giuliano, has lived on the other side of the duplex house since he married Adele. He was standing at the bottom of the stairs leading to his side of the house welcoming everyone in. His son, Larry, was with him. Larry and his sister Rosemary are married to people they met at college who are not from the area. They both live out of town, Larry in Philadelphia, and Rosemary in Boston.



"Hello, Carmy, Gina, Nicky. Thank you for coming," said Giuliano, welcoming us.

"Zia Rosa was like a real aunt to us, more like a second mother," said Ma. "We are going to miss her."

Helen, Tony, Connie, and Charlie were right behind us, but Giuliano had not greeted them. It was Larry who welcomed Helen. We walked up the stairs and into the house. Adele was in the living room and directed us to the table in the dining room that was filled with food. We made our plates and walked through the kitchen and out the back

where there were folding tables and chairs. Ma had managed to put Helen between her and Pa when they came to Adele.

"Hello Gina, Carmy," said Adele.

"Hello Adele. You remember Helen Malatesta."

"Hello, Adele," said Helen. "We are sorry for your loss."

"Hello, Helen. Thank you for coming."

Maybe I was imagining things, but there seemed to be a coolness in Adele's voice. Nonno's explanation of why all the women turned against Helen came back to me. Is it really possible that it was just jealousy that caused them to do it? Ricco comes back from the War a changed man, then leaves his family for another war and gets killed. And then all the women in the neighborhood turn against his wife. Could there be something more? Maybe they blame her for what happened to Ricco, but why didn't Ma feel the same way? I think there's something they didn't tell me.

Adele turned to direct us all toward the table in the dining room and then greeted the next guests who were just coming in. The table in the dining room and in the kitchen were filled to the edges with food that had been prepared by all the neighbors on The Orchard. Lasagna and eggplant parmigiana were two favorites for the gatherings after a burial. I think I've been to one in almost every house on the street, including our own with Nonna Selia two years ago. Everybody is expected to laugh and have a good time, except the husband or wife or children of the person who has died. I looked for Ma's stuffed peppers and cheese pie. I got the last peppers and the last piece of pie. There was a lot of competition for the favorites.

Mom stayed close to Helen, and we all went to the tables in the back yard together. I had been here many times on visits with my parents for birthdays and anniversary parties. Giuliano continued with his father's main hobby, his very large vegetable garden that took up a third of the big back yard. The apple, peach, and cherry trees were already showing the early stages of what would be a bountiful harvest. The

chicken coop, pigeon coop and pig sty that were there when I was very young were all gone.

Tony sat next to his mother across the table from me, Ma sat next to her, and Nonno sat next to Ma. Connie sat next to me, squishing herself into the space that Charlie had thought was his. Charlie was next to her, then Pa, then Zio.

"What will you do after the summer, Nicky?" asked Helen, opening the table conversation. "Are you going to college?"

"I didn't apply. My grades and SAT scores weren't good enough. I plan on joining the Air Force if I pass my physical."

"Why don't you become a Quaker and apply for a conscientious objector deferment?" offered Connie.

"Contessa!" admonished Helen.

"She's a pacifist," added Charlie.

"Portobello tried that," said Zio, "but since there weren't any Quaker meeting houses in the area, he didn't get the deferment. But he never made it out of the States because he kept washing out of boot camp."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"He moved to California after the War and that was the last anybody heard of him."

"Didn't I see Contessa's and Celeste's names on the honor roll list?" said Ma, changing the subject.

"They like school," said Helen.

"We get a lot of help with our homework from Anthony and Anna," said Charlie. "Anna's real good in science, and Anthony's great in history and math."

"Franky and I are learning about your brother's hidden talents. We're getting some history lessons from the walking encyclopedia at the lumber yard on our breaks."

I could see a trace of a blush on Tony's weather-beaten face. There was a hint of a smile. His mother put her hand under the table on his hand. It was quiet for a while.

Franky and Donna were suddenly at our table.

"Thank you all for coming," said Franky. "This is Donna Keegan."

"I loved to be with Franky's grandmother," said Donna. "She always made me feel like I was part of the family. I could see why Franky was so devoted to her."

"We all felt the same way growing up," said Ma. "She was the queen bee on The Orchard, and everybody loved her."

"I hope Uncle Giuliano finds a nice couple to rent the other half of the house," said Franky.

"I think he's working on getting one of the kids back home," said Pa. "I have a feeling that isn't going to happen."

"Everybody thinks the grass is greener in Philly or New York or out in California," said Ma. "I don't think I'd ever get to sleep with all the sirens blasting in Manhattan or thinking that an earthquake could happen at any minute in San Francisco. It's nice and quiet here, and we don't have tornados or earthquakes."

"We do get hurricanes," offered Helen. "We have some experience with that."

"Yes, you do," said Pa, "and I hope we don't get another one of those hundred-year floods for another hundred years."

It always seems like everybody knows when it's time to leave. People start getting up and shaking hands or kissing, and then there is a crowd around the family members of the person who has died. Chairs

are suddenly empty, and then you realize it's time for you to leave as well.

"I'll stay with Adele to help with the cleaning up. Helen, we would like it if you and your family would come and visit with us. I'll call you tomorrow if that's alright."

"That would be nice, Gina."

We left Ma and all of us walked to Helen's car. Helen, Charlie, and Connie got in and Tony slid into the driver's seat. We stood on the curb, ready to wave them off. I could hear the click of the starter, but the engine didn't turn over. He tried a few more times, but nothing happened.

"Why don't you take my car and I'll check it out tomorrow," offered Zio. "It's probably just the battery."

"Are you sure, Al?" asked Helen. "I don't want to leave you without your car."

"Don't worry about that, Helen. I'll have it fixed up in no time and drive it over to your place."

"Thank you, Al. That is really generous of you."

"I'll walk home, Ma," said Connie. "Nicky will walk me, won't you Nicky?"

How did she know that I was thinking I'd like to walk her home and have a chance to talk to her? "Sure. It's a good night for a walk."

We all walked further down the street to our house, and Zio handed the keys to Tony. Helen, Tony, and Charlie got into the car and drove off. Ma, Pa, Zio, and Nonno walked up the stairs to the porch as Connie and I continued down Orchard Street to Main Street. We walked without talking for a short while, and then I said: "Do you have a steady boyfriend?"

"Not yet."

"Do you mean you have a boyfriend, but you haven't agreed to go steady, or you don't have a boyfriend?"

"Both."

"Are you trying to be mysterious?"

"No. I want to have a boyfriend and I would like to go steady with him, but since we're just talking for the first time, we haven't gotten that far yet."

I stopped walking. She walked a few more steps and turned around. She was smiling. "Have I scared you off already?"

"I have a strong feeling that you have a mind of your own and that I should be scared off. Let's see how I feel when we get to your house." She didn't stop smiling while she walked back and put her hand in mine as we started walking again.

"Pa was killed in Korea. You know that. That's why I don't want anyone to fight in any more wars, especially Tony or Charlie or you. But if we did decide to go steady and you do have to go to Vietnam, I will write to you every day and I will be here waiting for you when you come home."

"Ma and Pa kept all the letters they wrote to each other when Pa was in the War. They both say they haven't decided whether they're going to burn them before they die or let me read them. I guess they're pretty steamy. I don't think kids ever believe their parents had sex. We're all like Jesus with a mother who gave birth without it."

"I think it's just boys who feel that way about their mothers. Why do you want to join the Air Force?"

"I really want to go to college and study mechanical engineering. I want to design machines. But if I can't get into college, I want to get a good job, and I know that being an airplane mechanic is a good-paying job. I could work at Avoca and live on The Orchard."

"You don't want to go and live in a big city or live up in Darlton and join a country club?"

"Is that what you would like?"

"I'm not sure what I want to do. I know I don't want to be a teacher or a nurse or a secretary or a waitress or a store clerk or a seamstress or any of the jobs that women are supposed to do. I think I'd like to become a lawyer, help to write laws that people have to follow and cannot ignore, and then become a judge to help to make sure that those people who don't follow the laws are punished. There are too many people who mess up other people's lives and just keep in doing it."

"That's pretty ambitious, but even though we just met, I have a feeling that if you put your mind to it, you could do it."

"You do? How would you feel if you were married to a Supreme Court judge?"

"Proud, I guess. I'm not yet sure how I would feel about being married to anyone, so adding in the Supreme Court judge thing piles on a lot more uncertainty. Do you really think about all this stuff?"

"Yes. When Tony came home and told me you would be working with him, I figured I would be able to meet you this summer, before you took off for wherever boys take off after high school. I decided that I might as well come on your first day of work."

"You made the cookies so you could come over and we could meet?"

"Yes. And then I thought if we met, you might like me because I like you so much…"

"Wait! How do you know you like me?"

"I just do. I always have, ever since you helped your father and uncle move us from The Orchard."

"You were just a little kid."

"So were you. Now we're bigger and I haven't changed my mind."

We were at Connie's house. We were still holding hands. I didn't see Tony sitting on the porch.

"Looks like you two got to know each other real well on that walk," he said from out of the shadows.

Connie wouldn't let go of my hand until we walked up the stairs to the porch. Helen came through the screen door. "Thank you for walking Contessa home. Did you manage to get a word into the conversation? My daughter loves to talk, although she usually has interesting things to say."

"We weren't quite finished talking, so I thought I would come by tomorrow so we could continue," I said, trying to hold a poker face. I didn't succeed. Connie and I both laughed. Then Helen said, "Your mom just called and asked us to come over after church tomorrow for dinner, so I guess you can talk then."

The screen door opened again, seemingly by itself, and then a beagle was hopping up to Connie who was giving him all the attention he clearly desired.

"This is Benjamin. We call him Benjy and he seems to like that more," said Connie.

"His full name is Benjamin Franklin Malatesta. Officially, he is assigned to the entire family, but since Contessa spoils him rotten, he pretty much ignores the rest of us."

"He loves everyone equally," added Connie, but clearly enjoyed being their pet's pet.

The next day, Helen, Annie, Tony, Connie, and Charlie arrived at our house in their car with another passenger, Zio Al. He had found the problem with Helen's car the evening before. It was a frayed wire touching the frame that was shorting the electrical system. He drove over after they had come back from church, and they all came to the house together. Charlie was carrying something which turned out to be a lemon meringue pie, my absolute favorite dessert. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, so we decided to set up a table outside in the shade of Nonno's prize cherry tree that had started as a seed forty years ago. It was now as tall as the house. I'll be up at the top with the big ladder in a few weeks. Ma has convinced Nonno that he needs to stay closer to the ground, but he didn't give up without a fight.

Nonno's vegetable garden was already producing more lettuce, spinach, beans and peas, cucumbers, zucchini, eggplant, and potatoes than we could eat, so he made the rounds of the neighbors with his bounty in a wheelbarrow. The corn was waist high. It would be a month before we would have corn on the cob with dinner every night. I could eat it for breakfast and lunch as well. Nonno's tomatoes were always the best, whether we ate them fresh or canned in the sauce. He has a secret fertilizer that he uses, and he has promised that it will be given to me when he dies. He said it was passed on to him by his grandfather, and it has been in the Serra family forever. He couldn't say how long 'forever' was, but it was a long time. I have to pass it on to my grandson, he told me. "What happens if I don't have a grandson?" I asked him. "Make sure you do," he said. "And once you have the recipe, you have to use it, otherwise it loses its magic."

Ten of us sat on metal folding chairs around the two metal folding tables that Pa kept just for these occasions and which Ma covered with her red and white checkered plastic tablecloth. Ma sat at one end of what was now one, long table, closest to the back door and the kitchen. Pa sat at the other end. Ma told everyone that it was going to be boy-girl-boy seating, but she started by telling Helen that she would sit next to her on one side and Zio Al would sit next to her on her right. Then, next to Helen, came Charlie, Annie, and Tony. Next to Zio came Connie. As I was about to take the chair next to Connie, Nonno stepped in and sat down first. Connie and I looked at each other and smiled, thinking the same thing: we'll have to wait until dinner is over to continue the conversation we started the day before.

"I hear you bagged a nice six-point buck on West Mountain last season, Tony," said Pa.

"I was lucky. He was only fifty yards away when he popped out of the woods. Ma's been cooking it every way she knows how. We ate the last piece only a couple of weeks ago."

"Nicky hasn't seen one in range since he started coming out with us, but one day he'll have his chance."

"I go mainly for the hot dogs. They always taste better when they're grilled over a fire," I said.

Tony hasn't had a father or grandmothers or grandfathers while he was growing up. I wonder what happened with Helen's parents and with her whole family. I can't imagine growing up without a father. Pa doesn't talk that much, but I can see what he does and how he does it. Same with Nonno and Zio. I'm lucky because they're good examples for me. Ma and Pa are friends. It was the same with Nonno Berto and Nonna Selia. You could see they really liked each other and enjoyed being together. Connie and Charlie idolize Tony, even though he's close to them in age. He had to grow up quickly. Helen has had to be both mother and father to all of them. There should be medals for mothers. If there were, Helen and Ma would be loaded with them.

After dinner, Connie and I walked again from The Orchard to her house. "I like your Uncle Al," she said as we started down the street. "He has such a kind way of being. I've never seen Ma look like she looks when they are talking to each other."

"Yeah, I noticed. Do you speak Italian?"

"No, only Annie. She had her Nonna and Nonno around her all the time. She kept speaking Italian with Ma, and now she uses it a lot in the restaurant."

"I wonder what my nonno was telling her that made her laugh so much."

"She told me. He was telling her stories about herself, when she was little, during the war when they lived on The Orchard."

We held hands as we walked. We took a few detours to make the walk longer. By the time we reached the steps leading up to the porch, where Tony was sitting as if he hadn't left from the evening before, we were going steady. Even though I knew it was Connie's idea and that it was she who had made the proposal, I popped the question. Her answer was to turn, put her arms over my shoulders and give me a kiss. Not just a peck, but a real smacker. Right there on the sidewalk along Main

Street. A car passing by tooted its horn. I had no idea where this train was going, but I had happily hopped on board. As we neared the house, Benjy ran out to greet us. He hopped up on me after he had welcomed Connie. "I told him all about you last night," she said. On the porch along with Tony were Helen and Zio Al. They were all smiling.

It was Saturday, the 18th of July, and we went to the annual Guado family clambake at Lake Sterling. All the employees of both the lumberyard and the construction company are invited, along with their families and dates. It's mainly for the construction company workers because there are so few of us working in the lumberyard. It didn't stop Johnny from setting up a horseshoe challenge every year pitting a four-man team from the lumberyard against an equal number from the construction gang. For the entire week before the clambake, we practiced on a horseshoe pitch behind the stacks. Johnny's a pro. Tony's almost as good. Franky's size is an advantage. I didn't want to embarrass the team, so I got in some extra practice in the field behind the garage with Nonno offering tips.

I picked up Tony and Connie. This was going to be our first public date. Annie would be there as well. All the food was catered by Donnatelli's, and Annie was in charge of getting everything set up. Her helper was her new boyfriend, Gaitano Donnatelli. Everyone calls him Guy. He's a real Italian. He came over in the spring from a town near Naples. Annie says it's right at the foot of the volcano Vesuvius, something Greco. His grandfather and Guido are first cousins. Annie says he came to learn the restaurant business and to get better in English, and his plan is to stay for a year and then go back to Italy and start a restaurant in his town which gets plenty of tourists. He and Annie hit it off right from the start and now they're a couple. What happens next is anyone's guess.

Lake Sterling was only a half-hour's drive from The Orchard. Back then, it was more of a small pond than a lake, and four feet at its deepest part. It was man-made by damming up the creek. The water in the pond

was clean and cool because it was fed by a creek that starts in an underground spring. The dam was removed in the '80s, and the clambake pavilion disappeared with it. The creek is still there. It flows into the river a couple of miles downstream from what was the Malatesta homestead. The State Fish and Game Commission stocks it twice a year with brown trout, once in the spring and again in the fall. It's posted for spinning and fly fishing only, but everybody uses worms and fish eggs, and nobody pays attention to the posted limit of two fish. It's usually fished out a week after they put the fish in. I haven't caught a fish there in over twenty years, but I haven't given up trying.

As we approached Lake Sterling that early evening in the summer of '65, we could see the smoke from the charcoal grills where there were sure to be sausages and peppers roasting to serve as sides to the main event, clams and corn on the cob. I parked the car, and we walked toward the picnic area. We went right to the big open tent where Annie and Guy were doing the cooking duties while a crew of helpers were scurrying about to set up the tables where we would pick up our plates of food. There is always plenty of beer, but they're real strict at these types of events not to serve any alcohol to minors. Tony said he would bring some brews and keep them in a cooler bag he brought along, but I don't drink anything except watered-down wine at the table, and Connie doesn't even do that, so Tony's going to have them all to himself.

"Do you like clams, Nicky?" asked Connie as we walked toward the tent. When she said my name, it made me feel happy. There was something special about hearing her say 'Nicky', like she made the name up just for me.

I laughed. "Honestly, not really. I mean they don't really taste of anything."

"I don't chew them," said Connie. "They stick in between my teeth, and I can't get them out. So, I just swallow them, and I usually don't take very many."

"More for us, Sis. I hear that's the way you're supposed to eat oysters," added Tony, "but it's going to be a month of Sundays before I ever get to taste one of them."

Franky and Donna were sitting at a picnic table close to the food tent. Franky caught site of us and stood up to call us over. Johnny and his wife, Mrs. Grozinski to her students and Paulette to her family and friends, were headed toward the table as well. Connie had told me that she had met Johnny many times when she came by the yard to meet Tony on her way home from school, and Tony had taken her to last year's clambake. Connie met Franky after she and I had started going steady, when, as she said, she was "just passing by" on her way to or from town. "Hello Mrs. Grozinski," said Connie. "I have two dates this year."

"Hello Constance, Nickolas, Anthony. It's nice to see you all again."

"Hi, Mrs. Grozinski," I said.

"Hello, Mrs. Grozinski," added Tony.

"Franky, dis is my wife, Paulette," said Johnny.

"Hello, Mrs. Grozinski, this is Donna Keegan," said Franky.

"Hello, Mrs. Grozinski, Johnny," said Donna. "I'm pleased to meet you both. I've been looking forward to meeting you, Johnny, after all the nice things Franky has told me about you."

"You must be thinking about another Johnny 'cause I'm sure Franky couldn't have told you any good things about our boss," joked Tony.

One of the construction company workers came by just then, Louie Rosato. "Hey, Johnny. You guys ready to take a shellacking from the champs?"

"You got lucky last year, Louie," replied Johnny, "but skill and luck is on our side this time. The trophy will be returning to its rightful place after we show yuz how to throw the horseshoes."

"We'll see. Time to eat."

Two lines were already forming at the food tent. Big Jim was calling everyone to come and get it. We started to move to the line where Annie was serving, but it was twice as long as the one with her boyfriend Guy. I guess he's gotten used to all the attention Annie attracts with her great looks. True to her word, Connie took only a half-a-dozen clams. Rather than going back for sausage and peppers like everyone else, she took two of each with her first helping along with an ear of corn. Back at the table, Connie sat between me and Tony, and across the table were Johnny and Paulette. Big Jim and his wife Filice, and Livia and her husband Danny joined us. Introductions started again, and then we got back to eating. We were doing more eating than talking, and then Paulette broke the silence, speaking directly to Tony.

"Anthony, my offer still stands. Have you given any more thought to it?"

He didn't answer right away, then said: "I have, Mrs. Grozinski, but with the draft coming up and my work, I haven't made any decisions to take you up on it. I talked it over with Ma, and she thinks it would be a good idea."

"If your mother wants to discuss it with me, just let me know through Johnny and I will give her a call."

"I will. Thank you."

Except for Connie and me, no one else had heard the conversation. There was too much loud talk at both ends of the table, and Johnny was starting the countdown to the tournament by letting everyone know that if we wanted another helping of food, the time to do it was now.

Six-thirty was the start time for the horseshoe tournament. It was hot and muggy with not even the slightest breeze. The sun popped in and out from behind puffy clouds that looked like they could hold some thunder and lightning for a late-night natural fireworks display. A few mosquitos danced around us, and if the wind didn't pick up, they would be out in numbers

after the sun disappeared. It wasn't until just after seven that the first clinks of the horseshoes were heard. There were two pits with two from each side at each pitch. First to 21 or over wins the round, and first team to win three rounds wins the championship.

It wasn't for lack of support that we lost. I could see why Donna was captain of the cheerleaders, and Connie learned quickly. Paulette was no slouch, either. By the time we reached the last round I think we had most if not all the women there cheering for us. There would be discussions about loyalties when they returned home that evening. Big Jim handed the trophy to Mike and gave the winning team gold-looking medals on blue ribbons which they put around their necks. But then, to Franky's and my surprise, he brought out four more medals, silver-looking ones on yellow ribbons, and gave them to us. "I was hoping for gold this year to go with my two silvers," said Tony.

It was half-past eight when all the horseshoe ceremonies were over. Big Jim had told everybody that we could stay until 10:00, then they closed the gate to the park. Johnny and Paulette said their goodbyes, and about half of the construction workers and their wives headed for their cars. I asked Connie if she felt like staying, and she said she told Annie she would help with the cleanup, so I pitched in as well. Franky and Donna did the same. Tony disappeared and we figured he was having a beer or two from the stash he had brought along with him. When we were done and had everything packed for Annie and Guy to take back to the restaurant, Franky and Donna said they were going down to the pond to watch the sun set, and Connie and I sat together, side by side, at one of the tables and waited for Annie and Guy to join us.

"I don't want to pry into Anthony's business, but do you know what offer Mrs. Grozinski had for him? Tell me if I'm being too nosy."

"You're not because I know you're his friend. He's smart. You know that, right?"

"He's the smartest person I know except for his younger sister." I got a kiss for that compliment, and a big smile.

"Well, Mrs. Grozinski thinks the reason he wasn't able to do well in school is because he has something called dyslexia."

"What's that?"

"It's a problem with the brain that makes it hard to read and spell. I looked the word up in our dictionary and it wasn't even there. I finally found a book at the central library in the city that had information about it. It can't be cured, at least not yet, but I read that there are things medical scientists are learning about it which can help people who have it work around the problem."

"So that's why he reads magazines with lots of pictures," I said. "Now I understand all his memory tricks. He has come up with some amazing ideas, like remembering dates. What does Mrs. Grozinski want him to do?"

"They're doing research at the University, and she thinks they would be able to test Anthony to see if he has dyslexia, and if he does, then do things that would help him. They need him to be there full-time for three months. He doesn't think they can do anything more for him than he's already done for himself, and maybe he's right. Ma wants him to do it, but there's the money thing."

"What does Mrs. Grozinski have to do with the research?"

"Maybe you've wondered why a real smart woman like Mrs. Grozinski, college educated and a teacher, would be married to someone doing pretty much what Tony is doing, and has been doing that for a dozen years."

"I have to admit that the thought did cross my mind, but then I saw how smart Johnny is and I figured she and Johnny might have a lot of other things in common than their work."

"Well, Johnny has dyslexia. Mrs. Grozinski told Anthony that. He's taken short treatments with the team at the University to help him with reading, she said. Johnny and Anthony have talked a lot about it. Johnny's started taking high school equivalent courses so he can get a high school degree. It's such a coincidence that Anthony would end up

working with someone who has the same problem as he does. I really want him to do it, not because I think he needs it with reading and spelling, but because it will make him feel so much better about himself. He's his biggest critic."

Just then, Franky and Donna returned with Tony, and they all sat down at the table with us. Within a few minutes we were joined by Annie and Guy. When they sat down, Franky opened the conversation with a question to Guy.

"Guy, how come you don't have an Italian accent when you speak English? I have family who've been here for fifty years who I have trouble understanding."

"Annie said she would subtract one kiss for every 'A' I add to the end of a word that doesn't have one in English."

I looked at Connie with a smile. She smiled back. I'm sure she read my thoughts: I'll have to remember that line.

"He's a real charmer, isn't he?" said Annie. "I asked him the same question when we first met, and he gave me the true answer."

"Which is…?" I asked.

"Bing Crosby," answered Guy.

"He taught you English?" joked Franky.

"You could say that. Do you want to hear the whole story? Annie, Tony, and Connie have already heard it."

"It's a good one, so if you don't finish before we have to clear out, we can continue at the restaurant," suggested Annie.

"Okay. I had just turned five on the 4th of September 1943. That was the day after the Allies landed by boat in Salerno, in Calabria south of Napoli. They had captured Sicilia, what you call Sicily, from the Italians and Germans in six weeks after they landed there in July. They started moving up the coast. I have faint memories of that, but what I do remember very well is my nonno coming in while we were eating

breakfast late in September, yelling at the top of his lungs "We're going to kill all the Nazis and fascists". *Uccideremo tutti i nazisti e i fascisti*. The Italian resistance and the Napolitani started fighting the Germans. They managed to stop the German plans to put as many people as possible on trains out of Napoli and then blow the city up. They held off the Germans until the Allies got there on the first of October. It was called *quattro giornate di Napoli*, the four days of Naples.

"Then the radio started playing a song which was aimed mainly at the Allied soldiers, but if you had a radio, you heard it too. 'I'll Be Home for Christmas' by Bing Crosby. I read later that he had released it on October 1st. You must have heard it. It's still playing in Italy every Christmas."

Then Guy sang the first verse, and I swear he sounded just like Bing Crosby.

I'll be home for Christmas,
You can plan on me.
Please have snow and mistletoe,
And presents on the tree.

"I learned it by heart, the whole song, and I tried to sound just like Bing Crosby, which was pretty comical for a five-year-old. Every Christmas, until he died when I was eighteen, Nonno Checco, my mother's father, would ask me to sing the song on Christmas Eve, before we ate the traditional dinner of fish and seafood. But I didn't stop with the Christmas song. Pappa found a Bing Crosby record and we put it on the Victrola every day until the war was over and I learned every one of the songs by heart. No added 'A's at the ends of words."

"Did you have any idea what the words to the songs meant when you were singing them?" asked Donna.

"Not in the least. We've always dubbed our movies and TV programs, rather than having subtitles, so it wasn't possible to put the words together with simultaneous Italian translations. We didn't have English in our schools either, at least not in the village where I grew up. Pappa found a Berlitz book, Italian to English. I read it faithfully every

day and went to the library in town whenever I could to read the few American and English magazines and newspapers. It wasn't the real library. That had been blown up by the Allies along with all the German soldiers who were using it as a hideout. We had a temporary library in the basement of our church. Gradually, I could put sentences together, but I already had the pronunciation."

"What was it like after the war," asked Donna. "If the library was destroyed, there must have been other buildings and businesses that were bombed. How did people live and make a living? Were you able to go to school?"

"The time after the war was hard. We lived on food packages that came from America. We were lucky because we had a large garden behind our house where we could grow vegetables and keep a pig and chickens. But the hardest years were the ones when we were being bombed, first by the Allies and then the Germans. Napoli was an important city. It had been the capital of its own country with its own king until that *stronzo* Garibaldi sent by the pipsqueak, tin horn king from Torino made our kingdom part of what became Italy. But that's too long a story to tell here. A lot of people here either don't know or have forgotten that Italy was the enemy of America and the Allies when the war started. Mussolini declared war against America a day before Hitler. But we were as bad in the second war as we were in the first. Italy's official government signed papers on the 8th of September 1943 surrendering to the Allies. That made us German enemies. We were close enough to Napoli to get a stray bomb, and you never knew when one was going to hit. Every time we heard the sirens, we ran down into the cellar Nonno made for keeping the wine and drying the meats."

"I thought there was the Marshall Plan that helped the countries in Europe after the war," said Franky.

"It took three years for that to start. It helped a lot, but the same politicians that got the country into trouble in the 20s were still there after the war, and they were fighting over the same thing. Was Italy going to be a Communist country and become part of the Soviet Union's

club, or was it going to try to become a liberal, democratic country and stay connected to the United States and Great Britain? That question is still not answered even today. One thing is for certain. The part of Italy south of Rome is treated exactly the same way as it's been treated since we were forced to be part of the country of Italy, during Risorgimento. This is what the Northerners called it, the reunification of Italy, like when it was one country during Roman times. We called it an invasion by Piedmontese enemy forces, led by Garibaldi, and a military defeat and capitulation by the last king of the Kingdom of Napoli and Sicilia, Francis II."

"So, what's happening now in Italy?" asked Connie.

"The Communists and the mafia and the rich and the leftover fascists and the Church are all fighting each other over who will tell the rest of us what we should do and think. The American government is telling the Italian government that it can do anything it wants except turn the country over to the Communists. And now we're part of what they call the Common Market where the Germans, who lost the last two wars, want to tell us what we can buy and from whom. If you were writing a book of fiction, you couldn't make up a story as crazy as what's going on in Italy now."

"And you want to go back there and start a restaurant!" exclaimed Tony.

"There's a lot of good things about Italy. I've just talked about the bad stuff. You can have a good life if you stay out of the way of the bad guys."

"But you live next to a volcano!" continued Tony. "It erupted in 1944 when the Americans were there."

"Torre del Greco is on the side of Monte Visuvio where the lava doesn't fall, at least so far. Anyway, the volcano is what will attract all the visitors to my restaurant, and if I make really good food, they'll tell all their friends that they have to eat there when they visit."

I think Connie and Tony were wondering the same thing as I was. Is Annie going to be part of this plan? She was smiling as Guy was talking, and he kept looking over at her the whole time. My guess then was that she had already bought in. But the summer wasn't over, and Annie was about to call in a debt that had not been paid.

"Let's have a coffee," said Guy as soon as Annie came into the kitchen to start her shift.

"Okay. It doesn't look like we have too many guests waiting. What's up?"

"I made some espresso. I'll bring it right out. Take our usual table at the back."

"Something's on your mind, my sweet, so out with it," said Annie as Guy poured the coffee.

"If I saw back home in Italy what I saw a couple of hours ago here, I'd probably be dead now. Either Lucca's a complete *ciuccio* or he thinks I'm one. Maybe he's just waiting for me to leave the restaurant so that he doesn't mess it up with blood all over the place. So, if I'm a *cavadere* by the end of today, you'll know why."

"What did you see?"

"I was in the men's room, standing at the sink, washing my hands, and Lucca comes out of one of the stalls buttoning his shirt. I saw him in the mirror. His shirt was still open, and I saw a wire and tape. He was looking down and as soon as I saw him start to look up, I bent over the bowl and washed my face. He went to the sink next to me and started to put on his tie. I dried my face with a paper towel and left without saying anything."

"I don't think he's taping his conversations with his pals so he can write his memoirs. He's talking to the FBI. It started about six months ago, and I figured it out purely by chance when I saw the guy he was having a lot of lunches with at the restaurant come out of the federal

building downtown. I had gone there to get some tax forms. That's where the FBI have their office. Lucca's family's been part of the mafia since the thirties. He's responsible for my father's death."

"I thought your father was killed in the Korean War."

"He was, but he went there because of something that happened when he was in the Second World War. Ma doesn't think I know this because she has never mentioned it to me, but I was old enough to understand what they were saying when Pa came back from the war. Somebody had written to Pa during the war that said Ma was fooling around with Lucca. It was a lie. I know that too because I heard Ma talking with her best friend, Gina Fabriano, Nicky's mother, when it happened and then after the war. Pa wouldn't believe her, and he drank and gambled and finally left and went to Korea. It wasn't enough for him to leave. He had to go someplace where he could get killed. That's what he did."

"How can you be in the same room with that *chiavica*?"

"Waiting for this moment."

"*Inta a scurdata*," we say in Napoli. It means it's time for righting a wrong.

"Exactly. And if the Feds get him out, hide him somewhere, and change his identity, he wins. We can't let anyone know what we know. We're a threat to both sides. We have to figure out how to tell his gang so that they take care of him, but we don't know if any of them are also talking. Why don't you go and visit your cousin in Brooklyn, just in case. I'll call Anthony and have him pick you up at the back door and take you to the train station."

"No. If they can't find me, they might take you. I'm staying put."

"I think God has already answered one of my prayers when he sent you here."

During our morning coffee break, Tony told everyone what had happened the night before. I already knew the story because I saw it first-hand. The explosion had woken us up at around midnight. We all went outside onto the porch in our pajamas and saw the flames and smoke rising into the air at the southern end of the borough. Pa, Zio and I had the same thought at the same time. "That's close to the Malatesta's," said Zio. Pa and I ran into the house to put on our clothes. Zio was already dressed. Then we drove two cars toward the Malatesta house. I drove with Pa. "Maybe their car won't work," said Pa. We could feel the heat when we drove up to the house. The fire trucks were already at the site of the fire, which was the fenced-in area around the shack. A squad car was parked in front of the steps. There was a heavy smell of chemicals in the air as we ran up the stairs. Two policemen came out of the house followed by Helen and the whole family.

"Where are you going, Tommy?" asked Pa. Tommy Spagliotti was one of Pa's oldest friends.

"To the station," answered Tommy. "It's too dangerous for them to stay here."

"Come with us, Helen," said Pa. "It will be more comfortable than a jail cell."

"We weren't thinking of putting them in a cell," laughed Tommy, "but it's up to Helen where she wants the family to go."

"Thank you, Tommy, for your care. We'll go to the Fabrianos."

They all got into Helen's car, including Benjy, of course, with Tony at the wheel and followed us home. Ma had already brewed coffee and had brought out her store of cookies that she keeps in large tins on a shelf along the stairs down to the cellar. Nonno was on the porch waiting for us when we parked the cars and walked up the stairs. We sat in our living room for an hour or so and talked about what had happened and what might happen now. Tony told us what he saw, just like he was about to tell us now in the basement at the lumberyard. Then Helen and Connie went up to my bedroom and Annie took the extra bedroom. Nonno had offered his spare rooms, but they had no bed clothes and

hadn't been used since Nonna died. Charlie spread out on the couch and covered himself with the afghan that was always on the back of the couch waiting for someone who needed a nap. Tony got Pa's sleeping bag and I curled up in mine. I fell asleep thinking of Connie sleeping in my bed.

We all woke up around seven. I don't think Ma slept at all. She had made breakfast for everyone. Eggs, pancakes, bacon, Nonno's dried sausage, and her freshly made bread toasted. I thought, here they were, a family that had been forced out of their home in the middle of the night with no idea when they would be able to go back, sleeping a few hours in unfamiliar beds, and it felt like the most natural thing in the world for us to be together enjoying breakfast. Helen, Annie, and Connie were all bright and chippy, just like Ma. Pa and I and Nonno are all slow-moving in the morning, not grumpy, just slow and quiet. Tony and Charlie were definitely on the slow and quiet side of the scale as well. "If you're wondering, Nicky, Connie's always like this in the morning. It's no act."

Pa turned the radio on, and first up on the 7:30 news was the blast. They said the property was owned by Enzo Luccatella, who couldn't be reached for comment. They were interviewing the police chief, Hank Green, who wouldn't speculate on whether it was an accident or if it had been arson. After breakfast, Tony and I walked to the lumberyard, Pa and Zio drove to the shop, and Ma, Helen, Annie, Connie, and Charlie drove to the police station in Helen's car to find out when they could go back to the house. Ma, Helen, and Annie were on their one-week vacation from the dress factories where they worked, so they didn't have to worry about calling in sick.

"We'll drive by the lumberyard when we come back from the station, Anthony," said Helen.

When we got to the yard, Johnny met us and said we were having an early coffee break. Everyone was in the basement. When we got down there, we saw that Paulie was there too.

"Okay, Tony, tell us what you saw," said Big Jim.

"The blast shook the whole house," began Tony. "We're only a hundred yards away from where the blast happened, and now the worse-kept secret in the Borough is not a secret anymore."

"I guess I don't count 'cause I don't live in the Borough," interrupted Franky. "I suppose I'll be reading about it in the papers when I get home."

"One of our industrious residents, Enzo Luccatella, owns the property where the explosion happened," said Jim. "He's been moving stuff in and out of that site for years. We guess it was drugs and stolen goods. It was probably the chemicals they used for the drugs that caused the smell."

"I saw the whole thing. I was looking at magazines in bed. I heard cars on the road to the dump. I looked at the alarm clock. It was a quarter past eleven. I turned off the light, ran up to the attic window and grabbed my binoculars. One of the cars was Luccatella's red *Caddy*. The top was up. The other one was Jimmy Facio's black *Olds*. Eddy Gonzola got out of Facio's car, unlocked the gate, and then locked it again after they drove in. I saw Luccatella, Facio, Gonzola and two other guys walk into the shed on the site. And there was a woman. She had on a scarf that covered her head, and a tan raincoat. She got out of Lucca's car. I didn't see her face. I stayed at the window, making sure to keep hidden. It was a full moon, and you could see everything real clear.

"About half an hour passed, then the shed door opened, and they rushed out and got into their cars. A cloud had covered the moon, so I couldn't see too clear. The only one I saw for sure was Gonzola, who unlocked and opened the gate. The woman with the scarf and raincoat was there, and she got into Lucca's Caddy, in the back. I never got a good look at her face. The two cars drove real fast out of the gate, with Luccatella's in the lead. I couldn't see who was driving either car. Facio's car stopped and Gonzola got in, then both cars sped away. Gonzola didn't lock the gate. They didn't get fifty yards from the dump when it exploded and the whole place went up in flames. One more thing, I'm not

a hundred percent sure, but I think I heard shots before they all came out.

"The next thing I knew there was loud knocking on the door. I ran down the stairs and there were police in the hall talking to Ma. They told us to get dressed. We had to go with them to get away from the fumes. They were going to take us to the station. When we came out, Nicky, his Pa and his Zio Al were there and rescued us from a night in the hoosegow."

"Have you told this to the police?" asked Paulie.

"Not on your life. They can find out for themselves. That kind of explosion doesn't start by itself. Somebody must have set it, and there must have been a reason they did. Maybe it was Lucca, or maybe it was set to hide the fact that his gang wacked him."

The room got very quiet.

"Maybe it was an accident," suggested Franky.

"My guess is that it's going to take time to figure out exactly what did happen," reflected Paulie, "but I think you should at least tell the police you saw two cars pulling in there. You can just say you looked out the window before you went to bed and saw headlights. You don't even have to mention that you could see what model of cars they were."

"I don't trust anyone working there. I know Tommy is one of your Pa's friends, Nicky, but I can't be sure that any of them is totally clean."

"I can vouch for Tommy," said Paulie. "He should be Chief with all his service, but he's been passed over because he doesn't take bribes. I'll call him and ask him to come over. What do you say?"

"Okay, but I'm not giving any details. I saw two cars' headlights, then went to bed."

"Before we leave here," said Paulie, "I want you all to promise not to tell anyone anything you heard. I mean anyone. A word can slip in the wrong direction and if the gang knows there was a witness, things can go really badly. Promise?"

We all promised. Paulie repeated, "No one!"

Ma, Helen, Connie, and Charlie came by the lumberyard around ten. Franky and Tony had left with a load. I was up on a ladder scraping the wood trim on the roof of the main building, getting it ready for priming and painting.

"So, this is how you have been spending your days," I heard Ma say from below.

"Some days I get to drive the Rolls-Royce," I said as I climbed down. "What's the news?"

"We can't go back to the house until they put out the fire and take all the chemicals away," said Connie. "Ma got to put on a special suit to go there and pack suitcases and take all the important stuff. There's a policeman there now in a patrol car with a gas mask. I wouldn't want to have his job."

"Your nonno is coming over to stay with us," said Ma, "and we're going to have new neighbors for a few weeks."

I looked at Connie and could not hide how pleased I was to hear this news. They all left, and I told Tony he had a new temporary home when he and Franky came back to the yard. "I have a feeling there's a conspiracy here somewhere, but I ain't say'in nothing."

As Ma, Pa, Nonno and I ate dinner that evening, it felt strange to know that there was a family on the other side of the party wall who were strangers to me less than a few weeks ago, and now one of them is my steady girlfriend, another is my Zio's steady, and a third is quickly becoming my best friend. When we finished, Nonno went up to organize his room and Ma started to fill the sink with water to do the dishes. It was Pa's turn to wash and my turn to dry. As Pa and I cleared the dishes, I said, "Connie and I want to go the movies tomorrow. "Ship of Fools" has its first showing at the Rialto in town. Can I borrow the car?"

"There and back. No driving around if you know what I mean," answered Pa.

"Connie's not the driving around type. And Tony is coming with us."

"I'm not supposed to say this," said Ma, turning off the water, "because you kids are young and so much can happen before you are really grown up, but Connie is a really nice girl. She has so much of her mother's good in her."

I figured this was the time to ask the question I had been carrying around with me since Franky's nonna's funeral. "Something doesn't fit with the story I got from Nonno a couple of weeks ago when I asked him why the Malatestas left the Orchard. He said all the women, except you, Ma, were jealous of her, and after her husband got killed in the Korean War, they got the priest to tell her she should move. But I haven't seen anything like that about her, and Mr. Malatesta's behavior after he got back from the War must somehow be related. There's a different story, but I haven't been able to figure it out."

"Maybe you should audition for Perry Mason," joked Pa.

"You're right, Nickolas," said Ma. "There was a lot more to it. Should I tell him?"

"Too late to stop now," answered Pa.

Nonno had come back downstairs and come into the kitchen. "I didn't tell you the whole story, but you're ready for it now," said Nonno.

"After Ricco left for the Pacific in '43, Helen was alone in their house with little Annie," began Ma. "Your father went overseas shortly after that, and Helen and I became good friends. We were both working at the dress factory, and usually walked there and back together. Ricco's mother looked after Annie. One day, after Helen had missed two workdays because Annie was sick, she stayed late to make up her quota. When she was walking home alone, Luccatella drove by, stopped, and offered her a ride home. She was tired and wanted to get home to Annie,

but she says to this day it was the biggest mistake she ever made in her life to get into his car.

"When he dropped her off, he asked her out. She told me that she thanked him for the ride and started to get out of the car. He grabbed her, pulled her back, and tried to kiss her. She slapped him and managed to get out of the car. That was the start of weeks of pestering. He would drive by when we were walking home and talk to her as we walked. He was outside the factory, at the gate, every day when we came out. One morning, when I walked to her house on the way to work, I saw his big, red Cadillac parked in front of her house. 'He couldn't be in there!' I thought. When Annie came out, she gave out a shout and started to cry. One of his goons must have left the car in front of her house in the middle of the night so that the neighbors would think he was there. Instead of walking to the factory, we went to the police station and told them what had happened. It was as if they all worked for him. They just laughed.

"His harassment didn't stop, and then a few weeks later, Helen got a letter from Ricco where he said he had gotten a letter from one of his older cousins telling him that he should look after his wife and watch the company she was keeping. She wrote back immediately and told him what had happened. A letter didn't arrive for another month. He didn't say he believed her, just that "when there's smoke, there's usually fire." She was broken-hearted. How could he treat her like she was a liar? She asked me to write to him, which I did. I told him I had seen all of it, and that Helen was totally innocent. He wrote a short note telling me to mind my own business.

"When he came home, he acted like a stranger to Helen. He was never home, and when he did come home, he was drunk. He never said another word to me, and he was unfriendly toward your father. Somehow, he managed to keep his job in the mine and pay the bills, but most of his paycheck went to gambling and liquor. As far as we know, he never confronted Luccatella, but we did hear that the SOB was always taunting Ricco, making him feel like a fool. We guess that his joining up again to go to Korea was his way of escaping from the prison cell he had

put himself in by not believing his wife and listening to people who didn't have his best interests at heart."

She stopped talking here and started to cry. Pa went over to her chair, knelt down and put his arm around her. Through her sobs she said, "All the women on the street turned against her, and all the men treated her like she was a floozy. And it wasn't just on The Orchard. It was also at work and in church. She stopped attending mass altogether. I wrote about what happened to your father while he was still overseas, so he knew what to expect when he came home. I told both of your grandparents and your Zio when he came home on leave, so they knew the truth. But it was like no one else cared to know the truth. They were all afraid of that *shidrool*, Luccatella."

"Tony thinks that the *shidrool* was in the building when it blew up."

"What! That would be justice, real justice," exclaimed Pa. "Has he told the police?"

"He said he would only talk with Tommy, privately."

"I'll call Tommy if it's okay with Tony. Go over and ask him."

"It's okay. Paulie has already called him."

"Good. I'll call Tommy and tell him to come over. Go over and ask Tony and Helen to be ready to come here."

"Wait," said Nonno. "There's more you need to know before we get deeper into all of this."

"You mean about Luccatella?" asked Ma. "This is old history."

"The fact that we kept it all inside The Orchard all these years has only meant that Luccatella and his kind kept doing what they were doing since they came here. None of the kids know about what went on here and many other places where there were Italians in between the wars. It can happen again."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Adriano Luccatella, Enzo's pa, was a fascist. You know what that means, don't you?"

"It means he supported Mussolini, right?"

"Right. The family was from Gualdo Tadino, south of Sigillo, where we're from. He fought in the First World War for Italy, along with his two brothers. His brothers were killed, but he got out with his life. He went to Torino right after the war at the end of 1918 looking for work and fell in with the veterans who were angry about everything. They were especially angry with all the men who avoided fighting in the war by leaving for America. Early in the following year, Mussolini founded the *Fasci di Combattimento*, the Fascist Party, and Adriano joined it. He was one of the ones they called *squadristi*, meaning the action squads, who eventually became the 'blackshirts'. They were the thugs who beat up and killed people who opposed Mussolini and the fascists. As the story goes, the Party decided to send out spies to places where there were large Italian communities, mainly to keep an eye on the men they called 'traitors' who didn't fight in the War, and to help organize fascist organizations that would spread fascist propaganda. Adriano was one of them.

"He came to The Orchard with his wife and three kids. Enzo was the oldest. He was rich compared to all of us. We didn't know where he had gotten his money, but he had enough to buy one of the old houses and start his bleach business, which turned out to be a front for his fascist activities and then his bootlegging. Nobody knew him. He had no other family here. He made a trip back to Italy once every year, right up to the time when Italy declared war on America, on December 10th, 1941. When Mussolini and the fascists took over the government in 1922, Adriano organized a big party at the movie house where there was a newsreel showing a film made by the fascists. All the men on The Orchard went. I was there. That was the first time I saw Luccatella in his black shirt. There were a dozen other men in black shirts, but I didn't know any of them. This is one-half of the story.

"The other half is about the Malatesta family. Ricco's father, Antonio, came to The Orchard in 1914. His family lived on one of the farms on the edge of Sigillo. The land was owned by one of the king's cousins, and like all the farmers, the Malatestas were very poor. Antonio was sent to Sardinia when he was just fourteen to work in the coal mines. Two years later he went to the coal mines in Luxembourg where the pay was better. All his money, except what he needed for rent and food, went back to the family. When he was twenty-three, he married a girl from Sigillo, Regina Natale, who was seventeen."

"Was she related to the Natales here on The Orchard?" I asked.

"Yes. Her three brothers were already in America living on The Orchard by the time Antonio and Regina married. They were all much older than she was. Regina and Antonio lived in Luxembourg, and they had two children, Errico and Constanza. In 1914, when the First World War began, the Germans went through Luxembourg on their way to invade France. Italy and Germany were still in an alliance in 1914, so Antonio was going to be given a choice, either to join the German army or be sent back to Italy and go into the Italian army. As Antonio told the story, he had no interest in being killed in either a German or an Italian uniform, so he boarded a train for France and got on a ship to America. He came to The Orchard and lived with Regina's oldest brother, Pietro, and his wife Teresa, who was Antonio's first cousin. Regina and the two children were sent back to Italy, leaving most of what they owned in Luxembourg. It took them a year to be able to get a place on board a ship from Napoli to New York."

"Their ship was sunk by the Germans on the way back to Italy," added Pa. "Italy broke the alliance agreement with Germany and had declared war against the Germans while Regina's ship was sailing to America."

"Antonio went into the mines like all of the rest of us," continued Nonno. "He built a house, and we all helped him, like he helped everyone else to build their houses. When Luccatella arrived, it took only a

short time before he started making trouble for Antonio. He spread stories about him being a traitor for not fighting in the First World War. He also accused him of being related to Errico Malatesta, a notorious Italian anarchist and socialist. As proof he offered only the fact that Antonio had named his son Errico. We were mostly very unpolitical when we came to America, but there were a few of the men who had been Socialists and even Anarchists. They were anti-fascists. The biggest voice was Rigo Constantino, the baker. Antonio had no political opinions, although he did sympathize with Errico Malatesta even though he knew of no actual relation with him, and he did name his son after him. But he just didn't want to fight in any wars. It didn't matter to Adriano Luccatella. Ricco and Constanza were bullied in school by the fascist kids, who were led by Enzo. Some of the businesses in town refused to let Regina shop in their stores. Both Regina and Constanza were sickly, which we all felt was related to the treatment the family was getting. Constanza died when she was only fifteen, and Regina died in 1944.

"Antonio lived long enough to see his son return from the war. Ricco was broken when he came home because of the war and because of what Enzo had done to break the bond he had with Helen, but Antonio had one last thing to do before he died. He went to the Luccatella family grocery store, barged into the back room where Enzo had his office, and spit right in his face. 'Who's the traitor now? Show me the medals your son got in the war!' he shouted. His goons grabbed him and roughed him up, but Antonio had gotten his revenge."

"Everybody thought the reason Enzo wasn't drafted," added Pa, "was because his father had paid a bribe. The real reason Enzo didn't get drafted was because after America and Italy were at war, Adriano's luck ran out. He was put in jail for six months for his connections to the fascists, and then under house arrest until after Italy capitulated in September 1943. Enzo was banned from serving in the armed forces. For us, fighting for America was a way to show that we were the real Americans and sticking a sharp stick in the eye of people like Luccatella."

"Couldn't anybody do something about this?" I asked. I couldn't believe this sort of thing could go on. "What did Mussolini and his blackshirts have to do in America in the first place?"

"Nicky, these are the things you learn about as you get older," said Pa, "about how governments work and what causes countries to go to war. You don't learn it in school. I learned about the Fascists from one of the GIs in our unit. When Mussolini first came to power, Italy was close to becoming a Socialist country. It had only been a united country for sixty years, but the war and the founding of the Soviet Union was having a big effect on the country, just like it was doing in many other countries. Many of the cities were controlled by Socialists who set up collectives to compete with private stores and called each other comrades. America decided at an early stage that Communism wasn't something it wanted to see spreading, and anybody who fought Communists was a friend. So, Mussolini was seen as a positive force. Both President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill thought he was terrific into the 1930s. He was viewed as a hero who saved Italy from being a satellite of the Soviet Union. He made peace with the Pope and stopped harassing priests and nuns, which started in 1870 when Italian soldiers bombed the Vatican and forced the Pope out of his castle in Rome. It wasn't until Mussolini hooked up with Hitler and started to persecute the Jewish people in the country that America and England turned against him. That was in 1938. When he declared war on America right after Pearl Harbor, that was the end. But during the 20s and 30s, the Fascists in America collaborated with the FBI and the police to identify the Communists and anarchists. Eventually, the mafia played the same role, and Fascists like Luccatella moved into the mafia."

"Like father like son," I said. "That turd of a son of his acts like he can do whatever he wants, and the family still acts like it's above the law."

"Sooner or later, Nicky, they're all going to end up in jail or in a grave," added Ma, who had been very quiet while Nonno and Pa were telling the story about Luccatella and his connection to the Malatesta family.

"Well," I said, "Maybe Lucca's already dead."

"Okay, let's get Tommy and Tony together," said Pa.

I knocked on the door and it was Tony who came to answer my knock. I explained to him that I had told Pa about what he had seen, and that Pa was calling Tommy and asking him to come over. "We might as well all come over so that everyone hears it at the same time. I haven't told Ma, and she should know."

We were all in the living room when Tommy came in. Ma and Pa, Nonno, Helen, Connie, Charlie, and Tony. Annie was working. I opened the door for him and saw that he had come in his own car. He sat down and then said, "Tony, I guess you have got some important information to share with me."

Tony told the story just like he had told us in the basement at the lumberyard. Tommy listened without saying anything until Tony had finished.

"So, you think you heard shots before everybody rushed out, and you're not sure if everybody who went in came out, except for the woman and Gonzola, right?" asked Tommy."

"Right," answered Tony.

"Either everybody left the place before the blast, or there are one or more bodies in there. I called the FBI just after it happened. I did it on my own and talked with one of the guys there I know and trust. They have locked down the site and are going through it. Our boys were not happy when they saw them and learned they were out of the picture."

"It must be dangerous for them to be right in the middle of all the chemicals," said Helen.

"They've got NBC suits on," answered Tommy. "It stands for Nuclear-Biological-Chemical, not the TV station. It turns out that the Feds have had the place staked out for over a year. Somebody's been talking. They were close to making the bust when all their evidence looks like it

went up in flames. But if there's anything there, they'll find it. I'll tell them they should be looking for signs of humans, but they probably already know that."

"I'm not sure that label of human applies to Luccatella," offered Helen. No one laughed.

Tommy left and we all sat quietly in the living room. Then Helen spoke.

"Enzo Luccatella was an evil person, just like his father. The only things that mattered to them were money and power, and they didn't care who they hurt to get both. I don't wish suffering and death on anyone, but if anyone deserved to suffer and die a painful death it was those two people. I hope the FBI can confirm that he was in the building when it blew up. I would sleep better than I have slept in too many years."

I knew what Helen was thinking, but I wondered if Tony, Charlie, or Connie did. Probably not. One day, I thought, I would talk to Connie about all of this. It would explain so much about what happened to her father. But not now.

Four days after the explosion, we could still smell the smoke at the lumberyard. I wanted the day to pass quickly. I was looking forward to driving into town with Connie and Tony and seeing the movie I had heard so much about. We get most of the good movies in our local movie theater, the Holland, but it's much more fun to go to the big theatres in the city, like the Comerford, Strand, and Rialto. In two weeks, Tony and I will take our physicals. Then we'll figure out what the next step in our lives will be.

"Those window trims ain't gonna paint demselves, Nicky," I heard a voice saying, and I woke out of my daydream. It was Johnny.

"I was thinking we can still smell the smoke from the dump explosion. I wonder how the FBI guys are doing with their search for evidence."

"I was at da Post last night, and there was talk about Lucca. Nobody's seen 'im since da blast. So der's tree schools a taught. One's he's dead, got blown up by his own boys. Da udder's he set it up hisself so'z they'd think he was dead. Tird, it was really an ax'dent and he went off on a vacation to Bur'muda wid Ginger. She ain't been seen since the blast."

"Which one do you and your buddies at the Post think is the most likely?"

"Da first. We tink they whacked 'im 'cause they found out he was a snitch. Either Ginger's in der wid him, or she was part'a da hit squad."

"There are no secrets in this town," I mumbled.

"Ya got dat right, Nicky."

The truck trundled into the yard with Tony at the wheel. Franky jumped out before it had come to a stop.

"The cops found Lucca's *Caddy* at the airport!" shouted Franky.

"Were dare inny bodies in da trunk?"

"No bodies, and Lucca's wife is still in town. We were driving by the police station and saw her coming out. Facio's black *Olds* was parked right out in front, and Eddy Gonzola was guarding it. She got in, and then Facio came out and they all drove away."

"Any news on da redhead?" asked Johnny.

"She wasn't at the restaurant last night," answered Tony. "That's what Annie said at breakfast this morning."

"Maybe Lucca took off with the red head," offered Franky. I looked at Tony, and there was a closed-mouth smile on his face.

"The rents are due today, and Lucca always made it a point of collecting them himself from Pa," I said. "We'll see who shows up with the money bag then."

"I'm puttin' my money on the Feds finding one of the creep's gold fillings in the ashes," said Tony. "Then I'm going to have a party and invite everyone on The Orchard."

It was after six and Pa hadn't come home from the shop. It wasn't like him to be late for supper, and Ma started to look worried. She called the shop, but there was no answer.

"He's probably delivering a car to a customer," offered Nonno.

"He could have called," she said, and as she finished her sentence, Pa walked through the back door to the kitchen.

"Sorry I'm late," said Pa, as he gave Ma a hug and a kiss like he always did. She smiled and looked relieved. "Hi, Nicky. Hi Pa. I've got some important and good news to tell you. Zio Al and I have been at Gus Stucciano's office. You know, the crooked lawyer. He called me today, just before closing. He said he wanted to talk about the rent payment that is due tomorrow since it's the last day of the month. He said it was urgent and couldn't wait, so could I come over right away. I told him I would be there, and that Al was coming with me. We closed up and went right over to his office. We sat down. He offered us a drink. He looked and smelled like he already had a few. "No thanks," I said. "What's up?"

"Then he sat down at his desk, opened a big, yellow envelope, took out a paper and handed it across the desk to me. Written across the top of the paper was "Last Will and Testament of Stanislas Lewandowski". Right at the top it said: To Carmen Fabriano, I bequeath the property at 305 South Main Street, Drake's Crossing, PA. Then there was a description of the property and the three separate parts of the building."

"The property's been yours since Lewandowski died," said Gus. "I had the only copy of his will. We made a phony purchase of the property after he died with Phyllis Luccatella as the buyer, and you've been paying rent on your own property for the past twenty years and not collecting rent from the other two businesses. That's a lot of money Luccatella owes you, but I don't figure you are ever going to see a penny of it."

"I found out about the phony purchase," I said, "But I never figured Old Lewandowski would make a will."

"He did, but he chose the wrong lawyer to draft it for him, unfortunately for you. I don't have time to ask you how you found out about the phony purchase."

"Where's Luccatella?"

"Same place where I'm gonna be as soon as you two leave. In hell. Everybody's going to know soon enough, so I might as well tell you. He was inside the shack when it blew. His guys found out he was talking to the Feds. They figured out they were dead anyway, so they decided to take their revenge out on him before they got theirs."

"Then he took a revolver out of the top drawer in his desk. "Take the will and leave," he said. "I've got business to do. Find yourself an honest lawyer who can help you get the deed sorted out."

"One more question," Pa said. "Who was the lady who went into the place with Lucca and came out without him?"

"I don't know how you could have found that out, Carmy. You people aren't as dumb as we thought you were all these years. It was Ginger, the red head working at Donnatelli's. It turned out she was sent by Genovese. He suspected Lucca of double-dealing and needed somebody inside. He told Lucca that she was one of his girls who was under some heat from the cops in Philly and she needed a place to lie low. Lucca was no dummy. He figured she was a plant and kept her at a distance, even though everybody thought she was his new squeeze. Then somebody tipped off Genovese that Lucca was talking to the Feds. Genovese worked up a plan with Ginger and she told the guys. Genovese told Lucca he was coming up to talk about some new business and they should meet somewhere safe, where nobody could see them. That was the shack. Lucca thought he was going there to meet Genovese, but it turned out he went to meet his maker. Ginger pulled the trigger. She took a plane to somewhere after the hit. Let's just leave it there. Time for you to go."

"Al and I left to go right to the police station. We didn't even get out to the sidewalk when we heard a gunshot inside. We went right over to the station, gave Tommy all the information and then came home."

"This is too much to take in all at once, Carmy," said Ma. "You mean that Lewandowski left you the whole building, and that Gus Stucciano helped Luccatella steal it from you, and you, …and we… have been paying rent to him for the past twenty years?"

"That's the story. Can you believe it? And both of those crooks got exactly what was comin' to them. I hope God will forgive me for saying that."

At supper the next day, Pa told us how Tommy waited at the shop the whole day for someone from Luccatella's family to come to collect the rent. At four o'clock, at the same time as Lucca had arrived for the past twenty years, his son Gino showed up. Pa, Zio and Tommy were sitting in the office when he came in. Pa said the kid was all dressed up like he was going to a party.

"Can I help you?" said Pa.

"I'm here to collect the rent you owe," said Gino.

"You are, now?" said Pa. "And by what right are you here to collect rent on a property that you don't own, and why are you here instead of your father who has been taking my money illegally for the past twenty years? I thought maybe you were here to pay me back exactly $65,000 that your father stole from me."

"What do you mean?" asked Gino, sputtering his words.

Pa said Gino was starting to sweat and looked very nervous. "This building, including the restaurant and the dry cleaners was left to me by the owner in his will. Your father and the crooked lawyer who shot himself yesterday hid the will and filed a false purchase."

"I don't know anything about that," answered Gino. "My father told me to collect the rents if he wasn't home on the last day of the month, and that's what I'm doing."

"Gino," said Tommy, "You need to come with me to the station. Your mother will be there, and we'll have a talk about your father."

It was the 27th of July, rain was coming down in buckets. Paulie was waiting for us all to come down for the morning coffee break. He had been out of town since the clambake, in Harrisburg with plans for a new Sunoco station and convenience store. It was having problems getting approved, so we heard he had decided to go down and argue the case himself. It had happened twice before during the month I had been working at the yard that he was at our morning coffee break, and that was after the blast and when they had run out of coffee upstairs. Maybe there was bad news in Harrisburg, and he was going to tell us that the lumberyard was going out of business, and we were all going to be out of work. That wouldn't make any difference to me and Franky, but Johnny and Tony would definitely not be happy. When we had grabbed our doughnuts and poured our coffee, we sat or stood in our chosen places for Paulie to tell us what was on his mind.

"I say that you made a real good showing at the clambake. I wanted to tell you that right after that weekend when I came down, but we got all wrapped up in the blast and I forgot. Then I've been down in Harrisburg all week. Anyway, you took them down to the wire, and they were lucky to win. This was the tenth anniversary of our annual clambake and horseshoe tournament. We started the construction business in the summer of '55 and had a clambake to celebrate. Jimmy and I played against Louie Rosato and Mike Gubbiosi, our first two construction workers. They kicked our butts, which they've been doing every year since then. The lumberyard boys will beat 'em one day. We came very close this year."

"Franky and Nicky kept gettin' better as we played," said Johnny. "We need ta get yuz back next year. Tony, ya gotta promise not ta go off somewhere."

"Nowhere to go, Johnny," said Tony, but I caught some hesitation in his voice, "unless they send me to 'Nam."

"Johnny tells me that you boys wanted to talk to me about Asia after the war, is that right?" asked Paulie.

"We do," I said. "Tony and I are up for the draft, and, like he said, there's a chance we're going to end up in Vietnam. We want to know more about how the whole mess started."

"It's a mess, alright. Why don't we do it now because we're not going to get much done in this rain? Johnny, Jimmy, you want to stay?"

"Good for me," said Jim.

"Me too," answered Johnny. "Maybe you can fill in some 'a da holes in K'rya for me."

"Johnny told you I was in China during the war," started Paulie, "in the Office of Strategic Services, right?"

"Right," we all replied.

"It became the CIA after the War. It was our job to get information that would help us win the war, just like it's the job of the CIA to get information that keeps us one step ahead of our enemies. Did you know that China was part of the Allied Forces during the war and that we were on the same side against Japan over in the Pacific Theater?"

We all shook our heads no. "I don't know anything about China," said Franky, "except they are poor, are ruled by the Communists with Mao as their leader, and they hate Americans. And I think they used to make china."

"They were mostly poor back in the '30s and early '40s as well, but they weren't ruled by Communists, and they didn't hate Americans. That came after the Second World War. China is one of the oldest and richest empires that ever existed, and if they had wanted to, they probably could have conquered the world five hundred years ago. But they decided to stick to themselves. They had a big country, plenty of people to grow the food they needed, work the mines, build the buildings, roads, and bridges, make china, and invent things like gun powder. But because they isolated themselves, they didn't industrialize. By the end

of the 1800s, when many European countries, along with America and even Japan were at the height of what they called the Industrial Revolution, China was still living in its rural past. That made them vulnerable to countries that wanted to take what they had, and who wanted to sell them things they didn't know they needed.

"I'm going to pack in about a hundred years of the country's history up to the time of the Korean War. That will give you an idea of why things turned out the way they did. We'll start where the western countries start minding China's business. In 1840, Great Britain was the most powerful country in the world and had an empire so big that it was said that the sun never set on its possessions. Those possessions are called colonies, and until we won the Revolutionary War, we were one of those colonies."

"Yeah, and after we showed up, we turned the Indians into our colonists," said Tony.

"That's pretty much the way it worked for most of history," answered Paulie. "Maybe that'll change now after we've fought two world wars. We'll see. One of Britain's biggest colonies was India, and one of India's exports back then was opium, a very powerful drug. China was its largest importer, but not because the Chinese government wanted it that way. British merchants had set up operations in China and were making tons of money as drug dealers. More and more Chinese people became addicted to the drug, and this resulted in serious social and economic problems. The Chinese government, which was still ruled by an emperor, decided it had to do something, so they confiscated a large amount of opium that was stored by British merchants in a warehouse. One thing led to another, and a British naval force invaded, attacked the city where the warehouse was located, and for the next two years fought and won battles all around China. This was called the First Opium War. China was defeated and was forced to sign for peace in 1842. Part of the agreement was to hand over Hong Kong Island to the British. That's how Britain got Hong Kong.

There was a Second Opium War between 1856 and 1860, which China also lost. This one involved the British, French and the Americans. China had to turn over the Kowloon part of Hong Kong, which was bigger than the island. In 1898, the British negotiated with the Chinese to lease more land around Hong Kong. The lease was for ninety-nine years, which means it will be up in 1997. Hong Kong's been run as a British colony since then, except for the time between 1941 and 1945 when it was occupied by the Japanese.

"China gave up more control and more of their country, especially their ports. The British and French built whole neighborhoods where they lived in style, especially in Shanghai. They called them concessions. The Americans were in there too. In 1894, Japan decided it was time for them to get into the act. Japan and China fought over Korea and China lost. Japan moved into Korea, and China also had to hand over Taiwan to the Japanese. China had taken Taiwan in the late 1600s from its native people and from the Dutch, who had colonized a portion of the island, so it didn't really belong to China in the first place. When the Japanese authorities came to Taiwan to set up a new government and rule it as part of Japan, it gave the inhabitants two years to choose whether to leave Taiwan or stay and become Japanese subjects. Only 10,000 out of two-and-a-half million left. Maybe that says something about how they felt about living under China's thumb."

"So, who actually ran Taiwan when the Chinese nationalists arrived?" asked Tony. "Was it still part of Japan?

"You've been studying your history," answered Paulie. "Japan controlled Taiwan from 1895 until it had to give back to China after World War II. That was part of Japan's surrender in September 1945. Remember, it was the Nationalists under Chiang Kai-shek who were and still are the official, recognized government of China. The Nationalists were fighting Mao on the mainland of China up until December 1949. That's when Mao's army forced the Nationalists and a few million soldiers and civilians to leave the mainland for Taiwan. The Nationalists were technically moving their capital to a part of China which they had taken back control of after the war from the Japanese. Chiang Kai-shek made the

reunification of Taiwan with China a major part of his policy from the time of the fall of the last Chinese dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1912. I'll get to that soon. Let's go back to the time when China still had an emperor.

"After all these humiliations at the hands of foreigners, in 1899 a secret society of Chinese men started killing foreigners and other Chinese who had converted to Christianity. Members of this society were called 'Boxers' by westerners. Its real name was the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists. That's where the 'boxers' name comes from, from fists. Eight countries sent troops to fight what they called a Chinese rebellion. This time, Japan, Russia, and the United States joined five European countries, Italy, Germany, Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, and France. Just like before, China lost the fight and were forced to sign a truce in 1901. More sanctions were put on the country, and more payments for war damages, called reparations, were demanded. All of this weakened the government and made the people even angrier.

"The next thing that happened was that fifteen provinces declared their independence from the Qing Dynasty. In 1912, these provinces formed the Republic of China."

"Isn't that what the Chinese on Taiwan call themselves?" Franky asked.

"Yes, it is," answered Paulie. "The government on Taiwan is still recognized by the United Nations as the Chinese government, but I think it's only a matter of time before this will change and the Communist government on the mainland, which calls itself the People's Republic of China, will be admitted to the U.N. and Taiwan will be moved out. Maybe Taiwan can come back as a separate country, but that's going to be difficult. But we're getting ahead of ourselves again. We're still back in 1912.

"From being one, big country, China broke up into many little kingdoms led by warlords. The central government, the Republic of China, didn't control the whole country. It chose Peking as its capital. This government decided that China would side with the Allies in World

War I, mainly because it disliked the Germans more than it disliked the British and French. It came into the war in 1917. At the Paris peace conference in 1919 after the war, China was not treated well. The Allies did the same thing to China as they did to Italy, which had also been with the Allies in the war, but I won't go into that now. America, France, and Britain decided to transfer Germany's interest in the country to Japan, which was also an ally during World War I, instead of giving them back to China. China protested, of course, but the decision was not changed. China refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles, which officially ended World War I. We didn't sign it either, but that's another long story.

"There were protests in China after the war and more unrest. The Chinese Communist Party was founded in 1921 as a reaction to the continued disrespectful treatment of China by western countries and Japan. This is exactly how the Fascists got started in Italy. This is also when Chiang Kai-shek became the leader of the Nationalist Party. He was helped by both the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communists to defeat the government that had ruled the country, who both the Nationalists and Communists blamed for the bad treatment of China. But as soon as Chiang came in and gained control, he threw out the Soviets and massacred the Communists."

"This is the guy who's still leading the government on Taiwan, right?" said Big Jim quizzically.

"That's right," answered Paulie. "Once he had power, he decided to make the Communists an enemy. When he took power, Mao was a member of his Nationalist Party, but he soon committed himself and the Communists to fight the Nationalists for control of China. In 1931, the Chinese Soviet Republic was founded in one of the provinces with Mao as its chairman. It fought skirmishes with the Nationalists, and this went on until 1937 when Japan invaded China. This was the real start of World War II."

I thought about what Tony had said when we had our first history lesson, that he learned nothing new in school about history. I didn't know anything about all this stuff Paulie was telling us. The only time I

saw Chinese people was when we went to Little Italy in New York, and we walked across Canal Street by mistake. Then there was the Charlie Chan series on TV, but the guy who played Charlie Chan wasn't even Chinese.

"In 1937, the Nationalists and the Communists agreed to cooperate to beat the Japanese. The Communists agreed to put their army under the Nationalist government. It didn't take long before the Japanese had wiped out most of the Nationalist forces, including its air force, and destroyed most of its modern industries, railways, and ports. But China had an endless supply of people who would keep enough of the Japanese busy defending the territory it had won so that they couldn't be used anywhere else. That was the main strategy of the Allies for involving China in the war effort.

"I'm going to take a little sidetrack here because it's important to know why things are the way they are between the U.S. and China now. The U.S. had what was called a diplomatic mission in China in the thirties. It wasn't exactly an embassy, but almost like one. It was in the Chinese capital, Peking. Between 1935 and 1939, an American general named Joe Stilwell was stationed there and was the highest-ranking officer at the mission. He learned how to speak and write Chinese. He left China in '39 to take assignments at home, but after Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt wanted him back in China. He went back in early '42 and was commander of American forces in China, Burma, and India until '44, and he served as Chief of Staff to Chiang. The Chinese capital had been moved to a city in the southwest called Chungking by this time."

"You mean like the canned Chinese food!" exclaimed Franky.

"That's probably where Luigino Paulucci got the name for his brand," laughed Paulie. "Chinese food with an Italian zest, or something like that. Anyway, Stilwell's job was to help Chinese forces win the fight against the Japanese. We didn't have any combat forces there at the time, so his job was commanding Chinese troops. He found Chiang to be difficult to work with. He felt Chiang was not deploying his troops

properly and was hoarding supplies, either for a major Japanese offensive or for the eventual fight with Mao's forces once the war with Japan was over. He called Chiang "the peanut" and reported everything to Roosevelt. He requested full control over Chiang, which Roosevelt granted, but then he was recalled to the U.S. He died in '46, but if he had lived, it is highly likely he would have fought hard to get the U.S. to recognize the Communists as the real government of China, not Chiang. Mao never forgot that Stilwell praised the fighting of the Communists. He probably would have pinned a medal on him if was still around when they won the mainland.

"Okay, back to the story. In the middle of 1941, the Japanese had not yet bombed Pearl Harbor. The group that I would soon be part of broke the Japanese diplomatic code. We learned that the Japanese were going to stop fighting the Chinese and direct all their forces south, into Indochina and Malaysia. That's when we decided to start sending arms and equipment to China to help them get back into the fight against Japan. This wasn't going to be easy, and we hadn't even built up our own forces. But once Japan attacked Pearl Harbor at the end of '41, we were committed. Early on, it was rough going. Japan took Hong Kong just after Pearl Harbor, and then defeated the British and its allies in Southeast Asia. Most routes to China were blocked."

"When did you go into China?" asked Tony.

"I went into Burma first, in the middle of 1943, and then we moved up into China in '44, before D-Day. We were connected to what was called the Dixie Mission. That's when we started training the Communist forces under Mao Zedong."

"Did you meet him?" asked Franky.

"Not one-on-one. He was tight with Colonel Barrett. Barrett was one of the guys who realized that if we didn't work closely with Mao, we'd lose him to the Russians. The Communists were much better to work with, but our government kept sending over people like General Hurley who thought our job was to get the Nationalists and Communists to play nice together, instead of working to win the war against

Japan. When their efforts failed, they blamed people like General Stilwell and Barrett, who had been trying to build a solid fighting force out of both groups.

"We were in bad shape after Pearl Harbor. We needed time to rebuild. Roosevelt and Churchill had agreed that Europe was the top priority. We had to defeat Germany before we could throw our full weight against Japan. Chiang Kai-shek saw himself as a big player instead of a bit player. He wanted to have a bigger role in planning the war with the Allies, but Roosevelt never gave him that chance. But what Roosevelt did do was to build China up to the American people. There's one thing I didn't mention. In 1892, the U.S. congress passed a law called the Chinese Exclusion Act. It stopped Chinese immigrants from coming to America.

"The Congress did the same thing against the Italians after World War I," I said. "Nonno told me that."

"He's right," said Paulie. "America has done a lot of strange things when it comes to how it treats people who didn't come over on the Mayflower. Roosevelt understood that if he was going to get Congress to keep supporting China, he was going to have to change the public's opinion about the Chinese. He did a good job with that. That's why after the war, China, the Nationalists, was given a seat at the main table in the United Nations. It's one of the five permanent members of the Security Council, along with the United States, USSR, France, and the United Kingdom."

"I always wondered how they got to sit at the big table," said Tony.

"I didn't even know there was a big table," I said.

"The American and British military leaders wanted to build up the Chinese ground forces so that it could take more responsibility for protecting overland supply routes. We were already training both the Nationalists and Communists, and there was more training going on in India. Chiang wanted us to build up the air force so we could attack Japan from the air. We did this too, but there were constant fights over who got more money. There was a big meeting in November of '43 in

Cairo, Egypt where Churchill and Roosevelt met Chiang for the first time. The result was something called the Cairo Declaration. They promised that after the war, Manchuria, Taiwan, and some islands I can't remember the names of would be returned to China, and that Korea would gain its independence. But after this conference, the U.S. and Britain realized that China wasn't so important to defeating either Germany or Japan. Chiang saw this meeting as his entry onto the world stage. He asked for more money and supplies. He didn't get either, and things began to cool between the U.S. and China.

"I saved this picture from the three leaders in Cairo. It was November of 1943. Chiang always wore his uniform. He called himself 'generalissimo' because he was the leader of all the Chinese armed forces."

Paulie pulled a small, framed photo out from an old leather briefcase he had placed on the table at the start of our meeting. I wondered what else he had in there.

"Nicky, go up and check the weather. See if it's still raining. My ten-minute talk has gotten longer than ten minutes, I think."

Paulie was right. We were down there for over an hour. I ran up the stairs. The rain was still coming down hard. I came down the steps and gave the report: "It's still raining cats and dogs." Paulie took up where he left off.

"Between '43 and the end of '44, the British and Indian forces won most of their battles with Japan, while the Chinese armies lost most of theirs. The Japanese campaign in China showed how weak and poorly commanded the Chinese armies were, and this was after nearly seven years of fighting. They should have been better. But then, the Chinese forces we had trained, including ones in India, entered the fighting. We started to see progress, but there was still the problem of the really terrible command structure of the Nationalist army. When Stilwell tried to go around Chiang, Chiang demanded that Roosevelt replace him. Roosevelt did, but that was the end of the road for Chiang and the President.

"During the last year of the war, China was in pretty bad shape. The government didn't have money to pay its employees, the army, teachers, and all the other public employees. Prices of everything just kept going up and people couldn't afford even the basics. Hoarding, smuggling, and a big black market meant that a small group of the people benefitted at the expense of the majority. Even the well-educated began turning against the Nationalist government. The government reacted by cracking down on people who criticized it, and that just made more people angry. This was mostly going on in the cities. Out in the countryside, the Communists were building a parallel government by winning the hearts and minds of the peasants, both inside and outside the Japanese-controlled areas. Once the Japanese started to retreat and finally leave China, the Communists had an army of almost a million soldiers, and another two million in militias.

"While the war was still going on, the Communists and the Nationalists held meetings to see if there was a way that they could somehow share power after the war. We were pushing this idea. If the Communists were going to form a government, they should do it in a democratic way, we said. Why not form a coalition government and share

the responsibility of rebuilding the country? Easier said than done. The talks went nowhere. Vice President Wallace even came over to help things along without any luck. Mao and Chiang didn't trust each other, with good reason. By the time President Roosevelt died in April of '45, the world war was winding down. The formal Japanese surrender was on the second of September.

"We figured there was just a small window when the two sides could come to some mutual understanding. Peace negotiations between Nationalist and Communist leaders were started. In October they agreed to set up a council to draft a constitution. But the Communists had no intention of giving up the areas they had taken from the Japanese, and they were not about to disband their army. President Truman appointed Gen. George C. Marshall as his special representative to China with the specific job of trying to bring about political unification and ending the hostilities in China. He later became Truman's Secretary of State and Secretary of Defense, and he put together the Marshall Plan for Europe which has his name. He even won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953, but it wasn't for bringing peace to China. The best he could do was to help arrange a ceasefire between them in January of '46. That lasted until the spring. Marshall left China in January of '47 and the war was already on. The Communists decided to call themselves the People's Liberation Army, which pissed the hell out of the Nationalists and the Americans.

"At first, the Nationalists made progress, but starting in the summer of '48, the Communists began to gain the upper hand. They had some big military victories, and by November of '49, they controlled almost all the mainland. Only the islands of Hainan, Taiwan, and a few other offshore positions were still in Nationalist hands. The defeated Nationalist government reestablished itself on Taiwan in December and Chiang went there with his family, taking most of the government's gold reserves and the Nationalist air force and navy. The Communists established the People's Republic of China in October 1949 and were immediately recognized by the Soviet Union and the rest of the Com-

munist countries. The U.S. refused to recognize Mao and his government as legitimate, and that's where we are to this day. Even after all the efforts the U.S. made to help China from the time it was a republic, its refusal to recognize the PRC as the single government of China has made it China's number one enemy.

"Why didn't America help the Nationalists defeat the Communists?" asked Franky.

"We tried. We gave them all the military equipment we had brought into the country. MacArthur forced the Japanese to hand over their weapons only to Nationalists. We helped the Nationalists with airlifts. We gave both material and moral support, but we demanded that the Nationalists come to an understanding with the Communists so that they could both concentrate on building back the country. Chiang refused. Inflation, unemployment, food shortages, and heavy taxes played right into the hands of the Communists. The more the people complained, and held strikes and demonstrations, the more Chiang cracked down with arrests and beatings. While the Communists were winning the military battles, they were also winning the hearts and minds of the people. After years of fighting the Germans and Japanese, none of the Allies were interested in sending troops to a place where the chances of victory and a lasting peace were zero."

"So, we chose sides," added Big Jim. "From that point on, all Mao wanted to do was to show up America. That's what Korea was all about. All Mao could think about was spreading Communism, and he had all the help he wanted from Stalin."

"One thing's for sure," said Paulie. "The U.S. is definitely not going to recognize Mao's China as the one true China as long as Mao's alive, just to spite him. Nobody's going to give him that satisfaction."

"And they won't do it as long as Chiang's alive either," added Jim.

"Hell'a da way ta run da world, if ya ask me," said Johnny.

"The more history I read," said Paulie, "the more I understand that no one ever learns any lessons from history. I guess it's time to do

some work. Johnny, I figure you have some rainy weather jobs that need doing."

"Sure do. Let's turn some lumber, boys."

We walked up the steps into the hardware store instead of going out the door to the yard, just to check on how hard it was raining. Rain was still pounding down. There were no customers in the store, and Livia was at her desk behind the counter. She had her radio on, and the Four Tops were singing their hit song, *I Can't Help Myself*. I was sure right there and then that this song was going to be one of my all-time favorites.

I left early for the lumberyard on Monday, the day before our physical. "You'll have to wait until Jim opens the gate," called out Ma as I went out the door. "Do you have your lunch?" she said as she followed me out of the house. "Yep. It won't taste as good as it does when you fix it, Ma, but it'll fill me up."

"Hearing those kinds of things makes being a mother worthwhile, Nicky, and I love you for being such a thoughtful son. Have a good day and be careful."

I felt like I needed to think about everything that had been happening during the past couple of weeks, and I thought better when I was walking on my own. I hadn't had a long walk since the last day of school seven weeks ago. It was only a mile from home to school, but it was long enough to let me get my head around things. As I thought back, there was never anything big that I worried about. We never had any family tragedies like some of our neighbors. I never had anything like what Connie had to go through. Connie. Almost everything I think about now comes back to Connie, and when I think about her, I feel good. I try not to think about what it's going to be like in Vietnam. I'm probably going there, unless the Viet Cong or we give up the fight in the next couple of months, and I don't see that happening. I read in the paper that there were two hundred American soldiers killed in Vietnam between 1956 and 1963, two hundred killed in 1964, and over a thousand so far this year.

I sure don't want to come home in a body bag, but if you're somewhere where people are shooting at you, there's always a chance that a bullet will find its way into you, like Ricco Malatesta, or a bomb, like the one that found Zio. He came back without a leg or an eye. It sure changed his life. Shit. It's just not worth thinking about.

What a weekend this was. Pa and Zio agreed to divide up the property so that Zio got the restaurant, Pa got the dry cleaners and they both own half of the garage. Pa had talked to Louie Antoniolli, the honest lawyer in town, and he said he should sue Lucca's wife for the money Lucca had taken in rent from him, Alfonso, and Donnatelli. Zio and Helen are getting along real well. If Zio proposes marriage to Helen and she accepts, that will mean that if Connie and I get married, my uncle is going to be my father-in-law and my wife is going to be my cousin.

When I'm drafted, I'll go to Fort Dix. That's where everybody from here goes. Then they'll decide where I go, Vietnam or some other assignment. Maybe I won't go to Vietnam. Maybe they'll send me to Germany. I hear that's where most draftees went before the Vietnam War that we got ourselves mixed up in. I'll be gone for all of Connie's senior year, maybe longer. Then she'll go to college for four years. That's a long courtship. It's long enough for her to meet someone else who has a brighter future than I do, someone who's going to be a lawyer like she wants to be. We're going to have to talk about this, but I don't know where I would even start.

The smell of newly baked bread coming out of D'Angelos was too much to resist. I went around to the back of the store where they sell bread fresh from the oven starting at 6.30, before the store out front opens. I bought an Italian loaf and ate it as I walked.

I walked up and over the hill past the cemetery. The grass was green from all the rain we had, and it needed cutting. What was it about the trees and their way of changing the color of their leaves? Did they know when the month changed from July to August? We probably were supposed to learn that in biology class, but I must have slept through that lesson. Some of the leaves on every oak and maple had a touch of

yellow. It wasn't much, and it would be two months before the real colors would make the valley look like it's on fire, but it was enough to remind everyone that summer was soon going to be coming to an end. I looked back over toward the river, and I could see Connie's house and the burned-out site where Lucca met his end. I can't see Helen bringing the family back to that place. They belong on The Orchard.

I walked down the hill toward the river and crossed over the bridge. By the time I got to the yard, the gate was open, and the loaf was finished. Tony was standing out front.

"Did you get lost on the way to work this morning, Nicky?" he asked, "or were you trying to see if there were any brown trout swimming in the river?"

"One day they're going to clean up the river and there will be real brown trout swimming in there. I needed a walk."

"I can understand that. Connie makes me want to take long walks, too."

We went into the yard. Johnny and Franky were standing in the middle of the inner yard when we got there.

"You know Nicky and me ain't gonna be here tomorrow, right Johnny?" said Tony. "We got our draft physicals."

"Sure do. I understand dat Gen'ral Westmoreland's makin' a special trip over jist ta meet yuz two for a steak dinner after yer physical, and ask for yer advice on how to beat those Viet Cong."

Chapter 4

WHO GOES AND WHO STAYS

The evening before our physical, Connie, Tony, Charlie, and I drove to Cravelig's Milk Bar in West Franklin where we met Franky and Donna. Tony, Franky, and I had decided during the day to try to earn the biggest and most prestigious Cravelig's pin with the words *"I was a pig at Cravelig's!"*. We thought it would be a good idea to celebrate before the physical because we didn't know how we would be feeling afterward. Tony drove, Charlie rode shotgun, and Connie and I sat close together in the back seat. Even though we were living in the same house because Connie and her family had still not been given the all-clear signal to return to their own place, our parents made sure we were never alone. They didn't need to worry, because even though Connie was not shy about kissing me, she made it clear that kissing was as far as she was prepared to go. That was fine with me because I had no idea where I would go anyway.

Franky and Donna were already there when we arrived and had saved one of the big booths.

"Donna thinks you and Tony should reconsider your decision to order the Cravelig's super big sundae, the Ocean Liner," said Franky as we were still sliding into our places in the booth.

"Eating lots of ice cream can cause the runs the day after," said Donna. "I haven't been inside the Armory where you are going to be taking your physical, and I sure haven't ever gone through the ordeal,

but I'm pretty sure you don't want to have to be asking for permission every few minutes to run to the bathroom."

"I hadn't thought about that," I said. Diarrhea was one of those problems that I disliked more than any other, even colds. "I'll go with the double-scoop banana split."

"I think I'll opt for the junior version of the Ocean Liner, the Clipper Ship," said Franky. "If I remember right, it's about half the size."

"I'll have that too," added Charlie.

"I came to have a Cravelig's Ocean Liner, and I'm going to have one," said Tony with determination in his voice. "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!"

"I'll let you all know how many torpedoes were fired from the Malatesta submarine during our physical tomorrow." I added, and then the waitress came to take our orders.

The next morning, it was agreed that Connie would drive the family car and take us to our physical. Tony climbed into the back seat with Charlie, and I sat up front with Connie.

"You look a little tired," I said to Tony as we were getting into the car. "Are you feeling okay?"

"The Malatesta family didn't get much sleep after three this morning," answered Connie.

"Submarine Captain Malatesta made at least a dozen trips to the head before we were all mustered in the galley by the chief steward," added Charlie.

"Very funny, Petty Officer Charles," replied Tony.

"Are we going to be able to make it all the way to the Armory without you having to make a pit stop?" I joked.

"I think I drained the swamp, but you never know," replied Tony, trying to manage a smile.

Connie stopped the car in front of the Armory, and we all got out. Connie gave me a tight hug. "I hope you both flunk," she said. At that moment, right then, I felt for the first time that I didn't want to pass my physical. I didn't want to have anything to do with the Army or the Air Force or anyone handing out guns. I looked at Connie, and I think she understood. "We'll figure something out if you pass, Nicky," she said. I smiled, but there were no thoughts in my head at that moment. Connie and Charlie got back in the car and drove to downtown. Their plan was to park the car and have another breakfast at Shuman's Department Store restaurant before spending the morning cruising the floors of the store and looking into some of the other stores in the city. The papers we got on the physical said it would last for up to three hours, so we agreed to meet at the Downtown Diner at noon.

Tony and I walked through the large, stone arch entrance of the Watres Armory, home of the 109th Regiment Armory of the Pennsylvania National Guard. "It looks like a fort," I said. It's made of brick with cutouts on top of the turrets where soldiers could be positioned to shoot down at the enemy. "It's got battlements on the turrets," said Tony, reading my mind. He had gotten very good at that. "They're also called crenellations. The cutout parts are called crenels, and the solid parts are called merlons."

"Don't talk too loud. People might think you're a guide and start following you around."

We each had our letters from the draft board and our birth certificates. We went to a long table in the vestibule where we showed our papers and picked up name tags. While we were looking for our tags, someone we both knew came up to the table between us, none other than Gino Luccatella. He showed no sign of being interested in talking to me or Tony. He picked up his tag and disappeared into the crowd.

"I guess the big hand that was protecting Little Lucca disappeared with his father," said Tony.

We went to a locker room to take off our clothes, except for our underwear. Dad suggested that I wear boxer shorts instead of the jockeys that I normally wore, and to wear a T-shirt, which I usually did not wear. I had on one with sleeves. There was something about the sleeveless T-shirts that I never really felt comfortable with. Tony had on jockeys and a sleeveless T-shirt. With all the hard work and heavy lifting he'd been doing for the past three years, he looked like he was a body builder or a professional boxer who could go ten rounds with Muhammad Ali. I heard someone say in a loud voice: "No T-shirts!" We returned to our lockers and took off the T-shirts and then went out into the big room.

I imagined what it would be like to be in the National Guard, which was another alternative to two years of active duty in the Army. This wasn't an option for Tony. You had to get as far as eleventh grade or have a high school diploma. There was always a chance that your National Guard unit would be called up for active duty and sent to Vietnam. I think I'd rather have more training than I'd probably get in the Guard.

I could see there were different stations around the edge of the hall. Someone with a uniform, standing in the middle of the hall, told us what we would be doing for the next couple of hours. We'd start by

taking turns in the lavatory at the urinals filling up jars with pee, he said. "Everybody with names starting with A to F go there now. The next group is G to L, then M to S and finally T to Z. Pick up a jar on the way in and write the number that's on your name tag when you come out and leave it on the table. Try to piss into the bottle, not on it," he said. "You got five minutes."

I went in with the first group. I stood at the urinal and had no problem pissing. I was almost finished when the guy next to me said: "Hey, can I have some of your piss?"

"What do you mean?"

"I smoked some dope this morning before I came in here. Maybe they'll pick it up when they check the sample and lock me up."

"Do you want to pass the physical and go to Vietnam?"

"Hell, no!"

"Well maybe drugs in your urine will help to see that you don't pass. Anyway, they're looking for medical conditions that will disqualify you, not drugs."

"Okay. Forget about it. Good luck with passing or failing, whatever's your bag."

I took my bottle, put on the lid, wrote my number on the label, and handed it in. I avoided any eye contact with my pissing partner for the rest of the examination. After the urine test was completed, my group went to the station labeled B, where we had our blood pressure taken. Perfect said the doctor. I moved with my group to the next station where they checked the rotation of our joints. Shoulders: check; elbows: check; wrists: check; fingers: "Why do you have your small finger on your right hand bandaged up?" asked the doctor. "I took off the very tip of it with a two-by-four a couple of weeks ago

working in a lumber yard." No problem, check; hips: check; knees; check; ankles: check; toes: check.

I saw Tony come out from the lavatory. I was at the eye exam station. First, they checked to see if we were color blind. I heard that color blindness could disqualify you from certain programs. The doctor said I wasn't color blind. Then I read the eye chart, left eye then right eye. I never realized the vision in my right eye was different from my left. 20/30, said the doctor. "You aren't going to get into flight school, but you'll make a great soldier," he said. The next test was reading. It was a short paragraph about the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia. I passed with flying colors, which meant I could read all the words. From here we went to the hearing test, which I also passed. So far, I was batting 900.

The next station was for testing stamina. We had to run fifty yards and jump up on wooden boxes. They took our pulse. There were a couple of guys who couldn't make it to the end of the fifty yards or couldn't jump high enough. I'm not sure if they washed out, but they stayed with the group to the next stations. I looked for Tony after he should have finished the eye exam, but he wasn't with the group anymore. The last thing we all did was to meet one-on-one with a doctor in an examination room. He took the checklist I was carrying which had been filled in by the doctors after each of the tests.

"You're in good shape, Nickolas. Did you play sports in high school?"

"Yes, doctor. I lettered in football and baseball."

"Did you apply to college?"

"No. My grades were not good enough, and my SAT scores were terrible."

"What happened to your finger?"

"I'm working at a lumberyard, and I caught the tip of my finger between a two-by-four I was unloading and one of the supports. It's only a small piece that was clipped off. I should have kept my gloves on, but the wood was wet and hard to get a good hold on."

"Is there any reason you believe you can't serve in the military?"

"You mean like whether I'm a conscientious objector. No. If I'm drafted, I'll go where the Army sends me. My Pa and Uncle Al served. Pa was in the Second World War and Uncle Al was in Korea. Uncle Al lost an eye and a leg."

"You're going to get a 1-A classification, Nickolas. Have you thought about joining a service, like the Air Force or Navy?"

"Air Force. I want to become an airplane mechanic in case I can't get into college. I'm going to try to build up my grades when I'm finished with my military service."

"That's a good plan, Nickolas. You do that. Apply to the Air Force. You sound like a young man with a positive attitude. Good luck."

I guess I shouldn't have been happy to be getting an all-expenses paid ticket to Vietnam, but I felt good that there was nothing wrong with me, at least nothing that showed up in the exams. I got dressed and walked out of the Armory's big door. Tony was leaning up against one of the telephone poles right outside the door.

"What's up?" I said. "I couldn't see you after the eye exam."

"They said I had dyslexia right away and they told me to go straight to the final exam room and sign out. I met the doctor, and he said I was 4F. How'd you do?"

"I finally found an exam that I can get 100 in. Well, maybe it was 98. I have 20/30 vision so I can forget about being a jet pilot. I'm still

going to try to get into the Air Force. I thought we could stop by there now. We're early, and it's on the way into town."

"Sure."

"So, did the doctor say anything more than that you have dyslexia and you're 4F?"

"Yeah. He said his father had it and his brother has it. Somehow it missed him, he said. I told him that Ma doesn't have it, and neither do my sisters or my brother. From what Ma said about Pa, it sounds like he had it. He never read anything, she said. I told him about the offer from Mrs. Grozinski, and he said it sounded perfect for me. I'll call her when we get back home and tell her I'll be ready to start whenever I can. You know, it should have been the other way around. I should be getting drafted, and you should be going back to school so you can get into college, marry Connie, and live happily ever after."

"It'll work out, Tony." That's what I said, but that's not how I felt. Bad thoughts were running through my head and my stomach was sending messages to my mouth that it felt like sending up breakfast. I tried to calm down as we walked. I couldn't think of anything more to say. I guess Tony figured it was best to just walk and not talk, so that's what we did, all the way to the Air Force Recruitment Center. We walked in. I recognized a couple of the guys from the physical who were waiting in line. The person sitting at the reception desk gave me a number and said, "We're closing for lunch in five minutes. Come back at one." I asked what the chances were of being taken into the Air Force. "I can't say. We've met our quotas for the next few months. Come back and talk to the Sergeant on duty."

We left and walked to the Downtown Diner. Connie and Charlie were waiting for us inside, in one of the coveted booths. When one of the old battleaxe waitresses the place is famous for came to the table,

Connie said she told her that they were waiting for two others. The waitress told them they had to order or give up the booth. So, they were both nursing cokes and Connie was staring at her tuna melt sandwich when we got there. Charlie had finished the apple pie he had ordered.

"You passed with flying colors, didn't you?" she said. "I can see it on your face. I bought two tickets at the Trailways terminal to Canada and took out all my savings from the bank. We leave at three."

"Passing my physical doesn't mean I'm going to Vietnam. I might wash out of boot camp for not being able to make my bed with perfect hospital corners or not being able to spit shine my boots."

"How'd it go for you, Tony?" asked Charlie.

"I got what the football hero should have gotten, 4F. Seems like being dyslexic is the surest way of staying out of the military. It was like they couldn't get me out of there fast enough."

"What happens now, Nicky?"

"I'm not sure. Do you know, Tony?"

"You wait to be called up for active duty. Then you'll go to Fort Dix in New Jersey for basic training. That's three months. Then you get a deployment, which means you get sent somewhere where the Army needs soldiers. It can be Germany, Japan, Vietnam, or stateside. But while you're in basic, you take tests to see if you should get special training, like in communications, artillery, the motor pool or as a medic. If you get picked for special training, you don't ship out for active duty until the training is over, and then you get sent to where they need what you've been trained to do. But since draftees only have two years of active duty and then they're out, and enlistees have to make a six-year commitment, two or three of those years on active duty, they get preference for training. One more thing. Just because

you passed your physical, it doesn't mean that you're going to get drafted. You're on a list, and whoever is in charge of delivering draftees picks from the list. I don't know what system they use, but I know that people who have passed their physical never got called."

"Why do they have to make it so complicated?" groaned Charlie. "Why can't they just make it the same for everybody?"

"I hear that's what they do in the USSR," laughed Tony.

"I stopped by the Air Force recruitment center on the way here, but it looks like everyone thinks that is the best way of staying out of Vietnam. They said their quotas were full for the next couple of months."

"We'd better eat something. I've got practice at four. Franky wasn't kidding about his practice field being a coal dust bowl. They hose it down before we start, but it takes about five minutes for the layer of water to disappear. It's worse than unloading bags of lime in a boxcar." As soon as I said this, I wished I hadn't. I looked at Tony.

"It's okay. I have a feeling that's behind me."

We won by a touchdown. My touchdown. I didn't want to leave the field after the game. It looked like everyone else felt the same way. As long as I was there on the field, I didn't have to think about what was happening next in my life. I could just stay there, and the world would stand still. An interception and a touchdown. Not bad for my last game. Cousin Jimmy's pass got me fifteen yards up field, but I made the rest of the fifty yards to the goal line on my own. Maybe if I had a couple of more games like that during high school, I might have gotten into one of those schools where grades and board scores don't count for much. It's too late now. The induction papers arrived this morning. I didn't have a chance to tell Connie before I left for the

game. I'll report in a month and head to boot camp at Camp Dix in New Jersey. What happens after that is up to the Army. Franky had a great game. He plays in a different league than most of the rest of us. I hope he manages to stay healthy and see his dream of an NFL career come true.

Connie ran across the field toward me. Ma, Pa, Zio and Helen, Charlie and Tony, Annie and Guy, Johnny and his wife Paulette were behind her. Nonno was there, too. I could see Nonno's hat bobbing in and out of view at the back. Connie threw her arms around my dirty and sweaty body and gave me one of her wonderful kisses. "You're going to tell our grandchildren about this game." I started to cry. I couldn't help myself. She laid out our life in one sentence. I had to come back, and whatever happened after, we would do it together. Then we were surrounded, and I don't remember how long we were there.

I slept late. Everyone was at church when I came down to the kitchen. We had all been up until around one eating pizza from Donnatelli's. Guy's Neapolitan pizzas had made the place famous up and down the Valley, and the place was packed after the game. But Guy had gone there on the way back home, made a dozen plate-sized Margherita's and brought them to the house. I remembered we had agreed before turning in that everyone would come to our place for Sunday dinner.

The table was filled with copies of the Sunday Tribune opened to the sports page. There was a half-page photo of me crossing the goal line taken from the back of the end zone. There wasn't anyone close to me, and my number 24 was clear to see. I sat and read the article about the game while I spooned in Cheerios and milk from the

only bowl I can remember ever using for my breakfast cereal. I wondered if they let you take your own bowl when you go into the service. Probably not. Just as I finished, I heard the car in the driveway and soon the kitchen was filled with everyone who had been on the field and in the kitchen the evening before, except for Guy and Annie, who had the lunch shift. Zio was there. He had started going to church with Helen and the family.

"Vince Lombardi phoned while you were still sleeping," joked Pa as they came in. "He apologized for having missed you in the draft, but he was hoping you were free tomorrow to meet him and talk about a multi-year contract."

"Uncle Sam's first in line," I said. "Coach Lombardi is going to have to wait." I looked at Connie. "The papers came yesterday, just before I left for the game." She pursed her lips to the side. Sad, sorry, I feel for you, for us her look said.

"Do Connie and I have time for a walk before dinner, Ma?" I asked.

"Dinner won't be ready for another two hours, so you have plenty of time."

"I'll just put on my sneakers," said Connie. She went next door and I waited for her on the sidewalk. It was a middle of August Sunday sky, and a middle of August Sunday heat. Dusty blue and dusty dry. Breezes came in puffs carrying the smallest seeds from the tall grass in the fields around the Orchard. There will be a thunderstorm later this afternoon. I can feel it. We had gotten used to taking the same walk as the one we took when I walked Connie home on that first evening. After the explosion and their move to The Orchard, we walked past the turn down to her house and continued a few more blocks before taking a left up to the cemetery. She always gave my

hand a squeeze when we came to the spot where we kissed the first time.

The door opened and she flew down the steps to where I was standing on the sidewalk. If there were high school sports for girls, she would be a star. We started toward Main Street. "When do you have to report?"

"Monday, the 27th of September. There's a bus that leaves from downtown at 9 a.m. It says it takes four hours. Basic training is three months, with two weekend leaves during those three months. There's nothing else in the papers about what happens after that. It just says an assignment will be made, whatever that means."

"It doesn't seem fair. We've only been going steady for five weeks, one day, seventeen hours and, let me check my watch, twelve minutes, and we're going to be separated for three whole months and then who knows for how long."

"I eat the same thing for breakfast so if anyone ever asks me what I had for breakfast I'll be able to answer, and you know to the minute how long we've been going steady."

"We make a great team."

"I've never written a letter to anyone except my parents when I went to summer camp when I was ten," I said. "They weren't very good, but I'll write to you every day."

"I would like that very much, and I'll write to you every day too."

We walked without talking for a long while. It was normal for me, but Connie always found things to say. It was like she had been saving up conversations for me since she was a little kid, and she pulled them out when we were together. They were always interesting

and fun, and just hearing her voice gave me a warm and happy feeling. She must be thinking about something, I thought.

"Nicky," she said finally. "I want to ask you to do something for me."

"Sure. What is it?"

"I want you to always trust me. If anyone writes to you or tells you that I've been unfaithful to you, I don't want you to believe it. You can ask me if it's true, but if I tell you it's untrue, I want you to believe me. I'll never lie to you."

"It sounds like you have experience with this. Is this about what happened between your father and mother?"

"Yes. Annie told me. Did your mother tell you?"

"Yeah, and Pa and Nonno. It was over dinner a couple of weeks ago. I was asking about why you moved from The Orchard. Your mother told my mother when it was all happening. Ma tried to help by writing a letter to your pa when he was still overseas, but he wrote back and told her to mind her own business."

"It was all because of that awful person that Ma lost the person she loved so much, and we lost our father. He got what he deserved."

"Did anyone tell Tony?"

"Annie made me promise to never tell Tony or Charlie. She said that boys would do something in revenge that would get them put in jail or worse. She said that one day it would all come back to him."

"I think it was a good idea not to tell Tony. I've been thinking about something, Connie. When Pa told us about his meeting with Lucca's crooked lawyer, he said that someone told Genovese that

Lucca was a snitch. Who could that have been? Whoever it was, we should thank him, or maybe her."

Connie nodded her head slowly. "Yes, we should," was all she said.

We reached the cemetery and went to Ricco's grave. There were always fresh flowers that Helen put there from late spring until the first frost. There were potted flowers up until the first snow.

"We won't be able to move from here, Nicky."

"Why would we want to do that?"

"There are so many other places where there are great jobs and life is more interesting. New York, Boston, San Francisco. I've never been to any of those cities, but that's what people say. But it probably costs a lot more to live in those places, and then we would have to spend so much time and money travelling back home for holidays, weddings, funerals, baptisms, and when our family members get sick."

"You've thought about all this?"

"I know that so much can happen, Nicky. Maybe you'll meet someone that you like better than me and then I'll have to become a nun."

"Does that mean I should become a priest if you find someone you like better than me?"

"That will never happen, Nicky. It's you or nobody. Would you like to become a priest?"

"No. I'm happy there are some men who decide to be priests so there's someone to give out communion, but I don't think it's so healthy that they can't get married. Protestant ministers, Ukrainian

Orthodox priests and even rabbis can get married. Why can't Catholic priests get married? Even if they could, it's not something I would be very good at. I'd never be able to remember all the prayers and sing the songs at high mass."

"I think I'd like to be a priest, but not a nun. I hope you won't find someone else that you like better than me, Nicky."

"Connie, if I go to Vietnam, there's a chance I won't come back."

"Your Pa went to the war, and he came back. My pa came back from the first one he went to. I don't think he wanted to come back from Korea. The best thing would be that you didn't have to go to Vietnam or any war, but I guess the reason there are armies is that men have to fight in wars."

"Yeah, maybe if we didn't have armies, we wouldn't have wars. I learned a lot this summer about how we got involved in Korea, and what China and the Russians did. It's probably similar to what led to Vietnam. Tony had almost all the pieces, and Johnny and Paulie filled in the details. I'm not sure that having a better understanding of how it started and why we're fighting there will be better or worse when it comes to taking orders and doing what I'm told to do. I have to believe it's better to do the right thing if you know why you're doing it."

"Write to me every day, say a prayer every night before you go to sleep and in the morning when you wake up, think of me waiting right here for you when you get home, and you will come home to me safe and sound. You'll see. God won't take you from me, Nicky. He wants to see our children grow up."

Pa and I drove alone into the recruitment center where I would take the bus to Fort Dix. Connie wanted to come, but I convinced her

that it would be best to say our good-byes alone and not in front of forty guys ogling us through the bus windows.

"Do the best you can, Nicky," said Pa, after we had passed through the center of DC, "but no more. Basic training isn't a contest. It's training. You don't get any medals or trophies for coming in first in the races. And don't hurt yourself. I saw guys who tried to hurt themselves when I was doing my basic training, so they didn't have to go overseas. You can't know how much damage you're going to do if you try to do it, and a couple of those guys would have been better off taking their chances against the Germans or the Japanese. If you do get sent into combat—and I sure as hell hope you don't—don't volunteer for anything. There are plenty of guys who signed up for active duty. They volunteered. You got drafted. Let them go first. Follow orders, but don't go putting yourself in danger. We want you to come home with all your limbs and eyes and ears. We'll be praying hard for you every day, son."

"It feels strange, Pa. A couple of months ago, I was in high school and thinking about what I would do so I could get a decent job. I was kicking myself for not studying hard enough to get into college, and I was trying to figure out what I could do to make up the courses. Being in the Army and shooting at people wasn't even in the back of my mind. All of a sudden, I'm a grownup. I'm going away for three months to learn how to do things I never wanted to learn. I understand why we decided that we had to draw a line against the Communists in Vietnam, but it doesn't feel like it's the same thing as fighting the Japanese who started the war with us by bombing Pearl Harbor, or fighting the Germans who would be coming after us after they conquered all of Europe."

"I was never one for reading history books, so I can't say much about why all those wars we hear about were fought. It seems like it's

always some lunatic who gets it into his head that he wants his country to rule the world. As far as Vietnam is concerned, I think the lunatics are in Russia and China. Like I've always told you, we can't decide which wars we want to fight in and which ones we want to sit out, unless we want to sit 'em out in jail."

"How did you make it through the war, Pa?"

"I was afraid as hell. Every day. I saw my buddies shot right in front of me or behind me, a bullet that could have gone through me if I walked a little faster or slower. Shells came into our camp and wiped out the guys in the next tent. A few yards one way or the other and that shell would have made sure you were never born. What did I do? I prayed a lot. I didn't go into the whore houses when we had leave. I attended mass when we had a chaplain, gave my confession, and took communion. I wrote to your mother every day and told her that if this was my last letter, she should know that I was always faithful to her. I did what I was told to do, but no more. I fired my rifle when I had to, and, like I told you, if I missed every time I shot, neither you nor I would be here today."

We rode the rest of the time without saying much. We came into the city and Pa drove right up to the recruitment center. The bus was there and there were already a couple of dozen guys milling around on the sidewalk. Pa parked the car, and I took out Pa's old duffle bag with the stuff the Army paper told me to bring. Pa had made me promise to bring his bag home after I got my own. As we walked toward the bus, we both spotted him at the same time. Gino Luccatella. He was standing on his own in his expensive clothes with an expensive suitcase wearing expensive sunglasses.

"Somebody made sure his name went back into the draft pool, and somebody made sure he passed his physical," said Pa.

"I guess what happens to him now is up to him," I said. "That's going to be new for him."

We left Gino with his own thoughts. He wouldn't make it through boot camp. Hard work and obeying orders that didn't come from his father just wasn't in him. He wound up in the brig before he washed out. Dishonorable discharge isn't a great credential to carry around through life. For Gino, that wasn't a problem. He didn't need letters of recommendation for a job in the criminal world, which was where he was going.

Fifteen minutes later a sergeant came out and called the roll. Everyone was present and accounted for. Pa gave me a big hug. "Call us once a week and let me know if I should come down and pick you up when camp is finished. God bless you."

I came home from Fort Dix the week before Christmas in '65. Between Christmas and New Year's Eve, the Guados gave an annual Christmas party. I was there with Connie. So were Tony and Franky and Donna. I hadn't had time to visit Franky before the party, but I was prepared to see him on crutches. He had written to me from the hospital. I was surprised to get a letter from him because I thought he would be too busy with football, but after his accident, he had plenty of time for writing to friends. His football career came to a crashing end in October. It was against West Virginia. He went in at the start of the second half. He caught a ten-yard pass from Jack White and was immediately hit by two players. The first one stopped his forward motion, and the other one was a late hit from the side by the free safety, directly on his right knee. His leg was broken just above the knee. He doesn't have to worry about being drafted, even after the break is healed, but he decided he could just as well go to college closer

to home and be nearer to Donna, so he was starting his first term at the University in January. He and Donna were already there when Connie and I and Tony came in.

"You made it through seven weeks of the most dangerous job on earth, and you break your leg the first time you get into a college football game. We didn't toughen you up enough." That was Tony's greeting.

"My brother has a strange way of showing his affection for his friends," offered Connie. "Hi Franky. Hi Donna. I'm sorry about your leg, Franky. How are you both doing?"

"I'm doing fine," answered Donna, "I'm happy to have Franky closer to home, but I think it's going to take him some time to retune his life's ambitions."

"Rip—you know the coach of Penn State, Rip Engle—was real nice," said Franky. "He visited me in the hospital. He said I could always remember making the catch for a first down, even if it was going to be my last reception for the Nittany Lions, and he congratulated me on not fumbling the ball. He even signed my cast. It was the first time I was ever in a hospital, except for when I was born, I guess. My doctor was a woman who grew up in Philly and decided she wanted to be a doctor. She asked me what I was going to do when I finished college, and I told her that I had planned on playing pro football, but now I didn't know. She said something I'll never forget: "Rather than getting your brain rattled, why not put it to use helping people and study to be a doctor." Hell, forget about me, how are you all doing? Tony, we want to hear about the tests and everything else. And you, Nicky, you made it through boot camp in one piece. What's next?"

"Let's hear from Tony first," I said. Connie's daily letters always included something about Tony's tests. She had made it her mission

to get him to tell the family at supper every day what he had done. He resisted at first, explained Connie, but when he finally understood that she wasn't going to let him ignore her questions, he started telling them without any prompting or coaxing. It started with lots of different tests, of his eyes and ears, of his motor control, his attention span, and, gradually, of his reading comprehension and retention. These tests took the first month, four days a week, six hours every day.

There is nothing wrong with Tony's hearing or eyesight. The special tests they did for intelligence confirmed something all of us already know. Tony is smart, very smart. It's just that his brain has difficulties with recognizing symbols, which you need to be able to do in order to read. During the second and third month they worked on getting Tony to connect letters to sounds and then the formation of letters into words. It's what kids without dyslexia learn in school, but Tony's teachers didn't know how to help a kid who couldn't do the matching themselves.

"Did you know that Albert Einstein and Leonardo da Vinci and even Winston Churchill were dyslexic," wrote Connie in one of her letters. "My big brother's in good company." There was something else they found when they did their tests. Tony is very good in mathematics. He sees things in those formulas that are completely opaque to people like me. He never got to take algebra or geometry, subjects that I just barely passed. The smart kids got to study calculus. They gave him some tests in calculus, the basics, and he understood it immediately.

"When do you start at Princeton?" asked Franky.

"First I need to get my high school certificate," answered Tony. "Mrs. Grozinski is helping me with that. Then I'll apply to Keystone Junior. There's a lot of makeup work I have to do before I can think about college. I've decided I want to be a math teacher."

"Wow, Tony," exclaimed Donna, "that's great. You're going to be a great teacher."

Franky has probably told Donna all about our classes at the lumberyard. Yes, Tony is going to be a great teacher.

"Have you thought about college, Connie?" asked Donna. "Do you want to stay close to home or find a place far away?"

Connie had taken the pre-college board tests as a junior and scored really high. Her guidance teacher told her that with her grades and high board scores, she could get into one of the fancy private schools for girls with a full scholarship. Then she would have an easy time being accepted to one of the best law schools. She's made up her mind that she's going to be a lawyer and then a judge. But she's also decided that she is staying put right here. She doesn't think she needs a law degree from Yale or Harvard to practice here in Drake's Crossing.

"I'm only applying to Sacred Heart. That's where I want to go. I'll have saved up enough to buy a car by next September. When Ma and Al get married and we move into Al's home, I'll have my own room where I can study."

It's not only Zio and Helen who were going to get married in a week. Annie and Guy were getting married at the same time. Mother and daughter in a double wedding. Connie and Charlie were going to be maid of honor and best man for both weddings. That was in one of Connie's letters in October. She told me that they had planned the date for after I came home from boot camp, just after Christmas. That's when the game of musical houses will begin. Helen, Franky, Connie, and Charlie will move in with Zio Al and fill up the Fabriano homestead. Annie and Guy will move into the side of the Arcobaleno house where Franky's Nonna Rosa had lived before she died. Nonno Berto will move back to his side of the house. "I'll wait until it's time

for you and Connie to get married," he said to me, "so you can have a place to set up house."

Connie had told Tony that I was going to Vietnam, but I had not told Franky. When I said, "I'm going to Vietnam in February," Franky just stared at me. He couldn't get any words out. He had a blank look on his face.

"Hey, I'm planning on coming back, so don't start acting like I'm a ghost."

Chapter 5

THE SADNESS OF VIETNAM

It was Sunday in mid-January. Ma, Pa, Connie, and I were driving to Fort Dix. Pa was at the wheel. Connie and I were sitting close together in the back seat, holding hands. This was the first trip that Connie was taking out of the state. No one had said much since we left home. This wasn't a joy ride. It was far from it. We went through the Delaware Water Gap toll booth and crossed over the river. I pointed out the Indian Head rock profile on Mt. Tammany after crossing the Delaware River into Jersey. I tried to push the cloud up that was hanging over everyone's head. "Look. There it is," I said. "They say it's the profile of a Mohican Chief that was carved by members of his tribe to commemorate his bravery. But it's really just a natural outcrop. That's what I read."

"I don't want to carve any stones to commemorate your bravery, son, so remember what I told you," cautioned Pa. Ma was silent. "I like it when nature makes things we can recognize, like clouds that look like swans," said Connie. Every time Connie and I have passed that spot since that first time, Connie repeated what she said, even though it has gotten harder to see the profile with the passing of time and the work of nature. One of the first things that Pa said to me when I came home was, "Thanks for saving me the work of carving a statue of you in stone."

Ma and Connie were both determined to go with me all the way to the base. Since the day I arrived back home on The Orchard from boot camp and told them that when I went back, I would be shipping

out to Vietnam, there was a sadness in their eyes. They both tried to hide it with smiles, but I knew they were both crying when they were sure I couldn't see or hear. I cried, too, when I was alone. I couldn't help it. I would read the papers I got before I came home on leave telling me everything I had to know to prepare for going and what I would do when I got there. I imagined each step, from packing my bag at the base, to taking the bus to the plane and landing in the middle of a jungle.

Leaving Ma and Pa and Connie and walking through the gate at the base was the hardest thing I had to do in my life up to that point. I wanted to promise them that I would come home, but I knew I couldn't give them that promise, and they knew I couldn't do it either. The tears flowed, the hugs and kisses never ended, but then I was inside the gate, and they were outside.

I was on the plane heading to Vietnam when my conversation with Pa, the one he reminded me of in the car on the way to the base, came into my mind. It was when I came back from basic training.

"I thought I told you not to volunteer," said Pa when I told him I was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division. It didn't matter to him that I wasn't going to be jumping or piloting, just taking care of the choppers. During the first week of basic training, we had all kinds of examinations, and then we met with one of the captains in charge of making assignments.

"What are you good at, Mr. Fabriano? What do you want to do while you are in the Army?"

"I want to do my job, the best I can, and get home in one piece."

"That's fine, but you're going to end up somewhere, so it might as well be somewhere you can do the most good."

"My father and uncle own a car repair garage. I've been helping them out since I was a little kid. I guess I'm good at being an engine mechanic."

"Well, that's a start," he said, and over the course of the next three months they did some more tests and they found out I wasn't just kidding. I was assigned to the mechanics division of the Screaming Eagles. That's what the 101st was known as. Its paratroopers were dropped into Normandy on D-Day. During the Battle of the Bulge, the division made its mark with its defense of Bastogne. I was part of the crew that kept the rocket-firing choppers in the air firing their rockets.

From the time I landed in a C-130 Hercules in the A Shau Valley in the Central Highlands I felt like I was in the middle of hell. Our air bases were the main targets for the Viet Cong. I guess they figured that our planes and rocket-firing choppers did the most damage when they were in the air, so keeping them on the ground was at the center of their offensive strategy. The Soviets supplied them with single round portable rocket launchers that they could get close enough to do some real damage, both to the aircraft and to us.

"You'll get used to it just about the time you're shipping out back to the States," said Sandy, the sergeant in charge of the chopper pool. "The 'Cong ain't interested in wasting their expensive ammo on us dime-a-dozen mechanics. The guy who hits us is gonna get a shellackin' from his super."

I never got used to it. Every time a shell landed, I jumped out of my skin. The longer I was there, the more I thought about what the Vietnamese people living there felt about what was going on. It was pretty obvious to all of us that our biggest problem was not being able to tell an enemy from a friendly. Some of the guys were getting newspaper clippings from home with stories about how we killed hundreds of innocent civilians. Maybe it was true in one place, but where we

were, whole villages were places where the Viet Cong lived. How many of the Vietnamese people supported the government and wanted us there to help them against Ho Chi Minh? It wasn't a hundred percent by any means. Fifty percent or less, probably. Maybe much less. We called it the Vietnam War. What did they call it? I thought about how I would feel if a foreign country sent a hundred thousand troops to help the South fight the North during our Civil War, and they came into Drake's Crossing and started shooting at us. I didn't know it while I was there, but after we lost, I heard that the Vietnamese called the war the Resistance War against America to Save the Nation.

I wrote to Connie every day and thought of her first thing every morning when I woke up and last thing every night before I fell asleep. I went to mass when we had a chaplain and prayed that I would never have to shoot my rifle. That prayer was answered. I had one R&R to Seoul, South Korea. It was six months after I landed. Five days felt like five hours. I kept my promise to stay away from the places where I didn't need to go.

It was in Seoul that I decided what I wanted to do when I got home. I was sitting in a small restaurant with half a dozen guys from my crew. Most of the rest of the guys had gone to Bangkok. There was more happening there, they said. Two MPs came in and sat at the next table. It didn't take long before we moved our tables together. It turned out that one of them was from down the line. His pa was a policeman, and he was a volunteer who applied to be an MP during basic training. He spent a year stateside, a year in Germany and was doing his last year in 'Nam. He said he thought that everyone joining a police force should do a tour as an MP to get a better idea about what a policeman's job really is all about.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Keeping people on the job and out of trouble."

"We've got a policeman like that in our borough," I said. "Tommy Spagliotti. A couple of his colleagues were sent up for being on the take. Maybe he'll need some help when I get back." That's when I decided to be a policeman, and I have never regretted that decision.

Six more months, I thought as I turned in the night after I returned from Seoul. Sandy said there had been a lot of skirmishes around the camp during the week I was gone, and it would be a good idea to sleep with my clothes on just in case we needed to move out quickly. I didn't sleep. I lay on top of my bunk, fully clothed with my boots on. I put all of Connie's letters into the pockets of my pants. Shells started dropping before midnight, and gunfire was coming from all directions. Suddenly, the door to the barracks opened and in rushed a dozen Viet Cong. One of our men fired, and then shots were flying all over the barracks. I dove out of my bunk to the floor. The shooting stopped. I felt my arms being pulled behind my back as I lay face down on the floor, and my hands being tied. I was pulled up to my feet. Of the twenty men in the barracks, only five of us were standing. Sandy wasn't one of them.

We were pushed out into the field in front of the hangar. The building was in a blaze. All the choppers outside of the hangar were in flames. There were around two dozen of us who hadn't been killed, and they lined us up, one behind the other. I thought about what Zio Al had said about being taken prisoner. It was usually better to be killed. Maybe that's what they are going to do now, I thought, kill us. One of the Viet Cong started talking in English in a loud voice.

"You are our prisoners. Do not try to escape. Do what we tell you to do. We are taking you to a place where you will stay until your country leaves our country. If you are still alive by then, you will be freed."

That was all he said. One end of a rope was tied around my neck, and the other end was tied to the hands of the prisoner in front of me. They did the same to all the other prisoners. The rope around the neck of the first prisoner in line was tied around the waste of one of the Viet Cong soldiers. He started walking, and we stumbled behind. We were heading north on a narrow path through the thick jungle. It was pitch dark. We kept tripping over exposed roots on the path. A light rain fell as we walked, and water dripped from the thick leaf cover. We heard noises from animals and birds.

At the first light, we entered a cleared area with grass huts around the fringe. I was soaked through. I had pissed on myself while we walked and needed to take a shit. Despite the summer heat, I was shivering. And I was scared. What happens now? What are we going to do? Are they going to give us food and water? Are they going to make us cut trails through the jungle? There was a bamboo cage in the middle of the clearing.

"This is your prison for now," said the same guy who talked to us at our camp. "There are no fences. If you try to escape and we don't catch you, the jungle will kill you or the villagers will kill you. If we capture you, we will cut off your head. If you make trouble, you will be put in this cage. Every day, six of you will be taken to a place where you will dig for food."

When he finished, the ropes were taken off, and we were divided up into groups of six and put into the huts. The only light in the huts was what filtered through the grass roof and walls. There was a bamboo platform in the middle of the hut. I figured that was where we were going to sleep.

"Rank and name," said one of the men.

"Private, Fabriano," I said.

"Private, Phillips."

"Corporal, Shields."

"Sergeant, Hellring."

"Private, Pinkewicz."

"Lieutenant, Edgars," said the one who asked for ranks, speaking in a very low voice. "We're not at a prison yet. I don't know how long they're going to keep us here before they move us to a real prison. I figure we're at least three days' walk to the closest one. Is anybody not sure what to do if they torture you?"

"Don't tell them anything until you can't take it anymore, and then lie," answered Shields.

"Right. They're going to start beating me. That's what they do to officers. That cage out there is where I'll be spending most of my time. Let's try to get some sleep while we can. The rules of the hut are simple. Shit and piss at the edge in a hole and cover it up. As long as we're here, we're going to be eating mostly manioc. It's a root vegetable, like a potato. It's also called cassava. It has to be cooked, otherwise it's poisonous. If we're lucky, we can pick the manioc leaves and boil them."

I don't know how long we were asleep. Light was still coming through the thatch when a guard opened the door. He left a jar of water and a bowl of rice. He went out and came back with six pairs of black pajamas that looked the same as what all the Viet Cong had on. He handed a pair to each of us and motioned with his hand for us to put it on. He let me keep my pants where I had stuffed all of Connie's letters. They took my boots, but I found out later that they became part of a pool of boots that the six soldiers who went out to dig for manioc wore. I rolled up my pants and used them as a pillow.

While we ate our meager ration of rice and one swallow of water as the jar was passed around, we introduced ourselves. Carl Phillips was from a place near St. Louis, Missouri. He was drafted right out of high school, just like me. Bill Shields was an African American and was on his second tour of duty. He was from Lansing, Michigan. Sergeant Hellring was from Springfield, Connecticut. He had been in Korea and signed up to go to Vietnam. Joe Pinkewicz said he was from a small town just outside Chicago called Evanston. He graduated from the University of Illinois in '65 and was drafted in the summer. Marshall Edgars was from a small town in Iowa. He was in ROTC at the University of Iowa, the Mighty Hawkeye ROTC Battalion, he said proudly. He said he majored in Asian history.

"So, Sir, you and I are the ones who know how the hell we ended up in this mess," interjected Hellring.

"You've got the first-hand experience, Mr. Hellring, and I have the history lessons," answered Edgars.

"If you don't have anything else to do for the moment, Sir," added Pinkewicz, "maybe you wouldn't mind telling us what you know. If I'm going to die here, I'd like to know a little bit more about the place."

That brought laughs from the rest of us. "Not too loud," cautioned Edgars. "We don't know if they're listening. If you pick up a Life Magazine, you might see pictures of the Vietnamese fighting the French during the Second World War and think that's how it all started. Ho Chi Minh founded the Viet Minh in 1941 to fight the French, but the fight between the French and the Vietnamese started much earlier than the 1930s and '40s."

"Wasn't it the Viet Cong, Sir?" asked Phillips.

"The Viet Cong came later. It was Viet Minh, the League for the Independence of Vietnam that Ho Chi Minh set up in 1941 when he came back to Vietnam from China. By this time, he had been a Communist since the '20s. He had washed dishes in New York City, lived in Paris and China and who knows where else. The Viet Minh fought with guerrilla forces against both the French and the Japanese during the War. But the Vietnam War really started when France took over Vietnam and the other countries in the area called Indochina. The others are Laos and Cambodia. That was back in the 1800s. China controlled the whole area for the first thousand years A.D., and then it was ruled by kings. There wasn't really a single, united Vietnam during this time, or a single Cambodia or a single Laos. There were a dozen different groups in the Indochina area who spoke their own language and had their own culture. They were spread out over the three countries. The territory that is now Vietnam was divided up into two or three kingdoms during this period.

"Between the early 1600s and the late 1700s, two powerful families had controlled the country, the Nguyen in the south and the Trinh in the north. Europeans started arriving, mostly missionaries from Holland, France, and Portugal, to convert the locals, but also for trade. The Portuguese teamed up with the Nguyen and the Dutch helped the Trinh. The Dutch and the Portuguese weren't friends back home in Europe, and they weren't friends in Indochina either. They made matters worse by supplying the two sides so they could fight each other. After a lot of fighting, one family, also called Nguyen, but not related to the first Nguyen family in the south, managed to unify the country, and in 1802 they started the Nguyen Dynasty that lasted until 1945. But they lost control of the country to the French in 1883. France started sending its navy and troops in 1862 to protect its missionaries, but one thing led to another, as they say, and they conquered the country, as well as Cambodia and Laos, and formed

French Indochina in 1887. This is really the beginning of the Vietnam War."

"Sounds like the Europeans did the same thing here that they did in China," offered Shields. I was thinking the same thing, remembering what Paulie had told us on that rainy summer day at the lumberyard.

"It was an old playbook by this time," answered Edgars, "and once they had conquered the country, they did everything they could to make sure all the Vietnamese people knew who was in charge. There was a lot of resistance, and starting around the time of the Russian revolution there were three Communist parties that were set up.

"Japan invaded Vietnam in September 1940. They needed to control Indochina to close off one of the main routes for the Allies delivering arms into China. It was also part of Japan's goal to expel all Western countries from what they called Greater Asia, which would become totally controlled as part of the Japanese Empire at the start of World War II. Remember, Japan, Italy, and Germany were allies during World War II. They signed what was called the Tripartite Pact in September 1940. So, when Japan invaded Vietnam, it was run by one of its allies, the Germans, because the Germans had already defeated France in June. The Pact said that Japan had "lordship" over Greater East Asia. It took a while for the puppet government in France to replace the people in Vietnam who didn't go along with the new order, but the Japanese decided to keep the French in an administrative role while they effectively did what they wanted to do without having to deploy too many soldiers.

"Some of the Vietnamese welcomed the Japanese. If they had to choose between being ruled by Europeans or Asians, they would choose Asians. The Japanese played the 'liberator' hand, rather than acting like conquerors. They tried to win the Vietnamese over and get

them to feel like they were part of a great movement to drive out the Western imperialists."

"Where was the U.S. in all of this, Sir?" asked Shields.

"Half of our raw rubber came from Vietnam at the time, so we had a strong interest in keeping the imports flowing. Before the Japanese invaded, we tried to do what we could to support the French. But everything changed after Pearl Harbor. By the middle of '43, President Roosevelt was talking about Vietnamese independence. We were supporting both the Chinese and the Vietnamese against the Japanese. We worked closely with Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh, and Ho Chi Minh was convinced that the U.S. would support the return of Vietnam to the Vietnamese people following the end of the war. There was only one catch. The Viet Minh and Ho Chi Minh were Communists. Same story as in China."

"I guess there are lots of loose ends in this story that end up in China, so we're probably going to have to hear about them, too, right Sir?" said Pinkewicz.

"Right, Mr. Pinkewicz. I'll get back to them another time if I make it thought the first bout with the Cong's bamboo sticks. What happened next was very interesting. Remember that I said the Nguyen Dynasty lasted until 1945? Japan started losing territory in 1944 after the American forces re-took the Philippines. France was liberated in September 1944, and the Vichy government that oversaw the colonial government in Vietnam was abolished. In March of '45, the Japanese accused the French in Vietnam of helping the Allies and kicked them out and arrested the ones that stayed. All the French soldiers were disarmed, and the Japanese invited the Nguyen Dynasty emperor to take charge. It made Vietnam a member state of its Greater Asia sphere.

"Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh controlled an area in northwest Vietnam, and in June he declared that it was a free zone. The Japanese had too many other things on their hands, so they ignored him. Ho used this lull in the action to recruit new soldiers, and by August, just before Japan surrendered, he had over 100,000 new recruits. Viet Minh started seizing control of villages and towns that had been controlled by the Japanese, and the emperor abdicated and pledged his support to the new Viet Minh government."

"I have a strong feeling I know what happens next, Sir," said Hellring.

"What do you think happens?" asked Edgars.

"The French want to take it back, and the U.S. lets them."

"Correct. As long as Ho was fighting the Japanese, he was our friend. As soon as the Japanese were defeated, he was our enemy. Why? Because he was a Communist. He even wrote a letter to President Truman and sent it as a telegram. It was dated the 28th of February 1946. It has the title "President Ho Chi Minh Vietnam Democratic Republic Hanoi". It's addressed to President of the United States of America Washington, D.C. I don't remember it all verbatim—although I did have to do that for an exam in college. It starts out with "On behalf of Vietnam government and people, I beg to inform you…," and then he says the French are preparing to stage a coup in Hanoi. He asks for the Americans to interfere urgently in support of Vietnam's independence and, quote, "help making the negotiations more in keeping with the principles of the Atlantic and San Francisco Charters. Respectfully, Ho Chi Minh."

"What are these charters, Sir?" I asked.

"The Atlantic Charter was something Roosevelt and Churchill produced in August 1941, before America was in the War. There were

eight principles, but the one Ho refers to is the one about respecting the right of all people to choose the form of government under which they will live. The San Francisco Charter is the one that creates the UN. It has similar language."

"So, what did Truman say, Lieutenant?" asked Shields.

"My wildass guess again," interrupted Hellring, "is that Truman ignored him. Am I right, Sir?"

"Right again," said Edgars. "It's called diplomacy. The French had told us they wanted to keep Indochina and that we should keep out of it. So that's what we did. If Truman answered he would have had to either tell the truth or make up some excuse for not abiding by what Roosevelt had promised. So, he did what a good politician would do. He punted."

"So, a new war starts?" asked Phillips.

"Not immediately," answered Edgars. "The French called for negotiations with Ho Chi Minh, and they worked out an agreement that looked promising. The French would recognize the Viet Minh government for all of Vietnam and give it the status of a free state within the French Union. French troops would gradually be withdrawn over a period of five years. But then the French started backtracking. While Ho was getting moral and maybe other types of support from the Chinese Communists, groups in the south where Saigon is located were being supported by Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese forces. The French government decided to give this southern region special status as an autonomous republic.

"In late November of '46, the French made the stupid decision to bomb the port city of Haiphong in the northeast part of the country. It started with the French ship seizing a Chinese junk that was bringing supplies to the Viet Minh. Viet Minh forces fired at the ship killing

twenty-three crew members. Fighting broke out on land, and several more French soldiers were killed. When word reached Paris about the skirmishes, Paris sent an order back saying that it was time to give the Viet Minh a severe lesson. That's what it said, a "severe lesson". The French gave an order for the Viet Minh to evacuate the French and Chinese parts of the city. When they refused, the French started shelling the city. Six thousand Vietnamese were killed. You heard me right: six thousand. The French followed this up by demanding that all Viet Minh withdraw completely from the city, which they did. The French then put all their efforts into taking complete control of Hanoi, which is where Ho Chi Minh had set up the Vietnamese government.

"It sounds like the French had no intention of leaving Vietnam in five years or ever," offered Pinkewicz.

"If they really thought it through, they would have left right after the war and handed it over to Ho. But they had their pride and their settlers who had businesses delivering rubber to all those cars the French would be driving. It also wasn't just Vietnam the French were trying to hold onto. Cambodia and Laos were part of the Indochina colonies, and if Vietnam was lost, so would the others go as well."

"The old domino theory rearing its ugly head again," I added.

"We sent over a staffer from the State Department to try to get a feeling for what was going on with Ho, to see if there was a way out of the log jam. His name was Moffat. He came back with the news that was no news to anyone, and that was that Ho was a Communist and if he took over Vietnam it would become part of the China/Russia Communist area of influence. A week before Christmas in '46, the French moved on Hanoi. Two days later, the Viet Minh counter attacked. This was the official start of what was called the First Indochina War that lasted from 1946 until 1954. Moffat predicted that the French were going to lose big. It turned out he was right.

"By the end of '48, the French had lost 30,000 troops and were outmanned almost three-to-one. The French continued to try to form a country out of the groups in the country that didn't support the Viet Minh, but more than half of the Vietnamese did support full independence and the Viet Minh. In the meantime, during '49, the Soviets detonated their first nuclear bomb and Mao declared victory in China. China stepped up its support for the Viet Minh, and the U.S. began to send financial aid to the French. We also delivered a couple of dozen B-26 bombers. In August of '49, the first U.S. military advisors arrived in Saigon. They were called the Military Assistance Advisory Group. We called them 'Maggies'. This would be the foundation of our increased involvement in the years to come.

"In January of 1950, the Soviets and Chinese officially recognized Ho's government. The U.S. and UK recognized the rival government run by Bao Dai, the old emperor. That was it for our hope to bring Ho into our camp. The Korean War started in June of '50, so the Chinese and Russians had their plates full helping their ducklings and bear cubs."

"And we weren't exactly sitt'n on our hands either," added Hellring.

"Correct," replied Edgars. "The French had some military successes in '51, but in the next two years things went back and forth. The Viet Minh lost many men, the French lost fewer but still a lot, and they couldn't gain secure control over any territory. Back in France, protests started against the war. Then in 1954 came the big battle in Dien Bien Phu in the northwestern part of the country, west of Hanoi. The French had an airfield there. This was the last major battle of the war between France and the Vietnamese, and France lost. It was in March. The Viet Minh used rockets supplied by the Soviets. Out of the 20,000 French soldiers, 2,200 were killed, around 12,000 were captured and

1,800 are still missing. The Vietnamese had many more killed and wounded, but they had more men to lose. They won the battle, and then it was all over for the French. There was a conference in Geneva where France and Ho negotiated what they said would be a temporary division of the country. There were supposed to be elections in 1956 for a government covering the entire country. The agreement wasn't signed because the southern Vietnamese forces didn't accept even a temporary division of the country.

"So, in 1955, Vietnam was divided into North and South. Ho Chi Minh was already in charge of the North, and someone called Diem was made prime minister by the emperor in the South. Most of the Catholics in the North began heading south in what they called the passage to freedom. After a while, Diem kicked out the emperor, made himself president and his brother vice president of what they called the Republic of Vietnam. They started to round up anyone suspected of supporting the Communists. Diem was a Catholic himself, and he surrounded himself in his government with Catholics, who had mostly supported the French during the period of colonial rule and during the First Indochina War. Most of the Vietnamese people were Buddhists, so this didn't make him so popular. He made the poorer people even angrier because he stopped the land reforms he promised. He even gave the land that the poor farmers had been given during the Viet Minh land reforms back to the old landlords.

"Ten years are going to pass until we get to where we are today, ten years when we Americans could have done so many things differently. Ten years when one group of smart people said one thing, and another group of smart people said another. Ten years when we have three different presidents here and a Soviet Union that is starting to act like it's strong enough to blow the United States off the face of the Earth.

"Diem had one thing going for him, and that made him popular with the Americans. He was a staunch anti-Communist. He had anyone who was suspected of being a Communist jailed or executed. Then the revolution started in the South instigated by the North. There were lots of different groups, including leftovers from the Viet Minh. In 1960, the North made it official and created the Viet Cong as a united group of insurgents in the South.

"What's an insurgent?" I asked.

"Rebel," answered Pinkewicz, "Like the American patriots in the Revolutionary War."

"Right, and very true," said Edgars. "In 1960, there was a presidential election in the U.S. and John F. Kennedy won.

"I remember our priest said we should all say an extra prayer every day to keep the first Catholic president safe," I said.

"I guess you Catholics didn't pray hard enough," quipped Shields.

"The Cold War had come to a head just as Kennedy entered the White House. In April of 1961, after only four months in office, he approved the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. We know how that turned out. In August, the Soviets built the Berlin Wall, separating East and West Berlin. We don't know where that's going to lead. In October of '62 we had the Cuban missile crisis when it looked like a nuclear war was going to start. The Soviets backed down and pulled their missiles out, but it scared the pants off everybody. We started adding advisors to the original nine hundred sent to Vietnam by Eisenhower. By 1963, we had 16,000 military personnel in Vietnam. The Viet Cong were running circles around the South's army, but Kennedy stood firm on not committing any American soldiers to the fight. They were there to advise and train.

"Ain't this about the time the Buddhist monk set himself on fire?" asked Hellring.

"Yes. Diem's forces killed nine monks who were protesting because the government had banned them from flying the Buddhist flag on Buddha's birthday. Can you imagine something more stupid? The monk set himself on fire as a sympathy protest. More of them did the same thing. In November of '63, some of the South's generals decided they had enough of Diem and told us that they were going to arrange a coup and kill Diem and his brother. We didn't do anything to stop them. In November, Diem and his brother were killed. The generals took over, and then one set of generals after another toppled their predecessors. And one American general after the other predicted that the war would be over within the year. The only thing that was over at the end of 1963 was the presidency of John F. Kennedy, and then Vice President Johnson took over.

"In the middle of '64, just two years ago, there was the incident in the Gulf of Tonkin with the USS Maddox, a destroyer. It was attacked by the North Vietnamese, and that led to retaliatory airstrikes. Congress gave the president the power to respond with force to any attack against U.S. forces. This is when we started bombing North Vietnamese and Viet Cong targets. Johnson campaigned against Goldwater on a pledge that he wouldn't send American boys to fight for Vietnam, saying that the Vietnamese should be doing it themselves. He won a landslide victory. But when the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese started attacking American bases and killing American soldiers, he decided that he had to act. He didn't want to be the president who lost Vietnam, like Truman was accused of losing Korea.

"The ground war involving Americans began in March of '65, when thirty-five hundred Marines landed at Da Nang. They went in to defend the Da Nang Air Base. Americans aren't used to fighting a

defensive war, and that's why the number of men being sent to Vietnam has been increasing since March of '65. We've got around 125,000. We've got General William Westmoreland as the commander in charge, and he doesn't like losing."

There was no longer any light filtering through the thatch. We sat on the bamboo platform and talked for a little while, and then we heard a gong outside and one of the guards was yelling, "Go sleep! Go sleep!"

"One more thing," said Edgars before we followed the guard's orders, "don't hate these people. It's their country. We're helping one group of them, but we could just as well have decided to help the Viet Cong. They're doing their job. It will be much easier for you to get through what's ahead for you if you remember that. We learned that in officer's training school. We also learned that we most likely would be killed if we were captured."

We spent our first night in our new home. As I fell asleep, I remembered watching Johnson's speech on TV. Connie and her whole family had come into our living room, and we all sat there together and listened. Zio was there, too. Mom cried, Helen cried, Connie cried, and I could see that Pa, Zio and Nonno were all choked up. Tony and I sat there, dazed. I didn't know what to think. None of it made any sense, even though President Johnson started his speech by saying it would be about why we're in Vietnam. But now, after Lieutenant Edgars gave us the full story, it all makes sense. I can see now how we got here and why we're there. Just like it was Pa's and Zio's bad luck to be at the right age to go to the Second and Korean wars, it was my bad luck to be the right age to go to Vietnam. Crap. That's all I have to say. Crap.

Three years passed. We were never moved. We figured out quickly that our manioc harvesting fed more than ourselves and the guards, so our labor was worth more to the Viet Cong than storing us in a prison cell. It was also probably the reason they didn't beat us to death. The one exception to beating was Edgars. His beatings started within days after we got to camp. They weren't for getting information, Hellring told us. They wanted him to sign papers criticizing the U.S. government and saying how well he was treated. After the beatings, they would put him into the cage and leave him there for a week or more. Then they would bring him back to the hut. We'd try to nurse him, but he just got weaker and weaker. One morning, less than six months after we arrived in the camp, we came out and he was lying in the bottom of the cage, dead. I got to dig his grave and put him in it. When I finished covering him, the guard pulled me away so I couldn't mark it in any way. I did manage to take his dog tags. I put them in my pants with Connie's letters.

Dysentery was the worst part of captivity. It came with a regularity that was almost predictable. Bloody diarrhea, abdominal pain, fever, dehydration. One of in the hut would start and it would work through the other four. It was the same in the other huts. It lasted a week, we would be free for several months, and then it would start again. No one in our hut died, but three others in the camp did.

Today was like every other day when it was our hut's turn to dig the manioc. A guard tied us up like when we were marched from our camp to the prison. We each picked up a cane basket as we started our walk and chose a pair of boots. My hut mates always let me wear mine. The basket would weigh sixty pounds when we returned with it full of manioc. The walk through the jungle to the village where we dug the manioc took around two hours. I now knew every step of the trail by heart. I knew where every root protruded that I had tripped over a dozen times. I knew where guards had killed snakes and kept my eyes

sharp when I passed the places. When we reached the manioc field, the villagers were already there, as usual. We picked up one of the dull knives that lay in a pile where the crew had left them the day before and began our work.

We started digging when suddenly three choppers appeared out of nowhere. Bullets were piercing the ground all around us making that distinctive 'thump, thump, thump' sound. Our guard got off one shot before a spray of bullets cut him in half vertically. I dove to the ground, closed my eyes, and began repeating a prayer: "Don't kill me! Don't kill me! Don't kill me!" No more than a few minutes passed. I didn't look up, but I could hear that the choppers were on the ground. I turned over on my back, put both of my arms in the air and yelled at the top of my lungs: "Private Fabriano! One-Oh-One First Airborne!" I repeated it again. Then I heard "Private Philipps! One-Oh-One First Airborne!" Then "Sergeant Hellring! One-Oh-One First Airborne!"

Six soldiers ran toward us. While five stood guard, one checked our tags. When he finished, he said, "Foller us. We're gonna take ya'all da hell outta here."

It all went so fast, from a manioc field in central Vietnam to a military hospital in Germany. For the first week I was there, I had one set of medical tests after another. I didn't get any real food during that time. The nurses explained that after three years of eating manioc and occasionally the plant's leaves, my body might not be ready for a steak. I wanted to call home, to talk to Connie and Ma and Pa, to tell them I was alive, but I wasn't allowed to talk to anyone until I was debriefed by the Army. There wasn't much I could tell them, except for the day we were captured, how we got to the camp where we were held, and how Lieutenant Edgars died. I asked if they went to the camp to get the other prisoners out, but no one knew the answer to my question.

Finally, after two weeks at the hospital, I was able to make a phone call to Ma and Pa, but not directly. It was around one o'clock when I was taken by a nurse into a small room in the hospital. In the room was a table and chairs. On the table was a telephone and sitting in one of the chairs was an officer, a lieutenant. He told me he was going to phone my parents so that he could prepare them to talk to me. He said it was their experience that parents and wives could become very excited if they receive a phone call directly from someone who has been missing in action. He said they had sent Ma and Pa a telegram telling them that I was alive and that they would be phoning on this day at this time. He said they had instructions to have only family members on the call. "Will I be able to make another call to my girlfriend?" I asked. He shook his head no. "Not until you have been completely debriefed and you are discharged."

He checked with me to be sure the number was correct, and then he dialed, or I should say, he punched in the numbers. "It's a speaker phone, so you won't need to use a handset. I heard the phone ringing, and then I heard Pa's voice.

"This is Lieutenant Collins at a U.S. Army Hospital in Germany. With whom am I speaking?"

"This is Carmen Fabriano, Nickolas's father. His mother, Virginia is here with me."

"Private Fabriano is here with me, so you can talk directly with him now."

"Hi Ma. Hi Pa. How are you?"

"Oh Nicky, it's so good to hear your voice. We're fine now that we know you are alive. Thank God."

"I've thanked him many times for keeping me alive for the past three years, and now I will be thanking the crew that rescued me and two of the other prisoners I was with that whole time."

"When will you come home?" asked Pa.

"I'm not sure," I said, and I looked over at Lieutenant Collins.

"The doctors say he has gotten most of his strength back, so I expect he will be mustered out and will be taken back to the States within a month."

"I won't be able to make any more phone calls. Please tell Connie that I love her and have thought of her every day."

Just under one month from the time of that phone call, I walked out of the same gate at Fort Dix I had walked through three-and-a-half years before. Everyone was there waiting for me. Connie came first, and we kissed. Neither one of us wanted it to end.

Ma and Pa hugged me together. We were all crying too hard to say any words.

Nonno Berto said, "I couldn't go until I knew you were safe."

Franky and Donna said, "We got married, but we can do it over again for you."

"This is my fiancé, Jenny Williams," said Tony. "We've been waiting to get married so that you could be my best man."

"This is Nicola. He's two," said Annie.

"You lived through the worst that life has to offer, Nicky," said Zio Al. "The rest will be easy. Enjoy it."

Chapter 6

LIFE CAN BEGIN

Connie was in the last semester of her senior year at Sacred Heart College when I came home. One of the first things she did was give me all the letters she had written to me every day during the time I was missing in action. After I read them, I felt like I had never left—except for one thing. It was hard to explain, but I felt it. I left home four years ago as a boy, but it wasn't a boy who returned. I didn't have any more experience with women and sex than I had when I left, which was a total sum of zero. But that's not what makes a boy a man, I decided. It's taking personal responsibility, having to make decisions that affect other people, both people you know and people who are complete strangers. I had lived with men—there were no women in our camp or the prison—from all over America, and we all had to do our jobs. But we had to look out for each other, especially after we were prisoners. A few of the guys felt like they were there to kill as many Viet Cong as they could aim their guns at, but most of us were there to do the jobs we had been assigned, and to get the hell out of there as soon as we could.

What I didn't expect was that Connie had become a woman without leaving The Orchard. As she had done from the moment we first met, she continued to surprise me.

"I had a long talk with Ma," said Connie when we were alone in the living room after dinner on my first night at home. "She said I would have to make up my mind about whether to stay a virgin. If I decided not to stay a virgin, I would have to take the consequences of getting pregnant and dropping the the idea of law school. She said it would be my decision because you wouldn't force me to do anything I didn't want to do, but if I told you I wanted us to make love, you wouldn't say no."

"I'd be lying if I told you that I didn't fall asleep every night for the past four years dreaming of making love with you, Connie. Your ma's right, though: it's going to be your decision. I will tell you one thing. It means as much to me as it does to you that you have the life that you want to have, and I'll wait until you're ready, either to get married or to find a quiet spot in the woods. And I promise you I won't be practicing with someone else in the meantime."

"Okay, Nicky. We'll see how long I can hold out."

As it turned out, we waited until Connie graduated from college and had been accepted to law school. Our wedding was on the 30th of June 1970. Tony was my best man, and Connie's best friend from grade school and high school, Judy Koslawski, was her maid of honor. Despite the Catholic Church's teachings, we practiced the triple method of birth control: pill, rubber, and rhythm, just to be sure a little one didn't pop out during the three years that Connie was completing her law degree at Temple. We made up for all those years of absence and abstinence, and every time was better than the last—for both of us. Connie made sure she told me that, and she wouldn't lie. Ever.

A month or so after I got back from Vietnam, when I had mustered out of the Army and had been able to start sleeping through the night without waking up with a fright from a dream that a bomb had landed in my bunk or that I was left in the cage to die by the Viet Cong, I talked with Pa about my idea of becoming a policeman.

"From engineer to airplane mechanic to policeman," he said. "You sure that's the basket where you want to put your eggs?"

"You and Zio aren't old enough to retire, so it's too early for me to take over the car repair business. With the experience I got in Vietnam, I suppose I could apply to Allegheny for a job. But I honestly think I want to be a cop, and I want to work right here in DC."

"How much of it has to do with Lucca?"

I was surprised by his question.

"It has more to do with how Tommy handled the whole thing. If all the cops in town had been honest like Tommy, Lucca's father never would have been able to get the whole thing started."

"Do you want me to talk to Tommy?"

"No. I'm going to put in my application and see where it goes. If it goes nowhere, I have my backup in Avoca with Allegheny. If that doesn't work out, I'll start with night classes and try to get into college."

And that's how we left it. There wasn't an opening in the DC force when I applied. Tommy promised that he would put my name up as soon as there was. Allegheny was only too happy to have an experienced mechanic, so I started the day after I applied for a job. It wasn't until after Connie and I were married for a year, in the summer of '71, that one of the six men on the force decided to retire early after he was caught selling drugs he had confiscated as part of an operation. Tommy recommended me, and I was hired as a reserve in training. It took a year after I started the training, but I made it.

Connie started law school at Temple University in the fall of '70. Zio gave her an almost brand-new *Pontiac LeMans* to make the trip down to Philly every week. She left early on Monday morning and drove back on Friday after her classes were finished. It was about a two-and-a-half-hour drive. She could have done it in less than two with the *LeMans*, but she said she couldn't afford to lose her license. The Chief agreed to let me work double shifts during the week so that I was always off on the weekends. Sometimes Connie had to study for tests and write papers, but the rest of the time we did everything together. We always made time for our walk, for church on Sunday and a visit to the cemetery afterward.

Waving good-bye to Connie every Sunday evening during the nine months of those three school years was really hard. She told me there were many times when she was driving home from Philly on a Friday when she had decided she wouldn't return when Sunday arrived. But she always did. I always said the same thing to her as she was climbing into her car: "Call me when you get there to let me know you made

it okay." She always called, and we made it through those years without any accidents of any kind.

We were all there for her graduation: Helen and Zio, Ma and Pa, Annie and Guy, Charlie, Tony and Jenny, Franky, and Donna. Only Nonno Berto was missing. He died within three months of my return from Vietnam. It was a heart attack, just before his eighty-fifth birthday. As he promised, he passed on his recipe for fertilizer to me. It was in an envelope that Ma gave me when she came home from the reading of the will. Along with a check, there was a note: "Dear Nicola, Remember, you have to use the fertilizer so it doesn't lose its magic, and pass it on to your grandson. Love, Nonno Berto."

It was noon on the Saturday two weeks after Easter, the 15th of April 1972. We were at the cemetery for Charlie's funeral. With the overwhelming amount of sorrow felt by everyone who had gathered there to pay their last respects, it would have been a small but appreciated token for the weather to at least be accommodating. It wasn't. A steady rain fell, the kind of rain that makes you feel that it will not stop soon. It didn't. It rained for the entire ceremony, for the rest of the day and well into the evening. It was cold, in the 40s, and the rain made it feel colder. The ground was still not completely thawed out from the cold winter. It had been below zero in February. Last season's water-logged grass was like a sponge underneath our feet. As I and the other pallbearers, including Guy and Franky, carried Charlie's casket and placed it over the grave, I could see that the bottom of the grave was filled with water. Cruel, I thought.

Helen, Annie, Tony, and Connie, all in black, were huddled closely together on the other side of the grave from where I was standing. Helen, Annie, and Connie wore black veils. Pa and Zio Al were behind them holding large, black umbrellas over them. Only Tony's white face, pale after the long winter, broke the blackness. Inside the coffin were only the charred remains of the young man who had been Charlie.

"What was it like there, in Vietnam?" Charlie asked me one day. It was the summer of '70, after I came home, between his junior and senior years in college.

"You don't want to go there if you can avoid it, Charlie," I had said.

"I've spent three years in ROTC, and will stay in for the fourth," he said. "I decided when I started college that if the Vietnam War is still going on when I graduate, I'll go."

"Why?" I asked.

"For the same reason Tony wanted to get drafted, I guess. Pa died over there. I feel like it's something I have to do."

"It's not worth it, Charlie, believe me. When our fathers went to the Second World War, they were fighting for something, to free Europe from the Nazis and to free Asia from Japanese domination. They were also fighting to show that they were Americans and not Italians. In Korea, we weren't fighting for something. We were fighting against something, against the people who live there, to stop them from becoming Communists. Your pa didn't have to go, but he made that decision and you all have spent your lives without a father. North Korea is solidly Communist, and South Korea is a dictatorship. We're doing the same thing in Vietnam, fighting against the people. We didn't win in Korea, and I don't think we're going to win in Vietnam, not after what I saw there."

He didn't say anything, and that's how we left it. He had great grades when he graduated from high school, and really good SATs. He even scored high on the National Merit Scholarship tests. He could have gone anywhere, but he stuck to his decision to go to the U and live at home. He drove into the city every day with Connie during his first three years. Then he took over Connie's car after we got married in 1970. ROTC became optional in Charlie's junior year, but he stayed in right through senior year and graduated with a second lieutenant commission in 1971.

The war in Vietnam was still going on when Charlie graduated, and Richard Nixon was in his third year of his first term. In his first year as president, 1969, when there were over half a million U.S. troops in Vietnam, Nixon started what he called the Vietnamization of the war. By that time, 31,000 American lives had been lost in combat, but it didn't look like our involvement was making any difference, and protests were getting bigger and louder. Vietnamization was intended to reduce American involvement in the war by transferring all military responsibilities to South Vietnam. According to Nixon's plan, we were going to build up South Vietnam's armed forces, withdraw our troops, and let the South Vietnamese fend for themselves. I remember listening to his speech on television announcing this new strategy, and how he criticized Johnson for what he called 'Americanizing' the war. That all started long before Johnson and Kennedy, when Nixon was Vice President to Dwight Eisenhower, and we started sending over advisors.

Two years later, when Charlie graduated, the war was winding down. That summer, the Democrats were trying to get Nixon to withdraw all U.S. forces. Between September of 1970 and October of 1971, the last major ground operation involving U.S. troops took place. Charlie didn't have to go to Vietnam. The day after he shipped out on the 12th of January 1972, Nixon announced that 70,000 of the 139,000 troops still in Vietnam would be pulled out by the 1st of May. He was stationed in Saigon and was on a routine patrol mission east of the city with six of his men a couple of weeks before Easter when they walked into a booby trap that exploded, killing all of them instantly. The letter arrived on Good Friday, and he came home in a box a week later.

Helen was so nervous from the time that Charlie left U.S. soil for Vietnam that she could barely talk for the two months before he was killed, and she was unconsolable for months after the funeral. Gradually, she began to live again. The sadness never really left her for the rest of her life. You could see that she tried hard for Zio Al's sake, to laugh and enjoy the life that they had started together. Those times were few. She placed the veil she wore at Charlie's burial in a drawer, but it was as if it was still there, covering her face every day.

Connie, Annie, and Tony carried their grief in different ways. I never told Tony about my conversation with Charlie, but I did tell Connie. She tried for four years to convince Charlie not to stay in ROTC and not to volunteer to go to Vietnam. She told him he was being selfish by volunteering. When Zio came over to tell us that the letter had arrived informing Helen of his death, her first words were reproachful: "Why couldn't he listen!" Then she hurried over to comfort her mother. She mourned and then accepted his death as his choice. Tony never forgave the government for Charlie's death or the deaths of the other 57,939 service members whose names are engraved on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. We were all there at the dedication of the Memorial in 1982. Annie saw it as another cruel act by her father's tormentor.

"How was your day?" I asked Connie as she came into the kitchen one day. She had taken off her shoes, but aside from that, she looked like a lawyer who could step into a courtroom and begin to prosecute for the plaintiff or defend the accused. She was working as a clerk for the county district attorney, a job she was offered right after she finished law school, and she was into her third year. She had three more months before our first baby was due.

"It was one of those days when I felt like I should have gone to work in the dress factory with Mom so I could feel like I accomplished something. I could look at the pile of clothes I sewed and feel like I did work that was worth getting paid for. Do you have days like that, Nicky?"

"Most days. That's why I help Pa and Zio out on the weekend, so I can make up for the days when we're just sitting around or doing paperwork. But today was a good day. We brought Ricky in."

I had arrested Lucca's nephew, Ricky, that day. He had picked up where his father, Eddie, his uncle Lucca, and his cousin, Gino, left off. Eddie began running the show as soon as his brother Lucca was gone, and Ricky was his right hand. He was a year younger than Gino, and graduated with Connie's class, having done even less to earn his degree

than his cousin. Gino tried to find a place in his father's business, but even though his uncle did his best to help him, the rest of the gang couldn't forget that his father had been a snitch. He went to New York City, but we suspected that Genovese saw him as a loose end. He disappeared without a trace, and we assumed he was at the bottom of the Hudson wearing a pair of concrete shoes. Ricky was a loudmouth and a showoff, and he had never learned that if you want to be a criminal, you don't cause trouble that can put you in jail. That's what he did.

"Tell me you caught him with a bag of marked bills in one hand and a suitcase filled with drugs in the other," she joked.

"Nothing quite as serious, but enough to cause him some grief for a while. I was both the principal witness and the arresting officer on a case of civil disturbance. Someone from down the line, a real estate agent as it turns out, had come to town to sign a paper at the bank. He parked his car right in front of Eddie's place, where Ricky always parks his *Corvette*. Ricky came back from wherever he was and saw that his space was occupied. He got out of his car, pulled a crowbar out from under the seat, and proceeded to break all the windows and put a couple of dozen dents in the hood, trunk, and roof before I could cross the street and cuff him."

"Ricky defined the word evil," said Connie. "The genes in the entire Luccatella family became infected somewhere along the way."

Our cat, Tassel, knew when Connie's *Plymouth Valiant* had turned off Main Street and was close to the house. Wherever she was in the house, she would run to the front door to wait for Connie to come in, and she would lie down on the floor, roll over on her back, and expect a tummy rub that Connie was always more than happy to give her. I had worked the night shift on this particular day in early February 1981. I woke up around one in the afternoon and went next door to be with the kids. Ma and Helen shared the sitting duties with Carmy and Ellen, and today was Ma's turn. Then I went out to shovel the foot of snow that had piled up since I cleared it at seven when I came home from work.

I brought the kids home and started dinner. Carmy, who was going to turn five in a few months, was playing with his new dump truck on the floor, and Ellen, who just had her third birthday, was sitting at the kitchen table with her latest coloring book. We all went to the door when we heard it open, and waited our turns for hugs and kisses from our favorite person as soon as Tassel signaled that she was satisfied with all the attention she had received. We were having chicken cacciatore that Connie had made for Sunday dinner. I'd put it in the oven to heat it up. "I'll get out of my work clothes, Nicky, and be right down."

It didn't matter what was on at work, Connie was always home at 5.00 p.m., whether she was in the middle of a trial, like now, or prosecuting routine cases, one after the other. She left the courthouse at 4.30 p.m. on the dot. Even later, after she became a judge, first in the county and then for the feds, she was always home around five. We never talked about our work when we were sitting at the dinner table, and there were times when we had to be careful what we said when work did become a topic of conversation, either just between the two of us or with our extended families.

Connie liked to read to Carmy and Ellen before we put them to bed. When it was my turn to wash the dinner dishes, I turned on the radio to listen to the news. I had gotten hooked on our local National Public Radio station, WVIA. It had a good combination of local, national, and international news. Reagan was a month into his first term, and it seemed like all the news concerned him. Today was his seventieth birthday. His wife, Nancy, decided to throw a big party and invite all their Hollywood cronies who helped get her husband elected President and make her the most important woman in America. It wasn't like he needed a lot of help. Jimmy Carter lost most of the support he received four years earlier with the Iran hostage crisis and the situation with high interest and super high inflation. I voted for Carter only because I didn't want to lie to the whole family or tell the truth and risk upsetting them for the rest of our lives. I just hope Reagan keeps his hand off the nuclear button.

I left Connie with the kids reading the third or fourth "one last bedtime story" and went downstairs to brew a pot of coffee. Connie came down and we sat on the couch together. This was my second favorite time of the day. The first was naturally getting into bed. I poured coffee.

"Can you talk about the trial?" I asked.

A month ago, we got a 911 call from a witness to a car accident on Lonesome Road. When we got to the scene, one of the cars was burning, but we got the driver out. He was the only occupant of that car. The driver of the other car was dead. We pulled him out and it was Jimmy Facio. A passenger, a woman, was unconscious. An ambulance took her to the State Hospital, and I sent my men with her. In her purse was a gun. Later, when we ran ballistics on it, we found that it matched the bullets which were found in Lucca's skull. Bingo. She looked familiar. Her driver's license was five years old, and when I looked closely at the photo there was no question that it was Ginger.

We put her under heavy guard. When she woke up, we charged her with murder one, and that's the case that Connie is working on as the assistant to the Chief Prosecutor, Jim Walsh. No one had ever been prosecuted for Lucca's murder. What they found of Lucca at the explosion site was enough to ID him, but there was not enough evidence to link his gang with his death. There were two bullets in his head. A ballistics check at the time came up blank. Tommy advised Tony not to tell anyone what he saw because he would probably wind up dead before he had a chance to testify since he was the only witness. Except for the killers, only our family and Tommy knew that the woman in the trench coat was Ginger. I had my own ideas about who told Genovese that Lucca was talking, but I never brought up the subject with anyone.

"I can give you the broad-brush picture. I haven't told Jim yet, but I can't work on this case. Given the lack of real evidence, it probably won't go to trial anyway, at least not for murder one. But I know too much."

"You know who tipped off Genovese, is that it?"

"You figured that out all those years ago, but you let me hold on to my little secret. Yes, it was Annie."

"How?"

"My big sister should be running the CIA or writing spy novels like Ian Fleming and his James Bond books. She had a Polaroid camera from the time she was in high school. She took a photo of the federal agent and Lucca coming out of the restaurant and sent it to Genovese. She had put the camera in a donut box and walked right past them when they came out. She showed the picture to me. It was ingenious. She sent a short note with letters cut out of the newspaper. I was with her when she made it. "Lucca keeping company with Fed Agent Smith." She had somehow found his name. You know what happened after Lucca checked it out."

"Who else knows?"

"Ma. Annie told her after you arrested Ginger. She told Ma that she knew the whole story from when she was a little kid."

"Isn't it time to tell Tony?"

"Yes. Our families and Tommy are the only ones other than Genovese and Lucca's gang who know that two cars went into the site, and that Ginger was with them. There's no point coming forward with any of that story when none of us actually saw Ginger at the scene. We only have Stucciano's word on that, and he's long dead. The bullets they found in Lucca match the gun Ginger had when you arrested her, but there is no way to prove that she pulled the trigger. Facio was the last one of the gang who was at the scene who could say it was her, but she could just say it was him or one of the others."

"So, she's probably going to go back to wherever she came from?"

"That's what it looks like."

"We should ask her for her address and send her a can of cookies at Christmas."

To add to all the other wars we had been fighting, then-President Nixon added a War on Drugs in 1971. That's the year he declared drug abuse to be public enemy number one. The year before, he signed the Controlled Substances Act that called for the regulation of drugs and drug-like substances based on their potential to be abused. In 1973, he created the Drug Enforcement Agency that was supposed to deal with illegal drug use and smuggling of drugs into the country. If there had been a DEA back in '65 when Lucca was murdered, they probably would have been the ones who were keeping tabs on him and his gang. In 1991, local police forces like ours in DC had to make sure whatever we did around illegal drugs was in line with DEA policy.

If it really was a war, we weren't winning it. Between 1980 and 1990, the number of drug-related arrests in the country doubled. Even in the DC police force, we were spending more and more of our time on crimes and misdemeanors that had something to do with drugs, either driving under the influence, possession, or dealing. During the Reagan and now the George Bush, Senior presidency, there was lots of talk about law enforcement and putting the drug sellers behind bars, but with all the tax cuts, we didn't have the money to really make much of a difference. Drug use just seemed to be getting worse. We didn't have too much of a problem in DC. There was a small group of older teenagers who hung out around the stadium at night and smoked marihuana, and there was a larger group who congregated out at the edge of town and had beer parties. We didn't see any hard drugs.

Then, one Friday night when I was working a late shift, a 911 call came in. Gail Phillips was working the desk and took the call. She rushed into my office. "Chief! There's a drug OD at the youth center. I called the EMS and they're on their way." We ran out to the squad car. Gail drove. We got there before the ambulance crew. Danny Rossi was lying motionless on the floor of the music room floor. Kneeling next to him, sobbing, was Patty Leo. I bent over Danny and put my cheek close to his nose. "He's not breathing." Gail started CPR, and within a few minutes the emergency team came in and took over. Danny still wasn't breathing when they wheeled him out on the stretcher.

I left Gail to get a statement from Patty and followed the ambulance in the patrol car to the State Hospital. When I came into the emergency room, I met the doctor who had just declared Danny dead. I told him I would call Danny's parents and would wait for them to come in and identify their son. I made that call and then called Connie to tell her I would be late, giving her a brief account of what had happened. While I waited for the Rossis, I phoned the station and talked with Gail. Patty said she and Danny were in the music room. Danny was playing his guitar, and she was playing the piano. Three boys came in with guitars. They had never seen them before. After they played for a while, they took a break and came over to talk. They said they were from down the line and heard about the youth center from a friend in town. They didn't say who it was. Patty said that Danny was impressed with how well they played. One of the boys said he had help from a little pill. He took out a small plastic bottle, opened it, and gave Danny one of the pills. He said it was called ecstasy. "It's not really a drug," he said. Then they left. Patty said she pleaded with him not to take it, but he did. He picked up his guitar and started playing, but then he collapsed. That's when she called 911.

Connie was waiting up for me when I came in just after midnight. "I guess it was a rough night," she said while she gave me the hug that made the end of every workday worthwhile. It felt like she pulled out all the bad thoughts and feelings that had built up inside me during the day when she put her arms around me. We sat down next to each other on the couch.

"You remember Danny Rossi, don't you? I coached him in the Little League."

"He was a quiet, little kid who always had a smile on his face. Linda Rossi's in the Sodality. Junior always says hello when I come into the market. This is going to be very hard for them. Danny was their only child, and it took them a long time conceive."

"He was a good kid. He didn't drink. He didn't take drugs. He did well in school. I met him in town just a couple of weeks ago. He said he

was applying to Penn State to study engineering." I told her what Gail had learned from Patty.

"Some of us only get to make one mistake in life. Charlie decided to go to Vietnam. Some of us make one big mistake, but then get another chance. Ma took a ride home from Lucca, but then she met Zio Al."

"I saw soldiers putting stuff in their bodies that would make them fight or make them forget. When we were growing up, there were TV programs that showed black kids using heroin. They were always black, and it was always in a place like Harlem. They would put a torniquet around their bicep and then stick a needle in their forearm that was already covered in black and blue marks. Then their eyeballs would roll back, and their lids would close. Every time someone offered me a joint or a pill or asked me if I wanted to share a needle, I thought of the pictures of those kids and just said 'No thanks'."

"Linda and Junior will spend the rest of their lives blaming themselves for not teaching Danny that one important lesson," said Connie, "to always make sure whatever you put into your body won't kill you."

"We learn about the different drugs in material that the DEA sends to us. Ecstasy is not a killer unless it's mixed super strong or it has something else slipped in. The doctor thought it might have been an allergic reaction that was triggered by the drug. They are going to do an autopsy, and we are going to find the boys who gave Danny the drug to try to prevent another accidental death."

I was off duty the next day, but I went in around noontime to start the process of tracking down the kids who gave Danny the pill. Gail and Sam had called all the stations up to fifty miles south of us. There hadn't been any similar incidents that were reported. At dinner that evening, Carmy said there was a general assembly at the high school, and the principal told everybody what happened.

"All of us are different," said Connie. "Some of us can eat a wild mushroom that is poisonous and just get very sick, while someone else can eat the same mushroom and die. We've gradually learned over the years what mushrooms, berries, or species of fish can kill us if we eat

them, and we do our best to avoid them. We shouldn't experiment on ourselves because what might not cause any harm to someone else might hurt us."

"Someone who buys a bag filled with a powder that the person selling it says is heroin," I continued, "doesn't know for sure what's in that bag. It's the same with anything we eat or drink or inject into our bodies. It's the reason we license street vendors, so we can control what they are selling. Make sure you always check to see if a street vendor selling food has a license before you buy anything from them."

"Why do people take drugs?" asked Ellen. She would soon turn thirteen. Was she too young to be hearing about these things, I wondered. Connie answered my question.

"You're not too young to hear about these things, sweetie. We are not going to be with you when someone says you should try this pill or smoke this drug. You are going to be there all on your own, and you are going to have to make the decision to walk away from that person or to put your life in their hands. It will be especially difficult for you if you have decided that you trust or even love this person. They may tell you that you should do it for their sake. That will make it even more difficult. Saying no would be the right answer, the safer answer. Danny Rossi should have said no, and now he is dead."

"When I was I Vietnam, some of the soldiers took drugs. I was as afraid of taking drugs as I was of getting shot or blown up. Hopefully, neither of you will ever have to be someplace where you need to worry about being shot or blown up, but given the way the world is today, it is very likely you will be in places where you will be offered drugs."

"I promise not to take drugs," said Ellen.

"Me too," added Carmy. "Can I change the subject now that we've gotten this settled?"

"What would you like to talk about?" I asked.

"What it was like for you in Vietnam, and what it was like for Mom being here for all those years you were there."

"I was a helicopter mechanic. My job was to keep the helicopters in the air, not to shoot people. That's what I did for the first six months I was there. I went on leave to Seoul, and shortly after I came back, our base was attacked. It would be easy for me to say that it was three-and-a-half years subtracted from my life, but it wasn't. I was away from everyone I knew and loved. I couldn't take part in the lives of my family and friends, attend weddings and funerals, watch my favorite TV programs, cheer for my favorite teams, and most of all, be with your mother. For three of those years, I was in a kind of suspended animation, trapped and held prisoner in the middle of a jungle with no possibility to escape or communicate with anyone except the other prisoners. But I learned things I would never have learned, about what are the most important things in our lives. Or maybe it's better to say that the experience made me draw out the lessons that our ancestors learned thousands of years ago, which is how to survive.

"The Viet Cong could have killed all of us, but they needed something we could provide, which was our labor to harvest food which kept them and their army alive. I knew that every one of those maniocs that I pulled up out of the ground was helping the Viet Cong to keep on fighting, but I also knew that if I refused to pull up those maniocs, I would be dead. How many American or South Vietnamese soldiers' lives would I save if I stop harvesting manioc, or if I back-talked one of the guards, or if I refused to do the daily exercises? I was not an officer, like Lieutenant Edgars, who was the only officer captured and one of the six prisoners in the hut where I was kept. He would be tortured to betray America, and he was dead after six months of captivity. If I was an officer, like Lieutenant Edgars, I would not be here now, and you wouldn't be either. I thanked God every day for that gift. There is not a day that passes when I don't think about something that happened during those three-and-a-half years, but as strange as it may sound, I don't wish those years never happened.

"One more thing. Before Lieutenant Edgars died, he told us that we should not hold feelings of hate for our captors. If we did, it would

ruin us. We would be bitter for the rest of our lives if we survived. He was right."

"Your father and I weren't engaged when he left for Vietnam. I had just turned seventeen, and he was eighteen-and-a-half. I was in my senior year in high school. But we knew we were going to marry. I knew that since I was five years old."

"It only took one of your mother's patented kisses to convince me."

"When your father's letters stopped coming, I knew something had happened. Then the telegram from the Army came with the news that he was missing in action. They didn't know where he was, or whether he was alive, but I was certain your father was alive. I told him before he left that I was sure he would come home because God wants to see our children grow up. I studied, did my work, tried to help your grandmother Helen and Zio Al, but your father was constantly in my thoughts."

"Those words that your mother said to me, 'God wants to see our children grow up', I repeated every morning when I woke up and every night before I fell asleep. We had to bring both of you into this world, and I had to make sure I came home."

Tony, Franky, and I had started meeting for breakfast once every couple of months during the time Reagan was president. We called it the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club. We alternated between Marie's in DC and the Glider Diner in town. Franky and Donna had bought a nice house in the Hill Section, near the park, after Franky had finished medical school and his residency in Philadelphia, so every other time we met, Tony and I went into the city or Franky came out to DC. In high school, the Glider was one of Franky's favorite post-football game stops because it's so close to the stadium where West played its home games. Six years ago, Franky and Donna bought a house in Darlton. We all agreed to move Franky's home diner to some place closer to Darlton, and we settled on Carl's Summit Diner. It was a real diner, like the Glider, with

silver siding, high-flying diner sign, booths and counter stools in red vinyl upholstery, and all the trimmings.

We didn't have any schedule for our get-togethers, but it was always a Saturday morning when there wasn't anything more important going on. Tony and I saw each other pretty much every day, and we both talked by phone with Franky at least once a week. He was the one with the heaviest schedule, and one that was unpredictable. He was on the permanent staff at Community Medical Center, and he also took shifts at the State hospital where he didn't take pay. He says it's called pro-something.

The previous Saturday, we had been together at the one-year memorial mass for Pa and the lunch at Donnatelli's afterward. It was full. As I sat there at the funeral mass, I thought of the day a year before—it might have been this Saturday in December—when Pa, Carmy, and I went deer hunting with Tony and his son Guy. Carmy was in his senior year in high school, and Guy was a sophomore. Pa's years of smoking had finally begun to slow him down. He was always thin, but he had grown even thinner, and his face had lost its ruddiness. He was pale and he coughed a lot.

"I'll sit this one out," he had said. "I'll get the coffee going and have it ready for when you come back."

"Carmy, go with Tony and Guy and I'll stay here with Grandpa," I said. "I'll take the second round."

When they had gone, I asked Pa what the doctor said after his visit for tests the past week. He hadn't said anything about them, and when I asked Ma, she just said he didn't want to talk about them.

"They give me six months to a year," was his answer. "The cancer's gone past the lungs, so there's no use in operating or doing any of those treatments."

I couldn't say anything. I knew it was bad, because I could see it on him, but I had not imagined that it would be that bad. There was so little time. Six months. Maybe a year.

"I figure that will be enough time to teach Carmy the business. Has he talked to you about that?"

"We've had a few talks about his future. He told me that he was thinking of asking you if he could work in the shop while he decides whether he wants to go to college. He's got good enough grades to get in, but he said he has a feeling that he wants to run his own business. What has he said to you?"

"The same. He's got the mechanical skills, just like you did at his age. I think he should go to Johnson to learn some of the new stuff. Cars are just going to get more and more complicated, and the dealers are getting equipment that we can't put our hands on yet. We'll get them eventually, but only if we have enough guys who are educated in how to use them. The business is his if he wants it. Zio Al and I are in full agreement on that."

Pa managed to go into the garage for a couple of hours each day when Carmy came in after school. He taught him everything he could during the time he had left, which turned out to be almost a year to the day that we had talked while the others hunted. He died at home in his favorite chair while he and Ma were watching the sitcom, Empty Nest, on TV.

Franky was there when we arrived, as usual. We sat down and Edie was right there with the coffee, three mugs, and menus. "Do I need to write it down, or is it the usual, boys?"

"The usual," we said in unison. Edie poured the coffee while Franky handed out the silverware and napkins from their place at the end of the table, and we settled in.

"That was a nice memorial for your pa last week, Nicky," said Franky.

"I miss him," added Tony. "I don't really remember having a father. Your pa and Zio Al have both been like fathers to me."

"Ready or not, it's time for our generation to step up to the plate," I said.

"I'm not sure how Clinton got to be first out to represent us Boomers," offered Franky. "I think Bush had more to give. He should have won. I voted for him. Twice."

"Bill's a slick talker," said Tony, "and most people seemed to think it was time to break with the Republicans after twelve years and give the Democrats a chance. It should have been the other way around, with Gore leading the ticket."

"It doesn't feel like Clinton's always telling the truth," I said. "He has a way of not answering a question when it's a simple yes or no, like when he answered a question during the campaign, 'Did you every use drugs?' He said: 'I experimented with marijuana a few times, but I never inhaled.' Who believed him?"

Franky chimed in with, "Johnny Carson said something like 'That's the trouble with Democrats. Even when they do something wrong, they don't do it right'."

"Maybe Clinton will be less interested in sending our kids on war excursions to Central America, the Middle East, and other places like Reagan and Bush were," I said. "Everyone was cheering when the Berlin Wall came down and then the Soviet Union collapsed, but it looks like it just opened a gigantic jar full of snakes. Look at what's happening in what was once Yugoslavia."

"We're probably going to have to go into Serbia," said Tony, "either with the UN or NATO. My money's on NATO. I don't think there's going to be another UN-led mission after what happened in Somalia, especially if it's in Europe, and I'm pretty sure that Clinton is not going to do anything with just U.S. troops. The days are over of the U.S. invading countries like Panama on its own to depose leaders, even if they are corrupt and running drug rings here like Noriega."

Edie came with our breakfasts and filled up the cups. "Sounds like you boys are hitting your stride. Enjoy your breakfasts."

"I have to admit that I don't see any purpose for the UN when it comes to keeping the peace and stopping wars," Franky said after Edie

had left. "Maybe it does a lot of good stuff helping people with medicine and food, but how can you have an organization where members fight each other, and one side carries the UN flag and the other side doesn't? The Korean War was a UN operation, but Russia, who was a member of the Security Council, had thousands of troops there fighting with the North Koreans against mostly the Americans and South Koreans. China had over a million troops there, right Tony?"

"Right, but they weren't in the UN at the time. The UN isn't set up to fight wars. They figured that out in Korea. That was apparently the original idea, that it would be some sort of world peacekeeper, but none of the big powers wanted that. We don't know how many wars we wouldn't have had without it, or if our planet would still be here if there wasn't a place to blow off steam, but it didn't do jack shit about Russia taking over half of Europe, all that went on in Southeast Asia, and especially everything involving Israel. How Israel got established has led to many of the problems we've had, and it's only going to get worse as the Arab states push more rockets into the hands of the Palestinians. Look at what Saddam Hussein did at the start of the Gulf War. He invaded Kuwait. We said he needed to leave, so he started bombing Israel, thinking that Israel would bomb the hell out of Baghdad and all the Arab countries that had decided to join the U.S. in Dessert Storm would back out. Well, Israel didn't bomb Baghdad and we kicked all of Saddam's so-called elite troops first out of Kuwait and then back to their play pin."

"What happened with Israel," asked Franky. "It just seems like there has been one war after another that starts with a bunch of Arab countries invading. Why can't they find a solution that sticks after all these years?"

"Do you want to take the ten-minute-bus-ride version or the bring-the-whole-coffeepot-'cause-we're-gonna-be-here-for-a-while-version?" We knew that Tony did his master's thesis on the history of modern-day Israel.

"Can we do something in between," laughed Franky. "I'm on duty in two hours."

"Okay. I'll do my best to collapse the first two thousand years into a couple of minutes."

"I remember when Paulie said something like that about China, but give it your best shot, Tony," said Franky.

"The conflict between the Jews and the Palestinians in the area that is now called Israel and Palestine, and which we know it also as the Holy Land, boils down to whether the Jews have the right to run a country on land where the Palestinians lived. So, who was there first and who took what from whom matters, right?"

"Right," answered Franky. "We know that the Jews came before the Christians because Christ was a Jew. We know that the Christians came before the Muslims because Muhammad, who founded Islam, wasn't born until, when, the 6th century? That means the Jews win."

"That's pretty much the logic that was used when some world leaders began talking about a homeland for Jews who had been without one for over two thousand years," continued Tony. "If they had given it more thought and time, we might have fewer problems today. But let's look at the who-was-there-first problem. A Kingdom of Israel was formed in around 1000 B.C. by twelve tribes that descended from Jacob, who was also known as Israel. Israel in Hebrew means 'strives with God'. So, Israel the country was named after Israel the man. The kingdom covered the entire area that is now part of modern-day Israel and more, into what is now Jordan. Jerusalem was its center. There's the story of the Exodus that's in the bible, that the Jews escaped from Egypt, wandered around for forty years, and came to the Promised Land. That's probably a myth, but it doesn't matter. The Kingdom of Israel was established by the Jews who lived in what is now the country of Israel, whether they came from Egypt or wherever to start with. They built their temple in Jerusalem. After around a hundred years, the single kingdom split in two—don't ask me why—with Israel in the north and Judah with Jerusalem in the south."

"Where was Bethlehem, where Christ was born," I asked, "and Nazareth where he lived?"

"Bethlehem was in Judah in the south and Nazareth in the north, in Israel. But they were both Jewish kingdoms. Then trouble started. First, around 700 B.C., people in the north called Assyrians, who lived in the area that is now Syria, invaded and destroyed Israel, the northern kingdom. Then in 568 B.C., the Babylonians invaded Judah, conquered Jerusalem, and destroyed the first temple. The center of Babylon was where Iraq is today. The Jews regrouped and a second temple was built in 515 B.C. But the Greeks, and then the Romans invaded. The Romans captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C.

"I think my couple of minutes has gone out the window. I'll try to speed it up. The Romans controlled all of what was the original Kingdom of Israel and all the surrounding area, down into Egypt and northern Africa. They installed local governors in the lands they conquered. In 66 A.D., the Jews in the region around Jerusalem revolted. It was put down by Vespasian and his son Titus. They besieged Jerusalem, set fire to the Temple, left the city in ruins, and a million Jews perished. Sixty years later, the whole thing was repeated, and half a million Jews were killed, committed suicide, or starved to death. Many of those who were left were sold as slaves, others emigrated to anywhere where they could live without being persecuted, and others converted to Christianity. What had once been Judah was renamed by the Romans *Syria Palaestina*."

"Where did that name come from?" asked Franky.

"Bordering the original Kingdom of Israel, in an area furthest south, along the coast, there was a settlement occupied by a group called the Philistines, who were Greeks, not Jews. It was a little larger than the area called Gaza today, but it included the town of Gaza. The words 'Palestine' and 'Palestinians' come from 'Philistine', but Palestinians are Arab, Persian, and even non-Jews or former Jews from what was the Kingdom of Israel. Some claim the Romans renamed Israel because they wanted to wipe out any trace of the people who had caused them so much trouble. It could be as simple as that, but nothing is ever simple.

"So now let's sweep through the next nineteen hundred years. Constantinople became the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire in 330 A.D., and the entire Roman Empire after Rome in what became Italy was plundered in 455 A.D. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 A.D. For the next four hundred years, the Byzantine Romans—from Constantinople—pushed Catholicism into what had been Israel, with the entire focus on the birth, life, and death of Christ. With the founding of Islam by Muhammad, his stories about making nightly rides in the sky around Jerusalem on a horse, and about Christ being one of his prophets, Jerusalem and the Holy Land took on a strong importance for his followers. Muhammad died in 632."

"Within a couple of years, his followers had formed armies that would start to conquer everything in the name of Islam. Jerusalem was high on their list. A group of non-Muslim Persians had taken the city from the Byzantines in 614, massacred 90,000 Christians living in Jerusalem, and captured the True Cross. The Byzantines took it back in 628 and managed to get the True Cross back. Ten years later, in 638, the Muslims came, put the city under siege, and the Byzantine Romans surrendered. Jerusalem stayed in their hands until the Roman Catholic Crusaders took it in 1099. They held it for a little over one hundred years, repopulating the city and the region with Christians after almost 450 years of Muslim control. The Muslims took it back in 1187 and undid everything the Christians had done. Then, in 1517, the Ottoman Empire, who were Muslims, made it a part of their empire.

"There were almost no Jews left in the entire region by that time, less than a thousand families it's said. They were descendants of the Jews who had never left. Somehow, they survived under the Catholic and Muslim radar. Ottoman Turks controlled what was once Israel up to 1917, near the end of World War I. The Ottoman rulers had backed the wrong horse in the War, and their empire was broken up. Great Britain took control of the region, which they called the Palestinian Mandate, or Mandatory Palestine as it was also called. So now it's thirty-seven years up to the time when the State of Israel is declared,

but we need to go back to the 19th century and take a quick look at what was happening at the end of Ottoman rule."

"History's never a straight line, is it?" I commented. "But it's a lot easier to understand when Tony telling the story."

"Thank you, Nicky. I'll pick up the tip today for that compliment. There were three forces working together that had a big impact on what would happen later in Israel. First, the Ottomans were getting lazy, and they were letting things fall apart in the outer regions of their empire. This opened the door for the second force, which was a renewed interest in biblical studies and missionary activities in the Holy Land. Britain, France, Russia, Austria, and the United States opened consulates in Jerusalem. People began to travel to Jerusalem and the Holy Land as tourists. Then Jews began to come there to live. They settled first in Jerusalem, but then their numbers increased so that they founded new villages outside the walls. By 1880, Jews were in the majority in Jerusalem. Immigrating Jews bought land for farming all over what was once Israel and Judah. Hebrew began to be spoken on the street. This was the start of the Zionist movement. For Jews, Zion is synonymous with Israel, and Zionism is a nationalist movement that started in the 19th century to work for establishing a Jewish homeland in what was the Kingdom of Israel. The third force, which would turn out to be the strongest, was the increasing antisemitism in Russia and parts of Europe."

"I know this is another whole story on its own, but what did the Jews do to deserve all of the shit they have had to put up with over the last two thousand years?" I asked. "The little I know about it is full of restrictions on where they could live and what they could do. It always seems to point back to a pope or a king blaming them for something, like killing Christ, and forcing them into a ghetto."

"You're right, it is another whole story," answered Tony, "and it does come down to persecution initiated by and sanctioned by the Catholic Church and then other religious groups. So, when the western, Christian powers once again took control of the Holy Land, the time was right to make amends, but to do it with the least amount of impact on

their own countries. The man who led the charge was named Arthur James Balfour, the British foreign secretary during WWI. He had been Britain's Prime Minister from 1902 to 1905, so he was a powerful politician. In 1917, he wrote a letter to Baron Lionel Walter Rothschild, who was very, very rich and a leader of Britain's Jewish community. It's called the Balfour Declaration. Look it up in your encyclopedias when you get home. In summary, the Declaration says that Great Britain is in favor of a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine, and that the British government would do what it could to make that happen. He says that it should be done in a way that would not prejudice the civil and religious rights of the non-Jewish people who are already there."

"That probably didn't go down so well with the non-Jews," said Franky.

"Imagine if the U.S. Congress said that it would work to recreate a homeland in Northeastern Pennsylvania, including Drake's Crossing, for the Lenni-Lenape Indians. Do you think we would all sit on our hands and wait for Chief Taminent's great-great-great-great-grandson to show up at our door with his family and invite us to move out and find another place to live? 'We understand how much you have suffered, Chief. Come in and make yourselves at home. We'll just gather up some of our belongings and be on our way.' Is that what we would do? I doubt it.

"The British spent the time up to 1948 in damage control mode. It wasn't just Muslims who were affected. It was also Christians who had settled there. The local Muslim leaders had been assured that if they supported the British during World War I, and revolted against the Ottoman state, they would be rewarded when Britain gave up its Mandate. They felt betrayed. There were confrontations between Jews and Muslims, and people died. This had two results. First, it showed clearly that the Jews and Muslims would not be able to rule together in a single, united country. Second, the Jews decided they had to take their safety and security in their own hands, and they formed a militia. This proved to be decisive in the struggle for their existence.

"To try to stop the violence, Britain had to backtrack and restrict the number of Jews who would be allowed to migrate into the Mandate area. They put up quotas and required those entering to have a certain amount of money to be able to take care of themselves. This became even more difficult after Hitler made it clear that he was going to get rid of all the Jews in Germany and any other country it eventually controlled. European countries, and even America, restricted the numbers of Jews that were allowed to enter, even when it was clear that Jews were in danger if they stayed in Germany.

"In spite of the British restrictions in the Palestinian Mandate, Jews continued to come in. When World War II was over, and the extinction of six million Jews at the hands of Germans and their collaborators was an undisputable fact, the pressure grew to create a homeland for those Jews who wanted a safe haven where they could live without the potential threat of persecution or worse. Britain had had over forty-five years to come up with a solution that was acceptable to both major parties, the Jews and the other inhabitants of their Mandate, but they didn't. The United Nations was established in 1945, and one of their first tasks was to propose a solution for the division of land area defined by the Palestinian Mandate. The UN Special Committee on Palestine presented its plan in September 1947. It was adopted in November of the same year as Resolution 181. The 57 members of the UN voted, and the proposal passed. All of the Arab and Muslim states voted against it. It passed 33 to 13 with 10 abstentions and 1 absent. That was Thailand. The U.K. and China were among the abstentions.

"It was a clumsy compromise from all viewpoints. It gave the Jews most of the coastline, but also most of the desert. The Palestinians would get a big clump in the center of the territory completely encircling Jerusalem and bordering Jordan. They got the Philistinian strip including Gaza and an extension down along the border to Egypt, and another piece along the Lebanese border connected by a thread to the central clump. The Palestinians had already stated that they were not prepared to accept any division of the territory, but the Jews were prepared to accept any proposal that gave them a foothold, a place to call a homeland

from which to move further. Civil war broke out, and the British did everything they could to get the hell out of there before the entire powder keg blew. Their main concern was to secure their withdrawal routes. Arab volunteers entered the Mandate to fight against the Jews, but the British forces held the borders against regular armies. President Truman tried to stop the implementation of the plan for division, proposing a UN trusteeship, but it was too late. At midnight between the 14th and 15th of May 1948, the British Mandate ended. On the 14th of May, the governing body of the Jewish community, the Jewish National Council, proclaimed the establishment of a Jewish state to serve as the homeland for the Jewish people. It was their intention to restrict their state to the territory defined in the UN proposal. In the coming days, Lebanese, Syrian, Jordanian, Iraqi and Egyptian forces crossed into what was now Israel, and the first Arab-Israeli War had begun."

"Geez," said Franky, "it sounds like they couldn't have made more of a mess out of it if they had tried."

"What it took for this whole thing to succeed peacefully was good will on the part of the Arabs, to show pity for what the Jews had experienced, not only during the holocaust, but during the two thousand years they were displaced and suffered persecution. It also took a completely different attitude on the part of the Jews, one that showed appreciation for the sacrifices that would be made by the Arabs to give up something which they had had for almost two thousand years. Neither expression of understanding nor appreciation by either party were forthcoming. What happened when Israel was invaded was a complete defeat of the invaders, an expansion of the territory that had been allocated to the Jews, and an occupation of the territories that the Arabs had left, but not by the Israelis. Jordan occupied what became known as the Left Bank of the Jordan River, and Egypt occupied what became known as the Gaza strip.

"Egypt, Jordan, and Syria came back in 1967, and they got a shellacking. Israel took over the Gaza strip and the Left Bank, and extended its territory into Syria into the area called the Golan Heights. All the while, the UN did nothing. Then, in 1973, the Arab states were at it again.

Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, and Syria invaded Israel while most Israeli soldiers were observing Yom Kippur. It started on the 6th of October and was essentially over by the 25th. Israel suffered heavy casualties, and Nixon delayed shipments of arms for a week for reasons only he knew. But the Arabs lost again, and Israel took more Syrian territory."

"What could the UN have done differently?" I asked.

"It should have created a force to replace Britain to act as the government of the area during a transition period. The U.S. should have been part of that administration, but so should Turkey, which was an ally during World War II and largely Muslim. The UN should have set up a fund to compensate every family that felt they had to move from where they were living and ensure that the family had a place to which it could go, either within the territory or somewhere else. All the countries who were members of the UN should have set up administrative bodies to accept and resettle people who wanted to resettle in their country. Only when the resettlements were completed and both the Israelis and Arabs had established operating governments with proper police forces, schools, hospitals, and voting mechanisms, should the country have been divided. Both countries, Israel and Palestine, if that's what the people living there wanted to call it, should have been accepted into the UN and recognized by all UN members, without exception. If any country attempted to invade Israel or Palestine, it should have been expelled from the UN and not accepted back in until it paid reparations and committed to uphold Resolution 181. This is foreign policy 101. The UN flunked the course in 1948, and it has not had a passing grade since."

"It sounds pretty hopeless," lamented Franky. "I guess they can't start over."

"It's not totally hopeless," continued Tony. "Egypt and Jordan have found ways to establish diplomatic relations with the country they have fought against. But the Palestinian leadership until now has done nothing to help the situation. Maybe Arafat, after winning the Nobel Peace prize last year with Israel's Rabin and Peres, can start to create

the semblance of a country. That remains to be seen. He has lots of opposition to making any concessions to Israel, and he has only recently settled in Gaza after years of running the PLO from faraway places."

Edie was back. "You can stay as long as you like, boys, but I'm going off shift. Here are your checks. I'll see you in a couple of weeks."

She gave us our checks, and each of us gave her a fiver. "Make sure you pick my section when you come back," she said as she walked back into the kitchen. We always sat at the same table, even if we had to wait for it, so unless she moved her section, she was our waitress.

"Time for me to get to the hospital," said Franky. "You've given me a lot to think about, Tony, as usual. I don't see the situation in black or white like I did before our breakfast today."

"There's somebody here to see you, Chief," said Jimmy, my Desk Sergeant, as he stood in the doorway to my office. "He says his name is Gary Long, but you would know him as Genaro or Gino."

I guess the look on my face was one that Jimmy had never seen me wearing before. I sat there without being able to say anything as I thought about all the reasons Gino Luccatella would show up here in DC after having been given up for dead thirty years ago. Did he find another deed for the property his pa had stolen and wanted all the back rent?

"Make sure he doesn't have a weapon, take anything he's carrying and put it in the bomb safe, and escort him in. Stay with us until I tell you to go."

Jimmy came back after ten minutes, walked in, and behind him was someone I never would have recognized as Gino Luccatella if he was standing in front of me, looking at me right in the face. He had always looked more like his father than his mother when he was growing up, but now it was the exact opposite. He used to wear his hair slicked back, but it was now shortly cropped and combed over from the left side. It was more grey than black. He had on a pair of horned rim, round glasses.

He was wearing a blue sport coat and grey slacks with a tattersall, button-down shirt, and a green and blue striped tie, and he had on cordovan penny loafers. He looked like he had walked out of an Ivy League clothes ad.

"Hi, Nicky. You don't recognize me, but I would have picked you out of a crowd at Yankee Stadium."

"Is that really you, Genaro Luccatella? We thought you were…"

"Dead. I almost was."

"Why are you here? Why have you come back?"

"I'm sure I've been missed about as much as my father, so I understand the question. I'm not planning to stay longer than my time here with you. I came back to pay your father the money he was owed for paying rent on a place that he already owned—with interest. I went by his shop. A young man there—I guess he is your son—said that his grandfather had passed away a year ago, so I asked where I could find you. He told me you were the Chief of Police, and I could find you at the station. That's why I'm here. Here's a check for $311,875. That's the original $65,000 plus thirty years of interest. The check's good, and it's honest money."

I was having a hard time taking all this in. Here was a person that I had never thought I would see again—and never wanted to see again—handing me a check for money that none of us ever thought we would see again, plus a whole lot more.

"Genaro—or Gary?"

"Gary. I was Genaro only to you and Ma, and Gino for only a third of my life, so far."

"Okay, Gary, you better sit down and tell me the whole story. Jimmy, you can go back to the desk, and close the door."

"I might have to go out and put another quarter in the parking meter."

"Don't worry about that. I think I can cover it." Jimmy left.

Genaro, Gino, Gary sat down and began to tell his story.

"My father's brother, Uncle Eddie, sent me to New York to work for the Genovese gang. Ricky was going to take over from his father when it was time, and Uncle Eddie didn't want any loose ends around that might cause problems. I had washed out of the army, where I might have gotten straightened out, or killed if I ever made it to Vietnam, so there wasn't much else I could do. Pa had never let me be part of anything he was doing. For me, when I was growing up, it was like a big game. Pa made money, and I got to spend it. When I showed up at Genovese's headquarters, they expected me to be ready to work. I wasn't.

"Within a couple of weeks, it was clear that I was going to have to start at the bottom rung, picking up the bags of cash and selling drugs. I smoked dope when I was in high school, but we didn't have the hard drugs here in DC that they were dealing in the City. The guy who was handling me told me that if I was going to sell the stuff, I had to try it. I did, and it didn't take long before I was stuck on it. I started using what I was supposed to be selling, and one day I woke up in a hospital cell where they take people who had overdosed. The gang had decided that they had enough of me and slipped me uncut heroin.

"Somehow, I managed to live. It was one week of hell and another two weeks of feeling really bad, but I came through. My first phone call was to Ma. She had been worried sick because I had disappeared without a trace. I told her what had happened, and she came to the hospital with her brother Victor, the priest, who was in a parish in Connecticut. They got me signed out and we drove to Uncle Vic's parish house. Ma and Uncle Vic already had made a plan, and they laid it out for me during the drive up. I would join a group of Catholic Brothers in a priory in Weston, Vermont. Uncle Vic had talked to them, and they were willing to give me a chance.

"It's hard to describe the transformation I went through from the person you knew when we were growing up to the person I became and am now. Maybe almost dying and seeing how my father's life ended was

what made me open to trying another path. After three years with the Brothers, I decided that I would not stay but would try to live a good life in the world outside the priory's walls. I had learned skills from the Brothers that I could put to use, like carpentry, gardening, and preserving. I found a job as a carpenter and lived as a boarder in the home of one of the older women who came to the priory for mass on Sundays. I took classes at a night school that was run out of the community school, and eventually, I was able to get an associate degree in accounting. I started my own business, which combined all the skills I learned at the priory and the knowledge I needed to run a business.

"The next miracle that happened to me was to meet a woman who was born and grew up in the town where the priory was located, studied to be a nurse at a college about an hour north, and came back to Weston to work. Kathy and I met, fell in love, and got married. I built our house, and that was the start of what I have been doing ever since, building houses. People started buying land to build second homes, and then people started to move up to Vermont to live permanently. I have a good crew, and we have built a lot of houses. Kathy and I have three children, a girl and two boys, and they have all settled in and around Weston. I decided when I was able to start putting money aside that I would pay back the debt my father owed to your father."

"Why?"

"Because I know my father and our whole family hurt a lot of people here in town, but the debt to your father was the only one that I knew about personally and could actually put a value on."

"Gary, I am sure Pa would appreciate this, but I don't think he would take the money, and I won't either. The IRS would probably take most of it and would want to investigate my tax returns back to the days when I worked in the lumberyard. If you don't want to keep it yourself, give it to a good cause. It sounds like the Brothers could use it to do more good works. They did a great job with you."

"You know what, Nicky, when I told Ma that I was saving money to pay this debt, she said that it was a good thing, and that I should do

it, but she said that Carmen Fabriano wouldn't take money from me. It was your father's debt, not yours, she said, and that's what he would tell me. But I should make the offer anyway, to close the book on it."

"This closes the book, Gary. How is your Ma? She left DC some years ago. We thought she went to Connecticut."

"She moved in with us and started a new life. She was always a good woman and did her best to be a good mother, which was not very easy with my father. She is a wonderful grandmother. She spends most of her time at the priory and also does volunteer work at the library. How is your mother?"

"Ma is The Orchard's grandmother. She and Pa had a very good life together, and now she is enjoying what remains of her life as much as she can. Both of my parents have always been good examples for me. And now it's time for me to make a round. Thank you for coming here, Gary, and I wish you and your mother and family all the best for the future. I'll walk you out."

That evening at dinner, it was Carmy who brought up the subject of the mysterious visitor. "Who was that guy, Dad?"

"It was someone who went to high school with me," I said. "He moved away, and we hadn't seen him back here since just after we graduated. His father died with a debt to Grandpa Carmy, and he came back to pay that debt."

I looked at Ma and then at Connie. They had shocked expressions, both of them. "Was it Gino Luccatella?" said Connie. "You didn't take it, did you!" said Ma.

"He wanted to pay it with interest, so it came to a little over $300,000, and no, I didn't take it."

"Why not?" exclaimed Ellen.

"It's a very long story." I looked at Connie. "Do you think they're ready to hear it?"

"Yes," she said. "Ma and I will help with some of the details."

"You can start at the very beginning," said Ma.

Franky was in the operating room performing an openheart surgery between 8.30 and 11.00 a.m. on Tuesday, the 11th of September 2001. Donna was waiting for him outside the operating theatre when he came out. She told him what had been happening while he was operating, and that their son Michael had called to tell her that he and his wife Jean were alright. Franky had told me this when he answered my voice mail around noon.

My first thought was of Michael and Jean when I came into the situation room at the station at just before 9.00 a.m. where the TV was on, and I saw a rerun of a plane crashing into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Then, three minutes later, we saw another plane crash into the South Tower, this time live. Michael and Jean live and work on Manhattan, I thought. I couldn't remember where they lived or where they worked. Were their offices or their apartment near the place where those two towers are located? Were they in those buildings? I couldn't remember. I called Franky and left a voice mail.

At 9.30 a.m., President Bush gave a news conference. If there was another plane up there that was intended to fly into the White House, he wasn't there. He was at a grade school in Florida. He started by saying that "today we've had a national tragedy, two airplanes have crashed into the World Trade Center in an apparent terrorist attack on our country". He said "apparently". Then he said, "Terrorism won't stand." He asked for a moment of silence, and finished with "May God bless the victims, their families, and America."

Literally, within minutes after he finished talking, at 9.37 a.m., there was a scene of a plane that had crashed into the Pentagon. At this point I was beginning to think we were under a full-scale attack. Who the hell was behind all this? Who could have managed to hijack three planes and then fly them into three of the biggest targets in the country?

Half an hour passed. There was another hijacked plane flying around in Pennsylvania, said a reporter. Passengers had made phone

calls from the plane. They were going to try to break into the cockpit and retake the plane. At 10.07 a.m. the plane crashed into the ground in a place called Shanksville, near Pittsburgh. Those who saw the crash said the plane was going so fast that it was impossible to imagine that anyone survived. No one survived.

That evening we were all next door at Ma's place. Annie and Guy had closed the restaurant and brought home the lasagna and chicken cacciatore they had made for lunch and dinner specials, and a couple of pizzas. Zio brought a gallon of his wine, and we sat in the parlor with the TV on tuned to CNN. Except for Pa, Nonno Berto and Charlie, everyone else was still with us. We were all in a sort of daze. What had actually happened? Up to that point, all we knew was that there were terrorists who had taken over four planes. Two went into the World Trade Center towers, one went into the Pentagon, and one crashed into a field in southwestern Pennsylvania.

At some point, the cameras were inside the White House and President Bush was talking. "Our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist acts," he said. "Thousands of lives were suddenly ended by evil, despicable acts of terror." How many lives? No one knew then. The rest of his speech said basically that the terrorists killed people and destroyed some buildings, but everything else is in place and functioning. We'll find the people who did this, and we'll bring them to justice, he said. We'll win the war against terrorism, he assured us. I didn't know we were in a war with terrorists, but I guess we were now. He ended with a quote from the bible, the one about walking through the valley of the shadow of death and fearing no evil because God's right there beside us. I wasn't so sure what that had to do with anything.

"Something with all of this smells real fishy," said Tony when the President finished. "How could four pilots trained to fly big passenger jets get on board four commercial airplanes along with a couple of muscle men who had weapons necessary to subdue and kill the crews of the planes, and crash them into the World Trade Center and the goddamn Pentagon without a single shot fired at them? How did four groups of

them get through four security controls? How is that possible unless they had help from people who would have shot at them or pulled them out of the security lines? I'm not buying this story. Who benefits if the price of oil goes up if we start bombing in the Middle East, which is what's going to happen?"

"You never believed that Lee Harvey Oswald shot President Kennedy," offered Annie. "Do you think the Texas oilmen are behind this?"

"I didn't say that Oswald didn't shoot the president. I just don't believe he did it on his own," replied Tony, "and I don't think whoever took over these planes did it without a lot of help, both money and whatever it took to get them through security."

It was getting late, and we were all worn out, physically and mentally. We all pitched in to help with the cleanup and then went home. As Connie and I lay in bed, both of us unable to sleep, Connie said: "The world changed today, didn't it Nicky?"

"I'm not sure if it was today or when the Iranians took over the American embassy or when the Palestinians killed the Israelis at the Olympics. We were fighting the Germans, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, and Vietnamese in wars with soldiers, and now, it seems like there's this whole group of religious fanatics that don't have any rules for how they fight. They kill civilians rather than soldiers, and they don't have leaders you can negotiate with. The world has changed for sure, and I'm not sure what life is going to be like for Carmy and Ellen and their kids."

Everyone seemed to be walking around in a daze for the next couple of weeks. Each day started with new details about the hijackers, how they did what they did, and who were behind it all. By the end of the week, we knew there were nineteen hijackers on board the four planes. Fifteen were from Saudi Arabia, two from the United Arab Emirates, one was from Egypt, and the last was from Lebanon. In addition to the nineteen murderers who died, there were 2,977 victims who perished, and thousands more were injured. Most of the deaths were in the twin towers of the World Trade Center. The 265 passengers and crew members on the four planes were all killed. There were also 125 deaths at the

Pentagon. Not included in the official death toll were 343 members of the New York City Fire Department and 71 NYC law enforcement officers, and a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Officer who died when the plane crashed in Shanksville.

Who did it? Also, by the end of the week there were reports that a group called Al-Qaeda led by a Saudi named Osama bin Laden had carried out the attacks. The hijackers were all tied to this group through evidence collected from the World Trade Center site, from left luggage, from cars left at the airport, and other sources. Months passed and no one claimed responsibility, including bin Laden. It wasn't until 2004 that bin Laden said in a video that he was the one who planned the attack. The U.S. didn't wait for any more proof than what it had. U.S. intelligence sources informed the President that bin Laden was in Afghanistan and under the protection of the Taliban. These were the totally radical Islamists who had controlled Afghanistan since 1996. That's when they took over the capital of Kabul, captured the president, killed him, and hung his body from a lamppost. The U.S. asked the Taliban to hand over bin Laden. They refused.

On the 7th of October, we started air strikes in Afghanistan. It was given the name Operation Enduring Freedom. Then came the ground forces, an alliance led by the U.S. that included United Nations forces. Afghan military were part of the alliance as well. Kabul was retaken in November and a new Afghan government was formed. It turned out that this was only the beginning.

It was just before noon on Monday, Memorial Day, almost two years after 911. All of the Fabrianos, Malatestas, and Antonellis who were still with us were gathered at Franky's and Donna's home in Darlton. The event had become a tradition since they moved there fifteen years ago. It was a cool day, in the 50s, and cloudy. Northeastern Pennsylvania, which is very much a part of New England, both temperamentally and climatologically, has a way of making you think that summer has arrived once April turns into May, but then it turns off the

hot temperatures and starts blowing in cold, arctic air. Saturday had been close to 80 with showers.

"I'll take cold and dry over hot and wet any day," said Mike, Franky's pa, as we piled into the back yard where Franky was starting to get the charcoal burning in the supersized Weber grill and the fire going in the outdoor fireplace. The fragrance of freshly cut grass mixed with the smell of burning charcoal and wood smoke. Oaks, birches, maples, and pines surrounded their lawn and were part of their large property. The mountain laurels, in full bloom, added their pink, white and red colors to all the shades of green from the trees.

Both Franky and Donna had grown up in the city, so this was all new to them when they first moved to the country, but they've adapted well to the life without forgetting where their roots are still planted. Franky's parents had sold their house in the city ten years ago and moved into a condo in Carl's Summit. Donna's parents, who had lived in the same house for the entire time they were married, and always felt that their neighborhood close to the entrance of the Cathedral Cemetery was the best the city had to offer, stayed where they were. They said they enjoyed their visits out to the country but liked it better when their neighbors were close by.

During the past two years, both Zio and Helen had passed away. Zio died of a heart attack while he was working under a car in January of 2002. Helen died of a brain aneurysm only six months later. Zio had lost his best friend when Pa died, and he took it really hard. He felt the pressure of having to do all the things that Pa had done during their many years of working together. Whatever life was left in Helen after Charlie's death quickly withered away when the true love of her live died. It was as if her body decided how her life could be ended without her having to die with the mortal sin of suicide. Connie, Annie, and Tony were always close; their mother's and stepfather's deaths brought them even closer. Carmen and Mary moved from their little apartment in the center of town into the Fabriano homestead. We learned at Easter that Mary was pregnant. Ellen's wedding is in a month, and she and her future husband have put a deposit on an apartment in a new building just

at the edge of town. If it's their choice, they will move in next to us when Ma is gone. They are going to have to wait because Ma is showing no signs of slowing down.

As always, everyone brought something to the party. It's the same every year. We start with hot dogs, hamburgers, sausage, grilled peppers, and slices of Guy's now world-famous pizzas. DC has managed to get itself declared the Pizza Capital of the World through some pretty clever self-promotion. But unlike the thick, gooey, trays of pizza that most of the places make, Guy has stuck with his classic Napolitano pizza, the original. He has a large and loyal following, and though some have tried to copy him, no one has succeeded. When we have finished the first round of eating, we move to the main event: horseshoes. Everybody plays. There are four pitches and there are four on a side. After a few hours or so, when we have decided who will be the horseshoes champions until next year's gathering, and the medals are awarded to everyone, we dig into the lasagna, manicotti, eggplant parmigiana, and a big salad with all kinds of greens.

Even when it's warm, we usually move into the house for coffee and desserts. With the temperature today going south of 40 in the late afternoon, we headed for the warmth of the indoors. Franky and Donna had added a big, glassed in patio, like a greenhouse, to the back side of their house just for large gatherings like the one on Memorial Day. We filed in via the back entry, where we left our jackets, and through the kitchen where we all took our first helpings of desserts and coffee. At one end of the patio there's a TV, which was mostly to keep the kids entertained when they were younger. It was turned on to CNN, and the scene was somewhere in Iraq, as it had been on the same station since the 20th of March. That's when the U.S. dropped bombs on the Presidential Palace of Iraq and started its invasion of the country.

It's easy to be a Monday morning quarterback with the vision of hindsight. We don't know what the world would be like today if the U.S. had not led a coalition force to invade Iraq to get rid of Saddam Hussein, but what we do know is that it did not make the world safer. It made it more dangerous and unstable for twenty years and counting.

"No trace of Saddam," noted Mike. "He's like all the other dictators who lose a war. Mussolini was dressed up like a German private when he was trying to sneak out of Italy. Why can't they stand up like men and take their medicine?"

But Bush had plenty of support in the U.S. from both politicians and regular people for invading Iraq. We were still pissed off about the Iran hostage thing in the late '70s, and with 911. Bin Laden was still hiding somewhere. Anyone who could be even loosely connected to these humiliations was an acceptable target, so Bush had pretty much of a free hand on the home front for expanding the war on terror beyond Afghanistan and into Iraq, and both the U.K. and Italy were strong backers. France and Germany were against it. People started calling French fries 'freedom fries'.

There was one clear American voice back then who warned against such an action. It belonged to former President Jimmy Carter. He had won the Nobel Peace Prize in October the year before his opinion letter appeared in the New York Times on March 8, 2003, before we invaded. It was titled: "Just War—or a Just War?"

"Maybe he thought his Nobel award would make Bush and his cabinet listen to him," said Franky. "It didn't."

"I agree with everything President Carter said," said Annie. "He listed all the reasons a war can be called 'just', and he argued that the U.S. invasion of Iraq met none of them. I doubt whether Bush or any of the people in his government even read the letter."

"I have to admit that I didn't read it," said Donna. "What did he say?"

"He said that invading Iraq did not respect international law and basic religious principles. A just war, he said, is one that is waged as a last resort when all non-violent options have been exhausted. The weapons and those who wield them should discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. Iraq's government has put many of its military places near hospitals, schools, and in residential neighborhoods, so bombing them is going to kill a lot of innocent civilians. The amount

of damage the attack creates should be proportional to the amount of damage that the country being attacked has inflicted on attackers, says Carter, according to international law. Iraq has not attacked America or killed Americans except when an allied force took back Kuwait. The invasion should be sanctioned by the society the attackers claim to be representing and supporting, but the United Nations hasn't sanctioned this war. Finally, the peace the war establishes should be a clear improvement over what exists now. Carter said that there was the highest likelihood that by invading Iraq, the entire region would be destabilized for a long time to come."

"The U.S. had made it its policy to remove Saddam Hussein even before 911," added Tony, "even before Bush was elected. It was President Clinton who signed the Iraq Liberation Act into law in 1998, after Iraq had expelled the United Nations weapons inspectors. It was their job to make sure Iraq didn't have what they were calling Weapons of Mass Destruction, the now-famous WMDs. We started supporting Iraqi opposition organizations. Together, the U.S. and Britain started bombing targets in Iraq. When George Bush the Younger was elected, he put getting rid of Saddam on the top of his To Do list. People in his administration have been quoted as saying that Bush started planning for attacking Iraq right after he was inaugurated."

"The 911 attacks certainly helped to make the case stronger," added Mike.

"But there was never any evidence to show a connection between Iraq and Al-Qaeda," interjected Jenny, "and so far, there hasn't been any evidence found of those pesky WMDs."

"On the good news side," added Annie, "there's no longer a draft, and our kids have been conditioned to understand that if they volunteered to join a military service, they had to be prepared to give their lives, like their grandfather and uncle had done, or lose a leg and an eye, like Zio Al, or endure captivity, like Nicky. They listened, thank God."

Ma was always an early riser. She did more in the few hours between when she woke up and Pa and I rustled ourselves out of bed than most people accomplish during the entire day. She continued her early rising habit even after she retired and Pa died. I always went over to her side of the house before I left for work, just to say hello and ask her if she needed anything that I could pick up during the day. The back door was still locked when when I turned the knob in September of 2008. Maybe she wasn't feeling well and slept in, or just forgot to unlock the door on this particular morning. I had the key on my ring, where it had been since she gave it to me when I was seven, so I unlocked the door. "Mom," I called. No answer. I walked upstairs, calling a few times along the way. Her bedroom door was open,but I knocked on it before I walked in. She was lying in bed, as peaceful as could be. I walked over and felt her pulse. There was none.

Ma always said there was one big advantage of living all your life in the same place as where you were born: there were lots of people around who would come to your funeral. That was another good reason for staying on terms with everyone in the neighborhood, she would say, so they would come to your funeral. She was right. It felt like everyone in DC came to the funeral home to pay their respects, to the church for the funeral service, to the cemetery for the burial, and to the house for the reception after the burial. It was a sunny, warm day with a slight breeze to freshen the air and blow the wispy clouds around in front of a light blue sky. Ma would have enjoyed this day, I thought.

It took a while for it to sink in, that Ma was gone. I was lucky to have her with me for sixty-one years. Except for the two years that Pa was away during the war, she had eighty-eight good years, surrounded by people who loved her and whom she loved in return. She had become the Queen Bee of The Orchard. I let a few weeks pass before I suggested to Connie that we go over and open the cedar chest where Ma kept her most precious possessions. "Do you think the letters are there?" I said to Connie. "Yes," she answered, and she was right.

There were two large stacks of letters. Ma had put a pink ribbon around her letters to Pa, and a blue ribbon around his letters to her. "I'll

read Pa's letters first," I said. At the bottom of the chest was a shoe box. I took it out and opened it. Inside were things that Pa had obviously brought home from the war. He had never showed them to me. All of them had nazi swastikas on them. There was a dagger in a scabbard. The handle of the dagger and the scabbard looked like they were made of silver. There were a few belt buckles, medals, a pocketknife with the SS initials on it, and a small nazi banner.

"What are we going to do with these things?" I said. "I don't feel like keeping them or selling them, but I don't just want to throw them away."

"I'll do some research and find out where they would do the most good," offered Connie. "There's probably a war memorial museum that could take them."

Ma's wedding veil was in another box. My baptism dress along with the cap and booties I wore were in a third box. I unwrapped a brown paper package and it was Pa's Eisenhauer jacket. "Men were a lot smaller in the '40s, weren't they?" I joked. I might have been able to fit into this jacket when I was ten. There were pillowcases embroidered with Ma's initials, VS, lace tablecloth in its original Scranton Lace carton. "Ma only took that out for the table when the President or the Pope came for dinner," I said. "I think she forgot she had it."

I took Pa's letters and Connie took Ma's. During the next few weeks, we read the letters instead of watching TV after dinner, and we talked about what we read before we turned in for the night. Connie started at the top of the pile, from the first letter Ma wrote through to the last. I decided to do the exact opposite. I started with Pa's last letter to Ma, dated 10 January 1946.

Southhampton, England
January 10, 1946
My Dear Gina,

It's taken them five months since they told me I didn't have to go to Japan to find me a place on the Magic Carpet, but I just found out that tomorrow I climb aboard a ship to come home to you. I've been waiting for my number to come up, and finally it has. I felt okay while we were fighting, but once it was over, after VJ-Day, I wanted to come home.

I hope this letter gets to you before I get home so you won't be too surprised when I walk through the door. I will send a telegram as soon as I can get to a telegraph office in New York where we will land. I know I have told you in every one of my letters how much I love you and how much I have missed you, but I will tell you again. I love you very, very much, and I missed you a whole bunch. I am looking forward to starting our life together.

Your loving husband,

Carmen

I didn't understand what he meant about Magic Carpet and his number coming up. I started working back through the letters. He sailed over to Southampton from Le Havre in France the week before Christmas. He said it looked the same as when he left from there to sail to southern France in September of '44. The people were the same as well, "ungrateful for our help, telling us we came in too late, they would have beaten the Germans on their own." Those who were still left in his unit, who hadn't been picked out to sail home Itearlier, got to Le Havre, France by train in late early October. They were bivouacked in a huge camp in the harbor area. His letters from this period were very short. The men hung around the camp, played cards, told stories about what they had experienced during the past two years, ate in the big mess tent, complained about the food, and slept a lot.

It was a letter in September that explained both the Magic Carpet and what he meant about his "number coming up". Pa explained in one of his letters about Operation Magic Carpet. It was what the government called the sea and air operation to bring all the troops home from Europe and the Pacific after victory was declared in Japan. It started on September 6, 1945. All the ships that were used during the war, includ-

ing the regular troop ships, aircraft carriers, cargo ships, and even passenger ocean liners. The plan, wrote Dad, was to bring everybody "home alive by the end of '45", which was the program's slogan. But as his later letters indicated, they didn't meet that deadline. He was in Austria when he learned how the point system was going to work.

Salsburg, Austria
September 15, 1945
My Dear Gina,
We learned today how the Army is going to start sending us home. They handed out a form to all of us that we have to fill in. We fill it in and total up the credits. The higher the number of credits, the higher up the priority list you are for getting on a ship. There are four types of credits. First is the number of months in the Army since September 16, 1940. I came in on June 11, 1942, so that's 39 months. You multiply that by 1, and I get 39 credits. The next is called an Oversea Credit. I shipped out from New York in June of '43, so that's 27 credits. That's also multiplied by 1. So far, I have 66 credits. The third one is Combat Credit, which is the number of decorations and Bronze Service Stars. I have a total of 5. These get multiplied by 5, so that's another 25 credits. The last one is the Parenthood Credit. Every child gets multiplied by 12, so the idea is that soldiers with lots of kids waiting at home get to go home first. We don't get credit for good intentions, so no points there.
My total is 91 as of today. Those who have over 125 are already being told to pack up and get ready to head to one of the ports. It looks like I will be in the Army of Occupation for a while. It gets pretty cold here, so I hope I get to ship out before winter.
Your loving husband,
Carmen

Between VE-Day on the 8th of May, and when Pa sent his letter explaining Magic Carpet, all the letters were about what the soldiers had to do to keep people from looting, staying out of the way of snipers' bullets from Germans and Austrians who refused to accept the fact that they lost the war, and doing what they could to get basic services like

water, electricity, and garbage collection working. Pa's letters were always a combination of hope and despair. On some days he was hopeful because of some good deed someone had done. On other days, he was depressed because of how the officer in charge handled a situation with a civilian, or the way that people tried to take advantage of others who were desparate for food, water, and medicine as they were.

I put a paper marker in the pile of letters to show how far I had gotten, wrapped the blue ribbon around the pile, and put it in a one of the shoeboxes Connie had saved just for just this kind of day. "I haven't finished them. I have two more years to go," I said to Connie.

"I'll keep reading. I'm learning about what it was like to try to make the best of life while a war is going on. Your mother's letters are long and very detailed. She talks about everything she did, who she talked to, what was on the radio, what the weather was like. Everything. She mentions Ma very often. They were good friends."

"Pa's letters are short. You know he didn't talk very much, but when he did talk, he said something worth hearing. That's how he writes his letters."

"Carmy and Ellen will one day read our letters and learn things about us they never knew."

"They'll only have six months worth of mine, and they'll miss the first six months of the ones you wrote to me. I wish I had taken them with me the day I was rescued. Reading your letters when I came home was the best thing I could have done to bring me back to life. I never forgot I was a prisoner for three years, but you gave me the three years in your life to make me whole again."

Connie, Jenny, and Donna had been planning this event for over a year without Tony, Franky, or me having the vaguest idea that they were doing it. In order for them to carry out our combined surprise retirement party, they had to swear the fifty invited guests and everyone who would be working the party to total and uncompromisable secrecy.

Franky and I are both easy to fool. Even though I had been a policeman for over forty years, I had never really learned how to be a suspicious person, someone who believed that people would actually try to pull the wool over my eyes. I guess that's why I never thought of moving from being a cop to being a detective. Tony, on the other hand, could see through a lead door, but he was no more the wiser than we. We'll never know how they managed to keep it under wraps, but they did.

So, when the three of us arrived together at the front door of Donnatelli's that Saturday evening in late June 2012, accompanied by our wives, we had no idea what was waiting for us inside. It was supposed to be just a dinner with the three couples to celebrate our 65th birthdays in one place at one time. The trick was to get me, Tony, and Franky to walk in together, rather than the three couples arriving separately. Connie, Jenny, and Donna had to cook up some reason for us to get there all at once. When we opened the door of the restaurant and saw the Happy Retirement banners, all we could do was stand in awe of their ingenuity.

Franky had driven down to DC in the middle of the afternoon. Connie, Jenny, and Donna were going to a concert at Mother of Mercy, Jenny's alma mater. That's what they said. What they really did was to go to the restaurant and get it ready for our surprise. Franky and I went over to Tony's to watch the Yankees at home get demolished by the Chicago White Sox. They came back about an hour before we had booked our dinner, and we drove to the restaurant in two cars, Connie, Jenny, Tony, and me in my Jeep, and Franky and Donna in their Suburban. The three of us were totally shocked when we walked into the restaurant. After the applause died down, Jenny said: "You haven't had any time to prepare your speeches, so you're just going to have to give them extemporaneously."

"Anyone bring a dictionary so I can look up what 'extemporaneously' means," called out Franky.

"As you well know, it means from off the tops of your heads, and you get to go first, my love," said Donna.

"Okay. Let's see. Where should I start? I'm not only not ready to give a speech, but I'm not ready to retire. When I was in high school and planning on making it to the pros, I thought I would be retired at least three times before I reached 65: once from football, once from coaching, and once from being a local sports announcer. I had it all planned out back in the summer of '65 when I was getting ready to start my freshman year in college. I was staying in shape as a lumberyard boy picking up bags of cement in between coffee breaks and lunches with these two other soon-to-be retirees. All those football jobs disappeared in a fraction of a second when I was eighteen, and since then I've only had jobs working in hospitals. Now, I'm retiring. What do I do next?

"It's not being a surgeon. One thing I learned pretty quickly is that for every hour a surgeon spends in the operating room, we spend at least one hour in the classroom. I might be able to keep my cutting and sewing skills for a couple of more years, but those grey cells are running out of steam. I accepted a position on my medical school alma mater's admissions board. I'll also be serving as a student advisor. There'll be plenty of time left over for golf and meeting up with the two other members of the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club. Thank you all for coming, and many thanks to my dear wife, and Connie and Jenny for totally surprising us with this party."

"Nice speech," I said to Franky. "Do you want to do mine?"

"Tony, my dear, you are up next," said Jenny as the applause for Franky faded.

"I never thought I would get to retirement age or have a job that I didn't want to retire from. When I turned eighteen, during the summer that the three of us laid the foundations for our Breakfast Club, I thought I would go to Vietnam and probably not come back. Things didn't turn out that way. My dyslexia kept me out of the Army. Fixing my dyslexia so I could get by in life made it possible for me to do the one job I always wanted to have, being a teacher. When I didn't believe in myself, I had many people around me who did. Ma, God rest her soul,

gave me her unconditional and unlimited love every single day, and always helped me every night to fall asleep with at least one positive thought, one thing that was good in me or what I had done. Annie, Connie, and Charlie were my guardian angels, and still are. Charlie is working undercover on the inside, and so far, has been doing a great job. There is not a day that passes when we don't wish that he was still down here with us.

"I am forever grateful to Johnny and Paulette Grozinski for all the help they gave me. It was Johnny who was first to see that I had the same affliction as he had, and it was Paulette who led me to the people who could help me to live with it.

"What's next? I'm going to spend at least two hours every day writing a book. It's going to be called "What If?", and it's going to be about what might have happened if history had taken a different turn. Jenny has promised to be my editor. I am also going to be spending time at the dyslexia center at the University as a volunteer advisor to kids with dyslexia. And, of course, we have our Breakfast Club to run. Thank you, Donna, Connie, Jenny. I don't know how you kept all of this under wraps. I congratulate you on your ingenuity. Thank you all for coming."

Tony stood there, beaming, accepting the applause. It was a proud moment for him.

"Nicky, my love, the last word is yours," said Connie.

"First, thank you Connie, Donna, and Jenny for this great surprise, and thank you all for being here. I remember when both of my nonnos retired from working in the mines. They had the biggest smiles I ever saw them wearing on their faces. The smiles said, 'Now I can spend my days doing all the things I could only do in the few hours between scrubbing the coal off my skin and going to bed.' They didn't have much of a choice about which job they would take when they got here from Italy. The mines paid a decent wage, but it was hard work. They made it to 65, and they enjoyed their retirements, but I remember they both said they missed something about going down into the mines every day. Nonno Nicco said he liked testing himself against the coal. He said he knew it

was time to retire when the coal started winning more often. Nonno Berto said he enjoyed the lunch breaks when he and the other miners sat around by the light of their head lanterns and talked about everything that was going on up above ground.

"Because of them, I did have a choice, and I chose to be a policeman. It was the second-best decision I ever made. The very best decision I ever made was accepting Connie's offer to walk her home on that summer evening in 1965.

"What am I going to do after I retire? One thing I'm not going to do is poke my nose into the station to check up on how things are going. I put together the best team of men and women to keep DC moving on the right path. I am going to spend more time mixing Nonno Berto's secret formula for fertilizer, and testing it on the vegetable garden, so that when it's time to hand it over I'm sure that it is working. Another thing I'm going to do is to spend more time doing the job that I learned from Pa and Zio Al, fixing cars. Carmy says he's lined up a lot of old clunkers that he thinks only I can fix. Connie and I have never been much for travel, so there aren't any cruises on the horizon unless Connie tells me she's changed her mind. I know Carmy and Ellen would do a great job taking care of the graves on the Sundays we would be gone if we did decide to travel. I'm going to try to convince Franky and Tony that the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club has to meet more often. The world is getting more complicated, and our meetings are a good time to try to understand it better."

Connie was right there standing next to me when I finished. She gave me big hug and one of her wonderful kisses. What an evening we had.

"What happens if the Joker gets back in office after the next election?" asked Franky to whichever one of us wanted to pick up the conversational baton. Franky, Tony, and I were sitting on my porch one Saturday evening in late June, five months after Joe Biden took office. It was after nine, but it wasn't yet dark. Mars and Venus were still visible

low in the west, while the stars were taking their time to show up for the show.

We had invited Franky and Donna and Tony and Jenny for dinner. Annie and Guy were usually with us too, but this year they had decided to make a month-long trip to Italy to visit with Guy's family and to travel around the country. Connie had carried on Ma's tradition of making a big pot of ragu with the last of the deer meat from the fall's hunt. That was Tony's and my job, making sure we had deer meat in the first place. Connie made fresh fettuccine, baked a couple of loaves of bread using the recipe that she had gotten from Guy, tossed together as many different salad greens as I could deliver from the garden, and we filled up a couple of carafes with the wine Tony and I made every year from grapes we ordered from California. Jenny brought her ricotta pie, which she learned how to make from Helen. It was always a hit. Franky and Donna stopped at Capalongo's and picked up all the ingredients for an antipasto. COVID-19 was still hanging over our heads, and everyone was still nervous about gatherings, but after a lot of to-ing and fro-ing, we decided to go ahead with our annual get-together.

I made a big pot of coffee, poured half of it into a thermos that I think Nonno Berto had bought in the '30s, and brought it out to the porch where we were going to shoot the breeze while Connie, Donna and Jenny sat in the parlor with the other half of the coffee. It was a cool evening, and Connie easily got a chill with the medication she was taking and after all the chemotherapy treatments. She and I would compare notes on our respective conversations before we went up to bed.

"It's no mystery," offered Tony. "The Joker's told us exactly what he's going to do when he moves back into the White House. First, he's going to pardon everyone convicted of crimes related to attacking the U.S. Capitol on January 6th. He's going to deputize them as his personal White House Guard and dress them up in special patriotic uniforms. Then, he's going to get the House and Senate to pass a law saying that he won the 2020 election and that everything that happened during the previous four years was illegal. They might even give him an extra four years without having to run again. They'll take away the eight-year term

limit, which will give him the possibility to stay on if he's still alive at eight-six when his two terms are up. He's going to direct the Department of Justice to bring charges against every state that he didn't win in the last election and put all the election officials in jail. Then he's going to withdraw the country from both NATO and the United Nations. He was ready to do that the last time he was there but got sidetracked.

"All of this will set the stage for signing non-aggression treaties with both Russia and China. The treaties will say that we don't care what Russia or China do as long as they don't bother us. That means the world will be carved up into three pieces, the so-called "Spheres of Influence", and each of the three countries will have full freedom to act inside of their own sphere. Russia gets all of Europe and the Middle East, China gets all of Asia, the U.S. gets all of North and South America, and the three countries let the African countries test their weapons by fighting with each other. That means the U.N. is pretty much useless, so Russia and China will stop financing it. I think I've covered the main points. Wait, one more. He's going to start a national university with Patriotism as the only course of study."

"It sounds like a book I read in a politics class in college, It Can't Happen Here," said Franky "I can't remember the author."

"Sinclair Lewis," added Tony. "I must have taken the same class."

"What happens?" I asked.

"It starts in 1936," continued Franky. "FDR is completing his first term as President, and he is being challenged by a couple of candidates. One of them is a whacky Senator, but Lewis doesn't say from which state."

"Berzelius "Buzz" Windrip," inserted Tony, "and he modelled him on Senator Huey Long from Louisiana, who was shot in 1935 before he could challenge Roosevelt for the nomination."

"Right," continued Franky. "So Buzzy Boy builds his campaign around three pillars. First, he says there are the 'forgotten men', who are paying for all of Roosevelt's progressive programs with their hard

work, but who are not receiving anything back. Then there was the lack of discipline that these programs were fostering. He advocated returning patriotism and traditional values to America and taking it back from the intellectuals and the rich. And third, and most important, he promised to give every single citizen $5,000. The supporters form a group that are given the name Minute Men, like the Revolutionary War militia. They have the same role in helping Windrip get elected that Hitler's nazi Brown Shirts and Mussolini's fascist Black Shirts had for their leaders. Buzz put white shirts on his M.M.s because they were patriotic and pure, according to Windrip. He wins the election, and in next to no time he creates a dictatorship which is pretty much a carbon copy of nazi Germany and fascist Italy. The M.M.s become the equivalent of what the S.S. and the gestapo were in Germany rolled into one."

"Buzz keeps the structure of government," continued Tony, "but neither the Congress nor the Supreme Court act without his direction. Everyone in any position of authority is hand-picked by the people loyal to Windrip. He abolishes state governments and creates regions. He closes most of the existing universities and creates super big ones that teach only technical or daily practical courses. He downgrades primary and secondary education.

"He keeps telling everyone that since the country is in a crisis, he has to delay his promised $5,000 payment. Wages are cut. Anyone who demonstrates any form of disloyalty is either shot or sent to a concentration camp. The only ones earning more than a subsistence wage are the M.M.s, and their numbers have swelled to half a million.

"Okay! Then what happens?" I begged.

"The same thing that happens whenever dictators or invaders from outer space take over: the good guys form a resistance force and start to try to kick the bums out," said Tony. "They haven't succeeded by the time the book ends. Lewis wants to let the warning sink in. It can happen here. It can happen anywhere."

"It's our generation that fucked up, you know," said Franky.

"I think we've learned during our time on this planet that every generation fucks up," said Tony. "We just happen to have the Joker in our cohort who has managed to keep from getting shot by everyone he's pissed off, robbed or raped during his miserable life. Our parents' generation produced Reagan. Our grandparents' generation delivered Herbert Hoover. Clinton wasn't such a bad president, but he had lousy morals, and the evangelicals somehow are stuck on his sins while they ignore the Joker's, which are much worse."

"So, you don't think the country is going off course in one direction or the other?" I asked.

"No more so than in 1972 when Nixon got re-elected, or in 1980 when Reagan won, or in 2000 when Bush the Younger squeaked in with the help of his brother in Florida" answered Tony. "Think of the lies Bush told to convince the American people and our allies to get support to invade Iraq. He started Shit Storm to try to match his father's Desert Storm, and we are still paying the price for it."

It started to get cold after the last light faded, so we went into the kitchen and began the cleanup. Jenny and Donna came in and tried to help, but we convinced them it was our turn. We joined them in the living room for a short while, and then Connie and I were there on our own.

"What part of history did you settle on during your porch talk?" asked Connie.

"The most recent. Tony told us what he thinks the former guy is going to do if he wins the election next year, and then we talked about a book both Franky and Tony had read in college, It Can't Happen Here."

"By Sinclair Lewis. I read it in college too. We have a copy if you want to read it."

"I think I would. The way Franky and Tony described it, the former guy is using it as his game plan. It's so strange that President Biden spent the first eleven years of his life just a couple of miles from here. I read stories about him, and there wasn't anything special about him or his family. Nobody has come forward from his old neighborhood and

said, “I knew Joe would be President one day.” He seems like a good guy, but if he had Tony as his chief advisor, he would be a great President. And then if Biden appointed you to the Supreme Court, the country would get the laws it should have.”

“Tony would never move to the other DC, and neither would I. We don’t know what’s going to come after us here, Nicky, but we did our best to make it a good place to live for us and our children. It’s going to be up to them now.”

“I wish we could go together, Connie. I really do. I love our children and our grandchildren and all our family and all our friends, but you have made the sun rise and set for me during the fifty-six years since we met.”

“Fifty-six years, five days, eleven hours and twenty minutes, Nicky.”

"Call me when you get there to let me know you made it okay."

Chapter 7

TIME TO PASS THE SECRET

Annamaria has been coming over on Saturday mornings ever since she decided she wanted to be a judge. She sits in her mother's room, which Connie had made into her study when Ellen got married and moved out, and reads Connie's law books. Before Connie had a proper study, I made her a room in the attic with both heat and air conditioning and bookshelves on all four walls. The only problem was the very steep and narrow stairs to reach it. So, as soon as Ellen moved, we moved down the bookshelves and the books. She could have taken Carmy's room, but she liked the light better in Ellen's room. "I'll wait," she had said.

"Good morning, Grandpa," she said. "Did you save me a cup of coffee, or shall I make another pot?"

"Did I ever tell you how old I was when I started drinking coffee?" I said, teasing her. I told her my coffee-drinking story as many times as Nonno Berto told me his fence-painting story. "There are a couple of cups left, which should be enough to keep you awake while you read your grandmother's books that would put most normal people to sleep within minutes of opening the cover. I'm off to my Saturday morning Breakfast Club meeting."

Tony came out of his house just as I drove up in my *'77 Jeep Cherokee* with its orange body and white top. It's been my hobby ever since I bought it in '89 for $7,000 from one of Pa's customers. It was what he paid for it new, he said, and I had no reason to

doubt him. He had put only 30,000 miles on it, and it was in mint condition. I've kept it that way for the past thirty-four years. Connie used to love driving it. She liked the floor stick shift. Me too. It reminds me of the *'51 Chevy* truck I got to drive at the lumberyard.

"I hope you saved room for a Carl's Summit Diner he-man breakfast," I said as Tony climbed in. He gave me his "Do bears shit in the woods?" look, and we were off. We were meeting Franky at 11:00, as usual. We've been going there for thirty-five years, ever since Franky and Donna moved up to Darlton. Franky and Donna had shifted down from their big house in Darlton and into a big condo in Carl's Summit, so it was just a short ride for him. I told the owner's wife, Betty, the last time we were there that she had to stay open until all three of us were gone.

I drove out along the back road, the same road we took when we delivered the load from the lumberyard to Ginger all those many years ago. "They never did anything with all the land around your house," I said, glancing over to where the Malatesta house once stood.

"The whole area was condemned, and the Borough took it over. They keep talking about getting money from the Feds to do a hazardous waste cleanup, but nothing ever happens. There's no demand for industrial property here, and it's not close enough to a highway for it to be any good as a warehouse distribution center, so what's the point? We moved there when I was almost four, and left when I was not quite eighteen, so I only lived there for fourteen years. I've been on The Orchard for sixty-two. I still have some very strong memories of the place, but I can't say I ever missed it."

It was late May, the week before Memorial Day, and it was hot. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. We had had a good amount of rain, so everything was green. The corn stalks were just starting to peep out of the ground. Knee high by the Fourth of July. I couldn't pass a corn field without saying that little worldly prayer to myself. It's hopeful. I know that Carmen and Ellen do it as well.

"Remember how the sky always looked a little on the grey side," said Tony. "I think we talked about that a long time ago."

"We did. First the steam trains disappeared, and then we stopped making gas and electricity with coal. Now we have a ski slope that's almost close enough to walk to, and I can go down to the river and catch a real brown trout any day of the fishing season. We're living in the perfect place, Tony. That's why we never left."

We turned off Kendall Avenue and started up West Mountain Road. When we came to the place where Ginger lived, I pulled off to the side of the road and we looked over at what had been a little bungalow. It was now a McMansion with colonial pillars and a four-car garage extending on one side, and what looked like an indoor swimming pool pushing out from the other. An eight-foot high wrought iron fence surrounded the property, and an ornate gate with a big letter S in gold marked the grand entrance.

"Any idea who lives there now," I asked while still looking across to the house.

"The lawyer Stucciano's grandson. Stucciano's son somehow got the deed to the place after his father killed himself, and he passed it on to his kid. The son and his kid have something to do with the landfill. I think they knew if they stayed in DC, you would find some way of arresting them, and then their jig would be up."

"How do you keep up with all of this stuff, Tony?"

"It's a lifelong hobby."

Franky was waiting in a booth when we came in. We settled into our usual positions, Franky on one side and Tony and I on the other. Franky had managed to keep in pretty good shape, but he hadn't gotten any smaller. He filled up the other side of the booth all on his own. There was a TIMES AND TRIBUNE opened on the table. Before we could say anything, Edie came right over with a pot of coffee in one hand and three cups in the other, her fingers curled around the holders. Diner cups are indestructible, I thought as she set them down on the Formica

surface, no matter how many times they are accidently dropped on the floor.

"Need menus boys, or will it be the usual?"

"Usual for me," answered Franky. "Me too," added Tony. "I'm going to swap the flapjacks for waffles," I said, and heads turned to see if I was actually a secret agent wearing a Nicky Fabriano disguise.

"One Western with hash browns and sausage links, one full breakfast with wheat toast, and one old fashioned waffle with hash browns and bacon coming up. Nicky, is this going to be a one-off, or should I update my customer database?"

"It's a one-off, Edie. I saw the 'Melissa, waffles are ready' episode on Seinfeld last night, so I just thought I'd give them a try." All of them smirked. I guess they had seen the original in '97 or as a rerun with Melissa eating waffles naked and Seinfeld looking like he was in seventh heaven.

"Don't expect Melissa to deliver 'em," laughed Edie as she left for the kitchen.

"Have you ever asked her how she does it, Tony?" wondered Franky. "What's her trick for remembering everybody's name and what they order? Have you ever discussed strategy with her?"

"Yep. It's the usual: for the men hair/no hair; if hair, grey/black/brown/red; glasses/no glasses; mustache/no mustache; thin lips/fat lips; big ears/little ears; big nose/little nose. She has more options for the ladies."

"Are you still reading the newspaper, Franky?" quipped Tony. It wasn't a question. "The media can usually hold only two thoughts at a time, so they have to kick off either the former guy or Russia's Hitler impersonator if there's a hurricane or earthquake that's killed thousands of people, or something exciting about climate change they think can scare the pants off their readers."

"Tina Turner died last night," retorted Franky. "It made it to the front page."

Tony plowed ahead. "I've decided that I'm not reading the newspaper or watching TV or listening to radio news until I learn through osmosis that the former guy is unable to run for office in next year's election, and that the Hitler impersonator has been locked up for war crimes and will never again see the light of day."

"It says here that Ronny DeSantis is going to run for president," said Franky. "That's going to make him real popular with the former guy."

"He'll make up a great nickname for him that makes sure everyone knows his grandparents were Italian on both sides," said Tony. "Bullies like him are terrific at doing that. Crooked Hillary, Sneaky Dianne, Little Marco, Pocahontas for Elizabeth Warren, Low Energy Jeb, Lyin Ted, and Sleepy Joe. He'll start calling DeSantis something like Meatball Ronny."

"I saw a list of nicknames for him," I said. "Adolf Twitler, Agent Orange, Barbecued Brutus, Benedict Donald, Bratman, Cheeto-in-Chief. It goes on. He looks like a Cheeto, but Cheater-in-Chief would be a better description of him."

"The war in Ukraine makes it into the news every now and then," continued Franky. "It seems like it's this Wagner group that's doing all the fighting, raping, and pillaging. Putin's got them working for him all over the world. It's like we're back to the time when countries hired soldiers of fortune to fight their battles because their own armies were so rotten. Think Hessians."

"What I don't get is why the United Nations isn't doing anything," I said. "Ukraine is an independent country and a member of the United Nations. I checked this when the war started just to make sure. When countries in Africa or the Middle East invade other countries, or like on Cyprus with Turkey and Greece, the United Nations sends in UN forces with blue helmets to stop the fighting and killing. Russia sends its army into Ukraine and starts bombing the hell out of it—and not just military

targets but houses, schools, hospitals, everything—it's executing civilians inside and outside their homes, and the UN doesn't do a goddamn thing."

Edie came with our orders. "I'll be right back to fill up your cups. It looks like you boys are going to need a lot of fuel to keep this conversation going." We dug in and concentrated on our food for a few minutes. Edie passed by and filled up our cups. "How are those waffles, Nicky?" she asked.

"Great. Terrific," I answered. "Maybe I'll switch between waffles and pancakes every other time."

"I'll expect you to remember which one it is," she said with a laugh. "Now you're just hash browns and bacon to me."

Tony picked up my question after Edie had departed. "Up until the time that Russia invaded Ukraine, political leaders in the U.S. and Europe let Putin do whatever the hell he wanted. They really believed he would eventually turn Russia into a democracy. His true colors started to show in 2008 when he began meddling in Georgia. Georgia the country, not Georgia the state. It has a border with Russia and used to be part of the USSR. It became independent in 1991. Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and helped two groups carve out tin pot countries, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which are only recognized by Russia and a couple of Russia's cronies in crime, like Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Syria. Nobody did anything."

"Didn't George the Second say he looked into Putin's eyes and saw his soul, or something like that?" interjected Franky.

"'I was able to get a sense of his soul,' is what he said," answered Tony. "That was back in 2001, before 911. He's been back tracking on that comment ever since. Russia was broke and needed friends, but more than friends, it needed money. Blowing up the Twin Towers and damaging the Pentagon did exactly what it was intended to do, which was drive up the price of oil. By the time Bush Junior was leaving the White House, Putin was rich, and the U.S. was in the middle of the worst eco-

nomic and political situation it had been in since 1980. China was cheering after its first Olympics. It won the most gold medals in 2008 when it was in Beijing, which never happened before, and hasn't happened since.

"Gosh, I wonder why," I said.

"Didn't President Obama try to improve relations with Putin?" asked Franky. "I remember Hilary Clinton going over there carrying a big, red button."

" She was Secretary of State, and she met her counterpart, Sergey Lavrov—who, by the way, is still there pulling all the strings around the world. She and Sergey were going to push the button together to reset relations between our two countries. The label on the button read "overcharged" instead of "reset", Lavrov told Clinton. It wasn't a great restart, but this and Obama's great speeches about making up with the Muslim world won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009, and then he became the great peacemaker. When Obama was running for re-election in 2012, his opponent, Mitt Romney, said in one of their debates that Russia was our number one threat. Obama scoffed and made fun of Romney, saying he was still back in the '80s and fighting the cold war. Putin was paying attention.

"Two years after Obama saw off Romney—maybe with some unknown help from Putin, who knows—Putin and Russia pulled out all the stops. They moved troops into Eastern Ukraine in early 2014 to whip up a group of locals who they would install as the government of what they called a "breakout" republic. Sound like Georgia? These halfwits then used Russian missiles to shoot down a Malaysian Airline regularly scheduled passenger plane, killing all 283 passengers and 15 crew members. That was in July. Back in February, Russia walked into Crimea—waltzed may be a better description of what they did—and declared it to be part of Russia. They went further: they said it was always part of Russia, and so was the rest of Ukraine."

"Why didn't the U.S. or the European countries do anything about this?" I asked. "If I remember correctly, Obama said he wouldn't send

any military equipment to Ukraine, and only slapped a few meaningless sanctions on Russia."

"Obama majored in political science at Columbia during the two years he was there. Maybe he fancied himself as an expert on political affairs. I think he was just told by the real experts in Washington that Ukraine had no geopolitical importance for us, but it is of major interest for Russia. They call it "escalatory dominance", which means no matter what we do, Russia will be able to do us one better because Russia will have better possibilities to exercise superior power. Obama gave an interview recently and continued to justify doing nothing to help Ukraine, either to regain control over Crimea or to build up its defenses against the inevitable invasion that would come. He said that at the time Russia took Crimea, it wasn't clear that the majority of Ukrainians wanted their own country, and many of the people in Crimea spoke Russian and were Russian sympathizers. He actually said that. You can look it up if you don't believe me.

"So, he turned the ball over to Germany and France to do the heavy lifting diplomatically. Merkel was up to her neck in Russian gas, and Holland, who was president of France at the time, was an old Kremlin bear hugger. The German chancellor before Merkel, Gerhard Schröder, was on the Russian state gas company's board of directors. That would be like Obama taking a paid position consulting to Putin on political strategy. And nobody in Germany or Europe or even the U.S. even batted a single eyelash."

"What did the Cheater-in-Chief do when he took over?" asked Franky. "I don't remember reading or hearing anything much at all about what Russia was doing."

"He let Ukraine have Javelin anti-tank weapons, but that's about it. There was no talk of letting Ukraine into NATO or giving them air or missile defense systems, tanks, or war planes, and especially no long-range missiles. If we had, maybe Russia would have thought twice or three times about invading Ukraine. Biden toed the same line when he took over as President, and a year after he came into office, Russia

drives into Ukraine on its way to Kiev, thinking it's going to be another cake walk. Putin calls his troops "peacemakers". But then something happened. Their trucks and tanks got stuck, and then they were sitting ducks. And now over a year later, Russia's bogged down, NATO has one new member, Finland, and maybe another one soon in Sweden, both coming to their senses about what Russia's real intentions are, and everyone falling over themselves to give Ukrainian soldiers the equipment they need to beat Russia."

"Fox News was on as usual at the gym when I was there yesterday, along with CNN and ESPN," interjected Franky, "and there was a Republican Congresswoman on the screen complaining about all the money we are spending on supporting Ukraine."

"She's one of the ones who got lots of financial support from Russia to win her seat," said Tony, "just like Adolf Twitler. Banon's still there, pushing the Russian escalation dominance doctrine at closed Republican rallies and fund raisers, out of the limelight, and travelling to Russia to kiss the patriarch's feet. Then there's the Pope. Every time he opens his mouth it sounds like he's reading from a Lavrov script. The EU's doing okay, but Hungary and Slovakia are definitely supporting Russia with their oil and gas purchases, and objections to sanctions."

"What really makes me angry," I said, "is India, China, Brazil, and South Africa refusing to condemn Russia and actually making it possible for Russia to keep financing their aggression."

"It seems like the best thing that has come out of this whole mess is that the U.S. and Europe have figured out that they are both better off if they work closely together as allies," offered Franky. "That business about pivoting east, away from Europe, wasn't very well thought out. I guess it was part of turning Europe over to the Russians?"

We were quiet for several minutes, finishing up the last bits of our breakfasts and sipping our coffees. Then Tony continued. "Russia has given the world great music, great literature, great dancers, great chess players, and some pretty good ice hockey players, but, on the whole, it's done more bad than good. It can't seem to help itself. It's as if evil is

written into the DNA of all the people who end up running the country. The people who don't have that coding leave the country. We keep thinking that things will change, that it will stop acting like the scorpion that stings the frog that's carrying it across a river to save its life and says that it had to do it because it's in its nature. Russia's never going to change. The rest of the world is simply going to have to live with it and find ways to keep Russia from always wanting to take something that doesn't belong to it."

"I watched a documentary on WVIA recently about Putin," said Franky. "There was an interview with an American political scientist with a Japanese name…"

"Francis Fukuyama," offered Tony.

"Yes," continued Franky. "He said something about Russia that really made sense to me. Russia has never become an industrial power. It has lots of natural resources, like oil, diamonds, and gold, but the country's wealth was never shared with its citizens by the tsars, the Communist Party, and now by the oligarchs. Making investments like Western countries do only pays off after many years, so Russia has continued to be what's called a predatory country. Those who have the resources, including the government, use them to steal from the weaker citizens and to grab whatever they can from their neighbors. If you start a company and it succeeds, you risk having it taken from you by an oligarch with the legal backing of the government, and if you are a neighboring country that has something that can make the Russian government or an oligarch richer, like Ukraine's rich farming land and its Black Sea ports, you run the risk of being bombed out of existence so that Russians can take over everything you once owned."

"It's time I read his books," said Tony, reflectively.

It was one o'clock. The lunch crowd had come and gone. There was never any pressure from Edie to vacate our table. She knew we were big tippers and steady customers, and each of us always bought a pie to take home: banana cream for Tony, blueberry for Franky, and lemon meringue for me. We left the subject of Russia and Ukraine there. I had

so many more questions to ask, but I felt that my head had gotten enough for one day. It was always the same when the lumberyard boys got together. Tony had a way of pulling facts out of his head, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that had gone missing from the board, and when he put them into place, the puzzle was solved. Franky and I had, over the years, gotten better at seeing the bigger picture and making connections between things that didn't at first seem to be related, but it was Tony who knew how to focus the camera.

Tony and I got into the Jeep. As I pulled out onto the highway, I said to Tony, "What ever happened to your What If? book? Did you ever finish it?

"It'll never be finished, but I got it to a point where I felt I could send it to publishers and see if they were interested in doing something with it."

"What happened?"

"I sent out about two dozen letters and got two replies. One said 'It doesn't match our demographics'. I thought that was really funny. I could see in my head the people this publisher was pushing books at, and I could definitely understand why I would not be one of the company's authors. I'm a white, straight male, married to a white straight female, over the age when people should be shuffled off to nursing homes so that the younger generation can have affordable places to live, and my book is not a murder mystery or a wild fantasy, it's not about feminism, same sex marriage, child abuse, drug or alcohol addiction recovery, escape from a sect, or any of the alphabet soup issues."

"What did the other publisher say?"

"He said my historical perspectives were too judgmental, and that I didn't represent a single side of the issues. Sometimes I sounded liberal, sometimes I sounded conservative, but most times I took positions that neither side would agree with. 'You don't praise a single President,' he said. 'You even found something negative to say about FDR, that he

liked Mussolini.' I wrote back to him and told him I am a tempered Liberal, neither a progressive or a conseratie, and congratulated him for having read the book so that he could verify why he didn't like it."

"So, what are you going to do with the book?"

"I decided to print three copies, one each for the other two Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club members, and one for me. Look for it under your Christmas tree."

"I look forward to reading it, partner," I said and smiled. I pushed the CD that was in the player back into the slot. It was my favorite and, over the years, had become Tony's too. The Four Tops were singing their hit song, *I Can't Help Myself*, and we headed back to The Orchard.

Ellen's younger son, Nicky, came home from his first day of his summer job on the borough's road crew. I was in the back weeding the vegetable garden. He was covered in a combination of tar stains and dirt. He smelled like newly laid pavement. Nonno Berto said I looked like a walking plaster statue when I came home from my first day at the lumberyard. Nonno then was about the same age as I am now, and Nicky is the same age as I was that summer. He's not worried about being drafted, like I was. Things are no more or no less unsettled than when I was eighteen, but at least he can stay out of a war unless he decides to sign up for one. I hope he never does. He worked hard in school and stayed out of trouble, at least so far.

"Were they using you as the steam roller," I joked. "Is that how they initiate the temporary help?"

"Very funny, Grandpa. I seem to remember that it was you who convinced me that this would be a great way to stay in shape for the Dream Game and get a head start on college football camp."

"I think I remember saying something like that," I teased. "I think I also remember offering you a job helping me out around the house, starting with painting the fence, but you said it was better to bring money in from the outside rather than taking it out of the house's piggy

bank. I said something like that to my nonno when I was your age. Being able to think like that must be an inheritable trait."

"It was when you said the first job would be painting the fence that I decided to work on the road crew."

The sky had darkened and there were rumbles coming out of the south. "You might get a forced day off work tomorrow by the sound of things."

"Maybe you can show me how to make the fertilizer if I have to stay home tomorrow."

"Was it you who was going to get the secret and not Joey?"

"Come on, Grandpa. You know you told Joey that it had to be your youngest grandson who got it so that it would last longer."

"Okay. Now that you mention it, I do remember saying something like that. But I also said that I would give it to you before I died. I'm not planning on leaving this earth all that soon, but in case I do without having had the fertilizer formula conversation with you, a copy of it is attached to my last will and testament, in an envelope with your name on it. If you stay on my good side until then, there might me more than a fertilizer formula in there, but don't start planning any round-the-world cruises just yet."

"You told me that I had to pass it on to my grandson. What happens if I don't have a grandson?

"Make sure you do," I said. "And once you have the recipe, you have to use it, otherwise it loses its magic."

The End

THE CHARACTERS

Nicky

Nickolas (Nicky) Fabriano is 17 (born July 14, 1947). He is 5' 9", 175 pounds, and was an offensive halfback and defensive cornerback on the high school varsity football team. He also played baseball. He applied to Kings College and ROTC but was not accepted because of his grades and SAT scores.

Father – Carmen (Carmy) Fabriano. Car mechanic. Runs a gas station and car repair shop. His father was Nikola (Nicco) who died in 1952, and his mother was Giovannina (Jenny), who died in 1958. Carmy grew up on The Orchard a few houses away from the Serras.

Mother – Virginia (Gina) Serra Fabriano. She works in the local clothes factory and has worked there since she was fifteen. Gina's mother, Conselia (Selia) Albertini Serra, died two years ago. Her father, Umberto (Berto) Serra, lives alone on one side of the house, and Carmy, Gina and Nicky live on the other side.

Zio Al (Alberto) Fabriano – Nicky's father's younger brother. He lost a leg and his sight in one eye in the Korean War. He has a prosthesis and wears an eye patch. He works at Carmy's gas station taking care of customers and filling up cars with gas and oil. Never married. Lives alone in the house his father built.

Franky

Frank (Franky) Antonelli is 17 (born July 28, 1947) He is 6' 5", 225 pounds, and was an offensive and defensive end on the city high school team that played and won in the State finals. He graduated in the top ten in his class, had good SAT scores and was recruited by both the big football schools and the Ivy League. He accepted a full scholarship to Penn State to play football.

Father - Michele (Mike) Antonelli. He is a chemistry teacher in the high school where Franky went to school. He grew up in the house where they live in the city and is a WWII veteran.

Mother – Maria (Mary) Arcobaleno (means 'rainbow' in Italian). Her father was Lorenzo (Renzo), deceased, and Rosa, still living on The Orchard at the start of the book. Her brother, Giuliano, is married to Adele and lives on one side of the duplex house her father built. Their son, Larry, and daughter, Rosemary, are married and have moved out of town.

Girlfriend – Donna Keegan, who is in the same high school class as Franky. Captain of the cheerleaders. Going to Sacred Heart College and then wants to go to nursing school. She won the medal for best in science.

Tony

Anthony (Tony) Malatesta is 17 (born July 9, 1947). He 5' 10", 190 pounds. He is a high school dropout and is working full-time in the lumberyard. Tony's father was killed in a mining accident.

Father – Errico (Ricco) Malatesta. He was a coal miner before he was drafted into WWII. He returned to the mines after the War, but then volunteered to fight in Korea. He was killed in action during the Korean War.

Mother – Helena (Helen) d'Assissi Malatesta. She worked in the local undergarment factory, the Dutchess, before she and Ricco married, and she has continued to work there ever since. She has cared for her children and taken care of the house.

Anna (Annie) Malatesta – She finished high school and is working as a waitress in one of the bar restaurants in town (Donnatelli's) in the evenings and weekends and in the dress factory during the day.

Contessa (Connie) Malatesta – Sister. Born October 1948. She will be entering her senior year in high school when the term starts in September.

Celeste (Charlie) Malatesta – Brother. Born May 1949. He will be entering his junior year in high school.

The Guado Family

Guado means 'ford across a stream' in Italian.

Paulie is the oldest and only brother in the family of four. All of the Guados are tall. Paulie is 6' 2". He started the lumberyard with two cousins after returning from service in the Pacific Theater during WWII. He is the boss.

Jim Guado –Son of Paulie's father's second youngest brother. He is called 'Big Jim' because of his height. He is 6' 4". He was in the European Theater during the War. He is married to Filice Settamente. They were in the same class in high school.

Olivia (Livia) Guado Navaro – Daughter of Paulie's father's youngest brother. She is the treasurer of the company. Married to Danny Navaro.

Others

Johnny Grozinski – Yard foreman at DC Lumber. Johnny was too young to fight in WWII, but he was drafted after the War and served in Korea from 1947 until 1949 in the U.S. Army Military in Korea, known as USMAGIK.

Paulette Grozinsiki – Married to Johnny Grozinski and a teacher at Drake's Crossing High School.

Enzo Luccatella – He owns a bar and restaurant, a car repair shop, and a dry-cleaning establishment in the borough. He is also the head of the local mafia gang, which he took over from his father.

Guido Donnatelli – owner of the restaurant Donnatelli's where Annie Malatesta works.

Gaetano (Guy) Donnatelli – visiting worker from a small town south of Naples named Torre del Greco. His grandfather and Guido Donnatelli are first cousins.