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## Remnants: The Family Archive as a Foundation of Historical Fiction The Match

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REMNANTS: THE FAMILY ARCHIVE AS A FOUNDATION  
IN HISTORICAL FICTION

THE MATCH

MELISA A. CONNELL-SPENCER

Master's Program in Creative Writing

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Dean of the Graduate School

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Melisa Connell-Spencer

2023

**Dedication**

For Mike

REMNANTS: THE FAMILY ARCHIVE  
AS A FOUNDATION IN HISTORICAL FICTION

THE MATCH

by

MELISA A. CONNELL-SPENCER, B.A., J.D.

THESIS

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The University of Texas at El Paso

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## Preface

### THE BACKDROP OF HISTORY IN FICTION

On December 11, 1941, The United States of America declared war on Germany, forcing young men from every corner of the nation to step away from schools, family farms, and the precious few jobs upon which so many households depended for survival. Leaving their aging parents, women, and children behind in uncertain circumstances, over twelve million of the most capable American men deployed to foreign lands to fight a war they only thought they understood (Vannoy par. 1).

Immediately following the State of the Union address earlier that year, President Roosevelt, Congress, and the media went to work with the two most effective tools they had to gin up the so-called will of the American people, the Constitution and mind-altering propaganda. European Fascists were the enemy, tyrants intent on destroying core Constitutional rights: freedom of speech, freedom to worship, freedom to live peacefully, and freedom from the fear of annihilation. Americans were fed a steady diet of advertisements, news, and entertainment designed to heighten a hatred of the Axis powers and illustrate the heroic role that only America could play in defeating evil. Believing this narrative about an eminent and deadly threat to their freedom and a brand of unbridled capitalism packaged as the dream every red-blooded American boy was supposed to dream, these men took up arms “for justice and even to save the world” (Dann 67).

So what if it was that greed-fueled, unregulated American Dream that helped plunge the world into depression after World War I? And what did it matter if, while America had clung to its isolationistic ways, people in Germany, Austria, Poland, and the Sudetenland had become trapped by the fascists and that some of those American soldiers were themselves only a

generation, at most, removed from those trapped families? How would soldiers leaving the land of Jim Crow rectify killing another country's xenophobes in the name of equality for all human beings? The answers to these questions would have to be compartmentalized on the battlefields and then contemplated in that period of private reflection every soldier experiences once the peace is won.

Despite these incongruities, America as a nation, some eighty years on, continues to laud its role in that conflict, keeping almost every aspect of this important episode of history relevant - almost every aspect. Under the guise that there are lessons still to be learned and the slogan "Never Again" much has been written about the war's risky, but rewarding military campaigns, the liberation of concentration camps, and the all-important preservation of democracy. World War II continues to be well-documented by historians and entertainers alike. Artistically it still serves as the backdrop to untold numbers of novels, documentaries, and feature films, the majority of which have one major thing in common. There is an adage in writing: know the difference between stopping and ending. History likes hard stops, and when she was picking one for World War II, the victory in Europe, VE-Day, May 8, 1945, is typically the stopping point, with an enthralling post-script tacked on, neatly tying everything up on Victory-Japan Day, August 15, 1945. The body of work surrounding World War II almost always adheres to that hard stop.

Reality, unlike history, is not so easily confined. Reality is never found on the pages of a high school textbook or at the end of the movie wherein a small band of soldiers blows up the bridge, thus inflicting the final blow to an evil regime before making the quick journey home and falling into the arms of adoring women who so effortlessly awaited their return. Reality has a

different tale to tell, and for many, the reality that unfolded in the days and years after the Allies' victory begins the true lesson of World War II.

As early as December of 1944, military leadership told American soldiers that victory was inevitable, that Germany was falling. But as one soldier reflected on those last months of the war, he revealed, “all we knew was that we were taking a beating in the foxholes” (Dann 68). A mere nine days before America declared victory in Europe, a group of soldiers, many between the ages of eighteen and twenty, part of the U.S. 42<sup>nd</sup> Rainbow Battalion, were fighting their way toward Munich. Deadly skirmishes with German troops continued all along the route, and although it was apparent those enemy fighters were dropping back, to the Americans in the foxholes, it was presumably to regroup in Munich for a brutal and decisive counterattack.

On that march for Munich, a handful of men from the 42<sup>nd</sup> took what they thought would be a short detour to investigate and secure a small factory town named Dachau. Sam Dann was one of those soldiers and his book *Dachau: 29 April 1945 The Rainbow Liberation Memoir*, describes what he calls the most traumatic experience of the war. On April 29, 1945, “[we] found out why we were fighting this war. True, we were aware of the fact that we were fighting for our country, our freedom, our way of life – for justice and even to save the world. We believed it as an accepted truth. But we believed it in our heads. Now, suddenly, as if we had been struck by a bolt of lightning, it became a revealed truth... Yes, Dachau was a lesson, a most expensive lesson. We had to pay for it with our innocence” (67). In their memoirs, members of the Rainbow Battalion acknowledge that they were seasoned soldiers by this point in the war and had seen many, bloody battles, yet nothing prepared them for the hellscape they discovered in Dachau. “Most of us were raised to believe in fair play, justice, mercy, the sanctity of life. Admittedly, there were violations of all these principles in our own country – but nothing that

could even remotely approach this unspeakable place. How could we accept the fact there were people – human beings – who could be responsible for this insane slaughterhouse, this Dachau!” (67).

Only when those soldiers surveyed pile after pile of emaciated corpses stacked like cordwood, looked into the unfinished mass graves, smelled the stench emanating from train cars filled with human beings who had been alive just hours before the soldiers’ arrival, and only as they liberated more than thirty thousand starved and sick prisoners from the Nazi’s grasp, did they finally understand the stakes of the war. Reality set in, and for some it was the final blow to their young psyches.

In the mid-1990s, several of the soldiers and prisoners of Dachau agreed to give Sam Dann interviews or commit to writing their memories of the liberation for compilation in his book. Even fifty years after the experience, some could not bring themselves to talk about it. Those willing to discuss their experiences almost universally conceded that the events they witnessed that day altered their lives forever. Private First Class Sam Platamone claimed, “Indeed, the sight I witnessed at Dachau, and the trauma I shared with my brother infantrymen...affected my postwar life immeasurably” (123). Platamone, who had been at the top of his high school class before the war, could “no longer glean information from the printed page” and was forced to turn down the free college education that the G.I. Bill could have provided him (Dann 123). At one of the reunions of the Rainbow Battalion in the eight years following the war, Ted Johnson recalled that “a Signal Corps film on the liberation of Dachau was shown in a large room crowded with veterans and their wives. When it was over and the lights came on, only four were still present. The others couldn’t take it – it was too terrible to watch” (Dann 215).

For the people on the other side of the barbed wire that day, their plight most certainly did not end on April 29, 1945, or even on VE-Day. Major General Harry Collins, who commanded the 42<sup>nd</sup> Division admitted, “When the sun set at the end of the twenty-ninth day of April 1945, the prisoners of Dachau were finally free. But it was not the heads-held-high, shining-smiling-faces marching-off-to-glory, singing-an-inspirational-hymn-of-victory type of free seen in happy-ending motion pictures” (Dann 233). Those who had barely survived the Final Solution were deathly ill with a long list of afflictions: acute malnutrition, typhoid, pox, hypothermia, vermin infestations, trauma, and disability from Nazi experimentation. To make matters worse, there was nowhere for the prisoners to go. In order to win the war, Allied bombers had reduced their former cities and towns to rubble. Germans, Austrians, Poles, Czechs, and French, all of whom still considered themselves members of the Nazi Party, continued to live in whatever was left of those prisoners’ homes.

On August 31, 1945, four months after the liberation of Dachau, President Truman wrote to General Dwight D. Eisenhower dressing down the Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe:

Apparently it is being taken for granted that all displaced persons, irrespective of their former persecution or the likelihood that their repatriation or resettlement will be delayed, must remain in camps--many of which are overcrowded and heavily guarded. **Some of these camps are the very ones where these people were herded together, starved, tortured and made to witness the death of their fellow-inmates and friends and relatives** (par. 3, emphasis added).

In his report to President Truman, Earl Harrison, the U.S. Representative to the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, immortalized the reality of post-war concentration camps,

As matters now stand, we appear to be treating the Jews as the Nazis treated them except that we do not exterminate them. They are in concentration camps in large numbers under our military guard instead of S.S. troops. One is led to wonder whether the German people, seeing this, are not supposing that we are following or at least condoning Nazi policy (Truman par. 6).

Disease and physical injuries would prove to be the most easily solved of the survivors' problems. As the millions of people displaced by the Nazis began their treks back to towns and villages across Europe, plans for repatriating the Jewish survivors fell apart. No country was willing to absorb them as their former citizens or even as refugees ("Postwar Refugee Crisis, par. 6). Those American soldiers, who just months before had fought fascism at the Battle of the Bulge and chased Nazis to a white flag in Berlin, were now given one last task, rebranding places like Dachau, changing the signage, shoring up the barracks, and locking the gates behind them on their way back to the land of the free. Months and in some cases even years after the war ended, the survivors of the Holocaust remained in camps awaiting the opportunity to relocate somewhere they could start a new life. That is where *The Match* was struck.

The first ideas for the novel came from reflection on what it must have been like to have witnessed, first, the war and then the tease of victory, only to grasp that the reality that the survivors' suffering would continue because America and her allies refused to restore, fully, the freedoms that the fascists had stolen and to complete the liberation. At that point, surely, the surviving soldiers sat in quiet contemplation of the nagging questions about America's role in the run-up to World War II and its complicities in xenophobia.

## THE POETICS OF HISTORICAL FICTION

In her assessment of historical fiction as a genre, journalist and author Geraldine Brooks describes historical, factual records as merely the scaffolding for a story, and opines that the writer's imagination must fill in the elements that we cannot know for certain (par. 14). *The Match*, and the excerpt of it that I present as partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Mater in Fine Arts, is a work of fiction clad to the scaffolding of one soldier's experience at the liberation of Dachau and the impact that event would have not only on him as an eyewitness, but on future generations of his family. The story, as initially conceived, marched in the combat boots of a fictional American soldier named Joe Herman, who served with the 42<sup>nd</sup> Rainbow Division and took part in liberating Dachau. That experience irrevocably alters the course of his life for two reasons. First, as part of the group of soldiers who are charged with committing war crimes because, in a fit of rage, they killed the Nazi soldiers they found within the camp, Joe's military career is tarnished. Second, the experience at Dachau forces Joe to acknowledge his own Jewish heritage and the abnegation of the Jews by the United States. As a result of these two assaults by his own country, Joe suffers a complete mental breakdown, disassociates with his American identity, and decides to join the displaced Jewish community as they attempt to rebuild in Israel. In the process of joining the Jewish cause, Joe abandons his American war bride and newborn son who await his return to America. Only on his deathbed does Joe realize that his disconnection from his American family could result in the devastation of his Israeli family, forcing him to put into motion a plan for unification.

In 350 B.C.E., Aristotle wrote some of the earliest recorded observations of the genre that would be named historical fiction,

...tragedians still keep to real names, the reason being that what is possible is credible: what has not happened we do not at once feel sure to be possible; but

what has happened is manifestly possible: otherwise it would not have happened. Still there are even some tragedies in which there are only one or two well-known names, the rest being fictitious. In others, none are well known...and yet they give none the less pleasure. We must not, therefore, at all costs keep to the received legends, which are the subjects of Tragedy. Indeed, it would be absurd to attempt it; for even subjects that are known are known only to a few, and yet give pleasure to all (par. 37).

It is the delight of all who write historical fiction to take these received legends and revive them with new names and new circumstances. To do so, writers must glean those credible elements that readers will recognize as manifestly possible. The cruelest day of the war for the 42<sup>nd</sup> Rainbow Battalion serves as the historical foundation for *The Match*, but World War II is a universal history with a message for everyone whether he has a personal connection to the conflict or not. Many of the events described in *The Match* did, in fact, take place during the liberation of Dachau. American soldiers, overcome with sickness and rage at the site of the camp, exacted swift justice on the Nazis. It is also true that the United States military arrested some of the liberating soldiers and put them on trial for alleged violation of international law and dereliction of duty. Only when General Patton intervened and lambasted the tribunal for daring to condemn the men for taking action justified in the face of such evil, were the charges dismissed.

Another authentic group joining the fictitious characters in *The Match* is the Surviving Remnant. This disjointed, multi-national group of Jews, recognizing that the purpose of their survival was to ensure that the nation of Israel would never disappear from the earth, took inspiration from the Talmud's interpretation of the verse "the surviving remnant of the house of Judah shall again take root downward and bear fruit upward" (Torah, Isaiah 37:31). At the moment the death camps were rebranded Displaced Persons camps, this group fashioned plans for re-establishing their roots. This



movement provided the historical scaffolding Joe Herman uses to complete his transformation from American soldier to a fighter for the complete liberation of the Jewish people. It is through Joe's work for this movement, that he is reunited with his first wife and how his granddaughter ultimately discovers her own connection to the Surviving Remnant.

Aristotle concludes his theoretical work, *Poetics*, with a discussion of the roles that Reversal of the Situation and Recognition play in storytelling. "Subject always to our rules of probability and necessity" Reversal is the manner in which the action folds back on itself (Aristotle par. 41). Recognition is the moment in which the characters and audience share the experience of moving from gathering of the parts to revelation of the sum. Experimentation with these concepts opened several possibilities for the plot of *The Match*. To determine how best to approach these components of the novel, I used the method Libbie Hawker recommends in her book, *Take Off Your Pants: Outline Your Books For Faster, Better Writing*. Hawker instructs writers to complete a graphic chart for each main character in a story. The elements of the chart are titled: Character, Goal, Antagonist, Journey, Ending, Flaw, Lesson, Ally, Theme. When I used this chart to create and braid the arcs of each main character, the process clarified which characters would be the vehicle for the novel's Reversal and Recognition and which of the other elements would accomplish Reversal and Recognition.

Each character in *The Match* shares a common theme: determining how to navigate the on-going impact of the Holocaust on the one man with whom they all share a relationship and the significance of their own survival. Hawker's elements of Flaw and Lesson, pitted against each other, give rise to the Reversal in the *The Match*. At the beginning of the novel, Joe's granddaughter is bitter and distrustful of him, her last remaining biological relative. Her flaw is

that she is aggressively independent and refuses to make lasting connections with those who want to be close to her. As she reluctantly works through the process of fact-gathering and grows her capacity for empathy, Joe's granddaughter passes through one final component of tragedy that Aristotle terms the Scene of Suffering. In *The Match* this Scene of Suffering comes when his granddaughter learns that Joe Herman did not initiate the reconnection with her, that he was already dead when his second wife set the ruse into motion and that her reason for doing so was wholly selfish. The initial impression of Joe Herman folds back onto itself; his granddaughter's feelings of bitterness and distrust return with a measure of added anger and suffering for having been made a fool. At the point of this Reversal, in an act of self-preservation and defiance, Joe's granddaughter rushes for the hard stop in the plot, and she is frantically reconstructing her boundaries when the ultimate Recognition, the revelation of the sum, takes over the narrative. Here, the characters' reality unfold, and the ending begins in earnest. In the end, the characters and the audience come to terms with the fact that family connections, as difficult as they may be, have value and that Joe's granddaughter holds the key to exacting the best revenge on the fascists who tried to annihilate her family.

The film *#Anne Frank: Parallel Stories* is part-documentary, part-dramatization in which a teenage girl visits modern-day Amsterdam and Germany as a tourist to learn about the Holocaust, and specifically, Anne Frank's life and diary. Along the journey the young girl blogs and posts on social media applications about the historical sites she visits and her emotional reaction to the story unfolding around her. Simultaneously, the film shows interviews with older women who, in 1944, were teenagers and who, like Anne Frank, were captured by the Nazis and sent to death camps. The contrast, of course, is that the women survived and describe the life

Anne Frank could have had, but for her tragic ending. This film had a direct influence on how I wrote Joe's twenty-something granddaughter and his second wife.

The young tourist in the film absorbs the lessons of the Holocaust as a matter of first impression. In *The Match* Joe's granddaughter has the same experience. She is a character who mirrors modern young people wrestling with how to define themselves and their lives in the context of their new adult independence. The reality of her grandparents' tragic lives washes over her in waves, from the snippets of stories she can find about them, until, in the end, she is able to abandon her cynicism and feel genuine connection to everyone involved in her family's Holocaust story.

In *The Match*, Joe's second wife is obsessed with exacting revenge on former Nazis, to the point it manifests as her character flaw. She will stop at nothing and use whomever necessary to accomplish her mission of revenge. A recurring plea in Holocaust literature and documentaries is the imploring by survivors to keep telling the story. Every survivor speaks of it with urgency. In the *#Anne Frank* film, Ethno-psychologist Nathalie Zajde states, "The dead Shoah [Holocaust murder victims] ask for revenge... It is a mission. The dead of the Shoah say, 'Avenge us even though we are dead. Say I am the son or daughter of such and such Jew. Destroy what the Nazis did to us'" (*#Anne Frank* 44:53). In the same film, Holocaust survivor, Sarah Lichtsztejn-Montard, states, "My children are my revenge against the Nazis" (*#Anne Frank* 15:35). Ensuring that the descendants of the survivors claim their lineage is a crucial element of any Holocaust survivor story and is the basis of Joe's second wife's Reversal and Recognition. Only when her grandson is afflicted with a disease for which the only cure is a transplant does she begin to share Sarah Lichtsztein-Montard's epiphany that family is the true revenge against the Nazis. At that point, her flaw gives way to lesson, and her motivations shift. She vows to pursue this form of

revenge with the same dedication she employed to hunt and punish Nazis, and in doing so, meets Joe's granddaughter and expands the Surviving Remnant.

## THE VOICE OF HISTORICAL FICTION

While Joe's experience in World War II provides the historical backdrop for *The Match*, he ultimately did not become the character telling the story. Joe's story, on its own, would be, at best, a fictional memoir not unlike the short, heartbreaking accounts of the actual soldiers who shared their memories with Sam Dann. *The Match* kept pulling itself away from Joe not unlike the rings that expand outward from the place a rock strikes a body of water.

Two courses in the University of Texas El Paso master's program influenced my decision on who would tell the story. Sylvia Aguilar-Zéleny led students through *Writing the Self: Memoir, Autobiography, Autofiction* while Carolina Ebeid simultaneously taught *Writing the Family Archive*. The readings curated for these classes exposed students to traditional and thoroughly modern methods of writing about memory, legacy, and the artifacts that evidence a life. The works featured women who find themselves gathering and piecing together the shards of their own lives following catastrophic events such as large-scale war or the private, psychological battles that defeat the men around them. With these readings in mind, the female voices that would relay the impact of Joe's experiences began to coalesce. Joe's war bride, Louise, loses him to undiagnosed and untreated post-traumatic stress. Chaya, Joe's second wife, shares a perfunctory marriage with him after the war, and Jillian, Joe's granddaughter with Louise, only comes to know about his experience and legacy through the artifacts and hearsay she discovers after his death.

*Antigone Gonzales* by Sara Uribe is a lyric essay that carries the theme of Sophocles' tragedy into modern-day Mexico. The memoir chronicles the physical and emotional journey of the fictional Antigone Gonzalez as she searches for a brother whose disappearance is connected to the drug war raging in Tamaulipas, Mexico. The book is a patchwork of narratives, poems,

and prose from other Antigones that the main character meets along the way, women who share what is, unfortunately, an experience that has repeated itself countless times, in countless conflicts spanning all the ages of man. When men disappear in conflict, the details that wander back to the families are often murky snippets of hearsay that frustrate more than the truth does. Uribe captures this void of information by writing, “They didn’t want to tell me anything. As if by naming / your absence everything would become more solid. As / if keeping it quiet would make it less real” (25). The not-knowing is just one more way in which the conflict throws wider its net of collateral damage. Collateral damage is the essence of *The Match*. Like Uribe, I explored the agony of uncertainty that Antigone Gonzales and all Antigones experience when they not only lose a man to war, but are left without closure, when no physical trace of that man is returned in valiant fashion, when there is no hero encased in a flag-draped coffin, when no medals are awarded for sacrifice. When Joe Herman fails to return from World War II, his wife, Louise, is thrust into the role of single mother, but left without any means of discerning if she is wife or widow. Uribe describes this existence as “...this strange place of being / between life and death, of speaking precisely from that / vacillating boundary... : a woman living on the border” (35). Louise lives the remainder of her life on that razor’s edge. I carried the void of this one man through the story so that two generations later, their granddaughter, Jillian, struggles to define her own independence because she has no point of reference for equating a man with security. Men die. Men leave. Men abandon women leaving only scant evidence that they ever existed or that the woman mattered.

In her memoir, *War and Me*, Faleeha Hassan relates her experiences coming of age in war-torn Iraq. The predictable afflictions are all included: government shutdown of all forms of education and free speech, seizure of men and boys to serve as bullet fodder, scarcity of food,

and traitorous neighbors. The memoir, however, also includes the episodes of war that come after the stop, those events that unfold as reality settles over a wasteland and its hollow-eyed inhabitants. When her brother is released from a prisoner-of-war camp, it falls to Hassan, the oldest sister, to nurse him as nearly back to sanity as she can coax him. The family is initially elated to have the young soldier returned home alive, but when he has outbursts of anger, clings like a madman to rotted, lice-infest clothing, and spends his time sitting on the ground “looking at the floor like someone gazing at a bottomless pit” his parents and siblings become embarrassed and even angered by his lack of hygiene and social skills (238). Hassan is the only one able to look past the symptoms of a broken soul and assume the unsolicited responsibility of a caregiver. With a gentle, feminine touch she helps the soldier process his post-traumatic stress. She bathes him, grooms his matted hair and beard, places him in a quiet room, and feeds him. With no access to psychological care “because sending a person [for psychiatric treatment] implied judgment...that a person was ‘crazy’” Hassan slowly worked to penetrate her brother’s “curtain of silence” (239). Eventually, he describes to her, in vivid detail, the circumstance of his capture and the torture inflicted by prison guards. Hassan’s role, a woman who is not only a survivor in her own right but is also forced to become a soldier’s savior, is the same character I strived to capture in Chaya, Joe’s second wife. The couple meets during the liberation of Dachau where Chaya has been a prisoner. As she and Joe establish their relationship, it is Chaya’s character who relays to the reader the grotesque and raw state that is left of a man’s mind when it is short-circuited by war. Also, like Faleeha Hassan, Chaya shows the reality that is life as a refugee. During breaks in the Iraqi conflicts, Hassan taught school and became a poet. When the government took issue with her poetry and placed her name on an execution list alongside other writers, teachers, and cultural figures, Hassan fled first to Turkey where she lived in a refugee

camp before moving to the United States as an asylee. Hassan's autobiography gave me insight as to how to place Joe's and Chaya's plight as Displaced Person's within the framework of *The Match*.

*The Litany of the Long Moment* is Mary-Kim Arnold's autobiographical attempt to make sense of her unknown origins. After being found abandoned at South Korea's Dongdoochun Babies' Home in 1973, Arnold was adopted by an American family at the estimated age of two years. Kim's memoir explores her unfulfilled longing for connection to her birth mother and birth country. One avenue Arnold uses to conduct a search for the missing pieces of her life is through Korean television media, a process that requires her, the person without any of the knowledge, to respond to unanswerable questions about her infancy and lineage. Not only does the memoir recount the predictable quest of an orphan attempting to connect the missing dots of her life, but it also delves deep into the bifurcation that people of multicultural lineage experience and how the expectation that they assimilate into a single culture is an impossible feat, especially when one of the cultures is understood only at the level of the chromosome. In fact, genetic code is a powerful Siren that compels orphans and non-orphans alike to seek understanding of the self. Arnold never fully satisfies her intense desire to understand South Korea and her place in its narrative. She concludes *The Litany of the Long Moment* by admitting,

I lived two years there, and not a word comes back, not a phrase, not the  
image of a single face, not the smell of a broom-swept home –  
I want this to be something it is not,  
Holding fragments is not the same as making a broken thing whole—  
None of it familiar but wanting it to be ( Arnold 111).



I had written the character of Joe's granddaughter, Jillian, long before I read Arnold's memoir. I wrote Jillian as an orphan before I ever poured over Arnold's words about holding broken fragments and being asked unanswerable questions. But once I discovered *The Litany of the Long Moment*, I used the experience to capitalize on the sentiment and enhance Jillian's urge to push forward on her quest for knowledge about her past and her place, specifically her discovery and connection to another culture.

In *The Book of Jon*, Eleni Sikelianos wrangles the messy remnants of her father's life and compiles them into a tender, but damning elegy for a parent who began life as a brilliant and adored jester of a man, but ended it in uncertain circumstances at a filthy, rent-by-the-hour motel. After forcing the scant happy memories to the forefront and acknowledging the reality that her father died with only the contents of his pockets to his name: sunglasses, cigarettes, \$11.42, and a host of medications prescribed to treat schizophrenia, Sikelianos asks,

What did I leave out? What should I put in? The crazy Aunt (my mother's sister) with whom my father had an affair when I was three or four? All the nasty details of a life gone awry? If it is not about confessions, about catharsis, what is it about? I only have this thin slice of the life: It is from a daughter's eye..." (73).

This question, "What did I leave out?" resonated with me because I, too, have stories in which I know the details are missing, the nasty details of lives gone awry, intentionally omitted in the many re-tellings. Ebeid and Aguilar-Zéleny instructed their students, armed with the memoirs of others, to explore the genre and create a work of personal literature. Ebeid specifically asked her class to find items from the family archive, interact with them, and attempt to divine the stories the items may want to reveal. The exercise led me to a photograph.



Fig. 1 Marie Corbin-Connell at Holiday Gathering, 1955.

Taken in 1955, the 3 x 3 instamatic print depicts my paternal grandmother and her mother at a holiday gathering in the home of my grandfather's family, an affluent Old South bunch. In the background, two other females face away from the camera. One is elderly, and the other is a girl about five years old. My grandmother flashes a radiant, but seemingly forced, smile as she goes about her role as a dutiful wife putting the holiday meal on the table.

Going into the project, I knew virtually nothing about my grandmother other than the fact that my father hated her and that his hatred had something to do with my grandfather's complete and permanent mental collapse shortly after World War II. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes opines on "the Photograph as family rite" (7). He describes the fundamental elements of photographs as the *studium* and the *punctum*. *Studium* is the content and context of any photograph, but *punctum* is that element that "rises from the scene, shoots out like an arrow, and pierces" its audience (26). The *punctum* is notorious for hitting its mark long after its recipient

has stepped away from the photograph, calling her back to say, “See this. This thing right here. This has meaning.” Such was the case with my family photograph (Fig 1. Marie Corbin Connell at Holiday Gathering, 1955). A little more research into the family archive revealed the *punctum* of the photograph. Letters and telegrams sent by both my grandfather and the United States Army cobbled together the timeline of a young man who left high school in 1943 to join the Army Air Force, and who by 1944 was flying bombers over enemy territory in Europe. A crash in the final months of the war would leave him with physical and emotional scars that would never heal; nevertheless, the military patched him enough to fly a few more war-time bombing runs, then sent him home to the girl he had proposed marriage to via V-Mail (the free postal service the United States put in place during the war). In the years after the war, the pressures of married life, raising two children, and maintaining a career as a civilian airline pilot proved too much and resulted in his lengthy stay in the Georgia State Lunatic, Idiot, and Epileptic Asylum.

The *studium* in the photograph is the dutiful wife going about the business of keeping up appearances while her husband, who is already very much out of the picture, is disassociating from the life they share and all the responsibility that goes into maintaining that life. The *punctum* is the faceless figure of the elderly woman with her back to the camera, the metaphor for the prestigious Southern family that would turn its back on a woman they never perceived to be the social or economic equal to their son, leaving that young woman no choice but to seek a divorce and quickly find another husband to support her and her children. The reality of those events spiraled predictably. In the way children can twist or fabricate versions of a narrative, my father never accepted his father’s disability. He blamed his mother for divorcing the violent, insane man and never forgave her for tearing the family apart. Undeniably my grandfather

suffered from post-traumatic stress that went untreated after the war. Like a stone hitting the water, the collateral damage ripples across our family to this day.

Like every naive war bride, Louise Herman, in *The Match*, pinned her life on the expectation that her husband would return home a hero and take up his role as protector and provider with the same masculinity he had employed to win a war. Upon discovering the truth, Louise is forced to shoulder the ruined soldier's responsibilities and stitch together a life with the scant resources available to single mothers in the 1950s. Decades later, his granddaughter, with all the perspective of a child short on details and adult experiences, blames Joe for tearing the family apart. When she finally pours over the V-Mail and hears the eye-witness accounts of history, she concedes that the half-truths and murky snippets of hearsay that passed for family history are only pale versions of reality.

Poet Simon Ortiz writes,

Survival This Way

Survival, I know how this way.  
This way, I know.  
It rains.  
Mountains and canyons and plants  
grow.  
We travelled this way,  
gauged our distance by stories  
and loved our children.  
We taught them  
to love their births.  
We told ourselves over and over  
again  
“We shall survive this way.”(28).

When the war changed the course of Joe Herman's life, it changed the life of every person connected to him. The commonality of *Antigone Gonzalez*, *War and Me*, *The Litany of the Long Moment*, *The Book of Jon* and the photograph of Marie Corbin Connell is laced

throughout *The Match*. It is the message that women play a unique role at the end of conflict. Notwithstanding the fact that their own lives have been interrupted, and in some cases interrupted many times over, women become the gatherers of remnants: remnants of a prior life, remnants of information, remnants of shared culture. In their attempts to restore order and function to post-conflict reality, women knit these remnants to new narratives and new endings.

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# THE MATCH

## PART ONE

*Germany 1944*

AUFMERKSAMKEIT! Deine nummer anzeigen!

Chaya Ashe heard the command shouted up and down the tracks. Attention! Display your number!

“We arrived. The end of the line.” The words croaked from someone’s parched throat.

“They’re opening the cars.” A man next to her whispered. No sooner had he gotten the words out than a hand clamped down tightly over his mouth and nose. Another jabbed him violently in the back.

“Where are we?” An old woman at the other end of the car asked, but no one answered.

Three days earlier, Chaya and her husband, Jozef were detainees at Westerbork prison when the SS burst into the cell blocks ordering everyone out into the cold night. Alongside the prison idled a train, fifteen cars long.

“Board! The evacuation transport is leaving! If you hope to leave here, get on the train.” Guards shoved the prisoners into the cars.

Whispers meandered among the captives.

“You see how they are panicked?”

“Why are they calling it an evacuation?”

“They are not organized. The Allies must be nearby.”

That fact that the young guards were rushed and not as violent as usual, coupled with rumors of recently intensified bombing by the British Royal Air Force, gave credence to the speculation that the long-anticipated Allied invasion was underway.

For these reasons, Chaya, Jozef, and their fellow prisoners complied somewhat willingly as they scrambled to the train yard. Chaya looked into the darkness at the end of platform for a sign of the invasion in the distances and prayed the transport would never make it to the notorious camps in Germany.

“Maybe the Allies will get there first and liberate them.” She said aloud.

Jozef was one of the first to jump into the car, before turning to pull Chaya in behind him. He dragged her quickly to the corner, staking claim to the spot he knew would offer both fresh air and a partial view during the journey. Jozef pressed Chaya face-first into the corner, then wrapped himself around her for shared warmth. The car filled to capacity behind them, then filled more, compressing the couple into the walls of the boxcar until at last the doors slammed shut and the clamping of metal locks echoed up and down the track.

Slowly the over-loaded train gathered momentum as it pulled away from the prison platform. Chaya watched the Dutch countryside flash by the narrow cracks between the boards, first in dark streaks, then in pastel blurs of pink, blue, and, yellow at dawn. The train made frequent stops, some lasting hours, but the prisoners always remained locked in the cars with no food or water. They had no place to relieve themselves anywhere but where they stood. As the second night settled over the land, the train stopped in a rural, heavily forested area, further bolstering hope for rescue.

“Perhaps the border with Germany is already closed?” A voice from the corner mused. Speculation swirled as to whether they would have to walk home or if the Allies would move

them back to Belgium or as far as France, areas that were reportedly already abandoned by the heinous Germans. Hungry and dehydrated they waited in the frigid forest, contemplating freedom. After more than two hours the doors of the squalid train cars remained locked. When *das captors* could be heard making camp outside the cars, building fires to warm themselves, and pissing into the slats of the train cars, any hope that the Allies were near faded.

One prisoner said what many were thinking. “We are behind German lines. Otherwise, they’d never be so conspicuous with the fires.” The cars grew quiet, grim.

“Darling,” Chaya whispered. “Change places with me. Take a turn at the fresh air. We must try to move our legs. Come on, slowly, let’s turn.” The cramping in her calves had burned for hours but flared more intensely as she turned from the corner to face her husband and wrap her arms around his waist. She could feel the tension in the muscles of Jozsef’s back. He was stone and ice, but she had no tears to cry for him. Only her soul moaned for the pain she knew he was in physically and emotionally.

“How can this be happening?” Chaya leaned her head to Jozsef’s chest and wondered to herself. “Who betrayed us? Why? This close to the end, what could anyone hope to gain?” Her despair compounded. “It could only be the papers. Three days until we had those papers. Was that so much time for G-d to manage? Three days to get the documents and the passage.”

Chaya looked up into Jozsef’s face. His eyes were closed, but his head tilted forward almost imperceptibly. “Think of something beautiful. Right now, Chaya. Don’t make yourself more miserable than necessary, my love.”

This man, her Jozsef, had been able to read her mind from the beginning. As teenagers in Raalte, he’d antagonized her to no end, teasing her for stealing glimpses of him in high school.

“You’re in love with me.” He smirked. She’d name a half dozen other boys she claimed to love and would make a point to bicycle home with one of his chums, circling the schoolyard until she was sure Jozsef saw the two of them leaving together.

At University, he’d show up at her door with chocolate and fresh pencils just at the moment she was thinking of quitting altogether. Study breaks he called them. Breaks that usually lasted through several drinks and late into the night, but always ended with him convincing her to finish school and pursue a career.

“You’re right. I’m meant for city life. There’s no future for a girl like me back home in that farm town, Raalte.” She professed.

When Chaya secured her first job offer, an administrative position in Zwolle, she walked up and down Jozsef’s street all morning, hoping for the chance to run into him and deliver the news. It was only when she saw his brother, Karl, returning from his early morning shift at the family’s bakery, that she learned Jozsef had left for Zwolle the day before.

“He didn’t tell you? And here I thought you two were friendly.” Karl mocked her. “Honestly, I just learned about it yesterday. He got a job in a factory there, salt-making, I think. It was a sudden thing. He’ll be back around to gather his things. I’m sure he planned to tell you then. Don’t be mad at him.”

A warm feeling came over Chaya and she smiled brightly like her life was unfolding splendidly before her eyes. “I’m not mad, Karl. I’m happy. Good for Jozsef. Who knows, maybe I’ll run into him there one day.” They were married a month later.

The memories of those days faded, and Chaya’s mind settled back into the cold, dark train car.

“Dance with me, Jozsef.” She cooed, pressing him to shift his weight. They turned silently in place, then she peeled him away from her, forcing him to face the corner and breathe air untainted with urine and death sentences.

Someone from the car next to their’s yelled in German, “Have mercy, brothers. We need water! Let us out.”

Up and down the line, other voices joined him, “Please! Bitte! Wasser!”

“Give us water!”

“Don’t leave us here to freeze to death. Just a bit of water. We need water.”

Machine gun fire electrified the night, riddling the first complainer’s boxcar. The gunman then swept his weapon back and forth lacing large holes into the other cars. When the shooting ceased, moans and the occasional garbled coughs of someone drowning in his own blood could be heard. Everyone listened, anticipating another sound, one that never came. The bodies had been packed so tightly, there was no room for the dead to collapse.

The night resumed its silence except for the sound of a wet, clumpy snow that began to fall, taunting the prisoners as it hit the train but failed to accumulate enough for the moisture to fall through.

Sunbeams eventually found their way through the slats and blast holes in the box cars providing illumination but no warmth. Over the ringing that still tormented ears, the faint prayers of a prisoner begging G-d to save them became audible. Up and down the train, prisoners roused from hypothermic dreams to the sound of a futile prayer. They went wide eyed, searching the faces around them for a solution. Heads shook, and mouths went taugth with fear and loathing.

“It’s coming from the next car. Right next to us.” Chaya realized. She shut her eyes tightly, squeezed Jozef to her, and willed the man to stop, to save himself, to save them all just by shutting up. “For G-d’s sake shut up!” She pleaded silently.

The crunch of boots on frozen grass approached and circled the neighboring train car. Still, the man prayed. The boots circled. The man prayed a bit louder. The boots clicked to a stop just outside the wall where Jozef and Chaya huddled. The man prayed.

“He has a death wish,” Chaya decided. “He wants to end this for himself, for all of us. Maybe he’s right. Why should we give them the satisfaction of delivering us to the camp? Force us to work for the Reich?”

Slowly Jozef began to rock, *shokeling* in a silent prayer of solidarity. One by one men around him shifted their weight to join him. The swaying and wordless prayer continued even as they heard the commotion come from the next car. Someone covered the praying man’s mouth, which only caused him to voice his intentions louder than a whisper, garbling more muffled prayers. Next, the soft tussle of men attacking their fellow prisoner resonated from the car. They beat him unconscious, perhaps to death, hardly making a sound in the process. The soldier’s steps sounded once more on the frozen ground, and Chaya prayed he rejoin his comrades around the fire. Jozef and the other men stopped swaying, stopped praying. Everyone listened.

“Let me help you,” the Nazi called out. “I will help you calm your noisy friend.” The brutish laugh of the guard preceded the report of a rifle. There was another shot, and another, and another. Twenty rounds pocked the railcars. Chaya swallowed a scream, wrapped her arms tighter around her husband, and buried her face into Jozef’s back. When the shooting ceased, prisoners up to three cars on either side of the noise mentally scanned their bodies for an

indication of where the bullets had landed. Chaya felt it first. A wheeze. It rattled Jozsef's chest, just before the tell-tale whimper rose in his throat.

There was no stifling the scream as she ran her hands up and down Jozsef's torso until she felt the sticky warmth at his collarbone. She pressed her face into the space between his shoulder blades, sticking her fingers into the wound in an effort to hold the blood in. She wailed his name over and over. The guard laughed manically on the other side of the train car wall and fired into the air. Jozsef slumped into the corner, and Chaya felt his life leave.

Frantically she wedged her body between his and the train, using the corner to help her prop him up. When she had him positioned, secure in her arms, she turned his face to hers. Chaya leaned her head against the wall and stared into her husband's lifeless eyes. There just to the side of where his head leaned against the train car was a hole, the bullet hole, splintered and stinking with the smell of hot wood and metal. Chaya put her eye to the hole and found the murderous guard looking back at her. Chaya knew him from her university days, an arrogant, poor student who'd taken every opportunity in class discussions to make his approval of Germany and Hitler known. He raised his rifle and pointed it at the hole. Chaya watched unblinking as his thick finger slid to the trigger and his blue eye found hers through the site.

"Pop." He said in a high-pitched, cartoonish voice, doubling over in laughter.

∞

The train jerked forward around noon, and sometime during the third night, it arrived at its final station. Still pressed into her dead husband's frozen corpse, Chaya listened to the thud of one lock after another open and the doors of the rail cars swing wide to the fresh shouts of Nazis charged with unloading and inventorying the cargo. When she made no effort to move, someone

tugged at her, but Chaya remained fused with Jozsef, preferring that the Germans kill her in the train car, with her beloved husband in her arms.

“Form three lines! Display your number! Line up! Number! Display your number.”

Interspersed with the guards’ commands, Jozsef’s last words came to her.

“Don’t make yourself more miserable than necessary, my love.”

She took her husband’s face in her hands and kissed him. Over and over, as the prisoners filed out and flopped to the ground behind her, she pressed her lips to his face until she sensed only an empty train car behind her. Jozsef’s body collapsed with a hard knock of his skull on the floor as Chaya turned to face the open door.

The guard, the one who killed her husband, waited for her at the edge of the car, the student from her university, Hanson Furchner. She remembered his name. Hanson Furchner. She saw the recognition in his expression and the smile as he watched her leap from train.

“Oh! Hallo there, Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!” He taunted her in the same, high-pitched voice. He leaned into the train car behind her, looking left then right. “Hallo! Anyone else? Let’s go! Everyone off!” Taking the butt of his rifle, Hanson Furchner shoved Chaya violently into a cluster of prisoners waiting nearby.

Over the course of the journey from Westerbork, feces and urine froze on the passengers’ legs and on the floors of the train cars making it difficult to shuffle out and climb down. Anyone who stumbled or fell during their dismount from the train was ordered to assemble in an area just outside of the prison. The rest, Chaya Ashe among them, marched through the gates of Dachau.



## CHAPTER 1

*Chicago, 2004*

*May 1, 1945*

*Dear Pops,*

*You're moldering in the grave and will never even read this. Hell, the censors wouldn't let it see the light of day anyway. It's just that I've got to tell someone. Not just someone. You. I need to tell you, Pop, what I've done. Why I did it and why, no matter what the Army wants to do to me, why I'd do it all over again. Who else would understand?*

Hands gnarled by arthritis and blotched with the deep crimson bruises of thin blood folded the brittle sheets of paper and placed them back in an envelope. The hunched figure turned the packet over on the table, rubbed a fingertip slowly across the address, then dropped the letter in a narrow metal box and locked that with a small brass key.

The bank's vault attendant stood in the corner of the marble and granite room, watching but seemingly without much interest. It was a scene that played out about once every two weeks. A customer would enter the bank, produce identification, and proceed to the vault to retrieve some item from one of a hundred boxes that lined the walls – or as was the case today, place some item in one of the boxes.

After several minutes the elderly customer straightened and motioned for the attendant to return the safety deposit box to its slot. Satisfied that it was secure, the short figure removed a handkerchief from a coat pocket, mopped at the corners of large, dark eyes, then shuffled slowly from the vault, across the lobby, and out the doors.

## CHAPTER 2

*Jillian*  
*St. Louis, 2005*

The plastic bags dug painfully into the scars on Jillian's right arm as she fumbled in her crossbody bag with her left hand for the key to her condominium. Forcing a puff of air from her bottom lip in an effort to move the wayward strands of hair that had fallen in her eyes, she raised a knee to brace the bag, but that was of no help. The desperate groping for the key, she was forced to acknowledge, was proving futile. Jillian let the bags slide from her wrist and fall to the floor with an ominous crack.

"No! Please don't be broken." She inspected the contents of the bag for any damage. "Oh, thank God." Her mouth watered thinking of that first sip of cabernet. The key. It was all that stood between her and a much-needed quiet night alone. She removed a bundle of mail she'd been holding her right arm and clamped it between her knees so that she was free to use both hands to plumb to the depths of the purse in earnest.

"Yes!" In less-than-fluid movement she held open the door, scooped up the grocery bags, and waddled in the entryway with the mail still tucked between her knees.

The smell greeted her before she was fully across the threshold, telling her there would be no quiet night alone. She opened her knees, letting the mail cascade across the narrow entryway, then kicked the door shut behind her. Straightening she checked her face in the small mirror that hung just beside the door.

"Smile." She commanded in a whisper to the reflection. Then louder, projecting to the back of the apartment from where the aromas wafted, "You're still here, squatter?" A man's laugh was the reply. Jillian made her way to the kitchen where she hoisted the shopping bags onto the counter.

“Squatter? What’s that about? You want me to take my stew and go?” Tom asked not looking up from the pot he was stirring on the stove.

“Well, I just thought after being here all weekend, you’d want a night or two at your place? What kind of soup is that?” Jillian stood behind Tom and peeked around his shoulder to inspect dinner. The scent of Tom’s citrus cologne mixing with the herbs simmering the pot made Jillian suddenly hungry for dinner and one more night in with Tom.

“Not soup. Stew. Squirrel stew.”

“Stop!” Jillian yelled in mock horror and set about opening the bottle of cabernet.

“Well, it would be if we were in The Lick, but since we’re stuck in the big city, I had to use chicken.”

Jillian tensed at the mention of The Lick, irked that Tom was finding more and more ways to work his sleepy hometown into their conversations these days.

“Ah yes, Licking, Missouri. God’s country.” She said neither concealing nor especially emphasizing the sarcasm.

“That’s just about right. I told my dad I’d come down this weekend and help him separate the calves from the mamas. You want to ride along? A weekend in the country air would –“ Tom turned from the stove just in time to see Jillian’s grimace. “Oh! Sorry. Yeah, it sounds bad. It’s just – well, it has to be done, Jill. It’s healthy for them both.”

“I know. I mean I don’t know, but sure. Mamas and their babies have to be separated. That’s how it works, but to answer your question, no I don’t want to ride along. I think it’s pretty obvious from our last trip to the Lick that I’d never make a good country girl. Besides, you should enjoy time with your dad. If I was there, I’d just be underfoot, in your mom’s way.”

“You wouldn’t. She loves you, but I guess you’re right. It will be a busy weekend, long days for dad and me. You might get bored.”

The stew paired beautifully with the rustic bread Tom had brought and with the wine that was Jillian’s sole contribution to the meal. A little buzzed, full, and relieved that Tom did not bring up any more of the family farm atrocities he so enjoyed, Jillian lay across the sofa with her feet in Tom’s lap after dinner.

“What’s that?” Tom pointed to the mail scattered in front of the door.

“Oh yeah.” She sighed and got up to retrieve the mail. Rifling through the envelopes she called out, “Junk. Junk. Credit card application aka junk. Ju- wait? What’s this?”

Tom had found the Cardinals game on television. Jillian threaded a finger through the flap, pulled the envelope open in jagged rips, and removed a single sheet of paper.

“What in the hell?” She said quietly, but in a way that roused Tom from his sports hypnosis.

“What’s that?”

“This letter.” Jillian’s brow furrowed as she re-read it.

“Bad news?” Tom’s eyes darted between Jillian and the close-up shot of the pitcher reading signals from his catcher.

“It’s from a law office in Chicago. It says Joe Herman wants them to deliver something to me.”

“Who’s Joe Herman?”

“Nobody. I mean. Just a guy I knew when I was a kid.” Jillian sighed and looked at Tom. “Joe Herman is – was - my father’s father.”

“So,” Tom processed what she said. “So, he’s your grandfather?”

“No.” Jillian took off determinedly to the kitchen where she put the junk mail, along with the attorney’s letter into the trash. She paced a few minutes, then returned to sit next to Tom. “He was my father’s biological dad, but he abandoned my grandmother when my dad was just an infant. In fact, my dad never even met the guy.”

“So why would he try to connect with you now?”

“I – I don’t know what he wants. We – we have no connection at all.”

“But you knew him as a kid?”

“I met him. Once.”

“And I’m guessing it didn’t go well?” Tom held up his end of the conversation while remaining focused on the game.

“That’s an understatement. He showed up when my grandmother died and – well, to put in plainly, he robbed me. He took everything. They were still legally married. Even though he abandoned her, they never divorced. No clue how that happens, but – anyway, since he was the husband, he got everything.” Jillian huffed. “Not everything. Not me. He wanted nothing to do with me. He’s reason I ended up in foster care.”

“Damn.” Tom turned to look at her. “This *is* a bad dude. And what’d that letter say?”

“It’s from some lawyer. They want me to contact them to discuss something he wants me to have.” Jillian pulled her legs under her and crossed her arms into a tight self-hold. Absently she brought one hand to her mouth and chewed the edge of her thumbnail. The next minute, she unfolded, slapped both hands on her knees, and jumped from the sofa. “Alrighty then.” She paced the small living room then aimed herself for the kitchen announcing, “I’m going to open another bottle of wine. Want some?”

In the solitude of the kitchen, tears brimmed in Jillian's eyes as she reached for the wine glasses still drying on the dishrack. Narrow pink welts arranged in a ladder-rung formation on the inside of her forearm peeked from the sleeve of her sweater and caught her eye.

After taking several deep breaths, with the wine and stemware in hand, Jillian returned to the living room in pursuit of the buzz that would blur the memories that the lawyer's letter had conjured and erase all thought of Joe Herman from her evening.

### CHAPTER 3

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1944*

“Lou-ise! Wake up! You should have been downstairs an hour ago, helping me.” The shrill woman gave the roller shade in each window an aggressive yank. Bright sun flooded the room searing Louise’s eyes through her still-closed lids. She rolled slowly away from the window, pulling the bedspread over her head as she did.

“I’m not telling you again. Uncle Raymond and Margaret will be here any minute.” Louise’s mother screeched.

She listened to the clap of the petite woman’s kitten heels marching to the closet followed by the metallic slide of hangars across the bar as the woman filed through the dresses. There was more clapping, then the soft flap of a garment hitting her feet through the quilt.

“Get up.” Her mother was tense, bordering on vicious. “You’re wearing this dress to the luncheon. You’ll need to pack cosmetics in your train case- everything you will need to make yourself presentable this evening. Daddy is having your ballgown and gloves steamed and delivered to the club this afternoon. Are you listening to me Louise? There won’t be enough time for us to come back home between the card party and the dinner, so we’ll dress for the dinner dance in the ladies’ lounge. Louise!”

She slammed back the blanket with both arms and squinted in the bright light. “Yes, ma’am.” She said in an overly deferential tone.

“Get dressed and be downstairs before Margaret gets here so you can keep her entertained. Perhaps you can offer to help her with her hair. God only knows what it will look like this time.”

Knowing her mother was not to be defied, Louise extracted herself from the comfort of the bed. The sun reached through the windows in distinguishable rays, like fingers delicately caressing the whitewashed plank flooring of the attic-turned-bedroom.

“Jimminy! Not that yellow thing.” The dress her mother had laid out was not at all the look Louise had been cultivating since her graduation from high school earlier that year. She endeavored to look as much like her favorite Hollywood idols as possible. She’d spent hours flipping through the pages of *Charm* and *Bazaar* magazines while sitting at the sewing machine in her father’s dry-cleaning shop. She’d taught herself to mimic the cuts of the starlets’ lapels, straight skirts, and rising hemlines, adeptly crafting exact replicas of the sophisticated numbers worn by Carol Lombard, Elizabeth Taylor, and Vivienne Leigh. With her dark hair, blue eyes, and flawless skin, Louise was frequently told that she bore a good resemblance to the latter two. Her wardrobe was the envy of every girl she knew.

Louise dressed quickly, knowing any protest to the dress would be futile. “I look like a walking, talking tub of margarine,” she said to her reflection in the full-length mirror.

Hearing the sound of a car doors closing in the driveway underneath her window, Louise pulled back the sheer curtains to peek out of the dormer windows. “I wonder what on earth Manly Margaret is wearing to this shin-dig? Dungarees if she thought she could get away with it.”

If she was being honest, Louise thought her only girl cousin looked better in pants. A straight skirt was out of the question for Margaret’s wide hips, and even the most well-pressed pleats flared at odd angles. The effect was that Margaret, who was not particularly fat, looked twice her size in a dress.



From her birds-eye view above the driveway, Louise grimaced at the sight of Margaret's hair pulled into the same slick, thin ponytail she always wore. Margaret's hair would certainly not pass her own mother's inspection.

"For the love of Pete, you would think Margaret would want to put forth some effort and primp a little bit. I don't care if she doesn't have a mother." Louise's mother had balked last Easter when Uncle Raymond and Margaret joined them for brunch at the club. "Some sort of hygiene should just come naturally to a girl."

Other family members had chimed in over the years, smiling and saying gingerly that Margaret was a little tomboy because, bless her heart, her momma died, and she had been raised by her daddy who didn't know what to do with a girl. Then everyone would pointedly change the subject.

Only eleven months younger than Louise, Margaret should have been interested in the same things that interested Louise. They had been forced to play together at every family event since they were old enough to walk, and it was not as if Louise disliked Margaret. She simply had nothing in common with her cousin and dreaded spending this particular afternoon and evening with Margaret in tow at the USO fundraisers.

Businessmen from all over Eastern Missouri, vying for government contracts, were sponsoring the event at the Norwood Hills Country Club that evening. Uncle Raymond managed a tannery on the Missouri river and had implored Louise's father, who was on the Board of Directors at Norwood, to get him invited so that he could position his company to supply more leather for gun holsters, belts, boots, and straps.

"Two buses of soldiers are coming up from Fort Leonard Wood." Her father was explaining to Raymond when Louise entered the kitchen. "The freshest batch of draftees

shipping off to the front lines, and the brahmins of Norwood Hills are determined to treat them to a fine evening. This group tonight is made up of soldiers who were selected to attend because they showed a certain aptitude during their training. We're even handing out prizes in the form of war bonds to two of them for especially notable achievements."

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"Have you ever seen so much red, white, and blue?" Louise asked Margaret as they crossed the foyer of the club making their way to the sunroom where the luncheon and bridge tables were set up. Inside and out the place was festooned in patriotic garlands and flags.

"It looks like the Fourth of July vomited all over the place," Margaret chortled.

Quite by design and collusion, Margaret and Louise were bridge partners and managed to get eliminated in the first round of the tournament. The girls shook hands as they exited the sunroom, Margaret heading for the lounge to spend the afternoon reading Hardy Boy novels while Louise made a beeline for the pool deck.

There was no time for swimming between bridge and dinner, but it was a nice enough day for the young people to sit outside and visit. Throughout the afternoon, as they were eliminated from the tournament, Louise's best girlfriends all found their way to the pool, as would the few young boys from her high school who remained in town. Most boys Louise's age left immediately following their graduation. For what seemed like ages, Louise and her mother had been dropping off homemade cakes and cards to the families of the boys with whom she'd grown up. After each of the visits, Louise's mother was irritable and incredulous.

"It's impossible for me to believe the Army would want David carrying a gun. He can't even walk and chew gum at the same time." Or "Did you see that boy's arms, Lou-

Lou? Matchsticks! How is he going to be any good in a war? He'll blow away with the first gust of wind to hit that ship."

She knew her mother's harsh criticism of their friends' sons stemmed from her own embarrassment. Louise's brother was tall, handsome, and strong, but he had been born with a clubbed foot which rendered him unfit for the military. One morning as he left for work at the dry-cleaning shop owned by their father, her brother attempted a joke about doing his part in the war effort not by *wearing* the uniform, but by *Martinizing* it.

"Don't you dare make this any worse than it is!" Their mother snapped. "Everyone is aware of your condition. It's not a joke at a time like this when our country needs *able*-bodied men." The shattered look on her brother's face as he shuffled out the door that morning made Louise's heart ache.

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At four o'clock two olive green buses turned in the wide ironwork gates and slowly navigated the driveway to the main clubhouse. Louise and her friends rushed to the fence to watch the able-bodied men file off the buses and line up like a wall of tan dominos. Goosebumps broke out on Louise's arms and tears brimmed in her eyes.

"Gosh! They are handsome," she said to no one in particular.

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A black man in a white server's jacket, black bowtie, and white gloves sounded a delicate bell that brought the din of the room to a hush. As the President of the club approached the podium, a host of other black men in white coats, bowties, and white gloves moved silently between the table clearing the plates and pouring coffee.

Several men, Uncle Raymond included, made speeches laden with patriotic-speak and optimism. A five-star general expressed the Army's gratitude for Missouri's enthusiastic and important support, and just before the orchestra took command of the evening, the presentation portion concluded with two of the soldiers being recognized for extraordinary efforts and ingenuity during training.

The first young man earned unusually high scores in marksmanship and would go from Missouri to North Carolina where he would receive specialty training for what the General termed sharpshooters. The second soldier to receive recognition was Private Joe Herman whose adjustment to the army-issued rifles prevented jamming and allowed the soldiers to reload faster. The head brass was so impressed when word of the enhancement reached them, that they had ordered the equipment adjustment across all its units. Like the soldier recognized before him, Private Herman received a ribbon and fifty dollars in war bonds for his contribution. Before dismissing Private Herman to his seat, the five-star General attempted to engage the young soldier in friendly banter.

"I bet you feel good going into the arena with the latest model of the weapon, don't you soldier?"

Joe nodded, then remembering himself added, "Yes sir!"

"We're lucky to have you in our army. You and your engineering skills." Joe humbly told the room full of people how he had learned the trick with his own hunting rifle back on the family farm in Rhineland, Missouri, and how he never imagined the small change would have such an impact on the war effort.

"Honestly, I don't know how someone didn't think of it before. It's just – well just a small rotation of the -" Something in the General's expression made Joe fumble, unsure of how

to finish his explanation. The young soldier dipped his chin and held it there a fraction too long, then he looked out over the room sheepishly, in James Dean fashion, complete with a bashful smile. The collective swoon of the women in the ballroom was palpable. Louise was in love.

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The band director raised his arms and the room burst alive with an impressive rendition of Benny Goodman's *Taking a Chance on Love*. Older couples wasted no time making their way to the parquet dance floor, but with most of the eligible young men in the area already deployed, some of the girls found themselves waiting several songs for a dance partner. Not Louise. Song after song, she twirled radiantly in her midnight blue, strapless ball gown with a red ribbon sash cinching her shapely waist. Her patriotic look was completed with a pair of white satin elbow-length gloves. She danced every dance with one then another of the visiting soldiers, but try as she might, she could not position herself close enough to Private Herman who stayed surrounded by girls who all of a sudden had developed an insatiable interest in rifle adaptations.

Louise and Private Herman made eye contact several times during the night, but he never made the slightest effort to ask her to dance. At first Louise was perplexed, then irked. While no one had ever accused her of being conceited, Louise knew she was attractive. She was accustomed to a lot of attention from the boys in her high school and even some of the college-aged men at the country club over the last few years. Not being asked to dance by the one soldier she most wanted to meet that evening was dampening her spirits.

When the band ended its first set, Louise made her way out of the ballroom intending to freshen her make-up and get off her feet for a few moments in the ladies' lounge only to find it did not provide any respite. The small rooms of the lounge were already hot and crowded when

she got there. Girls chattered excitedly about the dances and the soldiers, especially the handsome Private Herman who had won the award.

Louise's mood soured even more. She paused in the middle of applying fresh lipstick to tell the reflections of the other girls in the mirror, "Be careful, sisters! Private Herman might be some sort of wolf in sheep's clothing, trying to play the room. I haven't seen him dance once. Have you? He just goes from one girl to the next bragging about that award."

"I hope he comes to brag to me next!" A girl called from one of the stalls behind the dressing table causing the room to erupt with giggles.

"Yeah! He can brag to me all night if he wants to."

"Gosh! That smile of his!" Another moaned.

Louise snapped her lipstick shut and left the lounge determined to make her way back out to the pool where she knew some of her riskier friends would be gathering to smoke and pass around a flask of brandy. When she opened the door leading into the hall, she started. Private Joe Herman leaned casually against the oak-paneled phone booth holding two champagne glasses. Louise stiffened and gave him the slightest smile, her heart sinking as she took in the two glasses.

"He's waiting for someone in the lounge," she thought. Lifting the hem of her dress, she started to pass him, but Herman stepped into the center of the hall, preventing her from going any further. Louise stepped to the side and waited for him to move around her, but he remained standing in the middle of the narrow hallway.

"I was beginning to think you'd never come out of there."

"I beg your pardon?" She said, looking back to see if anyone followed her out of the lounge. Seeing no one, she asked, "Are you waiting for someone?"

“Yes, ma’am.” Herman offered her one of the glasses. “You look thirsty.”

Suddenly Louise’s old confidence came rushing back. Her mood lifted tremendously as did her eyebrow in just the way she had seen Vivian Leigh do it.

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Louise grew lightheaded at the thought of Private Herman’s eyes on her backside as they ascended a stairwell that opened onto the main level of the club. She led him to a dimly lit, mostly empty area of the sunroom where the card party had taken place earlier.

When they heard the band resume with Tommy Dorsey’s *It Started All Over Again*, the couple remained seated, knees-to-knees, talking.

“That band leader has some sense of humor.” Louise laughed, glad that Private Herman had not suggested returning to the ballroom where she’d have to share him with the other girls. She enjoyed having him all to herself and was amazed how their at-first awkward small talk fell quickly into a friendly, jovial conversation as if they had been friends for years. He was her age almost to the day, an only child whose mother had passed away when he was still a boy. She told him about her cousin Margaret having had the same experience.

“Yeah, well, I understand that. It’s just my pops and me. We get along pretty swell for two old bachelors.”

Louise pointed out her mother and brother across the portion of the ballroom that was visible from where they sat. She explained that her father was one of the men who had been on the dais that evening during the speeches.

“Yeah, I remember him. Impressive man. Y’all live here, in St. Louis?” Joe asked.

“Yes. Where’s home for you? I believe you said Rhineland, Missouri? Is that far from St. Louis?”

“Not too. Pops and I have a farm there.” Louise notices the shadow that cross his tanned, chiseled face. “Not sure how he’s going to run it without me there. I scaled down everything as much as I could before I left, but I’ll be wanting to get back to it as soon as I can. Pops’ll be anxious to see it don’t sit fallow too long.”

“Won’t you be going to college when you return from the war?” Louise probed.

“Not if I can help it,” He chuckled. “I’ll be expanding the farm. It’s full-time work. We were just starting to see some real profits in the last two years. You know, with the war effort and all.”

They talked about the war in the naive way young people with no frame of reference talk about such things. Louise explained that her mother had plans for her to attend finishing school next year.

“My cousin Margaret and I are going together. I’m sure it will be almost as bad as fighting Germans,” she tried to joke.

Joe said he had never heard of finishing school and did not challenge her on the statement. In turn, she contrived enough interest in firearms adjustments to get him talking about it which led to him talking a great deal about hunting and fishing with his father.

Working hard to impress him, Louise offered, “My father and brother go dove hunting each year. They belong to the Huntsman’s Club. Do you know it?”

“I dove hunt, occasionally, but no, I can’t say that I know of any club. I just hunt with my Pops. Deer, boar, squirrel, turkey, stuff with some meat on the bone. Does your dad ever hunt near Rhineland? We have some of the best dove fields in the state.”

Louise confessed she had no idea where her father hunted. Undeterred, Joe launched into a description of the Missouri countryside. His version of the area left Louise imagining scenes of



the English manor houses she had seen in paintings at the museum, estates surrounded by trout-filled rivers, pastures speckled with wildflowers, and docile animals in neat pens.

She studied Joe as he spoke. As the night wore on, his James Dean features in a military uniform were more intoxicating than the champagne.

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“Louise!” The especially pinched tone of her mother’s voice signaled the woman was furious about something. Louise grabbed Joe’s arm and led him quickly out a side door onto a patio overlooking the golf cart path. She turned abruptly so that the two of them were face to face, closed her eyes, lifted her chin, and leaned subtly forward just as she had practiced with her mirror in her little attic bedroom after seeing Irene Dunn use the move on Cary Grant in *My Favorite Wife*. The diffused light coming through the ballroom windows behind her and the faint music lilting out into the night air made the ideal setting for their first kiss - and a second, longer more passionate one. Finally, Louise pushed away and exhaled deeply with her eyes still closed. The kissing scene with Irene Dunn and Cary Grant had faded to black, which now left Louise unsure of what to do next. Finally, she said, “Private Herman -”

“Joe. I’m just Joe, Louise.” Her heart exploded at the sound of her name spoken so tenderly by this handsome man.

“Joe.” A smile broke across her face, “My mother is going to turn this place inside out looking for me. I have to go back in there.”

He offered his arm, but she led the way to a bank of French doors that opened into the ballroom. They joined the other couples beside the dance floor without any unwanted observation, or so Louise assumed.

In under a second, she spied her mother beckoning to her from across the ballroom where she stood next to Uncle Raymond. They both looked distraught. Raymond ran a hand over his sweaty bald head, looking around over the heads of people walking past them until he saw Louise. He flapped his hand motioning for her to hurry over. Louise wished Joe would leave and not witness whatever was about to happen, but he stayed by her side.

“Where have you been, darling?” Her mother demanded with a forced politeness, pointedly ignoring Private Herman.

“Here, the whole time, dancing. Why? Is something the matter?”

“I’ve been looking for you for over half an hour and you were not here the whole time. You most certainly were not on that dance floor.” Her mother said through a thin smile. “And how rude of you not to introduce this soldier, Louise. Surely, I raised you better than that.”

Louise introduced Joe just as she had been taught to do in etiquette classes, “Uncle Raymond, mother, I would like you to meet Private Joe Herman. He is the soldier who won the award this evening for his important invention.”

“Pleased to meet you, Private. Outstanding work,” Raymond shook Joe’s hand vigorously.

Louise’s mother softened only enough to say, “Congratulations, young man.” Turning to glare at her daughter, “Louise, I would like to have a word with you. Let’s step away so we don’t bore the gentlemen.” Just inside the grand entrance, she revealed the source of her aggravation, “Margaret has outdone herself this time, Louise. I thought it was understood you were to keep tabs on her tonight.” Her mother looked at her suspiciously. “You need to get your things together. Daddy is having the car brought around.”

Relief washed over Louise upon finding out she was not the one in her mother's crosshairs, but it was immediately followed by fear.

"What's wrong with Margaret? I don't want to leave now. No one else is leaving. Why should we?"

The woman looked over Louise's shoulder, then over her own before leaning in close to whisper, "Margaret is drunk!" Her mother spat the word drunk with an expression so abysmal that Louise almost burst into laughter but composed herself when her mother's eyes met hers. "She's been in the bar all night. Apparently finishing every drink anyone left unattended. Can you imagine anything more wretched? The waiters came and found me after she vomited and passed out. Why wasn't she with you?" The irate, beady-eyed woman stared accusingly at Louise. "We could not find you anywhere."

"Don't be mad at me. It wasn't my idea to bring her to something like this. I've been in the ballroom - or the ladies lounge all evening. Ask anyone. You know Margaret. You can't force her to participate in dinners and dances. And why should we have to leave? Uncle Raymond should take her home."

"He needs help with her, Louise! She's an obscene mess. We have to get her home and clean her up. *Change her clothes*. You understand? You know that falls to us."

Louise stopped and looked back to where she had left Joe and her uncle. Raymond seemed to be doing all the talking, not even noticing that Joe was watching Louise intently. She sent him a soft smile, then raised one slender finger, signaling confidently that she would be just a minute more.

"Why don't I just ride home with Brother? He has his car here. I'll have to pack up everything Margaret and I left down in the lounge this afternoon. That's going to take some time.

Mother, I really would like to stay and say goodnight to everyone. There are only a few more dances.”

Louise saw what she had said about packing up the cosmetic totes and luncheon clothes was resonating with her mother. Finally, the woman consented but gave her daughter a swift lecture on minding her reputation and not spending too much time with enlisted boys.

“They’re not your type. Especially that one. For heaven’s sake. Herman is a German name, Louise. I’m surprised they even let him serve. Stay away from him. Do you understand? He could be the enemy.”

The words struck a small flame of hatred in Louise, but she kept her mouth shut and her face blank. Her mother had acquiesced about staying at the party, and Louise did not want to give the spiteful woman a reason to ruin her night.

As soon as she saw her father’s Buick pull away from the portico of the club, Louise returned to the sunroom where she found Joe talking to one of his fellow soldiers. The other soldier had the decency to make an excuse about needing a drink and left them alone. Louise and Joe made their way back to the balcony just outside the ballroom where they would remain until the last song was played.

The evening turned out as fine as any movie Louise had ever seen. On the patio with Joe, talking, laughing, and kissing, she discovered romance unfolded just as beautifully in real life as it did on the big screen.

“I’ve never met anyone as beautiful and direct as you, Louise.” Joe said. She laughed demurely on cue. “Pops would love you! I don’t understand why it has to happen this way. Meeting you right before we’re about to ship out.” He gripped her hands tightly in his.

“Where will you have to go?”

“Europe. Pops told me all about it. He and my mother lived there - in Europe. In fact, I was born there, but I don’t remember it. They had a farm that they had to leave when I was a baby. More opportunity here, I guess.”

Louise turned his hands over in hers and inspected them.

“What are you looking for?”

Louise tilted her head back and laughed. “I’m seeing if you have farm hands. My mother gets so angry when I forget to wear gloves. She says I’ll get farm hands.” Then looking directly into his eyes, “Yours are beautiful and strong. You have the hands of a brave soldier, Joe.”

“Well, I think that is the idea.” He said sheepishly, turning his hands over and pulling them back.

As the clock struck midnight, the band leader transitioned into the last song of the night, a tune Dinah Shore had topped the charts with the year before, *You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To*.

“Should we join them for the last dance?” Louise asked.

“I don’t dance.” Joe said.

“What do you mean you don’t dance? Everyone dances.” Louise laughed.

“I don’t.” Something about the way Joe said it gave Louise pause, but she did not press him further.

Their last kiss of the evening would sustain her for weeks until she and Private Herman could meet again during his three-day leave the following month. In between the festivities at Norwood Hills and that leave, their relationship developed intensely through an exchange of almost daily letters that Louise rushed to retrieve from the postman each day, leaving her mother none the wiser.

## CHAPTER 4

*Jillian*  
*St. Louis, 2005*

Jillian bobbed her head forcefully as she stepped from her office building into the bright sun. The sunglasses slid from the top of her head and plopped perfectly on the bridge of her nose, a trick she had been doing since high school and one that always made her smirk pridefully. The two-block walk to the picnic tables in Kiener Plaza was another trick Jillian picked up in high school, after her grandmother's death. Walking, especially in the bright sun, never failed to ease her anxiety. It was this habit, specifically taking lunchtime walks in the park across from her office that led to her Tom one sunny April morning. For weeks she'd seen him jog through the park. After days of making awkward eye contact and smiling, it was Jillian who had made the first move, a small wave. Tom flipped his wrist to wave back and kept jogging. The smiles and waves went on another two weeks, then it was over. The cute jogger stopped coming to the park, and Jillian admonished herself for feeling disappointed.

“He's a stranger for the love of Pete! How could you feel like this is any sort of loss?”  
Just when she'd stopped expecting to see him again, Tom made the second move.

Entering Kiener Plaza that sunny April morning, Jillian stopped and huffed loudly. Someone was sitting in her spot, the picnic table where she always ended up after her walk and ate her lunch. From the looks of him – blue dress shirt, khaki slacks, a take-out sub sandwich still rolled in the paper on the table in front of him - he, too, was the cubicle type, taking his lunch break outside on the first truly warm day of the year. Seeing all the other tables occupied, Jillian veered toward a park bench.

“Hey!” The squatter stood and waived. “You! Lunch girl!” The squatter was waving at her.

“Did he just call me Lunch Girl? Is that the jogger!” Her stomach lurched in that way a schoolgirl’s does when her crush takes the seat beside her in assembly. Jillian weighed the situation. “Maybe he’s offering to give up my table?” She approached him but stopped what felt like a safe distance away, keeping the table between them.

“Hi. I’m Tom. And, well, I thought after all the weeks we’ve seen each other out here that we should meet and – I don’t know? Have lunch together?” He pointed at his sandwich on the table. “If it’s too creepy, I get it. I just thought – Look, I don’t really have a pickup line prepared. I mean it’s not like I can ask if you come here often because - I know you do. Come here often. Every day that it’s not raining.” He winced. “Wow. That sounds exactly like a stalker. But, you do come here. Me, too. You know that.” Clearly flustered, but not giving up, he admitted, “I didn’t really think this through.” His smile was disarming.

Jillian laughed, slung her lunch tote onto the table and took a seat opposite him. “I’m Jill. I work over there.” She pointed to the office building at the far end of the park. “So did you get hurt or what?”

“Hurt?” Tom sat down and taking his lead from Jillian began unwrapping his sandwich.

“The running. You’ve stopped running?”

“Oh! No. I’m fine. I was training for the St. Louis Marathon. My first one. That’s what I was doing when I came through each day.” He paused and held her gaze. “That’s why I didn’t stop when you tried to wave me down.”

Jillian froze, realizing that he thought she was coming on to him all those days. “I just – I wasn’t –” She was about to deny ever trying to waive him down when she saw the coy smile

playing at his mouth. The wink cinched it. He was teasing and was especially pleased he'd flustered her.

"I live over there." Tom pointed to a building opposite Jillian's office. "And I work there." He pointed and nodded to Jillian's office building, the coy smirk broadening into an adorable smile. "11<sup>th</sup> Floor. Third from the left. That's my window."

An awkward silence formed between them as they ate, but that first lunch date became two lunch dates, then three, and then four before it progressed to dinners, Cardinals games, and even a trip to Licking, Missouri to meet his family. Now, two years later, Tom rarely made the trek outside for lunch anymore, though at some point during her lunchtime walks, Jillian always smiled and waved at the third-from-the-right window on 11<sup>th</sup> floor of their building, confident that most days Tom looked out of his office window to check on her. It was Jillian's first real relationship since leaving foster care five years earlier and her only relationship aside from the one she had with her foster mom, Phyllis. But Tom was the furthest thing from her mind as she took her spot at the picnic table the afternoon after receiving letter from Joe Herman's lawyer.

She reached in her bag and extracted the envelope she'd retrieved from the kitchen trash that morning while she waited for her coffee to brew. Slowly she lifted her phone and dialed the number.

"Jillian Lloyd? Oh yes! Please hold on. I'll transfer you right now. The line will go silent for a moment, but don't hang up, ok?"

Jillian bristled at the urgency in the receptionist's tone. Clearly, she'd been told to put this call through no matter what. "This was a terrible idea," she said aloud.

"I beg your pardon?" A man on the other end of the line responded.



Jolted, she stammered. “I was just – Hello? I thought I was on hold. Sorry. I’m Jillian Lloyd. You wrote to me.”

“Thank you for calling me back, Ms. Lloyd.” The man was all business. “I won’t take up too much of your time. As you are aware, my client instructed me to contact you and deliver some items from Mr. Joe Herman.”

“How’d you find me?” Jillian sounded angry and bitter, like the sixteen-year-old orphan that had been driven from the family courthouse to the Missouri Social Services office by her attorney an hour after Joe Herman terminated guardian rights all those years ago.

“Well, we had some court records from Mr. Herman. Date of birth, social, that sort of thing. From there our investigator was able to determine your last known address.”

“You hired an investigator to hunt me down?” She asked. Suddenly overcome with trembling Jillian put the phone down on the table and stared at it. “Keep your cool! Don’t let him get to you.” She returned the phone to her ear.

“Hello? Ms. Lloyd?”

“I’m here.”

“Good. As I started to say, I am sending you some items that Mr. Herman wanted you to have. Or if, you’d prefer to come to Chicago now. You will need to anyway, in the near future - “

“Look, he’s not my grandfather. I want nothing to do with him or anything of his, and I’m absolutely not going to Chicago or anywhere for that matter.”

Neither of them said anything, but Jillian heard the unmistakable sound of typing on the other end of the line. The attorney cleared his throat.

“Ms. Lloyd - may I call you Jillian?” He didn’t wait for a response. “Jillian, I have an

obligation to my client to ensure these items get to you. What you do with them? That's up to you."

"Why didn't you just have your sneaky investigator drop it off when he hunted me down?"

"I'm sorry? What?" The guy sounded genuinely confused, then explained, "Oh, it's nothing like that. We're not following you, Jillian. Our investigator was able to locate you through what we call a tabletop investigation, just a records search. But now that I've confirmed your address and connection to Mr. Herman -"

"Maybe I'm not making it clear enough." Jillian interrupted, "Joe Herman is not my grandfather. He had one of you people - lawyers- or someone - I don't know. Someone represented him and legally terminated our relationship when my grandmother died. I want nothing to do with him and I don't want any of his stuff. Return it, burn it, do whatever you want with it, but leave me alone. Please."

"Ms. Lloyd, I'm not familiar with the particulars of the relationship between you and Mr. Herman. It's simply my duty to my client to prove I sent you these items. Be on the lookout for an overnight delivery tomorr-"

Jillian clapped her flip-phone shut before the attorney could finish his sentence. Based on the tone of his voice and the fact he already had her address, Jillian knew he would make good on sending the package, so upon returning to the office she put in a request to take the following day off "to deal with an urgent personal matter."

## CHAPTER 5

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1944*

Louise rose at 4:30 a.m. although she had not slept more than 15 minutes all night. She dressed as quietly as she could in a gray wool skirt and a yellow sweater then pulled the bobby pins from her hair to find the pin curls had set beautifully. She smiled at her reflection in the mirror of her dressing table, certain that Joe would be pleased. She eased her way down the staircase doing her best to avoid the creakiest areas of the steps and set about starting the coffee percolator. When she heard the Borden man set them in the box outside the kitchen door, she stepped onto the stoop to retrieve the milk bottles.

“Who’s there?” Her father called, hesitating just inside the dark living room.

“Shh. It’s just me, daddy.” Louise bumped the kitchen door closed with her hip, then took then placed the bottles in the Frigidaire.

“Why are you up at this hour, Lou-Lou?” Coming into the light of the kitchen, he looked at her suspiciously before kissing her on the head which caused Louise to jerk away and frantically tease her curls back in place with her fingers. She knew that rarely did her father know what to say or how to act around her these days. Their relationship had grown overly polite and formal with him deferring to her mother on every issue.

“Are you leaving for work already, Daddy?” Louise handed him a cup of coffee.

“Mm-hmm.” He muttered, unfurling the paper he’d collected from the front porch on his way to the kitchen.

“Do you want any breakfast?”

He lowered the paper and looked at her. “No. And why is it, again, that you are up before the chickens this morning?”

“I’m going to Muriel’s. Her cat had kittens late last night, and she said to come right over first thing this morning to see them.”

The newspaper went back up between them. “Don’t bring home a stray, Lou. You know how your mother would react to that kind of nonsense.”

“Muriel’s cat isn’t a stray.”

“Well, there’s a stray involved in there somewhere.” Her father took one last, long drink of coffee and stood up. “Enjoy your visit with Muriel.” He bent to kiss her on the head, remembered the earlier jolt over the curls and stopped himself.

As soon as he was gone, Louise took a large canvas bag from the pantry and went out the back door. She knelt by the lattice screen that blocked the view of the trash bins at the back of the carport and tucked the bag against the wall. She returned to her bedroom and waited for the sound of her mother in the kitchen.

“You’re up early.” Her mother said when Louise stepped into the kitchen a few minutes after seven o’clock.

“I’m going to Woolworth’s with Muriel as soon as it opens this morning.”

“I see.” Louise’s mother, still in her quilted housecoat and leather slippers, was preoccupied with disposal of the cold coffee and pressing a new pot. “Pick up some brown thread when you’re there. I want you to finish the hem on your brother’s slacks today.”

“Alright. See you later.”

“I beg your pardon? You’re leaving now?” Her mother questioned but remained primarily devoted to the business of coffee.

‘Well, first I’m going to Mur’s house to see the kittens her cat had last night. After that we’re going to Woolworth’s. We’ll probably walk around downtown and lunch somewhere – if that’s alright?’”

“Do *not* even *think* about bringing home some filthy stray cat. I mean it. I don’t want - ”

Louise was already across the back patio before her mother finished the sentence. Checking to make sure her mother hadn’t followed her and wasn’t looking out the kitchen or the den window, Louise grabbed the canvas bag and cut through the opening in the privet hedge to the alley behind the houses.

By 8:45 she was standing in front of Woolworth’s, exactly where she had told her mother she would be, but Muriel was nowhere in sight. Joe arrived right on time and kissed her passionately there on the street in front of God and everyone. Arm in arm, they entered the store. Joe took a seat at the counter.

“One orange juice, split in two glasses.” He said to the counter waiter.

“I’ll be just a minute, dear.” Louise made her way to the ladies’ room and tried not to think about how appalled her mother would be.

She changed into the pale emerald suit she’d made especially for this occasion and pinned a large pink peony to the lapel. In the cramped public washroom, Louise re-pinned her hair, added a hat, three quarter length gloves, rouge, and lipstick. She studied herself in the tiny mirror. She was pleased with herself, but when she walked back to the counter, the look on Joe’s face hit like a slap of ice water.

“What’s the matter? What’s wrong?” She pleaded.

“Nothing.” He said tersely. He stood and placed a dime on the counter for the juice. “Let’s go. Wait – do you want your juice?”

Louise was on the verge of tears and could only shake her head.

“Look. You - you look beautiful.” His face clouded into a deep concern that Louise had never seen. It scared her to see him go so dark. There was a long pause and then he asked rather unsteadily, “Are you sure you want to do this, doll?”

Her heart sank. “Yes! Aren’t you certain?” Louise bleated. She took hold of the counter, dizzy with panic. “I want more than anything to be your wife, but you’ve got cold feet, don’t you?” She said, unable to hold back tears.

“Doll! Whoa! Hey. Don’t cry. What’s all this?” Producing a handkerchief, he tried to calm her. “Hush now. I love you. I just don’t want you to regret anything. Regret me. We can wait - if you want to. That’s all I am saying. Wait until I get back and get reestablished.”

“But I love you.” The lump in her throat choked her.

Joe inhaled through his nose and nodded. Like clouds parting to reveal the sun, his demeanor and appearance changed. He, once again, looked regal and confident in his uniform. Something about his ability to transform so completely and quickly left an unsettling impression on Louise.

“Then, let’s go, doll. Let’s go!” He winked and the coy smile Louise loved returned to his face. She relaxed but the giddy anticipation that had filled her in the days leading up to their elopement was gone.

Just as Joe pushed open the door for her, Louise jerked away. “Wait. I forgot something. Stay here.” She hurried to the sewing notions aisle, grabbed two spools of brown thread from the spindled wrack and ran to the cashier’s stand where she charged them to her father’s account, tucked them in her handbag. Reverting to her best imitation of Lauren Bacall’s cat-like walk, she made her way outside where Joe stood smoking a cigarette.

## CHAPTER 6

*Jillian*  
*St. Louis, 2005*

“I was worried, Jilly. You get a strange letter. Throw it in the trash, then fish it out of the trash this morning. I didn’t hear from you all day. I was worried, that’s all.”

That was Tom’s excuse for being in Jillian’s condo when she got home from work that evening. Jillian kicked off her shoes and retreated to her bedroom without responding, shutting the door behind her.

“Are you mad?” Tom called through the door. “Don’t be mad. You want me to go? I get it. You need some space. Ok. I just wanted to make sure you were good. I’m out of here.”

Jillian opened the door. “I feel smothered, Tom. By- by work, by this Joe Herman stuff, by - by everything. I just don’t want to play house tonight. I do need some space.”

Jillian crossed the apartment and disappeared into the kitchen where she found a bottle of Chardonnay on ice next to two glasses and a bag of her favorite Chinese takeout. Tom had followed her to the kitchen but stood in the doorway watching her take it in. She turned to face him.

“Is that what I think it is?”

He shrugged. “Maybe. And maybe with an extra side of spring rolls in case it was an especially hard day.”

“Damn you, boy! You don’t play fair. How did you know it has been an extra spring roll kind of day?” Jillian melted into him, burying her head under his chin and wrapping her arms around him. “I’m exhausted - and hungry - and thankful. Stay for dinner?”

Tom unpacked the food while Jillian pulled plates from the cabinet and poured the wine.

“So what’s the deal with the letter?” Tom asked.

Jillian kept her back to him. “I called the lawyer, and turns out, it was nothing really. I explained that Joe Herman and I are not legally related. From the sound of it, he didn’t even know that. I assume he’ll drop the whole thing now. I know I will.” Jillian looked at Tom. “Drop it that is.”

“Understood.”

∞

The next morning, Jillian left for the gym at her usual time, leaving Tom to lock up her condo when he left for work. She was fumbling in her bag for her key when the elevator doors opened.

“Hey! What are you doing back home?”

Jillian’s head snapped up to find Tom standing in front of her holding the elevator doors open.

“Why aren’t you at work?” She demanded angrily, then softened immediately. “Sorry. Hi. Um.” Jillian stepped out of the elevator. “Look there’s something I’ve got to take care of today– about the letter.”

“The letter? Is there something about the call with the attorney, you’re not telling me?” Tom resorted to silliness to break the tension. “You’re an heiress now, aren’t you? The letter, it’s an inheritance, isn’t it? I knew it! Look at you! You’ve quit your job and tried to throw me off the trail by going for one last workout, and now you’re sneaking back in just long enough to pack, call a taxi, and leave me a Dear Tom letter.”

“Shut up!” Jillian hissed, dragging Tom by the arm back into her condo. “I’m not leaving any Dear Tom letters. I just have some stuff going on, Tom. You’re making me feel guilty. Like



I'm hiding something. I'm entitled to my privacy!" Her voice cracked. "I have something to take care of and I took the day off. I didn't tell you about it because it's no big deal. Don't make it a big deal, ok?"

"Well, all this mysterious behavior and talk about 'not a big deal' is making it kind of a big deal, Jill. Why the secrecy?"

"It's my business, Tom. My issue. Nothing you need to worry about."

"That's convincing. Now I'm not worried at all."

Jillian composed herself. "Relax. It is absolutely not a big deal. Look, I told you I called the lawyer. Right?"

"Yeah, I kind of remember something about that." Tom goaded.

"I'm not trying to hide anything, but I may not have talked him into dropping this Joe Herman thing. I mean I did. He is going to drop it, but he said he is sending me – whatever – and he doesn't care what I do with it. So, he is dropping it - after he does his duty and unloads some of Joe Herman's stuff on me. I want to get it and dispose of it the minute it gets here. I took the day off to get the package, toss it in the trash, and drive out to spend the afternoon with Phyllis. Then," cupping Tom's face in her hands, she added, "When I get home, I want to take you out to dinner. I'm celebrating my favorite people today, you and Phyllis. My therapist armed me with this trick years ago. She said, 'On especially bad days find something, anything to celebrate.' Joe Herman is not going to give me one more bad day, not one more bad memory."

Tom pulled her into a hug and kissed her forehead. "Smart girl, cutting the mean old man off at the pass like that." Pushing her away and checking his watch, he added, "Listen, that all sounds great, but I'm now in real danger of losing my job. I'm so late." He turned to leave, then

stopped and turned back. “About tonight. What should I wear? Cardinals T-shirt or tux?” His grin melted her.

“Casual. As in pants-two-sizes-too-big casual. I’m thinking Italian with all the bread and desserts!”

∞

When nothing had arrived by ten o’clock, Jillian knew whatever Joe Herman had to send wasn’t worth paying extra for early morning delivery. She called Phyllis and played it cool.

“Hey, you! Listen, I’ve been slammed at work lately, so I’m treating myself to a day of sunshine and fresh air. How long has it been since you and I had a long lunch on a restaurant patio somewhere?”

∞

Ladybird, Phyllis’ latest rescue, waddle-hopped slowly on three short legs forcing Jillian and Phyllis to crawl at a snail’s pace behind her.

“Maybe I should just carry her, Phyl. I told Tom I’d be home for dinner. At this rate, I won’t even make breakfast tomorrow.” Jillian complained.

“Don’t you dare. She needs the exercise. Bassets aren’t bred for speed, you know, especially ones who’ve been through what she has. Be patient. She’s doing great. Aren’t you, Ladybird?”

Jillian’s phone rang breaking the monotony of the sluggish walk home from the bistro. “It’s Tom,” she mouthed to Phyllis putting the phone to her ear and walking ahead several paces.

“Babe, you know that package you’re waiting on?”

“Not waiting on, but yeah?”

“The delivery guy left a note on the door. Looks like someone has to sign for it.”

“Son of a Bitch!”

Phyllis beelined it to stand three inches from her, hoping to hear everything on the other end of the line and dragging poor Ladybird into a sort of tripod trot behind her. Jillian unsuccessfully tried to wave her off.

“It’s fine. I’ll just get it later. Or I won’t. At this point, I’m over the drama of it all.”

“Jill,” Tom said. “I’ll go to the office and sign for it. Don’t stress about it. I’ll deliver it to you on a silver platter and you can have your way with it. Text me the name of the restaurant and I’ll meet you there, ok?”

Tears welled in her eyes. Seeing the waterworks, Phyllis closed the gap between them to two inches. “I’ve got to go, Tom. See you in a little while, Ok?”

“Jillian! What on earth? Was that Tom?” Phyllis demanded answers. “The swearing, this- this unannounced visit?” The sight of her foster mother’s pursed lips and raised brows made it clear to Jillian that Phyllis had not bought the whole sunshine and fresh air story. This was a touchstone visit. “There’s something you aren’t telling me. I can see it all over you. Now spill the tea, miss.”

Jillian scooped Ladybird into her arms and started at the beginning, with the letter from the attorney. As they arrived at Phyllis’ house, Jillian concluded with her plan to trash the package as soon as it was delivered.

Phyllis said, “You should open the package first. I know you don’t want to, but you should. You won’t get closure if you don’t. You think you will, but you won’t. You’ll brood on it until you make yourself sick, Jilly.” Phyllis placed her hand gently on Jillian’s forearm. “Open it, process it, and then make a decision once you have all the facts.”

Jillian promised to consider that plan primarily so that Phyllis would let her go home. The woman had perfected the art of the long goodbye. Walking beside the car as Jillian backed down the driveway, Phyllis patted the door and said, “Now call and tell me what was in the package. Ok?”

‘Yeah, sure thing.’ Jillian laughed, “Because one of us needs closure, right?”

## CHAPTER 7

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1944*

“Married!” The scream electrified the kitchen where Louise and Joe stood facing her parents. “You do not know the first thing about him! My God, Louise! What have you done?”

Louise’s mother crossed quickly over the line from shock and was well into hysteria not five minutes after Joe and Louise entered the back door into the kitchen and made their announcement. As her mother became more and more unhinged, Louise’s father paced tight circles around the room, then stopped abruptly and stared off somewhere further up than the ceiling.

“You!” Louise’s mother directed her anger at Joe. “You low life! How could you have done this to our only daughter? You don’t have the common decency to ask her father’s permission?” Once more she broke into a guttural scream. “She is *ruined!*” Taut with rage, she grabbed her daughter by the shoulders. “No wedding! No home! Nothing! He can give you *nothing!* You have ruined your life, young lady. You have ruined your father and me.” Turning back to Joe, she hissed, “We were worried sick about her. All day. All night. No one knew where she had gone.” Alternating back to Louise whose shoulders she still gripped, “Muriel did not cover for you. No! You will see what your friends think of you now. You will be a pariah. As well you should be. No decent girl or boy will want to admit even being acquainted with you.” She let go of her daughter and screamed, “After all your father and I have done to see to it that you had everything. Everything, Louise. You throw it away. How could I have raised the most ungrateful child ever to draw breath?”

Joe stepped in front of the woman, blocking her from his young bride and expecting her to lash out physically at him. Instead, she played the victim, instantly feigning fear of Joe. Louise's father left the kitchen and could be heard pouring himself a drink from the bar cart in the living room. Anger pinched Joe's jaw as he watched Louise's mother lower her head into her hands and pretend to cry. The woman moaned, "Not even married in a church!"

Louise's father returned and cleared his throat. "Can this -can this be annulled? Undone? I mean – in the eyes of the church there are – circumstances – under which a marriage is not – valid. Is not - consummated."

Louise's mother looked up and watched her daughter closely.

Joe remained silent, refusing to make eye contact with his new in-laws, but Louise met her father's gaze.

"I am almost nineteen years old," she said in a soft, metered voice. "I'm a grown woman and today I married the man that I love. We did not have time for a big wedding because Joe is leaving for to fight a war for this country. He will deploy in a matter of weeks, and you two should be proud to have him as your son-in-law." Louise continued speaking to her father. "No. The answer to your question is no; this marriage cannot be annulled." She let the words sink in. Louise's mother brought her hands to her face and sobbed.

Louise continued. "I am not looking for your blessings or Mother's idea of a perfect wedding that we both know would only be for her benefit, her need to appear perfect in front of her friends. I don't need showers and teas and registries. I need Joe and I need to be with him every moment that I can before he leaves. I want him going to war knowing that I love him and that I will be here when he comes home. In fact, we're leaving now because it is plain to see that we are not welcome. I'll be by tomorrow for my things."

As they walked down the driveway to the borrowed car that had served as their honeymoon suite, Louise could hear her mother's renewed screams directed at her father, ordering him to stop her from leaving. If her father made any attempt to do so, she never knew.

∞

The next day Louise's brother met them in the driveway. The minute she saw him, Louise burst into tears, understanding that any hope she'd held on to that her parents would come around and accept her marriage was a fantasy.

"Dad's already left for work and mother's locked in her bedroom." Her brother said. "I think it's best if Joe waits out here. Let me know when you're packed and I'll help you with the bags."

The attic bedroom was bright, but not cheerful as Louise folded and stacked her things in the matching green Tourister luggage Uncle Raymond had given her as a high school graduation present just a few months prior. When she reached for her jewelry, she discovered it was gone, every piece: the diamond pendant that had been her grandmother's, a string of real pearls she received on her confirmation, and the cocktail ring that had been a birthday present from her parents. Her mother had come, a thief in the night, and taken it all back.

Handing the last bag off to her brother, she said, "Tell Joe I will be just one more minute."

Louise walked down the narrow hall that led to her parents' room and stopped in front of the door. She remained quiet, listening for any sounds on the other side of the door. She tried the handle and found it locked. She knocked softly and called, "Mother?" When she got no response, Louise turned to leave, then stopped and turned back, once more, to the door.

“Mother we are leaving now.” Her voice was loud enough to carry through the wooden door and even back to the en-suite bathroom her parents had installed two years ago. She waited several more moments before turning and walking quickly across the house and out the backdoor.

Joe was leaning against the trunk of the car smoking a cigarette. When Louise appeared, he flicked it to the ground, then crushed it with his foot.

“All set, Doll?” Joe asked. Unable to speak, she nodded and waited for him to come around to open the door for her.

As the old Buick backed down the driveway, bile burned Louise’s throat. Her brother waved, then bent down to pick up the cigarette butt from the pristinely manicured lawn.



## CHAPTER 8

*Jillian*  
*St. Louis, 2005*

Tom was already seated when Jillian arrived. From the hostess stand, she could make out the thin, flat mailer sitting on the table across from him, at her seat. Jillian took several shallow breaths, fighting off an actual pant. She wiped sweat from her palms onto her slacks and followed the hostess into the dining room which seemed to grow too dim, too quickly. Tom must have noticed the change in her expression because he moved the envelope to the seat beside his as he stood to greet her.

“Alright. Lay it on me.” She said sliding into her chair and reaching for the water glass. “Let’s get it over with.”

“You don’t want to order drinks first?”

The water did little to alleviate the sticky dryness in her mouth. Jillian shook her head and held out her hand.

“Looks like it’s just another damn letter.” She said regaining her voice and sliding a second envelope from the cardboard mailer. She sighed deeply.

Dear Jillian,

Although we never had a relationship, you are my flesh and my lineage. It is only by connecting the root to the living vine that we nourish the channels that allow us to experience mercy and miracles. You are my son’s only child, my family.

For this reason, it is important that you are connected to your birthright. I see that now, and I was wrong to think otherwise all those years ago.

I regret the actions I took when your grandmother passed away. I am not asking you to understand. Only to know the fact that so many years cannot be re-orchestrated. Life does not allow us to control it. It only gives us the illusion that we do. And yet even without control, there is purpose to life. My life's purpose is the obligation to my people, to our people. Of course, had I known my life's purpose, I would never have married your grandmother.

Jillian tossed the letter on the table.

“Can you believe this bullshit? I'm not reading this trash. He does not get to blame GramLouise for his – his complete abandonment of her and his son. For what? For getting in his way - over some life-purpose bullshit. What about our life purposes? Why would he send me this? It isn't some deathbed apology. He's not sorry.”

Tom picked up the letter and scanned it. “Hang on, Jill. There's more to it. Listen.”

“No!”

“Just listen.” Tom was gentle enough to be convincing.

We met at a complicated time, and both of our lives were complicated before we met. We were merely children ourselves, and your father's birth was not part of our plan. Louise and I unintentionally altered each other's fate. She came to agree with me on that in the end, and we loved each other in spite of all the distance and tragedy. I loved her very much, and she loved me.

You and I remain connected, and you must know your lineage and claim your birthright. At the time I write this letter, I do not have the strength to travel to St. Louis and try to win your trust.

I have taken care to preserve some documents for you. They contain some of the explanations I believe you seek. My hope is that you will take the time to consider and accept. If you choose to pursue your birthright, you will find everything you need to claim it in the care of Miriam Leitner. Enclosed is a card with her address. She will be expecting you.

Your faithful grandfather,  
Joe Herman

P.S. Please note the enclosed key. You will need this key when you meet Miriam. You must not forget to take it with you.

“What key? There’s no key.” Jillian shrugged. Tom reached in the mailer and produced a small calling card with a brass key taped to the back of it.

∞

The text notification from her phone brought Jillian out of the trance the next morning. She wondered how long she’d been staring at her computer and looked around to see if any of the coworkers had noticed.

So? It was from Tom.

So what? She replied.

R u gonna call Miriam

No number on card. Tried looking her up. No luck. She is prob homewrecker that he left GramLouise for. Time to end his little game.

During lunchtime walk, Jillian called Phyllis who felt strongly that she should contact the Leitner woman.

“Look. I know he abandoned you, honey. Still, you have to admit he came through on some things.” Phyllis reminded Jillian that Joe Herman had put GramLouise’s entire estate in a trust with her as the beneficiary when she reached twenty-one. “That is no small thing, Jill. As her husband, he had a rightful claim to all of that, but he elected to leave it intact for you. It paid off your college debt and helped with the down payment on your condo.”

“Surely, you’re not suggesting that I owe Joe Herman anything, Phyl? That money was my birthright! That’s the only birthright I care about, and I shouldn’t have had to wait for him to decide when I got it. Now he is doing it all over again. Trying to control my life! He doesn’t get to. I’m aged out, Phyl. I call the shots from here on out. No one else.”

“Oh, honey. You don’t own him a thing. He was an idiot for sure. But all I am saying is, he left money for you in the past and under the circumstances - . Well, maybe he has had some sort of epiphany about how he neglected you and is trying to make good before he dies. People do that, you know.”

“Are you saying I should just trot off to Chicago and knock on this strange woman’s door? That doesn’t sound like the Phyllis I know.”

“Well, I guess that could be dangerous. You have her address. Why don’t you just mail her a letter? Tell her you will accept the inheritance and she should make arrangements to send it to you.”

“We don’t even know if it is an inheritance. And there’s the matter of the key. Maybe this Miriam woman can’t even get to it. God! Why can’t I shake Joe Herman? He appears, disappears, appears. I want him out of my life.” All the rage she had felt as a teenager came flooding out. “I do not want a fucking pen pal, Phyllis!”

Jillian noticed people in the park starting to look her way and lowered her voice. “Especially some floozy who was probably his mistress the whole time he was married to GramLouise! I should have never called that attorney!

“Jilly, baby.” Phyllis’ voice was calm and measured on the other end of the line. “Don’t let this have any power over you. It’s not worth it. I agree with you. Forget about this. Your life, your happiness and your own accomplishments are better than any token this guy might have for you.”

“Yeah. I think so, too. I’m going back to work. We’ll talk later, ok?”

∞

Before leaving the office, Jillian took Phyllis’ first attempt at advice and typed a letter to Miriam Leitner.

Dear Ms. Leitner,

I received a letter from Joe Herman stating that you are holding something for me. He didn’t provide me with any way of contacting you other than by mail.

I never really knew him, and I’m not interested in getting anything from him. You can keep the item or dispose of it. If you need anything else from me, you can reach me at either of the numbers listed above.

Sincerely,

Jillian Lloyd

## CHAPTER 9

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1944*

“Oh, Joe! No! No!” Louise wailed, throwing herself dramatically across the thin mattress. “I can’t possibly live with her! You know her.” Disheveled curls stuck out at odd angles as she sat up from the bed and pleaded with her young husband, “Joe, Honey, there has to be another option. Please! Think of something!”

“Listen to me, Doll.” Joe paced the room. “It won’t be forever. You’ll be safe. You could get a job, you know. That would get you out of the house. Away from her all day. You could play cards with your girlfriends. All the stuff you enjoyed before. If you had a little job, you’d have some spending money, and we might have a little something saved up to restart the farm up when I get back.”

“Get a job? For a farm?” Louise shrieked and flopped back on to the motel bed.

Just four weeks into the marriage, Joe learned the date for his deployment to Europe. When he told Louise, she became physically ill and had grown progressively worse over the last few days. Each time he tried to discuss the plans for her while he was away, she went into fresh hysterics.

Louise was only casually acquainted with one or two of the other army wives who had visited their husbands and stayed at the rundown motel Joe had rented for her near his base. Those women were all living with family back in the places they called home, or they had jobs and roommates lined up. For days, Joe tried to sort out an affordable boarding arrangement for Louise but had no success.

“Hon, we’ve got to get this ironed out. I can’t be off halfway around the world worried that you’re not settled.”

Louise jumped from the bed, ran to the small bathroom, and crumpled to her knees. At the sound of her vomiting and dry heaves, Joe closed the flimsy door to give her some privacy.

“Doll, I hate to see you get worked up like this. It’s just a bump in the road. You’ve got to pull yourself together. It’s all going to be all right. The war won’t last forever. Come on, Honey, please, pull yourself together.”

The toilet flushed, followed by the sound of water trickling in the sink. Joe returned to sit on the edge of the bed. Louise came out of the bathroom clutching a damp rag to her head.

“Can’t I go live with your father?” She asked.

Joe ran his hands up over his face and through his short black hair. “No, Hon’. I don’t see how that’d be possible. Pops is – Pops is older. A lot older than your parents, and he’s – set in his ways- and –“ Joe shook his head.

Louise lowered herself to the bed and curled her knees to her chest. Her body shook with silent weeping. Finally, she whispered, “Okay, Joe. I’ll go.”

∞

The young couple’s second meeting with her parents went no better than the first. Neither side said more than ten words, but everyone agreed that Louise would return home to live with her family for the duration of Joe’s deployment.

After seeing her husband and his unit off on a train bound for New York, an almost catatonic Louise Herman boarded a bus bound for the Union Station stop in St. Louis where she found her brother waiting to collect her. Much to her relief her mother and father were nowhere to be seen when they arrived home.

“Do you want something to drink or eat, Lou-Lou?” Her brother asked setting down the last bag in her room. “You look like you could use something.”

Louise ignored him, collapsed on her bed, and remained there for the better part of two days.

∞

By day three, Louise’s mother determined there might be something seriously wrong with her daughter and called the doctor.

“She really is impossible to live with in this state. She needs something to lift her mood.” Her mother explained over the phone to the doctor’s nurse. “She seems to have suffered a mental breakdown. Knowing what she’s done to her life and to this family, it’s no wonder, but we cannot go on like this.”

The next afternoon, the family’s physician closed the door to Louise’s room behind him and motioned for her mother to speak privately with him in the kitchen.

“Louise is perfectly fine, except for some dehydration. She’s not suffered a mental breakdown, so that should put your mind at ease.” The doctor kept his tone mild. “Can I trouble you for some iced tea?”

Louise’s mother scowled and made a small glass of tea as quickly as she could. Placing it on the table in front of where the doctor had taken a seat, she waited for an explanation.

“Won’t you join me?” He asked pointing to the chair across from his.

“I’m not thirsty. And if you don’t mind, I’m terribly busy this afternoon. Won’t you tell me about Louise? Please, tell me what *is* wrong with her since you don’t believe it’s her mental state. Clearly, she’s unwell. Has she contracted some disease from that filthy German?”



The doctor sipped his tea slowly. “Have a seat with me. Won’t you? Let’s discuss Louise’s condition.”

When Louise’s mother made no effort to sit, he kicked the chair beside him from under the table and looked harshly at the woman. Slowly, in an overly dignified manner, she took a seat and glared back. “Louise is a sweet, beautiful young woman. I remember the first time I saw her. She was a beautiful baby, wasn’t she?”

The woman refused to be goaded into polite conversation. The doctor continued. “Clearly she gets her good looks from you and her personality from her father.”

The woman’s expression never changed.

“I understand her husband is a soldier and he just left for Europe.” The doctor’s chin dropped, and he let his head hang for a moment. “God keep him safe.” He raised his head and said, “Ma’am, Louise is pregnant.”

“Shit!” Her hands flew to her mouth. As she worked to control her rage, she watched the doctor reach into his bag and extract a prescription pad. He wrote something on it, tore out a sheet, and slid it across the table to her. Her eyes searched his face for some sign, hope rising in her. She read the prescription and tossed it back on the table. “This doesn’t help the situation.”

The man laughed in disbelief. “That is for you. For your mood, ma’am. Try to stay calm for your daughter, won’t you?” He stood and picked up his satchel. “I’ll be back next month to check on their progress. I’ve stressed to Louise the importance of eating and drinking plenty of fluids. See to it that she does.” The two of them walked to the front door. Just before leaving, the doctor turned and pleaded, “Above all else, think of the innocent baby, won’t you?”

The doctor was hardly across the threshold when Louise’s mother slammed the door with all her might.

“Oh, I am thinking of the damn baby!” She said loud enough to carry through the door.

## CHAPTER 10

*Jillian*  
*St. Louis, 2005*

The downpour came out of nowhere. When Tom and Jillian started their Sunday morning run, the sky had been overcast, but not threatening. As they rounded the corner at Market Street, the cloudburst was visible in the distance and moving east, giving them just enough time to duck into the lobby of the Union Station Hotel and avoid a soaking.

“While we’re here, we may as well have coffee, huh?” Tom suggested.

“Dressed like this?” Jillian looked down at her sports bra and breezy runner’s shorts.

“It’s a hotel. They’re used to seeing guests wander around on their way to work out. Besides the bar is not what you think. Come on. You’re going to love it.”

Jillian followed him to the expansive train-track-tunnel-turned-gathering-place. A large bar spanned one side of the hall and there were dozens of intimate seating spaces scattered throughout. Overhead, on the dome of the tunnel, an artsy video montage played in sync with the music pumped into the room. Jillian’s phone rang just as they settled in a booth with the best view of the video show.

“It’s from Chicago!” She said looking at Tom for her next move.

“So? Answer it.”

“Hello! Jillian?!” A cheery and very old voice squealed on the other end.

“Yes.”

“Hello, dear. I am Miriam Leitner! You wrote to me! About Jozsef Ashe -- HUH? Oh, yes. You wrote to me about Jozsef.”

Jillian detected a heavy accent but could not place it. She shook her head and pointed to the phone.

“I think it’s a scam!” She whispered to Tom then focused on getting the crazy woman off the line as quickly as possible. “Listen. I’ve changed my mind. There’s nothing for us to discuss. I want nothing to do with Joe Herman. Please do not contact me again. Thank you.”

Jillian closed her phone and dropped her head to the table.

“She couldn’t even get the name right.” Jillian sat up and started to explain. “She’s not even American! She had a thick accent. Like - like Russian or something! Oh my God. What have I done? She said she was Miriam Leitner, but she was calling about a guy she called Joseph Asha or something like that. Oh, Tom! This is probably some scam. What if it is crime mobs in Chicago – or God knows where? How did I fall for this?”

“Hang on. I’m confused. That was the Miriam Leitner lady your grandfather told you to contact? How did she find you?”

Jillian was caught out. She closed her eyes and leaned back into the booth. Tom was waiting for an answer and watching her closely.

“I wrote her a letter telling her to call me. Ok?”

When she opened her eyes, the mixture of confusion and disappointment on Tom’s face gutted her. He was stiff and would look only at this coffee. Jillian searched for her next words carefully. “Phyllis suggested it. I wrote the letter over a week ago on my way out the door at work –“ She pointed at Tom. “That Friday you went to Licking to help your dad! Honestly, I didn’t think another thing about it. That’s why she’s calling. But –“

Tom continued stirring his coffee and did not look up.

Jillian started again. “She said she was Miriam Leitner and that she was calling about a Joseph Asha but then she caught herself and could not remember the correct last name. Someone must have fed it to her because she finally said Herman. She had that accent. Oh God!

These people have all my information!” Jillian stopped and waited for Tom to respond. When he didn’t, she bolted up from the table. “I’m going home.”

Tom caught up with her outside and they walked back to her place in the rain. When they reached the lobby of Jillian’s building Tom said, “I’m not coming up.”

“Come on. Don’t be mad. I completely forgot to tell you I wrote to her. I never expected her to call me. Come on. Please. Let’s go up and get dried off.”

“I’m not mad, Jilly. I get it. This is an intensely personal matter for you. I see you working through it, how conflicted you are, and - You’re right. I don’t know Joe Herman and all that you’ve had to deal with. I get it. This is your stuff. It’s private.”

Jillian’s phone rang before she could respond. “It’s the Chicago number again.”

“Let it go to voicemail. When she doesn’t get a response from you, she’ll stop.” Tom wouldn’t make eye contact with her now. He turned to leave just as the voicemail notification sounded.

“Don’t you want to hear this?” Jillian asked.

“Not really.”

She had already pressed play, and Tom paused to listen.

“Jillian? Hello?” It was the old woman speaking, but there was an inaudible male voice muttering in the background. “What? Oh. A message? Jillian. This is Miriam. Miriam. Leitner.”

“She sounds a hundred,” Tom said.

“I want you to change your mind. Please. Jozsef was my friend. I met him in 1945 in Germany, and he paid me a visit last year. Just last year, can you believe it? Oh! It was the first time I had seen him in years! But he had not changed a bit. Such a handsome man. Just like the first time I ever saw him. I will never forget that smile of his! - What? What, Ehud? What are

you saying? I can't hear you both! Oh. Jozsef told me about you, Jillian; that he needed me to help you with something." She giggled into the phone, then recovered, "He has something important for you that he locked in the bank. I can sign to get it with you. We set it up that way. I helped him, but I do not know what he put in there. He did that part, you see. It is some packages. For you!" The woman giggled again. "I cannot mail it to you. The bank will not give it to me. We both have to get it. Together. Jozsef did not want it to get in the wrong hands - What, Ehud?" The old woman snapped at someone, then continued alternately talking to whomever was with her and into the voicemail. "I said that! We have to sign together? Eh? Phuh!"

Returning to speak clearly into the phone, the old woman attempted to finish the voicemail, "Ok, so, Jillian, you will please call me, ok? I can't hear the phone, but my grandson, Ehud, he is a good boy. He will help me call you. I want to help you and help my friend, Jozsef, who helped me very much, many times." The old woman's voice faltered. "So many times. I will help you, Jillian." Glee returning to her voice, she concluded, "So. Call me! Thank you. Shalom, Jillian. Thank you. Goodbye."

"Well," Tom said tentatively, "I don't think she's a Russian mobster."

"What's she talking about not wanting what to fall into the wrong hands? That can't be good."

Tom gave her a peck on the forehead. "You'll figure it out."

## CHAPTER 11

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1945*

The baby arrived on Valentine's Day. Despite a grueling twenty-hour labor, Louise was a ball of energy as she cooed and talked to the infant.

"Give him to me," her mother demanded after Louise finished the first feeding. "You need to rest. You have no idea what you've got in store for yourself now."

For the first time since she had married Joe Herman, Louise looked her mother directly in her eyes, and in a low, stern voice that was more growl than whisper, she said, "Don't you dare touch my baby. My perfect son." Turning back to the bundle in her arms, she smiled conspiratorially. "Joseph Francis Herman, Junior. Baby Frank. That's your name, isn't it, my sweet boy?"

## CHAPTER 12

*Jillian*  
*St. Louis, 2005*

Jillian heard from Tom only a handful of times over the next week, mostly through texts. At first, she reveled in her time alone filling the long, quiet evenings with bubble baths, a deep clean of her apartment, her favorite take-out food paired with classic movies, and finally a game night with Phyllis. Several times during the empty hours, she caught herself playing the Miriam Leitner voicemail, mulling over every word.

“What does Tom think about it?” Phyllis asked as soon as she heard it.

“Not much.” Jillian was evasive, intentionally withholding the detail that Tom somehow felt Jillian was excluding him from this part of her past.

Phyllis looked up from her cards, over the rim of her glasses at Jillian.

“Have you two had words?”

Jillian winced. “What? No.”

Phyllis nodded and pretended to focus on her hand again.

“Are you thinking of calling her back? Miriam.”

“Honestly, I hadn’t given it much thought.”

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On Thursday Jillian left her cubical and took the elevator to Tom’s floor where she got by the receptionist by holding her phone to her ear and pretending to be on a call with Tom.

“What? Yeah, I’m here. At the front. Oh, sure – “ Jillian lowered the phone and looked over the tall desk. “He said to come on back. He’s running something around to one of the partners and then we’re going out for lunch. Can you buzz me in?”



Jillian had always been especially friendly to the ancient woman who was a notoriously lax gatekeeper.

“Surprise!” She said knocking on Tom’s open door and carefully gauging his expression as he looked up from his computer.

“Hey! How’d you get back here? Let me guess. Was our tenacious guardian dozing or off on one of her many smoke breaks?”

Relieved that he seemed genuinely happy to see her, she walked around the desk and kissed him tenderly.

“Want to go grab lunch somewhere?” She asked. “I’ve missed you.”

“Wish I could, but I’m taking a half-day off and heading to the farm for the weekend. Otherwise, I’d definitely go with you.” Tom stood and swept his keys off the desk. “Come on. I’ll walk you to the park on my way home.”

Jillian could not disguise her displeasure. Learning that Tom was leaving for the weekend without first mentioning it to her outweighed the disappointment of eating another lunch alone in the park.

Jillian nodded her sunglasses in place as they exited the building, but this time there was no satisfied smirk.

“Phyllis came over last night, and I brought her up to speed on the Miriam Leitner thing. You know, played the voicemail for her. The one you heard.”

Jillian was picking her words carefully, hoping it conveyed nonchalance toward the Joe Herman drama. “Phyllis thinks I should call her back. I mean she didn’t come right out and say it, but I know that’s what she’s thinking. She really wanted to know what you thought about it.” Jillian waited a beat then added, “And I do, too. What do you think I should do?”

Tom kept walking. “Depends. What are you hoping to get out of it?”

They ended up at the picnic table where Jillian always ate her lunch. Tom took a seat first, and Jillian followed.

“I guess I don’t hope to get anything out of it. If I’m being honest - am I curious? Sure. But a big part of me feels like it might not be healthy to chase this. I – I didn’t exactly handle it well when my grandmother died, and Joe Herman put me in foster care. I don’t want to go back there – I mean, I don’t think I ever would – go that dark. I was a kid then, who lost everything. Now it’s different. I’m a different person. An independent adult with nothing that can be ripped out from under me. I’m safe.” Jillian’s voice trailed off.

Tom’s brow knitted. Jillian sensed he was distracted and only discussing her plight with Miriam to be polite.

“Look you’ve got to go. We can talk about this stuff later. When you get back from your parents’. When are you coming back?”

Tom sighed. “Jillian.” The way he said her name ran a physical shock through her core, and the scars on her arms suddenly felt hot and itchy. “Something’s come up at work. Nothing bad, necessarily, but something I want to run by the fam. Get their input.”

“I see.” She stifled the urge to ask whether he wanted her input.

“They’ve sold our company to a bigger group out of Denver.” Tom paused. “And they’re closing our office.”

Jillian felt the hot flush rise up her neck and into her face.

“What’s that mean for you?”

Tom shrugged. “It means I have a decision to make. I can either take a severance package or a relocation package. They’ve made me an offer to move to Denver with a promotion even.”

“That’s great.” Jillian could barely speak her mouth was so dry.

“I’ve already made my decision, but I want to tell my family in person.”

“Of course.”

“I am not telling the company though. They’ve given us a month to decide, and I want to keep the bastards guessing. Maybe they’ll sweeten the pot, you know?”

“A month?” Jillian’s voice sounded small and tinny even to her own ears.

Tom studied her. “Yeah. A month from today, I’m either out on my ear or on my way to Denver.” He wide smile broke out on his face as if he had seen something that made him especially happy which confused and irritated Jillian. “I love this job. The pay is great. And Colorado! Remember how much we loved Colorado? That ski weekend in Vail? I mean of all the places they could relocate!” Tom paused.

The hard knot in her throat made it impossible for Jillian to respond, and hot tears burned her eyes.

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa! Why the waterworks?” Tom reached across the table, taking her hands in his. Jillian was taut with stress.

“I don’t love Colorado, Tom. I mean – for a vacation – but – I don’t - love Colorado. I would never go there.”

“Nobody’s asking you to.” Tom laughed.

Jillian snatched her hands from his and wiped her tears. She looked around the park. Fuming with embarrassment, she looked back to find Tom still studying her and grinning.

“I’m not moving to Colorado, Jill. And I’m glad to see you couldn’t stand the thought of me going.”

She inhaled deeply.

He continued, “I do love Colorado and the money would be sick, but I don’t see myself doing this corporate stuff long term. At one point, it’s what I thought I wanted, but it’s not. I’m putting together a new plan and I’m holding off telling them. I am going to make them force me out the door. Ideally, they’ll drag it longer than a month, but either way, I am taking the severance.”

“What new plan?” Jillian’s voice was still frail.

“You know what plan.”

She inhaled. “The Lick.”

“The Lick.”

Her tidy, controlled life was fraying at the edges, but Jillian knew she had to smile, to be happy for Tom. The best she could do was nod and smile weakly.

“Eventually,” Tom said. “Take over the farm. Teach at the high school, and probably coach, too.” He waited for a reaction. “Jilly, I want to settle down at some point. And I think this is the opportunity to start making a move in that direction. I want the farm and the teaching gig, and kids and the whole country boy life. You’ve known that.” Tom stood. “I’m going there this weekend to tell my parents the plan. That I’ll take the package, go back to school for the master’s here in St. Louis, and once I’ve finished that, we can work out the rest of the details.”

“We can work out the details? What’s that supposed to mean, Tom?”

“You know. We can work out the details down the road a piece.” Tom stood. “Walk with me to my place. I need to get on the road and beat traffic.” Tom started across the park, but Jillian only followed a couple of steps.

“You know how I feel, Tom. You know – about –“

“About what?”

“About this fantasy people have. Settling down? It’s –“

“What?”

“It’s crazy. And ‘country boy life?’ Tom.” Jillian composed herself, but a deep sadness settled on her face. “Marriage and kids?”

“Jillian! Goodness! Slow down. Nobody said anything about marriage. What are *you* saying? Gosh, I’m feeling smothered here!”

He laughed, but the look on Jillian’s face made it clear that he had taken the teasing too far. He took her hand and walked her back the short distance they had moved from the picnic table. When he had her seated, he continued. “I know, Jill. I know how you feel. I don’t get it, but I hear you. Nobody said anything about marriage. Fine. You’re a self-sufficient, strong woman. You’ve proven that. I respect it and I love it about you. You think marriage is just a piece of paper and something that can be easily ended. Maybe there is truth in that, but I don’t see what’s so wrong with wanting to be committed in that way. I’m not trying to change your mind. I’m simply telling you that I am not going to Colorado because of you and because of what I think our life could be – together.”

## CHAPTER 13

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1945*

Louise placed Frank in the small crib she kept in the kitchen, turned on the radio, and started her morning routine of preparing breakfast for her brother. As part of the passing of the father-son baton, Louise's brother had assumed the lion's share of responsibility for the family's dry-cleaning business. In a less-formal, more punitive rite of passage, all of the housekeeping work had fallen to Louise. Her mother made it clear after Frank was born that Louise's sole financial support would be the twenty-five dollars a month the Army deposited in her bank account, half of Joe's salary, and that she would pay for her room and board with service to her parents.

It had been weeks since Joe's last letter, but, through sheer will, Louise had not allowed herself to worry. The war had turned, she told herself. Our boys are pushing hard to the victory. That was the talk in every diner, grocery aisle, and Sunday school classes all over St. Louis. When word spread that the President would address the nation early on the morning of May 8<sup>th</sup>, Louise was not surprised to see her parents shuffle into the kitchen with her brother. She took two more coffee cups down from the cabinet and set them before her parents. Hitler's death was confirmed, and everyone expected the news of Germany's surrender. Louise's hand tremored as she reached to turn up the volume on the radio. Scooping Frank into her arms, she settled at the table with her family.

As President Truman's words tumbled out of the Crosley AM/FM radio, Louise bounced Frank vigorously and wept. Finally, the end of her personal hell was within reach. The tragic start to her married life could be fixed. Joe would be coming home. Truman said things like, "We can repay the debt which we owe to our God, to our dead, and to our children only by work--by

ceaseless devotion to the responsibilities which lie ahead of us. If I could give you a single watchword for the coming months, that word is--work, work, and more work.”

Louise listened closely as the President continued to talk about binding the wounds of a suffering world and winning the peace. Like most Americans, she absorbed them as the words appropriate for victors. Of course, the Allies, the better men, would restore order to the world. Truman was talking about things politicians and Europeans had to do. For her, for Joe, it meant there was no more risk of him dying in war. The enemy had surrendered. Everyone knew, from the newsreels that had played before feature films over the last several months, that Europe was in shambles, but rebuilding Europe was not the work of American soldiers. The nation’s boys would be coming home to the families who loved them, to rebuild their lives in America.

She looked from her mother to her father. Smiling through the tears she said, “Isn’t it wonderful? Joe’s coming home!”

“Not to this house, he isn’t.” Her mother replied.

Louise looked to her father for support. He rose from his chair, said, “This is good news, Lou-Lou,” and walked out of the room.

Refusing to let her parents spoil something as wonderful as peace, Louise squeezed her infant and tried to envision Joe’s homecoming: where they would meet, his elation at seeing his son for the first time, and deciding, together, where they would live as soon as he was released. She could not imagine being a farmer’s wife, but neither could she envision a future for them in St. Louis. As tears streamed down her cheeks and landed on the crown of the baby’s downy head, Louise knew only that she absolutely had to leave St. Louis, to get as far away from that life as possible.

## CHAPTER 14

The last drops of the Cabernet dripped from the neck of the bottle into the glass. Jillian took one last swallow of her go-to numbing agent and set the glass on the coffee table, knocking her phone to the floor in the process. She leaned to retrieve it, almost toppling from the sofa in the process. Settled once more under her blankets, she flipped open the phone and scrolled through the call log until she found the right number.

“Hello?” A man answered. Jillian ended the call. Immediately her phone rang. The screen flashed with what she already knew. It was the number she had just called. Miriam Leitner’s number.

“Hello.”

In a polite baritone, the man said, “I believe you called. We were disconnected.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I have the wrong number.”

“If this is Jillian Lloyd and you’re trying to reach Miriam Leitner, you have the right number.”

Jillian cursed the fog the wine had cast over her brain. Of course, they would recognize her number. She searched for a response that would extract her from what she saw as a huge mistake, but an afternoon of trying to drink her anxiety into submission had her mind racing from one half-thought to the next.

“I was – I called - This is Jillian Lloyd.”

“I know. Hold on a minute. I’ll get her.”

Jillian stood, then paced her living room, fighting the urge to hang up again.

“Hello!” The same cheery woman that Jillian had heard so many times on the voicemail chirped on the other end. “Jillian! How nice you called! Ehud, it’s Jillian.”



“Ms. Leitner. I got your voicemail and I wanted to talk to you about the items you are holding for me.”

“No, no. Not holding. They are in the bank here. We can go together and - you have the key, yes?”

“What? Oh, yes. I have a key.” Jillian looked around her living room wondering where she had put the mailer that contained the letter and key. “I have it here somewhere.”

“Good. Good. Then you just need to come over, and we will go together to the bank. Ehud, Jillian is coming over.”

“What? No. No, that’s not possible. I’m not in Chicago.”

“Where are you, dear?”

“Missouri.”

The little voice laughed. “Missouri is not too far. So, you can come here. When do you want to meet?”

∞

“So just like that, you went from ‘this is not healthy’ to meeting Miriam Leitner in Chicago next week?” Tom asked.

“I must say, you’ve surprised me, Jill.” Phyllis chimed in from the backseat.

When Tom returned from The Lick on Sunday, they decided to pay Phyllis a visit and update her on Tom’s career change. Wanting to probe the news as much as she could, Phyllis had insisted on taking the two to dinner to celebrate Tom’s exciting new horizons, as she put it.

“I was alone all weekend. I had some wine. It happened. Now, one of you has to go with me.” Jillian looked first at Tom then to Phyllis’ reflection in the rearview mirror. “Or both!”

Over dinner, the three of them vacillated between the possible outcomes the meeting with Miriam might have. Ultimately, it was decided that Tom was best suited to run interference for Jillian if things went sideways.

∞

When they stepped from the train station onto Canal Avenue, Jillian's phone rang with a familiar number appearing on the screen.

"My God. It's like she's tracking me – Hello? Miriam? Yes, we made it to the city. That's right. I did tell you we were coming in on the train this morning." Jillian rolled her eyes at Tom. "Dinner? No, I don't think – You did. Well, I'm sorry but I don't think we have time – 4:30?" Jillian looked at her watch and bit her bottom lip. She looked at Tom who shook his head and mouthed the word no. "OK, I guess we can meet you there." Jillian lifted a hand to her other ear trying to muffle the sounds of a busy city. "Yes, yes, we can find it. See you soon." Jillian hung up. "She wants to meet at 4:30 for dinner."

"Today? And you just agreed to that?"

"She sounds so excited about all this. It's probably the biggest thing to ever happen in her life. Besides, I had this thought. We go to the restaurant, peek in first, and if it doesn't look right, we'll just walk out and call the whole thing off. Better that, than in the bank tomorrow, right?"

"I don't see how it makes a difference, but ok."

"Besides, she eats at 4:30. We'll be done by 5:30 and still be able to go out tonight."

∞

Miriam Leitner was barely 5 feet tall. Her hair glowed a brilliant, unnatural black, like a raven. Her perfectly round head seemed barely balanced atop her rounded back, as if it might

roll down the front of the short, stout woman at any moment. She was waiting for Jillian just inside the lobby of the restaurant giving the couple no hope of scouting out the situation.

Miriam's dark eyes were lively and intelligent, and, in spite of discolored, aging teeth, her smile was radiant as she peered up at Jillian and Tom. Her avocado polyester pantsuit was clearly decades old but had classic enough lines. Taupe patent leather shoes matched her taupe patent leather handbag. Something about the woman, - was it the effortless friendliness? The put-together look of her vintage clothes? Something about the woman kindled the security and warmth Jillian had always felt from her grandmother.

Ehud, her grandson, turned out not to be a boy at all, as Miriam had claimed in the voicemail, but instead a fit, attractive thirty-something man. Jillian instantly recognized his baritone when he introduced himself. He wore a dark suit, and a yarmulke covered the crown of his closely shorn, stylish hair.

While they waited for the waiter to pour water, bring dinner rolls, and take drink orders, Tom and Jillian learned that Ehud was a real estate attorney. As he spoke, Jillian recalled the first impression she had of Miriam and her suspicions of an organized crime scam. She was relieved to see that neither Miriam nor Ehud fit the profile in her mind.

When the waiter poured the Shiraz Tom had ordered for the group, Jillian saw Miriam give Ehud a strange look, as if she were waiting for permission.

“One glass won't hurt,” he said quietly. “Just skip your nighttime medication.”

Miriam raised her glass to Jillian, “L'Chaim!”

Everyone toasted and sat quietly. Miriam turned in her chair so that she was facing Jillian straight on. “I didn't expect such a young woman! Tell me how you know Jozsef?”

Jillian's choked slightly on her first taste of the wine. Embarrassed, she set the glass down gingerly. She had assumed Miriam knew who she was even though she herself was still not sure how Miriam fit in the picture. Hadn't Joe Herman's letter said that Miriam was expecting her? Hadn't the woman said so herself? Tom's hand found hers under the table. Jillian seethed with fresh anger for Joe Herman, her mind re-conjuring those initial fears that she would be forced to meet the family Joe Herman had chosen over her grandmother and father. It was now obvious Herman omitted this part of his life from Miriam Leitner, never mentioning his wife and child, just down Interstate 55, who scratched and suffered their whole lives to get by with no help from him. Jillian inhaled deeply, fighting off a panic attack.

"You don't know who I am?" Despite the coldness in Jillian's tone, the old woman's eyes sparkled with the expectation of a child waiting to be told a fairytale.

"Did he help your parents or grandparents?" Miriam guessed excitedly.

Jillian could not contain her horror. "*Help* them?" Her voice was guttural. "No, he didn't *help* them! Just the opposite, in fact! He destroyed them. He abandoned us all! My grandmother had no way to support herself."

The old woman's eyes grew wide. Ehud sat motionless, watching Jillian.

"How do *you* know Joe Herman? If you don't mind me asking."

Jillian's reaction had rattled Miriam. Ehud intervened, "We don't know Joe Herman."

Jillian jerked the napkin from her lap and placed it firmly on the table. She rose from her seat, but Ehud continued, "My grandmother's friend, Jozef Ashe, visited her last year and asked to help you collect documents that he placed in the bank box for safekeeping. When we got your letter, I tried to research the connection, but I didn't get far."

Both Miriam and Jillian looked confused.

“Forgive me if I overstepped,” he said. “I had to be sure my grandmother was not getting caught up in some sort of scheme. When I learned about her meeting with Jozef and later the plan for her to meet someone named Jillian Lloyd, I simply tried to do some due diligence.”

“What are you talking about, Ehud? Josef Ashe was my friend.”

Jillian settled back in her chair.

Ehud went on, “It seems Josef Ashe met my grandmother first in a DP camp and then again in Israel just after the war. After she was finally liberated from the death camp, she went to Israel. Jozef and his wife took my grandmother in and later, and several years later, they helped my grandparents immigrate to America. We assumed - my grandmother assumed, that when he came to her asking for help that it was connected to his work in the DP camps or Israel. We thought, perhaps, that the packages he saved for you were from your family, from your Joe – is it Joe Herman, you say? We thought he had located something of yours from before the war.”

“Oh my God!” Jillian exhaled and looked at Miriam, “You were in a concentration camp?” All of the horrific images of Holocaust victims she had seen in school and museums flashed in her mind as she studied the small, ancient woman.

Tom cleared his throat and asked, “What is DP?”

Ehud spoke, “DP Camp. DP stands for Displaced Persons. After the liberation of the death camps, the prisoners had nowhere to go. It was impossible for them to their homes, you understand?”

“No, why?” Jillian asked.

“Most were too sick. And, even if by some chance their homes were still standing after all the bombing, they were occupied by the same people who wanted them annihilated in the first place. The Americans and the British converted the Nazi prison camps into Displaced Persons

camps. Essentially, they just rebranded them.” There was a touch of sarcasm in Ehad’s voice. “The Holocaust survivors stayed there while it was decided what to do with them.” He looked at Miriam, then back at Jillian.

Tom spoke, “Ehad, are you saying that the camp survivors were kept in the death camps after World War II?”

“Yes. For a time. The Allies worked to convert them to refugee camps, and of course, they did not murder the prisoners as the Nazis had, but, yes, in many cases the prisoners were locked in the same camps where their family and friends were murdered. Disease and the impact of starvation continued to kill them, and until that was brought under control, the mass graves continued to be filled.”

Jillian absorbed Ehad’s explanation of the camps and wondered how her grandfather fit in that picture.

Tom exhaled, “Wow. I had no idea. They never explain that part in school.”

Ehad started to speak again but stopped short when the waiter appeared. The foursome waited in silence while he refilled their water glasses and reviewed the specials. As soon as he left, Jillian announced her role in the bizarre meeting.

“I am Joe Herman’s granddaughter.” Ehad looked at Jillian expressionless. “He was married to my grandmother, Louise Herman in St. Louis, Missouri for over 50 years.” Jillian continued, “They had a child, my father, Joe Francis Herman, Jr. My father went by Frank.” Jillian paused for a moment, then rapidly finished the story, “My parents were killed when I was very young, and when that happened, I went to live with my grandmother, but I never knew Joe. He abandoned my grandmother when my father was an infant. I’ve always heard he disappeared in the war, but he came back right before my grandmother died. He stole her home, sold all of

our belongings, and abandon me to the foster care system. I never heard from him again until the letter from his lawyer arrived.”

Miriam’s hand came down hard, slapping the table and causing the silver to clink.

“BALAGAN!” she exclaimed. Ehud’s eyebrows shot up as he looked over at her.

“Safta! Your language!” He whispered, admonishing her for the profanity. Miriam waived him off with two flaps of her hand in his direction and stared intently at Jillian.

“This – You say Joe - ” Miriam started to speak, but stopped.

Jillian began again, “I thought you knew who I was. I --” Miriam cut her off.

“No. No. I did not. He abandoned you, you say? That you are his own family and he disclaimed you? That he had a *wife*? Here? That cannot be possible!” She paused, searching Jillian’s face, then said, “You seem like such a nice young lady, but I am sorry. There has been some mistake. A mix-up. This is chaos!”

“I thought you didn’t know Joe Herman?” Jillian challenged Miriam.

“I don’t.” The woman was suddenly sullen. She whispered, “It cannot be the same person.”

“Who?” Jillian asked.

Ehud took Miriam’s hand to calm her while Tom kept a firm grip on Jillian’s. The two men looked at each other as if to say, “What now?” The waiter appeared, breaking the tension by asking for their orders.

Tom leaned to ask Jillian if she wanted to stay at all. Ehud took his cue and asked Miriam the same question.

“What about the items in the box? At the bank.” Miriam asked. No one answered, but it was somehow settled. Jillian returned her napkin to her lap. Miriam took a long drink of her wine. Once the orders were placed and the waiter was safely out of earshot again, Tom spoke.

“As you can imagine this is a difficult trip for Jillian. She was - We - were not sure she should even go through with this. When Mr. Herman’s letter arrived, it revived a lot of painful memories. Like, she said, Jillian was raised by her grandmother until Mrs. Herman died when Jillian was sixteen.”

Miriam’s hand flew up again, this time to her chest and she whispered “Vife! She cannot be his *vife*.” Miriam’s continued shock at that word confirmed Jillian’s suspicions this meeting was somehow connected to Joe’s other woman. Miriam was clearly not that woman, but she knew something of Joe Herman and of another woman - or women.

Tom went on, “Jillian never knew him. The letter came out of the blue. And, well, here we are. You obviously knew a different side of him - or a completely different person altogether. This is a bit of a mystery really.”

Jillian turned to Miriam and inquired, “You said you met him at a DP camp?”

“I met Jozsef Ashe. It was a Displaced Person camp. After the war Europe was in total chaos. Most of the prisoners who survived were too weak and ill to move. And!” Miriam sat up taller, becoming more animated, “The United States refused to accept us! England refused us!” Calming a bit, she continued, “The Americans did not kill us in those camps, but as Ehud said, the typhus and pox still did. No one could stop the diseases. I met Jozsef at Dachau. I went there when I heard my cousin was there.” Miriam paused. “Jozsef had such a kind smile and he worked so hard. We all worked in the camp. Always after his shift ended, he stayed and talked to us. Jozsef helped me find my cousin, Ezra. Ezra was taken from my aunt and me in the ghetto one



day. The Nazis saw us walking near our apartment. They asked a lot of questions about Ezra and told us that he had to go for a health inspection. They just took him from us. There on the street. My aunt was crying and scratching her face. She was insane with worry. My parents heard us and rushed to the street. They tried everything to calm her. My Papa slapped her and told her she would get us all arrested, but my aunt did not care. Ezra was her world. He was very small for his age, you know and he was --" Miriam paused, searching for the right word, "Ezra was fragile. My aunt was a desperate animal the night the SS took him. The next morning, she took me with her to Radnice to search for him. The Germans made their office there, in Radnice." Miriam paused and looked down at her hands clasped on the table in front of her. "We never returned to the ghetto." The small woman shook her head. "My aunt never saw her son again. She made a terrible scene at the office." Miriam's voice cracked and she stopped talking. When she could speak again, she looked at Jillian. "At the Radnice, she asked to speak with the physician giving the exams. The soldiers told me to sit in the courtyard of the building and wait while my aunt met with the physicians. I waited all day. My aunt did not return to the courtyard until just before curfew. When she came back she was not able to speak. Her hair was" Miriam made a gesture on the side of her head with both hands. "A mess. And her dress had no buttons on it. It just hung open. Her underclothes – they were gone." Miriam inhaled deeply. "She did not even try to hold it closed, the dress. I grabbed her and tried to cover her. The soldiers began screaming for us to leave. On the street, I was trying to get my aunt home but she would not move fast. Of course, we could not take a bus and our bicycles were confiscated months before. We could only walk the distance to the ghetto. It was almost dark and we were out after curfew. When we got to our neighborhood the Judenrat stopped us and we were arrested."

Miriam paused. “My aunt and I went first to Ravensbruck. It was unbelievable! No-” she looked at Ehad and corrected herself, “Unbelievable. It was unbelievable. My aunt collapsed as soon as we arrived and the guards ordered some other prisoners to take her away. I never saw her again. She had not spoken a word since she entered the Radnice. She never looked at me, never said goodbye. My family. They were all arrested. We never had the chance to say goodbye.”

Miriam sighed and moved her hands to her lap. She straightened in her chair and continued, “After the war, I learned from the Red Cross that Ezra, my cousin, went to Dachau.” Miriam’s eyes welled with tears. “Ezra suffered too much. You know? He was not the same delicate young man.” Miriam whispered, “They did things to him.”

“I’m so sorry.” Jillian whispered. She had pegged Miriam for a senile, nosy windbag who associated with lowlifes like Joe Herman, but after listening to Miriam’s story, Jillian felt something akin to intrigue as to what all this meant for her.

Miriam’s demeanor brightened. “He lives with me now!”

“Who lives with you?” Jillian asked, trying to remember where Miriam’s story left off.

“Ezra! I take care of him.” Miriam stated proudly, then looking at Ehad, she added sheepishly, “Well, and the nurses Ehad sends to help me.”

The food arrived and the group picked at it, except for Miriam who devoured everything on her plate. As she ate Miriam resumed her habit of friendly chatter, “Eventually we had to leave the camps, you know? And I was part of a group that Jozef organized to go to British Palestine.”

Jillian glanced at Tom. His slight shrug signaled he, too, was confused by what Miriam meant.

“Ve resettled there, Israel.” Miriam continued in between bites “Ve built things. Ve did construction. Schools and clinics and businesses. Oh! And orchards. Beautiful orchards.”

“Who did this? ” Jillian interrupted Miriam digging for the connection of this woman to whoever had been responsible for Joe Herman abandoning his wife and child.

“All of us. The Surviving Remnant.”

Ehud explained, “The Surviving Remnant is from the Torah. It’s how the Holocaust survivors described themselves, organized themselves. Of the roughly nine million Jews caught under Nazi control, only about 250,000 survived the camps. Like the Jews who left Egypt, the Jews who escaped the Nazis were the Surviving Remnant of our people.”

“Surviving Remnant. I’ve never heard that term. That’s beautiful - and tragic.” Tom said.

Miriam began again, “I stayed in contact with Josef while ve lived in Israel. I saw him sometimes. He checked on us - Ezra and me. He took care of Ezra while I was on my honeymoon!” Miriam laughed a little as if she remembered something very funny about that time. “In 1977 my husband’s cousin in the United States told us ve should come there. He had work for my husband. He wanted us to help him with his business. Ve talked to Jozsef about how to do it, you know? How to get into the United States. Jozsef had to make some papers for us.”

Ehud cut her off, “He helped translate applications and recommendations for refugee status. That’s what she means. Those are the papers she is referring to.”

“That’s what I said!” Miriam insisted. Ehud just nodded and shrugged. There was an awkward silence. Miriam said, “That is how I know Jozsef Ashe.”

“Well, that all sounds amazing.” Jillian blurted. “We definitely are not talking about the same guy. Joe Herman was a U.S. soldier with a wife and child at home. I’ve never heard of him

being this all-around great guy, planting orchards in Israel.” Jillian said without hiding the contempt.

“A U.S. soldier?” Miriam asked and turned to look at Ehud.

Jillian spat, “Yes! Joe Hermann was a U.S. soldier. Married to Louise Herman. Father of Frank Herman of St. Louis, Missouri. Joe Herman fought in World War Two, then came home and ditched his wife and kid.”

“Jillian,” Ehud said tentatively. “Do you have the letter from Joe Herman, by chance?”

The letter was in her purse, but Jillian hesitated, weighing whether to share it. Finally, she nodded.

“May I see it?”

All eyes were on the letter as it passed from Jillian to Ehud. He read it and handed it to Miriam.

“I didn’t bring my glasses,” she said. Then added sourly, “They make me look old.”

Ehud smiled tenderly at her, then asked “May I read it to her?” Jillian consented. Miriam shook her head and scowled several times as she listened to Ehud read the letter.

“Perhaps the packages in the bank’s lockbox will sort all this out.” Ehud said, folding the letter and handing it back to Jillian. “Let’s discuss the plan for tomorrow. What time shall we meet? Still at nine o’clock?”

The dinner ended within minutes of that question. As the four of them stood in silence at the front of the restaurant waiting for Tom and Jillian’s taxi, Jillian watched Ehud help Miriam with her coat and was overcome again with a sense of connection to her own grandmother.

“Miriam, I can see this is not what you expected.” Jillian said. “Not what either of us expected. You seem very nice, and I’m so sorry to learn of all your pain, your life in - I never would have guessed.”

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As soon as the taxi pulled away from the curb, Miriam demanded Ehud, “Take me straight home. I have a call to make.”

“A call? It’s pretty late. Maybe you can make the call tomorrow once we know what’s in the packages at the bank.” Ehud held the door open for his grandmother.

“No, it cannot wait. She’s up to her old tricks again,” was Miriam’s reply.

## CHAPTER 15

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1945*

“What does this mean?” Louise’s mother snatched the telegram from her daughter’s hands.

If the soldier was taken aback by her tone, he did not show it. Louise supposed that years of delivering this and worse news, had numbed him to the point of mechanical expressions and communication.

“Ma’am, I don’t have any information that is not provided in the telegram. Private Herman has been reported missing in action. The details of his disappearance are not known at this time.” Turning to Louise, “Mrs. Herman, when more is known, the United States Army will notify you. We remain hopeful for his safe return.”

“What does this mean for her and his child?” Louise’s mother shook the paper at the soldier. “The war is over. How could he be missing? Is it possible he was killed? Will she continue to receive money?”

The soldier looked from Louise to her mother and back. Speaking to Louise, “The war is over ma’am. The telegram lists him as a member of the Constabulary Forces remaining in Europe. The Constabulary is conducting the investigation.”

“Why isn’t he with his unit? We heard they’re coming home this month.” Louise was polite.

“He was reassigned to the constabulary.” The soldier shifted his weight. “Perhaps he volunteered to join. Many men did.”

“He volunteered to stay? In Europe?” Louise fought to maintain her composure. The sound of the baby crying from his cradle in the kitchen startled her. “Thank you for coming here to deliver the news in person. It means a lot. I know it must be hard for you to deliver these messages. However, I’m sure there has been some mistake. The Army has made mistakes, you know. Two of our friends received similar telegrams only later to get the wonderful news that it had all been a mistake.” The baby’s cry intensified. “Joe knows we love him very much and need him to come home to us. If that’s all, I will show you to the door. My son needs me.”

Louise’s mother let out an exasperated sigh and started to say something, but the soldier cleared his throat loudly. “I’ll be going now.”

With her mother following two steps behind, Louise showed the soldier to the door then gathered Frank and escaped to the solitude of her bedroom.

As she served their dinner that night, Louise informed her parents, “I’m going to get a job. Outside of the home. To provide for Frank and me. Until Joe gets home.” Expecting an objection from her mother and getting none, she continued with her kitchen duties.

Her father cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. He glanced at his wife then back to the food in front of him.

“Lou-Lou. Your brother and I have made plans to add another store. With the war ending, putting a store closer to Chesterfield where all the new growth is seems like a good idea. Homes are going up by the day, for the soldiers returning and buying the places up on the G.I. -” He stopped himself. Her mother smiled.

Louise turned her back to them, gripping the edge of the sink. He didn’t need to finish the sentence. All anyone in St. Louis could talk about was the return of the boys from war and the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, the G.I. Bill. Every day her mother reported what she learned

over lunches and bridge games. Another soldier returning, another soldier buying a home for his new bride, another soldier returning to college. All courtesy of the G.I. Bill. All things Joe should be doing for her and Frank.

Her father continued, “We think it would be suitable for you to work as a counter clerk in the old store. Opening it in the morning and closing up in the evenings. You could take on the alterations, too, for extra spending money. You’re quite smart with a sewing machine, as I recall.”

Louise turned from the sink. Neither of her parents made eye contact with her.

“That’s what you think? That I’m to work for free – oh except any sewing I can get. That’s what I’m to use to provide for my son?” She waited for a response. “I was thinking more along the lines of taking some secretarial classes. I could pay you back for those, of course. Once I have a job. I need a position that pays well enough for me to afford an apartment of my own. A place Joe can come home to after this ordeal is over. Or don’t I have any say in this?”

“You can use the sewing room at the shop for your son, while you work. There’s plenty of room for his bassinet. That way you can save any money you were thinking of spending on childcare.” Her mother said.

The next morning Louise pushed Frank in a second-hand pram on her first walk to work. Her brother, on his way to Chesterfield to oversee the construction of the new store, waved as he drove past her in the family’s Buick.



## CHAPTER 16

*Jillian*  
*Chicago, 2005*

The next morning they were a party of five sitting in the bank lobby waiting for their escort to the vault. Ehud's wife, Rina, accompanied them. She was alarmingly thin, and wore her jet-black hair pulled back into a harsh chignon that only accentuated the shape of her narrow face. Thin lips matched her thin brows giving her a sour expression though the sourness was not directed at any person in particular. It was evident that curiosity consumed her. Jillian felt Rina's eyes scanning her long after Ehud introduced them.

"My grandson's wife is not so busy this morning." Miriam said with an air of judgment. Rina ignored her.

When the banker greeted them, Miriam pounced, "I know how to do this! Follow me, Jillian. I know where we are going. You stay here." She said pointedly to Ehud and his wife.

Tom took Jillian's elbow and whispered close to her ear, "What do you want me to do?"

"I'm fine. If it gets dicey, I'll come get you."

Jillian and Miriam followed the banker to his desk. "We both have to sign the card." Miriam told him. "Do you have the key?"

Once the card was signed and the key produced, the three proceeded into the vault. The banker pointed out the box and stepped aside for Jillian to open it. She carried it to a narrow table in the center of the room. Miriam pressed into her elbow and raised herself on her toes to see into the box better.

There were three packages wrapped in brown butcher paper. Two were taped generously with packing tape; the third was taped with only a single strip. Jillian lifted them out and started toward the exit.

‘What are you doing?!’ Miriam shrieked. ‘You are not going to open them?!’

Jillian turned to see Miriam had not moved away from the empty box.

‘No, not right now.’ She laughed at Miriam’s assumption they would share any further in this wild goose chase. ‘I’ll open them later.’ Seeing the disbelief on Miriam’s face, she stated emphatically, ‘Later. When Tom and I are home.’ To the banker, she added, ‘Do we need to do anything else? To close out the box, I mean?’

‘No ma’am.’

‘Is there any refund necessary on the box rental?’ Miriam inquired frantically, trying to stall, but the banker shook his head.

‘The rental fees were drawn from a trust account. The closure and any refund due will be handled with the trust administrator.’

Miriam scurried to keep up with Jillian’s long strides back to the lobby. ‘She is not opening it!’ She called out to her grandson, causing one or two of the patrons in the tellers’ line to turn and look at them. Ehud pressed his hands down signaling her to remain calm and lower her voice.

‘Don’t you want to know what is in it?’ Miriam asked Jillian when they rejoined the group. Rina smirked delighting in the old woman’s angst.

‘It feels like papers or books. Look, I appreciate everything you’ve done to help me. I’ll open it later. When I’m home. He left it for me and apparently, he thought it was private enough to tape up and hide in a bank box.’ Jillian’s voice trailed off as she held the packages out for the group to see. ‘You know he was nothing to me and I was nothing to him. For all I know it’s just the papers from the family court. Whatever’s in these packages, I’m sure, could have been mailed to me.’ Seeing the hurt on Miriam’s face at that statement, Jillian softened. ‘I promise you this. If

it's anything important for the Surviving Remnant or – or something connected to that, I'll call you and Ehud. I promise. But if it is just old family paperwork, I will not bother you. Ok?"

Jillian gave Miriam no choice but to accept the proposal with a nod. Everyone shook hands. Even Rina extended her slender, cold hand to Jillian. Tom moved toward the doors that opened onto Harrison Street. Jillian followed a few steps, then turned and walked back to Miriam. She stooped low to hug the little woman that reminded her so much of her grandmother. Too emotional to speak, Jillian rushed to catch up with Tom.

Miriam watched the pair get into a taxi. Ehud took her small, gnarled hand in his and said, "Be patient, Savta."

"But, Ehud, there is not much time left."

## CHAPTER 17

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1945*

Through the plate glass window of Woolworth's, Louise happened to glance up just in time to see a familiar figure crossing the street. Checking out as quickly as she could, she darted into the street to get a better look. The individual was broad-shouldered, wore a black suit and blue tie. But it was the hair that confused Louise, made her doubt she had recognized the person. The black hair was shorn short and parted on the side. The longer hair on top was held in place with oil. Louise walked faster to catch up, coming up just as the person stepped into a seedy-looking bar called The Shed. The red upholstered door had a port hole style window, but Louise wasn't tall enough to see in.

"You're losing your mind," she told herself and made her way back to the bus stop. Back at the shop, she ran a finger down the list of numbers her father had long ago slid under the glass on top of the desk.

"Hello, Uncle Raymond! It's Louise. May I please speak to Margaret?" A minute later, Louise lowered the phone to its cradle.

When she got home, she confronted her parents. "Why didn't anyone tell me that Margaret moved out of Uncle Raymond's house?"

"Because it's just one more disgrace brought on this family. That's why. People don't like to dwell on such things." Her mother said.

"Where did she move?"

"No one knows."

The next day, when the driver returned from making the drop offs and pick-ups, Louise loaded Frank into the delivery truck and made her way downtown. She parked across from The Shed and waited. For days she made this excursion, and on the third day her efforts paid off.

With Frank on her hip, Louise entered The Shed. Her eyes took several minutes to grow accustomed to the darkness and the stale smoke.

“Ain’t no kids allowed in here.” A gruff voice called from somewhere in the dark.

“I won’t be but a minute. I’m looking for someone.”

“Ain’t no one here looking for you.”

“But I was just out front and – “ Louise saw Margaret sitting at the end of the bar. She had recognized Louise, too, shaking her head like a dog that had been slapped on the nose. Frank squirmed in his mother’s arms. Louise shifted the baby to her other hip as she approached Margaret. “How are you, cousin?”

“Get out of here.” The stench of stale bourbon coming off Margaret turned Louise’s stomach.

“I hear you’ve moved. Where are you living now?”

Margaret refused to answer or look at her. Frank squealed and kicked to be let down.

“Get that kid out of here or I’m calling the cops!” The bartender yelled.

“Cousin,” Louise pleaded. “I can’t have the cops called on us. Can we sit in the truck just a minute? I’m parked right out front. Please.”

“You alone?”

“Very much so. Well,” she smiled at Frank. “Except for your second cousin here. Come on. Let me introduce you properly.”

“I’ll be right back.” Margaret told the bartender and followed Louise to the truck.

“How have you been, Margaret?” Louise asked putting Frank on the blanket she’d spread in the back of the truck and handing him a rattle. The two women climbed in the front seat.

“Swell.”

“You don’t look swell. I mean you – you look – different and you look liquor-sick.”

Margaret reached for the door handle, but Louise was quick. She grabbed her cousin’s arm and held fast. “I would be, too, if I didn’t have Frank to worry about. I could dive so deep in a bottle right now, they’d need a wench to hoist me out.” Margaret settled back in her seat. “You think they’ll still let us room together at finishing school?”

The joke landed and Margaret seemed to relax a bit.

“Where are you living, Margaret?”

“Not far.”

“How are you supporting yourself?”

“A little bartending. Odd jobs.”

“Come to work for me.”

Margaret looked at Louise in disbelief. “Doing what? Babysitting?”

“No. Haven’t you heard? I myself am reduced to working in Daddy’s store. My brother built himself a new one and moved to Chesterfield, so now I run the old one. I’m there from daylight to dark, and no one ever checks on me. Honestly, with people moving away from downtown, I think Daddy would have sold it, but for the fact, it was a place to stick Frank and me until Joe comes back.” At the mention of Joe, Louise suddenly lost her bravado. “Anyway, most of the old crew is still there, but we can always use a presser. You can start there. You can even stay at the shop if you like, until you get on your feet.”

“I don’t think so.”

“What’s the saying? Come as you are? You can come as you are.” Louise looked at the shabby man’s suit and tie. She stared at Margaret’s dirty, short hair. “Think about it.”

## CHAPTER 18

*Jillian*  
*Chicago, 2005*

Jillian stared out the hotel room window at the Chicago skyline. The three packages lay on the ottoman in front of the stiff loveseat. Tom busied himself stacking their late-night room service dishes on the tray.

“Hang on,” Jillian said. “Give me one of those knives.”

She slit open the top crease on the smallest of the packages. A handful of envelopes that appeared to be old letters addressed to R. J. Herman and some to Louise Herman tumbled out. Many of the envelopes bore a distinctive mark where the return address should have been printed. It read V-Mail. The word FREE was printed in the corner where a postage stamp belonged.

“It’s old mail.” Jillian tossed the stack onto the ottoman.

Tom joined Jillian on the sofa. “Think that’s what’s in here, too?” He tapped and shook the other two bundles.

Jillian ignored the question. “So, what should we do now? We have twenty-four more hours in the big city. Let’s do something fun to remember this trip.”

“You think we think we could possibly forget this trip, Jill?” Crazy little Miriam? Picking up mystery packets of old mail? And how will I ever scald the image of Rina from my mind? Did you get a good look at that woman? Harsh.”

“I had to sit across from her the whole time you were back there with Miriam.”

“And I don’t get it. Ehud is a real looker. Seems like he could have done better than that. Did she say anything to you?”



“No. It was so awkward out there with them. Wait! A real looker?” Tom sat up. “So you were checking out Ehud this whole time?”

“No. He’s decent. That’s all. Look, we might not be able to forget these people and this wild goose chase, but let’s get out there. Chi-town! I want to add fun to the memory mix - besides last night’s room service party, I mean.”

“Don’t you want to put those in the safe or in your bag?” Tom pointed to the packages.

“No. I’d have no problem with housekeeping tossing Joe Herman’s old letters.”

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A day of exploring museums and an aquarium ended with dinner at a Bohemian-style scratch kitchen just off the north shore.

“Wow. This is tight.” Tom said as the hostess showed them to a table nestled so close to another couple’s that it was impossible not to hear each other’s conversations. The aperitifs and craft beers with dinner, coupled with all the walking and drama they had endured over the last several weeks, left Tom and Jillian mellow to the point they talked very little and appeared to be eavesdropping on the other couple most of the time.

They think we r listening to them. Jillian texted Tom.

I am. U didnt hear that part about their son failing algebra?  
Enthralling.

Why bother going on a date night just to talk about your kids all night? Boring. R we getting dessert?

Hell yeah.

After asking to see the dessert menu, Tom excused himself from the table. When he came back, he wedged himself between the two tables with his back to the other couple and dropped to one knee.

“Jillian, there is something I want to ask you?” The woman at the next table squealed and motioned for her husband to watch. Other diners saw the commotion and watched as Tom pulled something from his pocket. “Darling.” He whispered. “Did you by chance drop this quarter?”

Even though this was by no means the first time Tom had pulled this stunt with her, Jillian nodded her head and giggled at their joke. In fact, the first time Tom had played the prank was the summer before at the Cardinals game. It had been convincing enough to get them on the jumbotron then.

“Yes.” She played along, taking the quarter from him.

Tom kissed her and announced to those around them, “She said yes, folks!” Seeing the quarter and realizing the joke, the couple next to them laughed. Those at tables across the room clapped but looked confused as they watched Jillian drop the ring that they thought they had seen on to the table.

From that point on, Jillian, Tom, and the neighboring couple enjoyed friendly chatter over dessert. The waiter, still under the impression there had been a proposal, brought them a champagne toast on the house. Tom raised his glass to their new friends and said, “Works every time! Cheers!”

Outside, as they walked in search of a taxi, Jillian slipped an arm through Tom’s. “You were quite engaging at dinner.”

“Does this mean your re-thinking your stance on the whole marriage thing?”

“Not a chance.”

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At 4 a.m. Tom was breathing the slow peaceful breaths of someone deeply asleep. Jillian moved slowly and quietly from the bed. Finding one of Tom’s t-shirts at the foot of the bed, she

pulled it on. The skyline of Chicago kaleidoscoped on the other side of the rain-streaked windowpane. Jillian moved to the sofa and sat in the semi-dark room, holding the two unopened packages, weighing them in her hands before deciding which to open first.

Inside the first package was a book, more precisely an Army-issued New Testament, with more envelopes tucked in its pages. Jillian opened the cover. The first page of the book was a letter itself.

***THE WHITE HOUSE***

***WASHINGTON***

*March 6, 1941*

*To the Members of the Army:*

*As Commander-In-Chief I take pleasure in commending the reading of the Bible to all who serve in the armed forces of the United States. Throughout the centuries men of many faiths and diverse origins have found in the Sacred Book words of wisdom, counsel and inspiration. It is a fountain of strength and now, as always, an aid in attaining the highest aspirations of the human soul.*

*Very sincerely yours,*

Franklin D. Roosevelt

A few of the envelopes slid out. Jillian caught them and, as she tucked them back in the Bible, she could just make out writing on its pages. A tight, hand-written script covered all the

verses and filled the pages, right into the margins. In the dim light of the hotel room, it was impossible to read. She tossed the little book on the sofa cushion next to her and reached for the last bundle.

It was the bulkiest of the three and contained an oversized, white envelope with her name scrawled in the palsied handwriting that only the very old or disabled produce. Just her first name, Jillian, nothing else.

“What’s he have tell me now?” When she pulled the flap open, some of the contents fell with light thuds into her lap. Looking at the neatly stacked bundles, she blurted, “What the hell?” Tom stirred but did not wake.

Jillian took more bundles out of the white envelope and inspected them. In all there were 10 bundles of \$100 bills. Jillian counted the number of bills in one of the bundles. There were 100 bills. \$10,000 in each bundle.

“One Hundred Thousand Dollars,” Jillian whispered turning the white envelope upside down to make sure she had not missed anything else. A final envelope with her name written in the same shaky scrawl slid out.

The city lights twinkled brightly right up to the shore of Lake Michigan where they halted abruptly into a pitch-black void. The ominous visual caused anxiety to surge through Jillian.

“Tom!” She called, but Tom didn’t stir. She returned to the bed and grabbed him by the shoulder. “Tom! Wake up.”

“Hummm?” Tom rolled onto his back. Jillian pushed hard on his shoulder.

“Tom! Wake up!”

“What? I’m up! I’m up. What’s wrong?”

“You have to see this.” Jillian gathered the stacks of banded cash and plopped them on his chest. Tom raised to his elbows. Seeing the money, his brow furrowed.

“What’s going on, Jill? It looks like you robbed a bank” He pushed himself up further to get a better look. “If you did, I won’t cover for you. If that’s what you’re after - unless, of course, you’re offering me some of those stacks?” Sleepily he added, “Is that all you scored?”

“You know where this came from.”

Tom raised and looked at the ottoman where the envelopes had been earlier. “Oh shit! Gramps?”

“The other two were full of more old mail, a Bible, and a hundred thousand dollars. Cash. At least I think that’s how much. I haven’t actually counted it.”

“Wow. I never saw that coming, but that’s fantastic! Dear old gramps, coming through in the end!”

“How dare you call him that, Tom? Look. Here’s another letter. You read it first. If it’s bad, don’t tell me.” Jillian went into the small bathroom and turned on a cold shower.

“It is not diabolical, Jilly,” Tom called to the open door. The water turned off, and Jillian returned to the bed. “But it is still part of a weird game, I think. He says you have a family. In Israel. They want to meet you. That’s what the money is for. He hopes you use some of it to connect with your - ” Tom hesitated. “With your family.”

“Well, I don’t want to meet them. Family? That’s absurd.” Jillian stated emphatically, tossing the letter down on the bed, then picking it back up to read it again.

*Dear Jillian:*

*I am grateful you met Miriam and received the items in the lockbox. The letters will explain many*

*events that led to the exact moment you are reading this letter. Rabbi Maimonides wisely advised that one must accept the truth from whatever source it comes. I want you to know the truth - our truth.*

*You are my grandchild, and I am sorry we were never able to have a relationship in this life. I will die soon. It is my time, and I am ready to die even though it means I must leave my adored family. As a dying man, as your grandfather, I would like to share that gift with you. The gift of family that I could not give you for many years.*

*I have enclosed some funds. My wish is that you use the money to build a relationship with your family in Israel. Our family there will welcome you with open arms. My attorney can put you in contact with them, but you must contact him right away. There is not a moment to waste.*

*Your grandmother once reminded me that the best apology is changed behavior. This is my attempt to change. I want to change things for the better. I think of you, your grandmother, and your father often. Louise was a remarkable woman. In the beginning, Louise and I loved each other. In the*

*end, we loved each other. In the end, that is all that matters.*

*I wish you a long and happy life, Jillian, and much love.*

*Sincerely,*

*Joe*

“He’s a lunatic. Why would I want to go halfway around the world to meet complete strangers? I just did that in Chicago and look what a nut fest it turned out to be. If this family is so great and so anxious to have a relationship with me, why aren’t they coming to *me*? Why have they never contacted me, Tom? Why didn’t he take me to join them instead of putting me in foster care?” The letter fluttered in her hand. “This is just some last-minute penance to try to ease his conscience. I can’t wait to tell Phyllis this. She’s not going to believe it.” The mere mention of her beloved Phyllis calmed her. Jillian wiggled her way under the blankets and wrapped herself around Tom. “I’m sorry to bring you into the insanity that is my so-called family, Tom. And thank you - for everything. I love you.” Tom kissed her, and in a few moments, she heard his breath go soft and rhythmic.

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Jillian and Tom stowed their luggage in their sleeper car, then headed to the dining car where they took the same side of a booth and ordered drinks. The city lights shrunk into the dusky countryside as the train left Chicago.

“Jilly?” Tom asked, both of them staring out the window.

“Yes?”

“Why do you have Phyllis’ last name? Why aren’t you Jillian Herman? Phyllis adopted you, right?”

The reflection of her face in the train window clouded. There was much of her life, she had not shared with Tom.

“I don’t have Phyllis’ last name. I have my own last name. I just happened to like Phyllis’ last name a lot.” She turned to face Tom. “It’s complicated and simple all at the same time – and I’ve never told anyone.” She searched his eyes, deciding if she was ready to share and how much. “My parents named me Jillian Jane Herman. And, yes, they called me J.J., or so I have been told.”

“J.J. Herman.” Tom tried it. They both laughed and shook their heads. “Doesn’t suit you.”

“Sometimes I think about meeting them and being able to ask them what in the hell they were thinking.” She turned back to the window. “Or what they think about me now.”

She watched as another train passed theirs in a whooshing blur.

“I don’t remember them. Sometimes I think I remember my mom, seeing her from the back, like she’s doing something. Washing dishes and singing. I don’t know. I could have made it up. A silly fabricated memory. When they died, I moved in with GramLouise. You know how that went. I didn’t tell anyone at school when she got sick. I didn’t tell anyone when she collapsed, and the ambulance came and took her to the hospital. When they let me see her, I told her that I was staying with my friend, Leslie, and that I was fine, and that Leslie’s family agreed to take me to school and the hospital. She seemed to believe me, but she was on so many drugs, and I think the cancer was in her brain by then. Anyway, she didn’t question me at all. She was trying so hard to get better and to get back home. She was trying so hard.” Jillian’s shoulders shook. She leaned her head against the window shutting her eyes tight. “We thought she just had a bad case of pneumonia at first. If she knew she had cancer, she never told me. I had no idea



how serious it was. I had no one to call. Her best friend, Miss Millie, had died the year before and her cousin- they were close -but I had no idea how to get in touch with her.” Jillian looked at Tom. “I was not staying with Leslie. Like I said, I told no one. I kept living at our house and going to school and then to the hospital in the afternoon. I took the city bus or walked.

One day I got to the hospital, and there was an old man in her room. He had pulled up a chair to her bed and they were holding hands, talking. She said, ‘Jillian, I want you to meet someone. This is your grandfather. He’s going to take care of us.” I didn’t know what to think. GramLouise was the most lucid I’d seen her in weeks, so, of course, I felt relieved. I thought we were saved. He drove me home that night, but it made me anxious when he went right in the house. I was scared having a man in the house, but I forced myself to accept that it was normal if he was my grandfather. He clearly knew his way around the place. I mean it was obvious he had been there before. e took his bag in her bedroom room and then came back to the kitchen. I remember he looked through the refrigerator and then went in the dining room to get a bottle off the bar cart. I had to show him where the glasses were. He offered me a glass of whiskey. At sixteen. We sat at the kitchen table, and that’s when I learned the truth about the cancer. That she was dying.”

“Oh, God. Joe Herman was the one who told you?” Tom pulled her close. Jillian nodded and shook grief. A few others in the dining car turned to look at them. Tom gave an assuring nod that everything was ok between the two of them and as if to say, “Just a woman crying. Look away.” Jillian wiped her face vigorously with a napkin and blew her nose.

“I went wild, but I couldn’t cry. Not with this stranger. I screamed and demanded that he take me back to the hospital. Of course, he didn’t. We sat back down and talked. He talked. For a long time and asked a lot of questions. He asked me about bills. I had no idea what he meant

which seemed to make him angry. He started rummaging through everything. I wanted to call the cops or go back to the hospital. I knew they'd never let me in after visiting hours, so I just went to my room and cried and listened to him roam the house all night." The corners of Jillian's mouth contorted involuntarily.

"The next morning, I found him at the kitchen table with her checkbook and papers. He said he paid all the bills. He bought some groceries while I was at school. When I got home, we left together to go to the hospital. On the way he told me that they were moving GramLouise to another hospital. He and I lived together a few weeks or so like that. He would be there when I got home from school, drive me to the hospital, take me home and feed me dinner. I would go to my bedroom, and he would sleep in GramLouise's bed. I knew on some level it would not go on forever, but I was totally unable to predict the next move and too scared to ask any questions. Then she died."

Jillian collapsed into renewed sobs. Tom stroked her hair and kissed the top of her head. When it was evident that she was not going to be able to stem the tears this time, Tom motioned for the check. The dining car attendant wasted no time getting the credit card run. The couple skirted between cars until they reached their sleeper. Jillian climbed into the bunk first facing the wall. Hot tears continued to run down her cheeks, though at slower intervals. Her eyes were painfully swollen, and she heaved frequently with erratic breaths. Tom curled in behind her. After a half hour, Jillian rolled on her back and said, "Are you awake?"

"Yes."

"I want to tell you all of it."

"You sure?"

“I was at school when she died. That asshole never came to get me. I never said goodbye.” Jillian burst into tears. “I got home from school, and he was there, at the kitchen table. He just said it. ‘Your grandmother passed away this morning.’” She paused.

“The next few days were a blur. He and I went to the funeral home, picked out a casket. He told me to pick a dress from her closet. We buried her. We came home, talked to people who stopped by. Ate the food people bring you when someone dies. I didn’t know what the future held, but I knew I had to go to school, I had to graduate, get a job, and I just assumed he would see to all this with me even though we barely knew each other.

The Monday after the funeral, I went to school. I was there maybe an hour when the secretary called me to the office. There was a woman waiting there with Joe Herman. They checked me out and took me to a law office. The woman was a social worker with the Department of Children’s Services. The lawyer was Leon Sampson. He said he was my lawyer and would represent me in my dependency hearing. I had no idea what he was talking about. The three of them explained that Joe was relinquishing custody of me to the state and that I would go to a foster care group home until a suitable foster parent could be found for me.”

“What the hell, Jillian? No shit? The week after the funeral?”

“That was it, Tom. He dumped me right there in the middle of a school day. I tried to talk to him and ask him why we couldn’t live in GramLouise’s house. I cried. I screamed. I swore I would be good. I vowed not to cause him any trouble or get in his way. I screamed some more. I cried some more. I demanded to be taken back to school. I thought at that point he was going to live there without me - in my home.”

“He didn’t?” Tom questioned.

“No. He said I couldn’t live with him, that we had to part ways, but that he would make sure I had some funds when I graduated. Then he left. He got up and walked out.”

“And you got sent to live with Phyllis?” Tom asked.

“No.” Jillian let out a raspy laugh. “No. I would not meet Phyllis for quite some time. At that point I was a physical and mental wreck. The social worker walked me to her car. I told her I needed to go home to get my things, but she had already been to my house and packed every piece of clothing I had in two suitcases. She packed a few things from my room, but the rest I never saw again. There was this quilt she made me for junior high graduation.” The memories wracked Jillian. “My books.” She cried huge guttural moans.

“It’s ok, babe. You don’t need to do this to yourself. I get it now. The guy –“

“No! I didn’t finish telling you how I got my new name. I want you to know. It is important.”

“It can wait if you don’t feel like talking about it.”

“My world went really dark. I lived in an emergency shelter for 120 days. The maximum time you can stay in a shelter during a twelve-month period. No one wants a teenager. But then a couple had a temporary opening in their home. I stayed there 2 months. I quit eating. I quit talking. I quit everything. I was trying to die and I got sent to an in-patient facility for depression. I was there a few weeks, got some drugs that made me even more numb than I was. When I was sent back to the foster home, I quit taking the pills and ran away. Back to my house where I found out it had been sold, so I took to the streets. Leon Sampson found me in a matter of weeks. It was Leon who called Phyllis. He knew her from a prior case - a bad case like me. Leon convinced her to take me even though she wanted out of the system by that point. And - the rest was a little complicated, but we lived happily ever after as they say.”

“But did she didn’t adopt you?”

“No. Joe Hermann destroyed or sold everything that was mine. He put the money in a trust. Phyllis got me back in my old high school so I could graduate with my friends. I was 17 years old and completely clueless. As independent as I thought I was, I had no idea how to be an adult. Phyllis did all the adulting for me and made me feel like it was my accomplishment. She got me in college and let me live with her all during college even though she had no legal obligation to do it. A few months before graduation, we had to order our diplomas. That’s when I decided to change my name. I loved GramLouise. I loved my parents - or the idea of them at least. But I hated Joe Herman. Surviving high school and thriving in college had nothing to do with him. I didn’t want to be related to him at all and I wasn’t. Legally he had made sure of it. I decided to change my legal name to honor GramLouise and mainly to honor Phyllis. I did it without telling her. Good ol’ Leon Sampson finally did something for me in court that did not leave me wanting to claw his eyes out.” Jillian croaked a hoarse laugh. “When I got the court order, I took it to Phyllis and told her that since she could not adopt me, I adopted her. I am Jillian Louise Lloyd. Child of Frank and Lydia and Louise and Phyllis.” Jillian swallowed hard on the painful lump in her throat.

“Wow. That is incredible, Jilly.” Tom said and then asked, “But why didn’t Phyllis adopt you? Surely, she wanted to. You two are closer than any blood family I have ever seen.”

“We almost did, but that’s where it got complicated. I talked to Leon about emancipation when Joe terminated guardian rights, so I could just live alone. I was in the shelter at that point and technically I was old enough at sixteen. Leon wouldn’t hear of it, but if you ask him now, he will say he merely advised against it - probably because he could see what a disaster that would be. He did not say that to my face, sweet man, but I know now that he sabotaged it and raised it

half-heartedly to the judge. Herman's lawyer got involved and blocked it for some reason, too, although I could never see why he cared since Herman obviously did not, but the lawyers seemed like, I don't know, like they cared. Anyway, between Herman's lawyer's objections and Leon's foot dragging, the judge decided I wasn't a candidate. When I got to Phyllis, she let me explore emancipation again. I was rabid to do it and while I know now that she did not support it, she did not kill my desire to explore it. We met with Leon, and he told us about the trust fund. Long story short, we agreed that since I liked Phyllis in those early days, I would sit tight and review it again when I turned 17 before I struck out on my own in college. Leon and Phyllis must have conspired."

Jillian smiled to herself in the dim train car.

"They fed me some story about how if I could show a year of stable, responsible living with Phyllis and graduating high school, then the court would be more likely to grant it before I turned 18. Well, when the time to file the petition came around, I trusted Phyllis. I loved her. She had me off all the antidepressants, involved in my old high school, and accepted to college. She loved me like GramLouise had. Exactly like that. Still, the day I turned 17 I asked to talk to Leon about emancipation. There was something about the trust and the fact that I would have to leave Phyllis for at least a year before she would not have a conflict of interest over my inheritance. That wouldn't work because by then I would have aged out. Basically, I would have had to have gone back to foster care for my last year - while I am supposed to be graduating high school and going off to college - all so Phyllis could adopt me right before I aged out and even then, it might not happen. It didn't make sense. I never admitted it out of pride and because I had been so dogged about emancipation, but the closer I got to graduation from high school, the more I did not want anything to change. I was nervous about college, and I didn't want to leave Phyllis.

Outwardly I think I even pouted and acted resigned to the fact that I would be Phyllis' foster child forever, but I was so relieved. Phyllis was kind enough to pretend to be proud of me for making such a 'mature decision' as she put it. We both knew that at 18, I was nowhere near ready to live on my own. Phyllis told me and I knew, not just because she said it, but because I knew in my heart that no piece of paper could make us any more family that we already were. So, we forgot about it and lived happily ever after. And in the end, I adopted her. We celebrate it every year. Our own version of "gotcha" day."

## PART TWO

### CHAPTER 19

*Louise*  
*St. Louis, 1955*

The phone rang just as Louise started pulling the laundry off the line. She let it go to the second ring, folded a towel, and placed it in the basket at her feet.

“Louise! I know you hear that phone. Run! We’re going to miss the call, for heaven’s sake!” Her mother admonished her from the chaise lounge on the patio where she sat doing the crossword puzzle.

“It’s probably just Dot Campbell wanting a substitute for bridge tomorrow. She’s the only person who ever calls here.” Louise disappeared into the house.

“Hello?”

“Oh! You answered! I was about to give up. Hello! Is this Louise?”

“Yes.” Louise could not place the chipper voice on the other end of the line.

“Oh good! Just who I wanted to speak to. This is Millie.” When Louise did not respond, she added, “At the post office!”

Louise wracked her brain trying to place a face with the name and link it all to the post office. Millie? Millicent Lawrence! “That poor old maid,” Louise thought, but said, “Oh. Hello Miss Lawrence. How are you?” Louise checked the clock on the wall. “Why is anyone from the post office calling this late?” She wondered.

“Oh, Hon, call me Millie. Listen, I’ve been sorting the mail for tomorrow’s deliveries, and I’ve got an overseas letter here for you. And well, hon, I just thought - I mean it can wait



until tomorrow, but I thought, since I am coming right by there on my way home -" Millie stopped short, there was a long pause, then she tried again, "This letter looks - Well, I thought it might be important."

"Important?" Louise said, something heavy settling in her chest.

"Do you want me to bring it around when I get off, Honey?"

"No. No!" Panic washed over Louise. She raised on her toes to look out the small window over the kitchen sink. Frank had rolled his bicycle close to where his grandmother sat and she was flapping her hands to shew him away.

Louise lowered herself and turned her attention back to the call. "No, please don't trouble yourself, Miss - Millie. I'll come around to you and pick it up. Will someone be at the door to let me in?"

"Don't be silly! You're right down the street from me. I wanted to make sure you'd be home before I pulled it from tomorrow's delivery. I just need to lock up and then I'll be there within the hour, ok?"

Louise peaked out the window again. Knots constricted her chest the way they always did when she was being coerced into something she did not want to do. Finally, she said softly, "Well, if you're sure it is not out of your way." She started to hang up but stopped. "Millie?"

"Yes, Hon?"

"Where is the letter from?"

"It's postmarked Jerusalem, Hon. That's a new one on me!"

Louise was waiting at the end of the driveway when Millicent Lawrence's Ford turned onto her street. When she saw the car, Louise moved to the middle of the driveway so Millie could not turn in. It was bad enough that Millicent Lawrence wanted to be on a first name basis

with her as if they were some sort of old maid chums. Now this woman had a tasty bit of gossip about Louise receiving mystery mail from a strange new country. Millicent was at least ten years older than Louise and although their families lived in the same neighborhood, they had never socialized. She had no intention of inviting Millicent in to deliver the letter in front of her mother and stick around trying to learn anything about its contents.

Millicent made a small production of, first, waiting for Louise to move out of the driveway then, seeing her stand her ground, angling the hulking, baby blue car alongside the curb. She shifted into park and slid across the long front seat to roll down the passenger window.

“Howdy!” She greeted Louise with the same oppressive friendliness she had used on the call. “Hop in!” Millicent opened the door and in a single motion, pushing it wide for Louise as she jetted her way back to the driver’s side.

Louise stared into the car. She knew this car. Her mind flashed back to a night when she had first seen it, when it was brand new. She bent down and looked at Millicent sitting in the driver’s seat beaming at her. An old sort of heartache gripped her, that pain that came time and time again during the war when they learned of friends and neighbors who received the terrible news of another beloved son or brother killed in action. Louise got into the car and shut the door.

“Thank you for coming around, Millie. My mother - she um,” Louise looked back toward the house,

“No need to thank me, Hon. And, truly, no need to explain. Your mom is a pistol, I know.”

Louise looked around the car. It was clean but showed its age. The baby blue interior was no longer an exact match or even complimentary to the baby blue exterior. The paint had faded

as the interior had burnished. The chrome was pitted and dark in a few places. The clock no longer worked.

“This was Lon’s and Don’s car, wasn’t it? I remember them driving over to show my brother. It was their last few days at home before they left.” Lon and Don, Millicent’s twin brothers were the same age as her own brother. Millicent was a year or two older than them. “How is your family, Millicent? Your mother and father? Are they well?”

The woman looked as if she couldn’t think of an answer. When she did speak, she had lost the forced friendliness, but was still trying for polite and light. “Oh, you know. They are doing as well as can be expected. Dad keeps busy with the VFW. Most of the time it’s just my mother and me around the house.” She paused and looked around the car herself as if she was now seeing it like Louise had, as Lon’s and Don’s car. She rummaged in her purse that lay on the seat between them. “Want a cigarette?”

As she plucked a Pall Mall from Millicent’s embroidered cigarette case, a tear ran down Louise’s cheek. She quickly brushed it away in a motion she hoped made to look like she was tucking a stray hair behind her ear.

Millicent flicked her lighter, took a long drag over it to get her cigarette lit and then held out the flame for Louise. Her hand was trembled. Louise reached to steady it as she lit her cigarette. The two smiled at each other and then turned to stare out of the windshield, down the street of perfectly uniform, manicured lawns.

“I drove this car once,” Louise said. Millicent gave her a quizzical look. “Lon and Don came to pick up my brother. I think they were going to take some girls to the pictures.” She gestured toward the house with her cigarette perched between her elegant fingers, “Don went inside, and Lon stayed in the car. When I came outside to have a look at the new car, he waved

me over. First, he showed me all around it, explained this thing and that thing.” A small laugh escaped. “He even opened the hood. I guess he was explaining the engine or something to me.” She paused. “Then, he asked me if I wanted to take it for a spin. I don’t have to tell you I was floored! I really thought he was just having fun at my expense. Kid sister thing, you know. I mean, I knew how to drive, but this was a brand-new car! Of course, I said no, but he insisted. Lon jumped in the passenger seat, and I got behind the wheel. We had to pull the seat so far up his knees were to his chest.” More tears escaped her eyes, but she made no effort to brush them away. “We just did one loop around the block, but when we got back, my whole family was standing on the front porch.”

The two women sat smoking and remembering happier times.

“That was the last time I saw either of them.” Louise looked at Millie who remained staring down their shared street. “I am so, so sorry for your family’s sacrifice, Millie. Those were good, good boys and I am so sorry they are gone.”

Millie nodded, sighed, and crushed her cigarette into the half-full ash tray under the radio. Louise did the same.

“Let me see the letter.” Louise said. Millicent pulled it from her purse, and Louise was suddenly thankful that the woman had insisted she sit in the car because when she recognized the handwriting, Louise thought she might faint.

“Now you see why I wanted to bring it directly to you. To make sure your mother didn’t meet the letter carrier tomorrow. I had to be certain this got delivered to the intended recipient and was not tampered with by *anyone*. That’s a federal offense, you know?”

“So you are, indeed, my friend,” Louise thought, looking through tear-filled eyes at the woman beside her. “Thank you,” she said, feeling genuine gratitude, an emotion she had not known in almost a decade.

JERUSALEN. ISRAEL. The two words curved around the country’s enormous postmark, a large white menorah on a blue background.

“He’s alive.” Louise whispered, “He wrote this,” and looked back to Millie for the courage she needed to open it.

April 29, 1955

Dear Louise,

I’ve started this letter many times, but I’m just never able to finish it. Hell, I don’t even know how to begin it. There are things I want to tell you and things I want to make right. In all my attempts, I’ve discovered that no letter can do this.

I’ll be direct and hope that my sincerity comes through. I want us to try to make a new life. After the war and after the occupation, I traveled to Palestine. At first, I thought I would help the refugees settle, but I’ve made a home here, on a small farm. It’s lovely and peaceful and I’m sure you will grow to love it as I have.

There are things about me and about my family, Louise, that I was never able to tell you. I never intended to hide

anything from you, but I couldn't find the right time to discuss everything. In the few months we were together, there just wasn't time. I thought we'd have a lifetime to get to know each other when I got back.

We can start again and get to know one another. And, most importantly, build a life far away from war and slaughter.

If you agree, I can make the arrangements for you to join me in Israel. Please contact me as soon as possible.

Your loving husband,

Joe

Louise folded the letter, placed it back in the envelope, and slid the envelope in the pocket of her dress. Millicent watched her closely and saw that she purposely arrange her face before turning her whole body in the seat to face her.

"Millie, I cannot thank you enough for bringing this to me. It is – it's not what I - not what I thought. I thought at first - that it was my husband. That he'd been found." Louise patted the pocket containing the letter. "This is a letter from a friend of his. Someone who knew Joe in the Army. He sent a kind letter to tell me of his friendship with Joe." Louise started to tremble and reached a hand back for the door handle. Millie reached across the seat and grabbed Louise's other hand squeezing it tight.

"Oh, Honey! I had so hoped it was good news. The best news. I really hoped."

"Yes, me too."

The sound of Louise's mother knocking on the window startled them.

"What's this about?" The woman bent trying to see who was in the car with Louise.

"Sweetheart, you go lie down." Millie said. "You've had a shock and you need to just rest for a bit. If you need to talk - anytime, hon, you just walk down to my house. It won't be any trouble."

Frank came around the back corner of the house on his bike. Louise got out of the car with an enormous, bright smile that to anyone else, but Millicent, would have been convincing.

"Thanks for the visit, Millie! I'm going to take your advice." She winked.

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May 26, 1955

Dear Joe,

Your letter came as quite a shock. In 1945, the Army sent a lieutenant to my home to tell me that you were missing. In 1946, you were presumed dead by the Army and United States' government. My father made a few calls to his contacts in the Army, and we learned that you disappeared from your post in Germany and that you had shown disturbing behavior prior to that time, behavior unbecoming of a soldier.

I told your son that you died a hero. He is proud of you, and I intend to keep it that way. There are several children in his school whose fathers died fighting for our freedom, so he does not feel so very different, although I know he misses out on a lot, not having a man in his life. My father passed away

and my brother has his own family now. I still live with mother and do my best to raise a brave, honorable man. Frank never needs to know his father abandoned his family and deserted his duty to his country.

When I got your letter, I spoke with a lawyer. He says that you have a responsibility to turn yourself in to the U.S. Army and to answer for your dereliction. Frank and I had no part in that, and we do not intend to join you on the run.

My lawyer says if you will sign these papers, he can divorce us legally here in Missouri. I want to do that, Joe. I want to divorce. I have Frank to think about and provide for. He is all I have in this world, and I need to make sure what is mine stays his. I must rely on my own good sense now and not be defrauded again.

Please sign the papers and return them to my lawyer as soon as possible.

Sincerely,

Louise



## Vita

Melisa Connell-Spencer received her Bachelor of Arts at the University of Georgia and her Juris Doctorate at the University of Memphis. Since retiring from her first career as In-House Counsel to multinational corporations in 2019, Melisa splits her time between Texas, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. When she is not caring for her family, traveling and catering to the every whim of her two Great Danes, she enjoys taking on *pro bono* legal services and teaching composition as an adjunct professor at colleges within her communities.

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