

“Make the world safe for democracy!” the sultans of sobriety

Commanded us.

Now luster fades from Woodrow Wilson’s promise.

Who were we to quarrel with their bright and shining morals?

While our emperors were naked

And dishonest.

—Canticles to an Angry God ©1929

Sr. Alma Martin, O.P.

CHAPTER I

ANAHEIM: FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 1918

I didn't tell Ma I had plans today to blow through my life's savings. I was certain she'd say, "No, Deanie." But I'd made up my mind. At ten years and eight months old, I grabbed Pa's hammer from the shed and busted open my Golden State National Bank souvenir piggy bank.

With joy, I dumped my nest egg onto my yellow quilted bedspread. Mounds of dimes and quarters flowed like loot from *Treasure Island*. Three years of paper routes, mowing lawns, pulling crabgrass, digging ditches, and stuffing milk bottles with umpteen-million icky green tomato worms I'd apprehended eating Mrs. Lander's victory garden—all this work had netted me the \$14.71 I had saved up since we had moved out west from Brooklyn.

I counted it all twice just to make sure.

That was enough for me to buy myself a brand new *Boy Scout Handbook* and still have \$12.21 left over. I spent my afternoon downtown, peering from fresh-cured concrete sidewalks through brick storefronts with a U S flag in most of the display windows. I loved the way it felt to be a man who earned a living. Nearly \$15 begged for me to spend it buying merchandise. For now, I simply wanted to enjoy this happy feeling.

After an hour I made my way into the SQR Department Store, dashed up the stairs past

their Wells Fargo office, and raced past male mannequins displaying “new men’s fashions for a California lifestyle,” high-water slacks and tilted hats made out of straw, bound up with hat bands wide enough to hide a line of silver dollars.

I fantasized about the day when I could dress up like my pa and sell insurance. Pa was gone a lot. I rarely got to see him. Still, he’d just come back from Belgium after blowing out his back. I was thrilled to have him home to teach me how to be a gentleman.

Boys only learned so much by reading books.

Beyond beige mannequins who studied me with razor-blade-thin smiles were the uniforms, the neckerchiefs, the khaki canvas tents. I bought myself that *Boy Scout Handbook* plus an aluminum canteen. It was a real one, emblazoned with the Boy Scout *fleur-de-lis* inside a special canvas case that I could clip onto my belt just like our troops wore, fighting Jerries on the Western Front in Europe. Me and my buddies talked a lot about the war.

All we needed were some rifles and dry ammo to assist them. We’d fly Nieuports over France, fighting the German *Luftstreitkräfte* at the side of Eddie Rickenbacker and his “Hat-in-the-Ring” 94th Aero Squadron. True Americans, dogfighting German Fokker *Eindeckers*, and watching Kraut planes spiral down in flames.

To prepare, I couldn’t wait to join the Boy Scouts of America in June, on my birthday, once I finally turned eleven. My best friend, Skeeter Wilson, was in the Skunk Patrol in Troop 71. He’d passed his test to be a Tenderfoot last month. Now he was studying first aid, camping out at Tin Can Beach, and building bonfires, hoping soon to earn the rank of Second Class.

It felt thrilling to be standing on the cusp of real manhood, ready to be the next Tom Mix, Black Jack Pershing, or Douglas Fairbanks. I eagerly looked forward to my first overnight campout as I walked the seven blocks back to our bungalow.

Ma seemed troubled when I walked through our front door. “Deanie, where were you?” I avoided her, despite the smell of homecooked three-bean soup teasing my nostrils. In my bedroom I unwrapped my *Boy Scout Handbook*. I found a rope and started practicing my knots, using their pictures. I tied square knots, two half-hitches, sheet bends, clove hitches and bowlines. Sadly, my bowlines wound up a disaster.

At six o’clock I heard my father make his way up our front steps.

“Esther, I’m home.” He shut the door. I made my way toward our parlor. He tossed his new straw boater hat onto its rack, making a ringer. “Ma,” he said. “I closed two sales.” He seemed his usual chipper self.

Pa shared an office in Downtown Anaheim at Beebe and Harrison Insurance on Los Angeles Street, one block north of Center Street, upstairs. He sold life insurance policies to veterans returning from the Great War they were fighting “over there.”

He’d been having a great month. Pa was whistling a barbershop tune, *Pack up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit-Bag*.

Ma looked uneasy. I saw her silhouette from down the hallway. She stirred her pot of soup. She didn’t even turn to face him. There was a letter on Pa’s placemat at our tiny kitchen table.

“You got some mail from the Army,” Ma told Pa. “Special delivery.”

Pa looked up. “What on earth do they want now?” He shook his head.

“Read their orders,” Ma said quietly. There was a tremor in her voice. It chilled the room and left the air heavy like fog along a riverbank.

She handed him the letter and returned to the steel stove to stir her soup and add more spices. “They want you training their recruits back at Fort Riley and Camp Funston to wear gas

masks.”

“Great,” said Pa. “Just when we get back on our feet.”

“I bought your train tickets. You leave tomorrow. Four a.m. Union Pacific. You’re on *The Los Angeles Limited.*”

“To Kansas?” Pa replied.

So unfair. Just last Christmas Pa had finally come home. After less than 40 days, Uncle Sam wanted him back.

Ma nodded, nibbling her thumbnail. She stared at it, then turned to Pa and frowned. “I upgraded to a Pullman for your back.” She wrung her apron and gazed toward her lace-curtained kitchen window. “Darling, I prayed they’d never call you up again.”

“Yeah, so did I. But can’t complain. I’m a Reserve. Plus, I’m commissioned.”

They met each other’s gaze for a long time.

My heart ached too.

Ma went back to cooking. Pa was a captain in the Army. Somewhere in Europe, he’d hurt his back helping the British load their trucks with ammunition. Two days later, at the Battle of Cambrai, a German mortar hit that truck he’d loaded.

All onboard were killed.

But Pa wasn’t on that truck. He’d been in France in an infirmary. Pa said they’d promised him a transfer to the Lafayette Escadrille. Like me, Pa dreamed of aviation and flying Nieuports over France. But when his back refused to heal they’d shipped him home as a Reserve. Said he’d be called up when they needed him.

They needed him.

Ma and Pa were trying hard to keep their chins up.

I had a paper route delivering *The Orange County Plain Dealer* every morning, so I wasn't going to see Pa board the train. Holding my rope in my left hand, I found Pa sitting on the chesterfield. I touched his shoulder. "Pa, can you teach me one more knot before you leave?"

Pa looked up. "I thought you knew all of your knots."

"A bowline hitch. I still can't tie it. Pa, can you...?"

I hurried down the hallway to my bedroom, and he followed.

Pa glanced down. He combed his fingers through his curly dark brown hair. "Dean, let me show you a little trick my pa taught me when I was your age."

I sat down, and I watched.

Pa took my rope and made a loop. He bent the bottom rope piece up above the circle like a tree. Pa made eye contact and smiled. He threaded the rope end through the opening. "You see, Dean, this end's the rabbit." Pa looked up at me and grinned. "The rabbit jumps out of his hole that I just made, and then he runs around the tree before he dives into the same hole he popped out of. Now *you* try it."

Pa handed me the rope.

Within ten seconds I had tied a perfect bowline.

"See, it's easy."

"Yeah," I stammered. "Pa, I'm really gonna miss you."

"At least I'm not being deployed to France where Germans can shoot back at us. Just training some recruits."

"So—how long'll you be gone?"

"Nothing much. Just ninety days."

I looked up, sad. "Write me a letter?"

“I will, Dean.” Pa gave me a hug. I felt good in his strong arms, like I belonged, and he was proud I was his son.

Then Ma walked by.

She peered into my bedroom, “Soup is ready.” Her eyes were red-rimmed.

“Don’t worry, Esther, dear,” Pa whispered. “We’ll get through this, just like last time.”

She didn’t answer.

That night I went to bed and tied the bowline in the dark seventeen times around the right leg of my bedframe. I fell asleep dreaming of rabbits running laps around their rope trees and counted the weeks until I’d finally turn eleven, old enough to take my place among the Boy Scouts of America.

I couldn’t wait to go on campouts, just like Skeeter.

At four o’clock a.m. when I got up to do my paper route, Ma told me Pa had left already. She looked at me. “He doesn’t like goodbyes much.”

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It wasn’t like Pa not to write us, but he didn’t. There were no letters from Camp Funston nor from Fort Riley in Kansas.

On a damp day two weeks later when I came home from fifth grade, Ma was on the porch sweeping the steps.

She wore a mouse-brown cotton housedress. She had obviously been crying.

“You okay, Ma?”

She didn’t answer. She just stared toward the sky. The fading Orange County sun lit up

the tears wetting her cheeks. She shook her head.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

She didn’t talk for several minutes.

Then she whispered, “Deanie, he’s dead.” Ma stared across the street, shaking her head as if I’d just said something wrong, and she was angry. Except I hadn’t said a word. She held this letter in her hand the way a child holds a butterfly, afraid to let it go.

“Who, Mama?”

Her chest was shaking.

I braced myself and sucked my cheeks in, dreading I already knew.

“Oh, Deanie.” She collapsed against my chest and started weeping. It was so hard to get used to being as tall as my own mother. “Your father.”

“What?” I stammered.

My spine turned into ice.

“He died of—influenza.” She caught her breath. She met my gaze with steel eyes that in her shock appeared as hardened as ball bearings. It’s like she’d somehow found a way to appear strong despite her grief.

I’d have to find a way to do the same.

I took a breath. Held it in. Ma stood quivering in my arms. The sun was shining, but the sunset turned this awful shade of red like it was bleeding. She buried her chin into my shoulder, and I feared she wished that *I* had been the one who’d died in Kansas.

I swallowed hard. I wasn’t up to it. I hadn’t even signed up with the Boy Scouts yet. I wasn’t old enough to be a Tenderfoot. I felt so worthless. She kept digging her chin into my flesh, shaking her head like we could make this go away.

But Ma couldn't. And there was nothing I could do.

Old Mr. Knutson, three doors down, said we were lucky, because Pa had bought a boatload of insurance. Ma forced a smile and told him, "Thank you." Now, it seemed everywhere Ma went she hummed my dead pa's trademark tune, packing her troubles in her old kit-bag and smile-smile-smiling.

Alma Martin from next door, who sat beside me in my French class, brought me a plate of macaroons covered with tiny chocolate sprinkles. Ponytails of auburn hair hung like two ropes down Alma's back. She wore a headband. Her French wire glasses made her look like a librarian. Alma looked at me with big sad Gallic eyes.

"I've heard talk about your father." She touched the backside of my wrist, "And I am desolate." Her lower lip shook like she meant it.

I picked up a macaroon. "Thank you, Alma. Would you like one?"

"*Non. Merci.*" Alma blushed, jumped to her feet and ran inside her yellow bungalow. She came from Normandy with the accent to go with it. I had this awkward intuition Alma Martin really liked me. I ate the cookies on the porch all by myself.

The March air became as chilly as an icebox.

I watched the sun making its way past rows of ripening Valencias out past West Street, where Center Street changes its name to Lincoln Avenue, and it rolls on toward Cypress before it runs into the San Gabriel River and a maze of streets that zigzag toward Los Angeles.

It was only eight o'clock when Ma decided to retire. Behind the plaster walls I heard her weeping in her bedroom. It wasn't *their* room any more, only *hers*. I shut my eyes, trying to block out the cruel truth:

I no longer had a father.

I felt more desolate than Alma Martin ever could imagine.

But I had to find a way to tough it out.

I didn't cry. Knew I couldn't. Had to stay strong. Act like a man. I laced my fingers behind my sandy hair and glared up from my bed pillow toward the stain around the edges of the parrot-green glass light fixture my father had replaced on Christmas Eve.

Because my pa had died, I didn't join the Boy Scouts of America, despite how much I hungered to belong. All those other boys had fathers. I felt like an outsider. I missed Pa, and I dared not tell a soul the way I felt.

Three months later, on my birthday, Ma presented me the last thing Pa had bought for me the week before he'd shipped out to Fort Riley. It was a baseball glove, an A. C. Spalding autographed Joe Jackson special edition, like Shoeless Joe wore in left field for the White Sox. It felt huge on my left hand, but not as big as my excitement upon receiving what I knew was Pa's last gift. Having no family to play catch with, I found a standpipe in an orange orchard. I threw my ball for hours against a hollow concrete pipe, fielding grounders when they ricocheted. I perfected my technique until I learned to throw a fastball so it bounced up from a pipe joint in a line drive I could catch in my raised glove.

One day at home I dropped my baseball. I looked beneath the dresser to retrieve it. I found my bowline hitch, still tied around the bedframe. There were dust bunnies all over it. The knot hid in the dark right where I'd left it. I thought about my pa.

I held back tears.

I kicked the knotted rope beneath my dusty box spring.

I walked outside. A trio of girls were playing hopscotch on the sidewalk. One sang a song I'd never heard.

*I had a little bird
Its name was Enza
I opened the window
And in-flu-Enza.*

My gut felt like they'd wrenched it inside out.

Doing my best to hide my pain, I pasted on a smile. I stepped inside. Time to get ready for my paper route tomorrow.

Ma was curled up on the couch reading her *Saturday Evening Post*.

Alma Martin stopped by, bringing another plate of macaroons.

CHAPTER II

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 2, 1924

From my driveway on the first Wednesday of 1924, the skies seemed too blue for a January morning. Turquoise hues lit up Orange County with an antiseptic sheen that felt surreal and more appropriate for linen picture postcards. Scents of lemon and Valencia flowers wafted from the orchards to the east along the clay banks of the Santa Ana River. It gave this chilly winter break-of-day a fairy-tale veneer, too cotton-candy sweet to launch another year of high school.

My next-door neighbor, Alma, was still bringing macaroons. I knew she liked me. She was pretty, but I didn't like her back except as friends. We'd both been nobodies in 1923, but I'd been growing. I'd been five-foot nine in August. Then I'd shot up like a weed to six-foot-even, adding twenty pounds of muscle. And a smile. Ma said you always had to smile to get by. Skeeter was calling me "Big Six" after those six-cylinder engines.

I caught my breath, unloading newspaper bags off my yellow Schwinn. Alma strolled toward our front porch, wearing her calico-print dress with purple flowers. She'd brought a little bag of wax-paper-wrapped cookies. "Did you hear about poor Boomer?" Alma handed me her

package. Her brow creased with a cascade of concern.

“No,” I said. “Don’t even know Boomer. I barely know the name.”

“There was an automobile accident. Poor boy lost both of his parents,” Alma’s voice shook. She glanced down. “*Quel dommage*. So very sad.”

Her tone made me aware I was supposed to be upset.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m real sad.” Except, I wasn’t, so I looked down. The kid wasn’t in any of my classes.

Alma fired me a look that said I wasn’t sad *enough*. “Their yellow Nash crashed east of town on Center Street across the river.”

“They know what caused it?”

Alma shivered. She threw a glance over her shoulder. She lowered her voice. “The police say both the two of them were drunk.” Her expression left me thinking Alma hadn’t been convinced. As if policemen lied to newspapers, the way they did back East.

“We’re in Anaheim,” I told her. “Not in Brooklyn.”

She didn’t seem to know the difference. “*Au revoir*.” She shook her head. She made her way across our lawn toward her yellow clapboard bungalow. She wiped her feet, slipped inside, closed her front door almost silently.

I sat on my front porch and polished off one of her cookies, before I grabbed my books and hustled off toward school.

I told myself poor Alma was a wee bit too emotional. Boomer would survive, the same way I’d survived Pa’s death. Still, it didn’t pay to argue. Being a girl, Alma was complicated.

“Never miss a chance to shut your yap,” Pa used to say.

At lunch at Anaheim Union High School, I watched Boomer eat alone next to the picnic

tables. He sat on a gray bench, peeling Valencias. I assumed these had been borrowed from the orchard south of Center Street. We weren't supposed to steal fruit, but Boomer's folks weren't here to feed him.

Eating my marmalade-wheat sandwich Ma had fixed for me this morning, I felt fortunate to have one living parent. I wondered whether Boomer's pain was anything like mine, a crater in my life where long ago I'd had a father waiting to welcome me to manhood and membership within the tribe. I tossed my sandwich crusts into the trash.

The bell rang. I grabbed my three-ring binder and my Muzzey's *American History* text and made my way upstairs toward the classrooms. En-route, I bumped into Coach Merritt. He was standing in the hallway. He clapped his huge right hand against my shoulder.

"I understand your name is Reynolds."

"Yes, sir," I replied.

"Skeeter tells me you're a southpaw."

"Yes, sir. I'm late for class."

Merritt smiled. "I watched you throwing in the orchard New Year's Day."

Smiling back, I answered, "Yes, sir. Can I..."

"Would you consider trying out? You own a glove, son?" Merritt asked.

"A Shoeless Joe special edition, sir." I said.

"Be there tomorrow on the baseball field. Tryouts. Two o'clock."

"Yes, sir," I stammered.

Merritt slapped me on the back, as if to telegraph to me I had already made the team.

My heart lifted inside of me. My smile became real. To beat the tardy bell, I sprinted into Miss Elgena's class, sliding straight into my seat like I'd just stolen second base.

Perhaps Orange County's cloudless skies hadn't been too blue after all.

FRIDAY, MAY 2, 1924

By March, my fastball had some zip. I started working on a curve. By April I'd discovered I adored the game of baseball.

Ma had taken Pa's insurance and hired Bannerman Construction to build three bedrooms on a second floor she rented out to boarders. When I wasn't on the ballfields or in class I earned good voot finishing roofing jobs for Bannerman to supplement our income. But then, Todd Larsen hurt his shoulder, Coach Merritt penciled in my name as starting pitcher for the Anaheim Union Colonists, senior varsity.

I was nervous. We were playing against the Santa Ana Saints, our arch-rival. We hadn't beaten them since 1921.

During my warm up, I felt loose. My fastball had plenty of pep, and my curve ball seemed to finally be behaving. I wore my lucky Shoeless Joe glove Pa had bought before he'd died. I'd worn that glove forever, even after Shoeless Joe was banned from baseball after the "Black Sox" threw the 1919 World Series.

"Play ball," hollered the umpire. He crouched behind home plate.

I'd known the umpire since I'd been in sixth grade. Because he only had one eye, everybody called him "Ace." Clarkson's other eye was glass. Before the war, the story went, he'd asked this redhead, Dottie Casey, out, and Dottie'd turned him down.

To cover up his disappointment, Ace popped his glass eye from its socket and played catch with it. He said, "I'll always keep my eye out for you, Dottie."

Screaming, Dottie had raced home. Stayed home from school for three whole days.

Rumor was no Irish girl had said a word to Clarkson since. Still a bachelor, Ace would probably remain so his whole life, notwithstanding his insistence he'd earned a Purple Heart in France.

But right now I had to think about my game.

We took our places on the new field in Anaheim Central Park in our knee socks and our baggy blue and yellow cotton uniforms.

The leadoff batter for Santa Ana was hitting well over .400.

I struck him out with three quick fastballs.

He stormed back to the dugout.

The second batter popped up, and the third grounded to short. Six pitches and three outs. I was making it look easy. Santa Ana couldn't hit me. The game was going my direction.

After five innings, we were leading Santa Ana by a run. Sid Lowry hit a single, followed by Boomer Corrigan's double. One-nothing, Anaheim. I had a scare in the sixth inning when a kid from Santa Ana lined a screamer to right field.

But Skeeter Wilson somehow came up with a diving one-hand catch, turning a sure extra-base hit into an out.

I wrung the sweat out of my cap and mopped my forehead with my shirtsleeve.

For six innings, I had pitched a perfect game.

No one on our team said a word, afraid to throw a jinx. Except for Santa Ana's coach who tried to jinx me all he could.

"This kid's a junior for crissake, and he's throwing a *no-hitter*. And if he does, you're walking home. Did you hear that? A NO HITTER."

When the seventh inning started, the next batter was their shortstop. I threw a pair of

inside fastballs, both for strikes.

He stepped out of the batter's box. He glared at me and spat. He stepped back in. I threw a changeup. He was looking for a heater. He'd swung his bat before the ball got to the plate.

"Steerike three!" Ace Clarkson yelled.

My mouth was dry and full of cotton. I wiped the sweat off of my forehead and dried the ball off on my pants. Two outs remaining.

The angry batter slammed his bat into the dirt, walked into the dugout, and threw his helmet on the floor.

The stands were silent.

The Santa Ana coach called a time-out. A kid I'd struck out twice before was told to sit down on the bench.

The pinch hitter he sent in wasn't even five feet tall.

I threw a strike on the first pitch. Then I threw a couple balls, high and outside. Two balls, one strike. I had to even up the count. I threw a fastball down the middle, but Ace Clarkson was half-blind. Called it a ball. I took a breath. Squeezed the baseball in my hand, trying to focus. I had to throw a strike on my next pitch.

As soon as I let go of my change-up, I wanted that pitch back. Low and inside. But for some reason the batter tried to hit it. And he did. A slow roller to my left, I somehow barehanded and shoveled to first base just before he touched the bag.

Two outs. Edgar Morris, who'd grounded out in the first inning was up. Everyone told me this guy hit like Rogers Hornsby. I'd been lucky the first inning, but this time I threw him garbage, hoping he'd swing.

He didn't.

“Ball One,” bellowed the umpire.

He didn’t swing at my next fastball. “Steerike,” hollered the umpire. An even count, and it was clear this batter didn’t like my fastball. I threw another one.

“Ball Two.” I could have sworn it was a strike.

The batter dug his cleats into the dirt inside the batter’s box.

My gut twisted in agony. My temples throbbed. My arm felt like a heavy slug of lead.

I threw a curveball for a strike, and then another for a ball. Three balls, two strikes. A full count. And then the Santa Ana coach called a time-out to make me worry.

I tried to focus on my pitch.

Santa Ana’s leading hitter stepped into the batter’s box.

I offered him a fastball down the middle.

He fouled it off.

I threw a curve ball and he fouled it off again into the stands.

I threw a curve that got away from me. It dropped down to his shins.

Except he swung.

“STEEERIKE THREE!”

Cheers exploded from the stands, and I felt as if a sack of wet cement fell off my shoulders. I raised my baseball mitt in triumph. Half the people in our bleachers started chanting out my nickname. “Go, Big Six.”

This was easy to get used to. I waved back. Walter Johnson had pitched for Fullerton, and he was the “Big Train.” I loved it when my friends called me, “Big Six,” like Christy Mathewson, the famous New York Giants starting pitcher.

I heard a whistle and looked up to see the final score they’d hung up on the board after

I'd pitched my perfect game:

ANAHEIM UNION COLONISTS	1
SANTA ANA SAINTS	0

All of us sprinted off the field and jogged the long block back to school, amazed that we had just pulled off an upset. Classmates were yelling out my name, backslapping, cheering, handing me ginger ale, and calling me a local hometown hero. It felt good to finally prove to all my classmates I could do something, if it was little more than throwing a white baseball.

After our showers, I made my way out of the locker room and was surrounded by eight girls who looked at me as if I'd won the war in Europe. I blushed. It was a game. I didn't deserve their adulation. I'd just been in the right place at the right time. What could I say? Their final two batters could have taken my last pitch and walked to first. I'd made mistakes, but so had they. I'd gotten lucky.

Coach Merritt sang my praises to a cheerleader in a tight blue and gold sweater with a jaunty silk scarf tied around her neckline, sailor-style.

"Hey, Big Six." She winked.

"Um." I smiled back. "Hello."

She was a sophomore on the B-squad who was waving to her father in his brand new silver Packard Single Eight.

I blushed and finger-combed my hair.

She met my gaze. "I can't believe I'm actually talking to Dean Reynolds."

I'd seen the girl around our high school. She used to usher at the cinema. I'd never

known her name. People just called her, “the pretty one.”

“Helen Webber.” She smiled wide. “My father’s a director on the Board at Sunkist Growers. He has an office at the Anaheim Orange and Lemon Association. He’d like to meet you. He admires how you played. Says you’re ‘the bee’s knees.’ You remind him of The Big Train, Walter Johnson.”

I looked at Helen, and I couldn’t look away.

“Thanks,” I said, and held my breath. If Helen’s eyes were pools of blue, it was apparent I had landed in the deep end. She had this flawless suntanned face framed by cascades of fair-haired curls cut short above her shoulders true to the fashions of the Twenties. Helen’s lips were red as rose petals. Her necklace was a string of real pearls, the sort my mother only wore to church on Christmas and on Easter.

Helen evidently wore pearls any time she wanted.

Her father honked the car horn on his Packard.

“Care to join us?” Helen asked. “We’re having malts down at the fountain.”

I glanced over my shoulder and caught a glimpse of Skeeter Wilson. He slapped my back. “Go on, Dean,” he said. “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow.”

Skeeter had class. Clearly, he understood I had to seize the moment, because Cupid didn’t smile on junior boys like me too often.

“Good luck, Dean.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I would do the same for Skeeter.

Helen leaned against her father’s Packard.

She looked almost *too* familiar. Somehow her image had been seared into my mind like

she was famous even though she lived in Anaheim. I'd seen her *somewhere*, as if her face appeared on sheet music, or lobby cards, or smiled down from billboards like the one I saw right now above the citrus orchard running south of Center Street. I saw the billboard every day from Miss Elgena's civics class. I'd stare out through the second story window to stay awake:

J. T. LYON REALTY

VALENCIA, QUEEN OF THE ORANGE—LYON, KING OF THE REALTY.

There was a lion in the center of the billboard like that lion at the movie theater introducing Samuel Goldwyn Pictures.

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Footsteps were headed my direction. I looked up to see Helen. "Daddy, this is Dean," The man had stepped out from his Packard. He wore a *suit*. Helen looked at us.

She beamed. "Ain't Dean the best?"

I grinned the way my mother taught me after Pa had died.

Helen's father grabbed my hand. "Herbert Webber. Guess you know I'm Helen's dad." His grip was strong enough to juice a navel orange. "Helen, I reckon this young man of yours don't need much introduction. Heckuva game out on the baseball field, Reynolds." His handshake worked my arm the way a farmer works a pump handle.

"Thanks," I said. "Got lucky."

"Probably hard work."

I glanced at Helen, then at him. The man was staring at my clothes. He shook his head. My home-sewn shirt, my tattered leather shoes with grommets that were missing. Mister Webber wore a *custom-tailored* suit, the sort you see in motion pictures that star Rudolf Valentino, or on bandleaders who play the Bon Ton Ballroom on Lick Pier.

I hopped into the back seat, sliding my hands over the cool and supple all-leather upholstery, softer than a puppy's ears. I thought I must be sitting someplace inside of a bank. I hid the holes worn through my soles and vowed a trip to Quality Shoe Store just as soon as I had cabbage enough to buy some decent shoes.

"Don't know much about your father," Mister Webber said.

"Pa died after the war. He was a captain at Fort Riley when the influenza hit."

"I'm sorry, son."

"But I work lots and lots of jobs to help my family. We may be poor but..."

"The poor boy ain't the man without a cent," said Mr. Webber. "It's the man without a dream who's really poor."

His tone of voice left me confused. I wasn't sure whether he liked me or he didn't, and he took his time while Helen pled my case.

"Daddy, that's probably how Dean got those big muscles, working weekends."

"You go to church?"

"When I can. Since Pa died, I mostly work. Ma needs somebody on Sundays to clean rooms after her boarders. She can't afford to hire anybody else."

"See, he has paint on all his fingernails," said Helen. "He works hard. And what's that black stuff?"

"Roofing tar. I carry hods for Mister Bannerman."

She made a face, but stroked my muscle.

I flexed, and felt a blush, wondering how soon, I'd be kicked out of the Packard.

Mr. Webber made a left turn onto Center Street and drove right past the Forrest Hudnall Soda Fountain all our high school went to. Three blocks east, he signaled left and parked behind the Heying's Pharmacy. The *original* Hudnall's Fountain, was on the first floor of the pharmacy. It was more upscale, where businessmen did deals over lunch. Mr. Webber scrunched the parking brake and turned off the ignition.

I jumped out from the back seat, raced around the car's rear end so I could open Helen's door.

Helen stepped out, saying, "Thank you."

Mr. Webber stood and frowned as Helen wiggled up beside me. I wondered whether Mrs. Webber had to stay at home. There was a wedding ring on Mr. Webber's hand, so he was married. He led the way, using the back door of the drug store past the bathrooms in the rear, and we emerged beside a long white onyx bar. A line of steel pedestal stools rose from a white tile-mosaic.

Next to the cash register and cigarettes, platoons of glass jars on the counter were filled with candy sticks and goodies like salt water taffy and Necco wafers. A giant mirror on the wall reflected Alma's older brother, Donnie Martin. He was working as the soda jerk tonight. He wore a clean white short-sleeve shirt, black bowtie, pleated slacks, Donnie was busy making malted milks by hand, using a spoon. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd see me here with Helen and tell his cookie-baking sister all about us.

Still this wasn't quite a date if Helen's father would be treating. The three of us sat down around a round white onyx table. Ceiling fans spun overhead, and rows of incandescent lights

glared off an advertising sign promoting Hall's Cherry Expectorant.

I was pretty sure that Donnie didn't notice who I was.

"You want a sandwich?" Helen asked, grabbing a tattered paper menu. "The grilled cheese sandwiches are dreamy here." She leaned back on her soda fountain chair with its pink loops that let her shoulders slide above them, displaying curves that could make Clara Bow or Gloria Swanson jealous.

A bug-eyed-Betty waitress came and scribbled down our order. "Three grilled cheeses, two chocolate malteds and a big order of fries."

Helen smiled, batting big eyes as if she wanted the whole store to see exactly who was seated at the table with her family.

And half the parents in the drugstore were now looking our direction, scratching their chins, seeming to wonder if Helen and I might be a couple. I wished we were. I was flattered, but for now we were just friends. I was hoping Mr. Webber wouldn't notice there were holes in both my shoes. Plus, I had to watch my manners.

"So you do roofing work?" he asked. He was staring at my hands and not my shoes.

"Yes, I work for Mister Bannerman," I said.

"Would you work for someone else? I have this good friend, Stubby Carson, with a roof job out at Sunkist. He could use another hod carrier."

"Tomorrow?"

Webber nodded. He lit up a cigar.

I hesitated, wondering if I needed to act humble or act confident without appearing cocky. "What's he pay, sir?"

"Buck an hour. Stubby will work you to the bone. He's on a deadline. It's a temporary

gig, you understand, but could turn permanent.”

“I never earned that in my life. You bet, I’ll take the job,” I answered, nodding, as my heart lit up like fireworks inside me.

“You need a ride?”

“I have a bicycle I use to run my paper route.”

“Stubby’s men show up at six. They start at dawn to beat the heat. Stubby won’t be all too happy if you’re late on your first day.”

“You bet. Thanks,” I said. I’d need to start my paper route at four a.m. to finish up in time and start another job at six.

I glanced at Helen. She’d been staring at my hands, but now she looked at me and smiled in a way that seemed to mask what she was thinking. Donnie Martin came by, dropping off our trio of grilled cheese sandwiches.

Mister Webber bowed his head and offered grace for thirty seconds, his skull nodding like a German bisque-based bobblehead.

I shut my eyes and did my best to look religious. It was the first time since my father died that I thought God might care about me, giving me a job so I could buy a pair of shoes.

When my eyes opened I looked at Helen Webber.

She was smiling.

I wore that smile-smile-smile Ma had taught me, extra wide.

CHAPTER III

SATURDAY, MAY 3, 1924

By five o'clock Saturday morning, I had finished up my paper route, and Mr. Webber's Packard Single Eight was at our curbside. He revved the engine. He had evidently been there for a while. I parked my Schwinn by the garage, raced inside to change my shoes and jump into a pair of fresh-washed overalls.

Mr. Webber wore a suit just like the one he'd worn last night. "Ready for breakfast?"

"You bet," I said.

"I stopped by a little early."

"Yes, sir, I noticed." I caught my breath, thinking I knew the man's agenda. For me to have a chance with Helen I would need to pass his muster.

"I kind of like to get to know a boy before he dates my daughter. Helen likes you."

"Thank you, sir," I said. My heart began to race.

"Can't have boys breaking her heart." I saw his right hand slightly shaking as if he needed a cigar right now but had to break his habit.

"I like her too. She's very pretty, but I need to get to know Helen a bit more than I do

right now before I ask her out.”

“She’s not shy. Time will take care of that, if *we* two get along. You won’t find a sweeter girl than Helen Webber in all Orange County.

“Yes, sir,” I said with mixed emotions. Clearly, he cared about his daughter. I had to think the reason he was here was Helen liked me. I wished my own father could be here, and I felt a pang of grief, wondering how it actually felt to have a father looking out for you.

“How ‘bout we go to Walter Godley’s? Best durned omelets in town. And fresh Orange County bacon straight from Schneiders by the Odd Fellows.”

“Sounds delicious.”

I slid into the supple leather front seat of the Packard and rolled the window down while Mister Webber started the ignition.

He glanced down at the dashboard. “Guess I need to buy some gas.”

“Not a problem.”

The morning’s warm May air blew through my hair.

He drove straight past the Union Oil Station, turned north onto Los Angeles Street, drove past Walter Godley’s and continued past La Palma north of town. Where Los Angeles Street angled toward where Palm Street became Spadra there was a Standard Oil Station I’d never noticed.

An easel by their driveway entrance said:

BUD’S CHEVRON

REGULAR \$0.08

ETHEL \$0.10

ayak

Mr. Webber drove his car up to the pump and honked the horn.

A slim man ambled out in overalls that looked like they'd been pulled straight off the clothes line. He seemed to squint, although there wasn't any glare. One of his eyes seemed to be lower than the other. He crossed his arms.

"Filler up," said Mr. Webber. "Have you seen Mister Akia?"

"You want ethel?"

Webber nodded.

Bud smirked and turned the pump on.

I couldn't help but wonder what the letters meant.

Bud had one of those old pumps that had that fish bowl on the top. Gasoline percolated into the dispenser bowl like coffee. "Izzat enough there, Bert?"

"Should do." Bud stuffed the nozzle into the gas tank. "Ten gallons are gonna set you back three quarters of an ace."

Webber handed Bud a dollar. I did the math and figured out these two men must have some arrangement that let Webber get a discount. Bud handed two bits back in change, and Mr. Webber dropped the coins into an ashtray he had evidently emptied out this morning.

Then he started the ignition. The Packard roared onto Los Angeles Street, signaling a left into the lot by Walter Godley's. Mister Webber scrunched the parking brake. He glanced outside and savored the attention of some local boys who whistled at his Packard. Wearing an ask-the-man-who-owns-one smile he sauntered through the backdoor of the restaurant.

I jumped out of the car and walked behind him, reminding myself Ma had said a boy

should never frown. I smiled wide enough to feel phony.

I followed Mr. Webber past the bathroom and the kitchen through its aromatic *potpourri* of scrambled eggs and bacon. Webber waltzed between glass tables like he owned the joint himself, and found a seat next to the window with real china and cloth napkins.

“Need a menu, son?” he asked as we sat down.

“I’ll try those omelets and bacon you suggested.”

“Good choice, Dean.”

“What’ll *you* have?”

“Same thing.”

“I’m encouraged.”

“You drink Hills Brothers?”

“I play baseball. They say coffee stunts your growth.”

Webber looked up. “Mind if I...?”

“Help yourself,” I said. “You’re treating.”

He placed his coffee cup in front of him and tapped it with his pinkie.

A waiter filled it full, and Mr. Webber took a sip of steaming java.

I took a breath and studied my surroundings.

A man behind us read the back page of the *Orange County Plain Dealer*. His wife went on about how bootleggers were ruining Orange County. On Los Angeles Street, outside, the city flagpole threw a shadow that ran several times its height before it angled up a wall. The shadow ended at a billboard ad for Murad Cigarettes, saying they “Never disappoint—never fail—never change.” There were no clouds in the sky. I’d been told clouds were illegal at this hour, as if anything unpleasant could be outlawed, and all one needed were a few good laws to legislate

perfection.

On the sidewalk, a stranger in a straw hat waved hello. He turned and made his way inside of Walter Godley's. I sensed Mr. Webber knew him. He wore a brown suit with a matching vest, an orange bow-tie, and round wire-rim glasses like Teddy Roosevelt's. He took his hat off, and his head looked like an oversized potato with eyes to match, tiny brown eyes. They say the eyes of a potato can be poisonous. On his lapel, he wore a small American flag pin like that flag up on the pole or in the restaurant's front window.

"Bertie boy," he bellowed. He headed in our direction.

"Mayor Metcalf? Good to see you. Elmer, have you met Big-Six Reynolds? We're having breakfast."

"Baseball player. Glad to meet you," said the mayor. He placed his hat down on our table and extended his right hand. "Good to see you boys defeated Santa Ana. What a game."

I shook the mayor's extended hand and couldn't wait to let it go. It seemed mechanical, a handshake you might get if Dale Carnegie taught Rossom's Universal Robots how to do their handshakes. Something about this mayor bothered me. I wasn't quite sure what.

Still I bravely smile-smile-smiled.

He sat right down at our table, and my heart sank. I'd hoped to eat with Mr. Webber and enjoy a pleasant breakfast, get some tips on courting Helen, find out what Stubby needed from his roofers. I read the clock out on Los Angeles Street.

Five-thirty.

"Missed you at Pastor Leon's Bible study." Mayor Metcalf grabbed my coffee cup and plopped it down in front of him. A waiter rushed to fill it. Besides the flag pin on his left lapel, a small white metal cross was on his right lapel. He seemed to wear religion on his sleeve with

those lapel pins placed like linebackers to back up his convictions.

“Business called,” said Mr. Webber. “Met a grower out in Riverside. Navy chum. Served hunting U-boats on the same destroyer I did.”

The mayor took a sip of coffee, and he didn’t seem impressed. “You need to bring that boy to church. We can’t let Hollywood corrupt young boys like him,” the mayor said, eyeing me over like a cop. “All that bootleggin’ and liquor even here in li’l old Anaheim. We need to put a stop to it. We need to have a rally.”

“I hear you, Mayor.” Mr. Webber said. “I’ll ask him if he’s interested.”

“Helen coming?”

“Of course, your honor.”

“We need more good and wholesome girls like Helen Webber in our midst. That girl’s the choicest bit of calico to grace the streets of Anaheim.”

Mr. Webber looked as bristled as a brand new Fuller brush.

Although I privately agreed, I didn’t like the way he said it. Mayor or not, I got this feeling in my throat I didn’t like. Plus it appeared that Mr. Webber was afraid of Mayor Metcalf, even though they both went to the same First Christian Church.

One of the waiters brought our breakfast. I gobbled down my omelet. It was the alibi I needed to not talk to Mayor Metcalf. I wanted energy for work. The omelet tasted like heaven.

The clock outside showed ten minutes to six.

Mister Webber left two dollars on the table for our breakfast, and we hurried out the back door of the restaurant together. We jumped into the Packard, and Mr. Webber revved the engine.

We made it to the packing house with two minutes to spare.

#

“Sorry we didn’t get to talk more.” Mr. Webber shook my hand before I hopped out of the Packard down at Stubby Carson’s jobsite. I saw the rusted iron roofing on the Anaheim Citrus Packing House. Another one of J.T. Lyon’s billboards overlooked it.

My goal today was making money. Earning a dollar every hour I stood to make a stack of cabbage I could use to buy new shoes.

“Stop by for dinner,” Mr. Webber said. “My wife is a swell cook. She won a prize last year at Fairview for her orange meringue pie.”

“You mean *tonight*, sir?”

“Six o’clock.” He cocked his right hand like a pistol. “Don’t be late. I’ll tell Helen you’ll be coming. She’ll expect you. We’re on Clementine at Sycamore, the craftsman on the corner with the swing on the front porch, next to the olive-green front door. You’ll see a steam shovel out back where we’ll be puttin’ in a tennis court.”

“You bet, sir.”

“Don’t be late,” he said again and turned the key in the ignition.

I feared this man had an agenda. Helen was gorgeous, and I understood her father might protect her. But something else was going on here. Helen’s father wore a poker face. He fired up his Packard and drove off before I had a chance to ask.

Still it intrigued me that Mr. Webber even wanted me around. When Skeeter Wilson had his first date the girl’s pa met him with a shotgun.

The work went quickly, hauling sheets of 18-gauge galvanized steel up long ladders to the roof above the packing rooms. I was grateful it was mild today. The men on Stubby’s crews

seemed to appreciate my strength and can-do attitude. Somehow I kept up with their riveting. But sheet metal is heavy. After hauling several tons up to the roof, I was exhausted. My sore back wailed like a blues singer, and my hands were nicked and bleeding from the edges of the corrugated steel.

By nine o'clock, my ears were ringing from the rivet guns that hammered out non-stop throughout the morning. But I'd already earned three dollars. That was enough to buy a pair of decent shoes at Quality Shoe Store. I was going to buy them just as soon as I got paid.

Stubby Carson finally gave his men a break at ten a.m. All of us stood up on the roof. Men smoked their Lucky Strikes and Chesterfields. I didn't smoke, so I took time out to enjoy the panorama. Anaheim spread out before me. I stared down toward Lincoln Avenue and Five Points with those new mysterious "KIGY" letters on the concrete. They'd been stenciled there last month on every road that entered Anaheim.

Nobody would tell me what they meant.

Beyond the high school rose the steeples and the towers of my town, Saint Boniface, Zion Lutheran, and Salem Evangelical, the cupola downtown outside the SQR Department Store, and the flagpole just behind our City Hall.

The men were putting out their cigarettes. I had to wash my hands, and so I scrambled down the ladder to the packing rooms downstairs. I found a water closet, locked the wooden door, finished my business, and made my way out through a corridor with packing crates stacked six-feet-high on both sides of the aisle.

Every single crate had the same label.

"PRIDE OF ANAHEIM VALENCIAS" the fruit labels proclaimed. "Packed by Scott-Borden, Incorporated, Anaheim, California." Every label bore the same face of a girl.

She looked familiar. A whole lot like the actress, Colleen Moore.

But not exactly.

She had blond hair cut in a bob. She wore pearls and a black dress, and she had mesmerizing eyes.

Good God, it couldn't be.

It was.

For thirty seconds I just stared at it.

A thrill ran up my spine.

I swallowed hard and took a breath, taking a moment to recover from my shock.

I knew where I'd seen Helen's face before.

I imagined they'd be shipping Helen all over the planet. Barons in Europe, sheikhs in Hejaz, Ottoman sultans, Persian shahs, Chinese moguls, Wall Street titans, would see Helen's face on every single carton full of Scott-Borden Valencias from Anaheim, Anaheim Beauties, Prides of Anaheim, and all their other brands.

Tonight I would be dining at the home of Helen Webber who had the face that launched one-hundred-thousand oranges.

#

After eleven grueling hours we finished up at five o'clock. We towed off with oil of turpentine to clean away the tar beneath our fingernails. I was grateful Mister Carson honked his horn.

"Son, need a lift?"

“You bet,” I told him. Stubby’s ride would buy me time to take a shower and to change my clothes to look my best for Helen.

I slid into the front seat of Stubby’s Dodge two-seater pickup. He tossed aside a newspaper, the *Orange County Plain Dealer*. It plopped into the floor well where I briefly saw the headline.

NEW CITY COUNCIL HIRES 4 MORE POLICEMEN

I wondered why so many cops were needed here in Anaheim, and why I hadn’t seen the headline on a paper I’d delivered.

Stubby Carson was a sturdy man with shoulders like a baby-grand piano and muscled forearms like you saw in Popeye comics. Stubby’s sleeves were rolled up tight, showing off his farmer’s tan. He turned to me and flashed a crooked grin.

“Tired yet, Reynolds?”

“Yes sir,” I said and grinned. “And thanks a million for the lift.”

“Bert says you got eyes for his daughter.”

“News travels pretty fast,” I said, surprised at Stubby. Anaheim was just a small Orange County town. With only 5500 people in the 1920 census, I understood how Stubby managed to know all the local gossip.

I looked at Stubby, and I shrugged. “You know I haven’t asked her out yet.”

“You might want to be careful,” Stubby said. “Round Helen Webber.”

“Why?” I asked, wishing I hadn’t.

“Helen ain’t who she pretends.”

I felt the hair rise on my neck. “So do you know something?” I asked.

“I know she smokes. No decent woman needs to smoke. It jus’ ain’t ladylike. It’s – decadent.” He signaled and changed lanes.

“It’s just a fad. Everybody’s smoking cigarettes,” I said. “In every film they make in Hollywood the stars are smoking cigarettes.”

Stubby shifted into second.

“It’s glamorous.” I shrugged. “Modern girls want to look glamorous. I’m not setting the fashions.” I stared outside.

The cabin of his pickup truck turned colder than an ice house, and I wondered what had obligated *me* to defend Helen. Some sort of instinct, I supposed and one that Stubby didn’t care for.

He frowned. He made a face and floored the truck down Lincoln Avenue. “I’m disappointed in you, Reynolds. Hollywood? Glamour? You *can’t* be serious. I thought your parents raised you right. Hollywood today’s a moral cesspool.”

Before I thought to ask him why, Stubby launched into a tirade over Hollywood, bad morals, how Fatty Arbuckle had raped Virginia Rappe, the William Desmond Taylor murder, Mabel Normand and cocaine, Pola Negri, Alla Nazimova, Rudolph Valentino. “They’re all homos,” Stubby said. “And Wallace Reid, dying on morphine. The studios hire fixers to hide stars’ habits from the public. A disgrace.”

“I thought that Rudolph Valentino had a wife.”

“Lavender marriage,” Stubby said, making a left onto Los Angeles Street and driving to the same gas station that Webber had this morning. The easel still stood on the corner with its curious initials:

BUD'S CHEVRON

REGULAR \$0.08

ETHEL \$0.10

ayak

Stubby opened up the cab door. "Bud, have you seen Mister Akia?"

Bud repeated the same ritual Mr. Webber had this morning. He filled the fishbowl with ten gallons, giving Carson the same discount.

From my seat by Mister Carson I stared northward onto Spadra Street, and there I spied the same letters I'd seen on Lincoln Avenue, freshly stenciled in white paint onto the asphalt on the highway south from Fullerton where it crossed the city limit into Anaheim.

"KIGY"

Something about it made me nervous.

Nervous enough I wanted to cover those dumb letters up with roofing tar.

"What's with all the secret code?" I asked and turned to Stubby Carson. Once again I wished I hadn't.

Mr. Carson looked away but murmured gently. "Come to Pastor Myers' Bible study, Reynolds. First Christian Church on Tuesday nights. We start at six-thirty p.m. Maybe if you come, you'll start to figure these things out."

I wondered how they fit together. I didn't have the nerve to ask.

Stubby dropped me at my house five minutes later and sped off.

#

Outside my house I paused a moment, hearing a loud whine overhead. It came straight out of the yellow sun and hung near the horizon. A speck of red up in the sky was suddenly straight overhead. Till now, I had only seen a couple of them. Aeroplanes. I loved them.

And then it veered off toward the south, flying toward Santa Ana, loud and faster than an eagle. Engine noise faded in the distance, but I was spellbound. *Someday I would like to learn to fly*, I thought, but chocked it off to pipe dreams. More urgent matters seemed to beckon.

Alma Martin was on my porch. This time she brought no macaroons. Her eyes were red. It seemed that Alma had been crying for a spell. This wasn't like her. She was normally a lot more put-together. The mascara from her lashes flowed in streaks down both her cheeks.

"Alma, what's up? Are you okay?"

She sat and stared down at her feet and said, "*Mon oncle.*"

Alma slowly shook her head.

"What about him?"

She pulled a handkerchief from her purse and wiped her eyelids leaving a big smear of mascara on the white and lacy cotton.

"He left this morning. They succeeded. They drove my Uncle Raymond out."

"You make it sound as if your uncle's leaving Anaheim." I said.

"But yes, he is." She shut her eyes. "These people mail him a letter, but they do not sign their names. In France we call it '*anonyme.*' These people tell my Uncle Raymond if he does not

shut his hotel down before eight o'clock this morning they will..."

"What?"

She looked away. "They do not say. All they tell us is – 'or else.'"

"Or else what? Who wrote the letter?"

"*They* did."

"Who?"

"People in Anaheim."

"Was there handwriting? You could talk to the police."

"You're so naïve. Why do you think the City Council hires all these new policemen, and lets the old ones go, the ones we knew and trusted?"

She shrugged. Her trembling shoulders lost all pretense of composure as she tried to catch her breath and carry on a conversation. Alma stared out past the clock towers and church steeples and wept. "Why do they hate us?" Alma asked, mopping black tears from both her cheeks, "calling us bootleggers, and Frogs, and filthy Catholics, and telling us America's for Americans. They tell us *we* should all go home. This *is* my home. They blame the *war* on us. We're *French*. We didn't start it."

"People are stupid. They don't know anything about the war in Europe. People who didn't even fight parade around like our protectors."

"Why do they treat us with reproach? They claim French people are winos. If we manifest dissent they call us Communists and say we hate America. I *love* America, but it's hard when you love them, and they hate back, and claim that everyone in France is either pink or homosexual."

Church bells rang six times from steeples all across the city.

I panicked. Glanced around. “Alma, right now I can’t talk.”

“But Dean...”

My heart stopped. “We’ll talk later. I need to be somewhere. Right now.” I ran inside and changed my clothes, combed my hair, and brushed my teeth, dashed back outside and felt horrific as I ran away from Alma for my date with Helen Webber at her house.

Alma was hurting, but there wasn’t any way I could console her.

She called me, and I didn’t answer back.

I had a date with Helen Webber, and that date was starting *now*. I sprinted north on Citron Street, heart pounding fast as a machine gun. Turned right on Sycamore. Raced past Pine Street, Palm Street, and Central Park.

Ahead of me on Clementine was Helen Webber’s residence.

Helen stood on the front porch beside her father on her left.

He was looking at his wristwatch. “Son, you’re sixteen minutes late.”

Helen glared at me. Her cold twin-barrel stare said she was furious. Her look bore no resemblance to the girl on all the orange crates. Her lips were trembling. She glanced toward her father, and I knew I was in serious hot water.

#

I took a breath.

Helen’s father was still staring at his wristwatch, and I wondered why the man was so obsessed with punctuality. He sent Helen inside and backed me up against the porch rail.

“Sit, down,” he said.

I sat.

“You have an attitude. A bad one.”

“Sir, I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault, son. You grew up without a father. You’re a good kid, but it’s time you had a man inside your life. Before you go out with my daughter there are things you need to learn.”

“Yes, sir.” I kept my lips sealed, taking care not to point out that it was *he* who’d asked *me* here. I had yet to ask out Helen. Now I wasn’t sure I wanted to. She wasn’t worth the hassle, and I didn’t like men telling me they didn’t like my attitude. Especially when my back ached after I’d slaved eleven hours so Stubby Carson could meet his deadline on some roofing job today. I’d worked my tail off to help these people meet their stupid deadlines.

I stared down at my feet and somehow managed to stay quiet.

“You go to church, son?”

“No,” I said. “After my pa died, Ma stopped going.”

“Stopped going where?”

“White Temple Methodist.”

“You need to come to church with *us*.”

“Come to church where?”

“First Christian, Anaheim. The Reverend Myers teaches Sunday School as well. Helen goes there almost every weekend.”

It was pretty clear that Mr. Webber liked to call the shots. And furthermore there was some reason he had *me* picked out for Helen. I didn’t know the reason why, but I decided to keep my mouth shut. I had no father, and no mentor, and my shoes were full of holes. I’d been fending for myself, doing the best job that I could, but it was hard. And Mr. Webber seemed to know a

lot of people who could help me, like Stubby Carson, even Mayor Elmer Metcalf.

Mr. Webber wound his wristwatch. "Let's go inside, son," said the man. "This lecture's over, and my wife cooked a fine meal. It's getting cold."

I hopped down from the porch rail and took a giant breath of air.

Mr. Webber grinned and shook my hand.

I hadn't yet agreed to go to church with Mr. Webber, but he seemed to think I had, and it was not the time to argue. Wiping my shoes off on his doormat, feeling the bristles of the mat poke through my socks, I stepped inside. Mr. Webber stood behind me.

I slowly made my way across an oriental carpet that was woven full of images of citrus leaves and oranges. The Webbers' huge craftsman-style dining room was filled with glass-framed fruit labels.

And Helen's smiling face was in the center of each frame.

There in the middle of the dining table a pot of three-bean soup steamed on a hot pad made of custom California mission tile. It matched the tile on the staircase in the living room that wound its way upstairs to where the bedrooms were.

Helen nibbled her pearl necklace.

I hadn't tasted three-bean soup since Pa had died of influenza. Ma never cooked it after that. She said it triggered awful memories. Our family's last dinner together was a pot of three-bean soup that smelled exactly like the steaming pot in front of me.

It seemed an omen, as if God wanted me to join First Christian Church and be a member of a family the way my life had been before the war. I had been too young to appreciate such things.

"Shall we pray," said Mrs. Webber. The swinging door into the kitchen was behind her.

She wore an apron cut from the same cloth as our placemats. She had a strong angular jaw and eyes the same color as Helen's, but unlike Helen, Mrs. Webber looked afraid.

I bowed my head to join the family.

Mr. Webber bowed his head and said the blessing.

“Lord, we give thanks to thee for everything we have here in America, and we ask that you protect your town from every form of evil, from the Communists, the Catholics, the foreigners, the union thugs, the bootleggers, and Hollywood, and all forms of corruption. Father, give us back our town. Make Anaheim a model city free from vice. We pray these things in Jesus' name.”

We said, “Amen.”

Except for Helen, whom I noticed had been staring out the window toward that hole in the backyard where they were putting in new tennis courts. I wondered why someone would dig a hole to build a tennis court.

Helen gave me a quick glance and didn't say another word, but it was obvious she had some strong opinions.

SUNDAY, MAY 4, 1924

At seven-thirty the next morning, the Webbers pulled up into our driveway. Ma was sleeping when Mr. Webber honked his silver Packard's horn. I wrote a note to tell my mother where I was and raced upstairs, combed my hair, straightened my tie, and tried to squeeze into a sport jacket that barely even fit me since my arms had grown last winter.

My sleeves were climbing up my wrists. My slacks were clearly the “high-water” type. I cut the hem, unrolling it to stretch down to my socks. I looked outlandish, like some extra out of

Keystone central casting. I raced downstairs and greeted Mr. Webber on the sidewalk.

“Mornin’, Dean.”

“Good morning, Mister Webber,” I replied. I saw the shotgun seat was empty. Mrs. Webber sat in back, talking to Helen. It was evident the men would sit up front. I felt uncomfortable but slid onto the front seat they’d assigned me.

We made it to their church ten minutes early.

Mister Webber introduced me to his pastor, Leon Myers, while Mrs. Webber and three friends stood by discussing Prohibition. One of the ladies in her circle was as big as Carrie Nation. She must have left her axe at home. The other woman didn’t say much, but I judged from all her cashmere she was terribly important.

Then Mayor Metcalf took her arm, and it was quite clear whom she was.

Helen vanished until just before the service.

She slid into the pew beside me. Her perfume smelled like orange blossoms. It didn’t cover up her cigarette breath.

The service wasn’t like those I was used to with the Methodists. These people sang *God Bless America* instead of the Doxology. A U.S. flag big as a movie screen was thumbtacked to the wall behind the pulpit. It dwarfed a cross that made it up to the eighth stripe.

Reverend Myers preached a sermon unlike any I’d ever heard. He was clearly a fine speaker, but all he talked about was movies. I could see where Stubby Carson might have picked up his material. Reverend Myers thundered from the pulpit.

“Ever since they made *Intolerance*, Hollywood has gone downhill. Now it’s been overrun by flappers, murderers, perverts, alcoholics.”

I noticed half the congregation hanging on his every word. I glanced at Helen.

She rolled her eyes.

We'd need to talk about this later.

#

Our opportunity came thirty minutes after the last hymn. *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* was still banging in my brain.

As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free,

While God is marching on.

Helen grabbed me by the elbow and suggested we might march around the block, "Just you and me, Dean. God can join us if he needs to."

I said, "Sure." I needed air, and we needed to discuss things.

We stepped outside to take a stroll. One block west, we turned a corner.

She lit a Fatima and looked at me. "So how did you like Leon Myers?"

"He confuses me."

"You just need to understand *The Fundamentals*. It's this book of Christian essays Myers quotes like it's his Bible. If you believe in his pet doctrines, you don't have to love your neighbor. You could lynch the Good Samaritan, and Jesus would applaud."

"Interesting."

Helen laughed. "My Daddy says you're quite the diplomat."

"W-what does that mean?"

“What do you think? Surely you’ve noticed something odd about this town, all those queer letters. KIGY? AYAK? What *could* they mean?”

“Nobody knows.”

“I do,” Helen said. “I’ll even tell you if you kiss me.”

“You mean right now?”

She looked at me and laughed. “You’re so naïve. Dean. Although at least you make me laugh, and you’re good looking.”

I took her answer as a no for the time being. But of course I hadn’t even asked her out yet.

Her left hand bumped against my wrist. “My father thinks that you can tame me.”

“Are you an animal?” I asked.

I heard a purr.

“What sort of cat?” I asked.

“Depends upon my mood.” She blew a kiss. Then Helen puffed her cigarette and blew a smoke ring. “Meet me Monday after school.”

“I have baseball practice.”

“Four-thirty,” Helen said. I’ll be waiting beneath the J.T. Lyon Billboard.”

“In the orchard?”

“Absolutely. You can be Lyon, King of the Realty. I’ll be Valencia, Queen of the Orange.” Helen puffed her cigarette. She snuffed it out a dozen steps before we walked into the church’s field of vision. She took my hand. “This time Daddy won’t show up. It’ll be fun.”

She winked, but I was feeling apprehensive.

We turned the corner, and I walked the block to the church holding her hand. The

congregation was outside. Someone pointed our direction.

I could feel half the congregation's stares.