

Path of Grass

A novel
by Savannah Liston



I'm not afraid
They'll stamp me flat.
Grass stamped flat
Soon becomes a path.
- Blago Dimitrova



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Dedication

To all those, famous and obscure, who have lived out
liberty and dreamed of peace.
To everyone who has encouraged me to continue writing.
I dedicate this work to the One who has redeemed my
life, the *Logos* of the universe, who has given me my
own words to write.

Acknowledgements

There have been times during the process of writing *Path of Grass* that the corrections, scribbles, and red ink discouraged me so much that I wondered if perhaps someone else would be better at writing it. But then I realized that no one else would write it and so I needed to persevere. In a sense, this has been a very individualistic work, but after the hard work of getting all the words on paper it became a group project. Many people have read and reviewed this work, from professional editors to friends. They have contributed to making this a strong and smooth story; they noticed the inconsistencies and pointed out the weaknesses in my plot that I had not seen.

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Savannah Liston



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Part One



Chapter One

“Louise, she is beautiful,” he murmured as the infant’s soft hand curled around his calloused finger.

“Ja, Heinrich. She is our baby, and she is beautiful.”

“What will we call her?”

“Margaret.”

“That is a good name.”

“Welcome to the world, Margaret.” He smiled. “I will write to my parents tomorrow to tell them about the new grandchild; they will be happy.”



“You have done what?!” his father’s voice boomed.

“I have married a French woman. That’s what I already said.”

“Karl, you must be joking,” his mother exclaimed.

“No, I am not joking.” He held out his hand. “Here is the ring.”

“I can’t believe it,” his sister murmured. “What a disgrace.”

“Is her family good?” his mother asked.

“Ah... well, her mother is very kind.”

“But her family—where does she come from? Is she well-off?” his father persisted.

“She will be very prosperous soon,” Karl said.

“Why?” Matilda asked quickly. If her brother had to marry a French woman it was fortunate she would be wealthy.

“She is in the ballet. She has great potential. Her instructor said she would soon be a star.”

“Ballet?”

“She works at the theater?”

“Yes, you should see her; she is very talented. That is why I did not bring her. She has a very special opportunity to make a great future, and I didn’t want to deprive her of that.”

“Karl, we raised you so well,” his mother wailed, clutching at her apron. “We have been so proud of you. And look at you now: marrying a French ballet dancer.”

“There could be worse,” he said brightly, but from the look on his mother’s face it was clear she did not agree.

“Look at your brother, Heinrich,” his mother replied. “He married a good, country girl and has a sweet little child...”

“I presume you will not further disgrace this family by remaining under our roof,” his father interrupted.

This was more of a blow than Karl expected. He knew there would be no money now, but no home either?

“Ah... no, father, I will not intrude any longer. I’ll pack my things now.” He paused, looking around at his stern family. “I’m tired of being told what to do. I want to be free to live my life the way I choose instead of my father choosing my career... and my wife.”

He left the room quickly, before they could reply.

“What a ridiculous boy,” Matilda said. “I didn’t know anyone in our family could be so stupid. ‘She will be rich from ballet.’ That will never happen. If only it was an inheritance or something more secure.”

Karl went to his room and started shoving clothes wildly into his suitcase. He took one of his law books from the shelf and threw it on the floor. "I am done with the law. Father knows I don't want to be a lawyer. I've gone along with it, but that is over now."



When Karl returned to Paris, Leah was not a star of the ballet. He found her in their kitchen crying.

"They paid no attention to me last night. They picked a girl who had nothing; she was nothing compared to me, and they passed right over me. Oh, Karl, what will I do? This was my only chance. Without this... we are doomed!"

"Leah, Leah, it will work out. Don't be upset. We will not be doomed, I promise."

It took nearly an hour to soothe her. And then the inevitable question came.

"What did your parents say? Are they happy?"

He sighed. "No, Leah. They were not happy at all. They were very angry. They made me leave, which is why I am back so soon. We will have to make do on our own."



A year had passed since Karl had last seen his family.

"There is a letter for you," Leah said one evening. It was from Matilda.

Dear Karl,

It is my duty to write to you and tell you what has happened. Father and Mother were taken ill this winter and died. I am engaged to be married very shortly. You don't need to come to the wedding. That is all the news that I have.

Matilda

“Leah, my parents are dead.”

She turned from setting the table. “Oh, Karl. I’m so sorry.”

She came and stood next to him, holding his hand.

“And I had no chance to make peace with them.”



Leah had a child the next year, a little girl. They named her Adele. But added to this joy was more worry; it was difficult for them to make ends meet. Leah scrimped and saved every franc, but they were forced to sell some of the furniture and valuables to pay the bills.

“Leah, we cannot stay here any longer. We must do something for Adele, for her future,” Karl said one evening.

“What do you mean?”

“If we sell the house, we will get enough to take us to America. We can go to New York and start afresh. I don’t like what is happening in Germany. That man, Hitler, he worries me. I’m afraid he’ll try to start a war. He might even take over France. And then where will we be? America is a good place; they are free and we don’t have to worry about people like Hitler.”

“We must leave?”

“Yes, we will have to leave Paris.”

She was silent, her eyes full of fear.

“My dear, if we don’t do this, what will we do for Adele? How will she grow up if we can’t even feed her? America is a good place. There are more opportunities there. A man can do as he pleases.”

“Yes, Karl, you are right. We will sell the house and go to America.” But the house sold for barely enough to pay for two tickets.

“Leah, I will write to my sister and ask her to care for

Adele; she is over a year old now. If Matilda can watch Adele for a few months—just while we get settled in America—then we can send for her.”

“But we can’t send her to Germany! Not with Hitler...”

“What else shall we do? There isn’t enough money for us all.” He took her hand and held it tightly. “What could happen to a baby there? Hitler would take no notice of a little child. She will be safe with Matilda, just for a few months. It won’t be long.”

Leah cried many bitter tears over this, but there was no other choice. Karl wrote to Matilda and soon received a reply.

Karl,

You may send her. We will be waiting.

Matilda

Chapter Two

They finally arrived in New York, exhausted. But they had no place to stay. Karl sent Leah to search for apartments with their meager savings while he looked for a job.

Leah visited many buildings, but they could not afford any of them. It was close to evening, and she was hungry. She decided to knock at one more door.

"Hello?" a young man answered. He leaned lazily against the doorpost, smoking a cigarette.

"Hi," she said. "I'm looking for an apartment. This is what I have," she said, holding out a handful of coins and a few pieces of paper. He laughed. "I don't know how you will find anything except a closet with that."

Her eyes burned with shame and anger.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that," he said.

"We just came from Paris. My husband will find a job soon, and we will be able to pay more than."

He was silent, inspecting Leah from her tousled but beautiful hair to her dusty boots.

"I will make a deal with you. The money you have would maybe get you a room for a week, but I'll give it to you for a month."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you so much."

He flicked his hand carelessly. "It is nothing. Let me show you the room."

He led her inside. "The stairs are a little steep," he cautioned and took her hand as they ascended. As they were going downstairs again he asked if she had eaten any supper.

"No, no, not yet. My husband..."

"Well, come sit down. I happen to have a little extra in my cupboard."

"No, I must go find my..."

"How will you find him when you are faint with hunger?" he laughed gently. "Come and sit down; you must be tired."

She was tired—too tired to protest.

He soon had a meal ready, and by the time it was over, he had learned everything about her. She was in the ballet but was treated shamefully there. She had a beautiful daughter in Germany. He was entranced by her every word, and she enjoyed having someone to speak to, someone who could laugh and smile after her difficult journey.

"I must go now," she finally said reluctantly. "I will find my husband, and we will come back later. Thank you again."



Karl found work in the city. He left early each morning before Leah was fully awake and didn't come back until late into the evening.

"Karl, can't I go look for a job? I'm sure I can find a job sewing or something."

"What are you thinking, Leah? No, no. If you need more money I will work harder. But I will not have my wife going out to work because I couldn't support her." It stung his pride to think of Leah working; he would do anything to keep her from that fate.

"Yes, Karl," she answered meekly. It wasn't the money she wanted; it was something to do. The days were so long

and tiresome without Karl. There was little she could do to amuse herself. But she would not tell Karl that for he would only worry more.



Leah did not have much time to stay lonely without Karl. The landlord soon discovered she spent her day sitting alone in the apartment, watching all the people rushing about outside.

“The air in here is very stuffy—why don’t you come out with me for a walk?” he said one morning.

“Oh, Charles, I couldn’t do that...”

“Come now, you will make yourself ill pent up like this, and then what will your husband say?”

So she followed him out. The streets were very crowded and Leah found herself pushed about and jostled. “Here, take my hand; otherwise you will get lost,” he said. So she did.

“It is nearly noon. You must be hungry,” he said. “There is a nice little place just down here, delicious food. Come with me.” So she had lunch with him.

The next morning he came and knocked at her door.

“The walk yesterday put color into your cheeks—you are looking much better now. Let’s not undo the great improvement,” he said, rubbing her cheek softly. “The doctor prescribes another walk today.”

They laughed.

“How can I resist?” she answered.

He put his hand around her waist, and they went out together.



One night Karl came back from the factory and found she was not there.

“Leah?” he called.

There was no answer.

“Leah?” he cried louder. His voice was worn and weak.

He went downstairs again.

“Leah?”

There was no answer.

He went back to their room and found a note on the table.

*I've gone away with the only one I have ever truly loved.
Don't try to find me, you never will.*

Leah

He sat down weakly.

“Leah...?” His voice cracked.

“Leah...”

He crumpled up the note, threw it on the floor and crushed it under his boot.



Karl,

I'm writing to say that Heinrich has died. It was from some sort of wound that never healed. There wasn't anything that Louise could do for him. I hope all is well with you. Adele is growing very much. She is looking forward to seeing her parents.

Matilda

He never responded to this letter. There was nothing he could say now that Leah was gone. And so Matilda never knew if he had received it or not.



Soon after this, Karl lost his job. It seemed like nearly everyone in New York lost their job. It took him a few weeks to gather the courage to stand in a soup line. Karl grew tired of this humiliating and dull existence. He left the city and went west.

When he got to Indiana, Karl found a farm that had been abandoned; it couldn't provide enough for the people who lived there. They had started for the West Coast, full of dreams and illusions. He bought the farm using the money he and Leah had saved to bring Adele to the United States.

A few months later he met a woman from a nearby farm. Her husband had died. She was very plain and practical, but it was soon apparent they would both benefit from a marriage. She would give the farm to her younger brother who had great plans for it, and she could assist Karl with the work at his farm.

After they were married Karl wrote to Matilda, asking her to send Adele. He didn't realize what was happening in Germany, he didn't know Germany was in such tumult that his letter probably wouldn't reach Matilda. And it didn't.

He wrote again and again, but his letters just seemed to disappear. His wife, Anna, had a baby boy, which eased the pain of losing touch with his daughter.



Matilda wrote to the address of Karl in New York, but her letter was returned.

"Gottlieb, we can't keep this girl any longer. Times are more difficult now, and with my own baby...."

"What will you do? Throw her out on the streets?"

"No, that would be shameful. I was thinking of taking her to that convent, St. Isolde's. They take in orphan girls.

I will tell her that her parents died—it is probably the truth. They will bring her up well.”

Chapter 3

My name is Adele. But the other sisters call me Catherine, so I do not know who I am. My mother was French; my father was German. My father's family was angry because he married a foolish French woman. After my parents died I was given to a convent and have lived there ever since. I remember the day when I was four years old. My Aunt Matilda pulled me impatiently through the streets and stopped at the convent door. She crossly straightened my little brown dress and tied the old shoes that were too big for me, and then a nun opened the door. My aunt at once became grown up and wouldn't look at me anymore.

"This is an orphan; her name is Catherine. Will you take her and bring her up to be a good girl?"

"Please come in. I will go ask the mother superior."

I was confused that my aunt lied about my name, but she gave me a sharp glance that made me afraid to protest.

We were led into a hollow-sounding, dark courtyard and made to wait a great while, it seemed to me. My aunt amused herself by rummaging through her small purse and looking at relics of the past stashed in it. She would not allow me the privilege of touching anything, so I wandered around the room and stared at the strange pictures of a woman holding a child, angels, and a man wrapped in sheets

floating on clouds. At last another nun came in and spoke to my aunt for a few minutes. My aunt sounded angry and, after shouting a little, became satisfied. As I look back, perhaps she did not shout, but the vastness and emptiness of the room made her voice louder than it really was. My aunt smiled too sweetly at me and walked out. The nun took my hand gently and led me into another place. It was a long hallway, and I was afraid it would never end. We at last reached the last door, and the nun slowly opened it. It was a sort of chapel with candles lining the walls. At the very front of it was a statue of that same woman I saw in the courtyard pictures, smiling down at her baby. The nun paused where we stood.

“This is where we worship God,” she said softly. I didn’t want to speak; the lady with the child seemed to be telling us to be quiet and just look at her. “This is where you will come also, to worship God with us. Do you know who that lady there is? It is the mother of Jesus Christ. He delivered His people from their sins by dying for them. He was perfect. He never sinned, but He bore our sins for us. We now pray to Him and His Father because His Father is now our Father. You used to have a father, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“But he died. Christ’s Father never died and never will. He is in Heaven, and he listens when we speak to him. Now, enough of that.” She turned around suddenly, as if remembering her real duty. “My name is Sister Clotilde. Let me show you where you are to sleep.”

She took me out of the chapel and down the hall about halfway. She opened another door that led into a very small room that had a little bed in the corner, a window, and a shelf next to the window. The walls were brick. I felt them, and they were cold.

“You aren’t used to this plainness, are you? But this is the way we know Christ better, for He did not have grand and comfortable rooms. Through this we learn how to love Christ and others more. This dress is all you have, isn’t it? We shall make you a new one tomorrow. Lie down and rest until dinnertime. I will come get you then.”

I sat on the edge of the bed for a little while after she left me, and then I stood up on the bed so I could peer out the window. I saw a small garden, where some nuns were walking. It was fall, and nearly everything was dead and brown. There were no children out there, and I was disappointed. I had never played with children my age before and had hoped there would be some here. Maybe the children were lying down, resting, like me. Finally I became tired and threw my head down on the hard mattress. The blankets were rough and smelled strange to me. My back was against the clammy chill of the bricks, and I shivered. It was a different place here, and I did not like it. I wanted my parents, the parents I could not even remember. And I cried for them. I wept until the blanket was damp. Then I closed my eyes and slept.

Sister Clotilde came and woke me. I hoped she did not notice how red my eyes were or how wet the coverlet was.

“Time to come eat, child. Do you miss your parents very much?”

I nodded.

“My mother died when I was little too. I cried for months, even years after she was gone. I am sorry that it happened to you.”

I nodded again a little. I was still very shy. She took my hand and led me down the hall, almost back to the courtyard, but we turned right and went into a long room with a long table in it. There were steaming bowls of

something at every place. She sat me down beside her and we waited for the other sisters. After they were all seated the nun at the end of the table began speaking, like a chant, and everyone bowed their heads. I did too, but I couldn't keep my eyes closed.

It was soon over, and they began eating in silence. The nun at the end of the table asked me how old I was. I told her I was four, and she said I was very young. All the nuns spent the dinner time looking at me. Some were cautious and suspicious, others full of compassion, and others a little angry, as if I was intruding. After I ate my stew Sister Clotilde told me I was to go back to my room and sleep. In the morning I would come to Mass with them. She took me and a candle back to the little room. The candle only weakly penetrated the darkness. Sister Clotilde then left me with the tiny beacon of light and closed the door.

I was frightened. I had always been frightened of the darkness. But this dark was even worse because I was alone, and I thought that if I screamed perhaps no one would come comfort me. I crept to the bed and pulled myself up to the window again. The moon was shining brightly, and that helped to sooth my worry. I watched it shining on the cold ground until it moved beyond my sight. Then I lay down and cried myself to sleep.

Thus was my first day at St. Isolde's Convent.

Chapter Four

“Nikolaus, please don’t leave—don’t go away now,” Margaret cried, wrapping her arms around him.

“Margie, it is for our country, it is for Germany, it is for the Fatherland. Otherwise, they will come and take our land. They will take away everything we know.”

“But I want you with me; I will be left alone,” she pleaded.

“Kneel down,” he said. “Feel this,” he put his hands on the earth. “This is our land, this is ours. If we let the British and the Russians and the Americans win, this will be gone. Be brave, Margie, for our country, for us, and for what we are protecting.”

He kissed her gently, stood up, and walked away.

She knelt there on the ground, weeping, until there were no more tears.



She had always known Nikolaus. When they were grown—it was just natural—she married Nikolaus. No one was surprised; it seemed the way things were meant to be.

Margaret never realized how much she loved him until he declared he was leaving for the war. And then she felt alone and afraid. Nikolaus was everything. He provided for her, he protected her, he loved her, and now he would not be there.



Margaret sat down at the table. She was tired. She hadn't slept the night before. The house was big and dangerous without Nikolaus. She looked around, her eyes weary. It was an old house, mostly stone. It was cold in the winter—like it was now. It had been in her family for generations. Someone had come to this place and built a house, intending to provide for his family by hunting. Eventually there wasn't enough land for that, so he was forced to become a farmer.

The house was in a dense and large forest. On the east side of the forest were the fields that her family had cultivated for many years. They had refused to clear the forest to farm it. The trees were something to cherish, not destroy. She wondered exactly how long the house had been there, hidden away beneath the thick branches of the trees. How many people had lived there? What stories could be told about their lives? Children had been born. Families had been raised. And children had died.

As her own had.

Margaret pictured the tiny grave in her mind, the small lump of earth. Her child, her beautiful daughter, who died before they even named her, before Margaret even knew her.

And so now Margaret was all alone, with Nikolaus gone.

Her father died when she was young, from a wound that never healed. She vaguely remembered it—or maybe she was just imagining it from the stories her mother told. She would never know for sure....

“Here he comes!” Margaret shouted. He had spent the day working in their fields.

She ran out of the house to greet him. He was walking

slowly, and she reached him before he even approached the house.

“Papa, you’re hurt!”

“Ja,” he said quietly. Her father was a silent man. He never spoke much.

“Heinrich, we weren’t expecting you yet, it isn’t dark.” Margaret’s mother said, as she too came running towards him.

“I couldn’t do anything more.”

“But you are limping, are you hurt?”

“Ja, but it is nothing. It will be gone soon.”

“Come inside, lie down and rest,” Louise urged.

He rested, and they cleaned his wound, and no one worried any more.

But one morning he woke up feverish.

“Heinrich, what is wrong? You are in pain? What is it?”

“My leg, it hurts.”

Louise felt him.

“You have a fever.”

“I must get up and work.”

“You will not work today, you are sick. Lay still and rest.”

He was a stubborn man; he tried to get up anyway, but he collapsed again on the bed.

“Ja, I will rest.”

So he lay down, fell asleep, and never woke up. He tossed in a feverish sleep for three days, and then was gone.

“Mama, what happened?” Margaret asked. Papa was sleeping, but he was strangely still. And Mama was crying.

“Papa is gone,” she said. “Go outside.”

Margaret went outside and found Nikolaus, working out in his family’s field.

“Nikki, something is wrong with my father.”

“I know, my papa told me. He is sick.”

“But now Mama says he is gone. What does that mean?”

He paused from his hoeing.

“Margie, it means he is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Ja.”

“But how?”

“I don’t know.”

“What does it mean? To be dead?”

“I don’t know. It is like he is asleep, but he will never wake up now.”

“Never?”

“Never. Until God comes again. Then he will wake up.”

“I hope God comes soon. I want my papa.” She thought of her father, lying silent and still on his bed. He would never play with her again. Never tell her stories. Never be there for her. Margaret started crying.

“Nikki... I want my papa. I don’t want him to be dead. Can’t he come back? He came back from the war. Can’t he come back from being dead?”

Nikolaus wrapped his arms around her.

“Margie, he can’t come back now. It is too late. But you’ll see him again, remember? When God comes. Don’t cry, your papa would want you to be happy.” He stood and held her while she wept, until she was exhausted.

“Margie, you need to go home, you’re tired. You need to sleep.”



Nikolaus took care of her; he comforted Margaret when she was afraid or sorrowful. Her mother could no longer help her. As Margaret grew older, her mother became like a child again.

“Margie, when will Heinrich come back from the war?”

He has been gone too long.”

“I don’t know, mama, but soon. Soon.”

She was eighteen and used to this now.

Her mother sat and knit by the window, asking questions about long dead relatives and creating stories about her life.

“Your brother, Albert, such a naughty little boy he was, always getting into mischief.”

Margaret was an only child.

But she was kind and did not argue with her mother.

And then one day her mother was gone, too. Peacefully, during the night.

So Margaret was alone. Nikolaus asked if she would marry him. It was two weeks after her mother died. She could not refuse; what else was there for her to do? Of course she would marry him, and they would raise a family and have a happy life.



They were happy, Nikki and Margaret together.

She announced to Nikolaus she was pregnant.

“Nikki, we are going to have a child,” she told him one evening, her face bright with excitement.

Nikolaus carved a cradle for their baby. Margaret knitted blankets and hats and socks.

But when the child was born, she was too young and fragile. She was born in the morning and did not outlast the day.

So when they had planned to celebrate new life, they were digging a miniature grave.



“This is all we have now,” Nikolaus told her one night, “each other and this land. My parents are gone. Your

parents are gone. Our child is gone. This is what is left. And we can't lose it. What would I do without you? And what would you do with me? We've got our house and our love."



All of this Margaret remembered, sitting at that sturdy oak table.

Now she wasn't even sure if she would have Nikolaus. He might be so easily taken from her. It happened to so many others why would it not happen to him?

Chapter Five

When I turned thirteen my aunt came to see me. I was in the kitchen, chopping carrots, and Sister Mary told me someone was here to visit me. I rinsed my hands and went back into the courtyard.

“My! What a nice looking girl you are! You have plumped out, haven’t you! You were always just as skinny as could be. So today you are thirteen years old! How does it feel?”

I had forgotten the day of my birth; the nuns cared nothing for worldly things like that.

“It feels fine, aunt. How are you doing?”

“Me? Oh, just the same as ever, a little older, but I am not ready to sit down and knit now—with the salvation of Germany on the rise. Isn’t it a glorious thing? After all we have suffered from the Allies, we are finally going to make them pay.”

I hadn’t the least idea what she was talking about but merely nodded.

“Anyway, Catherine, I have come to give you something. I think you should have it now. Do what you wish with it.”

She handed me a small package wrapped in brown paper. I did not open it then; I did not know if it would be polite or not.

“There are things in there from your father. He was going to be a lawyer—these are his books. Well, I have to

be going. It was good to see you again, Catherine. You are growing into a fine woman.”

She perhaps forgot I was only thirteen. My dress and the seriousness of my life made me seem older than I was.

“Good bye, Aunt Matilda. It was nice to see you. I hope your family is doing well.”

She rushed out the door, and I was left alone. I carried the package to my room and left it on the shelf until I had time to look at it. I was longing to open it and read the books but was used to denying my wishes.

That evening after the dishes were washed, and prayers were said, I took an extra candle to my room and opened the package. There were three books; they were old and musty, the pages yellowed. I carefully opened one and began reading. I couldn't understand it; nothing seemed to make sense. It wasn't like the prayer books the nuns had me read. But my father had written his name on them, which made it special to me. I was sorry I could not understand the book though. Oh well, at least I had a little something to remind me of them. My candle was dying. I carefully stacked the books and set them up on the shelf. They were the only things I had. Other nuns put rosary beads there, or crucifixes, but I preferred it to be left bare, until now. I didn't mind their religion, only it seemed a bit too much. I liked a little space that was not invaded by matrons with children staring down at me or rosary beads haunting my sleep with murderers strangling me with them.

I watched the candle go out and felt a rush of self-pity as the darkness covered me. I had to stay here though I longed to be in the world and experience its mysteries. I did start crying; it was such a gloomy night, and the mustiness of my room didn't help. It was dark, there was no moon, and I groped about to find my pillow so I could

lie down and weep. I thought about praying as Sister Clotilde said she did when she was sad. But I didn't want to. Mother Mary couldn't help me. She wasn't an orphan—I was sure of that—and she didn't grow up in a muted grey convent. So I cried myself to sleep as I did on the first night I was here.

Thus was the night of my thirteenth birthday.

Chapter Six

Karl and Anna had been married two years when she gave birth to their son, Robert. And when Robert was five years old, the war began. They knew about it only because Anna's sister lived in Chicago and sent her letters. Besides that they were isolated from the world for they had created their own world.

One day that all changed.



"Karl! Karl... come quickly!" Anna called as she ran towards the barn, half carrying and half dragging Robert.

He emerged from the barn, shovel in hand, his clothes filthy from his work.

"What's wrong?"

"Men..." she gasped, "men are inside... and they want to see you."

He walked quickly up to the house, Anna following more slowly, trying to catch her breath.

"You do not deny that you are from Germany?" one of the men asked Karl.

"No, I do not. Why should I? I came to America to start a new life. This is a better place."

"How long have you been here?"

Karl thought for a moment. "About sixteen years."

“As a precautionary measure, we must ask that you come with us.”

“What do you mean? Why?”

“You do know that there is a war. We have to be careful. Can’t take any risks.”

“What are you talking about?”

The men were clearly exasperated by his questions.

“Just listen, okay? It is for the country. Come now.”

“No! I will not go off somewhere with you. I am an American citizen!”

The man shrugged. “That doesn’t matter now. You are from Germany.”

“But my family? What will they do? And my farm? Who will take care of my farm?”

“That isn’t our problem. Orders are orders.”

Anna stood in the shadows behind Karl, her face taut with fear. Even Robert sensed this was a time to be silent.

“I won’t go! I won’t! You have no right to do this!” Karl protested.

One of the men nodded to the others.

They came up to Karl and grabbed his arms. He struggled. He tried to punch one of the men but only succeeded in getting battered in the face. His nose started to bleed. Anna screamed, clutching at Robert. Karl was no match for the four strong men. His hands were soon bound, his eyes to the ground.

“Good day, ma’am,” one of the men muttered as they led Karl outside.

“No, Karl!” Anna ran after them. She snatched his arm. “Karl, don’t let them do this! What will I do without you? Please... no! Karl...”

The men pushed her aside. They had him in their truck in a moment, and before she could do anything more,

they were gone, leaving only a stream of bitter dust that billowed up in her face.



“John? John... where are you?” Anna called. She had trudged all this way to talk to her brother, hoping he would be there.

“Anna? What are you doing here?”

“John, oh John, this is terrible.”

She sunk down on a bale of straw, her face red and sweaty.

“What happened?”

“They have taken Karl away. He is gone.”

“What do you mean? You can’t be serious.”

“I am serious, John. They tied him up and took him away in their truck.”

“Who are they?”

She pushed a strand of hair back from her face impatiently.

“I don’t know. They are from the government. Soldiers.”

“Soldiers?”

“Yes, soldiers.”

“Our government?”

“Yes, our government. They said they did it to protect America.”

“What?”

She nodded.

“Yes. To keep our country safe. They asked if Karl is from Germany.”

“I can’t believe it.” He sat down beside her and wrapped his arms around her shoulders. “Anna, I am so sorry. I am so sorry. There must be some mistake. Once they know he is an American citizen they will let him go.”

She shook her head.

“They know that. They said it didn’t make any difference.”

“But it must! Why else would anyone be an American citizen but to be protected from things like that?”

“I don’t know. But they know how he is, and it didn’t matter.”

“We will do something to get him back, I promise. We will find a way.”

“Thank you, John. Thank you.”

They did not yet realize there was no way to free a man who had been taken captive in that system.

Chapter Seven

It was dark. He stumbled and fell to his knees—throwing his hand to the ground to steady himself—and felt flesh. His hand was wet. He raised his hand to his nose. It was blood.



He stood up and ran. It didn't matter where, even across enemy lines, just far away from the unnamed body he had touched.



But he made it back to familiar grounds.

“Lee, we thought you were gone,” a dirty and bloodied man said.

“I know, I thought I was gone too,” Lee said weakly.

“You don't look good—where are you wounded?” Ralph asked.

“I don't think I am hurt.”

“Are you sure?”

Lee nodded.

There was an explosion nearby. It shook the ground, and the men grabbed each other to keep from falling.

“Better get back; they're coming closer,” Ralph said.



Dear Margie,

I am doing fine. I can't tell you where I am, but we've been doing a lot of fighting. Many of the men hope the war will be over in a couple months, but I am not so sure. The weather is very cold, and most days it snows a little, but not too much. And then it will warm up and the fields will turn to mud, but overnight it will freeze again.

How is the farm doing? Don't overwork yourself; I don't want to find you worn out when I come home. I suppose it is cold and snowing back in Iowa now too. Remember the big snowdrifts there were last year? It is amazing how the wind can blow snow into all those shapes. I think of you when it snows because I remember the first time it snowed on the farm, when we were together. It was on Thanksgiving; we had the turkey roasting in the oven. I came in from feeding the cows and said it was snowing. I told you the dressing and the pies could wait—you needed to see the snow. So I took you outside in your pretty plaid dress and apron, no coat or hat. We stood together, catching snowflakes with our fingers until we were numb with cold. Then I kissed you and carried you inside...



She lifted the paper up to her face. It even smelled like Lee. It was a good letter. He sounded good—as good as a man can be in the midst of war.

Margie picked up a piece of paper, found a pencil, and sat down at the kitchen table. Where would she start? What would she say? There was so much—yet so little. So many thoughts to share, but so little that was truly significant. Would she tell him about the night after he left? Would it worry him? Was there a reason to tell him?

Dear Lee,

The farm is doing well. Your father comes over nearly every day to make sure all is in order. Avery is taking good care of the animals, and it is good to have him here.

The first night after you left, I was all alone. I told Avery he didn't have to come because he had chores to do at your father's farm, and it would have been dark by the time he was done. The house feels empty when you are not there. Even when you're outside working, and I am inside, it feels like you're beside me. But that night, I was alone. I never realized how quiet it is in the country. In the city there is never silence, always noise on the streets, even in the middle of the night. Your farm is quiet, though. There was not even a wind. Just silence. I couldn't go to sleep. I am used to hearing you breathe beside me, but that night there was nothing. It frightened me—I couldn't think or calm myself. So I walked around the house, up the stairs, down the stairs, around the kitchen, around our bedroom, around the parlor... over and over. Eventually I suppose I went back to bed, for I remember waking up early in the morning—and you were not there. For a moment I panicked, wondering what had happened. But then I remembered. You had gone away. And I was afraid. I didn't want to get up. I wanted to cover myself up, fall asleep, and never wake up.

Lee, you brought me out to this strange place, to this lonely and forsaken land—and then you left. I never left the city before I married you. That was my home, and I don't know what to do here without you. I just hope that whatever you're doing is worth it, and please come home soon.”

Margie paused and looked over her letter. It wouldn't do, it would upset Lee too much. She tore it into slips and brushed the shreds into her cupped hand, crunching her fingers around the paper to form a tight ball. She threw the

remains of the letter across the kitchen floor, and it landed in the trash can. *Time to start over*, she thought, and picked up her pencil again.

Dear Lee,

The farm is doing well. Your father comes over often to check up on things. And Avery is very helpful—he does most of the work.

We had our first snowfall a few days ago. It was beautiful. Yes, I remember last Thanksgiving. That's why the gravy was burnt—I was outside too long... but it was worth it. We don't do things like that in the city... somebody might see us, and there would be rumors around town within hours. People would talk; they are too dignified and proper to stand out in the snow like we did.

Your parents invited me to come to their house for Thanksgiving. I haven't decided yet if I will go. They are very nice, although I think I'd rather spend the day alone. But I don't want to offend them. They are trying to make me part of the family, and I think it is hard because I am not one of you. But they are trying, for your sake.

Remember that old oak tree out in front of the house? A couple nights ago it fell down. I think because of the snow and the wind. We'll probably leave it until spring because it is getting too cold to deal with it now.

Frieda still misses you—she stands out in the lane, looking towards the road, and barks for you. And she won't let me feed her, either; only Avery can. But at least I can coax her inside when it gets cold—she is getting too old to be out in the dark winter nights.

Lee, I miss you so much. It seems selfish that I would wish you home when you are fighting for our country, but I can't help it. Please come home soon. I love you.

Margie



She saw them coming down the lane and ran upstairs to brush her hair and make herself presentable, wiping the remains of tears from her cheeks.

There was a quiet knock at the door.

Margie hesitated, and then pulled it open.

“Hello; come in,” she said, hoping she sounded brave.

“We didn’t mean to disturb you, but...” Eva glanced at her husband.

“That’s fine,” Margie said. “Nothing much happening around here anyway. I think Avery is out in the barn.”

“I’ll go out and help him,” Wilson said, “and leave the ladies to chat.”

There was silence for a few moments after he closed the door.

“Would you like to sit down?” Margie finally asked. “And can I get you any tea?”

“Oh, yes, thank you.”

“Let me put the water on, just a moment.”

Eva wandered into the room and sat down. Margie soon followed her.

“How are things going at your place?” she asked.

“Fine, thanks.”

There was another pause.

“Margie, I wanted to come over and talk to you,” Eva finally said. “I hope you aren’t offended. But I realized that this must be a lonely place for you now. I haven’t exactly welcomed you, and I am sorry. We’re just not used to strangers around here. But you love Lee—I can tell—and I know how you must feel now that he is gone. I’ve been worried for you lately; it isn’t good for you to be alone like this. I look out my window at night and see lights still on

here—you're not sleeping. We both miss him, but you're hurting yourself by fretting so much and keeping it all inside."

Margie was silent, unsure of what to say.

Eva took her hand and held it gently.

She sighed.

"We both love him, and that will never change. It wasn't easy for me—to give him up to you. I didn't know you, and yet you are closer to him than I ever was. That hurts.

"I was always afraid I might lose him; Lee is so independent. That's why we aren't living here. Wilson wanted Lee to have the farm, but Lee wanted to do it his own way and not have anyone tell him what to do. So Wilson and I moved down the road, just far enough to make Lee happy. There was a girl, Josie, from another farm, and I wanted Lee to marry her. She was sensible and just like us, a strong girl. But he refused. So he went away to the city. I knew he would come back with someone else, and I was afraid. It was hard to see him come back with his heart still in the city with you. We're simple folk out here, and it was all so strange—the way he went away and came back in love, but with no girl. We weren't used to that; out here when a man wanted to marry, he just got married. But he wrote letters for months to you; we couldn't understand him. But I suppose you are not all that different from us. And you love him. And we both want him home again."

"I didn't know what to think of the people out here either, you are all very different from what I am used to. It does get lonely, there is no one to talk to. I can't seem to make friends with any of the other neighbors. So I just stay here on this big piece of land, waiting for Lee. I am sorry though—I did take your place. I took Lee away from you."

"No, you didn't; he was gone already. It isn't your fault.

It is just the way he was. I couldn't keep him tied to me forever."

The front door opened.

"We're back," Wilson said.

Eva was silent.

"Come on in here," Margie said. "I'll get you some tea to warm you up."



The wind was sharp. His boots sank deep in icy mud. They'd been walking for miles, all day and late into the night. His body was numb and yet throbbed with pain.

And this was only the beginning.

Chapter Eight

Three years later I was summoned to the Mother Superior's chamber. I was very much afraid. She didn't often call young nuns to her unless they were guilty of a misdemeanor. I walked down the hall and turned into a corridor. There was her ornately carved wooden door in front of me. I did not want to go in. What should I say? How should I explain my innocence? What had I done wrong? At last I made myself turn the knob, and the door creaked heavily on its hinges.

"Sit down," she said, more kindly than I expected. She didn't speak again until I was seated. "You will soon be turning sixteen. You know how you came to be here: your parent's death and your aunt bringing you here. We agreed to take you in until you were old enough to choose for yourself. This is not a religion of forced obedience. It is a life willingly sacrificed to God with love and humility. No one can make you do it. So you must go back to your aunt's house for a few weeks, and see how it is, living in the world, before you decide whether to become a nun or not. It is a gross sin in God's eyes to act holy but be angry and hateful inside. You must truly want to be a nun; otherwise, only suffering will follow you. Catherine, is this clear to you, and do you agree to do as I say?"

I had no other choice. I deliberated for a moment and

imagined going out into the streets, as other girls did, and living as a part of it. It suddenly appealed to my loneliness, and I accepted her commands eagerly, though I did not show it.

“You will leave in two days. Do you know where your aunt lives?”

“No, I was too young to remember.”

“Very well. We will do what we can to find her.”

She beckoned me to leave, and I went to the chapel for Mass. I am afraid I did not pray very sincerely; I mostly dreamed about leaving the convent. I would buy new clothes and walk about the town, talking to people and having a lovely time, enjoying life... and not cooped up in this musty old place. Then I remembered I had no money. I would have to ask my aunt for some. It was a shame. I could not even buy myself dresses to wear. If mother were alive, she would have made me the most wonderful clothes I could imagine. But she was dead, and all I had were my white robes. I would be very conspicuous. I nearly cried and fled to my room for fear someone would see me.

So two days later I was ushered out of the convent, out of the big hollow room through which I had first come. Through roundabout ways my aunt's address was found. I had only to find the street. I stepped out into the street with too-large shoes on, and a very bland baggy dress. I pulled the door closed behind me and then regretted it. The streets were full of people shouting and crowding all over. I didn't want to walk out into it, but it was too late to go back now. I took a deep breath and pushed my way through. I walked in the path of least resistance for a while, just trying to get my bearings. The stores were empty, the windows dirty and bare. Children ran around begging from everyone. I was frightened when they came near me, and

at last I made them see I had no money or food either. Infants were crying from all over. The big houses were disheveled and crumbling. Most of the people I passed had a listless, hollow look in their eyes. They gazed at the city, but they really didn't see it. They didn't want to see it; they tried to block it out. But others were livid, and their eyes were full of hate and scorn. I was scared of those people. No one ever looked like that at the convent. I had never seen anyone glaring with disgusted gleams of revenge. I shuddered and quickly passed the people like that. I stopped and asked a few women for directions. I wouldn't speak to the men; they were too loud and rough. After walking for what seemed like all day I found Aunt Matilda's house. I was shocked to see it just as dilapidated as everything else. I had the strange idea that her home would always be the same. There was no wooden door, just a dirty ripped sheet. I walked in very slowly. If the houses could change so much, maybe my relatives could, too.

"Hello; is anyone here? I am Catherine from the convent. Auntie, are you here? Hello?"

I walked into the kitchen, where there were pots strewn all over, but not one had anything in it. A dog barked, and I almost screamed. The little thing jumped out from behind the stove and ran at me. It made ferocious sounds and nipped my ankles. I grabbed its neck, I am afraid to say, and muffled it in a bucket until it stopped barking.

"What are you doing?" A voice from behind me sounded. I turned around, still keeping a tight hold on the dog. It was a gruff man staring at me. "That's my dog. Let go of it. What are you trying to do, kill it?"

"No... no," I stuttered, "I am Catherine. I heard that my Aunt Matilda lived here. Is that right?"

"I don't know. You'll have to talk to her. She'll be back

from the ration line in a little while. I don't remember your looks, and there are plenty of rascals running around claiming they're our long lost brothers or sisters. You can't trust anyone anymore."

He evidently didn't trust me. He sat down on a rickety chair, the back of which was threatening to fall at any moment, and looked at me intently. I concluded he must be my uncle. How he had aged; he had been a very handsome looking man. Now his face was shrunken, and he walked stiffly, as if there wasn't anything inside of him but bones. After a few minutes I could not stand his gaze any longer and I could not imagine waiting any longer.

"Do you remember Aunt Matilda's brother, who married the French woman?"

He nodded.

"Well, they had a daughter, and I am she. I was taken to a convent when I was little."

"Why'd you have to come out now, in the worst of times? Didn't they have enough food either?"

"No, not at all like that." I blushed for the first time in my life, to think of trying to live off of my aunt and uncle because I didn't get enough to eat. "You see, I am now sixteen, and before I make a decision about becoming a nun, they wanted me to come back here to see the world a little first."

I did not want to promise to go back to the convent, yet I wanted my uncle to know I wasn't looking for hand-outs. I heard someone's creaky footsteps down the hall.

"Matilda must be back. Didn't take her as long as usual."

A moment later a tired woman walked into the room.

"Gottlieb, there is getting to be less and less food to eat. A strange thing since there's less and less people to eat it who is that?" She sat down suddenly, and wearily, in

another chair, as if her feet couldn't keep her up any longer.

"I am Catherine — Adele — don't you remember me? From the convent?"

"Oh yes, you." She nodded suspiciously towards me. "What do you want?"

"Well, I am sixteen now, and the nuns wanted me to come back, to live in the world for a few weeks before I decide whether to become a nun or not. And you are the only family I have."

"How long do you want to stay?"

"Just a week, or maybe two."

"Well, I suppose I can find room somewhere for you. Where'd you get those awful clothes?"

I blushed again.

"They were the only ones the nuns had to spare."

"Do you remember Chloe?"

"No," I said; I had no idea who that was.

"She was my daughter." Aunt Matilda wiped her nose on her sleeve. My uncle got up and left, mumbling something about women always crying. "She was a few years younger than you. Always very frail and weak. When she was born there was something wrong with her leg; it was all twisted, and she couldn't walk. She was so sweet, such a bright and happy girl. We loved her... oh how we loved Chloe. And then one day they came and took her away. She's gone. We haven't seen her since." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "They've killed her, I'm sure. They don't want anyone who is a burden to the rest of us. If only they knew that Chloe wasn't a burden, she was a joy to be around. We didn't mind sharing what little food we had with her. But there's no chance of that now. We're trapped in this wretched hole we've dug for ourselves. Nothing is left but dust and death." She clenched her hands around a cracked mug.

“You see the streets; you see the emptiness everywhere. You saw the people full of hatred, and you were scared; I know you were, just like I was.” Her voice trembled, and tears ran down her cheeks. “But the worst part of it is, though we are frightened of that hate, we are becoming like them. I can’t help it. It starts to creep in like hunger pains. Little by little. At first you don’t notice it much. And after a while there’s nothing left but that all-consuming desire for food. It takes over everything. Oh, I wish I never heard the name Hitler. I wish I had never been born. This is what hell is like. It is death that never ends. Catherine, go back to the convent. That’s the only safe place for you. Look at me. I am old, I am tired, I am bitter, and I am ready to die. Don’t stay here, or that’s what will happen to you.”

She stopped to get her breath back and wipe the tears away. I didn’t know what to say. I was shocked and embarrassed. I couldn’t utter any trite comforts because I wasn’t used to shallow consolations, and it seemed utterly inappropriate to a woman driven nearly mad by grief and agony.

“But what I began to say,” she continued after a moment, “was that I have some of Chloe’s clothes; they might fit you. They are upstairs. We can go look.”

She led me across the hall and up some rickety, dusty stairs. She went into a tiny little room, completely empty except for one small trunk in the corner.

“We’ve sold or used up all the other things of Chloe’s. This is all that is left.”

The old box was opened very slowly, and Aunt Matilda pulled out a simple, pale green dress. She told me to try it on, and I did. It was strange putting on the clothes of a dead girl. I wondered if, up in heaven, Chloe minded much. She probably didn’t. She would be glad I didn’t have

to wear those other things. The bottom was a bit short and the bodice a little small, but it would do much better than anything else.

With some blankets and straw she helped me fix up a bed on the floor in Chloe's room. We made dinner together: a little tea and half a parsnip each. By then it was dark, so I shivered my way up to bed. The nights were dreadfully cold, and the green dress was very thin. I put on my other outfit over it, too, but I still wasn't able to warm up. It was hours before I drifted off to a restless sleep.

Thus was my first night back in the world.

Chapter Nine

I was awakened by screaming and shouts. My aunt and uncle came rushing into the room, holding a candle that just went out.

“Catherine, come here.”

“What is wrong? What is it? I don’t understand?”

It had been dark, but there was suddenly a great light shining in the window. I could see my aunt’s pale, scared face and my uncle’s angry looks.

“Its them...”she stuttered, “...th-they’re l-l-l-look-k-king f-f-f-or Jews. D-d-don’t look guilty or avoid them...”

“What do you mean? What are you talking about? Who are they?”

I stood up and clutched the blanket around me.

“Hitler’s men.” She sounded a little exasperated with me. “Now come downstairs. They want to make sure there aren’t any Jews hiding.”

“What is that light?” I asked, and then turned to the window. I saw my answer. The houses across the street were burning. I could hear those inside crying out. There were soldiers standing and watching but not helping.

“Why don’t they rescue the people stuck inside? They are going to die!” I was shocked that no one did anything. “Can’t we do something?”

“No, no,” my uncle shouted, “Catherine, don’t you dare

say anything like that again. You'll get us killed."

My aunt grabbed my uncle's arm as we heard loud footsteps below.

"They locked the people in the houses on purpose; don't you understand, girl?" He said in a low voice, "They mean to kill them. They argued and perhaps were Jews. Come along, don't start crying or fainting, either of you."

He pulled on my makeshift shawl and led us downstairs. As we walked out of the room, I glanced back, through the window, and saw a woman reaching out through the window of a burning house. I almost screamed, but uncle shoved me in front of him. We reached the bottom of the stairs—a miracle indeed—and there were about a dozen men roaming the house. They demanded our names. I hardly spoke mine; my tongue didn't seem to work very well. Three of them pushed past us and went to look around upstairs. We had to go sit in the kitchen while they searched every nook and corner. It was terribly cold, and the doors and windows were thrown wide open. There was a strong wind blowing through, and I couldn't stop myself from shaking. At last they said we were allowed to get up but we were to make sure we didn't do anything against Hitler's commands. I thought that was rather hard because I had no idea what Hitler said we should not do.

By this time it was nearly four o'clock. I was exhausted and when I closed my eyes all I saw was the face of the woman burning to death... her look of utter despair and agony... it was how I imagined Jesus looked when Judas betrayed Him... her shock and disbelief that that they would do such a horrible thing.

After a futile attempt at sleep, I went back downstairs, where my aunt was sitting and drinking warm water as a poor substitute for tea.

“Couldn’t sleep?”

“No.”

“In the convent, did you hear any news of the world?”

“Some of the nuns had acquaintances outside who would give them news, but I didn’t really hear anything. The convent really was its own little world.”

“Do you know anything about our history? Do you know who Hitler is?”

I shook my head.

“Here’s a cup of water. It might calm you down. Pretend it is hot cocoa or something nice.” She handed me a mug and continued, “You weren’t around to remember the Great War. It was horror beyond imagination. It was just a big fight between everyone. But we lost. The winners made us pay for everything. They made us give them our factories, our food, our money; they forced us to kneel down before them like nasty sniveling little creatures begging for their lives. I watched everyone around us die. We all withered away, just barely clinging to life. All because of them... they ground us into the dust. It was humiliation and shame you can’t imagine. Then Hitler rose up. He came to save his people. He promised freedom, life, and happiness. And look at us now...” she laughed a little wildly, “we can’t speak our thoughts to any other living being. We can’t whisper rebellion to our pillow at night without being thrown in prison. People are dying like flies, all over, everywhere. And this is happiness. If this is happiness, I don’t want to see unhappiness. So that’s why we are here.”

Uncle Gottlieb came into the room, and my aunt cut off her lecture. I had a feeling he preferred not to speak any more than necessary and wanted everyone to follow his habit, too.

We didn't go outside that day. It started snowing a little, and the streets were littered with soldiers and people—dead and alive. I walked all over the house, trying to stay a little warm and trying to keep my mind off the terror of the night. It didn't help very much.

My, or should I say Chloe's, dress was a little dirty and torn. I think it got snagged on something during the night. I apologized to Aunt Matilda about it. She didn't mind at all. "Everything else in the house was torn; why should the dress be any different?" she said. It was very kind of her to say so. I felt that perhaps Chloe's things were rather valuable to my aunt, the scraps of remembrance for the daughter who faded away. I wished there was a picture of Chloe, I wanted to know what she looked like.

I sat at the upstairs window all afternoon. It was the only window with unbroken glass. There was nothing else to do. The weather wasn't suitable for cleaning—if there had been anything worth cleaning or anything to scrub with—and there wasn't any food to prepare, either. I could see why my Aunt might go a bit insane... I could feel it, too. The whole country was slowly losing its sanity. Everything and everyone were stretched taut. Nerves were tight, and no one dared say what he felt. There was an enormous pressure to act properly and say the correct things, when inside the people were raging with anger and frustration. I could sense it even through the window. Danger and alertness was in the air that we all breathed. Auntie never again said things like she did on the first day. She never cried in front of me again. Her lips were thin and closed unless there was something she had to say. Uncle never spoke either. There was too much risk. Someone might overhear, might misconstrue the words, might report on you... so it was safer to be silent. The silence created a very

lonely and eerie existence. The house even creaked, but we made not a sound.

For the first few days I was very hungry. I was so hungry I wanted to die just to relieve the pain. I writhed between my blankets during the night, trying desperately to distract my mind and body from the thought of food. But then the gnawing died too, like we seemed to. I felt like a skeleton rattling around in a casket. There was no purpose to anything I did. All that remained was the struggle to survive, the battle for our very breath. But why did we want to keep on living? I questioned myself—over and over—all throughout the long days. Why should we keep on living this hellish ghost of a life? This isn't true life; this is standing on the brink of death. This is like a statue, an example of life, but it isn't like really living. So why keep on? Why not step down into death and get it over with? Life isn't going to get any better—only worse; there is no reason and no purpose to keep living...

I sat at the window and thought about jumping through it. There was a long way to the ground. The stones and cobbles should do the job, I thought to myself. But no, I couldn't do that. I was going back to the convent in a week. I would go live there, and perhaps the war would end. There was hope, after all. I didn't have to stay in this haunting old house.

I could go back to the convent. But poor Auntie and Uncle... how would they survive? Should I escape just to leave them in misery and lingering death? Oh... what to do? It was selfish to leave, but what else could I do? I spent the whole of one night pondering my future. When morning came, my mind was exhausted and tired of the subject. In my impatience I decided to return at once to the convent; it was the best thing to do. I was young. I had my life to

live; Auntie's and Uncle's were near their end. They had lived, been happy, mourned, and now were ready to depart.

"Auntie, I have made up my mind. I feel I should go back to the convent. It is very important to listen when you feel you have been called by God." I nearly started laughing, it was so hypocritical. I hadn't heard God's voice, I merely wanted to survive this awful war. "So, I shall leave today, if it is alright with you."

"Yes, yes," she shook her head sadly; "it is the best thing. Germany is dangerous. But perhaps there is more respect for the churches, the nuns, and those who had dedicated their lives to serving God. You have been almost like my own daughter to me, you know. I sometimes wake up and imagine that it is Chloe I hear gently sleeping." Her voice was dry and dull now. There was no hope, no meaning in the sounds. "But this is the best thing. I don't think you shall ever see me again after today. I have been a wretched aunt to you, but what can I do now? Go, and God bless you."

After a moment I asked her if I should wait for Uncle Gottlieb to tell him goodbye. She said he wouldn't be offended and that I should leave at once. So I did.

Chapter Ten

The way back to the convent had changed very much; I nearly lost my way a number of times. Buildings that I remembered no longer existed. There were soldiers all over, and I was frightened of them. Thankfully they didn't take much notice of an ugly, scrawny girl creeping along dressed in old clothes. But it was mid-afternoon by the time I reached the convent. I was quite weak and had to stop often to rest. I knocked quietly on the door. There was no answer. I tried again, as hard as I could. I waited until I could not stand any longer, and then I sat down on the cobblestones. A few minutes later someone opened the door, and I jumped up, brushing the dirt off my skirt.

"I am Catherine, do you remember me?" I recognized the other person; it was Mary, who had the room across from mine.

"Catherine?" She stared at my ragged frame and apparel. "We didn't think you would come back. Are you really Catherine? You went to stay with relatives for a week or two?"

"Yes, it is truly me. Please let me come in, I am terribly tired."

"Have you come back to stay, for good? To be a nun?"

"Yes; yes, I have. I shall be a nun." The words flowed clumsily on their own, and I did not make them. After they

were spoken and the sounds echoed eerily in the cloister, I felt heaviness in my heart. The weight squeezed out a tear, and I hastily brushed it away. I shall be a nun. There was leaden dullness left, as if what used to beat with energy and hope had now turned to stone. I felt prison doors being pulled closed and tighter with each step I took. This was a life of dreary self-imprisonment. This was a life of utter despair and routine. It was safe, but even coffins are safe. Those inside the convent were living corpses, praying and pretending they were enjoying a life of denial and pain. But there was a thick heaviness that pervaded even the air I breathed. Oh no, not this. I can't do it, I can't promise to live my life like this. I can't make myself suffer this. There must be something else to do, some way to escape. But it was too late. I had made up my mind. No matter what, I had to carry through my decision.

"So, you have decided to come back?" The mother superior asked me. I did not know what to think. My mind was not working. Again, the words simply rolled out.

"Yes, I have. It is a good way to live. It is the best thing." I suddenly wondered why I said exactly what Auntie told me. "The world now is too violent and dangerous."

"There is a refuge in God," she said gently. I did not want to hear her.

"So shall I become a nun?" It was the question most tearing at my heart, I had to know my destiny.

"I think in this time of war, it is best if you perhaps live like a nun, but not with the binding promises. I believe many people may want to begin a new life after the war is over. It would be wrong to bind yourself to this way of living. Right now you don't have many other choices, but after the war... well, then you will be able to see other possibilities. This house of God must not be a prison."

I wanted to laugh giddily and dance. I think it was because I was tired. But in the haze of my mind I knew one thing: I would be free. There would be no life of drudgery and servitude in order to outlive the war. After it was all over, I could do anything I pleased.

I thanked the mother superior, and she advised me to go lay down. I probably looked a little dazed. I collapsed on my old bed; it was so comfortable and welcoming now. When I woke up I realized it must be dinner time or later. I was very hungry and went to see if there was anything left. The others were just finishing their meal. When I walked into the room, they all stopped, spoons paused in midair, and looked at me. I wanted to sink into the ground; I hadn't the least idea why they gave me such strange looks.

"Catherine has come back to stay with us, sisters," the mother superior said briskly. I felt their resentment at once when I asked for something to eat. Then it was clear: I was simple one more mouth to devour the sparse food. My staying would mean everyone would get a little less, so that I could eat. I didn't want to cause them any inconvenience, but what else could I do?

"She's come back to be fed, that's what it is. Doesn't think of us, hardly enough to eat anyway. But young people are like that: just as selfish as could be," someone murmured in the kitchen. I blushed for the second time in my life. I was ashamed partly because that was, indeed, one reason why I returned, and because they made me sound so wicked and conniving. After eating my thin soup that was more like muddy water, I went back to my room. It was very cold, and I shivered under the blankets. For the first time in a while there were no sounds to wake me, no marching armies, no screaming women or children, no devouring fires. It was peaceful. But I was frightened.

The silence was more dangerous to me than the noise. I felt locked up, away from the world. A form of solitary confinement... I thought bitterly... those horrible crimes are still happening; I just can't hear them. The deadly muteness threatened me with imagined voices and sounds. Restlessly, I fell asleep at last.

But I had a dream. I was sitting on my cot, and a soldier came in. He stomped his way over to me and stood over me, smelling of beer, cigars, blood, and sauerkraut. I cringed and tried to turn away. He grabbed my neck and mumbled something in garbled German. He took out a sharp, shiny knife.

"This is for those who lie. Those who are self-centered. Those who pretend they are righteous but are not. Those who take food from the mouths of the innocent. I shall either use this," he ran his finger across the blade, "or burn you alive in this room." I shook at the thought of dying in a fire. He took advantage of my fear. "I think that is the best way to remove hypocrites from the world." He took a match from his pocket, pulled the blanket off my bed, and made a pile in the middle of the floor with it. He snatched my father's books from the shelf. "Perfect tinder," he muttered. He crumpled the sheets up on the blanket. "I'll light the match, and as soon as the paper has caught fire, I'll leave and lock the door after me. I'd better tie you up so you don't escape." He used his belt to wrap me to the bed frame. Then, holding the match firmly, he lit it and carefully dropped it in among a treatise on the development of civil law. The greedy flame consumed the first sheet within seconds, and then the man left. I heard him bar the door. With agonizing awareness, I watched the fire spread and grow. It charred the blanket and crept closer to the bed. Then in a moment it caught the mattress

and the straw inside. Another moment, and it was inches from my body. I could feel the intense heat, and I screamed.

I woke up, sweating and throwing the covers off me. I looked around desperately for the fire, but there was none. The fear choked my throat; I could not swallow. Oh, no—I can't live like this. Please, I must escape; I must do something to get away. It will be like this every night. Every night I shall be haunted by what I have done. So I worried and fretted until morning came.

Thus was my first night back at St. Isolde's Convent.

Chapter Eleven

Lee wondered about Margie. Her letter didn't seem quite right. Something about the tone of it wasn't like Margie. Perhaps she was just worried about him. Perhaps she was lonely. Perhaps... he tried not to think about it too much. Margie was his Margie, and she would always be there for him.

Margie—his Margie—followed him faithfully from the city; she didn't even consider not going back to his home. Of course she would move the country; that's where Lee wanted to be, and so that's where she would be.



“Whatcha doing, mister?” a girlish voice called.

Lee quickly drew his hand back from the tree branches, startled, but it was too late. There was already an apple fallen into his palm.

“Oh... just picking an apple.”

“But that's my apple tree, mister. See?”

The girl across the fence pointed to the ground.

“The trunk comes up on our side. It is my tree.”

She stared expectantly at him.

Lee wasn't sure what he was supposed to do.

“I... uh... I mean, I didn't, um...”

“But I suppose I'll let you go this once. My papa would probably nearly strangle you if he found out you took one

of our apples.”

Lee wasn't sure if the girl was serious or only joking.

“You're a stranger around here?”

“Yes, from out of town. I am staying with my uncle, Mr. Richter.”

“He is a good neighbor. But he has quite a rude nephew...” she laughed. “I am just teasing, don't worry so much.”

Lee smiled, awkwardly.

“I'd still like to know your name, mister.”

“Lee. Lee Mitchell.”

“Margie Drescher.”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Drescher.”

“And you, Mr. Mitchell.” Margie took a step forward and leaned on the fence. “So what brings you here?”

“Just visiting. To see what it's like.”

“Where are you from?”

“Out in the country; Alwein is the town near our farm.”

“I never heard of it.”

“No one has—we're used to it.”

“And so why did you come here?”

“To see the world.”

“Is this what you think the world is?”

“Not all of it, but more than what we have in Alwein.”

“Do you like the city?”

“Not really. There isn't room to move around, to think, to breathe.”

“We get along just fine; the city is so exciting, always changing, always something happening.”

“Yes, but on my farm, we know we can trust the land; it will always be there. It doesn't change. It is a good thing.”

“How long are you staying?”

“I don't know yet. I just got here; it depends on if I get used to it or not.”

“Well, I need to be going,” Margie said. “Nice to meet you.”

Then she was gone, and Lee was left in a whirlwind.

There weren’t girls like that back in the country. All the girls he knew were strong workers, tan, and silent. But Margie was slim, like a slip of sunshine, and she wasn’t afraid to speak. Her eyes were bright and bold. He liked her already.



“Aunt Jane, who are your neighbors?” Lee asked quietly.

“Old Mrs. Gates?”

“No, on the other side.”

“You mean the Dreschers?”

“Yes.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I met Miss Drescher today.”

“Oh.” She was silent and then suddenly looked up from her embroidery. “You met Margie?”

“Yes.”

“Oh! What happened? How did you meet her?”

“Well... I didn’t realize it, but the apple tree in the back belongs to them, and I was ready to take an apple, and Miss Drescher came out and told me that it was their tree.”

“Was that all?”

“No, we talked for a few minutes.”

“Hmmm... how interesting.”



“Fredrick, I think we need to invite the Drescher family over for dinner,” Jane said.

He looked up sharply from the paper.

“Why would we need to do that? We already know them.”

“Yes, but Lee doesn’t.” She spoke in a low whisper, as if afraid of someone listening in. “And I think he likes Margie. There can’t be any decent girls out there where he lives. Think of what it would do for him—and his family—if he married her.”



Lee was thrown in with Margie frequently, and they grew to know each other better. He discovered that Margie on the inside was even more entrancing than Margie on the outside.

And then the day came when Lee realized he had to return home. His help would be needed on the farm. He promised his mother he would return. She was begging him to come back. But he could not leave Margie there, alone, without telling her how he felt.



They were together under the apple tree. Margie had given him the privilege of enjoying its fruits.

“Margie,” he said quietly. “I am going to be leaving.”

She looked at him in surprise.

“Already? I thought you would stay longer. I mean... you haven’t really gotten to see the city much, and it would be a shame... it would be a shame if you went back to the country without knowing it better.”

“I know, but my family needs me to help. And they miss me.”

Margie was silent.

“But, Margie, can we write to each other? And Margie... I, I, um... I want you to come out to my farm and marry me. I love you, Margie; you’re not like anyone I’ve ever known. I want to live with you, to share my life with you.”

“Oh!” She glanced at him with shock. “You want to marry me?” She asked, a little breathless.

“Yes, I love you, Margie. Will you marry me?”

“I don’t know... I need to ask my papa... I don’t know.”

“But do you love me?”

“Yes, yes. I love you, Lee; I do.”

“Then I will ask your father.”



Margie heard the door close. She heard Lee’s footsteps outside on the sidewalk.

“Margie, papa wants you,” her mother called.

She took a deep breath and went into his room.

“Yes, papa?”

“I think you know. That young man, Lee, he just asked for permission to marry you.”

“Yes. And...?”

He took his glasses off and looked steadily at her.

“Margie, do you realize what you are doing?”

“Yes.”

“You’re devoting your life to this country bumpkin?”

“He’s not a bumpkin. He is just different. And I want to spend my life with him.”

“You love him?”

“Yes.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know, papa,” she took his hand, “but I do. Please let us marry,” she pleaded.

“We may never see you again.”

“His farm isn’t that far away.”

“And you’ve never been to the country.”

“I will get used to it. And I love him.”

“What if you don’t get used to it? And you marry him?”

You'll be trapped."

"I'll be happy. I'll get used to it because that is where Lee is."

He sighed.

"You're stubborn."

"I know. Like my father."

He smiled.

"What will I do? What will I do without my little girl? And he is poor, and you will never be famous or rich. You'll just be stuck out on that deserted countryside with a poor farmer."

"Papa, don't say that! Lee is a good man, and he isn't poor. He isn't rich, but he isn't poor. We will manage. Have you told mama?"

"No, I'll let you do that," he laughed.



"Margie, you can't be serious!" her mother moaned. "That is just too much. I didn't like that boy hanging around here; now I see I should have stopped it at the beginning."

"But mama, we love each other..."

"Love? How can that silly young boy love? His head is full of cows and corn and..." she broke down and began crying. "Margie, you're the only child we have left. And you want to go off and live there?"

"Yes, I love him."

"But what will we do without you?"

Margie shrugged.

"You did something before I was born, didn't you? You can still go to parties and drink tea with fancy ladies."

"But the house will be so lonely without you..."

Margie put her arms around her mother.

"I know. But would you have me give up an opportunity for love and happiness?"

"No; no, I wouldn't want that. I want you to be happy. But how will you find happiness on that farm? It seems so strange."

"I know, but I love him. That makes all the difference."



"Well, Lee, my parents finally agreed," she said quietly. "It took some convincing. And there are some conditions."

"Like what?"

"We have to wait until the spring. But we can write letters."

"I am leaving in five minutes to catch the train. My uncle is tired of me being here, I think; he is rushing me out on the soonest train," Lee laughed. "But I will write you. And make plans—there shall be a wedding in May!"

"Yes, Lee, I will look forward to that and write to you in the meantime. What do you think your parents will say?"

"I don't know. But they cannot stop me. Once my mind is made up, no one can stop me."

He took her hand and kissed it.

"Don't worry, and don't get lonesome. I will be back to take you home. I will always love you—don't forget that."

She brushed tears from her eyes and nodded.

"Yes, I love you, and I'll try not to become impatient. I'll be waiting for you."

And in the distance they heard the train whistling.

"I need to go. Good-bye, Margie.

"Good-bye, Lee."



And so he was gone. She watched after him, fading away into the blur of crowds until she could see him no more.

“I love you, Lee” she whispered. “I love you.”



He didn't notice the other passengers or anything about the train. He couldn't get his mind off Margie. But as he drew closer to home, a nagging worry grew. How would he tell his parents?



“Oh, Lee, you're home!” Eva threw her arms around him. “We've missed you so much. I nearly thought you wouldn't come back at all.”

“I promised I would return, so here I am.”

And even then, as she embraced him, she knew there was something different. She knew something had happened to him in the city. She looked up at him, hoping he would tell her, but he brushed her silent questions aside.

“Where is father?”

“Out in the barn; Avery's out there too.”

“I'll go surprise them.”

He nonchalantly greeted his father and brother.

“I am back. Here to help out with the chores again,” he laughed.

“Glad you're back,” his father said simply.

It wasn't until after dinner that night did he tell them.

“Mother, father, I have some news for you.” He paused, unsure of how to say it. “While I was in the city... I mean, there were—there are—some neighbors, they live next to Uncle Fredrick. They have a... oh, I'll start again. Next May, I am going to marry Margie Drescher, a girl I met in the city.”

His father looked at him, slightly surprised, more confused than shocked. His mother looked down, her lips tight.

“And you didn’t ask for our permission?” his mother said.

“I knew you would say no.”

“Why?” she asked, a bit offended at his presumption.

“Because she isn’t who you wanted me to marry. But she is a good girl, very nice, very pretty.”

“And you love her?”

“Yes.”

“And she loves you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Only a girl in love would want to marry some nearly-poor farmer and move out to this sort of place.”

“Well, I hope she can adjust to life out here. And I hope she is really a good girl,” his father said.

His mother was silent.

Chapter Twelve

It was a very quiet and small wedding. Lee knew Margie wasn't used to their country weddings, and the neighbors wouldn't know what to make of Margie.

And so although Margie was married, and officially part of the community, she hardly knew any of the people.

"Lee, your mother mentioned that there is an ice cream social in town next week. Will we go?"

"Do you want to?"

"Yes, I want to meet your neighbors, the people you know. They will be my friends now."

"It is different from what you know."

"Yes, but I can adjust. It will be fine. Can we go?"

"If you want to, of course."



"Is it alright if my parents come along with us?"

"Lee, this is your farm, you make the decisions, you don't have to ask permission from me. Do I look good enough?"

"Margie, you're beautiful."

She was wearing a brightly colored dress; it had large flowers all over it. The sleeves were short and had ruffled edges. The skirt was full and swirled around her legs. "Will they think I look nice?"

"I don't mean this against the others, but they are very plain. You see... the girls here..."

She was staring intently into his face, trying to understand what he meant.

"Oh well, it doesn't matter. You will see soon enough. Come along; we need to get going."



"Here we are," Lee said. He smiled at Margie and took her hand. "Let me introduce you."

"Lee, how nice of you to come," Mrs. Gratcher exclaimed. "And this must be...?"

"This is my wife, Margie. And this is Mrs. Gratcher, a long-time friend of our family."

"Pleased to meet you," Margie said quietly.

"I hope you are adjusting to country life?"

"Yes, I enjoy living here."

"Oh, Josie, here is Lee, come back from the city," Mrs. Gratcher said, catching a girl walking past. "And this is his new wife, Margie."

"Hello, Lee."

She did not speak to Margie, but her eyes scanned Margie quickly.

Josie was a strong girl, her face was tanned from long hours in the sun and she walked with a heavy tread.

"How has your family been doing, Josie?" Lee asked.

"Fine. Mother had another baby, a little girl. And that makes eight of us now, plenty of help around the farm!"

Lee laughed and asked Josie to give his congratulations to her mother.

"Lee, glad to see you back," a man said, coming up and shaking his hand. "And you brought someone with you?"

"Yes, Henry, this is my wife, Margie."

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Mitchell."

"And you, as well."

“Lee, I wanted to ask what you do for calves that are...”

And suddenly Lee was whisked away from Margie, to talk with the other farmers about calving. She stood there, alone and surprised at her husband being gone, and felt very out of place. Margie had no experience with children, and all the young women her age were either watching their own children or their siblings. She didn't realize it, but she began to stare at the girls, watching their faces, studying their clothing. They're so coarse, she thought, and loud; what dark skin they have! And their hands are so red and rough. I suppose they do nothing but work on their farms, day after day, year after year, nothing more to life than that. And she felt a twinge of panic and fear—that she would turn into them. That one day she would look into the mirror and see a tanned face; hair pulled back in a tight bun; an ugly bonnet over her head; a dirty, worn-out dress; and hands rough as sand, chapped, with torn fingernails. Suddenly she realized the other girls were staring back at her, and she was embarrassed for a moment before glancing down at her dress and seeing the impeccable fashion of it. There's no reason to be ashamed; those poor girls just don't know what stylish dresses look like. She lifted her chin high and resolutely, sweeping over the young women with a hollow glance, and walked towards her husband.

“Margie, that's no place for you,” Eva said, coming up to her quickly.

“Why not?”

“They're talking menfolk talk, and we don't go and interrupt them.”

“Oh,” she stammered. “But Lee's there, and I want to be with him...”

“We don't do that around here, so come meet these girls, they're about your age.”

So Eva led her back to the same cluster of women she had just fled from.

“Girls, I’d like you to meet Margie, Lee’s wife. Margie, this is Josie, and Mary, and Helen, and Joan. Margie’s from the city and is new out here.”

Margie thought it sounded like Eva meant that to be an apology for something about Margie, but she wasn’t sure what it was.

Eva was called away by someone to help with the ice cream, and the girls were left staring silently at each other. To Margie’s relief, the multitude of children around soon distracted everyone’s attention, and it wasn’t necessary for her even to speak to the other girls. Eventually Lee returned to her.

“I am sorry I left you; the others wanted to know about our calves.”

“That’s alright,” and Margie smiled for she noticed he said “our” calves. But then it washed over her—the confusion she felt when he wasn’t there, the loneliness when Eva said it wasn’t proper for her to go stand beside him, and the quiet strain of looking at the other women but not knowing what to say.

“Lee, I want to go home,” she murmured and put her head against his shoulder.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I don’t want to stay here,” and she closed her eyes and buried her face in his arm.

“Margie, I am so sorry this happened... I wanted you to get along with the others...” He led her away from the group of people until it was quiet. “I didn’t want this to happen; I knew you weren’t like them...”

“Lee, don’t blame yourself—you tried to tell me,” she said, looking up at him and wiping tears from her face. “I

didn't understand; it isn't your fault."

"I should have done something, so you wouldn't have felt so left out."

"Never mind about it now; can we just go home?"

"Yes, of course. I'll go get my parents—we'll leave right now."

And she stood looking back at the others, talking and laughing together. She shivered and turned to leave.

Chapter Thirteen

Margaret lived alone in the old stone house, and no one came to visit. She went out every morning to feed the chickens and milk the cow. During the day she would weed the garden and tidy up the house. And in the evening she sat and stared at the fire until it died away into blackness, and then she would go to bed.

It was true; when she was younger she had friends: there was Loise, and Sophie—they were once good friends. But Loise went away to Berlin with her husband. Although Sophie still lived in Elsteraue, she had three children already, with another on the way, and the two women were no longer close. Margaret could not bear to visit Sophie's house, with the merry prattle of children all around, a house full of brightness, hope, and energy. And Sophie was not sure how to speak to Margaret, how to comfort her old friend after the miscarriage...

Both the doctor and midwife were called for the delivery. It came too early—Margaret and Nikolaus were worried. Elsteraue had a doctor, a new-fangled addition to the village, and the old midwife, who had been around longer than any of the women could remember. The baby was born in the morning, and Sophie decided that by late afternoon Margaret would have enough time to rest, and perhaps she could help around the house and let Margaret

relax. So she gathered up some blankets, a jar of her own jam, a loaf of freshly baked bread, and a few other things, put them in her basket and set out to visit Margaret. But as she approached the house, she felt something was not quite right. Even the air seemed to bode ill as she went closer. She was ready to knock on the door when she heard a scream.

“No... not my baby!”

It was Margaret.

Sophie paused and did not knock.

“Margie, come, lay down, don’t go over there,” Sophie could hear Nikolaus pleading.

“What’s wrong with my baby? Don’t let her die! Nikki, do something, please... don’t let her die!”

“Margie, don’t get up, lay down, let me cover you up. Everything will be alright...”

And Sophie suddenly heard the crack of breaking glass.

“She’s dead! And we didn’t do anything! Nothing! Now it is too late,” Margaret cried. There was the sound of fabric rent in pieces, chairs knocked over, and more glass shattering.

“Nikki... our baby is dead...” Margaret’s shrieking ripped through the calm of dusk.

Sophie backed away from the door, and as Margaret’s voice followed, she began to run—she ran all the way back to her home, frightened and disturbed by what had come over Margaret.

After that, she didn’t know what to say to Margaret, and so they slipped apart, Sophie consumed with her own family and home, Margaret enveloped by her husband and their love, until he left. Then the sounds, the sights, the smells of her past haunted her every moment.

She would hear someone out walking on the road and

jump up for it sounded just like her husband, returning from war. She made soup, and the aroma of the spices brought back her childhood, those cheery nights with her mother—just the two of them, dunking thick wedges of bread in their soup. Margaret would tell stories to her mother about her day’s adventures, what she played with Nikolaus, and what they discovered together.

And then Margaret’s mother became the child, and Margaret had to grow up quickly in order to take care of her. She didn’t have time to go out and join in on the plans of her friends; she sat at home in a chair beside her mother, next to the window so she could watch the day pass, and they talked together. Margaret’s mother talked a great deal of nonsense, and Margaret quietly assented to what she said, not wanting to disturb her little world. And sometimes, just sometimes, Margaret wished she could escape into her own world, too, where life was always happy and there was always the expectation of it becoming even happier.

“Your father will be home soon from his business, won’t he?”

Margaret’s mother pushed the war out of her mind; it didn’t exist for her, and she believed her husband was in Berlin on a business trip.

“Yes, it will be very soon.”

“And he will bring lovely things back to us: chocolates and silks and lace...” and she would go on all day, dreaming of a better life that would never come.

But Margaret wasn’t patient all the time.

“You don’t want Papa to come home, do you?” her mother said one day, in an accusing voice. “You don’t want him to come back because he’ll make you stop seeing that boy from the village. I suppose you hope he’ll be killed on the way

home or something dreadful will happen to stop him.”

“Mother! What are you talking about?”

“That boy, Ernest, you’re always sneaking out to see, and you know Papa doesn’t approve. It would be just like you to secretly hope Papa never returns. And then you’ll probably sit around and wait for me to die, and then go off and marry Ernest.”

“I will not let you sit and say those lies!”

“It isn’t a lie—it is the truth; I know it! You go off every morning to see him...”

And Margaret rushed out of the house, slamming the door behind her. She ran, not knowing where, just running away.”

“Margie! What’s wrong?” She heard a familiar voice.

She stumbled and fell on Nikolaus, nearly knocking him over.

“Nikolaus?” she asked, as if in a daze.

“Yes, it is me. Are you alright? What’s going on?”

He held her steady while she wiped the tears from her face.

“Come, sit down; this log will do. Tell me what happened.”

“Oh, Nikki, I am so tired of everything—this isn’t what life is supposed to be. I am young, I want to live, I want to do so much, but I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Nikki, my mother isn’t in her right mind anymore. You’ve been so busy with your farm and your family, I haven’t seen you for so long. But my mother, she’s crazy now. She sits and talks of my father coming back from Berlin; she asks where my little brother is, and I have no brother or sister. I am tired of it all.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, Nikki, of course I am serious. You can come see for yourself.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Since at least the spring; it started quite a while ago, but didn’t get bad until then. It has been fine, but today she said I didn’t want Papa to come back from Berlin, and...” She tried to laugh, a tight and strained laugh. “I just couldn’t take it anymore, she is so unreasonable. There’s nothing I could do to stop her from prattling on.”

“Doesn’t anyone come out from the village to visit?”

“Not much. Sometimes a few of the ladies make some jam or soup and bring it out, but they never stay long. I think they’re afraid of my mother; they don’t know what to do around her.”

“So it is just the two of you all the time?”

“Who else would come?” she said, almost bitterly. “So of course it is just us.”

Nikolaus was silent for a moment and finally spoke.

“Margaret, my father has some jobs for me to do today, otherwise I’d come home with you right now. But I’ll come over tomorrow to see you, alright?”

“I don’t want to take you away from your work and everything...”

“It is fine, I don’t mind, really.”

“Thank you, Nikki; thank you. I’ll look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

“Will you be alright going home by yourself?”

She laughed.

“If I can’t walk home by myself, I am not much good for anything. I’ll be fine. Thank you again, Nikki. Good-bye.”

Margaret slowly walked home, thinking of Nikolaus and his kindness to her. There were many pretty girls in the village who would give anything to have Nikolaus look

their way, and yet he was still so thoughtful to Margaret.

When she entered the house she didn't seem to mind her mother's fretting and childish whining over her absence.

"Mother, there will be someone visiting us tomorrow, so you must look your best."

Margaret rushed around the house, straightening the furniture, plumping the pillows, and dusting the shelves.

"Who is coming? Is your father returning already?"

"No, not father," she said quietly. "Someone else. A friend of mine."

"I didn't think you had any friends."

Despite her buoyant mood, this sharp statement left her stunned for a moment before recovering herself.

"Well, mother, I suppose this will be quite a surprise to you, but I do have at least one friend," she returned briskly.

The rest of the day seemed to drag so slowly, and it was with a sigh of relief that she helped her mother into bed, and then collapsed—wary, but happy—onto her own bed.



Margaret was up early the next morning, straightening the house again and worrying about if Nikolaus would come at a mealtime and what to prepare.

She helped her mother dress, and they both sat in silent expectation until Margaret began to worry that maybe Nikki wasn't coming until later in the day. Her mother grew tired of sitting for so long and was irritable.

"I don't know what you meant by someone coming to visit; I can't think of anyone who would want to visit us. Whoever it was probably just lied and doesn't mean to come at all."

She went on like this longer and longer—Margaret was growing desperate.

At last there were footsteps outside. Margaret jumped up and ran to the door.

“It is Papa returning!” Her mother cried joyfully, “He has come back at last!”

“No, Mama, it is my friend coming to visit.”

“But it sounds just like Papa—you are telling lies again.”

Margaret was ready to retort, but there was a knock at the door. She smiled and opened it slowly.

“Oh, hello Nikki; it is so good to see you. Please come in.”

“Mother, this is my friend Nikolaus; he came to see us.”

“Hello, Mrs. Bachmeier, it has been a long time since I’ve seen you.”

He spoke in polite and quiet tones but was shocked to see how frail and small Margaret’s mother had become. Like a child. Her eyes betrayed her simplicity and childishness. He said nothing of this to Margaret, though; they both knew it, why talk about?

“Nikki, please sit down.”

“Thank you.”

They both sat down awkwardly and silently.

“So, where are you from, boy?”

Margaret winced at her mother’s overbearing voice.

“I live just up the road, on my family farm,” Nikki answered patiently.

“I suppose you help your family and are a credit to them.” Margaret’s mother sighed. “What a blessing that would be—Margaret here is nothing but trouble. She doesn’t lift a finger more than she has to; it makes life so difficult.”

Nikolaus glanced at Margaret. Her eyes were filling with tears. He slipped his hand over hers and held it tightly.

Margaret smiled and was glad for once of her mother’s failing eyesight—seeing Nikolaus holding her hand would surely incite much fury.

“So, I see you have a nice garden, Mrs. Bachmeier; is it growing well?”

“Oh yes, the peas are just gorgeous, plump and juicy. I am so eager for Heinrich to get back, he will be so happy.”

Nikolaus gave Margaret a questioning glance.

“My dead father,” she whispered.

Margaret’s mother rattled on and on, Nikolaus always patiently replying. At last he stood up and said, “Well, I really need to get back to my farm. But I was wondering if Margaret could come over some time and visit.”

Margaret stood up, shocked at his daring. My mother would never allow it, she seemed to say silently.

“I’ve heard Margaret is very good at knitting, and my younger sister has such a time with knitting, she just can’t get it right. Perhaps Margaret can come and show her how to do it properly? It would make my mother so happy if my sister learned how to knit.”

“Well...” Margaret’s mother sat deliberating, and Margaret was trembling with fear, that she might say no. “I suppose she can; she is rather good at knitting, and if it would make your mother happy.”

“Yes; yes, it would. Thank you so much,” Nikolaus said. “Can she come tomorrow evening?”

“I suppose it is best to get it over with. Yes, she can go.”

“Thank you, Mama, thank you.”

Margaret led Nikolaus to the door.

“I have no sister,” he whispered.

“Yes, I know,” she smiled.

“But don’t forget to bring your needles anyway, to make your mother happy. I will come by to get you tomorrow evening. Good bye!”

“Good bye, Nikki—and thank you!”

Chapter Fourteen

It was now winter, deadly winter. We all huddled together during Mass, to try to stop the shivering. Nights were the worst; I was so lonely and cold in my small room. The stone walls seemed to exude coldness. No matter how I huddled under the blankets, I was still freezing. The one good thing was that during the summer the nuns kept a little garden, and now that it was winter there was reason to use the harvests. So while the rest of the city was getting lower and lower in food, we had enough and even a little leftover.

One evening we were eating our squash, carrots, and dry bread when there was a knock at the door. The nuns looked around suspiciously, wondering if anyone else knew who it was.

“I’ll go answer it.” The mother superior said quietly, getting up and putting her napkin on the table-edge. No one ate another bite as we listened to her muffled shoes nearing the door.

“Hello?” she said. From our distance her voice sounded small.

“Yes, this is Sergeant Plfaum of the Fourteenth Panzer Division. Hitler has issued a command that all religious centers be used to house wounded soldiers. They will arrive within a quarter of an hour.”

“But, how many are there? We don’t have a doctor?”

There is no food... what are we to do?" the mother superior responded.

"That is your problem. I am only to deliver them." The man walked away, I thought, because there was no more talking, and I heard the door close. Mother superior came slowly into the room, with a hollow gaze. I don't think she saw where she was walking.

"Did you all hear that?" she said bleakly.

"Yes," someone replied.

"We have a lot to do. Come girls, this is our duty. Perhaps God has placed these men here for a reason."

She divided us into groups, and each given a number of rooms to prepare. I went with Sophia and Charlotte to find blankets and sheets for our ward. Sophia glared sullenly at me. When I heard her speak to Charlotte, I realized that she was the one who complained in the kitchen. But I did not say anything to her. We hadn't even begun arranging the cots on the floor when the men were carried in. I didn't think the flow of wounded soldiers would ever end. There would be a pause, and I thought that perhaps that was all. Then someone would usher in a whole train of others. It was nearly midnight by the time the commander who gave us the news announced that that they were all in now. I sighed in relief, but then realized my job had only begun. Some of the nuns went to kitchen to scrounge up some sort of meal, or at least some tea. I was given the job of cleaning wounds and determining what men had serious, dangerous wounds and needed immediate attention. I stood for a moment outside the door, listening to them talk and complain. My eyes slid shut, and with great effort I kept them open. My stomach churned to think of the flesh and carnage. The blood and wounds. The men sounded rough and angry. Like the men I saw on my way to Auntie's

house. My hands shook; I could hardly open the door. My head throbbed like the aching hinges of the rusty door. I was so tired, so weary, and this stench of blood and pain was overwhelming.

At last I pulled myself together and entered. The first man I noticed was bleeding quite badly. He was young, and his face was pale.

"Can I help you?" I asked him in almost a whisper.

"You can get this bloody rag off my arm," he said in angry tones, and then smiled. I knew he was just pretending to be angry.

"Let me go get some rags and a bucket of warm water." He looked up at me with such a strong gaze I didn't know what to do, and confusedly went all the way to kitchen before I realized there was a bucket and rags outside the ward room door.

"Here we are," I said to the young man cheerfully. He didn't seem to notice the pain as I wrenched the sticky bandages off.

"What's your name?" I asked, trying to make conversation and keep my mind from what I was doing.

"Franz. And yours?"

"Catherine." He just stared at me for the longest time, until I said it was time to move onto the other men.

"Yes, but don't forget to come back," he smiled at me again. I did not know then—I was such a stranger to the world—but I know now that it was then that Franz Gruber fell in love with me.

Some of the men were old and tired. But they were inflamed with the passion of Hitler. Men who hardly had the strength to get out of bed in the morning managed to go fight for the Fatherland.

"Little nun, you just get me fixed up as fast as you can;

we've got some battles to fight," they would say to me. I weakly smiled and didn't tell them they would be unable to fight for a number of months, or perhaps never again if infection started.

And so I spent the whole night, until the rooms were lit with brightness not from candles, and I knew morning had come. There were three or four men left to take care of.

"Good morning, sir, how are you?" I said to one of them.

"I am alright, alright," he murmured, looking pityingly at me. I quickly cleaned his wounds and left, with him still having that look of sorrow and regret.

One of the other nuns came to relieve me. I laid down for a few minutes and fell asleep. Sometime in the afternoon I woke up and went to check on the men. Most were sleeping. Franz wasn't. He beckoned me to come near.

"Yes?" I said.

"I am lonely. I haven't talked to anyone in ages."

So I sat down to listen to him.

"Do you know how long this war has lasted? It isn't over yet, either, I can tell you that. Have you ever hated anyone? In this army, we live on it. My father was murdered by the Allies. My mother and the rest of my family died of starvation. I was so young then, and I remember watching them die away, like flowers wilt and are gone. They've done that to us... it is their fault we are in this now." He clenched my hand so tightly I nearly cried out in pain. "My mother, she was so kind and so beautiful. I loved her with all my heart. She was so full of life and vigor, always ready for a game with us children. But little by little all her strength drained away. She worked, she toiled to let us survive. When I was very young, I remember her laughing gaily. But as the English, the Russians, and the Americans sucked our very life away, my mother became weak and

tired. She didn't laugh and romp with us. If she had the energy, she slaved for a bit of bread, but the energy died. She sat listlessly, with hollow eyes, watching us scavenge for food. Then one morning she didn't wake up. And it was all because of them." He nearly started crying. After a moment he regained his composure. "After this war, my dear," he said hesitantly, "we'll do something together. We can start a life together, can't we? After we pound the Allies to pulp, then we'll live in riches and victory, just you and I." He squeezed my hand again. I was thoroughly embarrassed and had no idea what to say. I just sat silently, and he took that for an agreement. I heard someone moaning from the other room and left Franz for a moment.

It was the man with the strange melancholy gaze who was making sounds.

"Are you alright?" I asked him.

"Do you ever feel a dull aching right about here?" He put his hand over his heart. "That is my ailment. What is your name, child?" He spoke so sadly and so gently.

"Adele. I mean, Catherine." I cursed myself for saying Adele; I didn't know why that came out. I hadn't called myself Adele for years, at least not out loud.

"Do you forget who you are?" He said with a queer smile. "You aren't the only one."

"Well, you see, my parents named me Adele, and that is French. But my parents died when I was a child, and my father's family, who were German, sent me to this convent, and renamed me."

"Which do you like better?"

"Adele. It feels like my name. I just pretend I am Catherine, but Adele is my real name." It was odd... I hadn't thought about my name for such a long time. And here I was discussing it with a stranger. I desperately wanted to know his name but was shy and knew not how to ask.

“Was there some French connection in your life that your parents gave you that name?”

“My mother was French.” I paused. “Sir, why did you go to fight?” I asked, very timidly.

“Why? There was no other choice. Either fight or be thrown in prison. Do you ever hate yourself? I did such stupid things. I went to war because I wanted to. Now I see that it was all false. I thought I was fighting for freedom. How foolish of me. How could we be fighting for freedom, when if we didn’t want to fight, we would be killed? That isn’t freedom. It is all an illusion. Do you know what an illusion is?”

I said no.

“It is something you think exists, but really it doesn’t. Hitler fooled us, and we believed him. Germany was so desperate to strike out, and Hitler gave us someone to blame. There are two kinds of leaders. Some appeal to the goodness, kindness, and nobility of mankind. Others draw out the evil in the heart, hatred, deception, jealousy, and revenge. That is what Hitler did. And we fell for it.”

He shook his head as if he couldn’t quite understand how it all happened. He looked confused. When he started talking I was sure I would be bored to death, but there was something in the tone of his voice, in the gentle crescendos of his sentences that I found fascinating. And so we talked on and on until it was time to serve the soldiers their supper. And when I went to bed that night, I realized I still did not know his name.

The next morning when I went to clean the men’s bandages Franz became very angry at me.

“Why did you go talk to that crazy old man? I wanted someone to listen, someone to talk to. And you deserted me for him.”

“I am sorry, Franz, but I have an equal duty to all of

the men here. I can't spend all of my time with you even though I might want to."

That pacified him a little, of which I was glad because he was raising his voice and the other men were looking a little suspiciously over at us.

When I gave the other man his breakfast, I worked up my courage enough. "Sir, I still do not know your name; what is it?" I asked.

He laughed a little. "You mean you spent all afternoon yesterday wondering what my name was? What a funny girl you are. But let me ask you one as well. My name is Frederick. How old are you?"

"I think I am nearly eighteen. Here at the convent we don't put much importance on ages."

This seemed to make him very happy.

"Oh, that is older than I thought. You look so young."

I laughed nervously and moved away to help someone else. I was a little confused. He only gave me his first name, but yet I didn't feel it was proper to call him by it. After all, he was so much older than I. But I couldn't ask him again; he would think I was prying too much. And in my mind, I began thinking of him as Frederick, not "sir" anymore.

Thus passed the next week.

Chapter Fifteen

Sometimes the loneliness was too much for Margie. The large, echoing house was too big for her. Out of desperation she would write letters to her parents, but she never sent them. They were letters of misery and boredom—she knew that if her parents found out how unhappy she was, they would demand that she return home. No, she would wait here for Lee to come back. It wasn't her marriage that she regretted; she still loved Lee—it was his departure she hated.



It was after Pearl Harbor when it started. He was not happy being at the farm. Margie wasn't worried because Lee had found out he was not required to go into the military since he was a farmer. So she didn't think he would actually leave.

But by the summer after Pearl Harbor, Margie knew he wanted to leave. He didn't say a word, but she could tell. He didn't like talking about the war.

“Did you hear the news?” Margie said one evening as they were having dinner. “The British tried to attack the Germans, but it failed. It ended very badly. Apparently there were a lot of British deaths. It is a shame they have to keep on fighting like that, wasting so many lives...”

“Margie, will you be quiet?” Lee shouted.

He had never shouted at her before.

She stared at him for a moment, shocked and not sure what to say. She slowly stood up, pushed her chair in to the table with solemn finality, and left the room. He could hear her going up the stairs, going into their room and shutting the door.

He sat silently for a long time—till the sky outside grew dark, till it was lit up with the summer stars. Then he got up and went quietly upstairs. He knocked gently on her door.

“Margie?” He said in a muted voice.

“Yes?”

“Please let me come in.”

“The door isn’t locked.”

He paused for a moment, and turned the knob, opening the heavy old door.

She was kneeling beside the window, looking out at the expanse of land—their land.

“Margie, I am sorry.”

“I know.”

He was silent, not knowing how to tell her.

She looked up at him sadly.

“You want to go off to the war?”

He nodded.

“The only thing that’s held me back is you—I know you want me to stay here.”

“But that won’t keep you any longer.”

“Margie, I don’t want to make you unhappy, but I can’t just sit here and watch every other man give his life for our country... and stay here, like a coward.”

“Your father isn’t going.”

“Yes, but he is too old; they won’t let him.”

"I wish the war had never happened," she said softly.

He knelt down beside her, and she cried into his shoulder.

"What if you die? What will I have?"

There was nothing he could say.



And so the next week he was gone. His parents were upset, although not as much as when he married Margie. At least his leaving for the war was a good cause.

Lee left early in the morning. Margie walked down their farm's long, winding lane with him. Brown September grass covered the path.

"Take good care of the farm, Margie—I know you will."

She nodded, wiping tears from her eyes and trying to smile bravely for him.

"Are you going to stop and see your parents again?"

He sighed.

"No, I don't think so. I said good-bye to them yesterday."

They were silent for a moment, looking at each other for the last time for a long while. Early morning birds chirped in the background. A breeze rustled through the tree branches.

"Lee, I love you," Margie whispered.

"I love you Margie—don't forget that."

He wrapped his arms around her once more, and then walked away.

"Lee, no; please don't go!" she cried as the empty space enveloped her, and he became smaller and smaller, walking down that dusty country road. She shouted after him again, but he was too far away to hear.

She stood looking after him until he could be seen no more.

“Why?” she screamed into the bright morning. The sound startled the birds, and they fluttered away nervously, so she was left with only herself.



It felt good to laugh again. Margie held up her dough-covered hands and laughed again. She was baking Christmas cookies with Eva, and they were both enjoying it.

The whole idea had started as a labor of love—Eva didn’t want to ask Margie to come over and help make cookies, a stranger intruding into their family traditions. She asked Margie anyway. Margie didn’t want to go; she was so much happier alone, thinking of Lee and his return. But she knew Eva was trying to welcome her, so she accepted the invitation.

And so—surprisingly—they were having a merry time together. Margie discovered Eva could be light-hearted and happy. Eva realized Margie was more than a china doll.

“Back home we used to make *Lebkuchen*,” Margie explained. “It is a German cookie, my family...” she stopped suddenly, “...is from Germany.”

She paused to finish rolling out the dough, a little out of breath.

Eva glanced at the young girl, her hair disheveled but her face bright. Yes, she did look German, her strong jawbone; dark, thick hair; green eyes. Funny that she hadn’t noticed the resemblance sooner—most of the people in the area were German also. Margie wasn’t that different.

Margie looked up quickly.

My family came from Germany a long time ago,” she said sharply. “Before any of this happened with Hitler, and all that. We’re Americans now, if that’s what you were thinking.”

Eva laughed.

“No, no, I wasn’t worried about that. I believe you.”

Margie looked relieved.

“I’ve been worried about that — people might talk about me being a German.”

“No, they wouldn’t, most of us here have at least some German in us. And what does it matter? There are good Germans and bad Germans, just like there are good Americans and bad Americans. Being German doesn’t make you evil just because some Germans are.” Eva paused. “You are going to come over on Christmas Eve, right?”

Margie was silent.

“I don’t know... I wasn’t planning on it...”

“What else would you do?”

“I’ll sit at home and cry for Lee,” Margie thought, but didn’t say it.

“Yes, I suppose I can come.”

“Very good. And maybe do you want to make those German cookies to bring?”

“I am not sure if I remember how to make them, but I will try.”



Margie trudged through the snow to Eva’s home on Christmas Eve. Avery walked beside her with a lantern. She was glad he was there — it was very cold and very dark.

They finally reached the warm house, glowing with lights and holiday decorations.

“I am glad you finally made it — and merry Christmas!” Eva exclaimed.

“We thought we’d never get here; the snow was so deep,” Margie laughed. “Here are the cookies I made, I hope you like them.”

She handed Eva a red tin and Eva took it to the table.

"Avery, take Margie's coat," she said. "Hang it back in the hall."

"Come sit down, Margie, and get warmed; you must be freezing."

"Hello, Margie," Wilson said, and returned to reading the newspaper. Margie had discovered Wilson was a very silent man, not much for talking unless it was necessary.

"Well," Eva said brightly, "I hope you're ready for lots of good things to eat. I've been busy all day making food. We don't have the usual pies, but it is so hard to get sugar nowadays—I used all of mine for the cookies. Hopefully the men won't be too disappointed. That's a lovely dress you have, Margie. Is it from town?"

"Yes, my mother bought it for me right before I left. I am glad you like it." The dress was pink with pale green trimming. It was knee-length with a full skirt.

"Why don't you come in the drawing room and see our tree? It isn't quite like most years, but I think it still looks nice."



It was a bitterly cold night, but at least the holiday spirit seemed to warm it a little.

The men sat around smoking their treasured cigarettes and talking about their homes.

"There's a pretty girl waiting for me when I get back—we're gonna get married. She's blonde, the cutest little thing you've ever seen."

"By the time I get home, my wife will have had her baby—our first."

"My wife is waiting for me, and our twins. They're about a year old now."

“And what about you, Lee? A sweetheart back home?”

He smiled.

“Yes, my wife, Margie.”

He was too wrapped up in the memories of Margie to keep talking.

“My family always went out on Christmas Eve Day to cut a tree. Then we’d decorate it in the evening and sing carols,” another man said.

“We had our tree up right after Thanksgiving. My mother would make treats on Christmas Eve, we would sit together eating popcorn and all her candies.”

All Lee could think about was home—and Margie. The happy chatting of the other men seemed to fade away. “Lord, please let me get home,” he whispered. “Please let me see Margie again. And make her happy while I am away.”



Margaret sat quietly, knitting beside the fireplace and watching the blizzard outside. It was Christmas Eve, and she was alone. The howling wind made her shiver. There was no one to talk to. There hadn’t been since Nikolaus left. But this night especially she felt alone. The silence—save for the gusts outside—seemed to pound against her; at last she couldn’t bear it.

She stood up and walked nervously around the room and began singing softly. At first it was just a murmur.

“Silent night, holy night. All is calm, all is bright.”

And then she grew bolder, it sounded good to hear a voice, if only her own.

“Round yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.”

And so she sang—all evening—until she was exhausted and she fell down on her bed and slept.

Chapter Sixteen

One day Franz accosted me. He grabbed my wrist, and I was frightened by his face.

“Franz, let go of me.” I didn’t want to make a scene. I was a nurse, and a nun besides that.

“Don’t say that; I am not hurting you.” He smiled again in that same way the first time I met him. It suddenly occurred to me that it was a blank sort of smile. I wondered what he was thinking. “I just want you to stay here for a moment; you are always running all over. Catherine, why are you a nun?”

I cringed, and hoped there would be some convenient interruption. I did not want to face that question.

“Oh, I don’t know. I grew up here, you know. I am an orphan; my relatives put me here when I was little. It was just natural to stay.”

“Did you take the vows for life, or whatever nuns do?”

I was reluctant to tell Franz that I was free to go if I wished. I felt he would take advantage of me and convince me to leave. And for some reason I dreaded the thought of running away with Franz.

“Not for life I mean, it isn’t that strict here, it more like, you know... I think I hear someone calling me. I’ll be back.”

I slipped away before he had a chance to stop me. I went

to see Frederick, hoping he wasn't asleep.

"Hello; how are you feeling?" I asked him, wanting to sound like a busy nurse checking up on patients.

"What did you want to say, Adele?"

"They call me Catherine, here," I protested.

"But you look like Adele, I can't help calling you by it. It is much prettier than Catherine. Was there something you wanted to ask me?"

"No, not really." He looked so kindly at me, I decided to speak. "Frederick..." it came out very slowly, but naturally. My tongue slipped over it so easily, yet I was embarrassed by saying it. He nodded encouragingly to me. "Frederick, what was it like, outside of the convent, before the war?"

"You've lived here all your life then, haven't you?"

"Since I was four. I spent a week with my aunt last spring, that was all."

"Adele, I don't remember the first war, the Great War, I was only three when it ended. But I can still see the streets afterwards. My family changed. My father used to be a jocular, happy man, who tossed me up to the ceiling when he came home each day. But after the war he would merely sigh when he saw me. And almost every night, after I was put to bed I could hear my parents shouting and arguing. My mother loved to bake pies and those sorts of things. But after the war we lived very frugally. There wasn't money for that anymore. Her lovely lips, which kissed me every evening, became thin and perpetually pursed. Her twinkling eyes turned hard and severe. And little by little, as I sat and watched my parents I noticed something creeping into their voice, their faces, and their hearts. It took me a long time to understand. But I do know what it was now. It was hate. They began hating Germany for losing. They hated the victors for being so demanding.

And then they hated themselves all the more for being so hateful. I spent my days outside alone, playing. We ate meals together, but they were silent meals. There was nothing to say except bitter complaints. I ran away when I was sixteen to join the army. I do not know if my parents are alive or not. At first when I listened to Hitler I did not understand why the multitudes followed him. But I slowly began to learn why. It gave me such a satisfactory feeling to do something against someone. I had always tried to love, or at least respect those around me, they were after all, fellow humans. Hitler taught me to despise my friends and harden my heart against those who wanted mercy. Once I let go of the restraints, I couldn't stop hating people. I hated people who told me what to do, I hated those who had humiliated Germany and forced us to start another war, and on it went. I lived that dark life until one day in battle. The hatred just burst out of me, and I killed with such glee and satisfaction. As I looked at the strewn bodies, I realized it was me; it was my fault. I knew these other men had families, and people loved them. Yet my hatred destroyed their lives. Just as my parents were at home waiting for me, these soldiers had parents, perhaps wives and children eagerly awaiting news. They would be having a funeral soon. Because I hated and did not stop myself. It was that night—as I lay in the dark—when I resolved to stop this foolishness, I would begin to love those who wronged me and my country.” He began to cry, just a little, and I gave him my kerchief. “I see now, after contemplation, that love is the only way to end wars. If we keep holding grudges and hate, we shall keep on fighting for eternity.”

Neither of us said anything for a long time. I was kneeling on the floor, by his side. When he took the kerchief, he did

not let go of my hand, but kept holding it so gently I hardly felt the pressure.

“Adele, thank you. You’ve never hated anyone, have you? When you came in to help us, I could see by your face that there was no hatred. And yet no love either. You’ve never loved, have you? It will come, it will come someday. I suppose the only one you can love in a convent is God, isn’t it?”

He embarrassed me; I did not know what to say.

“I suppose God is a worthy object of your affection...” he murmured, and I said—as a dutiful nun should—that God is the right and more worthy object of human love. He laughed and said they had trained me well. I did not tell him why I was living in the convent, that it was out of fear and cowardice... but I felt he already knew. It just seemed like I didn’t have to tell him very much, for he knew me just by looking at me.

Chapter Seventeen

It was curious to see how differently the men began to heal. Franz gained strength every day and was so invigorated and full of ambition. Some of the others had no reason to get well. Their families were gone, and they were disillusioned with the war. They laid in their beds, wasting away and growing stronger in body but weaker in their minds. Frederick was somewhere in between. He wasn't as young as Franz and didn't have that energy for revenge. Yet he didn't lie there hopeless, just waiting for death. He got better just a little bit at a time. His face filled out and wasn't shrunken anymore. His eyes brightened and I rarely saw that empty stare anymore.

It puzzled me that there was enough food for ourselves and these men. Before they came the meals barely satisfied our stomachs, but now there was not only enough for us but plenty for the soldiers. Then one day I discovered that a cart of food was brought to the convent every morning.

"Where is this coming from?" I asked one of the sisters bringing a sack of vegetables into the kitchen.

"Where do you think?" Her voiced dropped to a whisper. "They've stolen it—so the soldiers can eat and heal."

"Stole the food? From whom?"

She sighed. "What do you think? The people. Probably farmers. They think these soldiers are more important

than anyone else.”

It made me sick to think of our dinners being plundered from innocent, hardworking farmers. If their food were gone, they probably wouldn't live through the winter. After that I had to force myself to eat our meals; all I could think of were those who no longer had anything to eat. I knew how it felt to be starving, but there was nothing I could do to right this injustice.

About six weeks after the men had been at the convent that Franz told me he had something to say.

I sat down to listen. At first I had not liked him, but he was so bursting with plans and ideas that I could not help but enjoy sitting with him. We had many conversations together, and he was always talking about what we would do together after the war. Although he had never asked me outright, I came to believe, little by little, that I would indeed leave the convent and live with Franz after the war.

“Cathie, dear,” he said to me, that was his own nickname for me. I didn't like it as well as Adele, but I never told Franz. “Cathie, I can't stand it here anymore. I feel like I am living in a tomb. There are battles to be fought, and I must help. You didn't take the life vows; I asked one of the nuns. So you are still free to come with me after this is all over. Here,” he drew something out of his pocket, “this will make it a more solemn promise.” He took my hand and put a small gold band on one of my fingers. “It was my mother's. Now I can go away and be sure that you will be here waiting for me.”

He sunk back on his pillow and sighed in pleasure. I loved this young man, and I imagined myself spending the rest of my life with him.

“Yes, Franz.”

“Oh, another thing,” he sat up again. “We must write

to each other while I am gone. It will help us know one another better, and so neither of us will forget the other. You will write, won't you?"

"Of course I will. But I've never written a letter before, so mine shall be quite terrible at first. I'll learn, though."

This dreary tomb didn't seem so dark anymore. Here was Franz, and he was going to write me letters, and I would have this lovely ring, as a token of our love, and we would write letters. I would wake up every day and wonder if I would get a letter from Franz that day. It was going to be a beautiful life now that I loved someone, and he loved me. After a few minutes it looked like Franz fell asleep, and so I crept away. Frederick was awake, and I felt I had to stop to talk to him, although I didn't feel like it.

"So, Adele, what have you been doing today?"

"Oh, all sorts of things."

I didn't want to tell him, of all people, that I was engaged. I didn't think he would appreciate or understand it very well. I hid the ring under my other hand, and hoped he wouldn't think it was an odd way to stand.

"Adele, do you know what I am going to do after this war?"

I said I hadn't the least idea and prayed that he would not want to do the same as Franz just asked me.

"I am going to Switzerland and buy a little cottage up in the mountains. And I'll have a little garden, and maybe a goat or chicken. And I'll just stay up there. When the weather is nice, I'll sit outside and watch the mountains. When it is cold I'll be inside next to the fire. And that way I'll never have to fight again. I won't have anyone I will want to fight with, and I can just enjoy the world from on top of my mountain."

I said it sounded like a lovely idea.

“You don’t feel like talking today, do you?” He said quietly, after a moment.

“No, I suppose I don’t. Some days are just meant for thinking, not speaking.”

I wandered off then, leaving him to sleep, or dream about his cottage in the mountains. Frederick was a strange man. I don’t think any other soldier in our convent would want to do something like that. And yet, it was a good idea. Life had been so chaotic; it would be nice for Frederick to just relax and live calmly.

Two days later Franz left. We didn’t make a big fuss over it, but he promised me a letter very soon. Neither of us said much as he departed. There wasn’t the need to. We both knew what we would do after the war was over, and this was just an interruption.

I was sitting with Frederick one day, and forgot to hide my ring. I saw him look at it and then up at my face.

“What is this all about?” He was so gentle and sad. I was not angry at him for prying into my life.

“I am engaged to Franz. When he comes back, we are going to get married.”

I didn’t ask for congratulations, which was fortunate because Frederick gave none. He simply closed his eyes. I imagined that there were pools of tears around his eyes, but I was just imagining things.

“We’re going to write letters to each other, and then we will get married and have our own house out in the country, and have chickens, and cows, and a big garden, and an orchard, and there we will raise our children.”

I felt silly for blurting that out because Frederick didn’t seem interested, and I had never once told Franz that was what I wanted to do. It suddenly just came into my head.

“That is what you both have planned out to do?”

Frederick opened his eyes and asked.

“Well, no, I mean, we haven’t discussed the details yet. It is not really settled yet.”

“I knew Franz, when we were in the army.” He said in a subdued voice. “And I don’t think he would live on a farm out in the country. Franz has a heart full of anger and revenge. He doesn’t have room for peaceably settling down.” He paused for a moment. “But perhaps love has changed him.”

I felt a dull ache in my stomach and said I was going to go lay down. By the time I laid down, the aching had grown greater, and it was in my heart. I was sick of thinking about Franz and life after the war. I thought about seeing Franz again... and dreaded it. I cried until my pillow was thoroughly damp. I cried with fear at what Franz would say, I cried because I was angry with myself for thinking I loved Franz, and I was enraged at Frederick for drawing the tears out of my heart.

Thus was the first day of sorrow after I became engaged to Franz.

Chapter Eighteen

I soon recovered from my bout of tears. The next morning I was sure that I loved Franz with all my heart. And that day I received a letter from him. I walked, very fast, through the ward rooms with it, on my way to my room.

“A letter, Adele?”

“Yes, from Franz,” and I smiled in joy. I only heard Frederick sigh in return.

My dearest Cathie,

We have been so busy; this was the first chance I got to write you. My apologies if it was late. What have you been doing, without me to talk to? I am sure the war will be over soon, it can't go on much longer; there aren't very many more Germans for the Brits to kill. I am afraid Germany doesn't have much hope, but then, we've done all we could. But, my dear, I can't stand the idea of surrendering to the Allies unconditionally. It simply can't be done. It is too degrading and painful. I and the others here have sworn to keep fighting until we don't have the strength to raise our arms up to shoot. Then, and only then, will we give in. Doesn't it just make you so angry; to think of those Brits, Russians and Americans smashing us to smithereens and making us admit to the whole world that we lost. And we will have to pay back everything, too. It is just crazy. As long as I can breathe, I'll keep

shooting. I am sorry this isn't very long, but I haven't got much time, just a little here and there. I'll do the best I can. It is horribly rainy and muddy here. It isn't warm, either. The rain is like ice and the mud like frozen dirt. But we're doing the best we can.

*All my love to my little nun,
Franz*

It was the first letter I had ever received from someone. I didn't know what to expect from Franz. It was a nice letter, but I had hoped it would be more like a love letter, not all about that awful war. Yet I suppose it would be hard to write a love letter while you are in the trenches, sitting in ice water and filth.

I sat down to write him back.

*Franz, my dearest,
I thank you ever so much for your letter. That was the first time in my whole life I've gotten a letter from someone! I manage to stay rather busy around the convent, even without you to talk to.*

I didn't want to tell him I spent nearly all my spare time visiting with Frederick; he wouldn't be happy.

I am sorry to hear how bad it is for you. I am sure you must want to come back to this "tomb" now... after seeing what war life is like again. Don't you think we would force the Allies to unconditional surrender, if we had the chance? The victors only want to make sure there is no way for the losers to win ever again.

Dear, are we going to have a home, out in the country, to raise our family? I've lived in this gloomy convent for so long; I'd love to live out in the sunshine and space. We'll have peach trees, and cherry trees, and a huge garden with fruit and vegetables, and a cow with fresh, creamy milk every day, and lots of chickens for

eggs, and stews, and oh! I can't wait until this dreadful war is over. I must go now; like you, I am busy all the time. I love you, my dear, dear Franz, and am thinking of you throughout the day, and night.

With all my love, yours affectionately,

Catherine

After I sent the letter off, I went to see Frederick and apologized for not staying with him earlier. I did pity poor Frederick; he didn't have any high ambitions for life. It just seemed like he sat waiting for life to come to him instead of snatching at happiness.

"Frederick, I am sorry I rushed off in such a hurry. I was so eager to read the letter from Franz."

"Was it worth all the waiting?" He asked, and I felt he meant, "Was it worth the neglect of me?" I did not know what to say. I treasured the letter, but it wasn't what I thought.

"Oh, Frederick, he is so busy; in those terrible, dank trenches he can't write like he would like to. But I've never gotten a letter, and so even though it was a bit boring, I am glad he sent it."

"I've found that things in life have a habit of not turning out as nicely as you expect. But I am happy for you, that you received a letter. Spoken words are nice to hear, but they fade sometimes in our mind. No matter what, you can always read a letter again."

I didn't tell Frederick this, but I sure I was never going to read that letter again. There was no deep meaning in it for me to remember. Simply hollow words on a paper.

"Adele, what do you remember from your childhood? I've told you my memories, now it is your turn."

"All I remember is living here." I smiled, trying to make

it a little less serious sounding.

“Yes, but aren’t there any vague memories of your parents? Anything of your life before coming here? And you must have had thoughts and events in your childhood. Even people in prisons think, they have ideas, they have feelings and emotions. They might not physically do anything, but in their mind they are all over the world. So, what was your childhood like?”

“It was boring.” I laughed and then wanted to pull the laughter back. Frederick did not want sarcasm; he wanted sincerity from me. “I don’t remember my parents, they died when I was very young. My aunt brought me here. I wanted other children to play with. I never played any games with children my age. I don’t know how that would feel. But I grew up very solemn and religious. The other nuns were so much older than I that I think I grew up long before my age. My aunt came to see me once, but that was it. Until I turned sixteen. Then I went to stay with her, to experience the world.” I paused.

“And how was it?”

“The world?” I asked.

“Yes, how did you like the world?” He questioned eagerly.

“I didn’t like it. The world was so violent and terrifying. When I was at my aunt’s, our house was searched, and I was horrified. I think I understand what you meant about hate. I didn’t like the world because the people, and even the air, was full of hate... and it was frightening. So I came back here.”

“Did you come back to serve God?” He looked so searchingly at my face; I knew I could not lie to him. And why lie? He would not condemn me. Frederick would understand fear.

“No, I came back because I was afraid. I wanted to escape from the horror of the war and the worry of hunger.”

“And so you came back as a coward? Don’t misunderstand me; I know how you feel. I do not blame you. But Adele, just as I had to let go of my memories, so must you. Get it all out, and move on with life. You cannot spend your whole life pondering things you did long ago. And I think that no matter how careful you are, you will always do something you will later regret. But you must simply forget the past and look towards the future.”

He said that in such a kind and gentle manner I nearly began crying. Frederick seemed to understand me better than I did.

“Thank you, Frederick, you have made things very clear. It is a relief to say things I’ve thought but not dared to put into words.”

He said nothing but took my hand and kissed it. I was afraid he was going to say something more, something that would make Franz very angry if he heard it. But I should have known better. Frederick knew I was engaged, and he did not go any further. I got up, and he didn’t kiss me again after that.

Chapter Nineteen

I counted the following weeks in groups of three. I knew that every three days there would be a letter from Franz. It was a lovely feeling to look forward to something like that. Sometimes I was happy with the letters I received, and sometimes I cried because they were so dull and warlike. I never asked myself why I did not like those letters; I never examined my heart, and so the next few months passed. Most of the men were gone, and only a few lingered. Frederick stayed on for the longest. Some days when I went to see him, he was so lively I wondered why he didn't leave. And then the next morning his face would be listless and his eyes bleak. We had worked things out very well. On the days I did not get a letter from Franz, I spent the afternoons with Frederick, and when I received a letter, he willingly let me go to read it and reply.

"Adele," he said to me one day. "This shall be the last day we sit together. I am going to leave tomorrow."

I looked up in surprise. He had almost become part of the convent.

"I have no excuse now to stay in the comfort. I must leave. They will want me to fight; I am able-bodied now. It is my duty. It was foolish for me to think I could stay here through the whole war. To the battlefield I must go again."

"No, no," I grabbed his hands. "No, you can't go. I mean,

you are still so pale and weak." I was also surprised at myself for getting so upset and worried. "Just a few more weeks, then you will gain strength and be ready to go."

"But Adele," he smiled sadly, "I have told myself that for the past month. I have said, 'just one more day,' 'just another week.' And have I left yet? No, here I am whittling my life away in idle hopes. It is today, and only today that I have forced myself to tell you this. Did you know that for such a long time I have nearly said to you that I was getting ready to go? But I never got up enough courage. Until this afternoon. I resolved to do it, and I know that you will not let me stay now that I have told you I am leaving. I keep my promises. You will never know how much I have enjoyed these months here. We came in here one blustery night, and little did I guess that you would greet me and that you would be my companion and confidant for so long. But one stage of life cannot last forever."

"Frederick," I had grown used to his name now, "what will I do? I shall sit around on these dreary afternoons and think of you and Franz. I shall drive myself insane. You can't leave, not quite yet."

Tears welled in my eyes. Franz was bad enough... it was hard to be apart from him, but now Frederick gone too... I would be desolate.

"I am sorry, Adele, but it must be."

We were sitting silently, both of us weeping in our hearts, I am sure, when Sister Mary came in with a letter for me.

"It isn't the day yet, is it?" Frederick said.

"No, but maybe there is special occasion." I wanted to go read it, but I didn't want to leave Frederick alone on this last day, and there was so much to say to him, too.

"Go read your letter; you won't sit here any longer anyway."

I rushed away, and tearing it open, I read that Franz had a few days leave, and was coming back. By the postmark dates I concluded that he would be here the next day. The day Frederick was going. But Franz would someday be my husband; I could not spend time in sorrow over another friend. In the letter he wrote that he would come to the convent in the early morning, and we would go out into the countryside and have a picnic together—just the two of us—and catch up on all the things we wanted to say. Not to mention just seeing each other again. I was elated, and in my foolish joy I went to tell Frederick.

“Franz is coming tomorrow, and we are going to spend the day out in the countryside, on a picnic together. Doesn’t that sound nice? I can’t wait; I don’t think I shall sleep a bit tonight.”

Frederick looked at me and smiled sadly. I put my hand in his; he seemed to need comforting. My joy washed away, and I was left with a throbbing heart.

“I am happy for you,” he said, “I am happy for my Adele.” And he pushed my hand away and put his hands under the blanket.

Without another word I left him, sitting there, soundless, and went to my room. Life was so challenging, so painful. Why did Franz have to come on the day Frederick was leaving?

The next morning I woke up very early to see Frederick before he left. But when I went to his room, he was not there. I ran down to the kitchen.

“Where is Frederick? He hasn’t left, has he?”

“He left already,” Sister Clotilde told me. “He left late last night. Said he couldn’t sleep and might as well start walking.”

I heard the door open and ran to see who it was. Suddenly Franz was there, kissing my cheek.

“Hello, my Cathie, I didn’t know you would be up so early.”

I was impatient with him for interrupting my search for Frederick... Franz kissed me when I wanted to be left alone to think.

“Oh, dear, I am so glad to see you; it has been ages!” I tried to make my voice as sincere as possible. I was afraid he would notice I wasn’t putting my heart into it. “Mary made up a basket for us to take. When do you want to leave?”

“Now is fine; we can get out of the city sooner.”

And so I picked up the basket, and hand in hand we walked out of the convent. It was strange the second time I walked away from it. The first time I was alone, afraid and yet eager. This time I was with Franz, and my heart was heavy with unshed tears. But I tried to laugh, to make myself lighter and happier.

We walked for quite a ways, until we were on the dusty isolated roads. It was about noon, and we decided to walk to the top of the hill. I left the basket at the bottom, it was so heavy. We got to the top, and then I asked Franz how it was, being back in the army.

“Cathie, it is, in some ways, more horrible than I imagine hell is. But yet I can’t help enjoying it too.”

There was a strong wind, and I shivered in the cold.

“I can’t help feeling satisfied and happy for the revenge we are giving to the Allies. They had their turn, and now we are doing all we can to show them what it is like to lose. In the long run I don’t think we will succeed, but we are doing our best right now. You can’t imagine the pleasure of handling a machine gun and watching it mow down the lines and lines of those nasty Brits and Americans. It is indescribable. They ruined our lives, and now we are making them taste the dust and the blood.”

As he spoke I looked around and saw the early spring flowers budding and the birds singing. The grass was bright green, and the sky was a vivid blue.

“And it is more satisfactory when we are in close combat, to see them face to face. They beg and plead for me to save their lives.”

“Do you?”

“Why should I? Wars aren’t won by giving mercy to everyone who begs. I have to kill them; it is my duty to myself and to Germany. Of course we will lose if we don’t kill the enemy.”

I felt sick as I looked at Franz’s face. He hadn’t smiled like the first time I met him. His eyes had a certain hardness to them now. And his voice was stony and firm. Something had changed in him, and I was afraid.

“I am going to go get the picnic basket. You sit and rest,” I told him, in a slightly shaky voice. I walked down the hill. I stopped, knelt down, and took the ring off my finger and put it in the basket. Franz would find it later and understand. I kept walking, away down the hill. I walked through many towns in the next few hours. As it was nearing dark I stopped at one small village and asked someone for a room for the night.

The next morning I asked my host where Switzerland was. He pointed me in the right direction, and before the sun was barely up, I was walking, very slowly, very steadily towards Switzerland—and Frederick. I saw now that I did not love Franz. I could not love him and he didn’t love me either. I was frightened of him, just as much as I was of the men I met in the streets on my way to auntie’s house. I realized that Frederick loved me far more than Franz ever did. But he was a noble man and did not try to steal my heart.

And so, I waited in Switzerland until the war was over and kept looking for Frederick. I was befriended by a kind family there, and several years went by; I began to think that perhaps Frederick did not survive the war. Or perhaps, if he was still living, he had changed his mind about living in Switzerland. One day Emil, a friend of my new family, proposed to me. I did not know how to answer him, and he gave me time to think about it. I went walking in the mountains—I needed solitude to consider my future. I came upon a small clearing in the woods, nearly at the top of a mountain. There was a man in the garden; he was kneeling in the dirt and talking happily to himself.

“Frederick?” I murmured.

He still did not hear me. So I stepped out of the trees. My movement startled the animals in the yard. The man looked up. I walked towards him, and when Frederick saw me coming, he waved, calling my name, Adele, and ran to greet me, with the goats and the chickens following after him.

Chapter Twenty

Winter passed slowly for Margie. She found that she could manage more of the farm work, and Eva was teaching her how to keep the farmhouse clean and do all the things that were needed on a farm.

Margie grew to love the farm even more. She went out to help Avery every evening with barn chores. He showed her how to milk the cow, Lovely. She remembered Lee introducing her to the farm animals.

“You named a cow Lovely?”

He laughed.

“Yes, I did.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, I really have no idea. It is a crazy name, I know.”

But after Margie started milking Lovely, she almost understood why Lee named her Lovely. She was a very small cow, nearly a “midget” in the other farmers’ estimations. She was tawny brown and plump, not gaunt and bony like most cows. Lovely always moved slowly, and it seemed, almost gracefully. Margie laughed when she thought of a cow moving gracefully, but it was the best description for Lovely.

Spring came early that year, Margie was relieved.

“Thank goodness the snow is melting,” Eva said one day.

"It was beginning to drive me insane. I am used to arctic weather here, but I just don't have patience for it this year."

Margie felt the same way. She was glad when she could walk to the barn without bundling up in many woolen layers. The animals were happy for the fresh spring grass and the pastures to roam in.

"Are you going to keep up the garden this year?" Eva asked.

Margie hadn't thought about it. Last year, by the time she came out, Lee had it started already, and she just followed his directions in maintaining it.

"Well... I suppose, I should... I mean, Lee would want me to. But I don't know how..."

"Oh, that's fine. We'll do it together," Eva said happily.

It occurred to Margie that perhaps Eva was glad to have another woman around, like a daughter she never had.



By summer Margie was happy and adjusted to life on the farm without Lee. At night she would still cry for him. But she was kept so busy working there wasn't time to miss him. For the first time she could see what kept the women from leaving this place. It was beautiful land: hilly enough to be interesting, flat enough for farming. The fields rippled to the horizon, and the expanse was calming.

Dear Lee,

It is summer now, and the garden is growing very fine. We shall do a lot of canning this fall. All the plants are doing so well (except for the green beans, which are being eaten by some sort of bug—but I don't mind that much because I never liked green beans), and your mother has been so helpful in showing me how to do the garden.

Lovely's milk is very creamy and delicious; she's eating all the good grass out in the field. She's becoming even lovelier with the fresh meals.

I've been out picking strawberries—your mother showed me some of the best patches. I make biscuits to go with them and give it to Avery for his breakfast; he likes that.

There is so much to discover on our farm; I enjoy it all, and I just wish you could be here with me, it would make me so happy.

Please come back soon, I love you Lee.

Margie



Margaret sadly watched the fields lay fallow; weeds grew up tall and strong, but no crops. She longed to keep it up, just for Nikki—when he returned, but she couldn't do it on her own. At least she managed their large garden, as she always had, and it made her happy to think of Nikki coming home to find the garden growing lush and green with enough food to keep them through the winter. She didn't realize he wouldn't be home before winter.

One day she decided to venture into the village for one of her rare visits. There were a few things she wanted to buy, and she hoped the store might have them. Within the last few years she had odd feelings about being around other people. Things weren't the same; there was something dangerous in the atmosphere, the glances people gave, the tight and nervous words. It was just better not to risk it too much, so she stayed to herself mostly. Besides buying things like cloth or tea, she avoided going into the town. But this late summer day she was restless and wanted something to do.

The village was like a ghost town, hardly anyone out on

the streets. It gave her a queer feeling, and she shivered, even under the hot summer sun. The shelves of the store were bare, nothing on them—not a thing. She finally found the store keeper, sweeping back behind the building.

“Karl, what happened?”

The aged man turned to her, startled at the sound of another voice.

“Oh, Margaret, it is you.”

“Yes, me—what has happened here?”

“What... what do you mean?” He returned, trying to act ignorant of what she meant.

“The town, what happened to Elsteraue? And your store? I came for sugar and tea, but there is nothing on the shelves.”

He leaned nervously on his broom.

“You don’t know what is going on?”

“No, tell me, Karl, tell me,” she implored.

“The shelves are bare because I cannot get any more supplies. You know there is a war?”

“Of course, that’s where my husband is.”

“Well, that means that things are in short supply. We’re trying to support the troops and keep them fed, and so we have to give up on some of our luxuries.”

“Yes, but what about the people? Where is everyone?”

“Most of them are gone.”

“Where?”

He shrugged nervously, as if afraid someone was listening.

“I was told they were traitors. Not true Germans. They needed to be taken away.”

She was silent, shocked at his words.

“Sophie was the first,” he continued. “You remember her?”

Margaret nodded.

“She was here one day, gone the next. She came into my store one day, and the next day no one could find her anywhere. Her husband, poor man, could hardly take it. He knew where she was, but he was afraid to speak. But he wouldn’t let anyone take their children, although he was in no condition to take care of them. Then a few weeks later, soldiers came. They burned Sophie’s house. I’ve heard they took her husband away. And the children were left inside. There’s nothing left now, just rubble. You can go see it for yourself.”

Margaret shuddered.

Karl went on, like a deluge of horror that could not be stopped.

“The night they burned Sophie’s house, they took others away also. Only a few are left now, after the soldiers...”

“No, no,” Margaret cried, hiding her face with her hands, “don’t say anymore, I can’t listen.”

He stood there, silent and grim. He was once one of the most kind people in Elsteraue, always there with a smile. But Margaret’s cries did not move him now.

Margaret turned away from him, ran down the deserted street and away from the village. She stumbled and scraped her hand. It began bleeding, but she didn’t stop. She ran until she reached her home; she rushed inside, shut the door behind her, and collapsed in front of it, tears mingling with the blood from her hand.



Dear Margie,

I hope I will be coming home soon; it can't be long now. This war has lasted so long—it has been nearly a year since I left you. But at least I am doing the right thing. There are so many times

I've wondered what I am doing over here. There's the blood, the pain, the death, the mud, the hunger, the exhaustion—for what? For our country, for America, and so the world will become a better place.

I am glad that you are growing to love our farm; I only wish I could be there with you. When I am lonely, I think of you sitting on our old stool milking Lovely. I can almost smell the barn scents, the sunlight gleaming in through the knotholes of the walls, making streams of light in the dust. It won't be much longer; the war will end, we will be victorious over evil. I will return, and we will live together on our farm again. I love you, Margie; don't forget that.

Lee



Margaret shivered in the deep winter cold. It seemed colder than any winter she could remember—or was that just because she was alone and afraid?

She had tried to store firewood all summer, but her supply seemed pitiful now. The house echoed around her, bringing vivid memories to light and casting strange thoughts on her troubled mind.

Now there was no one: the village was gone, her husband was gone, she didn't know where to turn. She wanted Nikki back, to turn this horrible nightmare into just that—a nightmare that never really existed. She dreamed of waking up and finding Nikki beside her and a child cooing happily in a cradle.

And then one night she had a different dream. She dreamed that Nikki was returning from the war; it was dark and snowy outside. He was walking past the house, but he couldn't see it. He called out to her, but she did not hear. He walked farther and farther away, and she didn't

know it. He wandered about the countryside, trying to find Margaret, but the snow was too much for him, and he froze to death out there—alone and lost.

When Margaret awoke from that dream, she ran outside screaming for Nikki, thinking he was lying in the snow somewhere. She walked through the snow until her feet were numb and finally returned to the weak warmth of her house. And so, after that night she left a light burning in the window every evening in case Nikki came back—he would be able to find his way.



It was a very quiet Christmas for Margie. She had even less of a holiday spirit than the year before. All year she thought that Lee must return by Christmas—this year he would be there.

But he wasn't.

Eva, too, felt the disappointment, and they didn't even force themselves to be merry—it was too hard.

So Margie went to Eva's home again for Christmas, but they had only a simple meal, and a sparse Christmas tree.

"We put the tree up only because Avery wanted it," Eva explained. "I didn't want to bother with it. And the rationing is getting so bad, there wasn't much that I could make for the holidays."

But Margie knew Eva would not have made the traditional Christmas food even if she had the ingredients. They just wanted Lee to come home.



Lee was feeling more hopeful this Christmas than before. They heard rumors that Germany was weakening

and the Allies were planning an attack that would end the war at last.

This Christmas the men were laughing and counting down the days until the supposed end of the war, and then they would all go home.

The rumors proved to be right. By the end of January the Allies had destroyed a pocket of resistance, and the final sweep was about to begin.

And Lee was in the middle of it.

“We’re going for it!” Ralph exclaimed. “We’re gonna march across Germany and get this all over with. We’ll stamp down everything and everyone in our way and make America proud of us.”

Lee smiled to think of finally going home, and going after such a glorious victory would be even better.

By mid-February Lee was marching across Germany.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dear Margie,

I know I will be home soon. We're almost done beating Germany into the dust. It is such a wonderful feeling to know that America has won—or will win—and to know that I helped; I am part of it.

I will be home in time to plant the crops this year, I am sure. By then the flowers will be blooming, the grass will be lush and green. We can plant the garden together. And we can put our clean clothes out on the line to dry in the spring breezes. The hens will hatch their chicks and lead them proudly around the barnyard. And we will be there together. Hold on, Margie; don't give up—we're almost together now. It won't be long now.

With all my love,

Lee



Margie smiled and pressed the letter to her lips. It was still cold and wintry outside, but she could almost feel spring coming. “It won’t be long now,” she whispered.



“We’re coming up to another village,” Ralph said.
Lee groaned.

“Not another one—they just slow us down.”

“I’ve heard that we’re going to turn this one into a support base; that should be more interesting.”

They reached the village—it appeared to be mostly deserted.

“Go through and search the houses. Make sure there’s no one left anywhere, not for 5 miles around. We can’t afford spies here,” they were commanded.

Lee, Ralph, and the rest of their group started down the main street of the village. They found an old woman crouched near a flickering fire. She was crazed, and they couldn’t talk any sense into her. She was frightened by the men—she shrunk back from them in terror and refused to open her mouth, save for screaming unintelligible sounds at them.

The men shrugged and decided to leave her for the time and come back later for her. They divided the town up into sections to cover; Lee and Ralph took the outskirts of it. They were told to search the country roads around the town as well.

“I don’t know if anyone lives out there,” Lee said, pointing down the road. “I suppose I should go out there and see,” he sighed.

“Want me to come?” Ralph asked.

“No, it probably isn’t anything much; you don’t need to walk out there in the cold and waste your night. I’ll be back soon. Don’t worry.”

Lee trudged towards the light—away from that village that was called Elsteraue.



Margaret had another dream about Nikki. She dreamt that he returned home only to find Margaret in the village

and the farm overtaken by strange people who refused to accept Nikki as the true owner. He found Margaret and asked her what had happened.

“Those people wanted it, and I didn’t think you would mind. It is just a piece of land—what does that matter? We still have each other,” she said.

He became angry with her—angrier than he had ever been.

“It is just a piece of land?!” he shouted. “It is our land; it is where we belong. We’ll wander around without a penny to our name now. We’ll work for other people just to get enough money to survive. We’ll just be beggars, without anything.”

She started crying.

He continued ruthlessly.

“We were known as Nikki and Margaret with the farm that could make them rich. Now we’re nothing. What do we have now? Nothing. We have each other, but what is that if we have to spend our time finding just enough food for today?”

And Margaret woke up, there was a knock at the door.



The snow made it difficult to see where the road led. He was soon wandering in a quiet and hushed forest. Suddenly he came into a clearing and there was a house with a candle burning in the window. Perhaps this was a Nazi hiding place. It was his duty to find out. He went up to the door and knocked.

There was no sound.

So he knocked again.

At last he heard footsteps. A woman opened the door.

“Yes?” she said cautiously.

Lee said nothing for a moment but finally gained the courage to speak.

“I am from America, I am a soldier.”

“Yes, I know that,” she said, looking over his clothing.

“The Americans are winning the war. We are taking over Germany.”

She was shocked at these words—what would happen to Nikki if the Americans won?

“Are you telling the truth? Is this for real?”

He nodded and couldn’t help but smile a little.

“Yes, it is true—we have won.”

“You have won—I have lost,” she said bitterly.

There was an awkward silence as Lee realized her position.

“So, what are you doing here?” she said.

“You are required to come to our camp so we can help you,” he lied.

She said nothing.

“Do you have any food here?” he asked.

She nodded grimly.

“And animals?”

She nodded again.

“I am sorry, but we will have to confiscate that. The troops need food; they are starving.”

“I will not leave this land,” she said quietly but forcefully.

“But I have orders—we want to help you and make sure you are safe.”

“If you want to help me, just leave me alone!”

“But those are my orders, you must come...”

“I will not leave.”

She tried to close the door on him, but in a fit of anger he shoved it open again—hitting the woman on the head.

“Don’t come in here,” she screamed, but he burst into her home.

They stood looking at each other for a moment. Lee noticed her dark hair was pulled back in a disheveled bun, her strong jaw was set firmly and stubbornly, and her green eyes glared at the intruder.

“My husband is coming back to our farm, and I will not leave,” she said. “What if he comes back and I am not here?”

Her anger broke into sorrow, and she started crying.

“I’ve been waiting here for him—it seems like years and years. We’re going to plant the fields, and grow a garden together, and... and... and raise children. You can’t take this away from me—it is all we have.”

“Margie?” he murmured. “What is going on?”

She was startled to hear his words.

“Who are you? I don’t know you.”

“Margie... Margie... what’s going on?” he murmured.

“How do you know my name? How do you know who I am?”

He looked at her in confusion.

“I don’t know you.”

“But that’s my name—that’s what my husband called me, Margie. How do you know?”

“But Margie... where’s Margie?”

“I’m Margie! I’m waiting for my husband, he’s gone away to fight. But he’s coming back, and we’re going to have a family and keep this farm, and... and you can’t take it away from us!”

“I can’t do this...” he cried. “I can’t keep going.”

“What do you know? Do you know Nikki? Tell me how he is,” she continued begging, frightened by what he said.

“What would Margie say? How could I face her and remember what I have done?”

He backed out of the house, as if afraid of the woman.

“Where are you going? Tell me about Nikki, please!”

she called after him, falling on her knees and crying into her hands.

Lee stood outside in the snow for a long time, not knowing what to do.

“I have to get out of this, I can’t keep going.”



Lee walked slowly back to the village, hoping that perhaps an idea would come to him—a way to escape.

If anyone else happened to find the house they would hold him responsible. But more than that, how was he to escape from this war?

He just reached the fringe of the village when he heard strange sounds from behind a building. Lee followed the noise to see what it was.

It was an insane man, raving and screaming. He brandished a knife and waved it around as if it were not a deadly weapon. Lee watched him—unseen—for a moment and then recklessly accosted the man.

“Who are you?” Lee demanded.

“Karl, but it is not of your business,” the man said.

“What are you doing with that knife?” Lee asked.

“Protecting myself, so I can defend myself if they come again.”

Lee heard footsteps, it was probably Ralph and others coming to see what the commotion was. Lee lunged at the man—they wrestled viciously. And as he heard Ralph approaching, Lee threw his right hand in front of his face to protect himself from the knife aimed for his face. It sliced through his hand instead.

The other soldiers quickly grabbed the man; but it was too late to save Lee, for his hand was already mangled.



“There’s no way we can save it; there’s too much infection already,” a doctor said, leaning over Lee. “We’ll have to amputate.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

It was a spring day. Margie took a basket of wet clothes out on the porch and gulped in the warmth and freshness of the air. The only thing troubling her in this fine weather was that she had not received a letter from Lee in quite some time. But she heard about all the great Allied victories across Germany and was somewhat relieved, thinking that he was probably too busy ending the war to write letters—and he would be coming home soon anyway.

She walked out to the front yard where the clothesline hung and started pinning garments to the line, happily watching them flap in the breeze. Margie smiled to hear Lovely mooing contentedly from the barnyard, enjoying the spring weather also. She laughed a little to think of herself out in the sun laboring like the other farm women she had so dreaded—and despite her fears she was becoming like them, and strangely, she didn't seem to mind. She understood why they stayed on their farms, it was their land, and it felt good to work the earth, to raise crops and keep animals.

Margie looked up from her work and frowned to see a man walking down the lane. It wasn't Avery, and she couldn't think of anyone else she knew who would be coming. All the men were busy out in their fields. She didn't want a stranger interrupting the quiet pleasure of

a spring day. He was walking very slowly; it was odd to watch.

And then he came closer, and she gasped. It looked like Lee—but it couldn't be him.

She walked out towards the lane to see him better.

He waved and shouted,

“Margie—I am back!”

She ran towards him, the moist earth like a sponge under her feet. As she approached him she noticed his arm was in a sling... but she was too happy to worry about it.

“Lee, you're here! I didn't think you would ever come back.”

He wrapped his good arm around her and kissed her face, both of them laughing with joy.

“I didn't think I would ever make it either—but I am home now.”

They stood still for a few minutes, just looking at each other and trying to recover the lost months. Finally they walked down the lane together, hand in hand, like they had come home on their wedding day.

“What happened to your arm?” she asked as they neared the house.

He sighed and looked troubled.

“Oh, I'll tell you about it later, I want to see the farm first.”

So she led him down to the barn to see Lovely and to see the newly hatched chicks. They looked at the garden, some brave vegetables already peering up through the still-cold earth. She pointed to the clothes blowing on the clothesline. They sat on the porch steps together, smelling the scents of spring.

Avery soon appeared and was sent to get Eva and Wilson so they could all celebrate together.



It was very late before Wilson, Eva, and Avery said good-bye and headed for their own home. Margie was sitting beside Lee, tracing patterns with her finger on his arm.

"You said you were going to tell me what happened to your arm," she reminded him gently.

"Yes, yes; I know. I will."

They were silent.

Finally he began.

"It was in a small village, and I got in a fight with a loony man. He had a knife, and... and, well, he did a lot of damage to my hand. By the time we got a doctor to look at it, there was too much infection, and they had to amputate it."

"Oh, Lee... I am so sorry..." she whispered.

"No, Margie, that's not all."

She looked up, surprised.

"Would you call me a coward for escaping something that I believe is wrong?"

"I don't think so," she answered slowly, not sure what he meant.

"Something else happened in that village," he continued. "We were sweeping across Germany and winning. But we had to be careful. Although they were losing, we couldn't afford to make mistakes. This village where I was wounded—Elsteraue—is where they decided we would make a base for supplies. We didn't want moles—people to spy on us and report to the Germans about our every move. So we had to search the village and get them all out of there. I found this house a couple miles out of town. So I went to see what it was. There was a woman in the house, no one else. I don't know if I can explain this... it sounds so strange now. But that woman looked just like you. Her eyes, her hair, everything, just like you. And her name was

the same. Her husband called her Margie too. She was waiting for her husband to return from the war—he was fighting for the Germans, of course. They had a farm, and she started telling me about how she was waiting for him to come home so they could grow a garden together and plant the fields... Margie, I just couldn't make her leave. I couldn't stop thinking of you, waiting for me here on our farm. I realized what the war was all about—how could we be fighting evil when we forced innocent women off their land? I would be outraged if some country came over here and did that to you while I was away. How can we say this is a moral war when that is how we treat innocent people? And that old man who hurt my hand—Ralph and the other soldiers killed him.”

“But of course they should have; look at what he did to you,” Margie interrupted.

“No, I am not done yet. So I left that woman in her house, I didn't make her leave—how could I? And I realized I couldn't keep fighting; I couldn't pretend we were doing a noble thing. So when I saw that crazy man waving the knife, I provoked him. I made him hurt me. I did it on purpose. I could have stopped him; I could have grabbed the knife from his hands. He was just an old man and I could have easily overpowered him. But I didn't. I let him plunge that knife into my hand—my right hand. I knew I wouldn't be able to fight again. But I didn't know they would amputate my hand. But that's what happened. And so, how could I fight without a right hand? They sent me home since I was worthless.”

They were both silent.

“My only regret is that Ralph killed that man. It wasn't his fault, it was mine for provoking him to do it. So now what do you think of me? I didn't want to tell you earlier; I

wanted a few happy hours with you before you knew what a coward I was.”

She smiled and put her arm around him.

“How could I think you were a coward? Not many men would be that brave. You’re my hero, Lee, I am proud of you. How can a man be a coward for standing for what he believes in? And what man could be a coward for sacrificing his pride, his position, and even his body for what he knows is right?”

Chapter Twenty-Three

After the war was over the government released most of the incarcerated Americans. Karl was returned to Anna, after the farm had been lost and she was forced to take up sewing to provide for their son, after his spirit had been broken by the humiliation.

“They make a man into a beast,” he told Anna one night. “Those of us in chains, we were just as good as the ones chaining us up. We were all Americans; we hate Hitler just as much as they did, but that made no difference. I hate this place. I came here to escape. I came here to start afresh, to make a better life. Everyone comes to America to be free. It was the Promised Land of the world, and look at it now.”



“Karl, don’t do that,” Anna pleaded. “You have had enough to drink tonight. Please come lay down; you need to sleep.”

“No one will tell me what to do,” he slurred. He threw his empty bottle across the room. It hit the wall and shattered beside the boy playing on the floor.

The boy jumped up.

“Robert!”

Anna ran to him. The glass had not hurt him.

“Oh, Robert...” she ran her fingers through his tousled hair. “He doesn’t know what he is doing.”

The boy pushed her hands away and ran outside. There was nowhere to play outside in this crowded town, but he sat quietly on the front steps, listening to his father alternate between mumbling and shouting inside.



Karl kept a small store in town. He had bought it after the war when he was released from the prison camp. But he did not do well with it. He was past caring if he was successful or not.

“Karl, can’t you do a little more?” Anna said one night. “Surely the store could do better, if we tried harder.”

“It doesn’t matter.” He hit the table with his fist. Robert looked up from his reading. “They’ll come along and take it anyway. I don’t know why anyone should bother doing anything when they will come along and imprison you or just steal all your money. It isn’t worth it.”

Robert realized that his father sounded—and looked—very old. Old and tired. His face was gaunt and pale. His eyes were listless and dull. He was ashamed of his father and resolved never to be like his father; he would not live a defeated and pitiful man.



“Mother, I want to go to school,” Robert announced one evening. She looked up from her sewing, surprised.

“But you’ve been to school.”

“No, I want to go to school far away. In the city. Maybe New York. I’m tired of this little town. I want to learn more. They can’t teach me anything more here.”

“What do you want to learn about?”

“Other people. Other times. There are stories about kings and countries thousands of years ago. I want to read

those stories. I want to learn about all those things I have never seen.”

She paused and lay down her needle.

“You know we have no extra money. Between your father’s store and my sewing there is just enough to get along. I don’t know what else to do. If I had the money I would send you to college.”

“If I can find work and earn money, then can I go?”

She smiled. “Of course.”



Robert was exhausted. College was more difficult than he had anticipated. But he was enjoying it. His world was suddenly open to more possibilities than he had ever dreamed. His reading assignments were more difficult and harder than any books at home. It was a pleasant afternoon, so he stopped at a shaded bench and sat down to read. He did not notice a bag laying beside him, he threw his backpack over it.

“Excuse me,” a timid voice said.

He looked up, startled. It was a girl.

“Excuse me,” she said again.

“Yes?” She motioned towards the bag.

“That is... that’s my bag.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said, throwing his to the ground and handing her the bag.

“Thank you,” she replied in a relieved tone. “I am sorry to disturb your reading.”

“It is no matter.” He sighed and glanced at the book ruefully. “I need an interruption every so often. What is your name?”

“Julia.”

“Mine is Robert. Are you going to college here?”

“Oh no, I’m just visiting my brother. My parents wanted someone to check up on him.” She laughed.

“I see.”

“But you go here?”

“Yes,” he answered. “This is my first year. I’m from Indiana.”

“Long way from home.”

“Certainly is.”

“Do you like it?”

“A great deal. I wish I had the time to study some of these things more. The teachers move so quickly it doesn’t leave me any spare time.”

“What are you studying?”

“A little bit of everything right now. But I would like to become a teacher and teach ancient literature. Like Aristophanes and Plato, Homer and Sophocles. It is so interesting; there is nothing like it now.”

“Oh.” She was ashamed to admit she had never heard of those names.

“How long are you staying?”

“I’ll be here for another week or so.”

“Maybe I will see you again, then. I always study here in the afternoons,” he lied.

“Thank you,” she said and walked away.

His eyes went back to his book but he did not see the words. Instead he recalled Julia’s face and smiled to himself.



“So, where do you live, Julia?”

“Just west of Milwaukee, in Wisconsin. My father has a feed store in a town out there. It is a beautiful place.”

“Why?”

“So open and vast. This place here has so many people, so much steel and concrete, there isn’t room to think or to live. Hartfield, where I live, is just a little town surrounded by miles and miles of corn and wheat. It is a good place.”

“When I was very young my parents had a farm in Indiana.”

“What happened?”

“Ah... well, we had to sell it.”

“Oh. That’s too bad.”

“Yes.”



A year later Julia and Robert were married. After Robert finished college they moved to Hartfield. Her father was ready to sell his business, and Robert bought it. They purchased a small farm as well.

“You were right, Julia. This is a beautiful place.”

She smiled.

They were sitting on the porch, watching the fading sun turn the fields a bright gold.

“This is the perfect place to raise our child.”

“Our child?” he said.

“Yes. Our child.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Robert. Our child.”

He leaned back thoughtfully. “If it is a girl, we will name her Alice.”

“And if it is a boy, we will name him David,” she added.

Part Two



Chapter One

He was probably on his way to the airport, or maybe there already, she thought. And he should call soon. He promised to call when he was at the airport. But she knew Uzbekistan well—it was, after all, her home country—and she knew there were often unexpected delays. She would wait longer and try to be patient.

It was about 10 p.m... 8 a.m. the next day in Tashkent—and still no word from him.

This was longer than the usual two or three hour delays.

She paced the small apartment room, glancing out the window occasionally. It was raining and very windy. She could feel the wind vibrating the window panes, and felt—for the first time since he had left—real panic. The storm raging outside seemed only to increase her fear for him.

He had two phones so that one would always be charged; he had promised her that. But he didn't answer either of them that night.

She eventually fell asleep and slept until the foggy sunlight broke into the dim room.



“It is strange what a people will do when they're afraid. Or I s'pose it should be, it is strange what a government will do when the people are afraid.”

“What do you mean?” the boy asked him.

“My father came here for a second chance—this country was the Promised Land of the world. If you were really lucky, you’d come here. This was the land of dreams, hope, and freedom—and equality. That’s what my father thought, at least. But then he discovered that sometimes people weren’t always treated equal, even here. He really couldn’t live with that discovery. You see, my father was a bitter man. I never knew the man he used to be... before they did that to him. So all I knew was a bitter, resentful and disillusioned man who couldn’t face the truth he had experienced.”

“What did they do to him?” the boy prodded.

“It used to be a saying that in old Soviet Russia everyone was guilty until proved innocent. That meant you had to prove you were innocent or else you’d be assumed guilty. When we talked about that, we were always so happy that we were different here. Here—in this Promised Land—everyone was innocent until proven guilty. But one day, that all changed.”



She was tired, oh so tired. It had been a long day. She fell on the couch and absently turned on the television, hoping to find something relaxing and entertaining.

There was a knock at the door.

She slowly rose to her feet and stumbled to the door, glancing out on the porch before she opened it.

A stranger stood on the porch, and another stranger in a wheelchair beside him.

She opened the door.

“I think you have the wrong house,” she said, annoyed at the interruption.

“No, I don’t think so, ma’am” the stranger answered.

“Who are you?” she demanded, further irritated at his response.

He motioned to the man in the wheelchair, sitting silent and still. “Shouldn’t you be asking who he is?”

Chapter 2

“Good-bye, Zada—travel safely! We’re so glad you could come for the summer!” the young woman called out.

“Annie, thank you for allowing me to be here,” Zada answered, “I enjoyed our time together.”



“Annie, get the phone please,” her mother called.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Hi, is this the Grant residence?” a man asked.

“Yes,” she said cautiously.

There was silence for a moment.

“This is all very awkward,” he finally said, “I’m not sure how to say this.”

“Yes?”

“My name is David Moore, and I’m trying to reach Zada Hakimi.”

“Why?”

He laughed tensely.

“This is where it gets complicated. I just arrived in the United States from Uzbekistan. I’m, well, let’s just say, I work with the war relief effort in Uzbekistan. I met Zada’s family while I was there. I worked in their town, Quarmana, for a few weeks. I found your phone number by going through some of their papers.”

“What? Why did you do that?” Annie was confused.

“That’s not all, please listen. You see, after I met her family, they were all killed. I wanted to find her before she went back. Is she there—can I speak with her?”

“No, she isn’t here. She just left, she’s driving to Atlanta, and she’s flying back to Uzbekistan from there.”

“You must understand, I want to tell her what happened, I don’t want her to go back there. I want to explain it all to her. I was the last person to see her family before they were killed. How can I reach her?”

“Well... I’ll give you her cell phone number, and you can call her.” “Thank you so much, I really appreciate it.”



She was actually enjoying the drive through Alabama and Georgia. The weather was beautiful. She had the radio on, listening to a little bit of everything; Zada’s tastes in music were somewhat eclectic. Amidst the clamor of country music she heard her cell phone ringing.

“Hello?”

“Yes, hi... is this Zada Hakimi?”

“Yes. And this is?”

“This is David Moore.”

“I got your phone number from your friend, Annie Grant.”

“But who are you?”

“I work overseas and have recently been in Tashkent. It would be easier for me to explain myself in person though. I happen to be on my way to Atlanta. I’ll be there in a couple hours—could we meet somewhere this evening?”

“Ah... I... ah... yes, I guess I can do that. I’m leaving for Tashkent late tonight, but I think there will be time to meet you.”



A tall, dark-haired man came up to her at the fast food restaurant.

“Are you Zada?” he asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“I’m David Moore, pleased to meet you.”

“And you,” she said.

“Can I buy you something to eat?” he asked. “I’m sorry we didn’t arrange to meet at a more upscale place, but I’m not familiar with Atlanta and was afraid I’d get lost if the directions were any more complicated.

She laughed. “Me too.”

A few minutes later they were eating in a small, reclusive corner of the restaurant.

“You’ve probably never heard of me,” he said, “I’m afraid I’m not exactly famous. I work over in Uzbekistan... but that’s another story. I met your family while I was over there. That’s how I found out about you. Your younger brother missed you very much, and was always mentioning you. That night, after I had left your house, your family... well, you see, the U.S. army made a mistake, they, um... thought that your family was involved with the extremist movement, and so they... your family was killed.”

He reached across the table and held her hand.

“I wanted to tell you myself,” he said. “And I want to say I’m sorry. It was my fault—if I had stayed longer I might have stopped what happened. Or perhaps your family was targeted because of me, I don’t know.”

“You mean, my whole family is gone? They are dead?”

He nodded, slowly.

Zada stood up suddenly and walked out of the restaurant.

David waited a few moments and then followed.

She was standing outside on the sidewalk, her arms

folded across her stomach, as if trying to protect herself from something. She had pulled the edge of her head scarf over her right shoulder and was twisting the corner of it.

He put his arm her shoulders.

“It is a little chilly out here at night,” he said quietly.

She was silent.

“So now what?” she spoke at last. “What do I do now? I have nothing. They have taken from me everything that I ever had.” She pushed his arm away. “This really shouldn’t shock me. We are used to such things. Here in America no one expects to be killed. In Quarmana it happens all the time. It has always been part of life. I don’t know a time when we had peace—true peace. But yet I never expected it to happen to me.”

He looked at her and saw tears running down her face.

“Please... please help me,” she murmured. “I’m so afraid.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m so afraid of myself and what I will do. I feel the hatred creeping into my heart even now. Right now I want to find those soldiers who killed my family—and kill them. I want to take revenge on anyone, it really doesn’t matter who, but I want someone to die because of what those soldiers did. That is what frightens me. I don’t want to be full of hate.”

They walked down the deserted street.

“I have a hard time with that, too,” David finally said. “It is hard for me to forgive those people who have hurt so many. Although it doesn’t seem like they’re harming me, every time I see someone wounded or killed by this war, it makes me angry.

“Zada, I don’t know what you’re going to do now either. But I want you to stay here in the United States. I don’t think you should go back there. I know what has happening,

and what will happen there. It is too dangerous. You're still here; I think you should escape from the horror of what's happening over there. I saw the way your family was living; no one should voluntarily subject themselves to that."

"But I wouldn't know what to do here. My friend Annie is going back to college—I am here on a tourist visa. If I stay, I wouldn't be a tourist. But I wouldn't be an American citizen. I wouldn't be anything."

"Why don't you stay here in Atlanta for another day or two? You really need more time to think things over. I'll get you a hotel room for the weekend, and in the meantime I'll see if I can get help from the organization I work with. You see, sometimes we sponsor survivors from tragedies like this and help them get started again."

She nodded.

"Thank you so much. I don't know why you'd go to all this trouble for me, though."

He sighed.

"I couldn't help your family, but I can help you. I failed your family—I don't want to fail you."

"Thank you, David."



David finished making arrangements with the hotel clerk.

"Okay, here is a room key for you. I'm flying back to D.C. to meet with some others from our organization. I will be back by Sunday afternoon. You have my phone number and I have yours. Please call if you need to. Take it easy and just relax."

She laughed.

"You sound like a doctor."

"Just trying to watch out for you, that's all. Anything

else?”

She hesitated.

“Yes?”

“Well... you see, I bought that plane ticket back home. And that was pretty much all my money. I was counting on my dad picking me up from the airport. If you loan me a little money for the weekend, I will repay it whenever I get any of my own money, I promise.”

“Zada, I’m so sorry, I forgot all about that. I should have thought about you needing to eat for the next two days. Here’s some money, just take it, and don’t worry about paying it back.”

“Thanks so much, I don’t know what I would have done if you had not been here.”

He smiled and left the room.

It was hard for Zada to understand what had happened. She was still thinking about going home and seeing her family again, but they were no longer there. If she went home, it would be deserted and empty. It would no longer be a home.



“Hi, Dad, how are you doing?”

“David, it is good to hear from you. I’m fine. But what about you? Where are you?”

David laughed.

“I made a short trip to Atlanta today and just got back to D.C. I returned from Uzbekistan safely. Thought I’d call and check to see how things are going on the farm.”

“Doing a little harvesting; not too much yet, though. How was your trip? Did it go smoothly? Will you be coming home soon?”

“I don’t know, Dad, that was a lot of questions. My trip

was fine, I guess. I'm working on another project right now. It is a long story..."

"I have time."

"Well... when I was in Uzbekistan I met a family whose daughter is visiting in the U.S. She's about twenty. She came to visit some friends she knew from Uzbekistan. I met her family while doing some research. But that night, after I left them, there was a raid on their house—apparently someone had gotten some misinformation and believed they were conspiring with the insurgency movement in the area. Her whole family was killed. I found the contact information for the friends their daughter was staying with and when I got back to the U.S., I called them. The girl was just getting ready to leave to return to Uzbekistan. I met her in Atlanta, told her the news, and convinced her to stay here a little longer. I'm now trying to figure out how to help her. There's my update."

"Sounds like you're staying busy then. Let me know how it goes, and remember, you are always welcome to come here. I know Wisconsin is a little out of the way, but your father would be glad to see you."

"Thanks, Dad. Good talking with you. Bye."

Chapter 3

He knocked quietly on the hotel room door.

She finally came and opened it.

“David, hello...”

“I made it back. And a couple hours earlier than expected, too. How are you doing?”

“Fine, I guess. Come in and sit down. You must be tired.”

“Not really, but I’ll come in anyway. Did you have lunch already?”

“No, not yet.”

“Do you want to go out and get something?”

She shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter. Whatever you want.”

“Let’s go then.”

They walked down the hall together.

“Are you alright?” he asked her, looking concerned.

“I just can’t understand what happened. I’m sure that you’re an honest person, but I can’t believe it is true that my family is gone.”

He was silent.

She wiped a tear from her cheek.

“It is like I’m not really alive and that this is some horrible place where everything goes wrong.”

“Perhaps you are right. But perhaps there is another place where all these wrongs will be righted and where the world is beautiful.”

“If there is, I want to be there.”

They didn’t speak again until they reached a restaurant down the street from the hotel.

“The meetings this weekend with my organization went well.”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been asked to remind you that there’s no obligation for you to have anything to do with us. If you have other plans, then that is good, and we won’t bother you. But we are ready to help you start some sort of life here, if that’s what you want.”

She smiled.

“Thank you.”

He hesitated before continuing.

“My boss suggested that we get you a more permanent place to live. We’ll help you if you want to pursue any college courses. You can feel like you belong here and find things to occupy your time.”

“You are so kind to me. I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to answer right now. Just think it over. There’s plenty of time.”



Three months had passed since Zada met David and found out that her family was dead.

Zada was living in a suburb of Atlanta. She had accepted David’s offer of assistance and was taking some online courses to occupy her time. When David was not overseas on missions, he would come to visit her. And when he wasn’t there she would devote all of her time to studying.

It was a Sunday morning and David was in Nigeria on a humanitarian aid operation. He had been gone several weeks and she was exhausted from her intensive days of

studying. It was unusually warm for late October and she decided to take a walk and relax her mind.

She strolled down the street and discovered a church; the parking lot teemed with congregants as they headed inside. A woman noticed her and called to her.

“Good morning! We’re glad to see you. Come on in!”

“I... um, I wasn’t...” but her voice was lost in the noise as another car pulled in.

“The service starts in ten minutes!” the woman continued. She stood waiting for Zada to catch up with her. And Zada had no reason not to join her. She walked quickly towards the woman.

“I didn’t mean...” Zada started.

“Oh, don’t worry; it is no problem. We are so happy to have you with us. My name is Gladys.”

She was a tall woman with graying hair. When she smiled Zada noticed her teeth were crooked.

“Mine is Zada.”

Gladys smiled again.

“It is a beautiful day, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

“Are you from this area?”

“I actually have an apartment just down the street. But I’m originally from Uzbekistan.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“What area?”

“On the south side of Aydar Lake.”

“We have missionary friends near Tashkent.”

“Yes, that’s about eight hours from Aydar Lake, by car. The roads aren’t very good, so it takes much longer than the same distance would here.”

“You aren’t a Muslim?”

“No, I’m not. I don’t know why not. I grew up in a Muslim home. There’s no reason why I shouldn’t be. But Islam just isn’t enough.

“Maybe that’s because there is more than that.”

“Maybe. I just don’t know.”

As they entered the building another woman came up to them.

“Hello, my name is Lucetta. We’re happy to have you visiting with us!”

She had thick, pink-rimmed glasses. There were large rings on each of her fingers, and her nails were long. They reminded Zada of claws.

“Thank you, I’m happy to be here.”

“So, where are you from?”

“I’ll talk to you later, Zada,” Gladys said quietly and left her.

“I grew up in Uzbekistan.”

“Uzbekistan?”

“Yes.”

“Isn’t there a war there?”

Zada’s voice trembled. “Ah... yes, there’s a war.”

“Such a shame,” Lucetta sighed, “it has been going on so long. I wish we would just win and get it over with.”

Zada didn’t say anything.

“Are you a Christian convert then?”

“Actually... no. I just saw your church and thought I’d visit.”

“Well, we’re glad you came.”



Zada went back the next Sunday.

“Hello, Zada!” Gladys said as they met in the parking lot again.

“Good morning.”

“I’m glad to see you.”

“And you, Gladys.”

“My husband and I are having another family over for lunch today. Would you like to join us?”

“I don’t know, I don’t want to...”

“There’s an extra place at the table already. It wouldn’t be any trouble.”

“Well, I guess I can. I don’t have any other plans.”

After the service she went with Gladys and her husband, Scott, back to their home. The other family arrived soon after them.

“Zada, this is Pastor Grant and his wife, Emily. Their children, Jon and Amy,” Gladys said. “I think you met the pastor last week.”

“And this is Zada, she lives just down the street from church but grew up in Uzbekistan.”

They exchanged friendly greetings and sat down for lunch.

“So, what brought you here?” Pastor Grant asked Zada.

“I came to America this summer for a visit... and ended up staying.”

“Is your family in Uzbekistan still?”

“No. They... well... um... They were killed this summer in a military raid.”

There was silence as even the children paused from eating.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Gladys said at last. “We didn’t know...”

“Its fine, really.”

“So, you’re here alone?” Emily asked.

“Well, there’s a humanitarian group that has been helping me. They got me an apartment and are paying for

some classes I'm taking. It is very nice."

"That's good," Emily replied. "And so what brought you to our church?"

Zada laughed.

"I just was walking down the street and came upon it. I don't really know much about Christianity. I thought it would be interesting to see what your church was like."

"We're glad that you did. And so what do you think of us so far?" Pastor Grant asked.

"I'm not sure. It is so different from what I grew up with. But I find myself being drawn to it, to what you say about God and about our sin. I was taught that if we tried hard enough we could please Allah and he would accept us. But you are saying that on our own we can't satisfy God."

"Yes. He is a righteous and just God," Pastor Grant said. "Our sins must be punished. But His Son received the punishment for the sins of all who would believe. We can stand before God on Judgement Day and plead not our own works but the work of Christ."

"It is interesting; there's a lot to think about," Zada replied.

"Dessert anyone?" Gladys said.

After lunch was over Gladys asked Zada if she'd like to return to church for their evening service.

"Yes, I guess that'd be fine. Thank you."

They walked into the church that evening and Lucetta pulled Gladys aside. Zada stood nearby waiting.

"Gladys, did you have that girl to your house today?"

"Yes."

"Do you know who she could be?"

"She could be a child of God!" Gladys replied.

"But she was raised a Muslim! She told me so last week."

"Maybe she is a Muslim, but Christ commanded us to

love our enemies.”

“But she might be dangerous! For all we know she’s a spy...”

“Lucetta, you don’t know that!”

The service was about to begin and all the other attendees had gone into the sanctuary. It was suddenly silent and Zada could clearly hear their conversation.

“She’s from Uzbekistan, home of many extremists, and we don’t know why she’s here... it is just downright suspicious.”

“Let’s just wait and...”

“I’m not going to wait. How can I sit through that church service trying to sing hymns of praise to God when I know that the girl in front of me is an extremist spy? This is a matter that can’t wait. I’m taking it to the pastor.”

Zada bit her lip to keep from crying. She turned away from the two women and tried to distract her mind, but their sharp voices kept on.

“Don’t do that, at least not yet... Lucetta, think of Christ and His love for us—while we were still sinners who hated Him. Can’t we show that same love to someone else?”

“Not when they are endangering our church, our families, and perhaps our very lives. She’ll probably come to the service next week with a bomb, and that will be the end of us.”

Lucetta shot Zada an fierce glare and walked away. Gladys realized that Zada had overheard their conversation. She went towards her. In the deep silence they heard the congregation begin to sing a hymn.

“Zada, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean you to hear...”

“It doesn’t matter now,” she replied, backing slowly towards the door. “I know what this place is like now.”

“But Zada, don’t leave because of that, please!”

“I thought you were good people. But I was wrong. You’re just a bunch of hypocrites!”

“Zada,” Gladys was quiet and almost sorrowful, “we never said we were good. Church isn’t about us, we’re still wretched sinners. Church is about God. This is His place and we are His people, though not perfected yet.”

“I’m sorry; I wish I could forget about what happened and stay here. But I can’t. It hurts too much. I thought this country would be a welcoming place. I thought that people would understand my problems and accept me. Instead you accuse me of being an extremist! I can’t come here every Sunday knowing that people don’t trust me. You preach about love and can’t even accept a stranger. No, I can’t.” Zada turned and pushed the door open. She glanced back at Gladys. “Good bye.”



The months passed in a quiet monotony for Zada. When David was overseas she would get up early every morning and make a cup of tea. She would drink her tea and then take a long walk. She carefully avoided the church, even on weekdays when the parking lot was empty. The rest of the day would be spent studying. When David was there he’d stay at a nearby hotel and they would go walking together. They’d go out for lunch and he would insist that she take a break from her work and spend the afternoon shopping or strolling through the park.

“It was a year ago this month that we met, Zada,” David said one afternoon.

“Really? It has gone so quickly.”

He didn’t say anything because for him the year had seemed as if it would never end.

They kept walking.

“My organization has been evaluating your situation,” he said at last.

“Yes, I know. I was going to talk to you about that, David. I’ve really taken advantage of your generosity. I’ve been working on some plans, find a job and start paying my own rent and not live off of your kindness.”

He laughed gently.

“That isn’t quite what we had in mind.”

“No?”

“We were thinking that perhaps you need to consider getting married.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. It is true.” He was hoping she wouldn’t notice his smile.

“I don’t know. I guess I had not considered it.”

“They also did some research and found someone to recommend.”

It took her a moment to realize what he meant. She looked at him in disbelief.

“They are recommending a husband to me?”

He smothered a laugh and nodded seriously.

“Oh yes, it is part of our work... didn’t I mention that?”

“David, that’s ridiculous...” she saw a smile spread across his face. “Oh, David, you’re not serious!”

“Well, actually, I am.”

“What?”

“About the husband part.”

“You can’t be!”

“They deliberated and discussed it and then made their recommendation. And so here I am!” He paused and his face turned solemn. “Will you marry me?”

“David...”

“Look, here’s a lovely, romantic bench under a beautiful tree. Why don’t you sit down?”

She was too surprised to protest, and so she sat down. He knelt in front of her and took her hand softly.

“Zada, I love you. Will you marry me?”

She blinked furiously as if not seeing the scene correctly.

“You are asking me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“I don’t know... I had never...”

“You can think about it. There’s plenty of time.”



“Hi, Dad, how are you?”

“Hello, David. How are things going for you?”

“Fine. And you?”

“Good. Keeping busy?”

“Uh, well, actually, yes. I’ve been rather busy because last week I got married.”

“Wait; say that again. I think I misheard you.”

“I said that I got married.”

“What?”

“Dad, you heard me...”

“Who?”

“Zada. She’s the Uzbek girl we’ve been helping.”

“Her? Why?”

“Well, why do people usually get married?”

“I guess because they love each other—or think they love each other. But how can you love her?”

“How could you love Mom?”

There was silence.

“I’m sorry, Dad. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“It is okay. So you’re already married? Too late to stop you?”

“Yes. You couldn’t stop me anyway, you know that, Dad.”

His father sighed.

“How do you know she isn’t a extremist?”

“Dad,” he said, his voice tense and annoyed.

“Alright, alright. I’ll stop. It is just a question one should consider before getting married.”

“Yeah. I need to go. Talk to you later.”

“Bye.”



They had been married about six months. David moved from D.C. to Zada’s apartment near Atlanta. She had just announced to David that she was pregnant.

“Zada, I’m afraid I have some bad news. I need to go on a trip to Uzbekistan in a couple weeks.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Probably about three weeks. We should be glad I didn’t have to go over there sooner.”

“David, I’m proud of you, I’m proud of what you’re doing and I don’t want you to regret your work because of me. I will miss you. But someone must do it.”



“David, hello!”

“Zada, how are you?”

“Lonely, that’s all. But are you alright? How is it going?”

“Slow work, I might be here more like a month.”

“Really?”

“I’m sorry; I really am. I had hoped to be finished a little early, and come home to surprise you.”

She sighed.

“Well, I guess we can’t do anything about it.”

“Are you doing okay? I’m so worried about you.”

“David, you have enough to worry about besides me. I’m fine. Like I said, lonely. Back in Quarmana I always had my family around. It is hard to not have anyone here.”

“I wish you could find a friend so it wouldn’t be so bad while I’m gone.”

“Soon I’ll have a little friend to keep me busy,” she laughed.

“Try not to be discouraged, Zada, I will be home soon. It may seem long, but it won’t be.”

“David, I love you. Please don’t forget that. Whatever happens, don’t forget that I love you.”

“Don’t worry—nothing will happen, except that I come home. I love you, too.”

“Good-bye, David. Stay safe.”

“Love you, Zada. Good-bye.”

Chapter 4

He was probably on his way to the airport, or maybe there already, she thought. And he should call soon. He promised to call when he was at the airport. But she knew Uzbekistan well—it was, after all, her home country—and she knew there were often unexpected delays. She would wait longer and try to be patient.

It was about 10 p.m.... 8 a.m. the next day in Tashkent—and still no word from him.

This was longer than the usual two or three hour delays.

She paced the small apartment room, glancing out the window occasionally. It was raining and very windy. She could feel the wind vibrating the window panes, and felt—for the first time since he had left—real panic. The storm raging outside seemed only to increase her fear for him.

He had two phones so that one would always be charged; he had promised her that. But he didn't answer either of them that night.

She eventually fell asleep and slept until the foggy sunlight broke into the dim room.



She tried calling him again after she woke up, but there was still no answer. She finally decided to call his office headquarters, to see if they knew what was happening.

"Hello, this is Zada Moore. I'd like to speak to Joey."

"Just a moment please."

There was a pause as her call was transferred.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Joey, this is Zada, David's wife."

He laughed.

"I remember you. David really surprised us when he announced he had married, we had figured he'd always be single."

"Yes, well, I'm calling about David. I haven't been able to reach him since yesterday."

"What?"

"You know he was supposed to leave last night. But I haven't heard anything from him. His phone seems to be dead."

"He didn't seem to be following our schedule yesterday; I tried to call him. I was going to call you today. I thought he probably made some unexpected side trip or stop because of you. You don't have any idea what happened?"

"No, that's why I called you. Joey, he promised he would never lose touch with me, that he'd never let his batteries run dead. I'm worried."

"Zada, I don't think there's any cause for worry. There's probably a simple explanation. Let me see what I can dig up, I'll call you later today, okay?"

"Okay, thanks. Bye."

She hung up, discouraged and still worried.



Darkness.

Confusion.

Odd vague memories whirled through his mind.

Walking through a barren cornfield. It was early spring.

The corn had not been planted yet. It was so silent he could hear the wings of the sparrows flitting around him. The ground was soft and his feet left deep imprints in the still-cold soil.

He could almost feel her beside him, he could almost see their child in her arms. He wondered if he would ever really see her again.

Darkness.

Confusion



“Mr. Moore, this is Zada, David’s wife.”

“Oh.” He paused. “Hello.”

She took a deep breath.

“I know this is rather a surprise. But I was wondering if you had heard from David recently.”

He laughed bitterly.

“David? No, he doesn’t call me unless he has to, unless he has something really important he has to tell me, like ‘I got married.’ Why do you ask?”

“Well, he was supposed to leave Uzbekistan yesterday. But we haven’t heard from him. I was getting concerned. Thought maybe you would know.”

“I think he’d sooner tell a stranger on the street than me. But you don’t think he’s in trouble, do you?”

“I don’t know yet. I hope not. There’s no reason to think that anything serious happened. Thank you for your time.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do. And please let me know how it goes, call me... when he gets back.”

“I will. Thanks. Good bye.”



“Zada, this is Joey.”

“Yes?” she answered eagerly.

“I’m sorry, we haven’t found anything yet.”

She was silent.

“I want to be completely honest with you. I know... I know this is going to be hard. But I want you to know the truth. We have absolutely no idea what happened to David. We know he got to the airport in Tashkent. But after that—it is like he just disappeared, without a trace. It is like the movies, where someone disappears and no one knows why or where they went.” He tried to laugh. “Religious people would say he has been raptured to Heaven. I’m not exactly convinced of that.”

Still she said nothing.

“So I have a team investigating it right now. If he doesn’t show up by tomorrow morning, or if we don’t get a lead by then, I will report this and hopefully we can get a government investigation. They have access to more information than we do, and they should be able to clear it up quickly. In the meantime, I want you to be careful. Try to keep a low profile, don’t go out more than you need to. There’s no particular reason for that, but it is best to play it safe, in case we’re dealing with more than we expected.”

“Thank you, Joey. I will take your advice. I appreciate all that you’re doing. I wouldn’t know where to start with this.”

“No problem. I’m his boss, you know, so I have an interest in getting to the bottom of this. We have people here with experience in these sorts of matters, you don’t have to worry about doing anything. We’ll do everything possible.”



It was March 6. David had said he would be home by the end of February. Each day Zada awoke and wondered if this would be the day that David returned. She thought of her family, gone so suddenly from her, and was afraid David had reached the same end.

“Joey, please, tell me—what is going on?” she said, desperately.

“Zada, I don’t know any more than you.”

“But haven’t you contacted the government? You said they would be able to help.”

“That’s what I thought. But we keep hitting dead ends. You know the government, big clumsy bureaucracies. I can’t seem to get past that. They do a little investigation and say, ‘We’re sorry; the information you’ve requested is unavailable.’ I don’t know if that means they know but aren’t telling or if they don’t know any more than we do.”

“But isn’t there somewhere you can go? Isn’t there someone who can help?”

He sighed.

“I don’t know, Zada; I just don’t know.”

“But David is my husband! You must find him!” Her voice was fearful and angry. “He can’t have just disappeared. You must do something!” she shouted between sobs.

There was still silence.

“I need David—I can’t just keep on waiting for him. I’m going to have a child in a few months, and what is going to happen if you don’t find David? Please help me...” she broke down and began to cry.

“I’m sorry, Zada. We will do everything possible, I promise.”



March 18.

“Mr. Moore, this is Zada again, David’s wife.”

“Yes, hello,” he answered, almost kindly. “What is the news on David?”

“There isn’t any,” she answered bitterly.

“What do you mean?”

“It is like he disappeared. David’s boss has done everything to find him, but no trace of him. We don’t know if he left Tashkent, if he’s in the U.S., or really anything,” her voice crescendoed to a wail.

“Do the police know? Someone should tell the FBI or something like that.”

“Yes, we’ve tried all that, but keep running into dead ends, or worse yet, brick walls.”

“What could have happened?”

“I don’t know. David probably didn’t tell you this either, but I’m pregnant. Baby is due in early July. There are days at a time when I’m too sick to get out of bed. It is so frustrating—I want to look for David, I want to go back to Uzbekistan and find him, but,” she laughed grimly, “our child isn’t letting me.”

“Is there anyone there helping you?”

“No, I don’t know anyone. I’m doing okay, at least for now.”

There was silence.

“I know it is not close, but you are welcome to come stay with me and wait for David. He never came home, but you can certainly come.”

“Thank you, Mr. Moore. I appreciate your kindness. I think I will wait a little longer though. He might still come back.”



A wave of nausea swept over Zada as she reached for the telephone. She wanted to stop and rest but a growing panic forced her to continue. She dialed Joey's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Joey. This is Zada."

"Oh, hi there. How you are doing?"

"Besides being sick more days than not, I'm fine."

"I'm sorry. That must be difficult."

"Yes, it is. But what about David?"

"Nothing yet. But we're still waiting for a response from a couple bureaus, both in America and Uzbekistan. They might have some news," he added hopefully.

"What am I going to do though? It has been three months since David was supposed to come home. My baby is due in July and I can barely get out of bed, let alone take care of the house or the baby. Calling a few bureaucracy headquarters in D.C. isn't enough..."

"But what more do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," she cried, "I don't know. I just want David back. Please find David, please..."

Chapter 5

“Hello?”

“Zada, this is Joey.”

“David...?”

“Nothing yet. I’m sorry. But I’m contacting you about some short-term plans. We want to make sure that you are comfortable and provided for during this time. Is there anyone you know in your area who can help you when the baby comes? That is going to be hard for you to handle by yourself.”

“I know. There isn’t anyone around who can help me though. But David’s father, Robert, offered to have me come stay with him if I need to. He lives near Milwaukee.”

“Why don’t you do that? It will be good for you to have some company. We’ll take care of your apartment for a few months. It is going to take some time to file all the necessary paperwork and plod through all the red tape to get any more info about David.”

She took a deep breath to keep from letting out a cry.

“Yes, I will do that then.”



A week later she was at the Milwaukee airport waiting for Robert to pick her up.

An older man came up to her, lean and tan. His eyes were the color of David’s.

“Are you Zada?”

“Yes. And you are Robert?”

“Yes. I’m pleased to meet you. My car is just outside, let me take your suitcase.”

About an hour later they pulled into a dirt driveway leading to a picturesque farmhouse. It was surrounded by fields of corn just sprouting.

“This is it,” he announced simply. “Come on in.”

She followed him across the gravel sidewalk, up the steps and into the house. She was afraid it would be dirty and uncared for but was surprised to see the place tidy and clean.

“I got a room ready upstairs for you. I converted this side room here to my bedroom and closed off the upstairs years ago, but I cleaned one of the rooms up for you.”

“Thank you very much. I’m sorry you went to all this trouble.”

“You know, after a while of being alone, it is nice to have some trouble to go to,” he said, leading her through a narrow hallway upstairs. They came out into a bright, spacious room.

“This was David’s room,” he said. “I thought you should have it.”

“Thank you,” she murmured, glancing around the room. It was dark blue, with lots of big windows. “I can almost feel David here.”

Robert smiled.



“So this is your store?” she said, turning and looking at the inventory of Robert’s feed shop.

“There’s more outside. Let me take you out; I’ll show you around.”

He led her outside, and it began to rain.

"I was hoping for rain, May has been a dry month so far," he murmured. "Here's the barn; we can go in here until it stops."

They went in and sat down on piles of grain sacks. The building had a musty but yet sweet smell. The rain made gentle pings on the metal roof, it was almost musical.

She took a deep breath.

"Tell me... please, tell me about David. I knew him for such a short time. You are his father."

"David didn't seem to notice I was his father," Robert answered resentfully. "You probably know more about him than I do."

"But tell me about how he was—when he was young, when you knew him."

"Did he ever tell you about the anti-war protest he organized?"

She shook her head.

"Here?"

"Yes, here in little Hartfield."

"No, he never said anything about it."

Robert sighed.

"Not a day goes by when I don't remember it."

"What happened?"

"It was back when the war started up. He got it into his head that it was a bad thing. Maybe it was, maybe it wasn't... how could we know for sure? He was so upset that his country was so willing to start this war that would kill innocent people. At least that's what he claimed. So he printed out some fliers, said that there would be a march down Main Street one Saturday to show that not all Americans wanted more killing and fighting. He was so young... he didn't realize what he was up against. He didn't

realize that this whole community is steeped in that kind of thinking. He didn't know that to be a patriotic American here, you must support your government no matter what it does."

"And then what?"

"They shut it down. He put up a flier at the grocery store. Mr. Knobbs, the owner, took it down. He called David up and said that he wouldn't allow any of that leftist propaganda here." Robert laughed. "Poor David, he didn't even know what a leftist was. So he put a flier at the barbershop. They took it down there. The churches wouldn't have anything to do with it, and if neither St. Peter's or Willow Road Methodist support something, it just isn't going to happen. That's the way things work around here. So it failed. No one showed up. It took many months for people to accept him again. He had stepped outside their comfort zone, and they couldn't handle it."

"So, what did he do?"

"He pretended that nothing happened. He tried to go on as normal. But it hurt him. And it humiliated him. David was so idealistic... he didn't understand why some people should stop him from pursuing something he believed in. And then he left. When he turned eighteen, he left. I had dared hope that he would stay and help me, take over the business and all that. But after his failed protest, I knew he wouldn't stay any longer than he had to. He wanted to get away from this place that had quenched his zeal. And oh how I wish I could go back and redo that. You see, when Mr. Knobbs took his flier down, David asked me to do something. He still saw me as his daddy—the man who could make the world right again. He wanted me to use my influence and help him. I was afraid. I was unsure of it all. I didn't know what side I was on. I said no, I couldn't

do anything. I just stood back and watched his ambitions get crushed. And because of that, he left. It is all my fault.”

“No, I don’t think so. I think David would have left anyway. It is just the way he is. He is too restless to stay in one place too long. He had to go do something great.”

“But what made him leave and go do what he did? What did he believe? He never told me anything. He never explained why he got it into his head that the war was wrong.”

“I don’t think he would have known what to tell you. I don’t think he knew exactly what he was doing either. I think he got into this over the internet. He found a whole group of people in America who were unlike anyone else he had known. He discovered things about your country that he had never even imagined. Some people live on dreams. I don’t mean dreams you have when you sleep, but a dream like a mission or goal. I knew people like that in Quarmana. They were inspired to devote their lives to some principle or belief. I think David was like that.”

“Why the war? Why was he so anti-war? I don’t understand it. What is it like for you? You lived over there. Is it necessary? Are there actually dangerous people over there that need to be killed?”

“I don’t know. I’m just a tiny piece of this huge puzzle, a cog in their great machine, you could say. I don’t see it all either. But I think it would perhaps be wise for the Americans to consider what is motivating their enemy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, let’s say that there’s a man who’s at your door, and he’s threatening to burn down your house, with your family inside. It might be helpful to realize that he’s angry at you because you just burned his house down. While he’s still wrong and doing an evil thing, it certainly clears things up if you understand why he’s angry. I think there is a lot

of bitterness and anger in my country because of what others have done to us. There are some people who are willing to kill because of their hatred. They are wrong, yes, but to have a cure, we must know the cause.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard such a thing before!”

“Really? You mean no one says that here?”

He laughed. “Of course not. When you are fighting a war, reality and truth doesn’t matter. You just have to stay focused on trying to win, not trying to know what is right.”



After Robert showed her the feed store, the weather had cleared up, the sun was shining, and it was warm again.

“Would you like a tour of Hartfield?” he asked.

“It sounds exciting.”

He laughed. “Not after you’ve seen Atlanta.”

They started walking down the street.

“Here’s the Stop-n-Go gas station. Only one in town. The pumps don’t even take credit cards, you have to go inside to pay. They have a little food bar inside; all the old men come here on Saturday mornings to drink coffee and complain about how bad the world is getting. Across the street there is our dentist. He thoroughly intimidates everyone in town, nearly as much as the priest at St. Peter’s. The priest knows all your sins and the dentist knows when you snuck some of that forbidden candy or forgot to brush your teeth that one night. And they both hold some sort of great power over you.”

Zada laughed.

“And here is Fisher’s Hardware Store. They sell more than fishing supplies. I think Fisher was the name of the man who started it a long time ago. It is the sort of place that has one of every odd item ever invented, but when you

need washers or a simple bolt, they happen to be out. And then across the street there is Pop's Grocery. I think it has been around since the Great Depression, at least. It has undergone some major changes in the last century. And here's the veterinary clinic. It is a funny thing: Hartfield has a clinic for our animals, but we have to drive 30 minutes to get to a doctor. Go figure. And then, ironically, right across from that big clear dentist window is the ice cream shop. We walk into the ice cream shop like secret service agents in an attempt to outfox the dentist who, I'm convinced, keeps a careful tally of who goes in and out of the shop. And there's not only ice cream in the store but also candy and old stuff, like an old-fashioned general store. Pop's Grocery abandoned the quaint look and so someone came along and decided they could exploit the antique feeling of this building. It is quite popular now. Took some time for people to accept it—no doubt that's due to the dentist—but everyone comes here now at least once a week if not more. And next to the ice cream shop, if people want something more substantial, we have the Hartfield Family Diner. They specialize in Italian, Mexican, Chinese, and American style food. Want to have lunch here?"

"If you would like to."

"I don't often have an excuse to eat out, this is a good reason."

He opened the heavy, ornately carved door and they went in.

"Oh, Bob, how good to see you," a middle-aged woman exclaimed.

"Hi, Beth. How are you?"

"Fine, fine. And this is..." she murmured, glancing at Zada.

“This is... well, this is a friend, Zada. She’s staying here for a month or two.”

The woman was bursting with many questions, but realized that Robert wasn’t interested in revealing any more.

“Here for lunch?”

“Yes.”

“Come right this way.”

She led them to a corner booth. “Here’s the menu; I’ll be back in a few minutes to take your order.”

An older man came in and sat down at a table near them. He had a plaid flannel jacket on and worn jeans with high lace-up boots. A John Deere hat hid his balding head.

“Hello, Bob. How are you doing?” he said.

“Good, Tim. And you?”

“Oh, we’re getting by.”

There was a pause as the man realized that Zada was there and that she was not someone he knew.

“This is Zada,” Robert said. “She is staying here for a few months.”

“Hello,” Zada said, smiling.

The man looked uncomfortable and quickly glanced down at the menu.

“What are you having today, Bob?” he said. “I always like the country roast beef with stewed veggies. And, of course, top it off with some apple pie.”

Robert smiled politely and wondered why the man was so rude to Zada.

It was an awkward lunch, Robert and Zada trying to converse in hushed tones and the man trying to talk to Robert without involving Zada.

“Do you like your taco?” Robert asked her as the man finished up his meal and left.

“Yes, I do. I don’t think I’ve ever had one, but it is delicious.”

“You’ve never had a taco?”

She laughed.

“No, we don’t have tacos in Uzbekistan.”

“Oh yes, I forgot. I’m glad you like it.”

“I think tacos are my new favorite meal.”

After the meal Robert and Zada went next door to the ice cream shop.

“You’ve had ice cream before, right?” he asked.

“Oh yes, I have.”

“What kind do you like?”

“Oh... let’s see... I like vanilla. And that mocha flavored kind too. And the kind with chocolate chunks and carmel in it. I think any kind of ice cream must be good.”

“I need to pick up a few groceries, is it okay if we stop by the grocery store before heading home?” he asked.

“Sure,” she answered, licking the last remains of her coffee flavored ice cream.

They started walking down the street. A young woman came up to them.

“Hi, Robert. I just stopped by your store but it was closed.”

“Yes, I took the day off. Did you need something?”

“Nothing that can’t wait.”

She glanced nervously at Zada and then turned to Robert and spoke in a low voice, as if she didn’t think Zada could hear.

“Is this that Muslim extremist from Uzbekistan?”

“Uh... well, no. No, she isn’t.” He turned to Zada.

“This is Zada, a friend of mine.” He emphasized the word “friend.”

“Oh, I am a friend of yours too,” the woman said,

turning to Zada. "I am a friend who wishes you well." The young woman turned to Zada and continued, "I know how terrible Islam is, and how difficult it is to escape from the clutches of such a Satanic religion. I worry for your soul. Every time I see someone like you, with that head scarf and all, I just stop and pray that the Lord will save our country from Islam."

Zada was silent, a little stunned by the words.

"We're in a bit of a hurry, I'm sorry, we must get going now," Robert said. "Nice to see you. Have a good day."

They walked on quickly.

"Zada, I'm sorry. I'm very sorry. That must be hard for you."

She shrugged.

"It is okay. I'm used to it now. There are people who pretend I'm not different, people who accept my difference, and people who think that because I'm different I must be hiding a bomb somewhere and plotting to destroy the country."

"Do you mind if I ask you why do you wear that headscarf?"

"Oh, its fine. I'm not sure why. I guess I'm just used to it. I grew up like this, it is just our tradition."

"Are you... are you a Muslim?"

She laughed.

"It depends on who you ask. Some in Quarmana suspected I was not a devout Muslim, even though I wore my headscarf. People here think I'm Muslim because of it. If I am a Muslim, I'm certainly not a good one. When my family died, it made me question everything I've ever trusted or assumed. But I haven't really come to any conclusions. When bad things happen—like my family being murdered—it makes you wonder if there's a God,

and if He exists, perhaps He is evil and enjoys inflicting pain on us.” She paused. “I’ve seen your town, but what are the people like here?”

“Don’t worry, they all aren’t like the people you’ve met so far. We’re pretty laid back and easy going. No need to hurry, there’s always tomorrow. There are obviously a lot of farmers. We pride ourselves on our land; it is very important. Some people just move place to place, doesn’t matter where they are; they have no attachment to their home or land. Not here. It is part of us—if we lose our land, we lose ourselves.”

Chapter 6

A few weeks later they were sitting and watching television together.

“Murder case still unsolved, five years later...” the newscaster droned. “Family demanding that the police department revisit the case.”

“At least the family knows that their loved one was murdered,” Zada murmured. “That is better than never knowing if they are alive or not.”

“I don’t know what your plans were, but if you’re not opposed, I would like you to stay here.”

“Why?”

“I’m getting used to have someone around. I think I’d get lonely if you left now. Besides, I never had a daughter. Perhaps this is my second chance.”

“And... and I lost my father,” she replied. “I don’t know where I’d go anyway. I would be happy to stay, if it is alright with you.”

“What are you going to name your child?”

“David said that if it is a boy, he wanted to name him Isaac. And we had decided on Isabella, if it is a girl.”

“Those are nice names, I like them,” Robert returned.

“I need to find a doctor around here—I know there isn’t anywhere in Hartfield, but wherever the closest hospital is...”

“Yes, we can look into it tomorrow.”

“...American intelligence agents have just captured a extremist operative in the Mideast with close connections to Uzbekistan...” the newscaster continued.

“I’ll go get us some supper,” Robert said. “Mac and cheese sound fine?”

“Sure,” Zada answered, flipping off the television and following him to the kitchen.



Chapter 7

Zada slowly became used to the atmosphere of Hartfield. Within a few weeks she knew most of the customers at Robert's store by name, it was more interesting for Zada to spend her days at the store instead of on the farm, alone. And yet some of the customers could not accept her into the community.

"Robert," she said one evening as they sat on the porch together, "what makes people so difficult to know? What makes people so unwilling to welcome a stranger?"

"I don't really know. I guess we're all like that, in our own way."

"But why? Why are they almost afraid of me?"

"I suppose in your case people are afraid you'll prove them wrong. People have an idea of how they think foreigners are, and especially how they think foreigners from an enemy country are. It may be that some people imagine all people from Uzbekistan to be plotting extremists who hate America. And if they get to know you, they might realize that they're wrong. They might have to rethink their whole way of understanding the world. We, as humans, seem to be rather lazy. Instead of judging others according to their own abilities, we just throw them in a group of other similar looking people and judge them all the same. 'Americans are good because, well, I'm an American and I'm good.

Uzbekistan people are bad because many extremists are from Uzbekistan.’ When our way of thinking is challenged, we feel threatened. It could be that people around here are threatened by your presence since you challenge their beliefs.”

“Have you always been a farmer?” Zada asked.

Robert laughed.

“No, not really. After I married Julia, we moved here. It was her hometown.”

“What did you do?”

“I was going to be a teacher. I wanted to teach ancient literature in a university. The old stuff, the Iliad, the Odyssey, all that.”

“Why?”

“I don’t really know. It was a crazy idea. I think I just wanted to be one of those smart and maybe slightly insane professors, living in a huge house by myself, filling the rooms with books and ancient artifacts, being so smart no one knew what to talk about when they were around me.” He laughed. “It sounds strange now.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“Julia. After I met her, I knew I’d never have a big, lonely house—we would be together. And she wanted us to move back to her hometown, so we came here. We decided that we’d live here for two years, and then if I wanted to, we could go somewhere else, I’d go back to school and pursue my career. But that never happened. Julia’s father wanted to sell his feed store business and I took up the challenge. And I’ve been here ever since. I came to like it; I can’t imagine being anywhere else. And ironically, I did end up with a big, empty house.”

“I’m sorry,” she said softly.

“It is alright, I got used to it. But I’m glad to have

someone to talk to again. But don't get discouraged about how people treat you. If you stay long enough, they will accept you. I guarantee that by the time you've been here five years, you'll become as much a part of the community as I am. Eventually people will look past the label they've put on you, and see you as a unique person."

"I hope so," Zada answered.



Zada's baby was born in late June. He was named Isaac. The time was bittersweet, for a few weeks later Joey had her apartment in Georgia emptied. She received three boxes in the mail—everything that had once been David's. She could not bear to look at them and so hid them away in her closet. While Joey insisted that there was still a chance and that they just needed time Zada knew that there was no more hope.



It was late September. Almost all the crops were in; only a few stubborn fields of corn refused to dry.

Isaac was growing quickly. Zada felt ready to accept a new stage of life.

"Robert, this morning I went through some of David's things." Zada said. "Back at the beginning, when this started, Joey told me that someday I would need to be ready to move on with life and not just sit around waiting for David to come back. At the time I wasn't ready to face that, but I think I am now. My son needs my attention. It is time to welcome the future and so I decided to go through David's belongings and put some sort of closure on this."

"So, what did you find?"

“He had quite the collection of books. I never paid much attention to them. But he has at least a dozen books, maybe more.”

“What are they about?”

“Looking at those books, I feel like I can understand David better. He dated the books when he bought them, and I can see his progression, almost like being inside his mind. They are mostly political books, on economics, foreign policy, and so forth. He underlined many sections of the books, and wrote notes in the margins. In a few of the early ones, he seemed like he was struggling with the ideas, and almost resisting it. But by the end of the next book, he embraced the ideas.”

“Can you show them to me?” Robert asked eagerly. “I didn’t know that David read that much.”

“Sure, I’ll bring them out.”

She came out to the porch a few minutes later with a tall stack of books.

“Here they are.”

“I wonder how many more he would have collected—if he had been here.”

“I don’t know. But the important thing is, we have these books. Here, this one is the first one he bought. It looks to be about foreign policy.”

“Yes, but what does he say?”

“Here’s one of his notes. ‘Who gave America the right to rule the rest of the world? It seems like we’re getting ourselves into trouble. No one likes a busybody.’”

“And what else?”

“‘How many thousands of innocent civilians have been killed in this war? And for what? To protect American interests. We should be ashamed of ourselves.’”

There was a pause.

“Zada, what do you think about the war? How do you feel about America?”

“My father said he was really confused about America. Being older, my father could remember much more. He could remember a time when America was our ‘best friend’ and we liked each other. He said America confused him because they were always switching sides. He also said that if American troops are doing something wrong, they should stop because it is more important to do what is right than to win the war. David wrote in the margin there something about Iphigenia... who is that?”

Robert looked up at her, surprised.

“Iphigenia? Are you sure?”

“Yes, see, here.” She pointed to the page.

Robert laughed.

“I didn’t know he knew about Grecian mythology. Iphigenia is a girl from an ancient Greek story. She was the daughter of a warrior who wanted to go to war with another country. The gods were angry at the warriors and wouldn’t give them victory until they sacrificed the man’s daughter, Iphigenia. Her father wanted so badly to win the war, he allowed his daughter to be killed.”

“How sad,” Zada said. “But why did David write that? What did he mean?” “I don’t know, it doesn’t make sense...” Robert sighed. “David told me that the government now has the power to arrest any Americans if they suspect them to be part of a extremist organization. He also said the government can confiscate or search any of your property, and not even tell you. Maybe that’s the liberty we’ve given up. Maybe we’ve sacrificed our freedom for victory. It hasn’t seemed to hurt me though, we’re managing here in Hartfield despite not having these liberties. Sometimes I wonder if David, and those like him, are just making a big

deal out of something so small. But tell me more about this book and what David wrote.”

“Well, the author of this book said that the war in Uzbekistan is unconstitutional. He also talks a lot about the Founding Fathers—who were they?”

“Well, they were the men who wrote the Constitution and freed our country from Great Britain.”

“Why did they write the Constitution?”

“To limit the government. They were afraid our government would become as bad as the government in Great Britain. So they put together this Constitution that was supposed to stop the government from harming the people.”

“So, it has worked?”

“I don’t know. I guess it depends on who you ask. Some people say we don’t need it anymore anyway. Some say we aren’t following it and should again.”

“But has it limited the government?”

“Well... I guess, not really.”

“So, it didn’t work?”

“Like I said, some say it hasn’t worked because the government isn’t obeying it.”

“But why would the government want to obey it?”

“I don’t know. What else about David?”

“Well, he also says that we should never allow our government to torture people, or to conduct enhanced interrogations.”

“But how would we stop the extremists?”

“This book says that the suspected extremists will confess anything under torture and really doesn’t help. And David wrote that we should never deny anyone their right to life, liberty and property without a fair trial, and that torture is a denial of their humanity.”

“Interesting. They’re always talking about interrogating these extremists, I thought that they must deserve the torture, if they are extremists.”



Deafening voices.

Blinding light.

Memories he thought had been lost.

Gardening with his mother. Laughing with her as he pushed the small, shriveled pea seeds into the ground. The sun was bright and warm. The earth felt cool under his fingers. A gentle breeze whipped his mother’s hair into her face; she tried to keep it back but then gave up. They sat down in the grass together to rest. She picked a flower and smelled it, twirling the stem in her hands.

Deafening voices.

Blinding light.



“Robert, what do you think liberty is?”

“Liberty?”

“Yes.”

“Well... I guess liberty is being free to do what you want, unless it hurts someone else. Why?”

“David spent a lot of time thinking about it. In his books, they talk about liberty. At first, David disagreed with the books. Some of the books say, for instance, that all drugs should be legal. He wrote that the government should enforce some sort of morality on the people. But then later he seemed to change his mind, and agreed that drugs should be legalized.”

“Why? What made him change his mind?”

“I’m not sure. He calls it common sense. People own

their bodies, he wrote, and so they should be able to do what they want with their bodies.”

Robert shook his head. “I don’t know if we’d want a nation full of drug addicts. Seems difficult to understand.”

“But the idea is exciting,” she said. “One of David’s books says that we have unalienable right to life, liberty, and property.”

“I think that’s from the Constitution, or something like that,” he said.

“Unalienable means that it can’t be taken away. Think about that.”

“Yes?”

“I can almost understand what motivated David. What made him do what he did for so long. Life, liberty, and property. Ours, and no one can take it away.”

“Kinda like believing that you have a soul no one can kill.”

“I guess so,” Zada answered. “I’ve never really thought about being free. We certainly weren’t free in Uzbekistan. I don’t know yet about here. David said America was a difficult place to live because everyone thinks they’re free, but really they’re not. Is that true?”

Robert shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

Chapter 9

Zada glanced outside, wondering where Isaac was, and then remembered that he was out at the farm with Robert. They had never left Hartfield; she had been there over ten years now. It slowly became Zada's home. After her son, Isaac, was born, she bought a house on the outskirts of town not far from the farm. As Isaac got older, he would often bike out to the farm for the day. He was at the farm now, hopefully learning the intricacies of caring for a farm.



Robert and Isaac were sitting on hay bales in the barn, listening to the gentle mooing of the cows outside.

“Grandpa, what was your father like?” Isaac asked.

“He was German.”

“What difference does that make?”

“Have you heard of Hitler? In your history books?”

Isaac nodded.

“He killed millions of people.”

“Yes. My father wanted to escape from Hitler.”

“Did he?”

Robert laughed. “I don't know if maybe he jumped from the frying pan into the fire.”

“What?”

“It is strange what a people will do when they're afraid.

Or I s'pose it should be, it is strange what a government will do when the people are afraid."

"What do you mean?" the boy asked him.

"You see, my father came here for a second chance—this country was the Promised Land of the world. If you were really lucky, you'd come here. This was the land of dreams, hope, and freedom—and equality. He wanted to escape tyranny; he wanted to escape an overbearing government, like Hitler's. So he came here to enjoy freedom. But then he discovered that sometimes people weren't always treated equal, even here. He really couldn't live with that discovery. You see, my father was a bitter man. I never knew the man he used to be... before they did that to him. So all I knew was a bitter, resentful, and disillusioned man who couldn't face the truth he had experienced."

"What happened to him?" the boy prodded.

"It used to be a saying that in old Soviet Russia everyone was guilty until proved innocent. That meant you had to prove you were innocent or else you'd be assumed guilty. When we talked about that, we were always so happy that we were different here. Here—in this Promised Land—everyone was innocent until proven guilty. But one day, that all changed."

"I still don't understand," Isaac said.

"We hear all about World War II, don't we? We talk about the brave men who gave their lives and all that our country sacrificed. But there's a dark side to it, too. I know because that's what my father lived through." He paused. "There was a time when Americans were so afraid of their enemy, they let the government imprison some of their own. Japanese and German Americans were rounded up—here in America—just because we were fighting the Japanese and German governments. These people weren't

any different than the rest of America. They had become American citizens legally—but they were from Germany, and Japan, so they were put into prison camps. That happened to my father. It was humiliating. He had escaped Germany and he found his place in this new country only to be rooted up again, thrown in a prison camp, and labeled a Nazi.”

“So he never got over that?”

“Not really. My mother said that after the war he was never the same man. Before the war, they were prosperous and the future looked bright. But afterwards he never tried to do better. They just barely got along, scraping by, you could say. He didn’t care if they were dirt poor or not. He figured that as soon as he started making money, someone would take it anyway.”

“That is sad. I’m sorry for him.”

“You’re right, Isaac. That’s how I always felt. I never admired my father or tried to be like him; I just felt sorry for him. He was a broken man.”

“Where is my father?” Isaac finally asked.

Robert looked at him, surprised.

“Hasn’t your mother told you?”

“She says that he died. But she won’t tell me where he is buried. If he is dead, then where is his grave? And why won’t she tell me how he died?” Robert sighed.

“I thought she would have told you. You’re eleven now, right?” The boy nodded.

“You’re old enough to know. Does she ever talk about your father?”

“No. Never. His name was David, right? She hardly ever mentions him; it is hard for me to remember anything about my father.”

“Yes, his name was—is—David.”

“What do you mean? His name *is* David?”

“Soon after your mother found out that you were going to be born, your father had to leave.”

“Where?”

“Let me finish, Isaac. There are some things you’ll have to figure out on your own. Just listen.”

“He was supposed to come back in a few weeks, but he didn’t. He never came back.”

“You mean... he left her?”

“No, no. If only,” Robert murmured. “We don’t know what happened to him. It was like he disappeared—without a trace left.”

“Couldn’t anybody help you?”

“They tried. No luck. The company that David worked at, they contacted the government; they did everything. But we couldn’t find anything.”

“And he is still missing?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve never heard anything from him?”

“No.”

“But he might still be alive?”

“It isn’t likely, Isaac, but it is possible.”

“So I might be able to see my father again. He might come back!”

“Isaac, please, you must understand. It is important that we don’t just live in the past. Even though he might be alive, we must keep on living, planning, working, doing everything just as if... as if he wasn’t alive. When this happened, your mother was living in an Atlanta apartment. She couldn’t just sit there and wait for David to come back. She had to do something. She came here; she tried to make a life for herself without David. I believe you are old enough to understand what I mean. He might not come

back, so don't pin all your hopes on that."

Isaac nodded.

"I think I know what you mean."

"Your mother is trying to raise you in a way that would make your father proud. Your father did a very important thing, and I think that someday it will be your turn to do as he did."

"But how do I know how I can make him proud? And what is it that I'm supposed to do?"

"I have a feeling you'll figure it out, in its proper time. When you aren't even looking, I think you'll discover what you are to do."

Chapter Ten

“Isaac, I’m going to go get some groceries,” Zada said loudly, so Isaac would hear her from his room. “Annie chewed through the hose again; can you fix it while I’m gone? The tools are in the basement.”

“Sure.”

“See you later.”

“Bye.”

After he heard the front door close, he read for a few more minutes, but eventually—reluctantly—put his book down and headed towards the basement. His dog had chewed through the hose before, but Zada had always helped him fix it. He remembered where the tools were, given to them by Robert. He went down the dark, cool stairs to find the screwdriver and metal band he would use to connect the hose again. He tripped over a cardboard box—he had never noticed it before. He knelt down to look at it. There were thick black words written on the side—his mother’s handwriting. *David’s Books*, it said. He pulled a corner open and glanced inside. It was right; the box was full of books. He slipped one out and gently peered inside. The margins were covered with handwritten notes. If these were David’s books, these must be his notes, his thoughts, his ideas—buried in this cardboard box... a link to the father he never knew.

He resisted the temptation to keep reading; instead, he carefully replaced the book in the box, and closed it again, making sure it looked undisturbed. He continued on his search for the tools, but his mind was preoccupied with this discovery. He quickly mended the hose and didn't even take the time to play with Annie afterwards. His mother still wasn't home—there was time to return to the books.

He pulled the box open just enough to pull the top book out. He started reading. He read of wars—of unnecessary wars. He could feel the sorrow in his father's words, thinking of the lives that were lost not for the ideal of liberty but for the pragmatism of governments. He wondered what place this had in his father's mysterious life—were they responsible for his disappearance? He was surprised to realize that his father was initially shocked at the idea of unnecessary wars. He wondered why his father struggled so much with the idea that not all battles were between good and evil. Isaac didn't realize that his mother had been teaching him these things for years, and while it was hard for his father to accept at first, it was only natural for Isaac to embrace them.

And then he heard his mother's footsteps upstairs.

"I'm home," she called.

He shoved the book back into the box and ran up to the kitchen.

"I just finished with the hose," he said.

"It took you this long?"

He paused.

"Well... I read for a while before I started."

"I see," she smiled. "At least it got done. Did you have any trouble?"

"No, it went fine."

"Good," she replied. "How about tacos for dinner?"

“Sure. I’m going to go read some more.”

When he got to his room and shut the door, he didn’t open his book. He sat on his bed—thinking. He thought of what his grandfather said to him nearly two years earlier. He thought of the books he had discovered. He thought of his mother, now pretending David didn’t exist. Did she think of him ever? Did she ever read those books? Did she ever want him to come back? Why wouldn’t she talk about him?

At dinner that night, Isaac was quiet, still trying to sort out all the questions and information in his mind.

“Are you alright?” Zada asked. “Anything wrong?”

“Not really.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing.”

“Oh.”

Chapter Eleven

Isaac was almost seventeen. He had been reading his father's books secretly for about three years. He copied passages out of the books into a notebook he kept hidden at the bottom of a tote box under his bed. He wasn't sure why he was so afraid of his mother finding out, but he was careful to conceal his discovery from her. The books—the ideas—made him dream of a world far away from Hartfield. He discovered more than Zada could ever hope to teach him. He imagined his father as being a modern-day knight, risking all to save truth and liberty.



The phone rang.

"Zada, there's something wrong." It was Robert. He was slowly losing his ability to run his farm and the feed store and increasingly asked Zada for help.

"What do you mean?"

"There are some people here. I don't know what to do."

"I'll be right over."

"And Zada..."

"Yes?"

"Can you please bring Isaac?"

"Sure."

"Thank you." He sounded relieved.

"I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Bye."

"Isaac," Zada called.

He slipped his father's book under his bed.

"Yes?"

"Your grandfather needs us out at the farm. We're leaving now."

Her voice was urgent, so he ran out of the room and grabbed his boots, and since she was already in the car, he didn't put them on until they were driving down the road.

They pulled down Robert's long driveway. There were two black cars parked by the gate.

"Who is here?" Isaac asked Zada.

"I don't know."

She stopped the car and looked around.

"Stay here for a minute. I'm going to check inside, and if everything is okay, you can come in."

She returned presently from the house.

"Come in."

He followed her into the house, wondering what was wrong.

Robert was sitting at the kitchen counter, looking confused. There were four men standing around him. There were papers spread out across the table.

"I'm Zada Moore," she said. "Robert's daughter-in-law. This is my son, Isaac. Can you explain what is going on?"

One of the men shook her hand and pointed to the papers.

"We have found that Robert Moore is in violation of several state and federal laws."

"What do you mean?"

"In the way he runs his farm. He has not kept it up to standards, nor has followed the proper regulations."

"I still don't understand. Robert loves his farm! He takes such good care of it."

"I'm sure he has good intents," the man said, as if talking to a child, "but like I said, he is violating state and federal regulations. If you want to know the details, read this." He held up a stack of about hundred sheets of paper.

She cringed. Reading English had never been her strength.

"What is going to happen?"

"Well, Robert Moore can shut down his farm immediately if he doesn't want to comply, or carry through with the regulations and keep his farm within the standards, or ignore the laws and have his farm seized."

"How long does he have to decide? And what does he have to do to comply with the laws?"

"He has 24 hours. Here is the paper detailing how to comply with the regulations."

Zada looked at Robert. He was staring blankly at the table. She could tell the ordeal was stressing on his mind.

"Okay, we will look over the papers. You may leave now."

"We'll be back tomorrow."

"That's nice to know," she said softly. Only Isaac heard her.

They made a few notes on a sheet of paper and then left the house. Isaac walked to the window to watch them leave. But they didn't leave. He ran out to the porch to watch them better. They wandered around the barn and outbuildings, apparently inspecting everything. Isaac stood there on the porch, his arms folded, until they got into their cars and drove down the driveway. He went back inside to find Robert sitting on the couch, Zada beside him, and both of them crying.

“I didn’t think this would happen,” Isaac could hear him saying. “This has always been my farm. I never had to worry about other people telling me how to run it.”

Isaac wondered if Robert had ever told Zada about his father coming from Germany and being put in a concentration camp.

He went back to the kitchen and started going over the papers the men left. He was good at reading—the least he could do was decipher what all the legal language meant.

An hour later he paused and looked over his notes. The amount of money required to comply was more than Isaac could fathom.

Zada came out to see about his progress.

“How is it going?”

“There’s no way that he will be able to pay this. They want a fortune for it. Grandpa isn’t a millionaire... and that’s not all. As I watched those men leave earlier. I think there is more to it, and I wouldn’t be surprised if they come tomorrow with more violations.”

“Oh... Isaac, this makes me sick, I don’t know if I can take it much longer.” She spoke in a low voice. “Grandpa is in on the couch, hopefully resting. You know, he’s over 70 years old—I didn’t realize it until today. He’s aged about 10 years in the last few hours. He’s an old man, Isaac, an old man. And I can’t help it; I can’t do anything about it. I feel like I did... back when David disappeared.” She looked at him questioningly, wondering how much she needed to explain. He nodded. “It was like I was up against a force so strong there was nothing I could do to stop it.”

The afternoon had changed Isaac, too. He sensed that he was desperately needed not to do anything particular but to just be there for his mother and Robert. It seemed he was no longer a child but an adult ready to bear the

responsibilities of his position.

“Where is Grandpa?”

“On the couch, sleeping. After he wakes up, we will sit down and talk it over. Figure out how much money he has saved and if we can afford it.”

While they were waiting, Isaac went out to the barn to take care of the animals; it would take a little worry off his grandfather’s mind.

He found the barn doors padlocked firmly. He could hear the cows inside lowing restlessly. The chickens were cackling for their supper. He kicked the barn door in his rage—rage against people who were so committed to red tape that they would let animals go hungry.

Isaac ran to the garage and found a sturdy pair of wire clippers he figured would cut through the padlocks. It was hard; it took a few minutes, but he eventually tore them off and slipped inside. He slowly took care of the animals with an air of finality, as if it might be the last time he would do it.

By the time he finished, it was nearly dark. When he came inside, Robert was awake and they were all eating sandwiches.

“There you are, Isaac; we were getting worried about you,” Zada said. “Have a sandwich. What took so long?”

“They locked the barn doors.”

Robert paused, his sandwich in midair.

“What do you mean?”

“They put padlocks on the doors, so no one could go in.”

“But there were animals in there!”

“I know.”

“What did you do?”

“Cut the locks off. Thankfully they didn’t confiscate the wire cutters in the garage. I probably violated some law,

but at this point, I don't really care. I couldn't let those animals go overnight without water or food. So what are you going to do?"

"I'll give them what I have, although it isn't much," Robert said. "You don't get rich being a farmer," he laughed bitterly. "But that's what we have. When they come tomorrow, we'll see how far it goes. We can only hope it will be enough to pay them off."



"Isaac, your grandfather died this morning. I just got a call from the hospital."

She was in a dark red bath robe; he was sitting at the kitchen table eating a piece of toast.

Robert had a heart attack a few days earlier. He had been in the hospital since and appeared to be recovering.

"What?"

"Yes, he is gone."

"He's dead?"

"Yes. I'm sorry."

He pushed his chair away from her.

"Isaac, please, don't..."

She sat down beside him and he was silent.

"Last night when I visited him, he wanted me to write this note for you." She pulled a slip of paper out of her pocket and handed it to him. He slowly opened it.

Don't forget your father, don't forget what happened to me, and don't forget my father. We are the legacy that you can't abandon. We weren't crazy; we were right. Don't forget that.



After Robert died the legality of her situation became too complicated for Zada to keep the farm. She couldn't prove that David had actually died, and so there wasn't anything she could do to stop them.

"It was the only thing we could do," she told Isaac as they emptied the house of Robert's personal belongings.

"No, it wasn't," he protested, picking up a heavy cardboard box. "It wasn't the only thing we could do."

"What would you have done? My husband has disappeared, I don't have a fortune, I have no legal claim to it, there isn't anything I could have done differently."

He didn't answer.

Chapter Twelve

Isaac was almost done with high school. Zada had a full-time job that kept her busy. When she wasn't working she was helping Isaac with his studies or trying to keep up with the house.

One afternoon she came home from work and he didn't need any help. She was tired, oh so tired. It had been a long day. She fell on the couch and absently turned on the television, hoping to find something relaxing and entertaining.

There was a knock at the door.

She slowly rose to her feet and stumbled to the door, glancing out on the porch before she opened it.

A stranger stood on the porch, and another stranger in a wheelchair beside him. She opened the door.

"I think you have the wrong house," she said, annoyed at the interruption.

"No, I don't think so, ma'am" the stranger answered.

"Who are you?" she demanded, further irritated at his response. He motioned to the man in the wheelchair, sitting silent and still. "Shouldn't you be asking who he is?"

"Alright, alright. Who is he?"

"Your husband, David Moore."

The man nodded briefly to her and walked away before she had time to comprehend what he said. A black car sped down the street a moment later, he was gone. The

man in the wheelchair suddenly looked up at her, and she screamed. She knew then that it was David, but yet... it wasn't David.

"Isaac... Isaac!" she cried.

A moment later he came running, and stopped at the doorway.

"Mom...?"

"Isaac, I'm not sure what just happened. This man came to the door. He said he"—motioning to the man in the wheelchair—"is David. And then he left."

"Do you know if he was right?"

"That's the problem. I can tell it is David. But yet his eyes, they are all wrong. In a way, yes, his eyes are David's eyes. But look—they are so empty and dull. Like... like someone who isn't there. Something is horribly wrong. I'm afraid, Isaac; I'm so afraid."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"It will be alright; we will figure it out. Let's bring him inside."

It took a few minutes to maneuver the wheelchair across the threshold and into the kitchen.

Zada sat down and looked steadily at the man.

"David, David... can you hear me? David?"

The man looked up at her but did not speak.

Zada looked at Isaac, hoping he would know what to do.

"Mr. Grant is a retired doctor. I think we should ask him to come over; he might know what to do."

Zada nodded.

"Go ahead."

"I'll just run down the street and ask him. Will you be alright? It will just take a minute."

"I'll be fine... but hurry."

He slipped his shoes on and ran—literally—down the

sidewalk. Over the years he had gotten to know nearly all the neighbors. Mr. Grant was a lonely widower and Isaac was sure he'd be happy to have something to do.

He knocked on the front door.

"Mr. Grant?"

"Well, hello, Isaac! It is nice to see you," he said, opening the door and stepping out onto the porch.

"I have to ask you something, Mr. Grant. Can you come down to our house for a few minutes? You are a doctor, and... well, I can't really explain, but we need your help."

"Sure, but you really should go to the hospital if it is serious. I'm not a practicing doctor anymore."

"I know, but, well, you'll understand why we can't do that right now."

"Okay, I'll come down right away." He shut the door behind himself and followed Isaac down the street.

Isaac ushered him into their kitchen, where Zada was still sitting beside the man.

"Mr. Grant, can you examine this man?" Isaac asked. "We think that something is wrong with him, but we don't know."

"Who is he?"

"We don't know—yet," Isaac answered.

"It is David," Zada interposed. "I know it."

"How?"

"I just know. I can feel it."

"But who is David?" Mr. Grant asked, still thoroughly confused.

"David is my husband—Isaac's father."

"This is rather complicated," he said. "I don't think I'll ask any more questions. So, what do you want me to find out about him?"

"I think..." Zada said slowly, "...I think something is

wrong with his mind.”

“Can I sit down here and talk to him?”

“Yes.”

Zada quickly stood up to let Mr. Grant take her place.

“What is your name?” He asked.

The man stared blankly at him—uncomprehending.

Mr. Grant shook his head.

“My speciality isn’t in mental illness. But I have a friend who studied it while we were in school together...” he didn’t know what exactly to say.

“You don’t know—I don’t know—what has happened to this man. Without more details, what would be your guess as to how he’s been treated for the last, oh, about 20 years?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to do a physical examination, that will probably help clear things up. But without that, just from the last few minutes, I would guess he’s been alone for a very long time. I think he’s also suffered some sort of mental trauma.”

“Why?”

“My guess is that he’s been alone so long, without talking, he’s forgotten what words mean. He can’t understand us because he has no concept of the words... almost like an infant. If he experienced some sort of mental trauma, that could have erased it from his mind. What is his reaction when you say his name?”

“Nothing.”

“Exactly. It is as if he lost his identity. Either he purposefully erased it from his mind, or it happened... by force.”



As Mr. Grant examined the man—David—Zada made

supper and Isaac did some research on mental trauma. Eventually Mr. Grant came out to the kitchen—pale and shaking.

“If I didn’t know better... Zada, I don’t know where he’s been all these years...”

She looked up at him, her fingers still tearing pieces of lettuce.

“...But something awful has happened to him.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is... it is almost like he’s been tortured. That’s the only thing that can account for what I’ve found. His body is a wreck. He is malnourished. There are scars all over him. It is... it is bad.”

“Are you sure?”

“I can’t think what else it would be, but some sort of senseless and cruel punishment.”

“Where is he now?”

“Isaac is with him.”

“Can you bring him out here? We should try to get him to eat something.”

Mr. Grant wheeled him to the kitchen.

“Let’s give him a glass of water to start with. He’s probably dehydrated. That could be part of why he is so weak.”

Zada poured a glass of cool water and knelt beside the man.

His hands were limp, so she raised the glass to his lips.

He jerked his body violently and made a sort of screech—an unearthly noise. His hands were waving in the air, as if to protect himself from something. His motions knocked the glass to the floor, and it shattered... rivulets of water rolling across the tiles, carrying splinters of glass. It took a few minutes to calm him down; his eyes were large with

fear, and his body was still shaking.

“That the was first reaction he’s made so far. At least he’s aware of what’s going on around him,” Mr. Grant commented.

“But why? What made him do it?”

Isaac came in from his bedroom.

“What happened?”

“I tried to get him to drink some water. It seemed like he was afraid of it—or something. I don’t know what frightened him.”

“He wasn’t frightened,” Mr. Grant interrupted. “He was terrified.”

“Mom, I think we need to find out who brought him here, that might help solve the mystery. What do you remember about him?”

“Not much. He was wearing a black suit. And sunglasses.”

“His car?”

“Black. Dark windows; I couldn’t see in.”

“And you didn’t happen to see the license plate?”

“I think I looked... but I didn’t see one.”

“You didn’t see a license plate?”

Zada shook her head.

“No. I remember that because I’m so used to seeing them; it looked strange.”

“Not on the front or back?”

“No.”

“But that’s illegal.”

“I know.”

Mr. Grant had been silent for a few minutes, deep in thought. But he finally spoke.

“This is obviously a very serious matter. You’ve become part of our community, Zada. Isaac has been a good friend to me. I would like to return the favor and help you sort

this out.”

“Okay...” Zada answered, slowly, wondering what he meant by sorting it out.

“Firstly, how do we know for sure that this is David? I think it would be best to do a DNA test. Are there any of David’s things that we could get his DNA from? We can compare that to the DNA of this man and see if they match.”

“I have some of his clothes. I’ll look into it.”

“Secondly, I don’t know anything about David... what happened to him?”

“Well, he was in the mideast. He disappeared. We couldn’t find a trace of him. That was nearly nineteen years ago.”

“And you haven’t heard anything about him since then?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, I think it is obvious that he’s been held against his will. The question is, who did it? Who held him?”

“At the beginning, right after he disappeared, we thought maybe the extremists did it.”

Mr. Grant laughed. Zada looked at him strangely.

“I’m sorry, I know that isn’t really appropriate. But all of this is just so incredible, I have a hard time believing the story. Here we are in little Hartfield, where the biggest news is if someone’s cows escape from the pasture, and you’re talking about your husband being targeted by a global extremist ring.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. When I came over here from Quarmana, it was believable... but now, well, it is a little far-fetched. The other obvious problem is why? Why would they want him?”

“What was he doing over there?”

“That’s the thing. I could understand if he was in the

military, but he wasn't. He was with an anti-war group helping victims of the war. He didn't support the war. He believed that our government had no right—or business—interfering with mideast affairs. So why would the extremists want to imprison and torture him?"

Mr. Grant shrugged.

"I don't understand any of it."

Isaac finally spoke; they had forgotten he was still in the room.

"There's another option we haven't discussed," he said slowly.

"Yes?" Zada said.

"The mideast is basically controlled by two powers, the extremists and the government, namely, our government. If it doesn't make sense that... he... was taken by the extremists then might it make sense that he was taken by our own government? At least it is something to consider."

"I think there are a lot of other questions we need answered before we go speculating about that," Mr. Grant said. "It seems so unlikely. I understand that you don't want anything getting out about this, and we need to keep quiet about it. My fellow doctor who is an expert at mental illness and that sort of thing lives in Milwaukee; I will see if he can come out or if we can take David to his office. I'll ask him how we can do a DNA test without getting mixed up with the authorities."

Zada nodded.

"What should we do tonight? I don't dare leave him alone."

"If you can manage, I'd suggest taking shifts being with him. He certainly hasn't responded much, or done anything—except for when you tried to get him to drink—but I wouldn't take any chances."

“Thank you so much for all your help. I don’t know what we would have done...”

He smiled.

“It gets lonely watching reruns of old TV shows over and over. I like challenges, and I’m glad to help in any way I can.”

Mr. Grant left. Zada and Isaac were staring back and forth from each other to the man—David.

“Mom, you look really tired. Why don’t you go to bed, and I’ll watch him?”

“But you need your sleep... what about your schoolwork...?”

“I can do that tonight, while I’m up. Kill two birds with one stone, as they say.”

She looked around, helplessly.

“I never thought this would happen. I don’t think it has registered in my mind yet. I don’t know what to think, feel, or do.”

“It is okay; don’t worry. Everything will turn out fine. You need to rest—trust me.”

She looked at the man, sitting perfectly still, not making a sound, not moving an inch.

“I can’t believe it, I just can’t believe it is him...” she started crying. Isaac gently led her away from the man and to her own room.

“Go to sleep. Those are my orders,” he said lightly. She sat down on the edge of her bed, pulling her long hair over her shoulder and twisting it nervously into a tight rope. Here was no competent and confident mother but a frightened and confused woman. Isaac closed the door.

Isaac wheeled the man into his room and sat down on his bed to think. It was the first time since the man appeared that he allowed himself to think about this man as his

father. It was something he had to sort out in his mind.

“Dad...” he whispered slowly, hoping the man would react. There was nothing. He knelt down and took the man’s hand.

“Dad, can you hear me? Do you know who I am? I’m your son. I’m Isaac. Dad?”

There was no sound, only the heavy and rhythmic breathing of this man who was his father.

Isaac sighed. It was no use, there was no way to communicate with him.

He grabbed his computer and sat down beside the man. He opened a blank page.

Chapter Thirteen

Dad,

I had always planned to say this to you. I don't think that will happen, though. But there is so much I want you to know; I just have to write it down and get it out. I hope that you are proud of me. Grandfather told me how you had disappeared and how Mom was trying to raise me as you would want. I hope that you would be happy if you could see me now.

Grandfather told me about his father, sent away to prison camp while thousands of Americans fought to free other people from prison camps. It made me realize that our country is not perfect. Then I found your books. I never told Mom, but I read all of your books, some of them more than once. I have parts of them nearly memorized. It was the only way I could know you, to find out what you were like and what you lived for. And then, I confess, for a while, I felt like maybe you had good intentions but were really looking on the dark side of things. I thought that perhaps the condition of our country wasn't as bad as those books—and you—made it out to be. But then Grandfather lost his farm. That made me wake up. I realized that was why you worked so hard for what you believed in. You weren't a misguided fool; you were a beacon to the rest of the world, warning us of what was to come.

I don't think Mom wants to face where you've been these years. I can't prove it, but I'm pretty sure I know. It is the only

explanation that makes sense. You were threatening our government. They didn't like what you were doing. So they made you silent. They thought they could stop you by imprisoning you.

I'm so tired of just sitting around doing nothing. I've done nothing for the last 18 years. Well, that's not entirely true. I learned a lot. I spent so much time studying and learning. Now I'm ready to do something with this knowledge. I don't know what I will do, but I must do something. I promise you this, Dad... you gave your life for liberty, and if necessary, I will do the same.

Isaac sighed and realized how tired he suddenly was. There was no possibility of getting any schoolwork done, so he took the man into the other room and turned the television on. He caught part of the late-night news.

“...An American operative with ties to the extremists in Uzbekistan has recently escaped. Authorities are on the lookout for this potentially dangerous man...”

Isaac was tired of the war, and turned to look at the man—his father.

“Dad?” he said, still hopeful.

David turned to him, and for the first time, actually looked into Isaac's eyes.

The commercials were over and the news came back on.

“Here is our foreign affairs correspondent to tell us more about this troubling development in the war against terror.

“This man who recently escaped was being held to gain vital information about the plans of the extremists. The military was using enhanced interrogation techniques to learn more about extremist plots. The man escaped because the prison he was being detained at was not up to regulations. The president has issued a statement today saying that there will be new rules for bases in the mideast and that he will ensure this won't happen again...”

Isaac looked at David, and again their eyes met.

The words from the news broadcast were whirling through his mind. What if that escaped operative didn't exist? What if they just made it up? Or what if the person who escaped wasn't a extremist operative but an innocent bystander?

Zada came out of her room, rubbing her eyes.

"Hello," she said.

"Hi," Isaac answered.

"Everything fine?"

Isaac had difficulty concentrating on what she asked and how to reply.

"Yeah."

"You look exhausted, go lay down, I'll watch him."

"Okay."

Isaac stumbled off to his bedroom and closed the door. Zada watched the light seeping from under the door. Five minutes went by. The light was still on. Ten minutes, thirty minutes, an hour, the light didn't go out.

He fell asleep for a couple hours, but his sleep was restless. He finally decided he wanted to talk to Zada.

"Mom, can we talk?" he said, sitting down on the couch across from her.

"Sure. What's wrong? Can't you sleep?"

"No, not really. Tell me about the people Dad worked with, before he disappeared."

"I didn't really know many of them. I talked mostly with Joey... I can't remember his last name. He helped me look for David. Why?"

"I need to find him. There are things I want to ask him. Where did he live?"

"D.C. But that was nearly twenty years ago. How will you find him?"

“I don’t know. Mom, would you mind if I took a trip? After we get settled a little more with... Dad... I’d like to do some traveling.”

“Where?”

“Maybe D.C. To look for Joey.”

She sighed.

“What can I do to stop you?” She laughed tightly. “I tried to raise you fearless and independent. And I guess this is the result.”



The next few weeks were a blur for Isaac. He lived as if he wasn’t himself but just a spectator, watching everything unfold without being part of it.

It was determined that the man delivered to their door was indeed David. It was found that he had suffered severe mental trauma and serious memory loss.

“It is likely that he experienced very severe sleep deprivation,” Isaac heard the doctor say. “That’s the most likely explanation. If he was tortured, as you suspect, then sleep deprivation is a very common technique used. I think he was waterboarded as well, which would explain his violent reaction when you tried to get him to drink water. I’ve spent time overseas, volunteering to help victims of torture and other tragedies. This man’s condition is quite normal for someone who experienced torture, although his state is very severe. Most victims can regain some memory and mental stability. I don’t know about him. Do you know who imprisoned him?”

Zada shook her head.

“Most of the victims I’ve worked with had suffered at the hands of third-world governments, and those techniques were... I don’t like this word, but... crude. This man

appears to have been the victim of much more advanced techniques.”

The doctor sighed and put his hands over his face.

“I’m so sorry, I’ve tried to get used to talking about torture like I talk about colds or earaches, but I can’t. Using crude or advanced techniques doesn’t change the fact—it is cruelty against another human being.”

Isaac thought back to articles he read on how enemy combatants were considered non-human. Maybe that was why they declared them non-human, because otherwise many people couldn’t torture or assassinate them, knowing full well they were killing a fellow human.

“Will he ever recover?”

“It isn’t likely. What he experienced lasted a long time—you’re saying it was at least eighteen years—and was extremely intensive. There is not much hope of him ever regaining his mental abilities. And frankly, with the severe physical injuries he’s sustained, I don’t know how long he will live. He’s forty-five but has the body of an eighty year old. I’m sorry.”

“Thank you for your help; we really appreciate it,” Zada said. “You’ve been so helpful by doing this ‘under-the-table,’ so to speak. We didn’t want to get wrapped up with anyone right now, trying to explain how and why this happened, especially since we know so little about it.”



It was a month after David returned. Isaac was preparing to leave. He had found an address in D.C. that belonged to Joey, at least at one time, so he was going out there to see what he could find. Zada wasn’t sure why he was going and what was going on in his mind, but she didn’t bother him with questions; she knew he would explain when he was ready.

“Mom, I’m leaving now,” he said. “John is going to drive me to the airport.”

“Good bye. And I hope you find what you are looking for.”

He gave her a questioning look.

She laughed.

“There’s no use in me pretending I don’t know. This isn’t really about Joey, it is about you. I don’t know why you’re going, but I know it is something you need to do.”

He smiled in relief.

“I guess you’re right.”

“I love you,” she said. “Stay safe. David would be proud of you. Good bye.”

He waved, walked out the door, and was gone.



Isaac wandered through the streets of Washington, D.C. He checked the address for Joey, but not surprisingly, he wasn’t there and hadn’t been for years. It didn’t really matter, he thought. What could Joey tell him that he didn’t already know? Maybe he had come to this city to have someone confirm what he already believed.

He noticed a crowd of people in a park. There were other people walking around in black uniforms, brandishing some sort of weapon; Isaac couldn’t tell what exactly it was. He heard the crowd shouting and went closer.

Most of the people were holding signs. He squinted to see what they said.

“End the War,” “Stop the Torture,” “Innocent Until Proven Guilty,” and more. He came up to a man holding a sign that read, “War is Not Pro-Life,” and asked him what was going on.

“We’re holding a protest, can’t you see?”

“But what are those men doing with the guns?”

“Trying to make us leave.”

“But isn’t this a public park?”

“It is, but we don’t have a permit. They don’t allow meetings like this unless you get permission. And, of course, they wouldn’t give us permission anyway.”

The men in black confronted the group.

“This is not allowed. If you don’t leave now, we will arrest you.”

One of them pulled out a pair of handcuffs, perhaps to show that they weren’t bluffing.

“But why isn’t it allowed?” Isaac said suddenly.

The man in black turned to him.

“It isn’t any of your business.”

Isaac remembered seeing footage from protests like this before on the internet. He pulled his phone out and started filming the scene.

“No cameras allowed,” the man said in a loud voice.

“Why?” Isaac said. “It isn’t like a gun. What harm can it do?”

The man came closer.

“I don’t appreciate smart-alecky people like you.”

It was clear this was a showdown. A group of men dressed in black combat uniforms against stay-at-home moms, against college students, against businessmen, against grandparents. Isaac looked around. The crowds of people with their signs were huddled in small groups. They had moved away from Isaac when he became the center of attention.

“Listen to me,” he said in a loud firm voice, turning to the crowd behind him. “I know why you are here. I know you are here because you want peace. You want liberty. You want to be free to live as you believe is right. You don’t want innocent people murdered.”

The man in black moved a little closer.

"If you go home now, if you submit like scared sheep, then how will we ever have liberty? It comes with a sacrifice; we don't just wake up one morning and have freedom again. It means we must resist tyranny and take responsibility for our lives instead of always obeying orders. Who will be content with slavery, and who is going to stand up for liberty?"

With this, the man in black pulled a trigger.

Isaac fell to the ground. He did not move.

Other men in black moved closer in, encircling the crowd.

Someone came running towards Isaac.

"He's hurt; we need to get him to the hospital."

A man in black pointed his weapon at him.

"But it won't be you getting him to the hospital," the man in black said. "Don't worry, it won't kill him, just shock him a little."

"That's enough," he replied. "Didn't you all hear him? Who's going to stand with liberty? I don't know this man who was shot, but he was ready to give his life for liberty. Can't you do the same?"

One of the men in the crowd walked closer to the line of black. A woman followed, holding her sign high. And another stepped forward. Some pulled out cameras and took up a position on the sidelines to record the scene. Others ran to the sides, blocking off some escape paths, until the only exit was behind the men.

"We will not submit. We will resist tyranny," one woman cried.

"Don't think you can scare us," another shouted.

One knelt by Isaac's body.

"He's dead! You've killed him!"

“But it wasn’t supposed to kill him. It is just meant to shock a little. He can’t be dead!” the man in black weakly protested.

“But look; he is dead. You killed him in cold blood.”

And the people surged forward with even more anger.

And the men in black realized that they were greatly outnumbered. As long as the people had been afraid, they were in control. But now the people didn’t care about their black uniforms and shiny weapons. One of the men in black said something about calling in reinforcements. But it was too late. They were quickly driven away, running across the street when the light wasn’t green, dashing madly in front of angry drivers; it didn’t matter because they were afraid.

Most of the people wandered away, shocked by what had just happened. The man Isaac had spoken to at the beginning stayed. He knelt by Isaac’s fallen body and murmured, *Tyranny ends when we cease to support voluntarily our own serfdom.*

Part Three



Chapter One

“Jim, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, Sally,” he said in a loud voice and spinning around in his office chair to face her. “Who said anything is wrong?”

“I think you need to go to the doctor. It seems like you’ve been really depressed lately.”

“I’m not depressed, okay?”

“What do you keep doing on the computer? What are you so busy with?”

“I’m just writing some records, from when I was in Uzbekistan. You know, memoirs.”

“Oh, Jim, that’s wonderful. Dr. Kandarshan says that writing like that really helps people cope with their military experiences.”

He smiled tautly.

“I’ll leave you to your work now!”

He began typing.



People seem to have the strange idea that once someone puts on a uniform that’s a certain color and style then that automatically allows them to do things that they usually would deem wrong. Once I put on that uniform it was suddenly okay to kill women and children, for that is what

we did. We couldn't help but do it. The pressure is so great; it is like a great ocean, a sea of violence and murder that pulls us under... until we could no longer see right and wrong or black and white.



"Honey, here's your dinner," Sally said, setting a plate of spaghetti beside him. "How is it going?"

"Fine," Jim replied.

She stopped to fidget with the lamp next to the desk.

"Did you see that new email from Andrea with the pictures of Lucy? Isn't she just adorable? She's grown so much since last Christmas. Andrea said they might be able to come for Thanksgiving. She said Lucy has your personality, through and through. It will be so nice to see them again."

When she realized that he was no longer paying attention to her she quietly left the room, murmuring to herself.

He began typing.



There was a child. She was maybe four or five. Or maybe older, just small for her age. She was sitting on the ground, clothed in a large and worn t-shirt that was a dress for her. She had two fingers in her mouth—perhaps this had been her habit since infancy. Andrea sucked her thumb until she was six; Sally had such a difficult time getting her to stop. The girl's face was tight with fear. She was obviously afraid of us but didn't know where to go. Even from our distance I could hear her whimpering. I saw a tear roll down her dirty face. She opened her mouth as if to call out or perhaps start crying. We all ran in the other direction, for our lives depended on it.

And then it went off. We killed her. Why? I don't know. I don't know why I was such a fool then not to understand and not see what was happening. After it happened we all laughed a little, said it must have surprised her. Someone asked why we had to detonate the bomb. Someone replied that there was an extremist hiding nearby the girl and that sometimes life must be sacrificed to save lives.

The look on her face—before we turned and ran like cowards—haunts me. I see on the dark computer screen before I turn it on each morning. I see it on the empty plate in front of me at dinnertime. I see it in the puddle of rain on the sidewalk. I can't escape it.



“Jim, there's a good program on TV; it is about shipwrecks on the East Coast,” she called from the other room. “Very interesting. Want to come watch it?”

“No, Sally. Maybe another time. I'm busy right now.”

“You've heard of that Captain Blackbeard? Well, they're discovering the wreck of his ship right now. I didn't know that's how they restored shipwrecks! I thought...”

He got up and quietly shut the door. Her voice and the TV was just a dim sound in the distance.

He began typing.



For some unknown reason I was selected to go on a special mission. A group of us, all of them strangers to me, were sent to the airport in Quarmana. One of the men went and stood near the security line. When a certain man came through, he was led away from the main area of the airport. The rest of us were standing nearby, waiting and watching, ready to help. We took the man to a back room

of the airport where he was questioned. Interrogated is a better word. Then we handcuffed him, blindfolded him, and led him away to a dark, windowless van.

“What are we doing?” I asked one of the men.

He shrugged.

“It is best not to ask questions. Just do what you’re told.”

I was instructed to get in the back of the van and help guard the man. He was struggling fiercely but there was nothing he could do.

Even I didn’t know where we were going. After nearly ten hours of driving, we came to a large prison facility. The man was unloaded from the van and taken into the prison.

“Our job is done,” one of my companions remarked.

As we got into the van to go back I saw some papers. I quickly glanced at them. Apparently it was the record of this man we had just imprisoned. His name was David Moore.



“I’m going to bed, Jim. I’ll probably read for a few minutes first. Alice gave me that wonderful novel about this sweet girl who falls in love with a zombie. He’s really a nice zombie, just magnificent. Anyway, don’t stay up too late, dear.”

“Yes, I know.”

He began typing.



It was a remarkable coincidence that years later I encountered that same man. I had been sent to work at a detention center in Puerto Rico. I was there for some years. It was difficult work; I didn’t like to think of all these people being detained for years and years. I discovered that

many of them weren't even allowed trials. Their charges were so flimsy I couldn't see how anyone in their right mind would arrest them and detain them for so long. The stress of it all was wearing on me. I wanted to escape. But they wouldn't let me leave.

And again, for some remarkable reason, I was selected to be trained as an enhanced interrogator. That's the nice way to say it. I thought that perhaps they would just teach me how to trick people into talking. No, it was far worse.

I had been aware of something that we call "waterboarding," but it wasn't until this time that I discovered what it was. They trained me to waterboard people. That is what they called "enhanced interrogation techniques."

I was made to do this to many prisoners, many times. Day after day I would waterboard the same people. Day after day I would almost kill them but stop just short. Of course, they didn't know that. They didn't know that I would always stop. Each time it happened they believed they were dying. And after a while, I came to enjoy my work. I found it exciting and challenging to see how far I could go—how far could I stretch out their life?

It was horrible; I see that now. I see now that I'm not only a murderer but a mass-murderer. I've not only killed one person; I've killed many people many times. Each one of them has died a hundred deaths, only to find they are still just barely alive and so they can be subjected to this death yet again. How merciful it would be to simply kill and let them escape from this world of agony. No, we must prolong it. It is to get valuable information from them. What a farce. We don't get valuable information, only lies. Anyone would lie if he were on the brink of death and trying to survive. Of course, if they were sensible

they would realize how much better it would be if they were silent and waterboarded to death. But in those last moments the human survival instinct takes over and they can't think rationally; they must only survive.

And so this is where I met David Moore. "Met" is not the right word. He didn't know me, for he was blindfolded. The person in the room recording all that he said didn't remember his name, so he asked the guard. "David Moore," he replied in a muffled and dim voice.

After it was over and he was taken away, I asked the man who took notes what he was guilty of.

He laughed bitterly.

"Nothing... yet. But we'll find something if we do this long enough. It looks good, you know, for the papers. He's from America. They say he's a sleeper. An undercover extremist posing as just a decent American farm boy. By the time we're done, we'll know better."



He glanced at the clock and was surprised to see it was already past midnight. Sally must be sleeping. The house was still and dark. He began typing.



I can't even count how many lives were lost because of me. Not only directly, from the shots I fired, but indirectly, from my silence. Could I have stopped this if only I had said something? If I had protested? I will never know.

I know that I'm a great and glorious veteran of the war against extremism... or at least that is what they tell me. I can't take this any longer. It is hellish to hear so many people praise your brave deeds when you know you're no better than a common murderer. I play my part, but I hate

it. I hate this masquerade we must all keep up. A group of us get together once in a while, veterans, and we talk about the old days. We never mention the murder, the cold blooded killing, or the destruction of so many homes and families. We just talk about our camaraderie, how we kept going through such great difficulties, and the knowledge about what we really did is just a dark current running beneath all of our happy chattering. We know the truth. We can't admit it to the world. We seem to have this tacit agreement that we'll all keep playing the game.

The people I really can't stand are the ones who are so passionately pro-military. The ones with "Protect Our Troops" bumper stickers. If they really wanted to protect us they wouldn't wish us halfway across the globe fighting a pointless war. All that stuff about the war protecting our freedom—that's rubbish. It isn't true. When we're over there bombing buildings and dodging bullets, we're not thinking about liberty; we're just trying to survive. It is us against them, and neither side can claim they're on the side of freedom, for both sides commit horrendous crimes against liberty and against humanity.



The eastern sky was slowly brightening. Morning would be coming soon, he noted, glancing out the window. He began typing.



Everyone has the idea that he must constantly reassure me of my heroic deeds and assistance to my country. People think it is kind. And yet it is cruel. So cruel. For they have trapped me in this world of lies and cover-ups that I cannot endure. I can't keep living as if I were a great

man when I should be in prison for my crimes against humanity. They have forced me into a role that I cannot play. My patriotism has compelled me to support this net of lies, but I can't do it any longer.

I wish I could speak out; I wish I could explain what has happened, but no one will hear.

Part Four



Chapter One

The house is lonely. It is difficult for me to realize that Isaac is gone. I was afraid of this from the beginning. I knew that the return of his father brought many questions that could not be answered here. And I'm not surprised that his life was taken in such a way. Isaac has always been very passionate. And perhaps rash. He pays little attention to the consequences of what he does as long as he knows it is the right thing to do. I'm not so sure that it was the right thing, but it is hard for me to say for I am his mother.

It is autumn and I feel restless. I have a feeling that I must leave Hartfield soon. I don't know why. I don't know where to go, but I must do something. The greater question, however, is what to do with David. I try to talk to him. We go out in the backyard and I show him the flowers. Yesterday I slipped a deep red mum blossom into his limp hands. I tried to bridge that chasm between us, but I don't think it worked. When I'm gardening I put a clump of earth into his fingers. Occasionally he will move his hands ever so slightly, and I imagine that he knows what it is.

I promised him that I would never forsake him. I never dreamed our marriage would come to this. I will fulfill my duty to him, for I still love him... but it leaves such a deep aching in my heart.

He usually falls asleep in the afternoon. He sleeps very soundly, and so I feel safe enough to run out to the grocery store occasionally during his afternoon rests. Besides that, I don't go anywhere. Sometimes Mr. Grant comes over to visit. He, too, is very lonely. It seems a pity that there are so many lonely people in this world.



I started writing this to keep me busy. It gives me something to do. As there is only David to talk to, sometimes the words come welling up, and I must get them out of me. I find myself thinking a great deal about Quarmana these days. It seems like another life.

It was very difficult when I came to America from Uzbekistan. In some ways, life was similar... but in other ways, it was strikingly different. They had so much here. I spent the first few months marveling at the luxury and wealth of the country. We had cars in Uzbekistan, but they were all over ten years old and heavily used. People would use every bit of creativity to make those machines run another mile. Using old scrap materials and human ingenuity, they'd coax the rickety contraptions into getting them home one more time, just one more time. And here in America there are places that fix your cars for you! And if you get tired of your car or it doesn't work, you just get rid of it.

I remember reading something that David had written years ago, before we met. He said something like, "America is a hard place to live because everyone believes they are free when they really aren't." At the time I didn't understand what he meant, but I think I know now. Americans have a tradition of being independent, a tradition of fighting desperately to keep their freedom.

And, ironically, they have been conquered. Those who have been so proud of their liberty are now enslaved. It happens so slowly that no one realizes it. That is the sadness of it. I have often hoped that they might wake up. But I do not think that will happen. If they do wake up, it will not be until it is too late. Why? They won't admit that they went astray. Yes, they will say that there some problems. But they won't admit their wrongdoings, their crimes against the rest of the world. They won't admit their government's voracious appetite for taking over other countries. They won't admit that their government is responsible for murdering thousands of innocent people. They won't admit that they have no right to tell other people what to do.

I know this because I lived through it. The American government interfered in our government in Uzbekistan. They did it over and over. They helped set a tyrant in power and then came back ten years later to depose that tyrant and give us another. This was done with great violence and bloodshed. Our country was torn apart. There were many there, even in Quarmana, who hated the American government. They were filled with hatred. These were young men who had their families killed by the Americans. These were people who were removed from their land. They were forced to leave the land that had been in their family for generations. These were people who saw the slaughter and futility of it all. I cannot say I blame them for hating such a government. But I do know that hatred is not the answer. Yet, I do not know what the answer is.



David has died. A few days ago, in the night. It was peaceful, I know. There was no public service; I only

invited a few friends from around here to the burial.

I feel even more abandoned now. But ever since David returned, it has been difficult for me to see him in such a condition. That was no life for him. What of his dignity? What of his liberty? I shiver to think of the people who are capable of taking away a person's dignity, strength... and even his mind. The cruelty of it is beyond me. And yet more than that, I'm afraid that these are not people who are seen as wicked despots. These are people in official uniforms who have special privileges and who are admired by the masses. These are people who make excuses for their evil, people who believe they will not have to answer for their atrocities.

I have applied for a passport. I plan to go back to Uzbekistan. The house is for sale; I hope it will be sold soon. I don't know what I will do in Uzbekistan, but I feel I must go there. There is nothing left here for me except painful memories, which I must forget.

Chapter Two

I am on the plane to Tashkent. There are so many emotions inside me, I don't know how to describe it all. To be going home after so many years... what will it be like? What will people think of me? I wonder if anyone in Quarmana remembers my family.

The house was sold quickly, Mr. Grant's daughter and her family are moving back to Hartfield from Boston. My house was in a convenient location.

It was hard to let go of all those things that connected me to Isaac, to David, to the family I no longer have in the countryside of Wisconsin. But I have kept David's books. I knew that I could not give those up, no matter what. It was expensive to take such a heavy suitcase on the plane, but I had no other option.

On the way out of Hartfield, I drove by Robert's old farm. The house was gone. The trees are gone. Everything that I loved about it is gone. I don't know what they are doing with the land. Perhaps it will someday become something beautiful, but then again how can any true beauty come out of such injustice and suffering?

And I am also starting a new chapter. I don't know where it will take me. I hear that recent turmoil in Uzbekistan has left many areas badly damaged. I don't know if this includes Quarmana. And perhaps Quarmana does

not even exist anymore. Perhaps it has been obliterated. And if it isn't there, I will have to make other plans. I also don't know how I will be accepted into any community, for I shall no longer pretend to be Muslim. After living in freedom so long I can't go back to a life of hypocrisy.

There is the very bleak reality that I may very well be killed before I reach Quarmana. And if I reach it there is no guarantee that I won't be killed there, either. This is not very comforting, but since I'm not trying to do anything, see anyone, accomplish any great mission, it doesn't really matter in the end if I'm killed tomorrow or in twenty years. Of course, this makes me ponder what happens after that. So, I step off the plane in Tashkent and am killed in a social upheaval. Is that the end? I, Zada Moore, no longer exist? Like a candle that has been snuffed out, after I am dead, there is total darkness and nothingness? This makes me shudder. I cannot embrace this idea. If there is nothing after death then what meaning does life have? And what is David? What was David? Just a memory. Just a name. Nothing more. And the moment my son was shot down, he became just a memory and no longer existed.

No, I cannot accept that. It is too hard. There must be more than that to life. But what is it?



There's a newspaper on the seat beside me, an American newspaper. I don't know why I should be interested in America any longer, for I'm going home. But the front page has an interesting story. A man recently committed suicide. This is common and not front-page worthy, but the man is a veteran of the war in Uzbekistan. He also worked in a detention camp in Puerto Rico. Apparently he was very troubled over things he had seen (or perhaps

done) and couldn't take it any longer. Somehow, I am happy. I know I should not be, but I am content now. In some random and unknowable way, justice has been done.



I arrived safely in Tashkent and was not immediately killed as I had feared. It is true, the city is nothing like it was twenty years ago. People are angry; there are mobs roaming the streets and soldiers vainly patrolling. The sight of the soldiers only makes the people erupt with more rage. I suspect Tashkent would be calmer if the soldiers were not present and if they did not try to control everything. I quickly discovered that to survive I just needed to avoid the mobs and more importantly, avoid the soldiers. My old skills of maneuvering crooked and narrow streets came back to me. But I couldn't wander the streets all night. Quarmana was a good four days from Tashkent, walking. My father had done it before in three, but I doubted my long-distance walking abilities. In a quiet, back street I came across a man and a wagon pulled by a donkey. The man appeared to be a farmer; he wore the more traditional rural clothing that I vaguely recognized.

I approached the man and said something in Russian.

He turned sharply towards me and looked confused.

I tried again in Uzbek. This seemed to make more sense.

"I'm Zada," I told him. "I need to reach Quarmana. Do you know where that is?"

He tugged thoughtfully on his beard.

"Yes, yes, I think I know. It is not too far from where I live."

This was better than I had expected.

"Is Quarmana still there?"

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"I used to live there. I have been gone for over twenty years. I wanted to know if it is still a city."

"Yes, people still live there."

"Are you returning there soon?" I asked.

"Not for three or four days yet. I still have business to do here."

"Oh." I had hoped that perhaps I could go with him. "Thank you for your help," I said and walked away. I had plenty of money; if I could find someone with a car, I could have him drive me there.

I stopped for something to eat at a small restaurant. It was good to taste *palov* again; nothing in America quite compares to it. While eating I asked several of the other guests if they knew where I could find a car to take me to Quarmana. After almost giving up one man said that his cousin owns such a business and might be available to do that. He told me where to find his cousin, so when I finished dinner I took to the streets again, except this time I had a purpose. I knew where I was trying to go. I finally found the ramshackle house that I supposed to be the house of this cousin. I was not surprised that it was ramshackle, for everything in Tashkent was dilapidated. I met the wife of this cousin; she offered for me to come in and wait for him. He eventually came in, and I asked him about driving me to Quarmana. He said it could be done in a day. He was free the next day and agreed to take me. He asked a little more than I had anticipated; but I accepted the bargain. He kindly offered me to stay with his family overnight. They gave me a small but decent room, and so here I sit, writing.



Quarmana is not far from Aydar Lake. Apparently this lake was accidentally created back when the Soviets ruled Uzbekistan. To me, it is a beautiful place. It could be described as forlorn and rugged, but when you are there long enough, you begin to appreciate its beauty. It is not as striking as other places; you can't understand how lovely it is until you have become part of it. Strangers find it ugly and unappealing, but I know it and love it. I did not know how much I missed this place until I returned.

It is difficult to write; the road is less than smooth. I must admit, this driver is very clever at managing to avoid the larger bumps and muddy gouges, but even he cannot prevent all of the jostling and thumping.

Earlier he was trying to make small talk with me. It becomes awkward to ride in silence for such a long time.

"So you are from Quarmana?"

"Yes. I actually spent most of my childhood in Tashkent, but we moved to Quarmana later."

"What brings you here again?"

"Well, I had moved to America for about twenty years. But my husband died and I decided to return."

"Do you have family here?"

"No... they were killed years ago, during one of the wars."

"Oh. I'm sorry. My brother's family was also killed in that way. I hope I can speak frankly with you. America might be a good country, but I can't say the same for their government. It is enough to drive a man to commit crimes... not that I have done so, but I have seen others become so desperate..."

That was the end of our conversation. There was so much I wanted to say; my heart ached for him and all those who suffered such losses as I had, but I did not know how to form my words.

This desolate place makes me long for David. How I wish he were here! I have discovered that love is not always the beautiful and happy thing we think it to be. I used to envy Isaac for he had no attachments. Yes, he loved me, but I was his mother. He had not given his heart to anyone else and so could never feel pain in the way that I have these twenty long years.

I was such a child when I came to America. I was such a child when I left my home, Uzbekistan. And now I'm returning home, an old woman. No one would look at me and think I was old. But inside I feel so tired. Perhaps I have just come to Quarmana to die. I will make myself a home and live out the rest of my years oblivious to the world around me. Perhaps my mind will slowly fade away, waiting for my body to do the same.

What am I thinking? No, I cannot let that happen. I have not come home to simply sit and die. Something has driven me back to this place... David played his part, and Isaac gave his life for what we have believed. Perhaps it is my duty to pass this belief on to someone else before I'm gone, also. For if I die now, I know all that David did and all that Isaac did will be forgotten and worth nothing. I must do my duty as well.

Chapter Three

The driver left me at the ridge of a hill overlooking Quarmana. It was late afternoon and the sun was slowly setting.

“Listen,” he said, “I have to get home by morning.” He looked exhausted. “I can’t take you any farther.”

I pitied him, such a long drive back to Tashkent, and he probably had to work in the morning.

“That’s fine. I can walk; don’t worry.”

He got out and gave me my suitcase. I paid him, and gave him a little extra.

“Thank you,” I said, “for letting me stay in your home and for bringing me here.”

“Will you be wanting to come back? I can schedule a time to pick you up.”

This was something I had not thought of before. I could ask him to come back next week. Or in a month. I could know that I have a way to escape. I could rest easily, knowing that I can leave.

“No; no, that won’t be necessary. Thank you anyway.”

He nodded and got into the car again. He started it and a cloud of smoke sputtered from the back. I hoped he would make it to Tashkent. And that was it. I wanted so badly to shout and tell him to stop, to wait and let me jump in, to take me with him. It was horrible to stand there and

watch him leave; fear overtook my mind, and I panicked. But my body would not move. I stood motionless as his car slowly became a tiny speck and then was lost amongst the landscape until I could not distinguish it from a distant bush.

I took a deep breath, picked up my suitcase and headed down the mountain towards Quarmana. I reached the village just as darkness was settling. I could not remember any names, any houses; it was familiar and yet very strange. So I knocked on the first door I came to.

An elderly woman opened it.

“Hello?”

“Hi, my name is Zada Moore. I lived here, years ago. I was Zada Hakimi.” I paused, hoping she might remember me.

She shook her head.

“I’ve been here fifteen years and I don’t know a Zada Hakimi.”

“Oh. Well, I moved to America and got married, but my husband died. So I have come back here.”

“My son might know you; he has been here much longer. Please come in. He lives just down the street, I will go and ask him.”

She beckoned me inside and gave me a chair next to the fire. The night was turning cold and I was glad for the warmth.

“I will be right back,” she said, and shut the door behind her. I had a moment of quiet to absorb the room around me. It was small but cozy.

She was back very quickly and brought a man with her. These twenty years must have brought great change here. It would have been shameful for a man to come and speak with a strange woman. Perhaps it will be easier for me to

leave aside all the Muslim customs if others had already disregarded such a fundamental tradition.

"This is Aamir," she said. My breath caught in my throat. I tried to swallow but could not. I knew Aamir from when I was young. I finally managed to speak.

"Hello, I am Zada Moore; I was Zada Hakimi when I lived here."

He smiled.

"Yes, I remember you. I never expected to see you here again."

My mother had always liked the way he smiled. My father said he was a good young man. There had been talk of marriage after I returned from my trip to the United States. Nothing was official, but there had been a great deal of talk between my parents, and the same was probably true at his home. I never had an opinion of him. He was handsome and clever; that was all I ever knew. I had forgotten about him all these years. And then I realized that he was waiting for me to reply.

"Oh... yes, um... yes, it is good to be back."

"Have you had dinner?" his mother asked.

"No, I haven't. I brought something along in my bag..."

"I will fix you a warm and proper meal," she insisted. I did not argue.

Aamir sat down at the table while she hurried around the room.

"So what brings you back here?"

I shrugged. I wanted so badly to tell someone about everything, but I could not tell him.

"I wanted to come home," I smiled.

"You have been in America?"

"Yes."

He sighed.

“I don’t know why anyone would leave America to come here.”

“Why?”

“They are rich, they are free, they are happy. Americans have everything that we do not have.”

“No, no, Aamir, America is not what it used to be. I came here because America is no longer free, they are no longer rich, and they have no happiness.”

This shocked him.

“What do you mean?”

How could I explain it to him?

“Do you have the government come here and take your land if you don’t follow their rules?”

He shook his head adamantly.

“Never! We would not allow that. Besides, no one bothers us out here... most of the time.”

“That’s why I have come.”

His mother set a plate of food before me. It was steaming and smelled delicious.

“Thank you.”

I turned to Aamir. I felt awkward with him sitting so silently, staring at me while I ate.

“So how have you been?” I asked.

He laughed quietly.

“Twenty years is a long time.”

“Yes. I know.” He didn’t have any idea how long twenty years could be.

“I have a successful farm. I have six children: four boys and two girls. The oldest is nearly eighteen now. We are doing very well.”

So he was married. And happily, I could tell. Although he didn’t mention his wife, it was obvious that his was a happy family.

We talked on for a few minutes. Then he left. His mother offered me her loft for the night.

“It is small. You will have to find a place amongst the vegetables,” she apologized. “I would give you my bed and I would sleep in the loft but Aamir would not forgive me if I climbed up there. He doesn’t allow me to go up to the loft at all.”

“That is fine; thank you so much. I will be very happy to sleep in the loft. You have been so kind.”

And so here I am, sitting in the loft, propped up against a bag of radishes. I do not know how I ought to feel or think yet about Quarmana.

Chapter Four

This morning Aamir's mother would not let me help her prepare breakfast.

"Go outside and walk around a bit. It is a pleasant morning."

It was pleasant but a little chilly. I pulled my sweater tighter around my shoulders and yet shivered. I walked down the street and saw children playing in the dirt outside their homes. I smiled to them, remembering that once I did that as well. I wondered if perhaps they were the children of some of my playmates. I did not mean to, but I met Aamir on the street. He invited me to come into his home to meet his family.

He had married Ghaada. I wanted to laugh. I remembered Ghaada from my childhood. The rest of the girls had secretly taunted her because her name meant "beautiful" and she had been far from beautiful. She was clumsy and ugly. We all believed she would become a gnarly old woman and perhaps seclude herself far from the world. But she was beautiful now. She had a lovely smile and a graceful air. She ruled her home well and seemed to be the model mother. I sat down quietly where she motioned.

"I could not believe it was you, when my husband said that you had come back. I thought that surely he was mistaken."

We laughed.

"I can hardly believe I am in Quarmana."

"Why have you returned?"

I paused.

Having been asked this question several times before made it no easier.

"Things didn't turn out very well in America. I missed Quarmana and just decided to come home."

"Well, we are very glad to have you here."

I knew she truly meant that.

"Thank you."

She offered to show me around the village. I gratefully accepted as I could make no sense of the streets or buildings.

"Much has changed since we were young," she said. "We have suffered greatly."

"Yes, I know," remembering that my own family was slaughtered here. She caught my eye.

"Oh, I am so sorry. I forgot that..."

"It is okay. That is far in the past." I paused. "Do you remember a man who visited here, the day before my family was killed? His name was David Moore. He was an activist. He brought supplies and medical aid. He was protesting against the troops."

She thought for a moment.

"Yes; yes, I think I do remember someone. Aamir would know better for I think he helped the man. I am not sure. Why do you ask?"

And I realized that they didn't know anything about my past, they didn't know that I married David.

"Oh, nothing in particular. Just curious; that's all."

"Who is this, who lives next to your house?" I asked Ghaada as we walked.

"Dyab and his wife, Hafeeza."

“Do they have any children?”

“They did.”

I looked at her quizzically.

“They had a beautiful young daughter, Jena. She was about the same age as my oldest son, Saabir. She would have been nearly eighteen now. Her parents were only able to have one child. Some said that they were being punished for some wickedness. But after they had Jena every mother envied them. Jena was the most beautiful girl I have ever known... inside and outside. She was a pleasure to look upon and a pleasure to be with. She was so kind and gentle. She had a special way with little ones; she could soothe any fussy baby. It is a pity her parents could have no more children. She was also very good with animals. If anyone had a lamb or calf that would not eat or was ill, Jena could coax it into good health.”

She stopped. I was ready to ask her what happened next, but she answered me before I asked.

“It was a tragedy. Her parents are still mourning, as the rest of us are.” She paused again, trying to form the right words. “Out here in Quarmana we are usually ignored by the rest of the world. Perhaps that is why we stay. But occasionally people come here. I’m sure they are trying to be thorough, doing their utmost duty by raiding and searching such a tiny and insignificant town as this. One evening, about two years ago, they came here, men in black with masks and helmets and enormous guns. We had to allow them to search our homes. It was night and it was cold. They forced us to stand outside while they went through all of our belongings. I know that they took some of our valuables. When they got to Dyab’s house and saw Jena...” her voice broke and a tear ran down her face. “They did horrific things to the girl; and then killed her. They

haven't been here since, but the wounds are still so raw."

"I am sorry. I know how it feels. It is a terrible thing."

"I do not wish you to feel unwelcome here, Zada, but I'm afraid people will have a difficult time accepting you."

"Why?"

"These men who came, they were from your country, America. I know that you are not to blame, but there is... much bitterness against America."

"Oh, I see. Yes, of course it will be very hard to see me as one of you again instead of being an American."

She smiled sadly.

"There are many wounds in this village; you will discover that. Families here want to welcome you, but their sorrow and anger will make it a slow process. Please remember that, and do not be offended."



I was standing over the fire stirring a pot of pilaf. Aamir's mother, Nadina, had gone to get some meat from the butcher. There was a knock at the door. I turned around. It was Aamir.

"Oh, hello," I said. "Please come in."

"Thank you. I will take up just a moment of your time." He sighed and sat down. "My mother has been here many years now. She refuses to live with my family; she is too independent. It is a blessing that you have come. If you are willing, I will build a real second story to this room instead of that half-loft, and you can live here permanently. I fear for my mother; if she falls or becomes ill, it may be hours before I find out. I would be very grateful if you would stay here and watch over her."

I was not sure what to say. I think he mistook my hesitation.

“Let me say this,” he continued. “If she were to become ill or injured, I would not expect you to tend to her; my family would do that. But if she were to fall, I would appreciate it if you would come and tell me. That is all I am asking of you. And as long as you were here to keep her company on some of these cold, dark nights and help her if need be, I will ask no rent from you. The knowledge that someone is with her, and I know you will do that well, is enough for me.”

I was still not sure how to thank him.

“Of course, you may have other plans,” he went on. “And if you decline this offer, I will understand. Please do not feel obligated to do this; I only thought it might be mutually beneficial.”

I was afraid he would keep going if I did not speak.

“Yes, thank you. I don’t have other plans, and I would be happy to stay here. I am glad that I can be of assistance to your family. I wish that I could do more for you. If your mother ever needs anything more, please ask me. My only regret is that my duty is so small and your generosity is so great.”

“Do not think of it,” he said. “This means much to me. Thank you.”

He quickly got up and left the house. A moment later Nadima came in.

“Is the pilaf done?”

I had forgotten it. I stirred it frantically but soon discovered what happened.

“It is... it is a little burned.”

“It is of no matter; we will make do.”



Aamir soon had the second floor expanded. He was very artful and he made the whole plan sound to his mother as if she were doing me a favor. He told me it was for her sake. And I wondered which way it really was but gave little thought to it, for I would never know the truth anyway. I was just happy to have a permanent home with this nice woman.

She had one glaring fault. She snored. I thought that perhaps having a full floor between us that it would no longer bother me, but the sound still seemed to rack the whole house. One night it was particularly severe. I could not sleep. I was restless in body and mind. I crept down the ladder and went outside. I hoped the fresh air would do me good. I looked down the quiet and dark street, thinking about the Quarmana of my childhood.

And I saw two figures creeping down the street. They stopped at Aamir's door. I ran towards them, screaming. I thought that perhaps this would wake the others and they would stop these thieves.

"Zada!" I heard Aamir's voice. He was one of those figures at the door. "Be quiet," he commanded. I stopped screaming and looked at him.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'd like to know what you are doing."

"Is it any of your business?"

And I realized that it wasn't.

The figure behind him moved slightly, and the moonlight drenched his face for a moment.

"That's Saabir!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," Aamir said in a whisper. "And please be quiet."

"What are you doing?" I returned in a whisper.

"If I had wanted you to know I would have told you."

We look hard at each other, a silent battle of wills. I

finally dropped my glance to the ground. He won.

“Go home now, Zada; it is late for you to be out.”

I nodded and walked away.

I didn't sleep any better that night after the fresh air. My mind was busy trying to discover what Aamir was doing. He obviously didn't want anyone else knowing about it, and so I could not ask Nadima or even his wife. I remembered that I had not seen Saabir for several days. Maybe it had been a week. Where had he been? Did Aamir go to get him from wherever he had been? They had been carrying bags,; perhaps they were full of stolen goods. But it would be rather foolish to bring that into the house. They could have hidden it outside the village. What had they been doing? And why wouldn't Aamir tell me?

Chapter Five

I have been here about a year now. It has been a good year. I am glad that I came home. Still, there is this undercurrent of secrecy. Aamir will be gone for weeks at a time. Ghaada will not tell me where he is. Saabir often is gone also. It happened again today, and I confess I became very frustrated. I was probably not very polite.

“He is gone again?” I said to Ghaada.

She nodded.

“Where in heaven’s name does he go?”

“It is not for me to say.”

“Doesn’t he tell you?”

“It is not for me to say.”

“Ghaada, you treat me like a stranger. I’m part of this town, too. Why can’t you tell me?”

“Zada, remember what I told you at the beginning? I said that people would have a hard time accepting you again. You must be patient.”

All I really wanted to know is if Aamir was doing something wrong. I couldn’t rest peacefully knowing that perhaps Aamir was engaged in some criminal activity. I wanted to assure myself that he was not a thief or something worse. But I could not explain that to Ghaada. It would not be appropriate; she would not understand.

“I’m so tired of being told I’m a stranger. I don’t know why I stay here when no one trusts me.”

“Come inside and sit down,” she said. “Let me get some tea.”

She was probably hoping that my temper would cool and I would become more manageable. And she was right, to a certain extent. But the impatience and worry was still there.

“You are right; Aamir does not confide in you because he does not trust you.”

“But why?”

“Zada, don’t you realize that we know nothing about your life in America? What did you do there for all those years? And why did you really come back?”

I was shocked. This had never occurred to me.

“But why should you care about that?”

“Let me speak frankly, Zada. I believe you. I believe you are telling the truth. I believe you came back because you wanted to come home. Women have a way of sensing these things,” she laughed. “But Aamir is not sure. He doesn’t know. So he cannot confide in you.”

“Why should it matter what I did in America?”

She sighed.

“I do not want to say this, but I do not want you to be hurt either. Please, Zada, do not speak of this to anyone else. No one. Not even Nadima. No one. And remember, I do believe you, and please, do not leave Quarmana because of this.”

I nodded, encouraging her to continue.

“There are things that go on here in Quarmana that we cannot let anyone know about. We cannot let any governments know what is happening... let’s just say that if it was found out, we would all probably be killed. That is all I can say. And Aamir isn’t sure if you are on our side or not. Don’t mistake me, he has no reason to believe that

you are against us, but this is such a dangerous thing, our lives are at stake. He must be so very careful.”

“I see.” I really saw very little but needed time to think this over. “Thank you, Ghaada. And I will not speak of this to anyone. I promise.”

Chapter Six

Five years have passed since coming to Quarmana. The undercurrent of secrecy was still there, but I was content to wait until I was trusted. And the day finally came.

Aamir came into the house and visited with Nadina for a few minutes. I went outside to give them the opportunity to speak freely. I sat outside in the sunshine cleaning some carrots Nadina and I had just harvested. I heard Aamir come out and close the door.

“Zada?”

“Yes?”

“Do you have a few minutes to talk?”

“Of course,” I said, wiping my hands on a towel and getting up off the ground.

“Your family was killed years ago, by foreign soldiers.”

“Yes.”

“I am sorry.”

“I feel now as if that was another life. It was so long ago.”

“Many people here have lost loved ones.”

“Like Jena.”

“Yes, like Jena. There have been foreign soldiers coming here for years, longer than I have been alive. It goes back a long way. My older brother was killed when we were just boys. And about fifteen years ago my father was killed. That’s why my mother moved here.”

The pieces fit together. I had always wondered where Nadina's husband was but was afraid to ask. It made sense now.

"You lived in America for many years."

"Yes."

"You are in a very unique situation. You have seen both sides of it, so to speak. I would like to know what you think of it all."

"Of all what?"

I sensed that this was perhaps an exam, a test of where my loyalty lies. I wanted to know exactly what he was getting at.

"Which side are you on? Who do you believe is right?"

I laughed nervously.

"That's a hard question, Aamir."

"Then you aren't on our side?"

"No, it isn't that." How could I explain? "I don't think of people in America being somehow different than people here, either better or worse. They are just people. There are good people in America." I almost said that I married one of them but refrained. "I knew good people there. But like all places, there are bad people in America, as there are bad people in Uzbekistan."

"But are they somehow 'good' because they come over here and try to tell us how to live... and kill our people?"

"No, Aamir, that does not make them good. Not at all. That is wrong. It is wrong to take a life. If you were in their country and if you were killing them, then perhaps it would be more understandable. But we don't threaten American people. We just want to be left alone. So what they do is wrong."

"Then you believe that those people, Americans, are evil?"

“No, no, Aamir, they are not evil. Maybe some of them are evil. But most of them mean well. Some of them are murderers in official costumes. But I think most of them are just trying to do what is right and don’t mean to do these things.” I paused. I was treading dangerous ground and had to be careful. “Aamir, what exactly are you getting at? Why are you asking?”

“I believe you now, Zada. I think you are telling me the truth. So I will answer your question. Perhaps this is not so true in America, but here the fathers and husbands have the duty to protect and defend their families. And if someone in our family is wronged, we must avenge it.”

“Yes, I know.”

“There are many families here in Quarmana who have been wronged. They’ve been wronged by the soldiers in black who come and raid our homes. You know that... you have been wronged also. We cannot simply sit and let this happen without a protest.”

Aamir clenched his fists. A look came into his eyes which I had not seen before. His voice had a hardness that was new to me.

“My father was killed. He had a broken leg—they killed a crippled man. They did unspeakable things to Jena and killed her. They killed your family. Ghaada’s sister was killed years ago. It is a web of cruelty and murder that is enveloping our families. And am I to sit by silently and watch us all be killed, one by one? No! No, I cannot allow it. I must do something. I have been doing something. Some of the men of the town, and other towns, we have set up a camp a few miles out of town. That is where we go to learn and plan our actions. There are some leaders in Uzbekistan who have sent teachers and trainers to show us what to do.”

“Do what?”

“They came and killed our families. We will do the same to them.”

And suddenly it was clear.

“No; no, Aamir—don’t do it... please, stop.”

“Isn’t it clear to you? Justice is justice. Those who do wrong must be punished.”

“No! You can’t do that, you can’t go to America and attack them.”

“Why not? They have done it to us.”

“But it is all wrong. You cannot fight wrong with wrong. It won’t work. It will not do what you are hoping. It will only make things worse. Please, don’t do it...”

I grabbed his arm and pled with him, but he pushed me away roughly.

“I thought you were on our side,” he said. “I thought I could trust you.”

“You can trust me; I will not tell anyone else. I will not betray you or the others. But I beg you not to do it.”

“I thought you would understand. But those Americans have stolen your mind. You don’t think like us; you think like an American.”

“No, Aamir, I think as a human being. I’m not American; I am just me. I think for myself. I don’t believe this because Americans do. I believe it because it is right.”

“Never mind, Zada. It makes no difference. You are not on our side—that’s all that matters.”



I had not looked at David’s books for a long time, but this conversation with Aamir reminded me of them. I pulled them out of my suitcase and brushed off the dust. I had almost hoped to forget about everything I had once

thought of; I had hoped that Quarmana would erase all my memories, but it has not. Quotes from his books haunted me constantly, reminding me of the life I used to have with the one I loved. I spent one afternoon reading in my room. The words and ideas of the books excited my mind once again. Ideas must be very powerful to have such a repeated effect on me.

I heard Nadina downstairs making dinner and went to help her.

“Have you been feeling ill?” she asked.

“No, I’m fine. Why?”

“I thought you were sleeping all afternoon.”

“No, I was just reading.”

“Reading?”

“Yes. I brought a few books with me from America.”

“Oh! Do you know Daris?”

“Yes.” He was a boy who lived in the house next to ours.

“His mother wants so badly for him to read. He was sent to a summer school last year and learned to read a little English. He is very clever and has read all of them already. It would make his mother—and Daris—very happy if he could perhaps come over and read occasionally.” She paused. “His mother is rather worried about him. He never talks. He is so silent. He wants only to sit and read, but there is hardly anything to read except receipts and such from Tashkent.”

“Oh, of course. It is selfish for me to keep the books to myself. It would make me happy to know he could enjoy them.”

After dinner she went over and talked to his mother. She came back, leading Daris. I brought the books down to the table.

“Hello Daris,” I said. “I’m glad you could come over.

Why don't you start with this one?" I handed him a book. "It is easier to read than the others. If you don't understand a word or if you are confused, just ask me, and I will help you figure it out."

He nodded and opened the book. I sat reading another book until I felt his deep, solemn eyes on me. I slowly looked up.

"Yes?"

He said nothing, and I remembered what Nadina said about him. I saw that he was pointing to something in the book. I got up and looked at it.

"That word is 'liberty.' It means to be free. If someone is free, they can do whatever they want, but only if they don't hurt anyone else." I looked up at him and realized he was waiting for me to say more. I was struggling of a way to convey this idea to such a young mind. "No one is free to steal from someone else. I am not free to kill someone because that would be taking away their life, and their liberty. In some places, the government tells people what they can do. The government tells people what kind of food to eat, what they can wear, what they can do. They must ask the government if they want to drive, or fish, or sell something in the market."

This seemed to trouble Daris.

"Do you want me to tell you a secret?" I asked.

He nodded.

"That's why I came here. Here I am free to do as I please." I smiled, and he smiled back. He looked at the book and kept reading. I sat down again and turned to my book.

Chapter Seven

I grew increasingly worried about Aamir and his plans. I tried to watch for him and make sure he had not left Quarmana again. I went to give Ghaada some vegetables one evening and saw her tying up a bundle. She quickly concealed it but not soon enough. It was the same sort of bundle I saw Aamir carrying that night in the street. I gave her the vegetables and rushed home. I had to decide what to do.

I was out of my mind. I concocted such a crazy plan. I would watch for Aamir to leave Quarmana and follow him. What I would do once I got to the camp and how I would prevent him from carrying out his mission I did not know. I just knew I could not sit by quietly.

So that night after Nadina was asleep—I knew she was because of the snoring—I crept downstairs and watched out the window. And soon I saw Aamir and Saabir leave their house and walk slowly down the street. I waited until they were out of sight before pulling the door open and going out. If they had to be quiet to avoid waking people, I had to be twice as silent which was a difficult task. I paused and let them walk to the edge of town before following.

“Zada.”

There was a small voice behind me.

I spun around.

It was Daris.

“What are you doing out here?”

“I saw you.”

“Go back to bed; you shouldn’t be out here.”

“Neither should you,” he returned. I realized this was the first time I had heard him speak.

“Daris, this is too dangerous. Go back to bed.”

“Don’t I have any liberty? Can’t I choose to do something dangerous?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I had to laugh quietly. He was paying attention to what I told him and what he read.

I shrugged.

“I won’t stop you, then.”

He smiled and took my hand.

“I’m following Aamir and Saabir. They must not know we are here.”

We walked out of the village and were swallowed up in the desolate landscape. I could just barely make out the two dark figures ahead of us. Sometimes they would become impossible to see and I would panic. I think Daris would sense my panic; he held my hand even tighter and smiled up at me at those moments, and soon enough the figures would emerge from the shadows, and I would relax.

After an eternity of walking, the figures turned sharply and began climbing a mountainside. We hid behind a clump of bushes and watched. Suddenly they disappeared into what I assumed was a cave.

“What now?” Daris asked.

“We will follow them in there.”

So slowly, ever so slowly, we climbed the rocks. What had been faint voices became louder as we ascended. And then we were there, beside the cave. We were on a ledge

outside the cave, and none of them had seen us yet. I hesitated. I could still climb down those rocks and go back to Quarmana. They would never know that I followed them. But then I realized that this might be my only chance. If I did not act now, Aamir or Saabir might go to America... and then I would be powerless to stop them. I had to do it.

“Stay here,” I whispered to Daris.



I stepped out in front of the entrance to the cave. It was very large. There were probably thirty or forty men either sitting or standing around a bright fire in the center. Aamir was on the opposite side of the fire, facing me. He saw me instantly.

“Zada!”

“Yes, Aamir, it is Zada.”

“What are you doing here?” another of the men demanded. He was strange to me, he was not from Quarmana. “And who are you?”

“I am from Quarmana. I lived there as a child. My family was slaughtered by foreigners.”

“This is no place for women,” another man said.

“Listen to me, you must listen,” I said.

“Let her speak,” Aamir said. He sat down.

I had not expected this. I was not prepared to give them some sort of speech. My mind was in much confusion. I only vaguely recalled that I was here to prevent them from killing Americans.

“We have been very grievously wronged,” I started. “Horrible things have been done against our families, things that can never be undone.” They nodded in agreement. “There can be no mistaking that truth. Murdering of

innocent people can never be justified. But think about the other side. These men who did this, were they really evil murderers? They probably believed they were doing the right thing. You see, in America, the government tells the people how to think. If the government says to do something, you do it and you think it is right. The government has commanded these people to come here, the government says that it is a good and patriotic thing to do. The people believe the government. They don't know that we are humans just like them and that we don't want to conquer them or take over their country. They don't know that because their government has lied to them. And the people in the government believe they are doing the right thing, too. There are probably only a few people at the very top who truly know what they are doing and purposefully sending Americans here to kill us. We cannot blame the individuals for the crimes of a government. And what you are planning—it is not against those individuals but against the nation and against the innocent. We must..." my mind faltered and went blank. "We must..."

The men stared at me stonily. They were obviously not moved.

"We must..." I couldn't do it. I had failed. I couldn't convince them.

I felt someone brush past me. Daris stood in front of me.

"We must not do something wrong to avenge a wrongdoing," he said. His voice was strong and clear. "To kill innocent people in another country because a few of them killed innocent people here is wrong. What will they do? They will be angry at us for killing them. They will use that as an excuse to come over here and invade our country yet again. The government will say to their people,

'See, we must defend our country and go kill all those people who threaten us.' They will not understand that we are over there because they are over here. They will only use it as an excuse for more violence. If we attack them, they will return it; they will come here and kill us all. The problem isn't the soldiers, the individuals who come here with good intentions to defend their country. They are not the problem. The problem is the system, the institution of government, which says that if you are wearing these special clothes and got permission from some special person then murder is okay. They say that murder isn't murder if these people commit it. That is the problem. The problem is saying that sometimes wrong is right and right is wrong. And how can we be any better than them if we do the same thing? To win, to defeat those forces, we must hold ourselves to a better standard of action. If we are right and they are wrong, then in the end we will win."

There was utter silence. The soft crackling of the fire seemed deafening in the quiet.



"Come, Daris, we must go back." I took his hand and led him out into the darkness and down the mountainside. I did not speak for a long while. We walked and walked. It wasn't until the eastern sky turned a pale pink that I spoke.

"What happened? Daris, you have never said anything before. What made you do it tonight?"

He shrugged.

"There was never a reason to speak before, there was nothing to say. And if I said something, I might have been wrong. But tonight I knew that I wasn't wrong. And I realized how important it was."

I squeezed his hand tightly.

“Thank you, Daris, thank you.”

His mother was very upset when we returned. She had realized only a few minutes earlier that he was not there. She, Nadina, and a few other women were huddled in the street debating what to do when we trudged into town.

“Daris!” his mother cried, running towards him.

“Mother!” he answered. This reply doubly surprised her.

“Zada, what happened?” she said after embracing him.

“Let’s just say he found his voice,” I said.

Daris and I did not explain the details of the evening. Everyone was happy enough that Daris had found his voice and, I think, in the process found himself.

I slept most of the day, but my sleep was fitful. I did not know what the men had decided and this kept me restless. The door downstairs opened and someone walked in.

“Hello, Aamir,” Nadina said.

I caught my breath so I wouldn’t miss a word.

“Hello, Mother.”

“I thought you were gone on a trip. You said you wouldn’t be back for a couple of weeks.”

“Yes, I know. Plans changed. I won’t be taking any more trips.”

“Is this a good thing?”

“Yes, Mother. It is a good thing.”

That evening I went out in search of him. I found him pitching hay in the stable behind his house.

“Aamir.”

“Zada,” he said, breathing heavily.

I stood silently watching him. I wanted to talk to him about what had happened, but I didn’t know how. So I waited.

“You certainly surprised us last night.”

“Yes?”

“You had more determination than I thought.”

“Yes.”

He finally stopped and looked at me.

“Zada, thank you. You told us what we knew but were too angry to accept before.”

“It is a difficult thing to not be filled with hate and bitterness when such atrocities are committed against us, I know.”

“There have been rumors that the American army is moving out of the country. Some say they are going to Turkmenistan. Before last night we were too impatient to pay attention to the rumors. But we have decided to wait and see what happens before doing anything more.”

“Then I hope that the army is leaving the country, for the sake of the Americans. But I pity the people in Turkmenistan. No doubt the army will wreak the same havoc on their land as we have suffered for decades.”

“If the army does leave the country, we will only have to deal with the Uzbek military. They don’t have the drones and advanced weapons of America. We will be able to defend ourselves against their occasional attacks.” He paused. “That was one reason why we felt it was necessary to do something. How can you defend yourself against drones that come out of the sky at any moment? How can you defend yourself against soldiers with the most modern weapons invented? We have no chance. It is like a man with a stick against a man with a machine gun.”

“Yes, I know how it feels.”

“Zada, why did you come back here?”

She hesitated, looking down and twisting a bit of straw in her hands.

“It is a long story. Too long to tell now. But I wanted to be in a place where at least the people knew they were not

free. It is a horrible thing to be surrounded by prisoners who cannot even see their own chains.”

Chapter Eight

I have been here for ten years. How quickly the time passes. The American army did withdraw from Uzbekistan. My heart aches for those in nearby Turkmenistan who are now suffering. But Aamir kept his word and never again planned an offensive strike against America. Instead the men of our community put their energy and resources into preparing for an inevitable raid from the Uzbek army. They are disorganized and not very sophisticated in their weaponry but will sweep across the country every few years, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. It is meant to remind the people not to get too comfortable in their freedom. And so the attack did come, early one winter. The men were ready with their plans and preparations.

Nadina and I stayed quietly inside. I occasionally peered out the window. I don't know exactly what happened, but we were successful, for no one was killed. One man was injured, but none of the women or children were harmed. We have not been bothered since then. It might come again any day, but we are ready. We are strengthened by the knowledge that what we do is right and good.

Nadina has grown frail; I now do more work around the house than she does, but I am happy. It is good to have someone to care for. I now know how Robert felt when I came to stay with him after David had disappeared. He,

too, had been alone and appreciated having someone else to care about.

I do not think much of those days. It is so distant. But I often think of David, and I know that he would be happy if he knew that I was here.

Daris has grown a great deal in mind and body. He is no longer the thin, quiet child of years ago. We are all convinced that he is very special, either a genius or verging on it. He doesn't think his power of thinking and persuasion are anything extraordinary, but I know better. I have given him David's books to keep. He will go far in life. He has nearly all the books memorized and sometimes will recite passages for his family and friends. Once he even visited another village to recite for them because they wanted to hear about this idea of liberty.

This makes me very happy, and I am content now. I have done what was needed, and now there is another person to carry on these ideas for me, as Isaac did for David, as I did for Isaac, and what we as free humans have done and will do until the end of time.

David's Book List:

(The books I had in mind while writing *Path of Grass*)

The Revolution by Ron Paul

A Foreign Policy of Freedom by Ron Paul

Anatomy of the State by Murray Rothbard

The Enterprise of Law by Bruce Benson

Chaos Theory by Robert Murphy

Epilogue

While I used many ideas from many books here, the only direct quotation is found at the end of Part 2: “Tyranny ends when we cease to support voluntarily our own serfdom.” This was taken from the speech Helio Beltrao made at the opening of the Brazil Mises Institute, and it has made a profound impact on the way I view liberty.

The section of *Path of Grass* that took place during World War II was broadly based on historical fact, but I did take some liberties with it. For instance, I do not know if German soldiers were actually sent to convents to recover.

There has been much research done on the Allied treatment of German citizens after World War II and debates rage over whether the citizens were treated cruelly or not, but there is no historical evidence for the specific military policy and events surrounding the encounter Lee had with the German Margie. One can imagine that a government that has no qualms in systematically destroying a country by air raids (such as the Allies bombing the cities of Germany) would probably not be very respectful or compassionate towards the citizens of the country they have just conquered. It is historically accurate that Japanese and German Americans were sent to prison camps during the war, despite their American citizenship.

The situation described in futuristic Uzbekistan is based on information from the United States’ occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. The stories and tragedies of Uzbekistan are not a writer’s fancy because similar incidents have occurred in the Mideast. The same is true for the practice of waterboarding suspected extremists. This has been occurring (with the knowledge and encouragement

of the United States government) since the start of the “War on Terror,” and many people have been subjected to this cruel practice merely because it is a politically useful distraction. The Future of Freedom Foundation has done outstanding research on the lack of fair trials and humane treatment for suspected terrorists.

The encounter between Isaac and the “men in black” in the streets of Washington D.C. is loosely based on my own experience of political rallies and what I have heard from others about the violent opposition they receive for simply exercising their rights of free speech and peaceable assembly. Judge Andrew Napolitano has done good work to show how the camera is becoming the new gun (in the eyes of the government) and how officials feel threatened even when citizens pull out their cell phones to begin recording a situation.

The entire story was inspired by real events, and my goal was to set these tragedies and outrages in a fictional framework in order to see more clearly the injustice and tyranny. I did not write the book and then fit my interpretations of real events into this mindset; the reality came first and guided me through the entire process of writing *Path of Grass*.

Savannah Liston

