

**The  
Lumberyard Boys  
Breakfast Club**

**Revenge or  
Retribution**

By  
Michael L. Sena



## **The Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club: Revenge or Retribution**

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## PROLOGUE

**THE FIRST BOOK** in The Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club series, We Are All Prisoners of War, began in June 1965 and ended in May 2023. At the close of the book, the three men who, as boys, had worked together at Drake's Crossing Lumberyard during the summer of 1965 when they each turned eighteen, met at the Carl's Summit Diner. They had become lifelong friends and founding members of The Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club, and the diner was their clubhouse. On that day in May 2023, they talked about the war in Ukraine, which had been raging for over a year with no end in sight. They agreed the war was due to our lack of attention to what Russia's leader, Vladimir Putin, was really doing when we thought he was preparing his country for a place at the table of democracies. In fact, he was preparing his country to return to its old ways when it bullied, attacked, and occupied its neighbors and stole whatever it believed was worth stealing. Our inattention allowed Putin to savagely attack Ukraine without provocation, and allowed it to continue to kill Ukrainian soldiers and citizens without any engagement whatsoever by the United Nations. He had put the world out of balance again, and the mechanisms the world had put in place to maintain balance were not working.

They also talked about the Republican Party presidential candidates who were lining up to oppose the former president,

Donald Trump, when the primary voting started in Iowa the following year. In their opinion, there was no hope that any of the other candidates would be able to push aside the presumptive Republican nominee, the former President, in the 2024 presidential election. They'll all line up behind him, said Tony, once he wins all the primaries. Could he possibly beat Joe Biden?

This book, Revenge or Retribution, starts on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2024, election day in the United States, and ends on the 24<sup>th</sup> of January 2026, one year and four days from the day Donald Trump was inaugurated for his second attempt to be President. It was written in real time, as the actual events occurred during the year. During that time, the Breakfast Club members met at their clubhouse for their weekly get-togethers, and they met and talked in other places among themselves, with their family membes, and with others, about what was happening in their country and in the rest of the world. They also talked about what was happening in their local area, about how, suddenly and without any forewarning, life in Drake's Crossing was turned upside down by a proposal from a Native American tribe in New York that would change the nature of the entire community and its surrounding area if it were approved. Will the result of the election have any significant effect on what happens in Drake's Crossing and to all of the Lumberyard Boys' families, or will the events occurring in the home patch of the Lumber Yard Boys have lives of their own?

The characters in this book are fictional, but the events they are experiencing are very real. The towns which are the

settings for the story, Drake's Crossing and Carl's Summit, are fictional, but they could be towns anywhere in the country in 2024-26. Any similarities to real people and real places are purely coincidental.

*Michael L. Sena*  
*Strängnäs, Sweden*  
*14 March 2026*

*A prologue or prolog (from Greek πρόλογος prólogos, from πρό πρό, "before" and λόγος lógos, "word") is an opening to a story that establishes the context and gives background details, often some earlier story that ties into the main one, and other miscellaneous information.*

## **Dedication**

To my dear wife of forty-one years, Britt Marie, who battled cancer for seven years and finally lost the battle on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2025. She was an inspiration to me in everything I did since the first time we met in Stockholm in June 1982, and she will continue to be an inspiration to me for the remainder of my life.

## CHAPTER 1

# THE VOTERS DECIDE

**MY SOMETIMES COMPANION**, a grey squirrel that my granddaughter Annamaria named Franklin, had no idea why today, Tuesday the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 2024, was a special day. Franklin was the name of Connie's and my last cat who, like all of our pets, was given a name which connected it to her first dog named Benjamin Franklin Malatesta, simply called Benjie. It was 7 a.m. and the sun was already up. Sid, the WVIA weatherman, had promised that today would be sunny and warm, up close to seventy degrees. I could see Franklin sitting on the lowest branch of Nonno Berto's cheery tree, staring at me through the kitchen window while I ate a slice of toast and drank the first of what would be many cups of coffee during what would be a very long day. I needed to save room for a real breakfast at the Carl's Summit Diner where The Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club would meet at 11:00 a.m. Usually, the Club, consisting of me, Tony Malatesta and Franky Antonelli, met on Saturdays, but, as I said, today was a special day, maybe world-changing. Donna and Jenny, respectively Franky's and Tony's wives, and Tony's sister Annie and her husband Guy Donnatelli, would join us.

I visited Connie's grave yesterday, around midday. It was a relatively warm, clear, middle-of-fall day, after the trees had shed their leaves, except for the stragglers which needed stronger winds to coax them into loosening their grip. Green grass dotted with grey marble headstones, brown tree trunks and branches, and blue sky punctuated with cotton ball clouds

was yesterday's landscape painting. Every day at the cemetery there is a different painting. Connie's burial day painting was completely white, except for the blackish brown southern sides of all the trees and the black clothes we were all wearing. *What would you be thinking today, Connie? Four years ago you were extremely nervous on election day. Very unlike you. You were worried that the person who had done so much damage to the country and the world order during the four years he had been president would win again. You were so relieved by the result that you cried. Happy tears. Remember? A few months ago, it looked like a sure bet that the same two men were going to meet again, one of them a convicted felon, and the other one turning eighty-two fifteen days after the election. But sure bets have a way of not paying off, don't they?*

Polls opened at 7 a.m. From my days on the police force, I knew there were people waiting in line outside the borough hall to cast their ballot early and give their chosen candidate a head start. It's been twelve years and four months since I was in uniform, but I'm certain things haven't changed. I decided to get there at 8.30. The whole thing, including waiting in line, usually took about half an hour. I had agreed to pick up Tony, Jenny, Annie and Guy at 10.30, so I should have plenty of time. They all voted by mail. I refused to take that route. As long as I can walk into the voting booth and slip my ballot into the ballot box in person, I will continue to do it.

I washed my breakfast dishes, had a shower and shaved, and went through my careful tooth brushing routine, doing my best to keep the teeth I had left. I put on my standard, daily, non-summer-weather outfit of chinos (tan), long-sleeve shirt (light blue), and a cotton pullover (dark green). Connie used to say I would have saved a lot of money and time if in 1965 I had bought

all the clothes I would wear for the rest of my life because everything I wore looked like I had bought it in 1965. I used to tell her that I was lucky they still made most of the stuff I still wore because the clothes I had from my teens no longer fit. I kept them, I told her, because if I did live to be very old and decrepit, I would be able to fit in them again.

There was a long line at the Mine Street Community Park Pavilion when I drove past, looking for a parking space. Pennsylvania has the least restrictive regulations among the states for having campaign materials and supporters trying to influence voters in the vicinity of polling stations. The restricted area is only ten feet. There are no prohibitions at all on wearing buttons or hats or anything with your candidate's message, like there are in Texas and many other states. My fellow Drake's Crossing voters were expressing their opinions to the hilt. On the other hand, no policeman—in uniform or in civilian clothes—is allowed to be within 100 feet of the entrance to the polling station.

I found a spot on Pine street, a couple of blocks from where the line ended. Gail Phillips, one of my last hires when I was Chief of Police, was in uniform and standing at the corner of Mine and Pine Streets, which we set as the 100-foot limit when we moved the polling station there. She is now the Chief.

"Good morning, Chief," said Gail.

"Hi, Chief. Nice morning. Everything under control?"

"So far. I went in and talked to both groups of supporters and told them if I saw them harassing voters, I would clear them all out and charge them with disturbing the peace. It doesn't make sense to have all these people right at the entrance to the polling station. It's not allowed in most other states. They promised to behave, all except your neighbor, Richie Bianchi. I was

about to bring him into the station when his daughter came over and said she would stay with him and make sure he didn't cause any trouble."

"It hasn't been a problem in the past, Gail. People around here have always counted on neighbors being civil to one another. Bianchi went off his rocker when his buddy lost four years ago. He was one of the ones who took the bus from here down to DC, and he's lucky he wasn't charged along with the rest of the terrorists, like little Luccatella. I've tried to talk to him, but he won't listen. My daughter Ellen works with his daughter Lilly at the high school, and she has talked with her about how her father is making their lives miserable with all of his signs and banners and his bullhorn speeches from his porch. She says she has tried to make him understand what a nuisance he is being, but she can't reach him. His house is only ten feet away from ours, so if someone decides to torch it, there's a good chance ours will go too."

"Can't we just lock him up for disturbing the peace?"

"He needs to be in a mental institution, not a jail. I've been putting off having a conversation with Lilly about that, but I need to do it. Right now, I'm going to vote and hope for the best."

I left Gail and walked into the voting hall. I wasn't voting for my candidate of choice. I wanted to vote for Joe again, but after the debate in late June, I knew that wasn't going to happen. Even though I really hoped he wouldn't give up the fight, I felt deep down that he would have to do it. The signs of age, dementia, or maybe Alzheimers were clear for all to see when he stood there during the debate trying to find the words. At times during the debate, it looked like even his opponent felt sorry for him. One after the other, his party members and donors abandoned

him. The *New York Times* called for him to pull out of the race the day after the debate. He said he he had no intention of backing out. Then he caught Covid and went into seclusion at his vacation home in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. A few days later, he announced he was going to focus on finishing his term, and he was endorsing Kamala Harris.

I remember waking up on the morning of the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July and turning on the radio. BIDEN WITHDRAWS was on all the news. "Dammit!" That's all I said and had time to think before there was a light knock on the door and Ellen walked in carrying her coffee cup.

"You heard, Dad?"

"I heard."

"He's endorsed Harris."

"If she gets the nomination, I'll vote for her, but I think she is going to have a tough time winning. She's been invisible for four years. Whenever she tried to act vice-presidential, she came across as a lightweight. That's why she wasn't taken seriously when she was running in the primaries against Biden. He chose her as his vice president because of pressure from lefties in the party. They focused on her visible credentials: she is black and a woman, and that would supposedly get the female and black vote, they reasoned. Maybe having her as his VP helped Joe get elected four years ago. I'm not so sure about that. I think Joe would have gotten more votes with a strong VP, and he probably would have handed over the baton to him or her, rather than feeling he had to run himself. Maybe being a black woman and a Democrat will be enough to get her elected president, but there are at least the same number of voters who won't vote for her just for those two

reasons. That's sad, but it's a fact. There weren't enough women to get Hillary elected when she ran."

"She's not Hillary, Dad. She doesn't give the impression that she's entitled to run for president, that she's ticked all the boxes and deserves the job, like Hillary did. Hillary acted like anyone who didn't vote for her had to have their head examined and was 'deplorable'. Harris has been a loyal VP who has backed up Biden in every way. While people were calling for Biden to drop out, she continued to say he is the person to beat Trump. Joe says now that she's the person to beat Trump. We have to believe that and convince others to believe it as well."

On the radio, they were repeating what Biden had written on social media. That's how he announced his intention, on social media.

*"While it has been my intention to seek reelection, I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the country for me to stand down and focus solely on fulfilling my duties as president for the remainder of my term."*

"I was a prisoner in Vietnam the last time a president decided he wasn't going to run for re-election. It was a Democrat that time, too. Lyndon Johnson. He turned everything over to his vice president, Hubert Humphrey, who lost big to Richard Nixon. Johnson's advisors told him he was so unpopular he couldn't win. The election was the first time I would have been able to vote. Being a prisoner meant I didn't have to make the choice. Now it's time for me to vote. I don't want a lying, convicted swindler to live in the White House again, and I don't want him representing America to the world like he did for four, long years. He had those four years to prove he was better than those who didn't vote for him believed, and all he did was prove

to us he was worse. He has had the last four years to show some sign that he has changed for the better, that he has become a kinder, gentler, more statesman-like person, but he hasn't. He can't. I thought we were rid of him, but I was wrong. Now he's on the verge of becoming President again, and it's making me sick. He'll be out for revenge the minute after he's sworn in."

After I voted, I drove back to The Orchard and picked up Tony, Jenny, Annie, and Guy. Tony sat up front with me. "Did you have any last minute doubts, Nicky, before you ticked off the box for the former Cheater in Chief and his sidekick, Liberty Vance?" joked Tony.

"Very funny. I only wish I could have voted for someone I really wanted to see in there as our president. I hope she wins, but I don't think she's the right person for the job—and it has nothing to do with her sex or skin color. It has to do with her ideas about this country and the people who live in it. She could have won me over if she chose our governor as VP, but she chickened out. What is it about guys named Tim and women who want to be president?"

"Tim Kaine was a real dud for Hillary," offered Jenny. "It was like she chose someone who was the opposite from her husband."

"Let's listen to our favorite song and save the conversation until we've had a few cups of coffee," suggested Tony. I pushed the CD that was always ready to play into the slot. We all sang along with the Four Tops, "I can't help myself. I love you and nobody else....." Over the years, from the time I first heard it back in '65, the lyrics always seemed to fit the situation.

Franky and Donna were just getting out of their car when we pulled into the parking lot. We weren't sitting in our regular

booth today. When we were here for our weekly Club meeting on Saturday, we had booked the two tables on the right side of the diner. The tables had been pushed together and there was a 'Reserved for the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club – 11:00 a.m.' sign on them. There were already coffee cups and menus on the table. I sat in the odd seat at the end of one table with Annie on my left and Guy across from her. Donna sat next to Annie and Franky sat next to Donna. Tony sat across from Franky and Jenny sat between Tony and Guy. Edie came with her coffee pot. "What are the girls having?" she asked with her big, warm smile that she has been greeting us with for over thirty years.

"It's going to be a tunamelt for me, with fries on the side," said Annie. "You make the best tunamelts in the county."

"Thank you, Honey," said Edie. "I'll pass that on to the grill sergeant."

"I'll have a grilled cheese with tomato and bacon," said Donna, "and I'll have an order of your spicy onion rings."

"I'm going to celebrate the election of the first women president of the United States," announced Jenny, "with an all-American lunch: meatloaf, cornbread and a piece of apple pie with vanilla ice cream."

"Well," said Edie, "I wish you girls would come in more often. You add a lot of spice to the day. Now, boys, the usuals? And what's the pick for today, Nicky?"

"Usual for me," answered Franky.

"Me too," added Tony. "No point in making things complicated."

"It's waffles today, Edie," I said. "A man's got to dream."

Eddie smiled like she always smiled when I ordered waffles instead of pancakes, and left for the kitchen.

"What do waffles have to do with dreams?" asked Annie.

"It's a guy thing, Sis," answered Tony, and we left it at that, but I knew Franky and Tony were imagining a stark naked Melissa eating waffles on *Seinfeld*. We exchanged smiles.

Our food arrived and we all dug in. Usually, we started right in on whatever one of us wanted to talk about, and usually it was when our mouths were full of whatever we were eating. I wasn't sure how this was going to go today, so I concentrated on my waffles, eggs, sausage, toast, and coffee. It seemed like Franky and Tony were doing the same with their usual breakfasts. It wasn't until we were almost all finished eating that Guy picked up on what I had started to say in the car. "So, Nicky, what's your problem with Kamala Harris?"

"First, she's from California. We've had one president who was born, grew up, and lived in California, and that was Tricky Dick Nixon. We all know how that worked out. Then there have been three other presidents who called California home, but who weren't born there, and they were Herbie Hoover, Gerry Ford, and Ronnie Reagan. They were all Republicans as well. Hoover is remembered for being slow on the trigger with doing something about the country's economy after the stock market crash, Ford seemed to be a decent guy, but was still a Republican, and Reagan was not a friend of the working men and women of this country, even though many of them thought he was. He paved the way for Donnie.

"Second, she went to high school in Montreal, Canada, to an English-speaking high school in a French-speaking province. She missed out on one of the most important experiences of

growing up in America. Third, she has no military experience. Neither did Obama or Clinton, and it showed. The president is Commander in Chief of the country's military forces, and if you don't have first-hand experience with the military, you're always going to have to refer to the generals. That's not a good idea. Trump never served, and he acted like anyone who did was too stupid to find a way of avoiding the draft. Fourth, she has no idea what it means to grow up in places that were once industrial powerhouses and now are half empty. She lived in college towns where her parents worked when she was grade school and high school age. Fifth, she has never shown any interest in meeting the opposition half way. She is in the so-called progressive camp, and moves in lock step with them. I don't think she is going to represent me or my family or my friends. Now, don't get me wrong. I voted for her because the person she is running against has a list of negatives that is ten times longer than hers. But she is not the candidate I wanted to see there."

"You didn't mention anything about her being a woman," interjected Tony. Jenny gave Tony a left cross in his arm, and Tony almost fell out of his chair.

"No jokes about women," commanded Jenny.

"It sounds like you have been doing a lot of thinking about this, Nicky," said Donna. "The fact that she is the Democratic Party's candidate had more to do with why I voted for her than the fact that she is a woman. I wouldn't have voted for Haley if she were the Republican candidate against a male Democratic candidate. But I share a lot of the same concerns about her that Nicky has mentioned. She's the daughter of an economics professor from Jamaica who studied at the University of London and got a Ph.D. at Berkeley, and a mother from India who also got a Ph.D. from Berkeley. She went to a university that was 90% black

when she was there. As president, she has to represent all of the American people, not just black people or any other minority. I remember how the Republicans made such a big deal about Kennedy being Catholic, and how he was going to be taking instructions from the Pope.”

“I was hoping she would choose Shapiro as her running mate,” said Franky. “One big problem she has had as Vice President right from the start is being a good manager. Shapiro did a great job as attorney general, and he has been terrific as governor. He’s organized and is a good leader. Everyone says she didn’t choose him because he’s Jewish. Her husband’s a Jew, but she didn’t have to worry about what voters thought of her choice for a husband when she got married. I think there were two other reasons she didn’t choose Shapiro. He intimidated her because he is a better leader and manager than she is, and he didn’t have any military experience that she could use to make up for her lack of it.”

“I guess if I were in her shoes those three reasons for not choosing our governor would tip the balance,” added Tony.

“She won my full-hearted support after her debate with Trump on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September,” pitched in Jenny. “She handled him like no one I have seen handle him before, and she exposed all of his weak spots, like saying people leave his rallies before they are over because they are bored. For a show biz guy, this is the worst kind of criticism to get. I read somewhere that she made Trump look ‘small and angry’, and that sure was how I saw it.”

“The debate did it for me, too,” added Franky.

“You sure it wasn’t after Taylor Swift endorsed her after the debate?” quipped Tony.

"That didn't hurt," replied Franky. "He admitted she beat him when he wouldn't debate her again. She got to him even before the debate started by walking over to him and shaking his hand. 'Let's have a good debate,' she said. He answered, 'Have fun'. She did. He made a fool of himself talking about illegal immigrants eating pets in Springfield, Ohio, and she kept feeding him baited hooks that he kept swallowing."

"I think it's too bad Walz and Vance aren't at the top of their tickets," I said. "I would have had an easier time voting for Walz. I don't agree with Vance's positions, but at least he can put words into a sentence and make sense, which his running mate definitely cannot. The VP debate was the first one I've seen in twelve years that I didn't want to turn off."

"I didn't vote for Harris," said Annie, quietly. "I didn't vote for the jerk either. I stood there with the ballot and couldn't tick the box. The whole weird thing got to me. It was like when Hillary called people who weren't going to vote for her as being 'in the basket of deplorables'. Am I weird because I'm not black or a lesbian and still go to church every Sunday and believe in heaven and hell and am against abortion? I don't think black people or lesbians or aethists or people who do believe in abortion are weird. They are different from me and have every right to be who they are. I voted for Hillary, but I wasn't sorry that she lost. I didn't want to give a person my vote when I don't feel they would pick me to be on their baseball team because I don't tick any of their boxes, even if I can hit or catch better than someone who does."

"I remember that Connie reacted the same way when she heard about the deplorables comment," I said.

"We talked about it," said Annie. "It upset both of us. Connie thought it was wrong for Obama to stand in Biden's way to run for president and to push Hillary ahead of him because she was a woman and it was time for a woman to be President now that a black man had served as President. Biden would have won easily. Hillary lost because people who would have voted for Biden voted against her."

"Any more true confessions?" asked Tony. We were all quiet, and then Edie appeared with the endless pot of coffee.

"Anybody who doesn't need a refill?" She filled all of our cups. As she went around the table, Tony posed a question.

"Edie, if everybody in the diner right now decided the election, who would win?"

"Joe Biden. Hands down. Between the two who are running, Harris has a slight edge, but only because she's a Democrat and this is a county that mostly votes for the Democratic candidate."

"We voted for Carter in 1980, but then popped for Reagan in '84," corrected Tony.

"I said mostly," retorted Edie.

"It's been a long time since we expected our leaders to be warrior kings and come home victorious from battles," said Guy when Edie had left, "but if a leader decides to get on a horse or a bicycle, we expect that they don't fall off. If a leader decides to talk about a country in a speech, we expect that they remember the name of that country's leader. If they decide to debate an opponent, we expect they will be able get through the debate without embarrassing themselves. I like Joe Biden, but he should have eaten more pasta to keep his energy level up and more olive oil

to keep his wheels turning. Annie's his age, but she still remembers the name of everyone who ever came into the restaurant, and she looks as good as she did the first time I saw her."

Guy and Annie have been in love since the first time they met. It was the same with Connie and me. I was walking into lunch on the first day of work at the lumberyard in June of '65, soaked through with sweat and covered with cement dust, and there she was. She never got very excited about who was running for president and who won. She always voted for the Democrat. She told me that, and Connie never lied. But she always said the same thing if a Republican won. "It's only four years, eight at the worst." Trump was an exception. He worried her.

"It's going to be a long night," said Annie, interrupting my daydream. "We should get back to the restaurant to get things set up for following the results until a winner is declared."

"Before we break up," said Franky, "has anyone heard about what's happening with the claim on The Orchard by the Indians?"

"Our own local Native Americans, you mean, who just happen to live in New York," interjected Tony. "Their claim is winding its way through Borough Hall before it's turned over to the county, then the state, then the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and finally ends up in the Supreme Court before it is hopefully thrown out."

When I heard this a few weeks back, the first thing I thought of was a conversation we had at this very diner around thirty years ago. We got onto the topic of Israel and the conflict between the Palestinians and the Jews. Tony was taking us through the long and sad history of the conflict, and he came to the part where the British said they were in favor of a national home for the Jewish people. It was when they were ruling over

the area that would become Israel. World War I was still going on. They issued a declaration about making part of the territory into a home for Jews. I don't remember what it was called, something with 'declaration'. How did the Palestinians living there feel when they were told they would have to make room for the Jews? How did they feel when the just newly formed United Nations decided to make the division of Palestine official. The Palestinians said they would not accept it, and the Jews said they would and declared the area designated as theirs the country of Israel. Then a war broke out with the surrounding Arab countries, and that war is still going on, now more than ever after Hamas invaded Israel last October, killed almost fourteen hundred people and took two hundred fifty hostages back to Gaza. Tony asked us how we might feel if our government said they would create a homeland for the Indians in Drake's Crossing. We would all have to move out and find another place to live. Well, that's pretty much what is happening right now. The Oneida tribe from New York says they were cheated out of their rights to the land along the Lenape River, and The Orchard is their first claim.

"As far as I know," said Franky, "the tribe is not recognized by the state or the federal government. I wrote a paper on the Lenape tribe when I was a junior in high school. I had just been inducted into the Order of the Arrow and.."

"What's the Order of the Arrow?" asked Jenny.

"I think this is where Ma would say we have to climb one mountain at a time," I said, "and the mountain for today is our all night watch of election results. We need to get back to the restaurant to prepare for the big event that will hopefully end well for the home team. And before that, I am going to try to have a

talk with my next door neighbor to prevent the fire bombing of his home that could spread to ours.”



I dropped Annie, Guy, Tony, and Jenny off at Donnatelli's. Guy's son, Sal, had taken over the restaurant. He and his wife, Renè, ran it just like Annie and Guy had run it for forty-five years. Walking in there was like going back sixty years, with photos of the guests covering all the walls. My favorite was one of Ma and Pa after Pa had just returned from the war. He was still in his uniform. I stopped in to say a quick hello to Carmy. He kept the garage sparkling clean, just like Pa and Zio Al. The gas pumps were gone, otherwise everything was the same since Carmy took it over. The only change was that Carmy had taken over the space where the dry cleaners had been. He added a body shop in the back half and a parts store in the front that Greg Stancheck, his best friend from high school, ran.

“See you back here at 6 tonight, son,” I said as I left. I stopped at Dunkin' Donuts to fill my thermos and buy a half dozen Dunkins. It was already 2:30 when I turned off Main Street into The Orchard. I parked in front of the house. Richie Bianchi was on his porch with a bullhorn. He had a set of speakers on his porch blasting out Springsteen's “Born in the U.S.A.”. *I guess it's time*, I said to myself. I walked over to the gate to his yard, opened it, and walked up the steps to his porch where Bianchi was standing, giving his standard pitch for his favorite human being.

“Hi Richie,” I said. “Can we talk?”

“Can't you see I'm busy, Nicky. There ain't much time left, and everybody's got to go up town to vote.”

“Richie, I think that everybody who is at home who was going to vote has already voted, and if they aren’t at home, they can’t hear you. You’re just annoying us all with your music and bullhorn speeches. Why don’t you give it a rest. Come on, sit down with me here like we used to do and have a cup of coffee together. I brought your favorites: Dunkins.” It was a weak spot that I knew he had, just like my weak spot was the twisted glazed cruller sticks that they have stopped making. He sat down, and I tore open the bag. I brought plenty of milk and sugar. Richie’s not a black coffee drinker.

“Waddya wannna talk about?” he asked gruffly.

“How long have we been neighbors, Richie? Thirty years since you took the house over from your parents, and thirty-five years before that since you were born? Sixty-five years, right?” He nodded while he chewed. “You were a lot younger, so we weren’t good friends growing up, but we never had anything bad to say to each other. Your parents and mine were good neighbors. So, what’s going on with you? This Trump thing that you’ve been on for the past eight years has gotten you all wound up, and you have turned everybody on The Orchard against you.”

“Not everybody,” he interrupted. “Cinquegrande is with me.”

“You know as well as I do that Cinquegrande is a nut case and always has been. You were never like him. What happened?”

“You can see it for yourself, Nicky. The blacks and the ones coming up from South America are taking over the country. Everything you see on TV is full of queers and lesbians. They act like they’re all the chosen people and we should just be swept under the rug. I’m sick of it.”

“I get what you’re saying, Richie. Sometimes I feel like I’m walking around in another country when I see Muslim women all covered up, and young girls with almost no clothes on, their bodies covered with tatoos, and kissing each other in public. But we had our nuns, and our grandmothers wore all black and veils when their husbands died. They only spoke Italian. We can’t all be alike. What’s important is that we all want what’s best for our country, even if we have different ways of expressing it. Trump’s message is one of hate, that we should be afraid of people who aren’t white and Christian and speak English.”

“They’re the ones who hate. They want to take away what we have worked hard to get. They take our jobs and make everybody believe their way of living and thinking is better than ours. How about the Indians taking over The Orchard. Do you think Trump would have let this happen if he was the president instead of Sleepy Joe?”

“I don’t have a good answer to that question, Richie. It looks like the laws we made after the wars with the Indians weren’t very clear. We’ll just have to see how this all plays out.”

“How come we ain’t had any Italian presidents?”

“We got close in ’84 with Geraldine Ferraro when she was picked by Mondale as his VP candidate. I think too many of our generation went over to the Republicans, like you and Ron DeSantis. Besides, Mussolini and Capone didn’t do us any favors.”

“The Democrats don’t want us, especially men. It’s just women, blacks, hispanics, and rich liberals like George Clooney. What the hell did he have to do with telling Joe Biden he should resign? His Arab wife put him up to it.”

“It sounds like you have been watching too many Fox News programs, Richie. You know, when I was growing up, if someone asked Pa who he voted for he would have told him to mind his own business. No one had any signs in their yards. I don’t remember when everybody started wearing their voting preferences on their heads with dumb hats and putting up signs in their front yards, but it wasn’t all that long ago. There’s a reason we have secret ballots, and it’s because who you vote for is your own damn business. Have another donut. We have to finish them. They won’t keep until tomorrow.”

I poured more coffee into our cups and we were quiet for awhile.

“How are you gonna feel if Harris loses?” said Richie breaking the silence.

“The same way all the folks who voted for Trump should feel if he loses,” I answered. “That it’s time to get everybody behind the president and the government to do what’s best for the country and the people who live in it. The reason we live in a democracy is because we don’t want people stealing power, but it comes with the responsibility of accepting the will of the majority. A lot of the people who have come here from countries where they don’t have democracy have a hard time understanding that principle. I got really upset with the muslims criticizing Biden for our support for Israel and boycotting the primaries.”

“You see? That’s what I mean. We let all these people come here from those places and they start trying to change everything to be like what they supposedly escaped from. Look at all those rich, spoiled kids at the fancy Ivy League schools covered in Arab scarves and occupying the campus, criticizing Israel. Why aren’t they protesting against the terrorists who killed over a thousand

Israeli men, women, and children, and took how many hostages?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Over a couple of hundred, I think. Joe has done a good job showing strong support Israel, just like he has done a good job supporting Ukraine. That’s what I expect from our president, and if Trump becomes president again, that is what I will expect of him. I hope we can sit down after the results are in and talk about things, and maybe you can hold down the music and the porch lectures with your bullhorn. What do you say, Richie?”

“Thanks for the coffee and donuts, Nicky. Let’s see how things go tonight.”

We shook hands. I picked up the thermos and cups and put the sugar packs and empty milk containers in the empty bag and walked next door. It was quiet at Richies until I left to go back to the restaurant.



On the invitations the Drake’s Crossing Democratic Committee sent out to all registered Democrats, it said that food would start to be served at Donnatelli’s at 7:00 p.m. and the bar would be open beginning at 6:00. I arrived at 5:30, parked in the back, and came in through the employee entrance. Guy and Sal were cooking, Annie and Rene were getting the buffet table ready, Tony was putting up all the Democratic Party decorations and organizing the table where gift packs of hats, buttons, and banners would be handed out, and Jenny was tuning in the three TV screens that were set up around the dining room to CNN, PBS, and CBS. At 6:00 p.m., right on the dot, Rene opened the doors and a crowd flooded in. Rene directed them to the gift ta-

ble where the Drake's Crossing Democratic Party board members registered the guests and handed out the gift packages. From there, everyone headed to the bar.

I took a Schwepp's Indian Tonic out of one of the coolers, poured it into a tall glass, picked up a lime wedge from one of the dishes on the bar and dropped it into the glass. I never had a taste for gin and tonics, but a little vodka would have been a welcome addition. I decided to skip the alcohol. The last thing I needed was to be pulled over by one of my old hires on a DWI charge. I took a stool at the end of the bar and watched the groups forming around the dining room. We had a table reserved for the extended Breakfast Club that was even larger than the one we met at earlier in the day. There was room for all of our kids and their kids. Suddenly, Carmy was next to me.

"What do you think, Dad? Is she going to do it?"

"I feel like I did in 2016. All the polls said that Hillary was going to win, and then she didn't. When your mom and I went to bed the night of the election, your mom said we'd wake up with Trump as our next president, and that's what happened. Most people who voted for Hillary didn't really want her to be president, and everybody who voted for Trump really did want him to be president. That's what I think is happening again, this time with Kamala Harris."

"That's pretty much what I hear from the customers. They're voting for the Democrat or they're voting for Trump."

"The only difference this time is we know what we're going to get with Trump. Half of us don't want it, and the other half does."

“I haven’t been able to figure out what that other half got when he was president that would make them want him back. He never delivered anything he promised, except enough Supreme Court justices to deliver a new ruling on abortion.”

“The ones who voted for him didn’t get a lot of people nagging them about what they should and shouldn’t do, and when people like the woman from the Bronx, AOC, piped up, he pounced on her. I remember when Reagan won with the slogan: “Let’s get government off our backs!” The Democratic Party has been the place for the we-know-better-than-you people, and a lot of them are women. If there is one thing that men especially don’t like is being told what to do by a woman.”

“You don’t feel like that, Dad. I don’t either and neither do my friends, but I know a lot of people who do.”

“Your Uncle Tony once explained it as a zero-sum game, like poker. If you win, I lose, even if it’s only my ante. If women or minorities move a step forward, some people believe they move one step back, instead of thinking that their moving forward makes my group stronger. That’s the win-win mentality. I think the Democrats have lost the big picture. They thought they won the fight for America when they elected Obama, but, in truth, that was when the big split started. After Obama, they thought they could finally put a woman in the oval office behind the big desk, but Hillary was the worst possible choice at that particular time. Joe brought the party back to its roots while he made a lot of picks in his government that pacified the people like Elizabeth Warren and all the other women who wanted to see a woman in every seat of power. He chose a black woman as his vice president, knowing full well that she would take over if he fell. He would have beaten Trump again. I’m sure of it.”

“I watched the interview of Harris a few weeks ago with the Fox News journalist? I don’t remember his name. Did you see it.”

“Bret something. I did watch it with your Uncle Tony and Aunt Jenny. There is only one thing I came away from it with. She said her presidency would not be a continuation of Joe Biden’s presidency. I thought, if she doesn’t believe in what Joe was doing, then why was she there? If she doesn’t now believe in the policies he promoted, and Joe beat Trump, then what policies is she going to have that will be at least as good or even better so that she can beat Trump? Is she going to invite in all the so-called progressives that wanted Bernie rather than Joe. Bernie would have lost every single state. If there were any Democrats watching that show who voted for Joe and were prepared to give Harris their vote because Joe supports her, I’ll bet she lost a good percentage of them right then and there.”

“That’s how I felt, but I still voted for her.”

“So did I. Looks like it’s time for dinner.”



I wasn’t hungry, but I learned at a very early age that not eating what was put in front of you, or, worse, moving it around with your fork, was the most insulting thing you could do. What a meal. They chose to make dishes that were perfect for a buffet: mushroom and spinach *tortellini in brodo*; *parmigiana di melanzane*; *pollo alla cacciatora*; *porchetta*, the delight of the Umbrians; and *patate al forno* with rosemary. Guy would be in charge of the pizza-making starting at ten. I took a little of each, and stuck to a non-alcoholic beverage, a Sam Adams Golden.

My granddaughter, Annamaria was in her usual place when we were together and there was food on the table, and that

was next to me. That's just how it's been ever since Connie died. She took her grandmother's seat.

"Who's going to win, Grandpa?" she asked.

"I always think my team is going to win because I want to give them positive energy. I wanted the Yankees to beat the Dodgers in this year's World Series, and I really thought they would. But they only managed to win one game. I wanted our Blue Devils to win their last game of the regular season against the Chargers, and I was sure they would, but they didn't. I want the Harris and Walz team to beat Trump and Vance, and a month ago it looked like they would. Tonight, it's anyone's guess."

"Is it going to be as bad as everyone is saying if Trump wins?"

"We made it through four years with him before, and we will do it again if he wins. America's bigger and stronger than he is. We have to remember that there are a lot of people who will vote for him because they don't agree with the policies and priorities of the people who will vote for Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party. And there are quite a few people who will vote for the other seven parties that have candidates in this election. America has worked for all of these years because we're all willing to give and take and find ways to change when we have to."

At 8:00 p.m., the first results showed up on the CNN screen. Trump had won Indiana, Kentucky, and West Virginia, picking up 23 Electoral Votes. Harris won Vermont and its three Electoral Votes. A photo of Bernie Sanders popped up on the TV screen with a caption saying he had won his fourth term as Vermont's Senator. Nice going, Bernie. Glad you're there and not here in Pennsylvania. By 8:30, Trump had collected 101 Electoral

Votes and Harris 49. At 9:00, she was only 21 behind, but then Trump started pulling away. At 10:00, he had double the number of Votes, 198 to 99. Families with kids began to leave. There was school tomorrow. Annamaria tried to negotiate a respite, but Ellen stood firm.

“We’ll talk tomorrow,” I said, “and I will fill in all the details. I promise to take careful notes.”

Tony, Jenny, Franky, Donna, Guy, and Annie moved into the open spaces left by our kids and grandkids. Sal came out with the first pizzas, and we dug in because we knew they were great, but not because any of us was hungry.

“Why can’t Americans vote for a woman for president?” complained Jenny.

“Do you really think that’s what this is all about?” asked Donna.

“Yes, but that’s only half of it,” answered Jenny. “The other half is her color.”

“There are four men sitting at this table who voted for her,” said Guy, “and a couple of dozen other men in this place who voted for her and who probably also voted for Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, so I’m not so sure I would go as far as to say Americans can’t vote for women or black people.”

“Well, you men are obviously in the minority,” quipped Jenny.

“Democrats—and that includes us—are going to have to decide if we want these elections to be about getting a woman elected or getting a Democrat elected,” interjected Tony. “If this one and the one in 2016 were about getting women elected, then the Democrats picked the wrong women because Hillary lost and

Kamala is on her way to lose. If they were about getting a Democrat elected, then the wrong people were chosen as candidates. The candidate the Democrats chose in 2020 was neither a woman nor a person of color. He, a white male, won. Yes, he was old, but he did his best in spite of having to work around people in his own party, the so-called progressives, who didn't want a white male to be president. Maybe Joe should have bowed out earlier and demanded that there should be a proper primary period and the best candidate selected, instead of being treated by everyone in the party like he was no longer president and never should have been there in the first place. I'm in the camp who believes he should have run and would have won. I don't think I'm alone in the tent pitched around this table."

We knew who we were who wanted and believed in Joe. There was not much to say after that. Harris got Washington, DC's 3 Votes. Trump got Kansas and Iowa at 10:43. By 11:20, Trump had captured Idaho and a big one, North Carolina. Then Georgia was declared for Trump, while Harris won New Mexico and Virginia. Just after midnight, the score was 230 for Trump and 209 for Harris. People were leaving, and by 1:00 a.m. there were only a dozen of us who had decided to see it to the bitter end. Harris had pulled closer, but then at 1.00 a.m. Georgia moved into the Trump column with its 16 votes. New Hampshire went in the Democrat column at 1:21. The count was now 248 for Trump and 214 for Harris.

At 2:00 a.m., both Reuters and Fox News declared Trump the winner, even though he had not yet officially passed the 270 mark. At 2:30, the biggest of the blue wall states, Pennsylvania, our state, was officially declared Trump's. He now had 267 Electoral Votes. At 2:32, Trump came on stage at an event in Palm Beach, Florida. His family and the people who worked on his

campaign were on stage with him. He didn't say much, mostly just thanking everyone. At 3:00 a.m., we all decided to pack it in. We knew Trump had wrapped it up.



## CHAPTER 2

# NOVEMBER 6<sup>TH</sup> TO INAUGURATION DAY

**IT WAS AFTER** ten when I woke up on Wednesday morning. I put on my morning outfit of dark blue cotton sweats with the DC Blue Devils insignia on the top and pants, and went down to the kitchen. Orange juice and coffee was all I needed this morning and maybe for the rest of the day. I went out to the porch and picked up the paper. As I turned to walk back into the house, I glanced over at Richie's house. I had to rub my eyes to make sure I was seeing what I was seeing. All the Trump signs and banners were gone—GONE! It looked like every other house on the street, clean and respectable. Was it my porcheside manner, the donuts, or something else that happened after I left him yesterday? Maybe his daughter finally got through to him. I didn't give it a thought when I came back early this morning, so I don't know when it happened. I'll be darned. A new leaf has been turned, I thought.

As I sipped my coffee, I flicked through the few pages of what was left of the two daily newspapers that I had looked forward to reading every day, the Times in the morning and the Tribune in the evening. Now, after they were merged and sold to a national media company, it was a small fraction of what was in each of the originals, both in number of pages and overall size, and most of it was pulled from national and international news agencies. There was nothing local, unless it was of national in-

terest, like when Biden came for a family visit. We'll be completely off the radar in a two months. I logged into my iPhone and clicked on the NPR icon and the election results page. I saw that it was still 267 to 224. How long will NPR be around now that its enemy number one is back in the "You're Fired" chair. I clicked on the Senate tab. Bad news there, too. Republicans were going to control it, and it looked like Casey was about to lose to McCormick. The House was still up for grabs, but the Republicans were in the lead.

My phone rang. It was Tony. "Did I wake you?"

"No. I had to get up to answer the phone," I wisecracked.

"Did you see the article on page ten?" he asked without acknowledging my joke.

"I just turned over to page eight when you called. Let's see what's on page ten."

"I'll be over in a minute," and he hung up.

I turned to page ten. *Native Americans Claim Land in Drake's Crossing for Reservation* was the headline. A large map showing the Lenape River valley from the city to where it joins the Munsee River took up half of the page. There was a shaded area on both the northern and western and southern and eastern sides of the Lenape River, and a heavy line around an area in the southern part of Drake's Crossing with the river as the southern and western borders, Adigi Street as the northern border, and Elk Road as the eastern. The large area is what the Native Americans are claiming as their land, said the article, and the area inside the heavy border, which included The Orchard, is where they want to build the headquarters for their new reservation. I was still

staring at the map when Tony came in holding his breakfast coffee cup that was a gift from the last class he taught at the high school inscribed with 'You Make History Alive'.

"Is this an early April Fools joke?" I gasped.

"It's for real," he said as he filled his cup. "I wouldn't have given it a miniscule chance of happening if the former guy didn't win the election. His biggest supporter in the county has his business smack dab in the middle of the tribe's proposed headquarters, so there must be a connection between the Indians and Pignozzi."

"They must have been pretty sure when they started this whole thing that Trump would come back. They announce it on the day he wins the election."

"Let's start at the beginning," said. "I didn't think we had any Indian reservations in the county or even in the state. Who are these people and where did they come from? Why are they claiming half of the Lenape River valley as theirs?"

"They're Oneidas, and they live in Verona, New York. They're the ones who started the 'Change The Mascot' campaign in 2013 to get the Washington Redskins to change their name and mascot. Others had tried earlier, but the Redskins' owners wouldn't budge. The Oneidas finally made it happen in 2020."

"Okay, but what the hell are they doing down here? I thought we had the Lenape Munsee here. We don't have any rivers or towns named after the Oneidas, do we?"

"The article gives some background, but not much detail. Their lawyers probably thought they had a pretty solid case, otherwise they wouldn't have gone through the trouble, and they must have figured on the return of the MAGA tribe."

“Walk me through it. I know we’re going to have to do it again with Franky, but this will give you a chance to practice for the big performance.”

“Maybe you should put on another pot of coffee.”

“I’ll do that.” I got up and filled a new filter with coffee grounds, this time for six cups instead of the two I had brewed for myself. “How’s Jenny doing?” I asked.

“She went back to bed after we walked Benjy and Jamin this morning. She wasn’t very talkative during our walk and didn’t even eat breakfast. Even though I tried to prepare her for what I figured was going to be the result, she believed right down to the bitter end that Harris could pull it off. Connie got her through the last time Trump won. I’m not the one to do it this time.”

Jenny was really depressed when Hillary lost to Trump. She moped around for days after the election and wouldn’t talk to anyone. Connie finally convinced her to go for a drive. When they came back after a couple of hours, she didn’t say where they had gone, but that evening, Jenny and Tony came over after dinner for coffee and pie. Jenny brought the pie, Tony’s favorite, banana cream. She was back to her old self. Nobody asked any questions.

“Connie didn’t leave any instructions on what to do if the revenant returned, did she?” Tony asked.

“Revenant?”

“A corpse that’s been revived to haunt the living.”

“She made herself believe that he was gone forever.”

“We’ll leave Mr. Cheeto for the time being and get back to our more immediate problem. I’ll start with a quick sweep of the

early history. The people we call Indians, indigenous people of North America, or Native Americans, arrived in North America around 15,000 years ago..."

"Wait! This is going to be quick?"

"You will get through this if you have a good understanding of what we are dealing with," answered Tony. "The earliest traces of these people in this part of the continent were found in southwestern Pennsylvania approximately 10,000 years ago. Around the time that Columbus and other explorers landed along the continent's eastern coastline, five to eighteen million people were already living in what is now Canada and the United States. Some estimates make it as high as eighty million, but it seems those estimates are for both North and South America."

"That's a pretty wide range."

"It doesn't look like our scientists can get any more precise than that. Twelve million is about how many Incas there were in Peru. There were around twenty million Mayans in Mexico. Estimates put the total population of all of Europe at sixty million around the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. England and Scotland together had only a little over 3 million. France with northern Italy had around 16 million. So, there were three-to-fifteen times more people living in the area we know as Europe as in most of North America excluding Mexico, and this area is about two-and-a-half times larger in land area."

"If the Indians, or the Native Americans, had gotten together and put up a real fight when the Europeans started arriving in small numbers, we would probably be speaking Algonquian instead of English, right?"

“It might be more correct to say that we wouldn’t be here now. We’d all be making Italy, Ireland, Sweden, and the rest of the old country countries great again. But it’s more likely the Europeans would have come back with more men and more guns, which is pretty much what they did later. The Spanish wiped out the Mayans, Aztecs, and Incas with tiny forces. With their combination of guns and horses, they had overwhelming superiority over the natives, and when you add to their weaponry the germs they brought with them which the natives had absolutely no immunity to, the natives were defenseless.”

“What do you mean about the horses?”

“There were no horses in North or South America when the Europeans arrived. There had been horses here before the first humans arrived, but they disappeared shortly after that. No one really knows why, but those paintings you see with Indians riding horses were all from after the Indians had either traded for them or stole them from the Spanish.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said.

“Most people don’t. Once the Spanish wiped out the big civilizations and moved north above the Rio Grande River, they found a very different situation. There were no large cities, and the Native Americans in North America were spread out over the entire continent. They weren’t all that friendly with one another. They didn’t have the highly developed and dense settlements of the Incas, Mayans and Aztecs. They also had different languages, so even if the tribes on the East Coast sent out messengers to the West and they got past the first “How!”, they wouldn’t have been able to tell them why they had come.

“The first permanent settlement by Europeans in North America was Jamestown in what became Virginia. It was

founded in May of 1607 by a group of English men and boys—no women—led by John Smith. A few months after they arrived, two of the three boats that brought them went back to England. All the settlers nearly died from typhoid and dysentery during the first year, and the Powhatan tribe of Algonquian Indians, who lived nearby, did their best to finish them off. During their second year, they managed to agree to a peace with the Powhatans, and they were able to trade what they had for food.”

I interrupted Tony. “This isn’t the start of Thanksgiving, is it?”

“No. That was in 1620 with the Pilgrims in Plymouth and the Wampanoag. So, Smith went back to England at the end of 1609, and the settlers lived through what they called The Starving Time, when more than a hundred of them died from hunger. Just when it looked like all the last embers of the settlement were dying out, two ships arrived with another one hundred and fifty settlers, and the colony survived.”

“The Powhatan chief’s daughter, Pocahontas, married one of the settlers, right?” proud that I had remembered something from one of my history classes.

“Right. That was in 1614. She married John Rolfe, a tobacco planter. Tobacco became the main crop which the settlers used to purchase supplies from the British. Pocahontas died in 1617 on a ship sailing to England, and her father died a year later. The Algonquians became increasingly angered by the arrival of more settlers and the expansion of their settlements. They launched a major attack against the English settlements in 1622 and killed close to four hundred of the settlers, which was about a quarter of all the settlers at the time. But it was too late. The Algonquians’ numbers were slowly being reduced by the diseases the settlers

brought with them, like influenza, smallpox, measles, and typhus fever, against which their immune systems had no defenses, just like with the Spanish and the Indians in South America. By 1644, the colony was able to force the Powhatans to sign a peace treaty that gave away most of the tribe's land and forced them to pay a tax to the governor of what had become the Colony of Virginia.

“This is how things worked with most of the dealings the indigenous people had with the settlers. First, they let the settlers settle, then they tried to live together with them until the settlers kept coming and expanding into more land. The Indians attacked the settlers to try to get them to leave, and the settlers fought back and attacked the Indians. The Indians eventually lost and had to agree to stop using the land they had used before the colonists arrived.”

“I have to admit that I have never understood how the Indians could have let themselves be beaten time after time,” I said.

“We don't have any books written by the Indians about what they were thinking or doing when Europeans showed up on their doorsteps because the Indians didn't have a written language. They depended on passing on their histories orally. There were around 300 languages spoken by tribes north of Mexico, and these were grouped into about 30 families. So the Lenni Lenape spoke two variations of the Eastern Algonquian families of languages, Munsee and Unami. This wasn't so different from most other parts of the world. I read that in 1500 there were more than 100 dialects in Italy, and we know that the Siciliani couldn't understand what the Napoletani were saying, and vice versa. I remember when Annie and Guy tried to speak to each other in Italian, they eventually gave up and switched to English. And just like in Italy and most other parts of the world, people who

spoke one dialect didn't trust people who spoke another dialect, and that distrust often ended up causing them to fight with one another. North America was not one big, peaceful place when Europeans began arriving. There were constant wars among the several million inhabitants, fighting over the same things that people fight over to this day.

"Land, water, and things to eat," I added.

"One big difference between most other places in the world and North America was that it seems the Indians did not have a concept of private land ownership. It turned out that this really had important consequences in the dealings between them and the colonists. The people who lived in North America before the European settlers arrived did not believe that land could be owned, only lived with, respected, and cared for. They did not believe that anyone could claim ownership of land, as the settlers did. The settlers used a passage in the Bible to justify their own beliefs. It was Genesis 1:28."

Tony took out his phone and did a search. "Here it is: *God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'* It was the Catholic Church in 1493, with its Doctrine of Discovery issued by Pope Alexander VI, that claimed non-Christians could not own land, and that Christians should feel free to take whatever lands they "discovered". The Doctrine held that any land "discovered" by a Christian nation became the property of that nation just by showing up and claiming it. How do you argue against this circular logic? The Native Americans were definitely not up to the task. By the way, this doctrine applied everywhere, not just in the Americas."

“Has a Pope ever cancelled it, the Doctrine?” I asked.

“As a matter of fact, yes. By the middle of the 1500s, the Vatican did what was called ‘abrogate’ the Doctrine, meaning they ended the law. But it was too late. The principle was incorporated into the actions taken by all the European powers since they were all Christian, and then made part of the law of the land in the United States. A Supreme Court ruling in 1823 stated that Indigenous people had only rights of “occupancy”, not ownership over lands they lived on. As recently as 2005, the Oneida Indian Nation brought a case to the Supreme Court. Yes, it’s the same tribe as the one claiming our patch of land here in DC. The tribe had bought land in New York outside of its reservation using money it had earned from its commercial operations on its reservation. It claimed that it had sovereignty over the properties it bought, just like all recognized Indian tribes had sovereignty over the reservations that had been designated by the Federal government. I’ll come back to that. The Oneidas argued that it was purchasing land that was once part of the original reservation they were given, but which had gradually been taken away by the government and sold. With the claim of sovereignty came the right of immunity from taxation by any jurisdiction, which is what they were after. The city where the lands were located did not agree, and tried to foreclose on the properties and take over the title. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the city. The majority opinion of the Court, eight out of nine, with John Stevens as the sole dissenter, was written by Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.”

“She was Connie’s hero,” I said. “Connie said that everyone thought she was a left-wing progressive because she fought for gender justice, but she could be conservative on criminal issues,

liberal on religion and free speech, and progressive on civil rights.”

“The opinion Justice Ginsburg wrote basically said that trying to turn land in areas that are overwhelmingly populated by non-indigenous residents would have disruptive practical consequences. Those are the words she used. She acknowledges in the opinion that a grave wrong was done when reservation land was appropriated, but it is an ancient, wrong, she said. It’s too late to correct it. If the government grants tax immunity, it must grant the other rights that come with land that is part of a reservation, making the land part of the reservation, and it is this that will cause problems. So no tax immunity, and, therefore, no reservation rights.”

“Have the Oneidas bought the land they are claiming here?”

“No. They are saying they helped the colonists during the Revolutionary War and afterwards. They say the settlers who were here and received their help respected the Oneida’s rights to the land, but those who came later did not and they forced the Oneidas to leave.”

“Sounds pretty shaky, don’t you think?”

“I think it would have been tough to push it through the courts, including SCOTUS, with a federal and state government controlled by people who respect the law, and there are plenty of Democrats in the county who want to see Pignozzi get his comeuppance. But with the guy who won, and the loss of Senator Casey as well, if Pignozzi is behind this it has a good chance of going through. The other side of the river is mostly empty land that was or still is owned by the railroads. It’s got good access to the ski area, the Triple A ball field, and the airport, and it has good possibilities for access from the Turnpike and the Interstate. It

could be a good showcase for the Oneidas, but I'm not sure who benefits from making it a reservation."

"What was it you were going to come back to?"

"The legal basis of the reservations and the legal classification of Native Americans. I said the Oneida Nation brought a case to the Supreme Court. 'Nation' is a key word. Native Americans have dual citizenship, in their Nation and in the U.S., but they did not have U.S. citizenship until 1924. That came with the Indian Citizenship Act passed in 1924. Their Nations are called 'domestic dependent nations'. They are not independent nations inside the United States. This is where it gets complicated. When the U.S. Constitution was ratified, Indian nations were considered independent sovereigns. They had authority within the areas they claimed for their Nations. These sovereigns had made treaties with both the British government and the colonies before the establishment of the United States, and with the U.S. government after 1776. The British Proclamation of 1763 had designated the region between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River as Indian Territory for the "exclusive use of indigenous peoples", and the new United States nation honored this treaty. The Nations reserved for themselves the land they had not sold or given away with these treaties. These areas came to be called 'reservations', because the land was reserved for themselves.

"By the time the U.S. Constitution was ratified in 1788, the unstoppable force of expansion of the country was already meeting the immovable object of Indian reservations, which covered most of the land not already settled by the growing number of Americans. Thomas Jefferson as President bought the Louisiana Purchase territory from Napoleon's France in 1803, an area that is approximately one-third of the area of continental U.S. He

said he wanted the country to control both sides of the Mississippi River and secure New Orleans at the river's mouth, but adding such a large area of land to the new country was part of his vision for an expansive country stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Florida with the southern edge of Alabama and Mississippi up to New Orleans, along with most of the last one-third of the what eventually became the lower 48 States belonged to Spain in 1803. Jefferson tasked Meriwether Lewis and William Clark in 1804 to trek across the Louisiana Purchase and into the northwestern area that wasn't claimed by Spain or the U.S. at that time. He wanted them to find the best commercial route to the Pacific Ocean. Put another way, he was sending out the dogs to mark our territory, what we owned now and what we had every intention of owning sometime in the near future.

“Madison followed Jefferson, and Monroe followed Madison. When Monroe was President, General Andrew Jackson invaded Florida, mainly to clear the territory of Seminoles and to make the first move against Spain to take the territories they claimed but which the U.S. wanted. By 1819, Florida was ceded by Spain to the U.S. One of the first things Jackson did after he became President in 1829 was to get Congress to pass the Indian Removal Act of 1830. This Act required all Indians to move west of the Mississippi River, and it obliterated the British Proclamation. The Indians did not go quietly, but in the end the Cherokee, Muscogee, Seminole, Chickasaw, and Choctaw nations in the Southeastern part of the United States were forced to leave and go to what was called Indian Territory west of the Mississippi. At some point a name was given to this forced move. It was called The Trail of Tears. In their wake came the settlers. The next hurdle would be the Mississippi River.”

“Wasn’t this about the time when things began to heat up between the U.S. and the Mexicans? The year 1836 sticks in my head in connection with the Battle of the Alamo.”

“Disney’s Davy Crockett miniseries with Fess Parker and Buddy Ebsen gave a decidedly one-sided view of the fight between the Mexicans and the Texas settlers, but it did show that Americans didn’t win every battle. Mexico had gained independence from Spain in 1821. It made the same mistake as the Indians, let the settlers get a foot in the door. They came into the Tejas region of Mexico. The settlers in what the settlers called Texas started in 1835. It did not end with the defeat at the Alamo. Texas was annexed into the United States in 1845, and all the other Mexican land in the Southwest was ceded to America in 1848. Back to the Indians.

“Millard Fillmore became the country’s thirteenth President, and he went right to work with the next phase of de-Indianization. The Indian Appropriations Acts of 1851 allocated money to move all the tribes west of the Mississippi onto Indian reservations. Congress said the purpose of the Act was to protect the Indians from attacks by settlers who were moving onto their land. The Act also changed the relationship of Indians to the government. They became ‘wards’, collected into smaller, defensible areas, rather than spread out over the entire western territory where the chances of conflicts with settlers were high.

“Civil War General and hero, Ulysses S. Grant, became President in 1869, and during his first of two terms the Appropriation Act of 1871 was passed. This one took away the right of the Indian Nations to be recognized as an independent nation. It said that all Indians should be treated as individuals, not as citizens of a tribe or nation. No more treaties with Indians would be made, and no more payments would be made to individual

Indians or the tribes in return for land. This made it easier for the federal government to take over land from the Indians.

“So, on their reservations, they have sovereignty. They can’t be taxed by any local, state, or federal authority. But because they couldn’t be taxed, they did not get the right to vote or any other rights that came with citizenship. Until they became citizens of the U.S., they needed to have a pass to leave their reservations.

“What happened if a Native American left the reservation and tried to live outside of it?” I asked.

“I’m not sure what happened before they were legally made citizens, whether they lived on the reservation or not. If they leave the reservation today, they can do anything any other U.S. citizen can do, including being taxed. They can continue to be enrolled as a member of a tribe, like Deb Haaland in New Mexico, who is a congresswoman and was appointed as Secretary of the Interior by Biden.”

We had finished the coffee, and sat at the table silently for several minutes. Franklin suddenly appeared on the window ledge, peering in at us. “What do you think, Franklin, would you like to be living on an Indian reservation?” I asked my little companion.

“There would have been more Franklins here now if our grandfathers didn’t like to practice their aim on them, and our grandmothers didn’t like to add their meat to the sauce,” mused Tony. “I’d better get back to the house. Maybe Jenny’s awake and needs some comforting.”

Tony left and I emptied the coffee brewer, washed the breakfast dishes, went upstairs to take care of my morning business in the bathroom, got dressed, and walked to the cemetery. It was warm, in the 70s, and sunny, with low humidity. I walked to the end of Orchard Street. There wasn't a soul out. Did everyone stay up until dawn waiting for the last returns to come in? It felt like there were fewer cars on Main Street. I took the long way to the cemetery, along the route that Connie and I always took on our walks. As I passed the old bakery I remembered the aroma of the bread that always filled the air within a block of the ovens. It wasn't there anymore for real, but I still felt it. I could feel warm bread in my mouth as I ate an entire loaf I had bought for myself when I was sent to buy a few loaves for the house.

The grass was still green. We hadn't yet had a frost. The trees had given up most of their leaves. The last cleanup for the fall hadn't been made, so there were piles of leaves, large and small, all around the graveyard. Connie liked the leaf piles. There weren't very many trees around their house on the flats where they lived before they moved back to The Orchard. She told me that she used to come to the cemetery on her own to visit her father and to walk in the leaf piles. As I slid my shoes into one of the smaller piles, I closed my eyes and saw Connie. The noise I heard moving through the leaves came from her. I visited all the graves and then sat down on the grass in front of our tombstone. The ground was warm and the grass was dry. Whenever I saw Connie's face in my thoughts, like now, she was smiling.

*I guess God has a plan for us he hasn't gotten around to sharing. Does he really feel like it's necessary to test us again? Do you have all hands on deck meetings up there where he tells you what he and his chief lieutenants have been doing, and what plans they have for us down here. If there are meetings, does anyone have a chance to make objections or*

*offer suggestions, or is it all just one big one way conversation? The Lucatellas are at it again, making trouble. But this time it's not just our family. It's all the families on The Orchard. Is that another part of the plan? Is God going to gradually give everything back to the people who were living in America before the colonists arrived, like he's done in Africa? I wonder if he expects us all to go back to where our grandparents came from. I talk about these things with our family, but I never feel like I did after we talked. I try to imagine what you would say. Sometimes, I dream that we are lying in bed or sitting on our couch talking. I wake up feeling better.*

It was one o'clock when I got back to the house. I turned on the radio and heard that Trump was declared the official winner at noon when he was awarded Wisconsin's 10 Votes. The total was then 277 to 224. Michigan, Nevada, Alaska, and Arizona were still uncalled, and he was leading in all four of those states, but it didn't matter. He had passed the 270 Electoral College Vote mark. This time, he was winning the popular vote as well with almost a five million vote margin.



“Did you bring today’s paper?” asked Tony when we came into the diner, even before saying hello and shaking hands with Franky.

“Right here, chief. Do I get a star on my helmet?”

“Two. Sorry. I’ve been so worked up about the nightmare team the Cheater-in-Chief has been putting together during the past ten days that I’ve been letting my old behavioral disorder rise to the surface.”

“It’s okay, Tony,” answered Franky. “I knew you back when you were at your worst and still thought you were okay. We’re all upset about how the election turned out and we’re not very good

company. When I was leaving this morning, Donna said she was happy to have me out of the house instead of sitting in front of the TV watching CNN and listening to one announcer after another saying why the latest Trump pick was worse than the last.”

We settled into our booth. Edie came over with our cups and the magic pot of coffee that was always full. “From your sour pussies it looks like your pick didn’t win. Half of the people who’ve come in here during the past week look like they were cheering for the Yankees, and the other half were old Brooklyn Dodgers fans.”

“I’ve had my own trifecta, Edie,” said Franky. “My high school went zero and ten for the season, the Yanks lost, and the evil empire has returned.”

“But you kept your charming sense of humor,” answered Edie. “The usual, Tony and Franky? Pancakes or waffles, Nicky?”

“Pancakes,” I said, “and you know what? I’ll have an extra sausage patty.”

“I’m going to have to start writing your order down, Nicky,” she said as she turned to head back to the kitchen. Tony quickly got us back to the business at hand.

“Eleven days. In just eleven days, he has turned everything upside down. If Charles Schulz were writing today, he would have come up with a character who combined the worst traits of Lucy, Frieda, and Pig-Pen. He walks into a room, starts complaining and criticizing everyone, congratulates himself on being the best in everything, and immediately creates a huge mess. Is there one pick that wasn’t meant as a sharp stick in the eye to one adversary group or another?”

“Maybe his very first pick, his Chief of Staff, Susie Wiles,” answered Franky. “He called her up to speak first at his victory party, before he announced her as his pick as Chief of Staff. He handed her the mike, but she gave it to the campaign manager. She wouldn’t speak.”

“Trump calls her The Ice Maiden,” added Tony.

“Who is she?” I asked.

“She’s been a lobbyist for a long time. She’s sixty-seven, and knows how government works. She ran this campaign for Trump, and she obviously did a very good job. She doesn’t ruffle anyone’s feathers, and people seem to respect her. She made one non-negotiable demand before accepting the position, and that was that she would have more authority in controlling who had access to Trump in the Oval Office than the four others who had the position during his first term. Trump agreed, so there will be no clown cars driving through the door.”

“Isn’t she the daughter of Pat Summerall who was a kicker for the Giants?” asked Franky.

“Yep,” answered Tony. “His name was George, but he got the nickname ‘Pat’ from Point After Touchdown.”

“We’re off point,” I said.

“Okay, Wiles looks like a human being,” said Franky, “but what about Kennedy as the head of the Department of Health and Human Services? The entire Kennedy clan thinks he is out to lunch. How about his bear cub story, picking up a dead bear in upstate New York and driving with it to Manhattan where he staged an accident between a bike and the bear cub in Central Park?”

“I think he’s going to surprise everybody,” mused Tony.

“It sounds like he’s spent his life surprising people, especially his family, who all seem to think he’s a nut case,” quipped Franky.

“So, why is he going to surprise everybody?” I asked.

“I’d like to know that, too,” added Franky. “I kept the post Trump made about him on X when he announced him. Here’s what he said,” as he pulled a piece of paper out of his shirt pocket: “The safety and health of all Americans is the most important role of any administration, and HHS will play a big role in helping ensure that everybody will be protected from harmful chemicals, pollutants, pesticides, pharmaceutical products, and food additives that have contributed to the overwhelming health crisis in this country. Mr. Kennedy will restore these agencies to the traditions of gold standard scientific research, and beacons of transparency, to end the chronic disease epidemic, and to make America great and healthy again!’ America does not have a chronic disease problem. It has an obesity problem, and it has a drug addition problem, but to include blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, kidney disease, epilepsy, and many other ailments as ‘chronic’ along with obesity is simply ridiculous. What I am most worried about is that he is going to continue his campaign against vaccinations, and then who knows how we’re going to control all the diseases we thought we had licked, like polio and smallpox.”

“I think he’s going to concentrate on chemicals in foods,” answered Tony. “He’s going to go after GRAS.”

“Generally recognized as safe,” interjected Franky.

“What’s generally recognized as safe?” I asked. “What does grass have to do with chemicals?”

“It’s an acronym, G.R.A.S.” answered Franky. “One of the things Junior’s been harping on is that the food industry’s been poisoning us with the full blessing of the Food and Drug Administration. Kennedy says it started with the FDA allowing the companies to regulate themselves when they add flavors, colors, and preservatives to foods. They decide whether they’re safe and even whether they have to inform the FDA about having added them. Any chemical a company makes up can be added and listed on the label as ‘flavoring’. It might have started innocently, like not listing vinegar because it is generally recognized as safe, but then companies started adding all sorts of chemicals to make foods last longer, or make them tastier or crispier. The more they added, the longer it took for the FDA to test them, so in 1997—a Democrat was President, Clinton—the FDA changed its rules so that the companies could add pretty much whatever they wanted and didn’t need to tell the FDA. Countries in Europe don’t allow most of the chemicals we have in our foods, which means we can’t export them to Europe.”

“So, this is where Kennedy is going to make his mark?” I said with a question mark. “It’s a dream come true for him.”

“He’ll go after all the other areas on his hit list, like vaccinations, after he’s got the FDA where he wants it,” said Tony.

“Do you think Kennedy’s voters really made a difference for Trump?” asked Franky. “I read that the polls showed Trump would get maybe fifty-five percent of Kennedy’s voters, and the rest would go to Harris.”

“Whatever votes Trump got didn’t hurt, but I don’t think it was Kennedy’s voters Trump was after. It was sticking it to the Kennedy clan that motivated him to win over Junior,” said Tony. “The old nouveau riche hate the new nouveau riche.”

“What about Matt Gaetz for Attorney General?” I asked. “What the heck is Trump thinking? The guy has no experience as a lawyer, and limited experience as a politician.”

“Trump thinks he will do his bidding, something his AGs didn’t do during his first term,” answered Tony. “It was Gaetz’s motion that led to Kevin McCarthy, the Republican Speaker of the House, being voted out of his office, and he’s been a hard critic of the Justice Department as a member of the House Judiciary Committee. On top of all that, he’s tried to stop all investigations into Trump’s doings while he was President. Trump figures he’ll do whatever he’s told to do with no questions asked.”

“Wasn’t he under investigation for sex trafficking,” I asked.

“Yes he was,” answered Franky, “but he wasn’t charged, for some reason. But he’s still under investigation by the House Ethics Committee for sexual misconduct and illegal drug use. Can you imagine this guy being the Attorney General? He’s never going to make it through the Senate hearings.”

“I think it was pretty comical seeing the Tesla guy, Musk, jumping around like a kid at Trump’s rallies, and then seeing him on stage with all of Trump’s family on the night of the election,” I said. “A lot of money can buy you a lot of love. He got more attention than the vice president and Trump’s oldest daughter Ivanka and her husband. They acted like they were Executive Vice Presidents during his first term.”

“They disappeared after they moved to Florida,” added Tony.

“Didn’t Musk support Biden in the last election?” asked Franky.

“He claimed after the election that he voted for Biden,” said Tony, “and that he had voted for all Democratic candidates for president up to that point. Musk was grateful for what Obama did to help Tesla get started by supporting electric car-friendly policies, and helping his other company, SpaceX, get contracts. But Joe and his team pissed Musk off when they didn’t invite him to their wine and cheese parties, especially the one they organized in the summer of 2021 around Biden signing an executive order to make half of all new vehicles zero emissions starting with those sold in 2030. GM, Ford, and Chrysler’s owners, Stellantis, were all there at the signing event, but not Tesla. Why the snub? Tesla is not unionized. The union bosses told Biden they didn’t want Musk there, and the president complied. At the event, Joe told the GM CEO, Mary Barra, that she electrified the entire automobile industry, that she was the leader. Apparently, Musk was apoplectic when he heard this.”

“He should have been,” said Franky. “That was a really stupid thing to do, especially since the unions have been voting Republican ever since Reagan. There would be no electric car industry today if it hadn’t have been for Musk. Whether I like the whole idea of electric cars or not is another matter.”

“It went from bad to worse,” continued Tony. “Biden’s picks on the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Communications Commission, and the Justice Department began to accuse Musk’s companies of all sorts of infractions. The Department of Transportation started a number of investigations into Tesla. From Musk’s viewpoint, his wins with the Democrats did not make up for the losses. Then there is the whole ‘woke’ thing, which he blames on the progressives inside the Democratic Party.”

We were quiet for a few minutes, sipping our coffees. Then Franky said to Tony, "Remember what you said when I asked you what happens if Trump is re-elected in four years? We were sitting on Nicky's porch and it was something like five months after Joe swore the oath of office. I really thought Trump was finished. You said the first thing he's going to do is pardon everyone convicted of crimes related to attacking the U.S. Capitol on January 6<sup>th</sup>. You said he's going to deputize them and make them his personal White House Guard. Do you still think that's what he's going to do?"

"As far as pardoning every last one of them, even the ones who attacked the police, yes, that's what he's going to do. He may wait to dress them up in the new uniforms he's had made for them."

"Ricky Luccatella's kid, Eedo, is one of them," I said. Ricky was Eddie Luccatella's son. Eddie, whose name was Eduardo, was Enzo Luccatella's younger brother. Enzo got to be called Lucca, like his father, because he was the oldest son. Ricky's kid was named after his grandfather, and everyone calls him Eedo. Eddie took over the gang when his brother Lucca was killed. Ricky took over when his father died, and Eedo is line to take over when his father kicks. They're still hanging out in the same place as they were when Lucca was alive, a few doors up from Carmy's shop and the restaurant. Ricky had a stroke almost four years ago and doesn't come into town much anymore. Eedo inherited all the bad genes in the Luccatella family, stretching back to Enzo and Eddie's father, who came over after the First World War and was a Mussolini spy.

"The last time I saw Ricky was yesterday. He came in Dunkin' when I was there and came over to me, screaming like a banshee. "You son of a bitch, you know who killed uncle Enzo," he

said. “The mob killed him, Ricky, ‘cause he was snitching on your gang,” I said. “Everybody knows that. Maybe they put the gun in your father’s hand and told him to take care of the problem.”

“That sent him into a real fit. Just before the fists started flying, my crew came in. Nunzo had called them as soon as Ricky began yelling. They brought him outside, and then he disappeared. I went back to my coffee, which by then was cold. Nunzo came over with a fresh cup and another Dunkin’. “Bad seeds make rotten fruit,” he said.

“They know who shot Lucca and why,” mused Tony, “but as far as we know, they never figured out how Genovese found out Lucca was talking to the FBI.”

“Maybe they’ve figured it out, or think they have,” I said. “That’s the first thing that came into my mind when it happened.”

“They had to believe it was the redhead,” said Tony. “They all knew she was a plant from Genovese. Why would they think it was anybody else? Something about this this doesn’t make sense. There’s something else going on.”

“Do you mind if we change the subject and talk about the Indian raid on The Orchard?” said Franky.

“Good idea,” I said. “Trump is only just getting started with his peanut gallery. Tony and I had a talk over coffee the morning after election day when the the paper ran the big story on the claim, along with maps. I brought the paper with me.” I pulled it out of my bag and opened up the spread to show the maps.

“Not much has happened since the article appeared in the Times-Tribune the day after the election,” added Tony.

“I should have taped my session with Tony.”

“I can make a short summary,” offered Tony.

“I love you, Tony,” laughed Franky, “but you couldn’t give a short summary of Washington’s second inaugural address, which was only four sentences.”

“Yes I can. He said: ‘I’m honored you elected me. If I screw up as president, I will accept your criticisms.’”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

“The Oneida Nation from New York, the same ones who led the final fight to get the Washington Redskins to change their name and mascot, has made a claim to the county to be given title over the land shown on the map from the center of the city down to the Munsee River, on both sides of the Lenape River. They claim that the settlers in the area after the Revolutionary War told them it was their land to use. They say it was the settlers’ way of thanking them for the help the Oneida’s gave them during the War against the British troops and the Iroquois and Algonquins who fought with the British. Just by way of background, the Oneida Nation were a part of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy. They broke away from the Confederacy during the Revolutionary War to fight with the Colonists. Their contribution was recognized after the war in the Treaty of Canandaigua. It was signed by President George Washington, and it acknowledged the lands reserved for the Oneidas. These lands are in New York, not in Pennsylvania. The Oneidas can sell the lands, but only to citizens of the United States who live in the United States. There is an important clause in the treaty which I think makes a big difference in our case.” Tony brought up the treaty on his phone. “It says that the Oneidas or any of the other tribes included in the treaty, will never claim any other lands within the boundaries of the United States, or ever disturb the

people of the United States in the free use and enjoyment thereof.”

“So there was no recognition of land given to the Oneidas in Pennsylvania, right?” I asked.

“No, and there is no record of the Oneidas living in this area before, during, or after the war. It wasn’t long after the war was over that new settlers began arriving from southern Pennsylvania and from New Jersey, and the older settlers, who were mostly Yankees from Connecticut, began dying or were pushed out.”

“Wait,” I said, “what do you mean ‘pushed out?’”

“There was something called the Pennamite-Yankee Wars that went on in the northeastern part of the state from 1769, before the Revolutionary War, until just after its end. Even though fighting stopped, it wasn’t all finally settled until 1799. Both the Colony of Connecticut and the Colony of Pennsylvania rightly claimed this area where we live because King Charles had included the land in the charters of both colonies, to the former in 1662, and to the latter in 1681. Apparently, the English hadn’t heard of deed searches at the time. The Susquehannock Indians, who were Iroquoian and lived in this area, kept both colonies by force from establishing any settlements here until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but eventually they were outnumbered by settlers from both Pennsylvania and Connecticut. I can’t find any reference to the Oneidas living permanently in Pennsylvania. They are always referred to as living in what became New York.

“In 1754, Connecticut’s Susquehanna Company bought the top one-third of Pennsylvania from the Iroquois Confederation, and began sending settlers into the northeastern region. In 1768, the Iroquois Confederation said it really didn’t mean to sell the

area to Connecticut and they sold the same land again to Pennsylvania. Pennamites, which is what the southern Pennsylvanians were called, decided to drive the Yankees out, and that's when the Pennamite Wars started.”<sup>1</sup>

“Have you ever heard this story, Franky?” I asked.

“Never. There was no mention of this when I getting my Order of the Arrow.”

“These are what are called ‘Inconvenient Truths’,” said Tony. “They don't add to the positive narrative, so they are conveniently left out of our history books. During the Revolutionary War, the fighting between the two colonies stopped, but the British convinced the Iroquois to fight on their side to capture the disputed area of land. The Indians, British soldiers, and colonists who were royalists, moved against the colonists in the Wyoming Valley who supported the revolution, and killed around three hundred Patriots, either in battle, or after they were captured, or as they fled. This is what they call the Wyoming Massacre, and it took place in July of 1778. They did not kill non-combatants; they killed soldiers, but they did it in a brutal way. For the Indians it was payback time. Revenge. After the battle, settlements were attacked and burned by the Indians, and the settlers, fled across the Pocono Mountains back toward Connecticut or south down to the Pennsylvania communities.

“The Decree of Trenton in 1782, a year before the official end of the War with the Treaty of Paris, settled the dispute. It was the Continental Congress of the new nation that heard the case between Connecticut and Pennsylvania. Its judgment was

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<sup>1</sup> <https://wuarhives.home.blog/2023/06/20/a-conflict-forgotten-a-history-unexplored-processing-the-susquehanna-claim-1770-1801-subseries-of-the-gilbert-stuart-mcclintock-collection/>

unanimous, and it was in favor of Pennsylvania. For the next seventeen years, the Pennamites did everything they could to drive out the Yankees and force them to give up their property claims, and the Yankees fought back and petitioned to keep the land they felt they had claims to.”

“How and when did it end?” asked Franky.

“In 1799, the Pennsylvania legislature agreed to let the Yankees stay if they became Pennsylvanians, and in 1801 the Connecticut legislature gave up all claims to the land. Yankee settlers who were in DC during the Revolutionary War had seen the Indians give with one hand and take with another, and new settlers coming into the area, whether they were Yankees or Pennamites, had no reason to be thankful to the any of the Indian tribes that were still in the area. They started building and farming on it and planting orchards, and since there were no treaties to give land to Indian tribes in Pennsylvania, the government sided with the settlers if Indians complained. Gradually, the remaining Indians left for the reservation in New York or in other states. Some went to Canada. More people came from the Yankee colonies in New England, and from New York, New Jersey, and from the southern part of Pennsylvania. Eventually, our ancestors came from Italy, and others came from Ireland, Poland, Russia, Ukraine. I certainly don’t ever remember meeting a Native American, but we have used their names for everything from our rivers and lakes and hills and towns and counties and even our states.”

“This doesn’t square with what I learned about how the Indians were treated in Pennsylvania,” I said. “I remember in one of our high school history classes that Miss McGlauglin said William Penn was fairer in his dealings with the tribes than in other colonies, and that he paid for the land.”

“That’s true,” answered Tony. “In the case of this part of the state, one group of Indians, the Iroquois, got paid twice, once by the Pennsylvanians and one by the Connecticut Yankees. But the Oneida’s aren’t claiming they sold the land to the settlers or that they got paid for it. They’re claiming the settlers agreed that it was their land to use. I don’t know how they plan to prove that. I guess we are just going to have to wait and see.”

“I never gave this a thought before,” interjected Franky, “but while you were explaining how this area was first settled, I wondered how people could come here from Europe and just take people’s land. What gave them the moral right to do that?”

I looked at Tony. He said, “If you think about it a little harder you realize that it wasn’t anything new. People had been taking other peoples’ lands and killing them in the process for as long as we know. The Pilgrims and Quakers and other religious groups made noises about being fare with the natives who were here before they arrived, but, in the end, they were going to settle and make a new life for themselves and their families, and there wasn’t anyone or anything that was going to stand in their way. The natives fought back, but they lost, just like the Etruscans lost to the Romans, the Gauls lost to the Franks, the Anglo Saxons lost to the Normans, and on and on and on. If Poopin needs a moral right to take over Ukraine, he can just ask his buddy, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, to give him a signed piece of paper, just like Pope Alexander VI declared what he called a Line of Demarcation in 1493, dividing up the New World between Portugal and Spain. Do you think the natives in North and South America were consulted about that?”



Borough Hall has a public meeting room that can hold about a hundred people sitting and another fifty standing around the edges without blocking the fire exits. The Borough Council and the Planning Commission were holding a special meeting on the Oneida claim. It was Thursday, the 5<sup>th</sup> of December, a week after the usual date for Planning Commission meetings, but last Thursday was Thanksgiving. We arrived early so we could be sure to get seats. The first five rows were reserved for residents of The Orchard, and Richie Bianchi was already there, making sure only Orchardarians sat in the reserved area.

“Hi, Richie,” I said. “Do you need to see our invitations?”

“You’re all good,” he said with a smile. “Save me a seat.”

Tony, Jenny, Annie, Guy, and I sat in the middle of the third row. “Did you hypnotize Richie or dope the doughnuts?” joked Jenny. “He’s been acting like a normal person, the old Richie, ever since the day after the election, after you fed him doughnuts and coffee on his porch. I feel like he’s going to snap out of his trance and start yelling at everybody again.”

“I asked Nunzo if he put something special in the Dunkin’s on election day, but he claims it was the same, old recipe.”

The room began filling up quickly. By the time the Mayor, the seven members of the Borough Council, and the eleven members of the Planning Commission came into the room, there were at least a couple of hundred people crowded into the meeting chamber. Bob Amore, the Mayor, sat in the middle of the table, flanked by the Council and Planning Commission members. Bob hit his gavel on the block and called the meeting to order.

“Here’s what we know,” said Bob, getting right to the point. He was not a man known to beat around the bush. He took over from his father as president of the First Savings Bank. His grandfather bought the bank in the early ‘30s when it was about to go under. He earned the money to buy the bank from his trucking company that he started during the First World War. He won contracts from the government for hauling uniforms made in the valley to Army camps in New Jersey and New York. The family that started the bank about a hundred years before were Connecticut Yankees. The sale was one of the first signs that the Italians were going to be running the town. Most people in Drake’s Crossing either have a home mortgage or a car loan with Bob’s bank. The Amore family never were ones for showing their wealth, and Bob’s no exception. He lives on The Orchard.

“The Oneida Tribe in New York claim the land along the Lenape River belongs to them as a result of a contract they signed in 1789 with all the settlers who were living in the valley at the time. Elias Drake, the father of Joseph Drake who built the house at the end of The Orchard, was one of the men who signed the contract, according to the Oneidas. As far as we know, there is no verified copy of this contract. The Oneidas claim that Joseph Drake planted trees and started the orchard around 1830 despite the contract, and when the Oneidas objected, he and the other settlers called for help from the state militia and forced the tribe to leave the area. They want the land back, and they say they are prepared to fight for it in the courts. None of this story is substantiated in any documents, but the Oneidas have the money to pay for lawyers. Let me read you a list of the places where they get their money. The tribe owns and runs Turning Stone Resort Casino, LLC, which includes Yellow Brick Road Casino, Point Place Casino, SavOn convenience stores, The Inn at Turning

Stone, PlayOn at Turning Stone, and The Lounge with Caesars Sports. They say they don't want to be paid for the land, if we might think about that alternative. They want the land."

"What the hell are they gonna do with it?" came a question from someone in the back of the room.

"All the land on both sides of the river from where Rushing Brook flows into the Lenape River all the way to the Munsee River, which is mostly old railroad property, they are going to make a nature reserve and restore it to what it was there before settlers arrived. The Orchard is planned to be a casino and hotel that will be connected by bicycle and walking trails and a trolley line to the ski area and the stadium on Falcon Mountain on the other side of the Interstate. Before you ask, I'll tell you what this will mean for Drake's Crossing. Indian lands are not taxable, so we gain no revenue. The casino and hotel will have its own restaurants. If we compare it to what they have at Mohawk Moon down the line, there are restaurants of all kinds from the national chains, from the most expensive to the cheapest. All the pizza places in the Borough will try to relocate inside the casino, but they will be competing with national chains because the rents will be very high."

"Can they really take our land and the homes on that land?" asked Richie. "Our grandparents paid the Drakes for their plots, and your bank gave them the loans to buy the materials they needed to build their houses. Everyone helped everyone with their labor. I'll be damned if I'm going to let someone take it from me, and I don't care who they are."

"As you know Richie," said Bob, "my grandfather was one of them who bought a plot and built a house with the help of his neighbors, and I feel the same way as you. But we're going to

have to accept that there's a chance the courts will rule in their favor, and we need to prepare for that. I talked to the state Attorney General yesterday. I told her we were going to fight it, and said I expected support from Governor Shapiro. She didn't have much to offer. ”

“I made a call to the President this morning.” It was a voice I recognized: Louie Pignozzi. “Not the president we have for the next month, but the one we will have after Joe leaves. I told him what was going on up here, and he said he would put someone on it.”

The Pignozzis were friends of the Luccatellas. Louie was in my class and he hung around with Enzo's son, Gino. He never got involved in the Luccatella's business, but he used the connections to get his building supply business started and to win contracts. He managed to have a variance approved by the Borough so that he could build his gigantic building at the end of The Orchard. Nobody ever understood why he built it where he did. He could have put it anywhere. If he has to move he'll make sure that all of his costs are covered. Why would he call in a favor from Trump for this?

“We'll take all the help we can get, Louie,” said the Mayor. “as long as it's legal.”

There were laughs around the room, but Louie wasn't among those laughing.

“Our best chance to defeat it without going to court is to deny them planning permission for building a casino on the grounds of traffic safety,” said Al Capelli, the head of the Planning Commission.

“They won’t need planning permission if they own the land,” said Pignozzi. “Once it’s in their hands, they don’t have to follow any local regulations. That’s my understanding.”

“That might be so, but I’m going to set up a special committee to work on this. It will report directly to me,” said Bob. “I’ve asked Al to chair the committee, and we will be choosing six-to-ten people to serve on it. If any of you are interested in serving, or you want to suggest someone who you think should be on the committee, send me an email by the middle of next week. Any more questions?”

Tony leaned over to me and said, “I figured Bob would set up a committee. That’s always what he does whenever something needs to be decided. I’ve collected the names from almost everybody on the street to nominate you to be on the committee.”

“Connie would have been the right person for the job,” I answered. “I think you’d be better.”

“If Pignozzi gets on it, which I guess he will, it would just be a pissing match between the two of us.”

I got a call from the mayor on Wednesday of the following week to ask me if I would be willing to serve. I asked him who else had been chosen, and Pignozzi was one of them. I accepted. The first meeting was set for Friday.



It’s the fourth Christmas without Connie. She loved Christmas, especially Christmas Eve. She wanted to live seven more days to celebrate Christmas Eve with us, but her body just would not let her. We buried her on the 22<sup>nd</sup>. I had put up all the house decorations and the tree early that year so that she could enjoy them one last time. I turned all the lights off after everyone had

left the house the day she died. The neighbors and friends brought food during the wake, and that's what I ate during the week and through the holiday and New Year's Day, sometimes alone and sometimes with Ellen and her family. Christmas Day was on Saturday that year, the day that Annamaria always came over to sit in what had been her mother's room that Connie had turned into her study. She read Connie's law books. On Christmas morning at 8 a.m., Annamaria walked into the kitchen while I was still having breakfast. She was holding a wrapped up package, came over to me and gave me a big hug and a kiss on my cheek.

"Can I say Merry Christmas, Grandpa, and give you a present, even though Grandma just died?"

Just like Connie, she always knew how to say things in a way that made you feel like she really cared about what you thought and how you felt. I was pretty sure I knew what was in the package wrapped in paper with Santa Claus in his sled and all his merry reindeer. She had given Connie her present a few days before she died, wrapped in the same paper. It was a scarf she had knitted in blue and yellow, DC High School's colors.

"Grandma and I both enjoyed giving and receiving Christmas presents, so I think she will be very happy that you have one for me. She really liked the present you gave to her. She told me to keep it for her and to use it when the weather got cold."

I opened the package, and, sure enough, they were knitted mittens, one blue and one yellow. "In a couple of weeks the temperature should be down into the teens, so these will be perfect for then. Are you going to go up to Grandma's room to read?"

"I thought I would, if that's okay."

“It’s always okay, honey.”

Like the Christmases for at least the past ten years, there had been no snow that year. It was drizzling rain and it was in the forties. I dressed for the weather and took a walk to the cemetery. This year, we’re back to the old days with snow on the ground and the temperatures in the twenties. It’s Wednesday, the perfect day for Christmas and New Year’s Day when we were kids. School was out for almost two whole weeks. All the families gathered at Annie’s and Guy’s house for Christmas Eve dinner. Franky and Donna were there as well along with their son Michael and his wife Jean with their two children. There were plenty of cooks to make the thirteen courses, symbolizing twelve for the apostles and one for Christ. My favorites have always been the fettuccine with honey and walnuts and spaghetti alle vongole.

Somewhere in the middle of dinner, Jean, who is not of Italian heritage on either side, asked why we ate thirteen courses and not the seven fish courses that Italians ate. All the Italian restaurants in their Brooklyn neighborhood were advertising their Seven Fishes menu, she said. I instinctively looked at Guy, who was looking down at the table and shaking his head. I am constantly reminded of something from *The Sopranos* when I hear things like what Jean just said, when the young gangster from Italy, Furio Giunta, who is a *comorrista* from Napoli, is brought over to beef up Tony’s gang. He always gets angry when guys in the gang make comments about the way things are done in Italy, how the ‘gravy’ tastes or how the pizza is made. In one episode, one of Tony’s crew asks for a *cappuccino* after lunch. Furio is furious. “What the hell are you doing. Don’t you know you only drink a *cappuccino* for breakfast? It’s mostly hot milk.” Guy

was really upset when Furio suddenly disappeared from the show.

“Italians do not celebrate anything called *Festa dei sette pesci* on Christmas Eve,” said Guy in a quiet voice. “It’s an American thing that was started by Italian-Americans in the 1980s. *Vigilia di natale*, Christmas Eve, is not a feast day. It’s a vigil. It is a day of fast and abstinence, so no meat is eaten and there is only one big meal. Every region in Italy has its own food traditions, which depend on what’s available in that region or in the different parts of the region. My family ate lots of different kinds of seafood all year round, but people far inland ate fresh water fish, maybe a trout or a carp, and *baccala*, dried cod. You know, most of the *baccala* we eat in Italy comes from Norway, and has for many, many years.”

“Umbria, where our families are from, is completely landlocked,” explained Annie, “which is why we don’t have a lot of fish dishes.” *Baccala* was pretty much it at Christmas Eve dinner until in the 60s when more fish started coming in from New York.”

“Christmas Eve, Good Friday and Fridays in general were not my favorite days,” chipped in Franky. “I grew up not liking fish of any kind, except tuna fish from a can. I ate spaghetti with tuna fish and tomato sauce on Fridays and the fish-free holidays. Ma and Pa let me stay up until midnight on Friday nights so I could make myself a sub with cold cuts.”

“Franky’s taste buds matured when we went on a driving trip up to Nova Scotia on our honeymoon,” added Donna. “We stopped in Boston and stayed with some friends. We went to a place called Legal Seafood. Franky ordered a hamburger, but he

tasted my grilled salmon. I was lucky to salvage about a quarter of it. For the rest of that trip all he ate was fish and lobster.”

“I think I must have thought all fish tasted like what I ate the first time I tried it,” added Franky, “a fish that had sat in a truck from New York and then in the melting ice at the fish store for another couple of days. Today, we’re lucky. We can get fresh fish from all over the world, like everything we’re eating tonight.”

We ate dinner and then desserts. To Guy’s delight, Michael and Jean brought in his favorite *dolci di napolitani*, *sfogliatelle*, which they bought at a bakery in Brooklyn near the brownstone where they live. We talked about everything except politics and Indian tribes. Then we opened Christmas presents which everyone had brought with them and placed under Annie’s and Guy’s tree. When it was time, we all went to midnight mass and took up two pews in the church. It was a cold night. I wore my yellow and blue scarf and my one yellow and one blue mitten, which warmed my heart, soul, and body. I nodded off during the sermon, and neither Ellen on one side nor Annamaria on the other woke me up until the sermon was over.



President Jimmy Carter died on the 29th of December, three months into his one hundredth year. He was the first president I voted for when he ran against Gerald Ford. It was a tough choice. I liked both of them, Carter mostly because he was a Democrat and a fly fisherman, and Ford because he had a lot of character and played football in college. I was a prisoner in Vietnam when Nixon ran against Humphrey. I was never sure if I would have voted in that election. I knew I would never vote for Nixon after what he did after he lost to Kennedy, acting like a sore loser. Humphrey was just going to do what Johnson had

been doing. When Nixon ran again in '72, I couldn't vote for him or McGovern. McGovern made all of us who had to fight in Vietnam feel like we were the bad guys, and the draft dodgers were the ones who should be honored. Nixon didn't need my vote. He carried forty-nine states.

Then everything began to fall apart for Nixon. Agnew had to resign, which is when Ford came in. He was the House Minority Leader and Nixon figured he would be voted in by the Senate and the House, which were controlled by the Democrats at the time. When Ford took over after Nixon resigned, he brought in Nelson Rockefeller as his VP. I can't remember why he didn't run with Rockefeller against Carter, choosing Bob Dole instead. Carter had Fritz Mondale as his running mate, someone I never had any feelings about one way or another.

There just were things about Jimmy Carter that I liked. I voted for him, but his presidency was pretty much of a disaster. Interest rates went through the roof, which made life difficult for everyone. Unemployment rates were high. The revolution in Iran caused gas prices to spike again, even higher than in '73'. The biggest problem for Carter was the taking of American hostages in Iran in November of 1979, a year away from the next presidential election. A failed attempt to rescue the hostages ended with the deaths of eight American servicemen, making matters even worse. The hostages weren't released until the day Ronald Reagan was inaugurated, the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 1981, after he defeated Carter in another Republican landslide victory.

What Jimmy Carter did after his time as president was over made up in spades for what he didn't or couldn't do while he was in office.



“Today’s the big day for Donny,” said Tony as soon as I answered my phone. It was the 6<sup>th</sup> of January, the day that a joint session of Congress declares the winner of the presidential election. It is the Vice President who, in his or her role as President of the Senate, formally presides over the receiving and counting of electoral ballots, and declares the winner when all the ballots are counted. That was Mike Pence’s job four years before when Joe Biden beat Donald Trump by over seven million popular votes and 306 to 232 electoral votes. It was not close. That was when then-president Trump incited his rabble to attack the Capitol with chants of “Stop the steal”. That was when all the senators and representatives and the Vice President had to run for their lives when the mob broke through the thin line of security and ran amok through the rotunda, into the Senate chambers, down the halls and into the private offices of the senators and members of Congress.

For four hours, the mob wreaked havoc while President Trump sat in the White House watching it all on TV on his favorite channel, Fox News. He tweeted, he made phone calls, he continued to claim that the election was stolen from him, and he did nothing to stop the rioters. He sent no additional law enforcement. He did not call his Secretary of Defense. He did not call his Attorney General or the Secretary of Homeland Security. He did not order the mob to stop what they were doing and go home. He still claims to this day that he did not lose. He never loses.

“What time does it start?”

“Around noon. The vote counting starts around one. Franky is driving down and picking up the doughnuts.”

“I’ll come over at 11.30,” I said, and we hung up.

Tony and Jenny have the super big screen in their living room. Watching it, you feel like you're in the audience during a talk show, or you're sitting on a stool in Seinfeld's kitchen or in a booth at Monk's Café with Elaine, George, Kramer, and Jerry. I could hear that CNN was on as soon as I opened the back door and walked into Tony's and Jenny's kitchen. A 42-inch screen covered the wall next to the kitchen table which was once decorated with antique dinner plates when the Tedescos lived here. Lenora and Elmo Tedesco were a little older than Ma and Pa, and didn't have any children. I helped them with chores around the house and sat at their kitchen table eating Lenora's great blueberry and apple pies.

"They've been filling up the airtime all morning," said Jenny. "They're making a big thing about the fact that no one is outside the Capitol. They keep juxtaposing pictures of what it looked like four years ago and how it looks today. Wait and see when it's time. Kamala is going to do everything she can to act professionally."

I have vivid memories of things I've seen on television. I can see a mushroom cloud from an atomic bomb test on our first TV, a black and white model with a small screen. I can see JFK being shot while he rode with his wife, Jackie, through the streets of Dallas, and I can see his funeral procession with the riderless horse. I can see Richard Nixon boarding the presidential helicopter taking him from the White House after he resigned, extending both hands above his head and each hand giving the V for victory sign, his trademark. I can see American embassy staff in South Vietnam being lifted off the roof of the embassy in a helicopter after Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong. I can see an airplane crashing into the second World Trade Center building after I had rushed to the TV in the

police station when I heard that a plane had crashed into the first tower. And I can see Americans attacking the nation's Capitol, chasing Members of Congress out of their chambers to prevent them from certifying the presidential election victory of Joe Biden.

Today's coverage of the joint session of Congress started with a view of the Statuary Hall inside the Capitol. Senators and congressmen filed into the chamber of the House of Representatives where the joint session of Congress would take place. Then came people carrying wooden boxes holding the electoral votes. Kamala Harris as President of the Senate, and Mike Johnson as Speaker of the House, were at the top of the podium. Harris called the House to order. She explained what would happen. The 'Tellers' would count the votes, she said. There are four 'Tellers', two from the Senate and two from the House, a Republican and a Democrat from each house. The Tellers gave the Electoral vote count for President and Vice President for each state. Not surprisingly, the number of votes for President and Vice President were the same in each state.

"Can you imagine if Trump had to have Tim Walz as his VP?" said Tony.

"Didn't John Adams, the second President, have to have Jefferson as his VP when he won the election in 1796?" asked Jenny. "Didn't Adams run against Jefferson with Thomas Pinckney as his choice for VP?"

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“That was when Adams was running for a second term,” answered Tony. “Adams had been Vice President under Washington for two terms, 1789 to 1797. He won the election in 1796, beating Jefferson by a small margin, and Jefferson then became his Vice President. Back then, the Vice President was the person who got the second most number of votes. Electors cast two votes without distinguishing which one was for President and which one was for Vice President. Adams was a Federalist, who wanted a strong central government and close relations to Great Britain, and Jefferson was a Democratic-Republican, who wanted the states to be strong the central government weak. Luckily for Jefferson, when they ran against each other the second time, in 1800, Adams came in third. Burr was also a Democratic-Republican, and when the votes were tallied, he and Jefferson had gotten the same number. There had to be a vote in the House, which Jefferson finally won. In 1804, Congress fixed the problem with the Twelfth Amendment, which specified that one of the two votes per Elector was for President and the other was for Vice President.”

When all the votes were read out, Harris gave the total: 312 to Trump and 226 for herself. Then she gave the same numbers for Vance and Walz. She was calm and collected. “Thank you very much,” she said. She shook Mike Johnson’s hand. Then she declared the joint session resolved and walked out of the chamber, shaking hands with well-wishers along the way. No muss; no fuss. The camera focused on J.D. Vance, in the chamber as a Senator, with Republican Senators and House members posing with him in photos and selfies for their constituents. I hadn’t paid any attention to him during the election, but as I watched him now, there was something about him that I just did not like.



Inauguration Day. My only memory from Joe Biden's inauguration four years ago is Bernie Sanders sitting on a folding chair, all on his own, wearing a face mask protection against COVID, a winter coat, and a pair of knitted mittens. The mittens were patterned in black, white and brown and oversized. Bernie had his arms folded in front of his chest, like he was holding something under his arms to keep it warm. One leg was dangled over the other. His mask was askew. His bald head was bare. The temperature was around freezing that day in DC, not really that cold, especially for someone who had lived in Vermont for fifty-six years up to the point he was captured on film on the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2021. He looked angry. Was he thinking, "It should'a been me!?" No, Bernie, it should'n't'a been you. You would have gotten slaughtered. I don't expect he will be in the audience on this day, but he might surprise us.

Today, Monday, the 20<sup>th</sup> of January 2025, temperatures in DC are predicted to be in the low twenties or upper teens. On Sunday, the Trump inauguration team announced that the event was being moved into the Capitol's Rotunda because the incoming president was concerned that his supporters would freeze their fannies off if they were sitting and their toes if they were standing. Can't have that. And if it's too cold, people might stay home and watch the spectacle on TV, like we are going to do, and not fill up the space around the Capitol. Empty space would not be good for his image, and he would have to waste precious time explaining that there were more people there than the cameras recording the scene supposedly captured because the images were retouched before they reached the public, or, maybe, someone spread a dust over the crowd that made them invisible to cameras when they could be seen clearly by his own naked eye.

So, it was going to be inside, in the Rotunda, where his hoodlums first breached the barricades on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, before they spread like sewer ooze throughout the building.

It's Martin Luther King Day, a federal holiday, so everyone was home from school and work. The holiday is now celebrated in all fifty states, but I remember when it wasn't. The NFL had threatened in 1990 to move Super Bowl XXVII in 1993 from Phoenix if Arizona did not vote in favor of recognizing the holiday. Arizona voters finally did, but it was after the NFL had decided to move the game between the Buffalo Bills and the Dallas Cowboys to the Rose Bowl in Pasadena. South Carolina was the last state to approve it as a paid holiday for state employees. Tony said that that made sense because South Carolina was the center of the slave trade and the Confederate state with the largest number of slaves as a percent of total population. Schools and most businesses are closed here today because of the holiday, not because of the inauguration, so my three grandchildren, Annamaria, Nicky, and Joey, and their parents, Ellen and Mike, and Carmy and Mary, are joining me at my place to watch the show in my living room.

By the time we were all in the room before noon and I turned on the TV, the program had already gotten to JD Vance being sworn in by Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Kavanaugh was a Trump pick in 2018. Then, a singer came out from the back of the podium. Everyone but me seemed to know who Carrie Underwood was. Something was wrong with the accompanying music for her rendition of America the Beautiful, one of my favorite songs. After a few minutes of people trying to fix the problem, she decided to do it *a cappella*, and she did it really well. We all sang along. Then it was Trump's turn to be sworn in, and Chief Justice John Roberts administered the oath. That was

when I first noticed Melania impersonating Zorro. She had on a Zorro hat pulled down to her eyebrows. Her heavy eye makeup and the shade the hat brought on her face made it look like she was wearing a Zorro mask. After the oath, when her husband tried to kiss her, he had to awkwardly duck under the very wide brim. She also had on a dark blue overcoat, a white scarf, and black gloves.

“Didn’t anyone tell her she didn’t have to dress for the cold?” said Ellen.

“She’s covering up her dress,” suggested Mary. “She doesn’t want the fashion press to have an hour watching her standing still while they think up bad things to say about her, and then she wouldn’t be able to wear the *sombrero Cordobés*. That’s a traditional hat from the city of Cordoba in Spain. I learned that in high school Spanish class.”

After a the Naval Academy Glee Club sang The Battle Hymn of the Republic, it was time for the president to deliver his inaugural address.

“The Golden Age of America begins right now,” was his opening line. “From this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world. We will be the envy of every nation, and we will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer during every single day of the Trump administration. I will, very simply, put America first.” During his thirty-minute speech, he kept repeating this message in different ways. With President Biden and Vice President Harris sitting directly behind him to his left, he said, “Our government confronts a crisis of trust (because) a radical and corrupt establishment has extracted power and wealth from our citizens,

while the pillars of our society lay broken and seemingly in complete disrepair. We now have a government that cannot manage even a simple crisis at home, while at the same time stumbling into a continuing catalog of catastrophic events abroad. It fails to protect our magnificent law-abiding American citizens but provides sanctuary and protection for dangerous criminals, many from prisons and mental institutions that have illegally entered our country from all over the world.” Joe and Kamala were deadpan while the Trumpeters cheered.

I looked at Annamaria, Nicky, and Joey. They were watching closely and listening intently. Did their teachers tell them they were going to have to answer questions on a test about what the president said. This didn't sound like other inaugural addresses I had heard in my lifetime. Jimmy Carter's has stuck with me. He started by thanking Gerry Ford for all he had done to heal our country. He quoted his high school teacher who said, “We must adjust to changing times and still hold on to unchanging principles.” I've always remembered that quote. He had his hand on the first Bible used in the inauguration of George Washington in 1789, and he quoted from the Bible. He said he didn't have a new dream for the country, but asked for fresh faith in the old dream. Another thing he said has stayed with me: “...the best way to enhance freedom in other lands is to demonstrate here that our democratic system is worthy of emulation.” Trump mentioned the word ‘democracy’ only once, when he said, “My recent election is a mandate to completely and totally reverse a horrible betrayal and all of these many betrayals that have taken place and to give the people back their faith, their wealth, their democracy, and indeed, their freedom.”

All through his speech he kept saying he was putting America first, that America's decline was over, that he was going to

make America rich, respected, and great again. That was why God saved him when he was shot at, he said, to make American great again. Why didn't God save the person who was killed by the gunman or the person who was injured. I think Trump should have at least mentioned these people. He said he was declaring a national emergency at our border with Mexico, he was going to defeat inflation, he was going to make America a manufacturing nation again, that he was canceling everything to do with climate control and stopping the mandate for electric vehicles. It seemed like an odd time to tell us that he was changing the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America, and Mount Danali back to Mount McKinley, but that's what he did.

There was only a quick mention of something that I think most people might have missed. He said the United States will once again consider itself a growing nation, one that increases our wealth and expands its territory. Maybe that was the connection to President William McKinley, why he was making such a big thing about changing the name of what had been Mount McKinley back to that name. Tony said McKinley was the president during the height of the Gilded Age, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the robber barons controlled both the businesses and the government. Trump used 'Golden Age' at the start of his speech. Maybe he thought 'Gilded Age' wouldn't be a term people would understand, or that it was too poetic. The Gilded Age is when the United States took over Hawaii after the Spanish American War, and bought the Philippines, Guam, and Puerto Rico. McKinley was also the tariff president. His motto was "Prosperity at Home, Prestige Abroad". Sounds a lot like what Trump was repeating over and over again during his speech. It ended badly for McKinley. He was assassinated six months after he was re-elected for a second term.

“Shall we listen to what the different channels have to say about his speech,” asked Ellen?

“Why don’t we turn off the TV and talk about what we think about the speech,” suggested Mary. That’s what we did as we ate coldcut sandwiches on bread Ellen had baked this morning.

“America must have been a very different country when you were growing up, Grandpa,” said Annamaria. “I mean when you and Uncle Tony, Aunt Jenny, Aunt Annie, and Uncle Guy were growing up.”

“It was,” I said, “just like it was different for us than it was for our parents. They had the stock market crash, the Great Depression, the Second World War. We had Kennedy’s assassination, Vietnam, Nixon resigning. Your parents had the Internet, 911, the Middle East wars.”

“Then came the first non-white President and the laws that changed everything,” interjected Mike. If anyone in the family could have voted for Trump, it would have been Mike. But he didn’t. He manages one of the many Grady Supermarkets in the county. His grandfather had been a miner, one of the last. His father worked for DC’s Department of Public Works on the sanitation trucks. He had joined the Army out of high school and done two tours in Iraq. He and Ellen had decided they were going to get married when they were in grade school together.

“We were going to move very quickly from being a country run for and by white, male, straight Christians to a country that was going to be run for and by anybody but white, male, straight Christians. Kamala Harris represented everything that Trump and his supporters were against. And this is the America that you have grown up in. When you heard the President say

that he was going to make America great again, what he was saying was that America was going to return to a country run for and by white, male, straight Christians.”

“But white, male, straight Christians don’t make up the majority of people living in America, do they?” said Joey. “It’s about fifty-fifty for men and women, and thirty-five percent are black and hispanic. White males are only thirty-one percent. We just learned that in social studies.”

“But over sixty percent of adults in America identify as Christian,” said Mike. “That’s a pretty big number.”

“Aren’t there blacks and Jews and women and maybe even gay black women who are Republicans?” said Nicky.

“A lot of women, blacks, hispanics, Jews, and maybe even Muslims voted for Trump in this election,” said Carmy. “There’s something that they felt wasn’t right with where the country was headed. I felt it too, but I don’t like where Trump and his gang want to take it.”

“What would Benjamin Franklin think about what’s going on now?” I said. “Would he be pulling the alarm bell ropes, or would he be looking for ways to balance the concerns of both sides.”

“Didn’t he say something like ‘We should hang together or else we will all hang separately?’” said Mary. “I don’t think he would be a supporter of either the MAGA crowd or the Bernie backers.”

“Why wasn’t he elected President?” asked Joey.

“He died just after Washington started his first term,” answered Annamaria. “He was eighty-four.”



## CHAPTER 3

### JANUARY 21<sup>ST</sup> TO SPRING

**AS WE PLANNED**, the day after the inauguration, Tony, Franky, and I were walking along the old Erie-Lackawanna right-of-way that separates the Orchard from the river. Franky picked us up in his Outback and we parked at the lumberyard. We were going to walk all the way to the city on the west side of the river, and back on the east side to get a better feeling for what an Oneida reservation would feel like to a visitor. It's two hours each way. But now that we were out here, we weren't at all sure we would make it to the city. It was really, really cold, ten degrees Fahrenheit and dropping by the hour. It was ten in the morning, and we had only been walking for ten minutes, but we were so cold that we hadn't been able talk.

"Maybe we should take the bus back after we have one or two Texas wieners at Coney Island," I said.

"If we make it that far," answered Franky. "I can already feel my toes freezing up."

"You have to promise me that if I drop dead you won't eat me like they did on the failed polar expeditions," joked Tony.

"I vote that we take this walk on a day when we won't have to leave or eat our dead companions," said Franky. "Let's drive to town."

"Good idea," said Tony.

I just nodded my agreement and we headed back to Franky's car. As we got about two blocks away from the center of town, traffic came to a dead stop. I got out and looked up the empty lane and saw that there was a fire truck across the road blocking traffic in both directions. The first thing I thought of was Carmy's shop and Sal and Rene's restaurant, which are on the corner. "Park the car, Franky!" I said. "I'm going up to see what's going on."

Running hasn't been an option for me for at least fifteen years, so I walked as fast as my arthritic knees and hips would carry me. When I got to the corner where the fire truck was standing, I could see that the window in the door to the restaurant was broken, and one of the doors to a bay in Carmy's shop was scorched. Carmy, Sal, and Rene were standing outside talking to Gail. What the hell had happened! Carmy saw me first, and came to me. I repeated to him what I just said to myself: "What the hell happened?"

"Two fire bombs. About half an hour ago. We got it on the security cameras. A car pulled in, two guys with face masks on jumped out, lit the bombs, threw them, jumped back into the car, and it sped away."

"Was anybody hurt?"

"No. The sprinklers went off in the entrance of the restaurant, so the damage is limited. The fire bomb didn't break the security glass on the doors, and I put it out in a couple of minutes."

Gail, Sal, and Rene had joined us. "Are you two okay?" I asked.

"We're fine, just pissed off," answered Sal.

“We found the car,” said Gail. “It’s registered to an elderly woman in town, Gina Costanzi, who didn’t know it was stolen. We have the car at the station and we are going through it with a fine tooth comb.”

“It’s Ricky Luccatella,” I said. “He wants to have something to show his son when he comes home tomorrow, when they drive their motorcade through town with Eedo sitting on the back of his grandfather’s Caddy convertible waving to the crowds who will be cheering for him.”

“What’s Luccatella got against us?” asked Rene, just as Tony and Franky had arrived. “Uncle Tony, do you know why the Luccatella’s would want to do something like this?”

“We’ll talk about it tonight at home,” answered Tony, “not out here.”

Gail looked at me. “The Luccatellas have been hurting people for a long time in this town, Gail,” I said, “and it won’t stop until they’re all gone.”



We were all at Annie and Guy’s place, including Franky and Donna. This was his Nonno and Nonna Arcobaleno’s home. Annie and Guy moved in when they were first married, just after Franky’s Nonna Rosa died, and they never left. Sal and Rene moved into the other side shortly after they were married, like Ellen and Mike moved in next to Connie and me. Our grandparents did a good job planning for our futures. All the kids were here as well. We figured they needed to know the full story because what was going to happen, whatever it was, would affect them as well. Sal and Rene had closed the restaurant, so they brought home the food that they had already prepared for the

day's meals before the fire. I thought of the evening of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, when Annie and Guy closed the restaurant and brought lasagna, chicken cacciatore, and pizzas they had made for lunch over to Ma's. We sat in the parlor and watched CNN. Now we were eating *cannelloni di ricotta e spinaci, melanzane ripiene di carne al pomodoro*, and pizzas, and getting ready to talk about our own crisis.

"We all have part of the story that brought our families together," said Tony after we had eaten and cleaned up. "The parts we haven't told you kids is the reason we are here tonight. Annie, you have the whole story, so tell it to us."

"Our pa's father, Antonio Malatesta, who Tony is named after, came to the Orchard in 1914. He and his wife Regina had two children when they came, Ericco and Costanza. Ericco is our father. Everyone called him Ricco. Zia Costanza died when she was only fifteen, so we never met her. Nonno Antonio went to work in the mines, like all the other men on the Orchard. Nonna Regina was a Natale, and she had three brothers already living on the Orchard. Nonno Tonio and Nonna Gina built a house with the help of the other families on the street, just like Nicky's and Franky's grandparents built theirs. That was just after the First World War. A few years later, Adriano Luccatella came to DC, and our lives were changed forever. Adriano was Enzo and Eduardo's father. Eduardo was called Eddie, and he had a son named Ricardo, who is called Ricky. Ricky was in Aunt Connie's class. Ricky's son's real name is Eduardo, like his grandfather's, but he is called Eedo. He's the one who went to jail for attacking the Capitol, and who was just pardoned by Trump. Enzo was called Lucca. He also had a son, whose name was Genaro. Everyone called him Gino. He was in the same class as Nicky and Tony. He

moved away from DC with his mother after Lucca was murdered in 1965.

“Adriano Luccatella was sent to America by the Benito Mussolini. Do you know who he was?”

Carmy’s son Nicky said, “He was the dictator of Italy and an ally of Hitler.”

“Yes,” said Annie. “Luccatella was sent by Mussolini to America to spy on Italians living here and to try to convince them to return to Italy and join the army. He had money. Nobody knew where it came from because he didn’t have a job, but he paid people to work for him. Anyone who stood up to Luccatella or said anything negative about Mussolini was harassed or worse. Right from the start, Adriano started to make trouble for Nonno Tonio because of his name, Malatesta. There was an Italian socialist named Errico Malatesta who an anti-fascist. Luccatella said that Nonno Tonio was related to him and sympathize with him, and as proof, he said that he named his son Errico. It didn’t matter what Nonno Tonio said, Luccatella had it in for him and the whole family. Luccatella’s sons made life difficult for Pa in school, and for Nonna and Zia.

“The Luccatella boys were not drafted because their father was put in jail and then was under house arrest for being a fascist. When Pa was away, Lucca made passes at Ma, and when she wouldn’t have any of it, he started to spread lies about her. People who worked for Lucca sent letters to Pa saying bad things about Ma, and Pa believed them. They ruined our parents’ marriage, and then Pa signed up to go to Korea to fight in the Korean War and was killed. I was old enough then to see all of this. Ma never talked to me about it, but I heard her talking to Nonno Tonio and Nonna Rosa, and also to Nicky’s Ma, Zia Gina. They were

very good friends. I hated Lucca and his entire family. I made a promise to myself to one day get even with him for what he did to our family. Tony and our brother Charlie never knew anything about this, but I did tell Aunt Connie.

“In 1965, I was working as a waitress in a restaurant that was owned by Lucca. By then he was the head of a mafia gang, part of a bigger gang based in New York. Ma tried to convince me not to take the job, but I told her I could make good money because it was the best restaurant in town. My real reason was to be close to Lucca. He handed me a gift when I found out that he was talking to the FBI. I suspected it because of people he was meeting, but one day, Guy saw him fixing a wire on a tape recorder when he came out of a stall in the men’s room at the restaurant. Aunt Connie helped me to get photos of him with an FBI agent, and to make one of those cut-out letter letters that we sent to the head of the New York gang. To make a long story short, Lucca got what was coming to him.”

“Gee, Aunt Annie,” said Annamaria, “this sounds like it’s straight out of the movie *The Godfather*.”

“It does, doesn’t it,” I said. “When your Aunt Connie told me this story I had to ask her if she was making it up.”

“She wasn’t,” interjected Guy. “When I found out what was going on, I wanted to get Annie on a plane to Italy as soon as I could, but she wouldn’t leave until it was finished.”

“We know who pulled the trigger,” said Tony. “I saw everything except the actual shooting from where we were living at the time, down on the flats. Lucca’s gang had a fenced-in place they used for doing whatever illegal things they were doing. Lucca went in with other members of his gang and a woman, but he never came out. They set the place on fire. The FBI eventually

found the bullet that killed Lucca. Fifteen years after the killing, the person who did it, the woman, came back to DC and was in a car accident with one of Lucca's gang who had been in on the killing. He died. We put her on trial for the murder, but there wasn't enough evidence to convict her. She disappeared after that."

"Not totally," said Annie softly. "Connie and I sent her cookies every Christmas. Connie had her address from the trial."

"What?" cried Tony. "Why?"

"For being the revenging angel. We sent her a tin of cookies from a post office in New Jersey, just on the other side of the Delaware Water Gap. No return address. Packed with rubber gloves."

"When you and Connie took your annual Christmas shopping trip to the discount mall?" guessed Guy.

"Yes. Our little secret."

"So you know where she lives," Tony said. "Do you have any other information about her? Could she have confessed to somebody on her deathbed and it got back to Ricky. But I don't see how she could have connected it to you or anyone in our family."

"Ricky came after me, remember," I said. "So there's something more that we don't know. "

"Maybe since your pa took over ownership of the properties that Lucca claimed he owned, they thought he had something to do with it," guessed Franky.

"I think we are going to have to visit Ginger and find out," said Annie.

Between the cold weather and snow, visits to doctors, baby sitting sick grandchildren, and a long list of other reasons, Franky, Tony, and I did not take our walk from the lumberyard to the city along the railroad right-of-way until the Monday of President's Day Weekend, the 17<sup>th</sup> of February. A steel grey sky blended with the off-color white snow that was giving off a mist, like the steam that comes off wet wool when you come into a warm room from the damp cold. It was a few degrees above freezing, although it felt warmer in comparison to the low temperatures we had experienced in January.

"Can you believe how much trouble the cheesehead in chief has caused in just four weeks!" said Franky after we had been walking for a few minutes.

"He hasn't done anything we didn't expect him to do, has he?" answered Tony. "He freed the patriots, shut down all the woke agencies, and called his buddy Putin to pick up where they left off four years ago, dividing up the world pie into three pieces. They've decided to throw Zelensky under the bus and stop the fighting. Together, they'll squeeze the Ukrainians until they elect a leader who will hand the country over to both of them. Mr. High IQ thinks he is going to get the deal of his life from Poopin, but he's going to find that China already has all of Russia's minerals and the U.S. is going to get the leftovers, if anything."

"He told Europe over the weekend that they weren't going to sit at the negotiating table with Russia," I added. "I'm surprised he even invited Zelensky."

"He didn't," corrected Tony. "He didn't invite Ukraine to sit at the table with Russia and the U.S. in Saudi Arabia of all places. It's not a negotiation with Russia, it's a discussion of the deal between the U.S. and Russia for the U.S. stopping all support for

Ukraine. They're probably going to talk about pulling all U.S. troops out of Europe as well. That will make things easier when Mr. Black Belt starts his karate chopping. Killing American soldiers would make things very complicated."

"I don't think Putin would have started the war if he thought Biden or any Democrat would get elected two years later," offered Franky. "Tony's conspiracy theory attitude has rubbed off on me."

"I'll bet there are phone records of those two guys talking at least once a week during the past four years," said Tony. "I'm sure Putin got a real tongue lashing when Donny lost. I guess the money it cost to get the Russian thugs to frame Baldwin came out of Putin's pocket, as a sort of peace offering. Baldwin finally beat the rap after it put a huge dent in his career, but neither he nor anyone else stepped up to make Trump look like the fool that he is every Saturday night leading up to this election. Now they're at it again, but Donny can laugh along with them. Putin did everything to get back in the Trumpenheimer's good graces by making life miserable for Joe and the Europeans. Cooking up an attack on Ukraine bears all the traces of KGB chessboard thinking. It had to last until Donny was back in the Oval Room chair where he would direct all the deals to be made for as long as he can hold on to it. Putting the uppity Europeans, with what he calls their phony union and loser leaders, into their place was top of the agenda. And then to get the home boys in Gaza to attack Israel. That was another brilliant KGB stroke. Look at what the Palestinians have to show for that idiotic move. Gaza's a pile of rubble. I bet some of the Hamas leaders are going to start distancing themselves from it if there are any left after the bombing stops."

“I remember you said that Trump had gotten Putin to agree to ally with the U.S. against China in return for the U.S. giving Europe to Putin,” I said, “but how does that square with China and Russia making deals during the past couple of years? Hasn’t China been buying up all of Russia’s oil and gas and sending ammunition to them? You said they are mining the minerals in the occupied area of Ukraine.”

“Russia was desperate,” replied Tony. “ Putin thought he had Europe by the balls by timing his invasion to coincide with Germany closing its last nuclear plants. But then the Ukrainians blew up the Russian’s natural gas pipeline. Putin didn’t have a choice. He had to turn to China, and India pitched in as well. China was hedging its bets in case Russia failed to get Trump elected again. Xi knew he was taking a chance to have himself photographed with Putin, and maybe he thought the Democrats were smarter than they were. When they dumped Joe—who could have won—and pushed Kamala—who had no chance of winning—you could see Xi trying to pivot into being Europe’s best friend. We’ll see how that turns out.”

“I think Europe should get over World War II and stand on its own two feet,” said Franky. “They act like grade schoolers who have to ask the teacher for permission to go to the bathroom, and instead of going a couple of rounds in the schoolyard with the class bully, they run to the teacher and complain.”

“The U.S., Soviet Union, and the UK are the reasons Europe hasn’t grown up,” said Tony.

“What do you mean?” challenged Franky.

“They’re the ones who won the war in Europe, of course with help from armies from UK Commonwealth countries and

resistance fighters from the countries Germany defeated, especially Poland and France. Germany and Italy lost the war in Europe. Finland lost twice, once to the Soviets and then to Germany. France, Belgium, The Netherlands, Luxembourg, Denmark, and Norway were defeated, occupied, and had to be liberated. Austria welcomed Hitler, so it was dumped into a holding bin after the War. Spain and Portugal were clearly in Hitler's court, while Sweden and Switzerland managed to be neutral by helping both sides. Ireland stewed. The UK held on until Japan pushed America over the edge with Pearl Harbor. All the countries in Europe on both sides suffered severe damage and enormous losses of lives. The entire continent was devastated.

“Churchill knew his country was inches away from being conquered, but when the U.S. came in, he acted like he was the real leader of the Allies. With Roosevelt suffering from ailments that he tried his best to keep from being visible, Churchill made his own deals with Stalin. One of those deals is what we are living with to this day, the spheres of influence. Churchill gave Stalin Eastern Europe, and Stalin agreed to keep his grubby hands off Western Europe. It's all in Churchill's memoirs. One of Roosevelt's Cabinet members, Henry Stimson, the only Republican, pushed Roosevelt for making an agreement with Stalin to recognize each country's respective orbits, as he called it. Roosevelt didn't bite. Stalin tried to get Truman to the table on the “spheres” idea. He didn't agree either. Then came Henry A. Wallace, who had been Roosevelt's Vice President in his third term, but the conservative wing of the Democratic Party would not support him in 1944, and chose Harry Truman instead. Wallace ran for President in 1948 as the leader of the Progressive Party, and pushed for a friendly policy toward the Soviet Union. He said the United States should recognize it has no more business in the

political affairs of Eastern Europe than the Soviet Union has in the political affairs of Latin America, Europe, or the United States. This view is what got him fired by Truman in 1946 after he had been given the job of Secretary of Commerce. So there is nothing new about what Trump started doing in his first term and what he has picked up again now. The main difference is that he put his entire Cabinet on his page as a condition for appointing them.”

“Europe has suffered enough of Russia,” said Franky, “and it should freeze it out completely. It could start by sending back all the Russian fifth columnists who have taken up residence under the guise of being Russian dissidents. It should close off all trade and travel to and from Russia. Russians can sun bathe on the beaches of the Black Sea that they killed Ukrainians to occupy, and can stay in hotels in Crimea that they stole without any objections by the U.S. or Europe.”

“I’ll go one step further,” said Tony. “Europe should invade Kaliningrad and say it is keeping it as long as there are Russian troops in any square centimeter of Ukraine’s territory.”

“Where’s Callingard or whatever it’s called?” I asked. The answer was left hanging. By now, we had reached the overpass from the main road connecting DC across the river to Elmdale and then up to the mountain. The slope was full of skiers. This part of the river was a favorite for fishermen, including me. It had fast water skirting around deep pools. I caught one of my best browns here last season. It would take a few more months before the pools were ice-free and a new batch of trout had been delivered to the river.

“This area along the river is really beautiful,” I said.

“It probably wouldn’t still be here in semi-pristine shape if oil hadn’t been discovered when it was and the coal mines closed,” suggested Franky.

“It shows how little the industrialists thought about rivers when this country started to grow,” said Tony. “All the shit was dumped into them, and the railroads were built along the banks.”

“It’s not just in America,” offered Franky. “It’s the same all over the world.” Franky would know. He and Donna and their kids traveled all over the world. Even in a small city in a depressed region like ours, a heart surgeon can earn a lot of money. Connie and I went to Disney World a few times with the kids, and to Montreal once. Tony and Jenny rented a camper two or three times and drove to the Grand Canyon once and Yellowstone another time.

“How the hell did the Oneidas find this place?” I wondered out loud. “It could be a terrific nature reserve. All the land along the river on both sides has nothing on it except the traces of old tracks and train yards. There’s still a working yard that Conrail is using a little further up, but they should be able to get rid of it.”

“I don’t think the Oneidas came up with the idea themselves,” said Tony, “and I don’t think it’s going to be much of a nature reserve when the final plans are drawn up.”

Franky and I both stared at Tony.

“What do you mean?” asked Franky.

“I have a strong feeling that both the Luccatellas and Pignozzi are behind it,” answered Tony. “It’s the perfect opportunity for Pignozzi to realize his dream of being a big time property developer, and having a gambling casino in their own home town is just too good to be true for the small-time Luccatella

crooks. It took brains to come up with the idea of getting an Indian tribe into the picture, so they must have had some outside help with that part. None of them are smart enough to figure that one out on their own. They figured they couldn't use the Mohegans because they are going to be the competition, at least until one or the other gets bought out or is forced to sell."

We let Tony's words sink in, and then started walking again. I tried to put the pieces together in my head. Whoever was behind this casino and reservation idea could do everything they want to do without bothering with The Orchard and forcing us from our homes. The only thing on our side of the river is Pignozzi's place, but even including that doesn't mean all of The Orchard has to become part of it. Maybe the Luccatellas have decided this is their revenge for us helping to eliminate Lucca sixty years ago and making a pile of money at the same time. During the rest of the walk we talked about the train trips we took when we were kids, the awful smells coming from the river when sulfur was flushed from the mines, and stinking, burning culm dumps up and down the line.



We walked into the Coney Island Texas Lunch restaurant at around 11.30 a.m. Connie and I used to come here with the kids when they were small. It was always a major clean-up job after we ate here, but it was so much fun watching Carmy and Ellen dig into the wieners. We found an empty booth and slid in. A waitress came by with menus in one hand and three coffee cups in another. I thought of our regular breakfast club. Is there a special school where everyone who works in places like these goes to train?

“Coffee?” our waitress asked as she handed each of us a menu. We all nodded yes as we took the menus. She didn’t offer to tell us her name. *“Hi, I’m Lori and I will be your waitperson. Do you want to hear the specials?”* Nothing of that sort came from our solidly built waitress. “I’ll be back with the coffee,” she said. I looked at the menu. I immediately thought of Saturday Night Live with John Belushi as Pete Dionisopoulos at the Olympia Café. They served only cheeseburgers no matter what you asked for, and no Coke, just Pepsi. On the menu was a Texas wiener and a hamburger. You could get chili, cheese, or gravy, or any combination of them. Onion rings or French fries. Rice pudding or pie for dessert.

“I’m going with two wieners with the works,” said Franky. “I have to save room for a piece of their apple pie.”

“I think I’ll do one fully loaded wiener and a rice pudding,” said Tony.

“I’ll skip the gravy,” I said. “I’ll see how I feel about pie after I’ve finished the wiener.”

Our waitress reappeared with a pot of coffee, filled our cups, and wrote down our orders. I hadn’t noticed that she was wearing a ‘Biden for President’ pin.

“We all thought of writing in Joe’s name on a ballot in November, but figured that would just make the result worse for the Democratic ticket,” I said.

“We were all wearing these buttons when Joe came to town to campaign for Harris,” said our waitress, “and he always drops in here for a wiener before he heads back to DC or wherever else he is going. He thanked us all, but being the great and consider-

ate guy that he is, he said he couldn't take a photo with us because it would surely get out and it would make Kamala feel bad. So we took off the pins, but put them back on after the photo."

"He's a class act," said Franky, "not like the snake oil salesman who conned his way back into the White House."

"The snake oil salesman had better not show his face in here," said the waitress. "He might get a gravy bowl poured over his cheating head."

"I guess you don't get many tips from the MAGAs who come in," Tony joked.

"I tell them they don't get served unless they take off their hats. Most of them walk out and go up the street to the other wiener place, where MAGAs are welcome. We've picked up as many or more than we lost, so it all evens out, and we don't have to listen to the MAGA crap. I'll be back with your orders in a jiffy."

"It's nice to know there's a place in town where we can come and not have to be concerned about people talking about how Trump and his stormtroopers are doing such a great job cleaning up after four years of a Democratic administration," said Franky.

"One thing that's been bugging me since the Inauguration," I said, "is what this Musk guy is doing with his doggy show."

"Department of Government Efficiency," interjected Tony. "Somebody came up with a better meaning: 'Dangerous Oligarchs Grabbing Everything', like what they did in Russia when the Soviet Union collapsed and Yeltsin took over."

"The guy's supposedly the richest person in the world," I continued, "and he's leading an effort to fire half of all government workers. If he handed over all of his wealth, a quarter of those people could keep their jobs. Isn't there some irony here?"

“He’s getting rid of all the government workers who voted for Kamala, and for Joe before her,” said Tony. “It’s a smoke screen for the biggest spoils system ploy in the history of the United States. They say they are going to save money, but what they are doing is closing every department or operation that smacks of woke ideology or has anything to do with foreign aid. Once the doggy boy claims he’s saved two trillion dollars on the country’s two hundredth and fiftieth birthday, Trumpty Dumpty will open up a whole slew of new offices and hire people who voted for him. It’s in my book. I didn’t say that the Musketeer would be put in charge of it. He wasn’t a Trump supporter when I wrote it. But he was a logical pick to do the chain saw job when he did a Darth Vader and switched sides.”

“How about his Hitler salute at the Inauguration,” added Franky. “There was a lot of talk about his antisemitism when Hamas attacked Israel and Israel responded.”

“His maternal grandfather, Joshua Haldeman, was a Hitler supporter, wasn’t he?” said Tony. “At least that’s what his son-in-law, Errol Musk, claimed. He emigrated with his whole family to South Africa because it was a safe haven for bigots. Elon Musk is the guy everybody was throwing their money at to buy his ugly cars. Anybody who is Jewish and drives a Tesla should really think about their values and priorities. Anybody who is a Democrat and bought a Tesla should drive it to DC, park it in front of the White House, and torch it. AOC bought a Tesla and she’s been apologizing for doing it for a couple of years. She claims that she bought it because no other electric car could get her from the Bronx, her district, to DC. That’s bullshit. She bought it because that’s the car the glitteratti in California bought—before Musk took off his white hat and put on the black one.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed he wears a black MAGA and not a red one,” I said.

“Red isn’t his color,” quipped Tony.

We finished our wieners. I had room for pie. We took the bus back to DC.



I hadn’t been to the Post for a couple of months. This first Sunday in March (2 March) felt like a good time to go. It was a cold, clear day. The snow cover was gone from the graves, but there was a frost on the grass and tree branches from the sharp drop in temperature during the night. A hoar frost. The sidewalks were slippery, and I nearly fell a few times on my walk to visit Connie and all the other members of our families. I read yesterday’s gospel before mass started this morning. It had a short message: Whoever doesn’t accept the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it. Ma and Pa, my nonnos and nonnas, Zio Al, Connie, her mother Helen, and brother Charlie all did that, and they were all in Kingdom. I was sure of that. Everyone sitting with me around Ellen’s kitchen table today at Sunday dinner has a place waiting for them in that Kingdom. I had a taste of hell during my time in captivity in Vietnam, and I sure didn’t want to spend an eternity in a place like that.

It was a full house at the Post when I got there. It was a sea of blue and red hats with a few DC Blue Devil caps mixed in. The anti-MAGAs came up with a hat to counter the MAGAs, a blue hat with a Statue of Liberty and the words Liberty with Honor, both in white. Everyone was gathered in a circle around a table, and at the table sat Greg Pienkevicz. He was wearing a Blue Devils hat, which just happens to be the colors of Ukraine’s flag. Greg’s grandparents on both sides emigrated from Ukraine in

the beginning of the twentieth century, and many settled in Drakes Crossing. The men went down into the mines with the Italians who came at the same time. Greg was one of my friends in high school. He was the center on our football team. He was drafted a year later than I was, joined the Marines, and was in Vietnam for eighteen months. So, he was there while I was a prisoner of war. He managed to get out alive and not get captured. When he came back home he became a fireman and did that until he retired as Fire Chief at sixty-five. He married the first girl he dated in high school, whose both parents were children of Ukrainian immigrants, and they had four kids, who are great friends of our kids. I guess you could say we are similar in many ways. The main difference is that he's a head taller. Sitting at the table with Greg were two other blue and yellow hats, two blue hats, and two red ones.

As I approached the gathering, Greg saw me and motioned me over. "Come on and sit down, Nicky," he said. "We need someone who has a cool head."

I had seen the meeting at the White House on Friday with Ukraine's President Zelensky sitting next to Trump and surrounded by Trump's attack dogs. Directly across from Zelensky was the vice president, Vance. What do his initials, J.D. stand for I thought the first time I heard his name. I looked it up and found James David Hamel, but his original name was James Donald Bowman. His mother changed it when her third husband named Hamel adopted him. When he was twenty-nine, he changed his last name to Vance, which was his mother's maiden name. Maybe it was the 'Donald' that attracted The Donald to him. He was a U.S. Marine and served as a military journalist. He was stationed in Iraq for six months in 2005, got a law degree from Yale, but never really practiced law. He worked for venture

capitalists, was elected to the U.S. Senate in 2023 from Ohio, and that is the sum total of his political experience. By all rights, he is a Veteran of Foreign Wars, but I would not want to see him in this Post. He is an arrogant asshole. Six years ago he became a Catholic. Was that another box to tick on his way to being a natural pick for Trump as his running mate? I wonder if he attended mass this morning and listened to the gospel. "A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks." That applies in spades to both Vance and his boss.

"Did you watch the ambush on Friday, Nicky?" asked Greg.

"I saw it from start to finish, and then I watched the interview on Fox."

"What's your take on what happened?"

"Like you said, it was a set-up. Trump shook his hand at the entrance and belittled him. 'He's all dressed up,' he said, pointing at Zelensky's shirt. You could see by the look on Zelensky's face that he was not pleased by that stupid remark. Then one of the first questions he gets is from a reporter from some super conservative cable news channel. 'Why aren't you wearing a suit. Don't you think that's disrespectful?' Zelensky tells him he is wearing a military uniform out of respect for all the Ukrainian citizens who are fighting for their country, and then he says he will wear a suit when the war in his country is over. Did FDR say to Churchill and Stalin when they had their meetings during the war, 'Heh, Winny and Joe, I see you have your uniforms on. Don't you think you could show a little more respect for the President of the United States by wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and tie?' Did Churchill and Stalin tell FDR he was disrespecting his

soldiers by wearing a suit instead of a military uniform? Trump should have said to the reporter that his question was out of line, but he didn't. Maybe he or one of his staff told the reporter to ask the question."

"You know that reporter's dating Marjorie Taylor Greene, Trump's biggest cheerleader," said Bill Walsh, one of the blue hats. "Maybe that's how he got a ticket to the big event. No Associated Press, but Conspiracy Channel of America."

"She's not one of my favorites," I said, "and now her boyfriend isn't either. Then Vance says to Zelensky that he hasn't shown how grateful he is for all the help he has gotten from the United States. At this point, Zelensky should have gotten up and said, 'I am here because my country has the deepest appreciation for the assistance your country has given to us in our fight for our freedom, and I have come to this meeting out of respect for your country and to express our gratitude by signing an agreement as a way of repaying your generosity. If you have come here to discuss what I should be wearing and how I should be acting, then there is no reason for me to be here.' And then he should have looked at Trump and waited for his response. Trump doesn't want a deal with Ukraine because he thinks he is going to get all he wants from Putin. He and Putin have decided that Zelensky is too strong to just give up, so they want to get him the hell out of the way so they can steamroll their will over Ukraine and get on with dividing up the rest of the world. This meeting was Trump's way of building the case to get Zelensky out of the way by making it look like he was putting his personal status ahead of his country's."

"We don't have any business in what's going on there," one of the red hats at the table said. It was Butch Basta, one of Ricky's buddies. "Ukraine has always been part of Russia."

“Did you get your doctor’s degree in history out of a Cracker Jacks box, Butch?” answered Greg. “You know nothing about the history of Ukraine or Russia. If anything, Ukraine could argue that all of Russia belongs to Ukraine if you go back far enough, but there is no justification for Russia to claim the country as being part of Russia. The Soviets took it like they took all the other countries around its borders. It’s just another fantasy of Putin’s, and Trump and his hangers-on are buying it because they’re too lazy or too stupid to learn the fact.”

“We still don’t have any business there,” replied Basta.

“So when Russia says it wants Alaska back, what does Trump say?” countered Greg. “If King Charles says it’s time for the thirteen first states to become part of the United Kingdom because he wants to make Great Britain great again, what’s Trump’s answer? If Spain says thanks for taking care of half of California and all of Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico, and Guam but now it’s time for them to become part of Super Spain, how do we expect Trump to react? Putin can say that all of the Baltic states, all of the former Eastern Block countries, and Finland are part of Russia and do exactly what he is doing in Ukraine. What then? Russia is and has always been a predatory blood-sucking parasite, like a leech. Its leaders do the same thing to the people who live there as they do to the countries around it. It steals their ideas, their land, and their possessions. Putin has an estimated net worth of \$200 billion. Where did that amount of money come from? Trump’s is \$5 billion, so he’s tied for number two with the guy in North Korea.”

“I heard something today that shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did, and it made me sick,” said Tad Wojek. “China has taken over the mines in the territory that Russia has stolen from Ukraine. They are digging out all those rare earth materials and

other ores. That's why they have been supporting Russia during the years since Russia went into Ukraine. Didn't we know about this before. If we did, why didn't we announce it to the world. Russia invades and China steals. Sure, they're paying Russia lots of money for what they are taking, but it's not Russia's to sell. What's there belongs to the Ukrainians. Do you think they are employing the Ukrainians to work for them? Not on a bet. They import all their own people to do the dirty work and pay them peanuts."

"Saturday Night Live did a real number on the Trump gang," said Greg.

"I'll bet Trump is going to try to shut down the program for good," I said.

"He won't have to," said Basta. "He'll just shut down the channel. Trump voters don't watch NBC anyway."



My phone rang while I was getting dinner ready. It was Gail.

"Hi, Chief," she said when I answered. "We brought in the two kids who did the fire bombing."

"Kids?"

"Sixteen and seventeen. They're both from the other side of West Mountain. Farm kids. From every which way you look, good kids."

"How'd they get mixed up with the Luccatellas?"

"Internet. We've been seeing this for a while. Gangs put out an advertisement for a job on a web site, and people bid for it. They get paid with Bitcoin or something like it. They don't know who orders the job."

“So, how did you find them?”

“Somebody in town liked their motorbikes. They were parked together close to where the stolen car was found. He took a photo of the bikes, and he was about a block away when two kids ran past him and got on the bikes. When he saw the pictures of them taken by the security cameras that we released to the news channels, he put them together with the two guys he saw running. He sent the photo showing the licenses plates of the two bikes, and the rest was easy. The bikes were parked together at the high school. We went in and asked the principal to call them into his office. There was no problem. We brought them to the station, interviewed them separately, and they both confessed. This wasn't the first time they did a job. That's where the money came from to buy the bikes, they said. They're in detention.”

“Have you talked to the parents?”

“We went to their homes. They were both shocked, couldn't believe their kids had done something like this.”

Connie would know what would come next. Would they be charged, brought to trial, and locked up? Would they get away with probation, paying damages, community service?

“It's bad enough that scum like the Luccatellas bring their own kids into crime, or reel in petty criminals who already chose the life, but to start to attract kids who think of it as a game and committing the crimes and getting paid is like gaining points. Is there any way to tie the site the kids used to the Luccatellas?”

“The site's like eBay. The crooks are the buyers and the kids are the sellers of their services. Neither one ever has to know who

the other one is. The site's run somewhere where no law enforcement can touch it."

"Can you give me the link to the site. I want to check it out. And thanks for calling and filling me in."

"You're not thinking of answering one of the ads, are you Chief?"

"No, Gail. I'm too old to throw fire bombs or play armchair detective. I'll leave that to you pros."

I wasn't sure what I was going to accomplish by looking at the site, if anything. I was just curious to see how criminal gangs were functioning these days.



Guy is at the wheel of his twenty-year-old black Cadillac Escalade EXT Platinum. Annie is riding shotgun. Franky, Donna, and Jenny are in the middle, and Tony and I are in the back jump seats. Guy bought his Escalade while *The Sopranos* was still running. He and Annie were still working full-time at the restaurant while it was on, so they binge-watched on holidays when the restaurant was closed. Every time I see his car I think of Tony Soprano reaching through the window of the same car to pull out a ticket from a New Jersey Turnpike toll booth at the start of an episode. We are on another Turnpike, the Pennsylvania, and on our way to Philly, on a mission.

It's the second Friday in Lent (14 March). A year ago for Lent I began following the daily readings for the mass in my missal, the one I got when I received First Holy Communion seventy years ago. I found it when I was cleaning out my clothes drawers. It was stuck in the back of a drawer, in the same condition as when Father Grosso handed it to me, still in its plastic wrapper.

It's a bit more worn today than it was when I started reading it every day during breakfast. Easter passed, but I continued reading. I didn't remember the first reading this morning from last year, but I will definitely remember it next year on this day, if I'm still around and still can remember stuff. First readings are mostly from the Old Testament. In today's first reading the Lord GOD is talking. It never says who is taking dictation when GOD speaks. That's left to our imagination. Anyway, in today's reading GOD says if a sinner stops sinning and then lives a good life, doing what is right and just, he won't die. I always figure 'he' applies to 'she' as well. GOD says none of the sinner's sins will be remembered. Are we going to find a Ginger Riley who has been doing what is right and just since she dodged a murder conviction forty years ago, or a Ginger Riley we knew from her gang days? Or are we going to find someone else living at the address Annie has been sending tins of cookies to, who tells us that Ginger has either moved to a nursing home or is dead?

*"Exit the turnpike at the next exit in one mile,"* said the woman inside Guy's built-in navigation system, *"and follow the signs to Center City."*

"We're going to follow the same route as the one we take when we go to the Eagles and Phillies games, right?" asked Franky.

"Yes," answered Guy, "but we turn off before we get down to the fields. Pennsport is over by the Delaware, south of the Italian market. We'll see how the GPS routes us."

"I was using my GPS a couple of days ago to get to a place where I had never been before," said Franky. "I got confused with its directions and it told me to turn around. I did, but then I couldn't see where I was going."

“That’s a good one,” laughed Guy.

I couldn’t resist telling the one GPS joke I know. “I put one of those new portable GPSes in my Jeep. It not only tells me how to get to where I’m going; it tells my why I wanted to go there in the first place.”

“I’m glad you guys are all going to be in a happy frame of mind when we get to Ginger’s place,” said Annie. “If she’s there, she will recognize me and Guy if she still has all her marbles. We’ll go to the door.”

“Maybe she’ll say, ‘I wished you called ahead. I would have baked some cookies.’” joked Tony.

“I didn’t tell you,” said Annie. “I have a tin of cookies.”

South Fourth Street, number 224. Guy found a parking space almost across the street. It was a residential neighborhood with three-story brick walk-ups packed wall-to-wall. It was late morning when we arrived, and there were only a few people on the sidewalks.

“You can see us from the door, so if it’s alright with Ginger, we’ll wave you over,” said Annie.

“If you go in alone, I think it’s best that we wait here until we’re sure everything is okay,” suggested Tony. “Why don’t you give us a call if you go in without us and let us know.”

Annie and Guy got out and walked across the street. Annie led the way up the stone stairs to a small landing, and rang the doorbell. A man opened the door. There was a short conversation, and then a woman with red hair came to the door. I saw Annie take out the tin of cookies from the bag she was carrying, and the next thing I saw was the red-haired woman hugging Annie and Guy. Then, Annie was waving us over. Ginger was ninety,

but if you took away her face, she looked like the same Ginger who served Tony and me lemonade when we dropped off a load of lumber in her driveway in the summer of '65. She introduced us to her husband, Rich Grady, a tall, handsome man, probably a few years her junior. Ginger led us through the door and into their living room. "I'll put on a pot of coffee," she said. "Does anyone want tea instead?" We were all good with coffee. We sat quietly. No one wanted to start the conversation without Ginger. Finally, Franky broke the silence.

"I guess there was a big celebration here when the Eagles won the Super Bowl."

"Ginger and I go to all the home games," said Rich with a big grin. "They were great this year, and we were so happy they won. They really deserved it. So did Kansas City, but they got to enjoy being champs when they beat us two years ago. They pulled off the win that time, but we were too much for them this year."

"My husband had a dream to be a pro football player when we were in high school," said Donna, "and he started with Penn State."

"I was a one-game wonder. I caught the first and only pass thrown to me for a big gain and a first down, but I also got a broken thigh bone that ended my football career. Rip Engle, the coach, came to see me in the hospital and told me I did a good job holding on to the football after the tackle. He wished me a good life. Best thing that ever happened to me, other than meeting Donna, of course."

"I played end for Villanova when players went both ways," said Rich. "I never thought of being a professional, not good

enough. I wanted to be a science teacher starting in my freshman year in high school, like Mr. Cardoni, and that's what I did for forty-three years until I had to retire."

Ginger came in with a tray holding cups, saucers, sugar and milk holders in the same flowered pattern. "My dear husband never gave up the classroom. He has an after school tutoring class three days a week in the same parochial school where he taught for forty-three years. The classroom is full. Even parents come." Rich smiled. "I'll be right back with the coffee and your wonderful cookies."

Annie met her when she returned. "May I pour?" she asked. "Of course," replied Ginger. "You were the best coffee pourer and waitress I ever met. I made it a little stronger than we usually drink it, but not at the highest octane level that Guy used to make it." Guy smiled. We took cookies, sipped coffee. Then Ginger spoke.

"We have been wondering if we were ever going to meet our 'cookie angel' before we met the other angels or their counterparts. Every year when they arrive from a post office in New Jersey we talk about who the sender could be. Rich knows every last detail about my old life, the one I left after being given a third chance to turn it around. I didn't die with Jimmy Facio in the car crash. I didn't get convicted for murdering Enzo Luccatella, a murder I committed. I came back to Philly, to the same house where I grew up and had kept as my permanent address, and took care of my mother. I began to attend the church where I had received first holy communion and confirmation and hadn't set foot in again after I dropped out of high school and ran away to New York City. It was at a summer church picnic just after I came back where Rich and I met. His wife had passed away a few years earlier. He lived only a few blocks away. We started

seeing each other, mom passed away, we got married, and decided to make this our home. That's the long and the short of it."

"Did you ever figure out who was sending the cookies?" asked Annie.

"They started arriving the Christmas after the trial. The 'cookie angel' knew my address. It had to be for a reason, one that showed plenty of gratitude, especially because they have kept coming faithfully every Christmas. I thought it could have been Lucca's wife or someone else in Drake's Crossing, but I could not figure out why. I didn't think it was you."

"I was one of two 'cookie angels'. My sister Connie, who is now a true angel, was my helper. She was Nicky's wife. She died three years ago. The cookies were our expression of gratitude for pulling the trigger. Lucca and his family caused a great deal of unhappiness in our family from the first time they set foot in Drake's Crossing. As a result of what he did, he destroyed our parent's marriage and caused both our father's and brother's deaths. I was the one who sent word to Genovese that Lucca was talking to the Feds. Connie helped me."

"I always wondered how he found out about what Lucca was up to," said Ginger softly. "Everyone figured it was me."

"I confess it every time I say confession. 'I did something that led to someone being killed,' I tell the priest." He says, 'You have been forgiven for that sin many times over by God. You don't need to keep confessing it. Just don't do it again,' the priest says." We all laughed. We sipped coffee and took another cookie. Then Ginger asked, "But why have you come now. I am very, very happy that you did, but what caused you to make the trip on this Saint Patty's Day weekend?"

“The Luccatella family have begun threatening and harassing us again,” answered Annie. “They firebombed the restaurant that our son and his wife took over from us. They firebombed Nicky’s son’s car repair shop in the same building. Lucca’s nephew, Ricky, threatened Nicky. All of this came out of the blue. We thought they may have found out how Genovese knew about Lucca being an informant.”

“Ricky was worse than Lucca,” said Ginger. “He hated his brother and threw a big party with Champagne when we came back. ‘I don’t know how the Feds found out my brother was a snitch,’ he said at the party, ‘but if I ever find out I’ll pin a real gold medal on his chest.’ Those are his exact words. He didn’t have the imagination to believe it could have been anyone but me. The only thing Ricky cares about is money, so if he’s threatening you, you must have something he wants, and it must be worth something more now than before. If you figure out what that is, you’ll be able to start to solve the problem with him and his gang.”

We talked for another half hour or so. “Shall I put on another pot of coffee?” asked Ginger. “It’s time for us to drive back to DC,” answered Annie. “We promised to help the kids in the restaurant tonight. St. Patrick’s Day celebrations have become a long weekend celebration.”

“Annie,” said Ginger, “Your Christmas cookies are really appreciated, especially by Rich’s grandchildren, but I don’t want them to be wasted if we are no longer here to receive them. If you do want to continue to send them, wait until you receive a card. I’ll send it to the restaurant from The Franklins. You never know if the mailman has a sideline.” Annie smiled and looked over at Tony and me. We were also smiling. Ginger will have no problem getting into heaven, I thought.

When we had finally made our way back to the Turnpike after a few missed turns, Tony said, "It's the property they want. It's somehow tied to the land grab for the casino the Oneida's want to build."

"I think you're right," I said. "They're going to try to find a way to make it look like we stole the property from Lucca, and the intimidation is a way to keep us from fighting the claim."

"It's worthless to them if the Oneida proposal doesn't go through," offered Franky.

"Unless they're just out for revenge," replied Tony.



## CHAPTER 4

# SPRING TO SUMMER

**TWO WEEKS AFTER** the trip to Philadelphia, the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club met as usual on Saturday morning, the 29<sup>th</sup> of March, at Carl's Summit Diner. Edie was waiting for us with coffee pot and cups in hand.

"What's it today, Nicky? Waffles or pancakes?"

"I'll go for pancakes today, Edie."

"The usuals for you two handsome boys?"

"Always the usuals," answered Franky. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Edie."

"These past two weeks have been incredible!" exclaimed Franky after Edie had poured the coffee and left for the kitchen.

"Yeah," interjected Tony, "The guy who is trying to play circus ringmaster has phone calls with Gollum and Voldymr..."

"Wait!" I interrupted. "I have been trying to think of where I saw that face before. Putin really does look just like Gollum."

"Gollum played him like a damned fiddle," continued Tony. "Everyone was waiting for the conversation to end and some big announcement. All that came out was that Putin agreed to stop attacking Ukraine's energy infrastructure, and Trump thought it was a good idea to have Russia's ice hockey team play in the U.S. Putin did not agree to Trump's proposal for a general thirty-day ceasefire because it could not be monitored, he said. Of course it

couldn't because he had no intentions of keeping it. After the call ended, Russia sent the biggest fleet of drones to hit any and all targets in Ukraine, including its energy infrastructure. Two days later, Trump talked for an hour by phone with Zelensky. Zelensky agreed to a halt on hitting Russia's energy infrastructure if Putin kept his side of the bargain. Trump agreed to help with air support if he could locate the necessary military equipment in Europe."

"What the hell did he mean by that?" asked Franky.

"Rubio followed up after the call with details on that. The U.S. would redeploy air defense systems that are in place in Europe to Ukraine. Trump said it was a fantastic call, so it seems they kissed over the phone and made up."

"All of Trump's talk of stopping the fighting in Ukraine in two days after his inauguration was like everything else coming out of his mouth," I said. "Hot air."

"He learned a long time ago that the best way to look like you're winning a snowball fight is to make a lot of snowballs and then to throw them everywhere and all at once, high and low. Some might hit a target, but you are mainly trying to keep your opponents distracted. Trump's life is one big, goddamn snowball fight. But sooner or later, an ice-covered snowball is going to land right in the middle of his fat face."

"The Gaza ceasefire went out the window," said Franky, changing the subject. "Israel and the U.S. told those shitbrain Hamasers that they were going to start shooting if they didn't release all the hostages."

“ Hamas knows that as soon as all the hostages are gone, Israel is going to open the water pipe they built leading to the Mediterranean and flood their tunnels,” said Tony.

“ But whoever is left down there will miraculously emerge dressed as women and start yelling at the reporters about how many of their children were killed,” added Franky.

“ This week there were finally protests against Hamas,” I said. “ What’s taken them so long?”

“ Hamas has been ruthless with anyone who criticizes them,” answered Tony, “ but it looks like the people who don’t get to live in the safety of the tunnels eating up all the food delivered by the UN have realized that if the war keeps going, they’re all going to be dead anyway, and that the only way to stop Israel is to give up Hamas.”

“ How about Signalgate?” said Franky, pulling another switch on the tracks our conversation was moving along. “ Donna came into the kitchen where I was sitting when the story broke holding the latest copy of *The Atlantic*. ‘ You see,’ she said. ‘ You wanted to cancel our subscription, and now the editor breaks the biggest story of the century.’ I said I didn’t think that it would have beaten Watergate if it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but I admitted it was big.”

“ Amateur hour,” sniffed Tony.

“ I used to love that show,” I said. “ Ted Mack and *The Original Amateur Hour*.”

“ Round and round she goes, and where she stops nobody knows,” I said, trying to sound like Ted Mack. “ Box 191 Radio City Station. Send in your votes.”

“My vote for the top amateur goes to National Security Advisor Mike Waltz,” said Tony, “even though on paper he should know what security is all about. He was the one who invited Goldberg.”

“How do you invite the Editor-in-Chief of a magazine to a war briefing meeting?” said Franky, shaking his head. “To top it off, The Atlantic magazine has to be the most anti-Republican, anti-Trump publication on the Planet, and it’s editor would never even make it inside the White House property line, never mind being invited to a press briefing. The meeting starts and no one thinks to do what anyone leading a meeting of any kind should do, go around the table to see who’s there.”

“How the hell did Goldberg get on a Waltz’s chat list anyway?” I asked. “Waltz said he doesn’t even know who Goldberg is, but that claim has been debunked. They are trying to claim that Goldberg snuck into the meeting. These are supposed to be people who are in charge of big, national secrets. If it is possible for someone to sneak into an online meeting, why are they even using the software?”

“Trump is making it into a big joke,” said Franky, “like his team was having a little après-golf palaver. But I’ll bet he is really pissed.”

“I read what Goldberg said about the whole thing,” said Tony. “He sent a mail to Waltz, Hegsteth, Gabbard, and Ratcliffe on their Signal accounts with questions. Was the Signal meeting real? Did they know he was included in the group? Was it a mistake, or was he invited on purpose? If on purpose, why? Is the Signal channel regularly used for high-level discussions? He got

an answer from the National Security Council saying they are reviewing how what they called an ‘inadvertent number’ was added to the chain.”

“Waltz will be gone soon,” said Tony one more time, “but maybe not totally. Trump might have learned the lesson from his last stint as President. If you fire a staff member, they will find a way of firing back. Maybe he’ll just shunt him onto a sidetrack.”

Edie came with our breakfasts. “We’ve got a pool going on who is going to get the boot first.”

“Hegseth,” offered Franky, “for not briefing Trump about the four missing and possibly dead U.S. soldiers in Lithuania, and for his mouthing off on the Signal call.”

“I think it’s going to be Waltz,” repeated Tony. “This Signal thing is just the first of many mistakes he is going to make.”

“Who’s the head of his Secret Service?” I asked. “Trump’s security detail let a microphone operator push a boom mike into his face while he was giving a news brief on his way into a plane. His supporters are claiming the mike was laced with some delayed acting poison that will eventually incapacitate him, and that the boom mike operator should be put in jail while Trump is tested.”

“Most of the money is on Rubio,” said Edie. “He is an outsider and a reluctant MAGA-man.”

“No one is going to break Flynn’s record of twenty-one days from the start of Trump’s term, or Scaramucci’s ten days after he replaced Spicer,” said Tony.

As we ate, I thought about the a bigger problem that our families had, keeping our homesteads and keeping the businesses our kids were running. There hadn't been any more trouble from the Luccatellas. The two boys had been released on bail and a trial date was set for late April. I hope they learned a lesson and tell their friends to stay away from mail order crime.

"Wait until you see Eedo Luccatella's new car or truck or whatever it's called," said Tony. "It's one of those Tesla pickups..."

"Cybertruck," added Franky.

"Tesla Cybertruck," continued Tony. "He's had it painted red and put the initials M.A.G.A. on the side doors. He's driving it all over the place. He parks it right behind Ricky's Corvette."

"Maybe he hasn't heard what's going on with Tesla and all the protests against Musk," said Franky. "People like Che Ocasio-Cortez bought them when Musk was the big green hero. They've have been dumping them like they're rotten tacos. Tesla's stock price has been cut in half since the inauguration."

"Come to think of it, Carmy told me that he heard that the tires on Eedo's truck had been slashed," I said. "Eedo called the station to report it. Can you imagine, the Luccatellas calling the police?"

"It's been quiet since the fire," said Tony. "They got their message sent and now they're waiting for something to trigger their next move."

"The property's worthless to them unless the Oneida get to take over the land and build a casino," I said. "That's what we agreed, right?"

"Right," answered Tony.

“What’s been happening with the committee the mayor set up before Christmas?” asked Franky

“We’ve had four meetings,” I answered. “one every month since December. We have a meeting coming up in two weeks. Every meeting has been the same. Al Capelli says that he hasn’t gotten any proposal for planning permission from the Oneidas, and Pignozzi says the lawyers are working on it. Al asks Pignozzi if there is a proposal for how access to the eventual casino will be made, and Pignozzi says that the engineers are working on it. Al asks Pignozzi if he knows when the proposal will be made, and Pignozzi says he doesn’t know. Then we adjourn the meeting.”

“Something sounds fishy,” mused Tony. “It sounds like they think time is on their side. Maybe we should go on the offensive.”



My phone rang. I had just read the letter that arrived this Monday morning, so I knew it was Annie calling.

“Hi Annie. You got the letter?”

“Yes. But I don’t understand it. Tony’s on his way over.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

We hung up. The letter was from the Luccatellas’ lawyer, Gus Stucciano, the grandson of the lawyer with the same name who shot himself just after he admitted to Pa that he had hid Lewandowski’s will that deeded the property to Pa, and forged papers to make it look like Lewandowski sold the property to Lucca’s wife. The letter said we were being sued for conspiring with Lewandowski for defrauding Lewandowski’s son out of his inheritance. Annie is listed as a co-defendant because Pa signed

over half of the property to Zio Al, and he signed his part over to Annie. Pa left his half to me, and I am listed as the principal defendant. The suit was being brought on behalf of someone named William T. Loomis who claims he is Lewandowski's great grandson. His address is in San Diego, California, about as far from Drake's Crossing, PA as you can get in the Continental United States. Pa said the old man was never married and didn't have any children to leave anything to. How could someone show up sixty years later and claim they're someone's long, lost great grandson. This is obviously something the Luccatella's cooked up with a lawyer who had crookedness coded into his DNA. Connie would know exactly what to do with this phony law suit. I don't know where to start. I hope Tony has some good ideas.

There was a knock on the door, and Tony came in. "Are you ready to go up to Annie's?" he yelled as I appeared from the kitchen.

"Ready, willing, and able."

I could smell the coffee brewing as we walked through the back door and into the kitchen. Guy had just finished making the coffee in his *caffettiera a stantuffo*, or piston coffee maker. He was buying beans roasted in Sweden of all places, but I tasted the difference immediately with the first cup he brewed. There was no bitter or burnt taste with the first sip, like with Starbucks or even my favorite Dunkin', and no lingering aftertaste. Annie had made fresh croissants the day before and took them out of the freezer to thaw before putting them into the oven. I've heard that people who are selling their houses are told by realtors to make coffee and bake bread just before a viewing starts. They should hire Annie and Guy to do the honors. Annie took out the croissants, Guy poured the coffee, and we sat around the table.

“We need to find out how they came up with a great grandson in San Diego,” I said.

“This is an idea from left field,” said Tony, “but I think they found an orphan who was around your pa’s age and followed him to his great grandson. Did Lewandowski have a sister or brother?”

“All I know about him is that he lived just over the line in Marcy,” I answered. “One more thing. I remember that Pa said he was a member of the Polish Falcons. The lodge is still there. Maybe we can find someone who knew him.”

“That’s a good start,” said Annie. “Should we try to find out something about William Loomis? We can ask our cousins in California to do some snooping for us.”

“Let’s see if there’s a William Loomis who is about our kids’ age,” suggested Tony. He did a search on his iPhone. “Here’s a William Loomis who’s about our age. He was a professor at the University of California San Diego. His father was born in New York with real parents. So, that’s a dead end. Here’s a William F. Loomis, born in 1915, died 2009, and buried in San Diego. There’s a photo of his gravestone with his wife’s name, and a World War II stone. Says he was a Navy Petty Officer Second Class.”

“Any kids?” Guy asked.

“Doesn’t say.”

“I say we try the Polish Falcons,” I said, and everyone agreed. “Ma used to take me with her on Saturday mornings when she went to the butcher in Marcy center, which is across from the Falcons. She said they had the best pork for sausage and

porchetta. The Falcons is mainly a barbecue place today. It used to be some sort of social club for Polish people, right.”

“The Polish Falcons started out in the late 1800s as a youth organization for Polish immigrants,” said Tony. “We did some renovations for them the spring before the junior lumberyard boys came for their summer working vacation. I got friendly with one of the members, and he told me the whole story. It gradually became a support society for Polish independence. It signed up men to join a voluntary army to fight in the First World War, and then raised money during the Second World War to help refugees from Poland. Then it took up the cause of freedom from Russian domination. I think it’s become more of a fraternal and social organization, and now it has a restaurant.”

“Let’s go there tonight for dinner,” suggested Annie. “We’ll pick you up at 6:00, okay?”

Tony and I nodded yes. We enjoyed Annie’s croissants and Guy’s coffee for another half hour, and then Tony and I left to get on with our day’s chores. When I got home, I made a phone call to the number of the club that was on the web. A woman named Lauri answered. I asked her if she had the number of the president of the Polish Falcons in Marcy. She said it was her husband, Stan Yelnik, and asked what I wanted to talk to him about. I figured it would make things easier if I told her the whole truth, which I did.

“Wow! What a story,” she said. “There used to be a Lewandowski family that lived here in Marcy. I’m sure my dad knew them.”

“How old is your dad?” I asked.

“Eighty-eight,” she answered.

“We were thinking about having dinner at your restaurant tonight.”

“He’s usually there, helping out at the bar. I’ll tell him about our conversation and make sure he’s there tonight. His name is Paul Malashevski.”

Guy and Annie picked up me, Tony, and Jenny and we drove the ten short minutes to Marcy. There was a small crowd. It had the feel and the beer smell of the Post. We went to the bar and took up most of the stools. There was an elderly man drying glasses. I asked him if he was Paul Malashevski, and he said, “You must be Carmy’s boy. You look just like him. Let’s find an empty table where we can talk.”

The six of us sat around a big, round table for ten and introduced ourselves. We ordered beers and wines, and as I looked at Paul, a memory came back to me. “You had a ’55 Chevy that I worked on a couple of times, right? Back in the early ‘60s?”

“I wondered if you would remember. You were a good mechanic. Your pa told me you were a POW. I sold it in ’68 and bought a Dodge down the line, where I took it when I needed maintenance and repairs. Then I moved away for a dozen years. I understand that Carmy’s grandson took over the shop. I guess he’s your son.”

“Yes. Named after his grandpa.”

“I used to go with my pa to Lewandowski’s when I was really really small. Pa was too young for the first war and too old for the second. He worked in the mines during both of them. I went down there, too, for a while. I remember how we all went to Stan’s funeral. I think all of Marcy and half of DC were there.

There would have been even more if most of the young men and some women weren't in the war. Everybody liked him."

"Your daughter told you why we wanted to talk to someone who knew him?"

"Yes. Stan never married. His life was his business, and all his free time he gave to helping other people. He was real active in the church. It wasn't that he didn't like women. He was just someone who wasn't made to get married. If he did get a woman pregnant, he would have married her."

"Did he have any brothers or sisters?" I asked.

"He had a sister, Katarina. She and her husband Lenny Lenkewicz had one boy. They took in a foster child, a boy, when they found out they couldn't have more children. The son was killed in the war. The foster kid was drafted, joined the navy, and never came back after the war."

"You said it was a foster child, not an orphan. Did they adopt him?"

"No. He kept his name. It was Billy, Billy Lewis, I think. His father had died and his mother was sick and couldn't take care of him. They weren't from Marcy or DC. She died soon after her son came to live with Katarina and Lenny."

"Could his name have been Loomis and not Lewis?"

"Maybe. Yes, come to think of it, it was Loomis."



It was Saturday, the 12<sup>th</sup> of April, and the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club was having its weekly meeting at the usual time and place. It had rained all night, and it was still raining when

we met at the diner. Rainy days were my favorite days. That wasn't always the case. I liked it sunny and hot all through grade school and high school. I liked it cold and dry in the winter so that the ice was nice and smooth for skating. But after my three years as a prisoner in Vietnam, I became a rainy day person. The heat was more bearable when it was raining. I could drink the rainwater without worrying about whether someone had taken a shit or pissed in the water pail. The guards stayed under cover and didn't walk around to stick their guns in our stomachs or hit us with their whips. I felt safer when it rained, and the feeling carried over to when I came home.

"I read that Musk lost all the money he made on the stock market after he became a Trump bro and Trump won the election," said Franky.

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," I said.

"Look at this," said Tony, showing us the image on his iPhone. "Here's Tesla's market capitalization for the past year. On the sixth of April last year it was \$516 billion. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of December it was \$1.5 trillion, so almost three times higher than eight months earlier. Musk looked like the smartest guy on the Planet as well as being the richest. Yesterday, it was \$812 billion, one-half of what it was four months ago. Musk's gain from election day has been totally wiped out. But given what Trump has been doing with manipulating the stock market, who knows what will happen on Monday when the markets open again. My guess is that Tesla will bounce back when the sharks pick up the shares that the guppies dump."

"Musk called Trump's tariff guru, Pete Navarro, a moron," said Franky.

“Truly a moron’, to quote him exactly,” added Tony. “He also said he was ‘dumber than a sack of bricks’, proving that he grew up somewhere other than in the good ol’ U.S. of A. The saying is ‘It’s heavier than a sack of bricks’. It’s like saying ‘He had his snout in the gravy train’, instead of ‘He had his snout in the trough’, or he was ‘Riding the gravy train’.”

“How the hell did Navarro get into the position of being the most influential economic advisor to Trump?” I asked. “I read his bio and it looks like he’s an academic who tried a thousand times to break into politics but failed every time.”

“He wrote a book that caught Trump’s son-in-law’s eye,” answered Tony. “It is about how China has been ripping off the U.S. with unfair trade policies. It fed into Trump’s already negative view of China, so Navarro became an expert by default.”

“I brought a copy of last week’s Economist,” said Franky. “I wanted to read something to you from the lead article titled *Ruin Day*. It’s The Economist’s take on what Trump has been calling “Liberation Day”:

*‘If you failed to spot America being <looted, pillaged, raped and plundered by nations near and far>’ those are words used by Trump ‘or it being cruelly denied a turn to prosper, then congratulations: you have a firmer grip on reality than the President of the United States. It’s hard to know which is more unsettling: that the leader of the free world could spot complete drivel about its most successful and admired economy; or the fact that on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, spurred on by delusions, Donald Trump announced the biggest break in America’s trade policy in over a century—and committed the most profound, harmful and unnecessary economic error in the modern era.’*

“I guess their White House reporter will be having his press pass revoked after that indictment,” said Tony.

“It gets worse,” said Franky. Listen to this:

*‘Almost everything Mr. Trump said this week—on history, economics and technicalities of trade—was utterly deluded. His reading of history is upside down. He has long glorified the high-tariff, low-income-tax era of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, the best scholarship shows that tariffs impeded the economy back then. He has now added the bizarre claim that lifting tariffs caused the Depression of the 1930s and that the Smoot-Hawley tariffs were too late to rescue the situation. The reality is that the tariffs made the Depression much worse, just as they will harm all economies today. It was the painstaking rounds of trade talks in the subsequent 80 years that lowered tariffs and helped increase prosperity.’* Here’s the killer statement. *‘On economics Mr Trump’s assertions are flat-out nonsense. The president says tariffs are needed to close America’s trade deficit, which he sees as a transfer of wealth to foreigners. Yet as any of the president’s economists could have told him, this overall deficit arises because Americans choose to save less than their country invests—and, crucially, this long-running reality has not stopped its economy from outpacing the rest of the G7 for over three decades.’*

“I’ll make one correction to that last statement,” said Tony. “Trump does not have any economists who know anything about economics, so they couldn’t have told him he was stupid and wrong.”

“One last dig: *‘Mr. Trump’s grasp of the technicalities was pathetic. He suggested the new tariffs were based on an assessment of a country’s tariffs against America.’*”

“That was the prop he was struggling to hold up for the cameras in the Rose Garden,” I interrupted. “I’ll be willing to bet that the guy or girl who put that together has gotten the boot.”

“I’ll bet you’re right. It continues: *‘But it looks as if officials set the tariffs using a formula that takes America’s bilateral trade deficit as a share of goods imported from each country and halves it—which is almost as random as taxing you on the number of vowels in your name.’*”

“Do the economists at *The Economist* have any bright ideas about what to do about it?” asked Tony.

Franky answered, “Under the subtitle at the end of the article, *The madness of King Donald*, it says the rest of the free world should not throw up barriers but should work hard to build better trading relations among themselves and basically forget the U.S. It says that the U.S. is not really that big an importer. It takes half of what the other countries take from themselves, excluding China. It says they should not get closer to China until China cleans up its own act, especially its tendency to build too much for its own demand and then dumps its over production on the rest of the world.”

“While the economy is falling off a cliff and Russia keeps pummeling Ukraine, King Donald plays golf with Gulf State pooh bahs and collects donations for his next run for president,” said Tony.

Eddie came by with her bottomless coffee pot. We had finished our breakfasts in between talking. “I thought I would mention to you boys that there is going to be a procession on Holy Thursday from my church, Saint Vladimir Ukrainian Church on Seventh Avenue, to Saint Peter’s Cathedral on Wyoming Avenue.

The Bishop is going to give our Pastor a donation from the Diocese to the people of Ukraine. He is also going to give him a framed copy of a letter he and a large group of other American bishops have sent to the Pope asking him to support the Ukrainian people, and to stop talking like it was Ukraine that started this war.”

“Maybe the letter will have to be delivered by angels,” joked Tony.

Eddie frowned—then smiled.

“When does it start,” asked Franky.

“Three p.m.,” answered Eddie. “I’ll be leaving work early in order to be there.” She left and we looked at each other.

“Let’s go,” I said.

“All these years, I thought Eddie was Greek, like the owners,” whispered Franky.

“Just goes to show you,” said Tony. “You never know until you know.”

“Isn’t it: You can’t know what you don’t know?” I said.



At two a.m. on Sunday morning, Palm Sunday, Governor Shapiro, his family and guests who had celebrated the first evening of Passover with a seder, were awakened by Pennsylvania State Troopers. The south wing of the governor’s mansion was ablaze. Someone had broken in, started a fire, and escaped capture by the police, who had chased him. They were all evacuated while the fire was extinguished. Cody Balmer, 38, of Harrisburg,

was later arrested and charged with attempted murder, aggravated assault, burglary, terrorism, and arson. Balmer had placed a 911 call an hour after he set the blaze and told the operator that “Governor Josh Shapiro needs to know that Cody Balmer will not take part in his plans for what he wants to do to the Palestinian people. He needs to stop having my friends killed.”



The Pope died two days ago, on Easter Monday. He was 88. He got to deliver his *Urbi Et Orbi* Blessing blessing from the balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square. “To the city and the world.” He told us to revive our trust in others, especially people from other countries who have come to our countries to find a new life. He told us to respect other people's religions and ways of thinking. He asked Hamas to release the hostages and Israel to stop the bombing. He mentioned Yemen, Syria, Myanmar, Sudan, Congo, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. He asked Christ to grant Ukraine, devastated by war, his Easter gift of peace, and encouraged all parties involved—without mentioning Russia—to pursue efforts aimed at achieving a just and lasting peace. He met with Zelensky four times. The last time they met, Zelensky gave the Pope a painting by a young Ukrainian artist depicting a scene from the city of Bucha where 630 people were killed in a Russian attack. The last time the Pope talked about Ukraine, he told the Ukrainians that it was time to wave the white flag. The Ukrainians said they had only one flag to wave, and it was yellow and blue. Maybe the next Pope will be a Ukrainian. Tony was right. The letter from the American bishops would have to be delivered by angels.

I'll be eating *ciambellone* and hard boiled eggs for breakfast for the rest of the week. Ellen took over the *ciambellone* baking from Ma, along with the weekly bread baking. I always liked the taste of *ciambellone*, but it is very dry, especially after a few days. Ma used to wrinkle her nose when I cut slices that would fit into the toaster and then cover the toasted slices with lots of butter and strawberry jam. I've also got enough lamb for a week of dinners. Ellen and Jenny both made lamb roasts. Annie made *cappelletti* and Guy made *torta Pasqualina*, the southern Italian specialty made with spinach, egg, and ricotta wrapped in a flaky dough. Carmy and Mary brought stuffed artichokes. I have servings of each of those as well. We were all at Annie and Guy's. We are definitely doing our part to keep the old Italian American traditions going.

Annie and I are meeting Danny Eans in an hour to talk about the suit. Danny lives in Carl's Summit, but has his office across from the county court house. He clerked for Connie when he finished law school. He went to Temple, like Connie. For Annie, Pope Francis walked on water, so I'll keep my thoughts about the Pope to myself. She was waiting on the curb in front of their house when I drove up the street to pick her up.

"It was a great Easter dinner, Annie," I said after she was in and buckled up.

"It's not the same without Connie, either for you or for me. Connie made Easter so much fun. She was so excited about everything to do with the holiday, even the religious part. She talked about which churches we were going to visit on Thursday and where we would do the stations of the cross on Friday. 'We have to give all the churches a chance,' she would say. She loved coloring the eggs. She always wanted a white chocolate bunny in

her basket. Picking out the hat she would wear to church on Easter Sunday was the biggest clothes-buying decision of the year. You know all this.”

“She never changed, and she spread her excitement to me and the kids. I see it with Carmy and Ellen and my grandkids.”

We rode for awhile without talking. Then she said, “You know Danny better than I do. Do you think he has the stuff to deal with the Luccatellas?”

“Yes. Connie said she never knew anyone who thought about the steps in a case the way a chess master thinks about moves on the board. You’ll see what I mean.”

We parked in the garage next to the two story building where his office was located. We went into the entry and walked up the stairs to the second floor. I wondered how many lawyers had their practices in here over the hundred or so years since this building was built. There was still a faint smell of cigar and pipe smoke that must have at one time filled every office and the hallways. Every office had a couple of lawyers in their three-piece suits and bowties and their pocket watches that they took out every time they started a conversation with a client and then again when they finished. Danny’s office was at the top of the stairs. Daniel M. Eans, Attorney at Law and Notary Public. We knocked on the door. A woman, probably in her middle fifties, opened the door and welcomed us in. “You must be Annie Donnatelli, Connie’s sister, and you are Nicky Fabriano, Connie’s husband. I’m Lillie Stepchak, Attorney Eans’ legal aid and administrative assistant. He’s waiting for you right through that door. There’s coffee and tea in the room.”

It was a large room with a good view over to the court house. Danny wasn't wearing a three-piece suit with a pocket watch, and he didn't have on a bowtie, but he was dressed appropriately for court.

"Hi Nicky. Hi Annie. Please come in. Annie, I wasn't sure if you had a favorite doughnut, but I did order Nicky's honey-dipped crullers."

We sat at his big conference table, poured coffee, and took our pick of the doughnuts. Mine was a given.

"Gus Stucciano has only one client, and it's the Luccatellas, so this is obviously something they have cooked up. Right?"

"Right. We did a little investigating based on a hunch that Annie's brother Tony had, that the person who is bringing the suit did have some connection to Stan Lewandowski. I remembered that Stan was a member of the Polish Falcons in Marcy, the town just over the county line from Drake's Crossing. We found someone who knew Stan and he gave us the whole story. His name is Paul Malashevski, and is eighty-eight years old. He was a kid when Stan died during the war, and he remembers going to his car shop with his father and even went to Stan's funeral. Stan never married. Malashevski said that Stan had a very honest reputation, and if he had gotten a woman pregnant, he would have married her. He said that Stan's sister and her husband had one son, and they took in a foster child when they found that they couldn't have any more children. They never adopted him, and he kept his own name. Paul thought it was Lewis, but he said it could have been Loomis. The kid's father had died and his mother was sick and couldn't take care of him. She died after her son came to live with Stan's sister and her husband. Their son was drafted and died in the war. Loomis was drafted, joined the

Navy, and then just disappeared. He never came back after the war. Maybe he wrote to his foster parents, but Malashevski was pretty sure they never met him after he left.”

“What do the Luccatellas want from you?”

“They want the building because they think it will be worth a bundle if the Oneida Indian tribe get the land along the river for a reservation and build a casino. The Luccatella’s think they can put something on our site, maybe another casino.”

“They fire-bombed the restaurant and Carmy’s car repair shop,” added Annie. “The police found the kids who were paid to do it, but it was all done over the Internet, so there was no way to link it to the Luccatellas.”

“Is it really possible that the Luccatellas and their lawyer could think we wouldn’t find the connection to a foster child? For them to win this case, they have to prove that the plaintiff is actually the son of Stan Lewandowski, which will be very difficult unless they exhume him and run a DNA test. Since this is not a criminal case, it will be extremely difficult to obtain permission to do that. Maybe they thought it would be possible to convince a judge that the fact that the kid was living with Stan’s sister, it would be enough circumstantial evidence to prove the kid was Stan’s and they took him in. It should be easy enough to find the birth certificate for him, unless Stucciano has bribed a registrar general. If he was drafted, he had to be registered. When did the fire bombing occur?”

“On the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, the day after the inauguration,” I answered. “Ricky Luccatella’s son was one of the Capitol terrorists that Trump pardoned.”

“So they put a scare in you to make sure you understand they aren’t going to take no for an answer when they make a play to take over the property. Then they expect you to take a low-ball offer to settle the suit. Tell me how your father got the property, Nicky, and how you came to divide it with Annie.”

I gave him the whole story, except for the part about how Lucca actually met his Waterloo. That was going to stay a family secret, and after fifty years of Christmas cookies, Ginger was as good as family.

“This story would make a good book—or a movie,” said Danny when I had finished. “Here’s what I suggest we do. If you are served with a complaint, you can either answer it by the deadline, which in this case is twenty days, or ignore it. If you ignore it, the court will make a judgment based on the filing by the plaintiff. Usually, the judgment is in favor of the plaintiff, so your property will be handed over to William Loomis. I suggest that we respond. Either we can tell the court we will negotiate with the plaintiff, file a motion to dismiss the claim, or file a counter claim against the plaintiff. We don’t have any basis for a counterclaim, and there is no reason to negotiate for a settlement because we believe the claim is baseless, so we should file a motion to dismiss. I will include in the dismissal claim the full story of how the property was passed to your father, Nicky, beginning with your father working with Lewandowski and having a verbal agreement with him that he would turn the place over to him, and including the criminal action by Stucciano’s grandfather.”

“Should we try to talk to William T. Loomis?” asked Annie.

“If you agree, I will contact a private detective in San Diego through an agency that lawyers use for such cases. He can do all of the background checks.”

“That sounds good,” I said.

“I will ask one of my associates to put together all the information about the great grandfather up to the time he was drafted. One more thing. We have to be open to the possibility that the first Loomis was the illegitimate son of Stan Lewandowski.”



*Mom used to say that someone had ants in their pants if they were always moving around. It wasn't necessarily a criticism, but it wasn't a compliment either. People who she described as having ants in their pants had a hard time sitting still. They couldn't concentrate on anything for very long. They were not good listeners because listening requires stopping what you're doing and focusing on what someone is saying. People with ants in their pants have difficulty stopping and focusing, so, by definition, they were lousy listeners. Donald Trump has ants in his pants. Mom would have probably used something stronger to describe his inability to focus and hear what people say.*

*I've taken a pause from watching and listening to the news, Connie. The overload that came on the one hundredth day of his second presidency was just too much. It was all getting too jumbled and complicated. The stock market is down six thousand points since the king had himself crowned. Everybody was going to get rich from tariffs, but we all had to get poor first. One day, all the tariffs are on, and the next day they're off. We're suddenly shipping both criminals and innocent people to prisons in Central America, threatening to take over countries and canals, cancelling research grants to universities, closing embassies, sharing state*

*secrets with family chat groups. People are demonstrating and calling for the president to resign. I feel like something is going to happen that has never happened before in America. Is it possible that the military will arrest the President, Vice President, and the entire Cabinet? Will it go that far to save the country from turning into Russia. I need a break from the news to let my head clear.*



“You were right, as usual, on two counts,” said Franky. “Waltz got the boot, but Trumpty Dumpty is keeping him up on the wall, rather than pushing him off so that he can blab his story to Time, or maybe The Atlantic.”

It was the first Saturday in May and Tony, Jenny, Franky, Donna, and I were in Franky’s Lexus driving toward the Bronx for a Yankees game. They’re hosting Tampa Bay, and blanked them yesterday in the first of three games. Today’s game starts at one, and it’s now nine-thirty as we stop for coffee at the Mount Arlington, New Jersey Dunkin’ Donuts off Exit 30 on Route 80. We’ve stopped here several times before, and I knew they didn’t have my favorite, but they always have glazed sourdough, which are a good second choice. Every time I make this trip I think of the first time Connie drove through the Delaware Water Gap and Connie saw the Mohican Chief. Connie and I were sitting in the back seat of Pa’s car. He was driving and Ma was in her usual place next to him. They were taking me to Fort Dix from where I would ship out for Vietnam. There were many trips through the Gap after we were married, and we always looked up to make sure that the Mohican Chief’s profile was still visible. Over the past sixty years, erosion has softened his features, but he is still recognizable. I liked the old Route 46 better with the Midway Diner and its banana cream pie and Hot Dog Johnny’s. Route 80

was finished in '86, and since then, trying to follow '46 all the way to the George Washington Bridge became too much of a hassle. Johnny's is still there, but Midway is long gone. Connie and I used to take the kids for a Saturday drive just to have a Johnny's hot dog and root beer.

"It just goes to show you how this crew feels about the United Nations, to push Waltz out of the inner circle and dump him into the UN ambassador's chair," continued Franky.

"I'm surprised they haven't said we're leaving the UN like they're pulling us out of everything else," added Donna. "I guess putting Waltz there is the same thing. We haven't paid our dues for at least the last year. I heard on Morning Edition yesterday that if you don't pay for two years, you lose your vote in the General Assembly, but not the Security Council. They were talking about whether the UN would try to enforce that."

"Maybe that's what pushed Trump to de-fund NPR and PBS," said Franky.

"Trump owes NPR a big thank you," said Donna. "I remember when Trump first announced that he was going to run for president in 2016. It was in June of 2015, and it was at the Trump Tower. During the following months there were plenty of jokes about him. People were referring to him as The Donald. I was listening to a late afternoon NPR panel discussion on WVIA, and someone called him The Donald. One of the people on the panel said that it was not going to reflect well on those who belittled Trump if he did get the Republican nomination because it would be a sign of disrespect both for those who selected him and for the presidency in general. Everyone agreed, and, after that, I never heard the term used on NPR. Someone should remind him of that."

“It won’t make any difference to him,” said Franky.

“I wonder if the non-Trump billionaires are going to step up to replace the half-a-billion in funding to them that Trump said he is cancelling,” said Jenny. “Tony looked up a couple of rich Democratic supporters this morning to see how much they could give if they handed over everything they’re worth. George Clooney could deliver one year’s worth of funding.”

“The other George, Mr. Soros, could fund them for fifteen years if he cashed out,” said Tony. “Bezos’ ex-wife MacKenzie could carry them for fifty years.”

“Can you believe how much money these people have?” I said. “I remember when we were growing up and you talked about someone with a million dollars like he could buy a major league baseball team.”

“Not the Yankees,” broke in Franky. “George Steinbrenner bought it in ’73 for \$10 million in cash. His family still owns it and it’s worth close to \$10 billion today.”

“Who do you think the cardinals are going to pick as the next pope?” asked Donna. “The conclave starts next week. I’ll bet they’re going to get deadlocked between someone who is a liberal from Europe and a super conservative from Africa or Asia. I think they’re going to choose the converted Lutheran from Sweden.”

“Africa’s where the Church is growing fastest,” added Jenny. “Sooner or later they’re going to have to elect an African, but I don’t think it’s going to be this time. Are there any Americans who are in the running?”

“Two,” said Franky. “An Irishman from New York, Timothy Dolan, who’s Trump’s pick, and someone whose father was French and Italian and whose mother was from Peru. He spent most of his time as a priest in Peru. They say he’s too young to be Pope. He’s only sixty-nine.”

“Sounds perfect,” quipped Tony. “Too bad he doesn’t have some African ancestors.”

“He does,” said Franky. “A genealogist says there is evidence he has some black ancestors on his mother’s side who were from Creole country in Louisiana.”

“An American who is connected to Italy, France, South America, and the U.S. and who is part black,” said Jenny. “And to top it all, he’s young enough to not have one foot in the grave at the start. Sounds perfect.”

“Did you see what Trump was wearing at the Pope’s funeral?” asked Donna. “I guess he doesn’t have a black suit or a black tie. I’m surprised he didn’t have on a red tie and a MAGA hat.”

“He had a dark blue suit and a black tie on for Melania’s mother’s funeral,” said Tony. “I checked. He knows what should be worn at a funeral. Maybe he tried the suit and it didn’t fit, and maybe he was making a statement about the Pope by not wearing a black tie. If there is one thing we have learned about this guy is that he does not do what people expect him to do, and everything he does do he does for a reason.”

“That photograph of Trump and Zelensky sitting in extra seating chairs in St. Peter’s, knees to knees, is going to go down as one of the classics of diplomatic meetings. It was taken before the Pope’s ceremony. There were no hidden mikes, so as far as

we know there is no record of what they actually said during the fifteen minutes they met.”

“Maybe they were putting the final touches on their big minerals agreement that they signed this week,” suggested Jenny.

“You think?” exclaimed Donna. “In church?”

“There are no sacred places for Trump,” said Jenny. “The guy sells copies of a bible he had published called the God Bless the U.S.A. Bible. Can you believe it? I’ll bet he couldn’t name more than two of the apostles, Peter and Judas, but he could give you the names of the seven dwarfs and the three stooges.”

“The Trumper brings out the best of Jenny’s humoristic side,” laughed Tony.

“We better hit the road,” said Franky. “Wouldn’t want to miss batting practice when Judge hits homers on every pitch.”

We crossed over the Hudson River on the George Washington Bridge. “Let’s take the top deck,” I called out as we approached the bridge. The toll is fifteen bucks now. I think it was a dollar in the 50s. This bridge is almost a hundred years old. Whoever designed it must have been influenced by the Erector Sets. Maybe he designed them too. I used to build the bridge with my Erector Set, and it looked just like the real thing. I haven’t seen many long bridges, except in pictures and movies. I like this one because when I’m going over it, I’m usually going to a Yankees game. The game? Judge whacked a homer, his eleventh for the season. But we lost 3-2. I ate two Nathan’s Famous hot dogs.

On the same day that our lawyer filed our claim to dismiss the lawsuit brought by William Loomis, Annie and I were in his office to sign the dismissal papers. The private detective that Danny had hired made contact with Loomis. He was a fireman on the San Diego Fire Department. He told the private detective he had been contacted by a lawyer from Pennsylvania who said he represented people who were his grandfather's friends. They said they had proof that his grandfather should have inherited a property in a town that was owned by someone who they claimed was his great grandfather, someone with a long Polish name. He told these people that he was told that his great grandfather's name was Loomis, that he died and his wife could not take care of their child, who was his grandfather, so a family took him in and raised him. The family's name was Lenkewicz. He said his grandfather joined the Navy, was stationed in San Diego, served in the Pacific, and settled in San Diego when he was discharged. He married a local girl, worked as a maintenance man in City Hall, had two sons, one was his father who became a policeman, and the other one became a teacher. The lawyer told Loomis that he could prove that his father was the son of the other Polish guy, who was the brother of Lenkewicz's wife, and that he was raised by Lewandowski's sister. So he agreed to be part of the lawsuit."

"So, this Loomis totally corroborates what we learned from Paul Malashevski at the Polish Falcons," said Annie.

"Yes. I found the draft record and the birth certificate of William Loomis," continued Danny. "He was born in Marcy, Pennsylvania on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1920 to Thomas Loomis and Geraldine Grady Loomis. He was drafted on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1942. I also found papers for the transfer of his care from Geraldine to Leonard Lenkewicz and Katarina Lenkewicz on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May

1925. And I found the death certificates for both Leonard and Geraldine.”

“That kills the case, doesn’t it?” asked Annie.

“Yes,” answered Danny, “unless there is something that the Luccatellas have either found or forged that says Lewandowski promised to deed the property to Loomis. But trying to make Lewandowski into the great grandfather of William Loomis the First will not stand up in court.”

“But in his will, which we still have, it says that the property is deeded to Pa,” I said.

“I read the whole will,” replied Danny. “He left the property to Carmen Fabriano and everything else to his sister Katarina, including his house and all his money. I found the papers that showed the total value of this was close to \$150,000. He had been a good saver during his life. I found Katarina’s will. She died in 1965. Her husband had died ten years before, and she moved to Florida and spent the last five of those years in a nursing home. She left an estate worth only \$1,000, and that was used to pay for her burial. There is one more thing. We talked with the nursing home and learned that during the five years she was in a nursing home, a portion of the cost was paid by her foster son, William Loomis. We’ll file for the dismissal and then we will see what other proof they can come up with to justify their case. I find it hard to believe that Stucciano would try to make a case with such clear evidence against the main claim. He must have thought that it would never get this far, and that you would settle, or that there is much more going on that we have see so far.”

“Did you see the newspaper this morning?” I asked Danny.

“Yes,” replied Danny. “None of it makes sense to me. I don’t see how a tribe that has no legal standing in the state can claim land, and there is a treaty with this tribe that says it will make no claims on any land.”

“The Oneidas have finally submitted their proposal with a plan,” I said. “They want to put their casino on the west side of the river, on the land where Pignozzi’s lumberyard and hardware store are located. They show the Orchard as a parking lot accessed from Main Street at the southern end and from Adigi Street on the northern side with a connection over the river to the Interstate. It shows a hotel on the corner of Main where our property is now.”

“It feels like this whole thing has been cooked up to punish everyone living on the Orchard,” said Annie.

“It does,” said Danny. “These tribes have deep pockets now that they have been running casinos around the country, and they can pay for lawyers and engineering studies to tie up properties for a long time, wearing down everybody until they just give up. With this kind of proposal on the table it will be impossible to sell your homes unless you sell them to the tribe, and they’ll drive a hard bargain. In the meantime, if the land owners of the former rail lines give their approval to transfer the land to the Oneida, they can start to set up their reservation while the rest of the process takes its course.”

“Is there any way you think we can stop this Indian steam-roller?” I asked.

“It has to be proven that prior ownership by the Oneida tribe is not established,” answered Danny, “or if it was, that the tribe transferred that ownership to the person who sold the lots

to your grandparents. There is clearly a difference between the land that was owned by the railroads and the Orchard.”



“Was there this much interest in picking a new Pope twelve years ago when the cardinals chose Francis?” asked Kenny.

“I don’t remember,” I answered. I was sitting in Carmy’s office eating an Italian hoagie for lunch and watching CNN. Carmy’s partner in the shop, Greg Stancheck, and their new trainee, Kenny Walsh, were there as well. We made a regular thing about eating a hoagie lunch together on the second Thursday of every month. Today was the 8<sup>th</sup> of May and a special day.

“It only took two days and four ballots for the cardinals to decide,” said Greg. “That must be a record. Seems like it took weeks for the other popes.”

The white smoke went up this morning. Shortly after the signal went up, the new Pope appeared. He’s a sixty-nine-year-old American named Robert Francis Prevost, said the CNN announcer, and he has chosen the name Leo XIV. Then we got the answer to all our questions. That’s among the shortest conclaves in recent decades, but not the shortest ever. It took two days for Pope Francis, and only one more ballot. He was ordained in 1982 as an Augustinian priest. He was sent to Peru as an Augustinian missionary and eventually became the head of the order and ran it from Rome for twelve years between 2001 and 2013. That’s when he made all of his important connections at the Vatican. Before and after his twelve years in Rome, he lived and worked in Peru. Pope Francis made him a Cardinal in February, three months before he was elected as the new Pope.

“Do you think he’s going let women be ordained and priests get married?” said Greg, more of a reflection than a question.

When I was growing up, all Catholic boys were asked to give the priesthood serious reflection as part of their confirmation. I gave it a serious reflection—at least as serious as a fourteen-year-old could reflect—and could not imagine having a life that was different from the one I grew up in. I decided I wanted to have a wife and a family. I knew there were plenty of married couples who did not have children, but, back then, nobody said they didn’t want to have children. Connie and I were among the lucky ones. Connie told me before I went to Vietnam that she would prefer not to become a nun if I did not come back, but could think about being a priest if they were allowed to be ordained. Luckily, I finally came back, so she didn’t have to become Sister Contessa.”



The Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club had to move our scheduled Saturday meeting on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May to the following Monday, the 19<sup>th</sup>. Franky’s golf foursome kindly switched to the morning their mid-afternoon teeoff time at the country club with another group who had a member with a college graduation for his granddaughter to attend. It was just as well. Sunday had been an eventful day, so we had more to discuss.

“Did you boys get lost on your way here on Saturday?” joked Edie when we came in at our regular time but two days late. “You’re lucky we don’t charge for no-shows.”

“Franky was a Good Samaritan and switched his usual Saturday afternoon golf time,” answered Tony. “Do you have different breakfast specials on Mondays?”

“Would you like to try our bread fried in bacon grease topped with baked beans?”

“We’ll stick with our regular orders, thanks,” replied Franky.

“Nicky, pancakes or waffles?”

“Today feels like a pancake day, Edie.”

Edie set down the three cups she was carrying in one hand and filled them with coffee from the pot she was carrying in the other, then left for the kitchen. We got right down to business.

“I don’t see how the doctors could have missed Biden’s diagnosis of prostate cancer while he was still President,” said Franky. “They said it was a new finding of a prostate nodule which they found after Biden complained about difficulty urinating, and that it is metastasized to the bone. There must have been an indication that something was wrong well before, but maybe not when he dropped out of the race.”

“Maybe it was a deciding factor,” I said, “that they saw this nodule developing before July when Biden made his decision to quit the race. Maybe that’s the real reason he quit.”

“There was a doctor from Cambridge University,” said Franky, “who claimed there was plenty of evidence that showed men over eighty with prostate cancer die of something else. Maybe Joe looked at the odds and decided he would take his chances, but then his memory problems got the better of him.”

“The Republicans will have a field day with this,” said Tony. “If they did know about this before he quit, or even before the debate in June, why didn’t someone think about putting a positive spin on Joe’s bad news and suggest to Joe that by leaving the

field because of a health condition it would shine a spotlight on Trump's age. 'What's he hiding?' 'Who are these doctors giving him a clean bill of health?' Instead, he drops out reluctantly and does not mention anything about his general health. They could have connected his poor debate performance to his prostate cancer. But now, after the election is over and Trump is inaugurated, he tells everyone he might have had to quit after he was elected, or, worse, he would not have been able to complete his term. Joe should have thought of that, but if Joe didn't, someone in his organization should have."

"Think of what the Republicans and Fox News would have done to Joe if he had made the same grand tour of the Middle East and came home with a gold-plated 747 carrying a huge haul of gifts from the potentates," said Franky.

"It would have been nothing short of a virtual disembowelment," replied Tony.

"Donny decided not to attend the Pope's first mass," I said. "The last time he went to mass he got scolded by a female priest."

"Female bishop," corrected Tony. "She asked the President to have mercy on immigrants and the alphabet groups at the inaugural prayer service in the National Cathedral. "Be merciful," she urged. She had trounced Trump in a New York Times opinion piece during his first term when he made the famous bible walk from the White House across the street to St. John's Episcopal Church after federal officers had broken up a George Floyd death protest. I was really surprised that he let himself be set up for another pounding by her. What was he thinking? Didn't he check to see who was giving the sermon. The Trump contingent were clearly disturbed. Afterward, Trump got on his social media channel and asked for an apology from whom he called the

“so-called bishop and radical left hard line Trump hater”. She’s a bishop, not a so-called bishop. He said her tone was nasty. I listened to her sermon, and her tone was as far from being nasty as you can get. Hate the message, hate the person delivering it. That’s the true mark of a jerk, to use Robert De Niro’s term for Trump, not a statesman.”

“As long as we’re talking about spiritual matters, it looks like the Musketeer has fallen from grace,” said Franky. “There hasn’t been much barking coming out of the doggy house for a couple of weeks or a month. It looks like Rubio, Hegseth, and the Treasury guy...”

“Bessent,” added Tony. “Scott Bessent.”

“...and Bessent convinced their boss to can him.”

“The nail in Musk’s coffin was hammered in by himself. He tried to go around Bessent and put one of his buddies, Gary Shapely, in as the head of the Internal Revenue Service. Shapely warmed his chair for a total of seventy-two hours before the guards came in, packed up his stuff, and walked him out of the building. Musk and Bessent had it out in the White House after a meeting in the Oval Office, shouting at each other while walking through the halls. Musk managed to get everyone on Trump’s team to hate him. There was an article about Musk’s relationship to the cabinet and other staffers in Rolling Stone last month with quotes from staffers. ‘He’s always making jokes that aren’t funny and expects people to laugh,’ it said. ‘He thinks he’s smarter than everyone else in the room and acts like it, even when it’s clear he doesn’t know what he’s talking about.’ Pompous is a word that is used often to describe him. I guess, in the end, Trump figured he just was not worth the trouble.”

“Did he accomplish anything in those four months, other than confirming to the whole world what people who know him have been saying about him for years?” asked Franky.

“I have to admit I never gave the guy a second thought,” I said. “I wasn’t interested in buying anything he was selling, so I didn’t pay any attention to him or read anything that was written about him. I was surprised that he was given such prominence in the inauguration where he gave a speech that ended with a Nazi salute.”

“Two Nazi salutes,” corrected Tony.

“Two Nazi salutes. I thought that would be the end of him, but he certainly took up a lot of space during these four months.”

“I think the trip to the Middle East was Musk’s swan song as a member of the inner circle,” said Tony.

“He wasn’t on Air Force One, I read,” offered Franky.

“Trump probably wanted to enjoy the ride and not have any fights on board,” said Tony.

“You know,” said Franky, “When I sat down to watch the news of his trip to Saudi Arabia and the other countries in the neighborhood, I expected to see him wearing a robe and headgear with a MAGA logo.”

“The robe’s called a ‘thawb’,” added Tony. “The headdress is called a ‘ghutra’.”

“I promise you I will not remember either of those words. I could see him eyeing the kings and princes in envy, thinking how great he would look in one of those outfits, a twot and a gurka, seeing himself as Donald of Arabia.”

“That’s probably where he got his ideas for redecorating his office,” said Franky. “They probably have good prices on gold leaf over there.”

“Trump and Putin were no-shows at Pope Leo’s first mass yesterday,” I said. “I guess Putin wasn’t invited and Trump was massed out. The two top Catholics, Vance and Rubio were there. Zelensky was there as well. Isn’t he Jewish?”

“Yes,” answered Tony, “but the main reason he attended the mass was to have a meeting with the Pope afterward where the Pope offered the Vatican as a meeting ground for peace talks between Ukraine and Russia. Putin won’t accept that because it gives too much attention to a religion that competes with the Russian Orthodox sect.”

“They’re not under the Pope, right?” I asked. “They have their own leader. He’s got a name that I can’t remember.”

“Patriarch,” answered Franky. “I think Francis thought if he didn’t push Putin too hard, the Russia patriarch would be more willing to discuss a merger. I don’t think this pope is going to go down that rabbit hole.”



The Antonelli Annual Memorial Day Cookout has been an unbroken tradition for thirty-seven years. This year’s gathering was as great as all the previous years. Everyone was there. It’s a little more cramped than in the early days when it was at their house in Darlton. I think it makes it more cozy. I don’t know what happens when Franky and Donna are gone. Michael and Jean and their two kids seem to be pretty well ensconced in Brooklyn. They have good jobs. Michael is assistant provost at NYU and Jean works on the administrative staff of Brookdale

University Hospital in Brooklyn. They come in for all the holidays, and Memorial Day is no exception. Michael is like a very close cousin with all of our kids, and maybe if Carmy and Mary, or Ellen and Mike, or Sal and Rene decide to take over the tradition, Michael and Jean and their kids will keep coming in.

It was the Wednesday after Memorial Day and we were on our way up Interstate Route 81 to Verona, New York for a meeting with the Oneida Indian Nation Enterprises CEO, Ray Halbritter, and the Tribal Council. I was driving my Cherokee. Tony had joked that I should maybe park it off the reservation. Dan Eans was up front with me and Annie and Guy were in the back. Tony and Jenny had driven up in the Subaru Outback to meet Franky and Donna, and then hopped in the back of Franky's Lexus. Our meeting was due to start at eleven, and we had given ourselves plenty of extra time for the two-and-a-half-hour drive. We drove through Binghamton, bypassed Syracuse on 481, and then connected up with the New York State Thruway east to Exit 33. The meeting was at the Turning Stone Resort Casino. A twenty-story building with giant RS initials on top poked itself out of the flat landscape. We parked and went in the entrance. The guard at the reception area checked us in, gave us our visitor badges, and directed us to the elevator that took us up to the top floor. When the eight of us stepped off the elevator, there was a party of a eight men creating a semi-circle waiting to greet us. One of them stepped forward.

“Hi. I'm Ray Halbritter. Welcome to the Oneida Indian Nation. I will introduce you to each of our Tribal Council members.” We shook hands with each of the Council members. It reminded me of the handshake like at the end of hockey games, except this was at the beginning.

Eight of them and eight of us. Two more than on a hockey team. We moved to a conference room separated from the elevator lobby by a glass wall. There was a long, mahogany conference table with large cushioned and rollable chairs. On the side of the room opposite the interior glass wall were floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the lower-level casino complex, the golf course, and beyond. A long sideboard took up most of the space along one of the short walls. On the sideboard were trays of pastries and doughnuts, cups and saucers, knives, spoons and forks, coffee and hot water thermoses, and spring water in bottles. Above the sideboard was a round Oneida Indian Nation plaque, with an evergreen tree on a red background. There was a banner with a purple chain across the top of the tree. The other short wall was covered with photos of different sizes and from different eras which Ray told us were from the Oneida Nation's history.

"You had a long drive. Please help yourself to coffee or tea and pastries and we'll sit down and get started."

Each of us took a plate and a beverage and took our seats. The Council sat on the side facing the inner wall, and the eight of us sat on the side facing the outside view. Ray sat in one of the two middle chairs. Danny sat across from Ray, and I sat in the other middle chair with Annie to my right.

"You asked for this meeting to discuss our proposal to build a reservation along the banks of the Lenape River and a casino in Drake's Crossing," said Ray. "You said that you are not representing the Borough of Drake's Crossing, but you have come as residents of the location of the proposed parking lot for our Casino. You would like to discuss whether there is an alternative to this part of our plan. Is that an accurate description of the purpose of this meeting?"

“Yes,” answered Danny. “Five of those who are seated at the table, Nicky, Tony, Jenny, Guy, and Annie, live on the land in question, which is referred to as The Orchard. One of them, Franky, and his wife Donna, sold the property that Franky’s grandfather had built to Guy and Annie. I live in Drake’s Crossing, but not on The Orchard. I have been retained by these seven people to represent them. What my clients would like to understand is the basis for the claim by the Oneida Indian Nation on The Orchard.”

“The area you call The Orchard is part of a tract of land that we can prove belongs to the Oneida Nation. It was returned to us by the people who had settled in the area called Drake’s Crossing following the end of the war between the Colonists and the British. It was an acknowledgement of our people’s help to the Colonists during that war. We intend to make all of the land part of the Oneida Nation and have it officially designated as a reservation. You probably know this, but it is worth saying now. Our Nations are sovereign, with our own laws, our own law enforcement, and our own courts. We run our communities with no interference from the states in which they are located or from the federal government. The rights to run casinos or to gamble are not special rights given to the Nations by the federal government or any other level of the United States government as a gift or privilege. It is a civil right that we never gave away. There was a 1987 Supreme Court decision that said the Nations have the authority to manage gaming on their reservations and other tribal lands without being subject to state laws.”

“Thank you for that explanation. Just to be clear,” said Danny, “when you say “returned”, do you mean that it is your understanding that the land was purchased by the Colonists from the Iroquois on two different occasions, and that at the time of

these purchases the Oneidas were part of the Iroquois Confederacy.”

“Yes,” replied Ray, “on both counts.”

“May I ask what is the proof that this land was returned to the Oneida Nation?” asked Danny.

Ray produced a piece of parchment from a large manilla envelope that was on the table in front of him. The parchment looked old, and there was writing on it that looked like it had been made with an ink pen. There was also a drawing of a map. Ray did not give the parchment to Danny, but read what it said. “We the people of Drake’s Crossing do hereby return to the Oneida people the land shown on this map which was purchased by the Connecticut and Pennsylvania colonies from the Iroquois Nation, and we do this out of gratitude for the help you gave to us in our fight for independence from the British. It is signed Charles Drake and dated the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1805.” Ray put the paper on the table in front of him so that we could see it. The area designated on the map was The Orchard. It was not clear whether Pignozzi’s property was included because Elk Road leading from the center of the town across the Lenape River was not shown.

“So, if I understand you correctly, this is the basis for your case to be granted permission to take over ownership of the land contained within The Orchard, remove all buildings on this land, pave it over and use it as a parking lot for the proposed casino,” said Danny. “Is this the entire body of proof?”

“Yes,” answered Ray.

“May I ask if this paper has been in the possession of the Oneida Indian Nation since 1805,” asked Danny.

“Well, yes and no,” replied Ray. “It was brought to us about eight months ago by a tribe member who lives in Wisconsin. He said he found it amongst his father’s belongings when he died. His great, great, great, great grandfather was an Oneida Nation chief when this contract was signed. His great, great, great grandfather left the reservation in Verona and moved to the reservation in Wisconsin.”

“I see,” said Danny. “Is all of this documented, the fact that the person’s great great, great, great grandfather was a chief and that his great, great, great grandfather resettled in Wisconsin?”

“We didn’t have those kinds of records back then,” answered Ray, “but the person who gave us this contract is a bonified member of the Oneida nation.”

“So, the great, great, great, great grandfather and all the grandfathers down to this person had the contract but didn’t do anything with it, and that is why this claim was never made earlier, correct?”

“Correct,” replied Ray, now clearly showing some irritation at being on the receiving end of a courtroom grilling.

“Has the paper been authenticated for its age?” continued Danny.

“The tribe member who brought it to us said that he had taken it to a museum in Green Bay, and they authenticated it. Here’s the paper from them.”

Danny took the paper, glanced at it, and then handed it back to Ray. “Since this is the only evidence for the claim,” said Danny, “it will be necessary for it to be examined by experts in

connection with the legal action necessary to complete the transfer of the titles for all of the properties on The Orchard. We will have it carbon-dated, both the paper and the ink.”

“It isn’t our intention to just throw everyone out of the houses that they or their ancestors have built. We understand that they paid for the properties in good faith when they bought their plots. So we will offer every property owner a fair price.”

“What happens if we don’t feel that the price you offer is fair,” I asked, “or if we don’t want to move at all?”

“I guess we will negotiate on the price,” answered Ray, “but if we own the land on which the house is built, then eventually, you will have to move. In the meantime, you will be living in the middle of a parking lot.”

“Is there any room in your plans to change your mind about using The Orchard and removing it from your claim?” asked Danny.

“No,” answered Ray. “The condition we have for using the property for the casino is that the parking lot has to be where The Orchard is located.”

“I see,” said Danny. I could see his wheels turning. I could not see the slightest change in his expression, but I had the strongest feeling that he had put his chess piece in a position to declare checkmate in a few more moves. “So, the land where the casino will be situated, which is owned by Pignozzi, is not part of the area designated as a gift of returned land from the people of Drake’s Crossing to the Oneida Nation, correct?”

“That’s part of the donation of the land that will be used as a reservation,” answered Ray, seeming to be unprepared for the question.

“I have not understood who is making the donation of the land on both sides of the Lenape River?” asked Danny. “That has not been clear in any of the articles in the newspapers. There is no mention about Pignozzi donating his land either.”

“Well,” answered Ray, “we are not here to discuss that.”

“Yes,” said Danny, “we are here only to discuss the The Orchard, but it seems to be odd that a property owner who is donating his property and on which there will be built a large casino complex can make demands about property that he doesn’t own. I wonder what the legal basis for such a condition might be. You could make an agreement with Pignozzi to build a casino on his property without needing any other property up and down the Lenape River, and especially not The Orchard, or you could build your Casino and parking lot on any piece of the vacant land along the river that you are asking to be donated without needing the Pagnozzi property or The Orchard. I suppose there isn’t any more that we can discuss right now. I believe we understand what you intend to do if you are able to prove your claim to this land. Thank you for your time and your hospitality, and I suppose we shall see you in court.”

With that, the eight of us got up and prepared to leave the room. I spoke. “There is something I think you should know,” I said. “Our families have been threatened by unidentified parties—although we are certain we know who they are—in an attempt to frighten us into submitting to this takeover of our properties as well as a property in the middle of Drake’s Crossing

which my father was given. My son and Annie's son run businesses on that property. I don't know if you are aware of these activities, but it seems that you have chosen to work with people who feel they are above the law. As a former police chief of Drake's Crossing, I can tell you we have worked very hard for many years to prevent these parties from affecting the lives of residents of our borough as they affected our families. We will not stop our efforts, and we are not going to sit by idly and let anyone take our properties from us, and it does not matter if it is you or a bunch of gangsters."

There was quiet in the room. Ray finally broke the silence. "Whether we take your land or not is something we can discuss, but we intend to accept the donation of the rest of the land and build a casino. You can be sure of that. Then you can see how much your properties will be worth when you have something like you see here right next to you."

"Shall we go?" said Danny, and we left the Tribal Council in the conference room. We were quiet as we walked back to our cars. Before we climbed in the cars, we huddled in the parking lot.

"This whole thing looks to be as phony as that piece of paper Ray showed us," said Tony.

"Either these people are really delusionary," said Danny, "or they are certain that every judge at the country, state, and federal level can be bought."

"I guess they think because they were swindled out of their land, it's alright to swindle to get it back," said Guy.

"It looks more like they believe their land was taken from them by force when they were weak two-hundred-and-fifty

years ago,” added Annie, “so now that they have force, meaning money, they can use it to take it back.”

“Let’s stop in Syracuse for lunch,” suggested Franky. “I know a great diner. We stopped there on the way up for our game sixty years ago, which we lost. That was a bad season for the team. Five and five.”

“That was the week before West Virginia when they broke your leg, right?” asked Tony.

“My one and only catch in a game that we won. My college football career’s debut and swan song in the same game. At least we won the game.”



My phone rang while I was watching Washington Week.

“It’s Gail, Chief. We just got a call from your nephew Sal at the restaurant. Luccatella’s gang showed up for dinner and he’s worried there’s going to be trouble. Annie and Guy are there.”

“I’ll be right there,” I said, and I hung up. I thought briefly about taking my gun, but I decided against it. I called Tony as I was going out of the house. I told him what Gail had told me and picked him up at the curb. I drove a bit over the speed limit, parked around back, and went in through the kitchen.

“The son-of-a-bitch made a big mistake, Nicky,” said Guy. “He’s gonna pay. He already has.” He walked out, and Tony and I followed.

“I see you called for back-up,” said Ricky.

“They are just here as witnesses,” said Guy. “How did you all enjoy the bruschetta? Good? Anyone didn’t eat one? You didn’t

have one, Googie? Okay, you can do the driving. I suggest you pack them all into the little boy's Cybertruck and take them into the hospital. The rat poison I put into the bruschetta to spice them up will start to work soon. Better put them all in the back, Googie, so it will be easier to clean up the puke. Just hose it off. But, before you go, I want to let you in on something. You have forgotten where I came from. I have lots of cousins in New York who have been keeping their eyes out for me and Annie. They don't like what you have been doing up here, not telling them about what you have cooked up with the Indian tribe in New York. They'll be visiting you real soon to have a heart-to-heart with you. I gave them a call when you came in, just in case there was trouble, and then you had to go and insult my wife. That was not good, Ricky. No, that was not good at all. Probably the biggest mistake you ever made, except for celebrating with champagne after your brother's death.

"Okay, Googie. Take them all out now..."

Ricky stood up, pulled out his revolver and pointed it at Guy.

"Go ahead, little man, shoot me. That will certainly be the end of your piss pot operation. That will be the final nail in the coffin that you and your entire crooked family will be buried in."

Ricky turned red and then white and then green, and then he fainted. Gail had come in and took the gun out of his hand while she covered the rest with her own revolver.

"Pick him up and get him to the hospital as quick you can or he and the rest of you may not live to eat another bruschetta," ordered Guy.

They picked up Ricky who was coming to, and carried him out the door. Sal and Rene came out. The rest of the guests who

were there had been led out by Gail before we had arrived. We stood there looking at Guy.”

“I only wish I did have connections to *gli camorristi*,” said Guy, smiling. “Gail, I guess you will want to book me for attempted murder. It wasn’t rat poison. I put turmeric on each of the bruschetta, so they’ll feel like something is going on in their bodies while they rush to the hospital. ”

“What happened?” I asked.

“They booked a table for eight at eight in a name we didn’t recognize,” answered Sal. “Six of them showed up at once, and Rene took them to their table. Ricky and Eedo came in about ten minutes later. Rene took their order, and then Ma came out to see who was there. That’s when Ricky called her ‘cousin’ and told her that she had his brother’s eyes.”

I looked at Annie. She had a blank stare on her face. Was she thinking whether it was true, that the person she had helped to kill sixty years ago was her real father. Then she spoke.

“That’s what these people do,” she said. “They live to hurt others, to suck their blood, to put worms in their minds. Ma would have killed Lucca and then killed herself along with me if he had raped her. I know who I am and who my father is. His name is Errico Malatesta. That’s more than all of the people who were sitting around this table can say.” She looked at Guy and smiled. “That’s my man.”

After Gail left, Guy said, “That wasn’t the whole truth. I did talk to a cousin in Brooklyn, and the boys in New York will be having, what’s it called when Indians talk?”

“A pow wow,” replied Tony.

“Yes, a pow wow. And one more little thing I would rather we kept to ourselves. Rene put her phone on audio on the side table and taped their conversation. It will make interesting hearing, both for the Oneidas and for the judge hearing the case.”



Franklin was watching me as I ate breakfast and read the paper. He's a faithful friend. I hope he stays out of range of the hawks. 'Musk On Drugs During Campaign', was the headline on the second page. It was a story broken by The New York Times. He had his kid with him most of the time, a five-year-old named X. He calls everything X. Maybe he has a problem remembering names, so he calls everything and everyone X. I wonder what he calls his other kids. I read somewhere that he has fourteen kids with four women. One of his kids has changed his or her sex and disavowed him, and he disowned him or her. Was he taking drugs while his kid was with him? That's pretty irresponsible if he was. Musk said The Times isn't trustworthy and the story was all lies.

He had a bad shiner in the photo of him taking a present from Trump, a gold key. Did Trump get a couple of extra ones while he was in the Middle East? They're probably real gold, or at least gold-plated. Nice of him to share. Trump's thanking Musk for all his great work with D.O.G.E. now that Musk has decided to call it quits and get back to running his companies. I don't follow the financial news, but it's been hard to miss that his car company is in trouble since he became the unofficial leader of Trump's cost-cutting department. Sales of his clunky cars are way down. I never understood why anyone bought them, but now all the people who voted for Harris, or would have voted for Joe, have a reason not to buy them, on top of the fact that they're

expensive and ugly. Trump says Elon isn't really leaving. He's done a great job to get D.O.G.E. set up and running, says Trump, and Musk will keep his eye on it while he gets back to his businesses. Musk says he'll always be there to give advice. It looks like the intense part of the bromance is over between the two of them. It couldn't last with two guys who want all the attention.

The shiner? Where did it come from? It was X who gave it to him. They were "horsing around", he said. He told X to punch him, and he did! Didn't Musk ever learn how to duck?

Annamaria came in. "Good morning, Grandpa." She was carrying the brick-colored Stanley thermos I had given her for her birthday. She's become an expert in brewing hot chocolate.

"Good morning, counsellor. Are you ready for a long morning of reviewing cases? How far have you gotten?"

"I'm up to the Fourth Amendment. That's the one on protection from unreasonable search and seizure."

"It's the only one I know by heart: "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

"Grandpa, when you were Chief of Police, did you ever feel that the Fourth Amendment made it possible for a criminal to escape prosecution?"

"Yes. I am certain that if we were allowed to simply go into the Luccatellas' houses without having to specify what we were looking for, we would find enough evidence to put the whole

bunch of them in jail for life. But, as you know, that's not how the laws work in our country."

"Do you think that's a good thing, that we can't do what they do in other countries that don't have these kinds of laws?"

"Yes, I do. For every criminal we might catch, we would put many more people who are completely innocent in jeopardy. Just being accused of a crime is often enough to ruin a person's life. We have enough ways to catch criminals, especially with all the new techniques we have developed, like DNA tests."

"Next year I will have my first biology course and I hope to learn about things like DNA."

"What was your favorite course this year. Do you have a favorite?"

"Yes. It's a history course with Mr. Cardone, History From the Ground Up. We take an element from the Periodic Table and learn how it was discovered, what it meant to the people who discovered it, how it affected what people did over the years, and lots of other things. We spent a week on each element, so we studied thirty-six elements out of the one hundred and eighteen. It was really fun. We started with gold, silver, and iron and ended with uranium, iodine, and carbon."

"I had your Mr. Cardone's father as my science teacher. He was my favorite teacher. I guess he passed on his love of teaching to his son, along with his love of science. What a great sounding course. I wonder if they would let me take it next year. Maybe I could apply to be a teacher's assistant."

That evening we met at Tony and Jenny's place to listen to the recording Rene made of the conversation at the restaurant. I

had called Danny and asked him to join us. We left the kids in the entertainment room watching Mission Impossible on the super-sized screen while we met around the kitchen table. Rene put the phone in the middle of the table and turned on the recording.

“Stucciano says the adopted kid thing ain’t gonna work.” It was Ricky talking. He sounded drunk.

“Hej, Ricky, maybe they got a wire in here,” one of them said.

“Stucciano’s a stupido, just like his fadder and his gran’fadder,” continued Ricky, ignoring the advice. “They got someone out der to talk to the kid, so anything we try to show is gonna go tru a wringer. So, forget about it.”

“Can you pause for a second, Rene,” said Danny. “The judge took one look at the paper they claimed Lewandowski signed promising to leave his property to Loomis and knew it was a forgery. He had a lab analyze it just to make sure, and of course it was. Okay, start it up.”

“I say we burn the place down with pros this time,” said Ricky’s son, Eedo.

“These folks ain’t as stupid as we think,” said another voice that sounded like Googie. “We shouldn’t be talking here.”

Eedo continued, ignoring the good advice he was getting, just like his father. “Once it’s gone and the injuns get approval, we can put up our hotel anywhere around here. I say we buy up the properties around it.”

“I ain’t so sure those redskins have the balls to push this through,” said Ricky. “It all hangs on a piece’a papper Stucciano cooked....”

“Wait! Wait! Wait!” someone interrupted in a loud voice. Then there was Annie’s voice, “Here’s your starters, boys. Make sure you don’t leave anything on the plate or you won’t be getting your main courses.”

“Hi, cuz. Boy, you got my brudder’s eyes.”

“Okay,” said Annie. “I think we heard enough.”

“Please send me a copy of the call,” said Danny, “and I’ll have it put in a safe place with the other evidence we’ve been collecting.”

Danny called Annie and me the next day to say the suit by Loomis was dismissed for lack of credible evidence for the claim. I thanked him for a great job and told him he could now concentrate on saving The Orchard.



“Do you believe what the Ukranians did to the Russians,” said Carmy as we drove to the shop, where I was going to spend the day working on a ’55 Chevy, “taking out forty-one of their strategic bombers—with drones! They managed to get the drones in and move them around the country without being detected for almost a year.”

“We had eighteen Arabs for over a year training how to fly commercial airliners in front of our noses,” I said, “and then they drove them full of passengers into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a piece of Pennsylvania turf. Close to three thousand people were killed in 9/11. How did all of our security forces

miss that? This little drone caper wasn't quite in the same league, but it was impressive."

"It feels frustrating that we can't stop Putin from doing what he's been doing for the past ten or more years to the Ukraine, stealing their land, killing their people, kidnapping their children."

"You should sit down with your Uncle Tony for a couple of hours. He'll help you make sense of it all. Let's have a coffee before we get started. I could use a little extra boost of energy that comes with a glazed stick." There was a small crowd at the Dunkin', but a booth opened up after we had collected our order. We sat down and Carmy changed subjects.

"I think the feud that has started between Musk and Trump may be more important to us in the short run than Russia and Ukraine. Trump called Musk drug-crazed and said he was going to sell the Tesla he just bought."

"He might have to sell it at a loss," I said, "if he can even find a buyer. Democrats don't want to be caught dead in them, and now the Trump Republicans are going to shun them as well. There was something missing in that man's upbringing."

"Which man?" asked Carmy.

"Well, both of them, but I meant Musk. Nobody taught him to duck if someone is throwing a punch at you, even if it's your own five-year-old, and no one taught him not to start a fight with someone you can't lick. Musk may be the richest person in the world, but his wealth is all tied up in the value of his companies. If his falling out with Trump is going to affect his ability to sell cars, sell space on his rockets, and sell communications to

the government, that wealth will dwindle faster than kindling at a jamboree campsite.”

“Musk said that Trump was more involved with Epstein than has been told to the public,” said Carmy. “He said that Trump’s lawyers and the Department of Justice have put a lid on the evidence linking Trump to Epstein. I wonder if it would make any difference if they show proof that Trump was an active member of Epstein’s ring. Nothing Trump does seems to affect him. He’s completely above the law.”

“You know, this business with the Oneidas has changed my perspective on the different sides of the law, which side is the good side and which side is the bad side. There were many different tribes who were living here for thousands of years before people from Europe started arriving. But the same was true in Europe. There were people living just about everywhere when new people arrived, and either the new people took over, or they got mixed in with the people who were there before. The Etruscans were wiped out by the Romans, and then the Longobardi, who were Scandinavians, came down and fought with the Romans, but eventually mixed in with them. The story that says the Europeans forced the Indians off their lands is only partly true because there were payments made by some of the settlers to the Indians. In the case of DC, the Iroquois were paid twice. But how come the natives who were here and the new arrivals didn’t just melt together?”

“It must have been the attitude the two groups had of each other,” said Carmy. “That’s what Uncle Tony taught us in history class. The Indians didn’t want to mix with the Europeans, and the Europeans looked down at the Indians. So, the government herded all the Indians into reservations, gave them some money,

and let them fend for themselves. Heck, they weren't even allowed to be citizens until 1924. They fought in World War I but weren't even citizens. It had something to do with them living in places that were not subject to jurisdiction of the federal government and being citizens of those places. So, they couldn't vote and didn't have the rights of American citizens. On the plus side for them, they weren't taxed. There are so many stupid things the government did that we are stuck living with today."

"If the Luccatellas have an in with Trump, and if Trump wants to poke a stick in Biden's and Casey's eyes, the Odeida claim can be pushed through in spite of all the proof that the whole thing is a fake," said Carmy.

"You're right. Because the main claim is for land that is not occupied, the old rail lines, and the only neighborhood that is really affected is The Orchard. There are not a lot of people who really care. Most people in town and the surrounding area think they'll benefit because there will be new business coming in. They might think their properties will be worth more. A lot of people like the idea of a gambling casino being closer. They won't have to go all the way down to the Sun."

The red Cybertruck drove by. I could see that there were scratches over the M.A.G.A. letters on the door. "I'm surprised Eedo's still driving it," said Carmy.

"He probably can't afford to junk it, and I can't imagine who would buy it. Uncle Tony says there is big money on a reconciliation between Musk and Trump. Maybe Eedo's counting on that happening. Have you had enough of an energy boost now to tackle the Chevy? It's just sitting there waiting for you."



“A week left to the end of spring,” commented Tony as we settled into the ride in my Cherokee up to Carl’s Diner for our Saturday meeting of the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club. “The Trumpenator’s been on the job for a full five months. What a ride he’s giving us.”

“I guess you’re going to give us the scoop on what you’ve seen on Fox.” I said. Tony watched Fox News every day, at least once, always alone because Jenny could not consent to come near the TV when the Fox channel was on. He said he had to make sure he knew the arguments from both sides. There was always some screwy angle one of MAGA group would come up with that even he couldn’t have imagined, he claimed.

“Priceless footage yesterday. I filmed some so I could show you and Franky what the true American people think about Trump sending the National Guard into LA.”

It was raining, not heavily, but in a steady, soft drizzle. My ’77 Cherokee had two-speed windshield wipers, slow and fast, but not intermittent. That technological marvel started to be optional in ’79. Slow was too fast for this kind of rain. It was the kind of rain that made me wonder if it was raining when I woke up in the hut where I was held captive in Vietnam. It was the kind of rain that the guards could ignore and not feel like they had to stay under cover. They could walk around with their guns and sticks and poke us as we bent over pulling up the manioc, our main food, except for the bugs, snakes, and rats we captured.

Franky was waiting for us as usual in our booth. Edie came over as soon as we had taken our usual places, Franky on one side and Tony and I on the other.

“I hope you boys brought your protective gear,” said Edie. “We got a tip that ICE is coming in to make sure we don’t have any illegals working the dishwasher. They hit Coney Island yesterday, the hotbead of Democratic resistance. They thought they hit pay dirt, but it was the owner’s kid working the machine.”

“We’re ready for them,” said Franky. “I have my Goose Pond Scout Reservation Alumni Staff hat to put on if they arrive.”

“Okay, Franky,” laughed Edie. “That should do it. They’ll take one look at it and say ‘He’s one of us’ right away. What are we having today. Same? Waffles or pancakes, Nicky?”

“Pancakes today, Edie. You can make it just two. I feel like I need to drop a few pounds.”

“I’ll have Nino hold one in reserve in case you change your mind.”

“Okay,” said Franky when Edie left. “Let’s see the video.”

Tony turned on the video of a Fox contributor, Jonathan Turley, who is a law professor at George Washington University. While he was talking, the video showed California Governor Newsom saying he was going to sue the President. In a side screen there were pictures of rioters burning cars, some of them with electronics on top of them. I thought they were police cars, but they were those cars that a Google company is driving around without drivers. Then there was Bernie Sanders saying the Federal authorities in California didn’t ask for assistance. Turley said they did. Turley said the President has the authority to call in the National Guard and the Marines. Then Tony showed an interview with someone called the ‘border czar’, starting with more pictures of rioters burning the U.S. flag while waving the Mexican flag.

“I read there are over eighteen million illegal immigrants in the U.S.” said Franky, “and that so far this year, there have been around a quarter of a million illegal immigrants arrested. That’s close to one-and-a-half percent. At that rate, it’s going to take around thirty years to arrest them all.”

“The only reason so many people are in this country illegally,” said Tony, “is because they were allowed to come in by the same people who are now arresting them. And the reason they were allowed in is because we needed their arms and legs and hands and backs, just like when our grandparents came. Then, Congress passed laws to keep people from coming, but they got in anyway because businesses needed cheap labor. What’s the best way to have cheap labor, other than allowing slavery? By having people who can’t complain about being paid peanuts for doing jobs that no one would do even if they paid the minimum wage.”

“If I were an illegal,” I said, “the last thing I would do is join a protest march and start burning cars and attacking policemen.”

“Those guys with face masks standing on top of cars taking selfies are definitely not illegals,” said Tony. “They’re the protest pros. They show up everywhere there’s a group that wants to gather or march peacefully. I’ll bet there are a whole bunch of January 6<sup>th</sup> rioters who were released by Trump who are spread around the country in the middle of these protests. They are the ones wearing masks. If I really want to take my conspiratorial mind to the limit, they are hired by the same guys that want to call out the Army and the Marines to control demonstrations.”

“Makes sense,” Franky. “The alternative, the one where people who definitely don’t want to be arrested are burning cars, makes no sense at all.”

Eddie came with our food and filled our cups. "I can't help wondering what Joe is thinking right now," she said. "I'm sure he's blaming himself for not doing more to keep that bastard from getting back into the White House."

"Joe grew up playing by the rules because people who didn't were never respected," I said, "even if they thought they were."

"Trump was taught by his father that only chumps played by the rules," said Tony, "and all that was important was to win."

Eddie looked serious, even sad. She shook her head and started to go back to fill up her coffee pot but then turned. "Let me know when you're ready for the third pancake, Nicky." We dug in and were quiet for awhile. What would I say to Biden if he were sitting with us right now? Is there hope? Are we going to get through this, Joe, or is our country now so far into the whale's mouth that there is no escape? Franky broke the silence.

"I wish I could get into the head of Netanyahu," said Franky. "With everything he has going in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, he decides to attack Iran again, targeting their nuclear facilities and military leaders. What the hell does he expect is going to happen next?"

"Iran's going to do what they did the last time he bombed them, send in the drones and the missiles," said Tony. "Then Trump is going to complain that all this trouble could have been avoided if Iran had simply done a deal with him. If Iran pushes back too hard, Israel will nuke them. I am absolutely sure of that."

"Eventually it had to come back to Iran for giving Hamas the tools to do what they did," said Franky. "Sooner or later all the hostages will be given back, dead or alive, and then Israel can turn on the water to flood the tunnels."

"I think the Hamas boys who are left in Gaza spend most of their time topside wearing full-cover hijabs," said Tony.

"Are you and Donna going to watch the parade tonight?" I asked.

"We'll wait for the reruns," answered Franky. "How about you guys?"

"I couldn't get Jenny anywhere near a TV to watch it, but I will," replied Tony.

"I'm going to watch it," I said. "I always enjoyed going with Ma to the Memorial Day parade in town when Pa marched with the Veterans. I know some of the boys from the Post are down in DC. How did a parade become a we-them thing? Don't bother, I can answer that myself. Vietnam and all the bad wars that came after that."

We placed our bets on who would win the NBA and NHL finals and the spreads. The prize for winning was a free breakfast. Franky had won both last year. It's been a couple of years since I won at least one of them. "You're due," said Franky encouragingly. When Edie came around for the last round of coffee, she had the last pancake on a plate.

"Shame to put it to waste," she said.

"You're right, Edie," I said. "I think there's just enough room for it down there."



The answer to Edie's question about what Joe is thinking came the following week, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June in Galveston, Texas. The date and the place are significant. The 19<sup>th</sup> of June became a national holiday called Juneteenth when President Joe Biden

signed it into law on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June 2021. The word is a combination of June and nineteenth and commemorates the end of slavery in the United States. It was on that date in 1865 that Major General Gordon Granger issued General Order Number 3 in Galveston stating that “the people of Texas are informed that in accordance with a Proclamation from the Executive of the United States, “all slaves are free”. African Americans have been celebrating Juneteenth since 1866. A bipartisan initiative in Congress made it an official national holiday beginning in 2021, the first new national holiday since Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was declared in 1983.

“It wasn’t all slaves,” said Annamaria. It was Saturday morning, and she was on her way up to her grandmother’s room for her regular study session and had sat down with me as I finished up breakfast and read the paper. I was reading about Juneteenth when she came in.

“It’s a short article,” I said, “and it’s mostly about what President Biden said in his speech at the African American church on Thursday. He said: ‘Juneteenth is a day of liberation, a day of remembrance and a day of celebration. Juneteenth represents both the long and hard night of slavery and subjugation and the promise of joyful morning to come. Our federal holidays say who we are as Americans, what we celebrate and what we value. We need to be honest about our history.’”

“I wish he was still our president,” said Annamaria.

“So do I, sweetheart, but more Americans voted for the person who won the election. Why did you say it wasn’t all slaves who were freed on Juneteenth?”

“Joey wrote a really good paper for his history class about the Emancipation Proclamation and he let me read it. It starts out by explaining the differences between proclamations, executive orders, laws, and amendments to the constitution. Presidential proclamations are a statement of policy issued by the President. They are mostly to announce support for a ceremonial event. The Emancipation Proclamation was something more. It was an edict, or an official order that was issued on New Year’s Day 1863. In it President Lincoln declared that all slaves in the Confederate states were to be set free, but it did not free all slaves, just those in the states that had seceded. He could not just declare slavery illegal in the states that were still in the Union. That would require a new law because slavery was not illegal according to the Constitution. But he could say that the purpose of fighting the war with the southern states was to free the slaves. An amendment to the Constitution that would free all slaves was passed by the Senate in April 1864, and by the House in January 1865. The joint resolution was signed by President Lincoln in February 1865, two months before he was assassinated and three months before the war was officially over. The amendment was submitted to the states for ratification, and it took until December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1865, for it to get the required number of votes. The Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution formally abolished all slavery in all states.”

“Thank you, Annamaria. I’ll thank Joey when I see him. I guess it would make more sense to celebrate Juneteenth on December 6<sup>th</sup>, but it would have a different name.”

“Decemberteenth doesn’t have the same ring as Juneteenth, does it Grandpa?”

“No, and it probably doesn’t make any difference when it’s celebrated and what it’s called. It meant a lot to the people who were slaves, and it means a lot to the people who are living today who might still be slaves.”

“I heard that President Trump thinks there are too many national holidays and that it costs the country too much to have people out of work so often,” said Annamaria. “I checked. There are eleven. There are only seven in China.”

“I guess that settles it,” I said. “It’s much better to live in the United States than in China.”

“As long as we can live on The Orchard, Grandpa.”



## CHAPTER 5

# SUMMER TO FALL

AS I WALKED to the cemetery on the first day of summer, I thought about what it would be like on The Orchard and in Drake's Crossing without any houses. What did it look like before the first European settlers arrived and built their cottages, made roads for their wagons, ploughed fields for their crops, put up fences for their livestock and horses? How did it feel to walk among the oaks and through the grassy fields before there were stores and restaurants and car repair shops and a fire station and a city hall and so many churches? When the people who were here before the settlers, people who did not build permanently, but did plough and plant, and hunted and picked from the bushes and trees what they would eat, looked out from the land where the cemetery was placed by the settlers up on the highest piece of land in DC, what did they think? That what they saw, the smaller river flowing into a larger river in the direction that the sun sets, would be what their children's children would see, and their children's children's children's children? When they buried their children, their wives and husbands, their mothers and fathers, did they believe their bones would always be where they had placed their bodies so that they could come back to honor their spirits and hope that their own bones could one day be set beside theirs? That's what I want, why shouldn't they have wanted the same thing?

Here's where we come to the problem that we are now facing. If they wanted what I now want badly enough, to rest beside

my wife and all the others who went before me, they never would have let those settlers come here in the first place. And if they are going to try to use our laws to do what they couldn't do by force when they lost to the settlers, then there's something wrong with our laws. If they want to come and fight us for what they lost, like the settlers fought them, then that's fine. We'll see who wins. But the government that those settlers established should not be helping the people who are trying to take what is now ours and what that government said was ours.

*Does thinking this make me a bad person, Connie?*



It was Monday, the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, and we sat in the conference room at Borough Hall and wondered who they would send to make the presentation. After six months of delays, the special committee set up by the mayor, Bob Amore, was finally meeting. In the Sunday edition of the Times and Tribune yesterday was a short article about the status of the Oneida proposal. Both the city and the county said they would not back the gifting of the railroad land along the river to the tribe because of the major loss of tax revenue, both in the short- and long-term, considering that there may be opportunities for tax-paying development in the future. The article said that information had come to light that the proposed location of the casino in Drake's Crossing was on land that was owned by Louie Pignozzi which was not included in the land claim being made by the Oneidas. According to unnamed sources, Pignozzi was donating the land to the Oneidas in return for being given the contract to build the casino. Bob Amore had called all of the committee members yesterday to tell us that Pignozzi would not be at the meeting today and had been removed from the committee.

Yesterday's big news, which was in this morning's papers and was filling the radio and TV air waves, was that American B2-Spirit stealth bombers and Tomahawk cruise missiles launched from submarines had bombed three sites in Iran.

"The shit's really gonna hit the fan now," said Al Capelli, who had called the meeting. "Trump gave the I-rians plenty'a warning. I didn't vote for him, but he did what we should'a done a long time ago to those bastards who held our embassy staff hostage."

Al was in high school when that happened. At the time, there were still enough veterans from the Second World War and Korea who strongly believed that only cowards did what the Iranian students did, taking civilians as hostages and using them as shields, just like Hamas is doing at this very moment. The U.S. government has never forgiven the Iranians for that. It has been stuck in the craw of every non-communist American since then. Accusing the Iranians of building a bomb, like we did with Saddam Hussein, was as good an excuse as any for doing what every American military officer has wanted to do ever since since Operation Eagle Claw failed and eight U.S. servicemen were killed and six helicopters were destroyed or captured in the Iranian desert. What hurt most about that mission was that the choppers were not destroyed and the servicemen killed by enemy fire, but by mechanical malfunctions and a mid-air collision between one of the helicopters and a transport plane. Jimmy Carter did not look like he was going to win re-election before that mission, but he had no chance of winning after it failed.

"I don't know why we just don't nuke the whole damned country," said Hank Logan, manager of the Rite-Aid pharmacy

in town. "They are behind Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houtis, and every other goddam terrorist organization."

"You mean a final solution," said Bob Amore, who had invited himself to the meeting.

"Yeah, once and for all," answered Logan.

"Like Hitler's final solution," replied Bob. "That didn't work out so well for Hitler and his buddies in the end. I don't expect trying to do it to the Iranians and all their friends would work out so well for us either."

Just then there was a knock on the conference room door and Bob's secretary, Franny Ferri, led a group of six people into the meeting. Ray Halbritter was right behind Franny. I recognized two of the men following Ray from our meeting with the tribe in Oneida. There were two women and a tall, young man dressed like a lawyer. Ray introduced everyone. Tony had taken it upon himself to do some research on the Oneidas. He wrote a short report and in it he explained that the Oneidas are what is called a 'matrilineal' society. There is the Oneida Indian Nation and there are three Clans, Wolf, Turtle, and Bear. Each Clan chooses members to the Nation Council, both men and women. The men on the Council are responsible for daily decisions, and the Clan Mothers make the long-term decisions. The Nation is led by a person who is recognized by the United States federal government, and that person is Ray Halbritter. When Ray introduced the women he said they were Clan Mothers.

"We have retained a local law firm to represent us in our proposal," said Ray. "This is Robert Gosnick who works in the law firm Stucciano Associates."

Everyone on the committee looked at the other members, and if Robert did not know what we were thinking it was because he had just joined Gus Stucciano in his law firm this morning.

"Katherine and Madeline are two of our three Clan Mothers. You may not know how things work in the Nations, but to make it short, the men worry about the day-to-day affairs, and the women worry about what happens tomorrow and into the future. So far, this proposal has been in the hands of the men, who have been working to put together a proposal for the women to discuss and to decide upon. Frankly, we thought this was such a good idea for our Nation and the people in this area that we would have a proposal ready by this time. But, as it has turned out, it is not that simple. We did not expect the opposition we have encountered. So, we discussed this in a Council meeting and the Council decided that the women needed to understand what we were getting the Nation into. That means we would like this meeting to be a discussion rather than a presentation. Is that acceptable to you?"

This was Al's meeting. We all looked at Al, who was sitting in the middle of the conference room table seated directly across from Ray. Bob was sitting to his right. Al turned to Bob and said, "What do you think, Bob?"

"That sounds like a good idea," replied Bob. "It will give us a chance to clear the air and get all the issues on the table. I know the committee has studied the original plan that you put forward, and the members have identified the main problems we see with it here in Drake's Crossing. The recent statements by the city and the county concerning the substantial pieces of land you were asking to have turned over to you, and their objections to taking them off the tax rolls, is something we will have to consider. Also,

the fact that the site for the proposed casino is not part of the land claimed by you as part of the alleged gift from the early settlers to the Oneida Nation will definitely have an effect on how a proposal from you will be viewed. I say 'alleged' because we feel that claim needs to be verified beyond doubt because it is the entire basis of what is happening here. Does anyone on the committee have any thoughts to express?"

"I do," I said. I took a deep breath. "Both of my grandparents bought house lots on The Orchard over a hundred years ago and built houses with the help of their neighbors. Both families, like most of the other families on The Orchard and in Drake's Crossing, came from Italy before or just after the First World War. They came here to work in the coal mines and to start a new life that would be better than the lives they had in Italy. They didn't take the land from anyone; they paid the person who claimed he was the owner. I live in the two-family house my mother's father built. My daughter lives on the other side. My son lives in the house my father's father built. While you are claiming that the land on which these houses sit is yours, someone else claimed that the property where my son and my nephew run their businesses did not belong to my father. My father was given the property in the former owner's will and he divided the property with his brother. It is well known that a criminal had falsified the will, but that crime came to light after the criminal was killed by his own gang members. The same criminals recently produced more false documents in order to take the property, but their attempt has been stopped by the courts, at least for the time being. Their purpose in taking the property is to share in the benefits from your casino. We have proof of this from the criminals themselves.

"What happened two or three hundred years ago between your ancestors and the early settlers, before or just after this country was formed, isn't what we are here to discuss. As far as I understand it, there are treaties and agreements and laws that were made that will be used to decide whether you can use a piece of paper as proof that you own The Orchard. What I think we should discuss is whether you want to turn the homesteads of two hundred families into a parking lot, and whether you want to turn a whole community with schools and churches and shops and homes into a center for gambling and everything that goes with it."

There was just silence when I finally stopped talking. I surprised myself, and I guess I surprised the people in the room who have known me for most of my life. I don't give speeches.

Katherine spoke. "Tell us more about the claim that your father did not rightly inherit the property where your son and nephew now run businesses."

"My father worked for the owner of the property, Mr. Lewandowski. He ran a car repair station, and there was a restaurant and dry cleaner in other parts of the building. He told my father that when he came home from the war, he would turn the business over to him. When father came home, Mr. Lewandowski had died, and the building had been sold to Enzo Luccatella and put into his wife's name. The firm that your lawyer Robert here works for represented the Luccatella family in his businesses. The grandfather to the present head of that law firm gave my father the real deed to the property and the real will from Mr. Lewandowski and admitted to him that he had falsified the deed and the sale. This was just after Enzo Luccatella had been killed

by members of his own gang because they found out he was talking to Federal agents. When my father left his office, the lawyer shot himself. This same firm represented the grandson of a foster child who was taken in by Mr. Lewandowski's sister. This person, who lives in San Diego, claimed that his grandfather was promised the property but was cheated out of it. He had a letter that was supposedly written by Mr. Lewandowski. As it turned out, that letter was as false as the deed the one the first Stucciano produced. It had been brought to the grandson by someone who worked for Stucciano, who claimed it had been found. The case against me and my sister-in-law who was given the restaurant part of the property by her stepfather, my uncle, was thrown out by a judge."

"So, our claim to the land on which these peoples' houses sit is based on a piece of paper that was discovered, is that correct Ray?" asked Katherine.

"Yes, it is," Ray responded, "but it's been verified as authentic by experts."

"It has not yet been authenticated by our experts," interjected Bob, "but, as Nicky said, that really isn't the point right now."

"I agree," said Katherine. "The point is whether our people gain the high ground by doing to these people what was done to our ancestors by people unrelated to them, even if it were to be allowed by the treaties and laws that are on the books. We have always been guided by our belief that we deserve retribution, but that seeking revenge will serve no purpose. I think we need to go back home and talk this over. Robert, you can send us a bill for your time today, and you can tell your boss that we will no longer

have a need for the services of your firm. Ray, I hope you agree with that.”

Ray nodded. The meeting was over.

Tony and Frank were waiting in the lobby of Borough Hall when I came out of the meeting.

“How did it go?” asked Franky.

“Let’s go over to DD and talk about it,” Tony suggested.

“It was very different from the meeting we had with them in their headquarters,” I said after we had settled into one of the tables. “There were two women there, and just like Tony wrote in his paper, they are the ones who make the long-term decisions. I watched both of them as the whole house of cards their claim has been built on was taken apart card by card. At the end of the meeting, one of the women said they were going to go back and think about the whole thing. She said something I didn’t really understand, that they have always worked for retribution but not out of revenge. What do you think she meant by that?”

“Wow!” exclaimed Tony. “I wish I was there to hear that.”

“Aren’t they the same thing?” asked Franky.

“Retribution is literally ‘payback’, and the two words are generally used synonymously. But there’s a big difference between them. If someone kills your brother, and you kill the killer, you do it out of revenge. You get nothing out of it except a personal feeling of satisfaction and probably a prison sentence or worse. If someone kills your cow, you take that person to court to seek retribution, and when the court orders the cow killer to pay you for the value of the cow, you have received retribution.

If instead, you kill the cow killer's cow, you have taken revenge and you have forfeited the right to ask for retribution."

"But the men in the Oneida Nation weren't asking for retribution when they came with their claim to The Orchard. They said they owned it by right and never should have been forced to leave. The retribution part was their asking for all the land along the river as payback. Right?"

"Right," answered Tony. "They could have just built the Casino on the Orchard and left it at that, but they would never have been able to get the permits and permissions to do it. The whole thing would have ended up in the courts for decades. That's where the revenge part comes in, not for the Indians, but the ones who came up with the whole idea. Someone wanted to level The Orchard and turn it into a parking lot. It looks like that was the whole point of this plot from the start. Someone fed the Oneidas with a paper that said they owned The Orchard and the rest followed."

"Who has got it in for us and why?" I said. "This cannot have anything to do with Lucca's killing because if it did they would have gone after Ginger a long time ago. The fact that they are attacking Carmy's shop and Sal and Rene's restaurant property puts the spotlight on our families, whether it's mine alone or both mine and Tony's. Something else is going on here and the only one who knows what it is is the nutcase, Ricky."



Annie and Guy, and Sal and Rene were the hosts for this year's 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration. Franky's mother's homestead had become the Donnatelli homestead with Sal and Rene and their three children, Guy, Annie, and Silvain—Rene's father's name—

living on the side where Franky's uncle Giuliano and his wife Adele had lived, and Annie and Guy still living on the side they moved into shortly after Franky's Nonna Rosa died. I suggested that we have a block party for all the families living on The Orchard, and passed the idea by Tony and Jenny, Franky and Donna, and Annie and Guy. It was nixed by them all. So, like every other 4th of July—except for those years I was in Vietnam enjoying the hospitality of the Vietcong as a POW—we were the four families minus those who had departed plus those precious young ones who had arrived.

It was perfect weather. A few days before, the temperature was up in the 80s, but rain yesterday had cooled things off and freshened up the air. The high for the day was going to be around 77 and sunny. Guy had taken over the huge garden that Renzo left to his son Giuliano, and now Sal did all of the heavy work while his father supervised. It looked like they would have a bumper crop, as always, and the best tomatoes went to the restaurant for their special summer salad. My own garden was about a quarter of the size, and I could not imagine taking care of a garden the size of Guy's, even with my son-in-law's help.

We sat in the back yard where Connie and I had our first conversation sixty years ago. It was at the reception following Franky's Nonna Rosa's burial almost exactly sixty years ago to the day. The folding tables and chairs we were sitting at were exactly the same ones that we used back then. Connie sat next to me. I remember like it was yesterday. Her mother, Helen, asked me whether I was planning to go to college, and I told her that I hadn't applied because my grades weren't so hot. I said I was going to join the Air Force and become an airplane mechanic. Con-

nie said, "Why don't you become a Quaker and apply for a conscientious objector deferment so you won't have to go to Vietnam?" She had lost her father in the Korean War, and would lose her younger brother, Charlie, in Vietnam seven years later. For three years, while I was a POW, she prayed hard that she didn't lose me.

Annamaria was sitting in the chair where Connie sat all those years ago, and my grandsons Nicky and Joey sat next to her. Across from us were two of Tony and Jenny's four grandchildren, Thomas, Jr. and Emma, and on my other side were Michael and Jean's children, Gabriele and Raffaella. Annamaria, Nicky and Joey, Tony and Jenny's four grandchildren, and Annie and Guy's three grandchildren were all in the DC junior and senior high school. Gabriel and Raffaella attend a Catholic junior high school in Brooklyn.

"Tell us what it was like on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July when you were growing up, Grandpa," prompted Annamaria. It seemed like a pretty simple question, I remember thinking. "It was like this. Our families met and we ate hamburgers and hot dogs mixed in with lasagna and Nonno's sausages. In the middle of the day, before our backyard picnic, we watched the parade in town where the veterans marched. There was always a ceremony where a wreath was placed on the monument at the city hall for the war dead going back to the Civil War. When it got dark, the sky over the river was lit up with fireworks. Did I miss anything, Tony?"

"Yes," answered Tony. "Nobody questioned whether we should be celebrating the 4<sup>th</sup> of July back then. There was no People's Union USA whose founder organizes boycotts of what he calls symbols of American oppression as a side hussle when he's not teaching kids to play the drums. The 4<sup>th</sup> of July and Walmart

are on his list. Our parents, who were born here on this street, were doing everything they could do to show that they were just as American—or even more American—as the Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution. We didn't see anything wrong with starting the day in school with the Pledge of Allegiance to America, and everyone of us could sing the Star Spangled Banner—in English. It wasn't until after we left high school that the combination of protests against the Vietnam War and protests against segregation and the treatment of African Americans began to jell into a growing undercurrent of anti-Americanism among some of our generation. But still, it was nothing like today when any celebration of America's founding is an opportunity to criticize the founders of the country for their treatment of African American slaves, women, the natives who were here when the settlers arrived, and today the people who have been given asylum, and the illegal immigrants who have not been integrated into the country."

"It was the other way around in Italy, especially in southern Italy that had been part of the Kingdom of Naples," said Guy. "When my parents were growing up, they never sang the national anthem, *Il Canto degli Italiani*. Their grandparents had their own king, Francesco the Second, and they taught their children that they were living in a conquered nation. The conquerors from the north treated them like dirt. That's why so many of them left to come here. When I was growing up during the time of *Il Duce*, we had to sing the national anthem, *Giovinetta*, and we had to be patriotic, not just the kids, but everybody. Not being patriotic was a reason for getting put in jail or worse. Then, after the war, we kicked out the king and formed a new republic. We brought back the old national anthem, and for the first time, began to feel like we were living in one country. It's not perfect,

and there are still the old prejudices, but most of the younger generation feel like they are Italians first, not *Napolitani* or *Genovese*.”

“The Mexican kids in the public schools celebrate their national holiday, but say they don’t celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July,” said Raffaella. “It’s different in our parochial school. There are Mexican kids in our school, but their parents send them to the school because they don’t want them to be part of another culture; they want them to grow up American.”

“That’s how it was for our parents and for us,” said Franky. “They wanted us to be Americans, especially after the Second World War. But we were sent to public schools, not parochial schools. It was just the opposite of today.”

“All of our families have experience with Italians living in America during the 1920s and 30s who were more loyal to Italy and Mussolini than to America, like the Luccatellas,” said Annie.

“Your right,” added Franky. “I don’t think I ever told you about the experience my father’s brother, Uncle Larry, had when he was going to art school in Brooklyn in the early 1930s and living with his uncle’s family. I’ll make it short. My father’s family came from a small town east of Naples called Sant’Angelo dei Lombardi. My grandfather was the only one in the family who didn’t settle in Brooklyn. There was a large number of Santangirolese who lived in Brooklyn, and they formed an association called the Mutual Aid Society for Citizens of Sant’Angelo dei Lombardi of East Brooklyn. My great uncle, Zio Nicola, was on the board, and his three sons, his two daughters, and his brother-in-law were members. Every year they had a big celebration, a black tie affair. It was to celebrate Natale di Roma, or the Birth of Rome. It was something started by the Fascists, who

saw themselves as the recreators of the Roman Empire. In 1933, when Uncle Larry was in his second year at Pratt College of Art, he was asked to design and produce the program for the big event.

"I saw a copy of the program that Uncle Larry had kept hidden in their cedar chest. It was more of a book than what you might think of as a program. Right in the first few pages was a full-page photo of Benito Mussolini, Il Duce, reading a small book and deep in thought. Next to it was a letter written by him to the Society reminding its members that no matter where they are, they are Italians. Then there was a photo of the Italian Ambassador to the United States, who attended the celebration. This was at a time that the American and British governments were openly supporting and praising Mussolini as a bulwark against communism. It was April of 1933. Hitler had been elected Chancellor in January of that year, and Mussolini and Hitler would not meet for another year. Everything changed after that meeting, especially for the people like my great uncle who believed that what was good for Italy was good for Italian-Americans. My grandfather had a totally different view, and he turned out to be right."

"I wonder if they sang the Star Spangled Banner in Italian," mused Debbie, "like Nezza singing it in Spanish at Dodger's Stadium last month."

"That really got the MAGAs hot under the collar," I said. "They turned it into proof that Latin Americans want to create an independent sub-culture, like Mussolini was trying to do."

“The progs loved it,” said Tony, “because they saw it as a poke at the ICE brigade until they found out that President Roosevelt had commissioned the version Nezza sang back in 1945, just before he died, as a way to build up relations with South American countries. Supposedly, it was a way to communicate the ideals of America in a language the listeners would understand. It might have worked if American governments followed up with good neighbor policies.”

“What bugs people,” said Franky, “is people setting up outposts of their countries and carrying on with their lives as if they were still living where they came from. I know that my Nonna Rosa never thought of herself as an American. Everything she did every day was what she would have done if she was still living in Sigillo. Pa said his great aunts in Brooklyn were proud to say they had never been to Manhattan.”

“What’s happening now with the backlash against the open door policy for illegal immigrants is exactly what happened a hundred years ago, and for the same reasons,” said Tony. “Chinatowns, Little Italys, and other re-creations of foreign countries where everyone spoke a foreign language and lived like they were in the country where they came from got people thinking that the U.S. was being conquered from within. When you start feeling like you’re a stranger in your own country, it’s time to do something about it.”

“We were taught that multiculturalism benefits us,” said Raffaella. “But at the same time, there didn’t seem to be an acceptance that there is an American culture to share and be proud of. So, we’re supposed to appreciate and accept all the other cultures, but they don’t have to accept ours, and it’s okay for them to criticize it, but we can’t criticize theirs.”

"I wish I could have grown up when you grew up, Grandpa," said Annamaria.

"Every time has its good parts and bad parts," I found myself saying. "Life is easier for some people today than it was sixty years ago."

"There's less poverty," added Tony, "less hunger, fewer children dying."

"Why can't we get along better with each other?" asked Thomas. "Wouldn't it be better for everyone? Why can't we stop fighting with each other?"

No one was ready to answer that question. We lingered over our 4<sup>th</sup> of July food for another hour, and after everyone helped with the cleanup, we gathered in the field behind the garage where there were two horseshoe and two bocce courts. Pizzas and fireworks followed.



"I heard that if you get a job in the White House working for Donnie you get issued a whiplash protector when you report for work on the first day, and you have to sign an agreement that holds the government harmless if you do suffer whiplash and you're not wearing the protector."

This is how Tony greeted me on Saturday morning when I picked him up to drive to our weekly Breakfast Club meeting.

"Did I miss something on NPR news this morning?" I said.

"The Redskins! The ghost of Blackfeet Chief John Two Guns White Calf spoke to Donnie the Brave in a dream last night and told him the spirits of all Blackfeet ancestors would never rest until the Washington Commanders changed their name back to

the Washington Redskins and put his image back on their helmets.”

“What part of what you just told me are you making up?”

“He didn’t mention the dream, but how else could he come up with these left field ideas?”

“Who the heck is Johnny Two Guns?”

“Chief John Two Guns White Calf, chief of the Blackfoot tribe in Montana, went to Washington in the 1920s to champion the cause of his people and all Native Americans. He made Calvin Coolidge an honorary chief of the Blackfoot. It’s his image that’s on the 1913 Indian head nickel, and it’s the same profile that’s on the old Washington Redskin’s logo.”

“And suddenly, with everything else going on, including Trump getting dragged into the Epstein affair, our country’s chief decided to take up the cause of a football team’s mascot?”

“Diversion. Donnie’s a master of diversion. Remember the snowball fight. He throws out a fake video of Obama being arrested, he gets one of his lackeys to start a grassroots movement to rename the Kennedy center after his wife, and he inserts himself in a place where he definitely does not belong by spending his time talking about what was a dead and buried issue, the Redskins name.”

“I wonder what our Oneidas did to end up on his shit list.”

“Tribute. He lives in a world where the king receives tribute, and if you miss a payment, you can get your head lopped off. There’s one group of Indians who are giving him tribute, and two others who are not. The Oneidas are on the ‘not’ side, along with

all of the Indian affairs groups that have been pushing for cancelling the mascots. A new group was formed in 2017 called the Native American Guardians Association, NAGA for short. They came out to say that they stand with the President to return common sense and sanity to our nation. I'm not sure they were talking about their own Blackfeet nation, or the 'Pledge allegiance to the flag' nation. They say they're fed up with cancel culture and want to educate, not eradicate."

"So, they want to keep or put back the Braves, Chiefs, Indians, Redskins, and all the other names that other groups of Native Americans have been squawking about taking away?"

"Think about it for a second. Take away all the references to Native Americans and who will remember that they exist in a couple of years? How many Americans—or anyone else for that matter—know that Native Americans have their own self-governing and self-policing territories?"

"They vote and pay taxes, don't they?"

"Federal income taxes, and state income taxes if they exist, but only on income earned off the reservation. Tribal governments don't pay federal taxes, and whether they pay state taxes depends on agreements the tribes have with the states where they have reservations.

"Are they dual citizens? Do they have passports from their tribes?" I asked.

"I looked that up. They are U.S. citizens as of 1924, and it's illegal for them to try to leave or enter the United States without a valid U.S. passport. There is no such thing as a passport for any of the Native American nations. With citizenship came the right

to vote, but towns and states have done the same thing with Native Americans as they've done with other ethnic groups, made it difficult for them to register to vote. And, by the way, Italians were treated the same way when they first started to come over in big numbers, especially in the south."

"For the Oneidas to be able to run a casino in Pennsylvania so that they get the same tax exemption benefits, they are going to have to be recognized by the state, and the land is going to have to be designated as a reservation, right? There are no tribes recognized in Pennsylvania."

"That's what I understand, and before any of that can happen there's going to have to be hearings and legislation passed in the state and maybe even at the federal level. I don't think the Luccatellas or any of us are going to live long enough to see this happen, but it's a huge cloud hanging over all of us that I wish we didn't have."

"I got the feeling when we met the tribe in June that not everyone was on board with the idea. I don't think Ricky's going to give up so easily, and he's probably trying to keep the Indians on side."

I parked my Cherokee next to Franky's Lexus and we called our club meeting to order as Edie filled our first cups of coffee. There would be many refills to follow.



At the moment of the explosion I was dreaming about being rescued from the Vietcong. I wanted to see it to the end, when our men shot the guards and got us into the helicopter, but I woke up when the phone rang. Was it a real explosion or was it

in my dream. Carmy was on the other end of the call when I answered, and he gave me the answer. "Dad, they blew up the building. I'll pick you up."

I dressed quickly, went out as fast as my arthritic legs would take me, and hopped into Carmy's Scout. It was still dark as we approached, but in the flames' light I could see Sal, Guy, Annie, and Tony standing with Gail on the sidewalk across the street from the building. What was left of it was ablaze, and in front of it was the blackened carcass of what had been a Tesla Cybertruck, recognizable only in outline and still burning. We stood at a safe distance and watched as the firemen hosed the flames and tried to keep it from spreading to the adjacent buildings. They were wearing special protection gear because of the truck's electric battery. There would be nothing left of Carmy's shop or the Donnatelli's restaurant. I was certain Ricky Luccatella was behind this, even though everyone in the gang would have rock solid alibis. What would they say when the cameras show the pickup driving up and parking in front of the building. Who filled it with explosives, and who detonated them?

"They'll claim it was stolen, of course," said Gail. "I'll check to see when that call came in." She left and walked over to the station.

"Let's look at the videos," said Carmy. He took out his iPhone. After the fire bombing, Carmy and Sal had put in an extra camera on the light pole along the street to film both sides of any car driving up and parking in front of the building. We looked over his shoulder and saw the image from the first camera at the corner of the building. It showed the truck pulling into the parking area. Its license plate was covered, but it was clearly Eedo's Tesla Cybertruck with M.A.G.A. painted on the door. The next

camera picked it up as it parked close to the building. A few seconds after the truck stopped, it blew up. No one had gotten out from the driver's side. Carmy switched to the camera on the light pole and followed the truck until it parked. It blew up without anyone exiting.

"Smart Summons," said Carmy. "The Cybertruck just got it a week-or-so ago."

"What the heck is 'smart summons'?" I asked.

"The car drives itself to a place you give it," answered Carmy. "You have to be within a certain distance of the car, and you have to have it within eyesight, but you can give the car a location to park itself or you can call it to pick you up. In this case, whoever was controlling it gave it a place to go."

"You mean this clunker of a truck was able to drive here without anyone in it carrying enough explosives to blow up the center of DC?" exclaimed Guy.

"Yep," replied Carmy. "It looks that way. But we should be able to tie the movement of this truck to Eedo Luccatella because you have to be able to log into the web application to have it drive remotely. So, even if they claim the truck was stolen, whoever was controlling it would have had to have Eedo's phone and have his passwords as well."

"I should have put real rat poison in the broschetta and killed them all when I had a chance," said Guy.

We were quiet for a while. Then Annie spoke: "We need to talk to Ginger. She'll know what we need to do next."

"Is your Ginger the Ginger I think it is?" Gail had come back while we were watching the videos. "You don't have to answer

that question. I had put the pieces together a long time ago, but figured that part of history was best left to your families. But let me know if you are planning to blow up the Luccatella's clubhouse so we can clear all the innocents out of the vicinity."

"I didn't use real rat poison," said Guy, "although we wouldn't be standing here looking at our life's work going up in smoke if I did, so I think we'll stay on the right side of the law."

"I'll make sure we do," I said, "but these guys make it damn hard."

"There's a record that Eedo called in that his car was stolen about midnight. I called the number that was in that record, but no one answered. I checked whether the number I called is registered to Eedo, and it is. I sent one of our guys to his house to get a direct confirmation that he made that call."

"We checked the videos. No one got out of the car before it blew up," said Carmy. "So, unless you find a charred skeleton in the driver's seat when you finally put out the battery fire, the truck drove itself here. That's only possible if a person can control it with a special mobile app, and that has to be on the owner's phone. If he had his phone, then he was the one doing the controlling. If someone else had his phone they had to have the password to the phone and the car, and know how to operate Smart Summons."

"Gail," I said, "it's very important that the site is totally secured and guarded so that the Luccatella's don't take away any evidence before it's been thoroughly examined. You've got to get the truck locked up in the precinct garage and put someone you trust in there with it."

"I'll stay here until the car's been secured," said Sal.

“That’s not going to be possible for a while,” said Carmy. “That battery is going to take a couple of hours or more to be sure the fire will not flare up again.”

“Let’s meet back at our place at nine for breakfast and we can talk about what we’re going to do,” suggested Annie.

Just then, a Times-Tribune van showed up. A reporter ran out and shoved his microphone in our faces while a photographer began snapping photos. Dawn had arrived. “We have no comments to make at this time,” I said to the reporter. “This is a matter for the police, so please direct your question to Police Chief Gail Phillips.”

We got into our cars and drove back to the Orchard. The air was heavy and it was already in the low 70s even though the sun was barely up. “Your grandfather had a plan for what he would do if Lucca forced him out of the garage,” I said to Carmy as we drove down Main Street. “He never had to use it because he found out that he owned the garage and the rest of the property, but maybe it’s something to think about now.”

“I guess we need to wait to see what’s going to happen with the insurance. I had my whole life in that shop, Dad.”

“I know, Carmy. And you know that these people have made it their life’s work to try to destroy anyone and everyone who has any connection to the Malatesta family. Since I became a member of that family when I married your mother, I’ve made it my life’s work to stop them.

Annie and Guy’s kitchen was filled with the aromas of scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and coffee when Ellen, Mike, and I walked in the back door. Tony, Jenny, Carmy, Mary, Sal, and Rene were already there. The kids went to school. We weren’t

going to give the Luccatellas the satisfaction of stealing a day from their education.

"It was on the news on all the channels," said Jenny. "It's all speculation right now. The police haven't confirmed anything about the car."

"Breakfast is ready," said Annie, "so let's sit down and eat it while it's hot."

There wasn't the usual chatter at the table. I don't think anyone had much of an appetite. We ate out of habit and politeness to the cook. Annie was a master at cooking breakfast. Tony broke the silence.

"I keep thinking that it doesn't make any sense for the Luccatellas to use one of their own cars to burn down the building. Something else is going on here, and I don't think we can decide how to respond until we've figured out what that is."

"Maybe Eedo thought it was a good way to dump his Tesla like Trumpeepoo dumped his after he fell out with Musheepoo," suggested Jenny.

"Eedo's not the sharpest knife in the drawer," said Sal, "but even he must have known that the police would find out about the Smart Summons thing pretty quickly and link him to it."

"Unless it wasn't Eedo who did it," mused Tony.

That's when my phone rang. It was Gail.

"Chief, I have some news."

"Can I put you on speaker. We're all here in Annie's and Guy's kitchen."

“Sure. We opened the back of the truck after we got the fire totally out. There was a corpse, pretty charred, but with the necklace that Eedo wore, the one with a hammer, it was where his neck was. We got tests started to check the DNA for a match.”

“Did you see anything in there that looked like a phone?” I asked.

“No. His arms were tied with a metal wire behind his back, so he wouldn’t have been able to control a phone. There wasn’t anything else in there. The explosives had been in the front of the vehicle. We went to Eedo’s house. His wife, Angela, said he didn’t come home last night, but that he often is out all night and she doesn’t ask any questions.”

“Did you pay a visit to Ricky?” I asked.

“Ricky was in his pajamas and bathrobe when we he opened the door. He hadn’t seen Eedo for a few days, he said. ‘He should be over for a card game tonight,’ he said. ‘He never misses one.’ He didn’t act like he was worried for his son’s health.”

“It sure looks like he’s going to miss it tonight,” suggested Mary.

“We didn’t tell either Angela or Ricky that we suspected Eedo had been murdered,” said Gail. “We have Eedo’s DNA on file, so we just have to wait for the tests to come back so we are sure it’s him.”

“Thanks, Gail,” I said. “Let me know when you get a positive ID.” Then I hung up.

“Who would want to kill a Luccatella and hurt us at the same time?” asked Annie. “A Luccatella would more likely blow up the shop and the restaurant when we were all in there, not in

the middle of the night. If it was someone who was just after Eedo, why go through all the trouble of tying him up, stuffing him in the back of his truck, loading his car with explosives, and steering it with his own phone into our parking lot. They could have just as easily steered the truck to the culm roads at the edge of town."

"It was someone who had a grudge against both the Luccatellas and us," said Tony. "There's only one person who fits that bill, and it's Gus Stucciano. I heard that Ricky fired his firm after the meeting with the Oneidas. After the lame-brained attempt to come up with a long, lost heir to Lewandowski, and that phony letter about The Orchard that appeared out of nowhere, Ricky decided to can him.

"So," said Guy, "Gus kidnaps his life-long buddy, forces him to give him the codes to his phone and his truck, puts him in back of the truck and explosives in the front, remotely steers the truck into our parking lot, and presses the 'detonate' button. Good-bye Eedo, and good-bye to our restaurant and Sal's shop."

"Yes," answered Tony, "except for the part about life-long buddy. Eedo and Gus were not pals. Eedo knew that Gus's grandfather had told Nicky's pa the whole story before he shot himself, and he never really trusted the Stuccianos. Ricky kept the relationship with Gus's father mostly because no one else would work for him. Without the Luccatellas, Gus didn't have a future in law. My bet is that he's already gone as far as he can to get away from here."

"There's another possibility," I said. "The charred body belonged to Gus. Ricky figured out his scheme with the Oneidas wasn't going work and it was time to get rid of Gus. Ricky's main

aim is to punish us, and destroying the building is part of that. Maybe Eedo needed to disappear for some reason we don't know, and this accomplishes that—as long as we can verify that it's not Eedo in the truck."

"We are back to figuring out why the hell Ricky is bent on hurting us," said Annie. "Let's talk about what our kids are going to do about having a place to work. What are you thinking?"

"Rene and I want to get back into a kitchen as soon as we can," answered Sal, "and we want it to be right here in DC. What we're not sure about is where."

"I feel the same way," said Carmy. "I've been fixing cars since I was a little kid, and it's too late to start thinking about being an astronaut. We might be able to rebuild on the site, but if we tried to find another place where we could build together, we might have problems getting a permit for a restaurant and a car repair shop. I've been thinking that I need to expand into electric car repair, but the shop was too small to handle it. This might sound like a crazy idea, but the old DC lumberyard has been empty for years and it's much bigger than what I've had in town."

"Our place has the charm of a restaurant that has been in operation for almost a hundred years," offered Rene. "We could rebuild on the site, and have more space, but Sal and I have talked many times about what it would be like to have our restaurant in the old train station. We'd have to do a lot of renovation and make an addition for the kitchen, but the waiting room would make a great main dining room."

"And it's just across the street from the lumberyard, so I could still come over for lunch on Friday," said Carmy.

"You kids have been thinking about this for a long time, haven't you?" I said. "Maybe there's a silver lining on this black cloud of smoke."



We hadn't had a full Breakfast Club meeting for a month. Franky and Donna had gone to Italy in August to a place south of Naples called Positano. Franky had told us it was on the Amalfi Coast, which didn't mean anything to me. I got a postcard from them that arrived on Friday, after they came home on Wednesday. All the buildings were built on the cliff looking out over the water. 'No Cars Allowed' Franky had written at the top of the postcard. He didn't mention how they got to the hotel where they stayed. I said to myself when I read the card that I would have to remember to ask him that question.

It was now the first Saturday in September. The night before, DC lost its third straight game, having opened the season with a loss to Franky's alma mater 20-7. The news for the past couple of weeks while Franky and Donna were in Italy had been all about Ukraine, the meeting between Trump and Putin in Alaska, and the meeting between Zelensky, Trump, and some European leaders in Washington a couple of weeks ago. As Tony and I sat down and before I could ask my question about how they got to their hotel if there were no cars allowed, Franky spoke.

"Did you see the photo of Trump and Putin sharing a limo to their meeting in Anchorage? It was on the front pages of all the newspapers in Italy and on the news programs. I thought presidents took their own limos to meetings. Maybe there's a shortage of cabs up there."

“Yeah,” answered Tony. “I wonder which one of them picked up the tab, and if they gave the driver a tip.”

“I listened to a clip after the meeting on the CNN feed with John Bolton,” said Franky. “You know, the guy Trump hired and then fired because he couldn’t stand looking at his mustache? Bolton said, ‘Trump didn’t lose, but Putin won.’ That’s the kind of dumb comment I expect from people who don’t really do anything for a living except act like they’re experts.”

“What was the point of that meeting?” I asked. “It seemed like it was just a bunch of photo ops. How do you have a meeting about the future of a country without the country even being there?”

“History’s full of those moments,” answered Tony. “The British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain met Hitler in 1938 to talk about Hitler’s demand to take over a part of Czechoslovakia. At a later set of meetings, Mussolini and France’s Premier got involved. Czechoslovakia was not invited to any of those meetings. In what they called the Munich Agreement, Germany took over the part of Czechoslovakia they were discussing, and then, when they moved in, Germany occupied all of the country. This is pretty much what Russia has in mind for Ukraine, and Trump is playing the part of the clueless Chamberlain while he tries to build up points with the Nobel Peace Prize committee.”

“He can’t believe those Nobel people are actually going to consider giving him the medal, can he?” I exclaimed.

“If they gave it to Obama for just making a speech, which is what they did, they could give it to Trump if he brokers a deal that both Zelensky and Putin agree to,” answered Tony. “Stranger things have happened.”

"He's not putting all his hopes into the Israel and Ukraine baskets," said Franky. "He's got his people planting stories about all his peace deals around the globe. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that his Catholic supporters are writing petitions to the Pope to have him declared a saint."

"You can't be canonized, or made a saint until after you're dead," corrected Tony. "But you can be declared holy so you are prepped for sainthood after you die. I think the only way Donnie becomes a saint is if he first becomes Pope so he can rig the process."

"Didn't he suggest he would make a good Pope during the last conclave," I asked.



I was taking a nap on the couch when the door bell rang. The day had been filled with little chores around the house and then a couple of hours spent checking my fishing gear for my day out on the water tomorrow. When the bell woke me up, I was in the middle of a dream, searching a small pocket of water for the trout I had lost the last time I fished the creek where I would be going tomorrow. When I opened the door, there was Richie holding a cardboard coffee tray in one hand with two large Dunkin' coffee cups in it and a Dunkin' bag in the other hand.

"Got time for a talking break?" he said with a big smile.

"Let me put on my sweater and I'll be right out. Make yourself comfortable."

It was a cool late Friday afternoon on the 12<sup>th</sup> of September when we sat down on my side of the big porch. This is where the men of the Orchard had sat to talk about what was happening in

the world, starting in the years following the end of the Great War. Up until the end of the fifties, those conversations were shrouded in a haze of cigar smoke, produced mostly by Parodis, the American-made version of the Italian stogey, black, hard and smelly and made about five miles away up the line.

“They had your favorite today, the honey-dipped cruller,” said Richie. “I bought you two. You can save the second one if it’s too much to take at one go.”

“I must be one of only a few customers who eats them, or they must be hard to make. But then, maybe I wouldn’t think they were special if I could get one every day.”

We sipped and munched for a few minutes, and then Richie said, “Did you hear they got the guy who shot Kirk?”

“No, I didn’t hear that. Did he turn himself in or commit suicide?”

“The first news report said that someone in his family called the cops after he told them that he was the one who shot Kirk. I thought, Can you imagine that; with family like that, who needs enemies, right? But then the real story came out. His parents saw pictures of the killer and realized it was their son. They called him and asked him to meet with a family friend, who is a deputy sheriff. He convinced him to turn himself in.”

“So it wasn’t a jealous ex-girlfriend?”

“That’s another twist. The killer’s name is Tyler Robinson. He was living with a guy named Lance Twiggs, who is in the process of turning himself into a girl. They called him a “romantic partner” on the news. Transgender. Do you understand what

that means? Can a guy really become a gal, with all the right parts working?"

"Beats me. Why are they making a big deal about it?"

"Because they think the main reason Robinson went after Kirk was because he was a big critic of people changing their gender or sex or whatever they do, and this Twiggs guy hated Kirk. They interviewed a relative of Twiggs, a girl, who said he hated conservatives and Christians, and said he probably had a big influence on Robinson. Robinson's parents are registered Republicans and conservatives, so this boyfriend/girlfriend thing probably didn't sit well with them. The President is saying that the left has been comparing Charlie Kirk to a Nazi, and they share the blame for his killing. I agree."

I didn't feel like talking about Charlie Kirk or hearing the life story of the person who killed him. "Any chance we can win tonight?" I said, changing the subject. "Our first three games didn't go so well."

"The Hawks are one-and-two, but they're favored to beat the Blue Devils by fifteen. The Bulldogs are back. Remember when they won the state championship every year in their division? They recruited families with talented players to move into town while their kid went to high school. Their coach was the first one to figure out that if you got your players to lift weights and get strong, you could beat teams that just ran laps and did pushups."

"We played them one year. It felt like they were a steam roller and we were asphalt."

"Heh! That's a good one. Steam roller flattening asphalt."

“It didn’t feel great when it was happening.”

“Speaking of steam rollers, what do you think about Trump sending National Guard troops to all the big crime cities.”

“It seems that he equates big crime cities with the places that voted against him in the election,” I answered.

“I checked that out, and guess what? The biggest crime cities are run by Democrats. Fourteen of the top sixteen crime-heavy cities are Democrat-run. The Republican-run cities in that group are Stockton, California and Anchorage, Alaska. Democrats are soft on crime. I talked to my sister Rita who lives in the other DC. She said she can’t believe the difference after the Guard came to town.”

“How would you feel if the Pennsylvania National Guard came to this DC and started patrolling on The Orchard in full battle gear and automatic weapons at the ready?”

“If I had to worry about getting carjacked every time I drove to the grocery store, like my sister, I would welcome them with open arms. Even the DC mayor had to admit that the presence of troops has made a difference. She said that car jackings were down 87% compared to last year.”

“So, you think we should have the army doing the job of the police?”

“No, I think the police should do the job of the police, but there need to be more of them, and they need to be able to do their jobs without worrying that they are going to be charged with brutality everytime they arrest a criminal.”

Richie had a point. I saw the difference in how we were able to operate from the time I started on the force in the 1970s and

when I retired in 2012. Near the end we were understaffed, and our budgets kept getting cut. Tax income couldn't keep up with the costs. Everybody wanted higher salaries, and that also meant more social security costs. Everybody wanted health care, and those costs were going straight up. More and more of our time was spent filling out forms, and less and less time was spent out on the street. Then there were all the new laws about how we had to treat criminals that sometimes you were worried that if you arrested someone you might end up losing your job.

"I'm worried about us killing people in boats who we claim are drug runners," I said. "It's one thing to stop the boat and bring everyone to trial, but it's a totally different thing to shoot someone who you claim is guilty of a crime before the person has a chance to prove that they are innocent. How did the military who killed those eleven people know that all of them were drug runners? Maybe the boat was hijacked and the owner who was driving it was completely innocent."

"The President said on his first day in office that the drug cartels were going to labelled foreign terrorist organizations, and that it's the guy Maduro who's running the drug smuggling. That's the justification Obama used to take out bin Laden. He didn't get a trial. Those drug runners don't deserve a trial."

"What if the police or the national guard soldiers start shooting kids on the street who are pushing drugs? The Sixth Amendment to the Constitution, which is part of the Bill of Rights, guarantees criminal defendants the right to a speedy and public trial by an impartial jury. Those jurors must not be biased, and must be made up of a cross section of the community in which the crime was committed. People accused of a crime have to be told what they are accused of, and they have the right to be

defended, even if they cannot afford a lawyer. We do not have the right to string someone up like a lynch mob because we think the person is guilty. We have to prove it. Some criminals go free, and some innocent people are put in jail or executed, but, on the whole, the system works. How the hell can a government start killing people the way those eleven people were killed a week-or-so ago.”

“Our laws have been doing a great job of protecting criminals like the ones bringing drugs into the country just because the drug cartels knew they were outside of our reach. Let’s see how long it takes for them to figure out that they aren’t going to be able to keep doing illegal stuff.”

“There was a time when if we did things that were illegal, like knocking off a country leader, we didn’t brag about it,” I said. “We started handing out stars for the helmets after 911. It’s one thing if you are officially at war with a country, or you have rock solid proof that a person has committed a major crime against your country or its people, like bin Laden. Shooting at drug runners like their boats are ducks on a pond has no justification. That’s my opinion. Capture the boat, put the drugs on display, and bring the culprits to trial. Don’t just kill them.”

“The bad guys were winning, Nicky,” replied Richie. “They have been fighting dirty and winning. We have been playing by the rules and losing. I want us to win. Are you going to the game tonight?”

“Never miss one,” I replied. “But I expect that the team that wins does it fairly and squarely.”



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## CHAPTER 6

### FALL TO WINTER

TONY HAD CALLED Franky and me on Sunday evening. He said we would have a topic for our breakfast club meeting on Saturday: Trump's UN speech that he would give on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of September. He said Trump would sum up what he thinks he's done so far, and give a good indication of what he thinks he's going to do in the near future. I watched it live on NBC news. It started at 10 a.m. and ran for over an hour. I would have watched it with Tony, but he had a tutoring class at the high school.

Trump started his speech by saying that he would be giving it without a teleprompter because the teleprompter wasn't working. He didn't mind, he said, because not having a teleprompter would let him speak from his heart—"but whoever is operating the teleprompter is in big trouble." He began by saying that "six years have passed since I last stood in this grand hall and addressed a world that was prosperous and at peace in my first term. Since that day, the guns of war have shattered the peace I forged on two continents. An era of calm and stability gave way to one of the great crises of our time, and here in our United States, four years of weakness, lawlessness, and radicalism under the last administration delivered our nation into a repeated set of disasters."

For the next fifteen minutes, he praised himself for bringing the United States back in just eight months from the brink of total destruction, ending seven wars that everyone said could never be ended. He did it all by himself, he said. "I did it in just

seven months. It never happened before. It's sad that I had to do what the United Nations didn't do. It has such tremendous potential, but they don't live up to that potential. Everyone says I should get the Nobel Peace Prize for each and every one of them."

He's still holding a grudge against the UN for not winning the bid to renovate their headquarters building twenty years ago. He never, ever forgets a slight. "I was going to give you marble floors; they're going to give you terrazzo," I said to them. And that's what you got." He said he would do it for \$500 million, and they took a bid for \$1.2 billion. "It ended up costing you \$2.3 billion and all you got was terrazzo." The real point he was trying to make was that the UN is inefficient and wastes the money it gets, mostly from the U.S.

He moved on to what he did to Iran. "We have the greatest weapons on earth. We hate to use them, but we did what countries have wanted to do for the past twenty-two years," which meant he dropped big bombs on their nuclear facilities. He slid into Gaza and condemned all the countries thinking about recognizing Palestine as a state, and criticized Hamas. "Just release the hostages now," he said. "The last twenty are going to be the hardest. We want all the hostages at once, not one or two at a time. And we want all of those thirty-eight dead bodies back too." He said he thought stopping the war in Ukraine would be the easiest of the seven because of his relationship with President Putin. "Everyone thought Russia would win this war in three days. It didn't turn out that way. It's not making Russia look good." He slammed China and India for continuing to purchase Russian oil and fund the war, but then he said that some NATO countries were also continuing to finance Putin's war by refusing to stop buying Russian oil. "Stop biological weapons development. Stop nuclear weapons development," he said. "We can

never use these weapons. Experiments overseas a few years ago gave us a pandemic.” Did he just accuse China of starting COVID? He did. He just slipped that in there. The camera panned to the Chinese delegation. They all looked dumbfounded. The looks on their faces all said “Should we get up and say something?” They just sat there.

He returned to criticism of the UN. “The UN is funding the crisis of uncontrolled migration. Your countries are being ruined. The United Nations is funding an assault on western countries and their borders. In 2024, the UN budgeted \$372 million in cash assistance to support 600,000 migrants coming illegally into the United States. Over the four years of the incompetent Biden administration, twenty-five million people came through our southern border. Now we have it totally stopped. The UN is supposed to stop invasions, not to finance them. Europe is in trouble. It is being invaded by a force of illegal aliens like no one has ever seen before.” He claimed that the London mayor wants to start Sharia law, and the city is being ruined by people with different cultures, religions, and languages. “They should solve their problems in their own countries, not in our countries.” He started rattling off numbers, the percentages of people in prisons in Germany, Austria, Greece, and Switzerland who are not natives of the country. “They’re so-called asylum-seekers. By them not coming, we are saving countless numbers of lives.” He said that 300,000 children had been lost to human trafficking. “The fake news people don’t report about this.” He warned the drug gangs would continue to be “blown out of the water”.

He definitely did not seem to be running out of steam. “We’re getting rid of all the so-called renewables,” he said. “They’re expensive and they don’t work. They can’t be put out without subsidies. Most of them are built in China. Why is it that

they build them and send them all over the world, but barely use them? They use coal and gas, but they sure as hell like selling the windmills. I give Germany a lot of credit for changing their energy policy. It was being led down a very sick path, both on immigration and on energy, and they were going bankrupt. A new administration came in, and they went back to where they were. They were going all green, but all green is all bankrupt.”

He returned home, to the city where he now spends most of his time when he's not playing golf in Florida or New Jersey at his clubs. “Washington, DC was the crime capital of the world. It is now a totally safe city after just twelve days. I'll invite you to dinner out if you come to DC. We can walk from the White House. It's totally safe.” I read that he's getting credit from the people who live there for stopping the out-of-control car-jacking that was going on.

Climate was next on his list. “It used to be global cooling that would kill the world. Then it was global warming. Now they have changed it to climate change so that it could be by warming or cooling. I have been right about everything. If you don't get away from the green energy scam, your country is going to fail. If you don't get away from being politically correct, you're heading down the path of total destruction. It's a con job. You reduced the carbon footprint, Europe, but China and other countries have wiped out the reduction. Radicalized environmentalists want to kill all the cows. Asian garbage is dumped into the ocean and ends up in Los Angeles. The primary effect of these green energy policies is to redistribute manufacturing jobs and industrial activities from industrialized countries that follow the insane rules to polluting countries that break the rules and are making a fortune. The global warming hoax is killing people in

Europe. That's why I withdrew from the fake Paris climate accord."

He was getting close to the one-hour point when he started talking about tariffs. "Tariffs are a defense mechanism. As President, I will always defend our national sovereignty and the rights of American citizens." He closed with this: "Next year, the United States will celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> year of our glorious independence." And then he pitched the soccer World Cup next year and the 2028 Olympics and said he hoped everyone in the room would come to "celebrate great celebrations of human achievement. America was founded as a 'light to all nations'. Christianity is the most persecuted religion on the planet," he said, "and immigration and the high cost of so-called green, renewable energy are destroying a large part of the free world, and countries that cherish freedom are fading fast because of their policies on these two subjects. You need strong borders and traditional energy sources if you are going to be great again." He ended with a tribute to those who built our countries, the founders and ancestors, clearly a criticism of those who would rewrite history and pull down statues. "God bless the nations of the world," were his last words.

Some people did not clap. Other people did not clap loudly. There was no standing ovation. Almost everyone sitting in the hall, save his wife, Melania, and members of his administration, came in for some form of criticism. It was more of a campaign speech than a call for united action against tyranny and for upholding and defending democratic principles against dictatorial forces, like the speeches of former Presidents of the United States. That's what the talking heads all said after his speech was over. I sat there on our couch, Connie's and my couch, thinking:

I agree with almost everything he said, except for his claim that he is always right. No one is always right, not even Tony.

“It was a pretty predictable speech,” said Franky as we started our first cup of coffee to open our Breakfast Club meeting.

“He doesn’t talk in platitudes or parables,” said Tony. “There weren’t any ‘Unite for a better future’, ‘Stronger together’, ‘Change we can believe in’, or ‘Prosperity for America’s families’. These were campaign slogans for Biden, Hilary, Obama, and Gore. ‘We dropped big bombs on Iran and we’ll do it again if we have to.’ ‘Criminals are taking over our cities; we’re going to take them back.’ ‘The UN isn’t doing the job we set it up to do, but it’s doing a lot of things it has no business doing.’ He said things that a lot of people are thinking, but would never think of saying.”

“He’s got another year before the next midterm election, which could wipe out his hold on both the House and the Senate,” said Franky. “I think the coming government shutdown is going to make a difference in how much support he has going into the new year.”

“They could still avoid it,” I said. “It’s not just Democrats who are going to be locked out of work with no pay, and it’s not just Democrats who aren’t going to get the government services because there isn’t anyone working to deliver them.”

“The Republicans cut Medicaid and reduced health insurance subsidies,” said Tony, “and it was the Republicans who were pushing to keep the government running at the existing funding levels until November 21<sup>st</sup>, after the end of the budget year on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October. The Dems have refused to keep the doors open unless they get the changes they want. The Republicans refuse to make the changes so far because they think the

Democrats will cave. It looks like there will be a shut down, and it will probably last longer than the one in Trump's first term, which was over thirty-four days. The big issue then was funding Trump's wall along the border with Mexico."

"Seems to me like a stupid way to run a country," said Franky. "If every hospital, school, factory, or power plant shut down if the people running them couldn't agree on next year's budget, we'd have a hell of a mess."

"That's the whole point with this show," replied Tony. "Give the President the job of deciding and we won't have government shutdowns. The Republicans haven't said that yet, but if they win the House and the Senate in the next election, you can bet it will be on the table."

"Trump's meeting Netanyahu on Monday," I said. "Do you think they're going to announce that they have a peace deal ready for Hamas to agree to? It's getting close to when the Nobel Peace Prize will be announced. He's got no chance of ending the war in Ukraine, but he could pull the hostages out of the Hamas tunnels."

"The Israeli military is just itching to flood those tunnels," said Franky, "so once the hostages are out, I'm sure that's just what they are going to do."

"And the Hamasers will scurry to the surface like the rats that they are," I said. "Dressed like women."

"They're scum for what they did two years ago, and they're scum for what they have been doing to the people in Gaza," offered Tony, "but more than half of the countries in the world support them and more and more countries are recognizing Palestine as a state. They're winning in their losing. They're heroes to all of America's enemies, and they're freedom fighters to many

of the rest. Even people in Israel are telling their government that they have to change their course. The main problem is that Hamas has left no room for compromise. They want it all back and they want Israel along with all of the Jews to disappear. That's not a good starting point for negotiations."

"Back to square one after the war in Gaza is over," said Franky.

"You boys have been having a very serious meeting today," said Edie, as she filled our cups.



"If it's not Eedo, and it's not Gus Stucciano, who is it?" I asked Gail. She had called me while I was in the backyard raking leaves. Franklin was watching me on a branch just above his family's nest. There were at least two new baby squirrels that were born a week ago, the second dray for the year. Their mother, Debbie, named also by Annamaria after Benjamin Franklin's wife Deborah, was out gathering food for the young ones.

"We haven't been able to find a match, Chief. We know it was a male who is approximately thirty years old with brown hair and brown eyes, and from the remaining skeleton, we know he was around six feet tall."

"That sounds like the Stucciano lawyer who was at the meeting with the Oneidas."

"Do you remember his name?"

"Robert Gosnick."

"I'll check it out," Gail said, and we hung up. I went back to raking. Half an hour later, while I was still raking, Gail rang again.

“You’re not going to believe this, Chief, but Robert Gosnick went missing two days before the fire. On a hunch, I called the Fed’s office in the city. He was under cover. They figured his cover was blown, but they couldn’t make contact with him. We haven’t yet done a match on the DNA, but it’s in progress.”

“Any signs of Eedo?”

“No. We asked his wife again if she wanted to file a Missing Person, but she said no. She knows where he is. He might even be in the house. I’ve asked for a search warrant.”

“That explains why Ricky was so relaxed about Eedo not coming home the night of the fire. Have you made a fix on the last time anyone saw Eedo?”

“We have a shot of him driving by the station at 4:25 p.m. heading south the afternoon of the fire.”

“He must have driven back along Valley Road to get close enough to the building so he could guide his truck there.”

“We checked all our other cameras around town, including the ones on Valley Road, and there is no sign of him.”

“He must have put his truck into a carrier.”

“I’ll go through all of the videos and see if there is a truck coming back into town from the west and stopping near to the gang’s headquarters.”

I hung up with Gail and called Tony.

“Can you and Jenny come over for coffee? I have some news about the body in Eedo’s truck.”

“Jenny went with Sal and Rene to look at the station with the real estate agent. Annie and Guy are there, too.”

“Come on over and we’ll get them all here when they’re done.”

I left my leaf pile and told Franklin to keep an eye on it for me. I went inside to start the coffee. Tony came in a few minutes later.

“What’s up?” he said as he sat at the kitchen table. “I called Jenny and they’ll be here in about half an hour, after they’ve met with the real estate agent.”

“The body in the truck is Robert Gosnick, the Stucciano lawyer who was at the Oneida meeting at Borough Hall. He was a Fed working under cover.”

Tony didn’t say anything. I poured the coffee and sat down at the table across from him. He was thinking, taking slow sips of coffee. I did the same.

“Revenge,” he said finally. “This is all about revenge. The Luccatellas’ revenge against the Malatestas and the Fabrianos. It goes back to my grandfather and Lucca’s father. Lucca wanted Ma and didn’t get her. Rickie wanted Connie—you knew that, right?—and didn’t get her. Eedo wanted Ellen—you knew that too, right?—and didn’t get her. The family wanted the land that old man Lewandowski owned, and they almost had it, but your pa outsmarted them. They’re sure Annie had something to do with Lucca getting whacked. Eedo blames every Democrat in the Borough, and especially everyone on The Orchard, for him doing time for insurrection, when he and the whole family thought he was finally doing something to show the Luccatella’s patriotism. They cooked up this whole Indian thing out of revenge, to wipe out The Orchard and finally take the land they thought they were

due. And we continue to stand in their way. Eedo's gone underground to start a new phase of the battle between the Luccatellas and the family's nemeses, namely, us."

"Why put Gosnick, or whatever his real name was, in the Tesla with his own necklace?"

"Gain some time, I guess, either to put some other pieces together or put some distance between where he is heading and DC. My guess is that he's still right here where he'll be directing their next moves."

"Jenny, Annie, Guy, Sal, and Rene came in."

"How was it," I asked, wanting to ease them into the conversation Tony and I were having.

"It's going to be great," answered Sal.

"But it's going to take a lot of work," added Rene.

"Not as much work as rebuilding from scratch, but almost," said Guy.

"We decided to do catering out of our kitchen to bring in some money while the work is being done," said Annie. "We'll make it work."

"It's going to be super when it's done," repeated Sal, "and we figure we can reopen in about six months."

"Or nine," said Rene.

"What's the reason for the PowWow?" asked Annie.

"It wasn't Eedo in the truck," I answered. "It was the Stuciano lawyer who was at the Oneida meeting in Borough Hall, who also happened to be an undercover federal agent."

“I think Eedo would have put any body in his truck,” said Tony. “He’s moving on from the whole Indian gambit to take his and his family’s revenge on our families. He’s somewhere planning his next move.”

“So you think this is what the whole thing was about from the beginning?” asked Guy. “Revenge?”

“Yes,” replied Tony.

“Then I should have used real rat poison.”

“They know that if any one of us is hurt we are going to come back at them with legal guns blazing,” I said. “There’s going to be more of the fire bombing sort of thing, and I think it is going to start on The Orchard.”

“So far, the Luccatella’s haven’t been touched,” said Guy, “while our kids have lost their livelihoods. It’s time they started feeling pain, and I know where it should be coming from. I’m going to have a talk with my cousin in Brooklyn.”

“Do you really have a cousin in the Mafia?” I asked.

“He’s a cousin of a cousin, and he’s not in the Mafia. Lando Spagna is a good friend. He’s my mother’s sister’s husband’s brother’s son. We’re the same age and grew up together. We travelled over to America together. He went to a restaurant in Brooklyn that was owned by another one of his father’s brothers, and he eventually bought it. It’s called Landos, and it’s in Bay Ridge. The restaurant is in one of the older houses, and it has a lot of private rooms. It became a popular hangout for the Genovese family in the 60s, and it still is. The Luccatellas are supposedly connected to the Genovese gang, but there’s always been problems. The last time I saw Lando a couple of months ago, I asked him if he knew if there was any connection between the

Genoveses and the Indian casino thing. He gave me one of those looks that said “Don’t ask,” and looked around to see who might be in earshot.”

“So, what are you going to tell him?” I asked.

Before Guy could answer, Annie’s cell phone rang. She looked at it before answering. “There’s no caller ID,” she said. She pushed the answer button and put the phone to her ear. “Ginger?”



It was 4:30 a.m. on October 10<sup>th</sup> when Tony knocked on the back door.

“Jenny’s still sleeping,” he said. “I didn’t think she would get up at this time, even if it was to celebrate Trump’s loss of the Nobel Peace Prize.”

“We don’t know that he hasn’t gotten it,” I replied. “His team could have been up all night making calls to the Nobel Peace Prize committee members explaining why it would be in their and their country’s best interest to award the prize to their boss. Like you said, they gave it to Obama for one speech. Trump has saved the world with the Gaza peace deal, or so he says.”

“Obama’s speech came a long time before the committee met to make their decision. I read that they meet on Monday, four days before the announcement, to make their final decision among the several contenders, but the nominations for the year close in January of that year, so whatever he did after that won’t count until next year. The Gaza ceasefire and hostage release agreement came on Wednesday, so their decision was already made.”

“So, you don’t think he’s going to get it?”

“Not a snowball’s chance in hell. But they never give out a shortlist of people or organizations they are considering. Last year they gave it to the Japanese anti-nuclear group. The year before it went to an Iranian women for fighting oppression of women in Iran. Neither of these seemed to be obvious to anybody but them.”

“If I remember correctly, the year before that they gave the prize to three people: someone from Ukraine, someone in an organization in Russia, and someone in Belarus, all for documenting war crimes and abuse of power.”

“I think they finally learned a lesson about not counting unhatched chickens after the Obama award, which they should have learned after giving the medal to Arafat, Rabin, and Peres for working toward peace in the Middle East. That was in the mid-90s, the year after giving it to Nelson Mandela and de Klerk for actually doing something, terminating apartheid.”

“Why don’t you turn on the TV and I’ll bring in the coffee and the biscuit breakfast casserole.”

“Have you been up all night cooking!?”

“It’s a Pillsbury recipe. Easy and quick and good.”

I came in with a tray. Tony had tuned into CNN. We listened to the experts talk about who they thought would win and who they thought would not win. Trump was on every one of the experts’ ‘No Win’ list. They showed pictures of the room at the Nobel Institute building in Oslo where the committee comprised of five members and a secretary meets. They’ve been doing it since 1901, they said, one hundred and twenty-five years, in the same place. There was a short interview with the chairman of the Committee. He said the criteria they use to decide who would

win the prize are that it should be awarded to whoever has done the most for fraternity between nations, the abolition or reduction of standing armies, or for holding or promoting peace congresses. The walls are lined with photographs of all the peace laureates.

“Trump doesn’t meet any of those criteria, at least not until it is proven that the peace between the Israelis and Palestinians actually is a peace,” said Tony.”

“Here they come,” I said, as the door opened at 5:00 a.m. Our time and the chairman who was being interviewed earlier came out. He said: “The Nobel Peace Prize for 2025 goes to a brave and committed champion of peace, to a woman who keeps the flame of democracy burning amid a growing darkness.”

“Okay, so it’s not Trump unless he had a sex change overnight,” joked Tony.

“The Norwegian Nobel Committee has decided to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2025 to Maria Corina Machado. She is receiving the Nobel Peace Prize for her tireless work promoting democratic rights for the people of Venezuela and for her struggle to achieve a just and peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy.”

He explained that Machado was the opposition’s candidate for the presidential election in 2024. She was the most popular candidate, but she was barred from running by Maduro. He was apparently afraid that she might get enough votes to make it impossible for him to declare that he won by a landslide. She backed a candidate from another opposition party, who lost, and then she went into hiding somewhere in Venezuela. Most people think she’s in the U.S. Embassy.

“She’s not only a left field pick,” commented Tony. “She’s from outside of the ballpark. This is more of a stretch than the woman journalist from the Philippines who won it a couple of years ago along with a Russian journalist. Why don’t they just take a pass when there is no obvious and good candidate who actually meets their criteria?”

“Speaking of ballparks,” I said, “the Phillies lost in 11, so they join the Bronx Bombers who bombed on Wednesday night. Too bad. I was hoping for an Amtrak World Series.”

“Judge batted 500, but the Yankees didn’t have any pitching.”

“Ohtani’s hitting around 150, but the rest of the team is picking up the slack. He won a game pitching. Amazing.”

“Milwaukee is going to win it if they get past Chicago and the Dodgers,” predicted Tony. “Let’s go over to ESPN and keep a window open on the news. Trump’s going to have to wake up sooner or later and give a poor loser speech.”

It took about an hour, and it wasn’t Trump but the White House Communications Director, Steven Cheung. “President Trump will continue making peace deals, ending wars, and saving lives. He has the heart of a humanitarian, and there will never be anyone like him who can move mountains with the sheer force of his will,” Cheung said in a post on one of the social media sites. “The Nobel Committee proved they place politics over peace.”

“Do you think he would have handed out the million bucks prize money to all the government workers who haven’t been getting paid for the past ten days and counting because of the shutdown?” said Tony. “It looks like all of Trumpty Dumpty’s

men are still taking a paycheck home, just like all the members of Congress.”

“I read that both the military and air traffic controllers have to show up, but they aren’t getting paid,” I said.

“Our Senator, John Fetterman, is one of the few Democrats who I would vote for today,” said Tony. “He voted to keep the government open. Most Democratic politicians think he should join the Republicans. I think the best thing that could happen to the party is for him to take over its leadership and the Bernies, AOCs, and Warrens should get the hell out.”



A church rectory seemed like a strange place to have a meeting with a crooked lawyer. It was Annie’s idea. “Who would ever think of bugging a rectory?” she had said. Pope Leo XIV, previously known as Robert Francis Prevost, avid Chicago Cubs baseball fan and first pope born in the United States of America, looked down at us from his special place on the wall. His predecessor, Pope Francis, had been moved to the hallway with all the other popes of the past one hundred years. Annie, Guy, Tony, Jenny, Franky, Donna, and I were in the rectory meeting room sitting at the large mahogany conference table in old fashioned oversized mahogany chairs upholstered in red leather. The blinds were drawn so that no one could see in, but sunlight filtered through the small spaces that had been left open. It was 3 p.m. The high school team was playing its tenth and last game at home tonight (24 October). It had been a miserable season. Two wins going into the final game. But we all planned to be there cheering them on.

Ginger's call had saved Sal the trouble of visiting his good friend Lando in Brooklyn and Annie the journey to Philly. Ginger's former employer was holding Eedo, and whether he left their care under his own steam or in a body bag with heavy stones to be dumped in the East River depended on whether Eedo's father got back into line and started doing what he was told to do instead of cooking up schemes that had nothing to do with looking out for the family's interests. Killing Gosnick was a big mistake, and the way it was done was an even bigger blunder. Gosnick wasn't only working for the Feds. He was also working for the family. He was actually a real member of the family, Barney Bellomo's nephew. Barney himself called Ricky to tell him that his son would be winding his spaghetti with his left hand from now on, if he got to wind it at all. The only reason he's still alive, Barney told Ricky, is because Eedo thought that Gosnick, whose real name was Santorini, was a Fed.

"I never saw that," Tony had said when he found out. "So, it was double revenge." Barney called Ginger because he knew the history, that she had fixed the last problem they had with the Luccatellas, and he figured that she would be able to fix this problem before the Luccatellas dragged his entire operation and his family into a bigger net. Ginger told Barney he had to get Stucciano in a room with us, and he had to do what we told him we wanted the Luccatellas to do. The alternative was that he would kill the entire Luccatella family and all of the other members of the gang. From a strictly business standpoint, it was better to have them continue doing their jobs, rather than having to start over with new organization, reasoned Barney—even though he really did want to kill the whole bunch.

Gus Stucciano came in the room dressed like he was on his way to play golf at the country club. "Have a seat," said Guy, directing him to a chair across the table from us who were sitting in a row with Guy in the middle. Guy had made the call that resulted in this meeting, so he was going to run it.

"I don't know what the hell I'm doing here," said Gus.

"Your boss sent you," replied Guy. "Didn't he give you instructions about what you were supposed to do?"

"I don't have a boss. I have clients. Who are you talking about?"

"You know and we know that you have only one client, and if you leave this room without an agreement with us, your one client's son is going to be swimming with the fishes, like you people say. So stop acting like you're a lawyer and start acting like you are the bag man that you are. Here's the deal. Your boss pays for our kids to get their lives back. You stop all the bullshit with casinos and Indian reservations in DC, and you all leave DC so that our kids' kids and their kids never have to breathe the same air as a Luccatella or a Stucciano. Those are our non-negotiable demands. In return, you get back Eedo alive so he can go on trial for murder. If your boss doesn't think his son is worth the cost and the trouble, then not only is Eedo going to be swimming with the fishes, but your boss and probably you are going to join him."

"Who the hell do you people think you are talking like this? Are you part of the family? There are laws in this country. You can't prove that Eedo killed that double-crossing lawyer."

"Who said anything about a double-crossing lawyer?" said Guy. "The police had only said that the body in the Tesla was

wearing a necklace that belonged to Eedo, but they have not made any statements about who the person might be.”

“Eedo’s missing. Maybe it’s Eedo who was in the car,” answered Gus. He had turned instantly white, realizing he had just made the biggest mistake of his life. Between Ginger’s phone call to Annie and this meeting, Eedo’s wife filed a missing person report.

“You know it was Eedo who steered the car into our building, pushed the button to blow it up and kill the person who was in the trunk,” I said. “Your boss knows exactly where Eedo is and what he has to do to get him back. Your boss knows exactly why Eedo is where he is. He killed the wrong guy.”

“Listen to who is talking about laws,” broke in Tony. “Look, Stucciano, I don’t care if you don’t know the history of the Luccatellas and the Malatestas, but Ricky does. It’s got to stop.”

“We told you what to do, so do it,” said Guy. “You’ve got a week.”

Gus just sat there staring up at the wall where the picture of the pope hung. It was like he couldn’t decide what to do or what to say. Everything he had done in his own life was done to make up for what his grandfather had done, committing suicide after telling my father the whole story. He had devoted his life to helping the Luccatellas win their battle over the Malatestas and the Fabrianos, but every time he thought he had gotten them closer to their victory, one of the Luccatellas did something stupid. Maybe he was thinking he wished he had a gun so that he could do what his grandfather had done.

Finally, he spoke. “I’ll deliver your message. What Ricky does with it will be up to him. He might decide to put all of you

in hell so that he can continue his fight with you through all eternity.”

“Tell him that my grandfather’s curse on the Luccatellas trumps anything else,” said Annie, “that everyone in the Luccatella family will go to a special place in hell where they will never meet anyone they tormented while they walked the earth. Ricky will meet his brother, who he helped to kill. Tell him he finally has a chance to lift the curse.”



Ellen came over earlier than usual. She was carrying the Wednesday, 5th of November newspaper and her coffee mug. I had finished my hard-boiled egg and toast, and was on my second cup of coffee. I was reading the article in the paper that I was sure was Ellen’s reason for her early visit. It didn’t make the front page. That was filled with the results of the mayoral election the day before in New York City. I hadn’t really followed the election. The Democratic candidate was a thirty-some-year-old by the name of Zohran Mamdani who had been led around the city during the campaign by Bernie Sanders, who isn’t really a Democrat. Mamdani came out of nowhere and calls himself a Democratic Socialist. He was born in Uganda and moved to the U.S. with his parents when he was seven. His parents are both from India. His father is a Muslim and a Columbia University professor, and his mother is a Hindu and a filmmaker. He grew up in Morningside Heights, Manhattan, and said of himself that he had a “privileged” upbringing. He won. His main opponent was Andrew Cuomo, the former Democratic Party governor of New York who was forced to quit because of sexual harassment allegations. A “MeToo” casualty. He ran as an independent. Another opponent was Republican Curtis Sliwa, who founded the Guardian Angels

and is its CEO. He wore the organization's red beret all through the elections. Mamdani was really running against Trump.

In the week following our meeting with Stucciano quite a lot had happened. The article I was reading, which was on the third page of the Times and Tribune, was about the Oneidas. They were withdrawing their proposal for a casino in DC. The document they used to make the claim was found to be a fake, explained Ray Halbritter in a press conference that was held at Oneida Nation headquarters. There never was an agreement between the settlers after the War of Independence and the Oneidas to give them back land which the Iroquois had twice sold to the settlers. A criminal group was behind the whole idea, said Halbritter, and their plan was to control the casino by owning a share of the operation. It was the criminal group that was feeding them all the false information. He made no mention of any involvement by the Luccatellas or of the murder of Gosnick. He didn't apologize for the trouble and worry he caused to the residents of The Orchard. He said "this was just another example of white men taking advantage of Native Americans who only seek retribution for what they lost when their lands were taken from them, first by the settlers from Europe and the colonialists, and then the United States government".

A few days earlier, at another press conference held at Borough Hall, Gus Stucciano said that a memorial fund was being set up by the Luccatella family to take donations for our kids to rebuild their restaurant and car repair shop. An initial amount of \$500,000 was being donated by Ricky Luccatella in honor of his son who was murdered when his car, with him in it, was used to blow up their restaurant and car repair shop. He gave no reason why Eedo was killed. This meant that Eedo was planning to disappear. The Feds were not going to admit that Gosnick was

working both for them and the mob, so they would put the wraps on who was actually in the Tesla when it exploded. Stucciano said that someone in the White House called to extend his condolences to Eedo's father and described his son as a true patriot.

Guy called Lando right after he heard about this, and Lando called him back a few hours later. Barney had called Ricky and told him to put in the rest of the money. He had two days left to leave DC and set up operations somewhere else. He told him he didn't buy the bullshist about a call from the White House, and even if some lackey did call him, if he thinks it's going to make any difference in what he needs to do he's figured wrong.

"What do you think, Dad," asked Ellen. "about the Oneidas giving up?"

"They owe us an apology for all the crap they put us through. But I don't think we're going to get it. Victims never can admit that they have been the oppressors."

A week after the Oneida press conference, the county announced that it had signed a lease for the property along the river where the old Gas Works was located, just down from the Steamtown National Park. The lease is with UGI Utilities, which I guess took over the Gas Works property at some point. The county is going to build a park on the seven acres it is leasing. When they made the announcement, they said the county had been planning the park for seven years. They are going have to make sure the site is free of coal tar that might leach into the river. They're going to use money from the American Rescue Plan Act that was passed in 2021 under Biden. They're planning to start in 2026.

“If the county has been working on this for seven years, why did they just get around to telling us about it?” asked Ellen, not really as a question she expected me to answer.



“You gave us a real scare last weekend, Nicky,” said Franky. “How do you feel?”

“Better than I’ve felt in a while.” It was on Saturday evening a week ago, after I had made one of my favorite dinners, butter-fried beef tenderloin, that the pain started in my entire lower abdomen. I figured it was indigestion, and went to bed around eight. I couldn’t sleep. The pain gradually concentrated in the lower right. I got up early, had a cup of hot water and honey, and drove to the cemetery rather than walk as I usually did. We had put the wreaths on the graves on Friday for All Saints’ Day on Saturday. I came back and called Ellen to tell her I would not be joining them at mass. She came over after mass and checked my temperature. I didn’t have one. The pain was still there. She came back later in the afternoon with some chicken broth. She had called Franky and he told her to get me to the hospital. I might have appendicitis, he said. I did. Later that evening, I had my appendix removed. It had broken, but the infection had not spread. I came home on Tuesday, and had been on antibiotics until this morning. I’ve got three bandaids on my abdomen from what they told me was laparoscopic surgery.

“Do we know why we have an appendix?” I asked. “Does it serve any purpose? I thought if you didn’t have a problem before you were out of your teens, it would just sit there for the rest of your life.”

“It doesn’t seem to serve any purpose any longer,” answered Franky, “but everything we have in our bodies is there for

a reason. They think that at one time it served as a reservoir where food was put that could not be totally digested because our bodies didn't need it right then. Humans, like all animals, didn't know when they would be getting their next meal, and if they had a surplus that they could not store someplace for later, they tried to stuff it into their mouths. If they went too long without food, they could call on what was in their internal cupboard. There's another viewpoint, which I personally hold to, and that is that the appendix does serve a purpose by being a storage location for good bacteria that can replenish the intestines if they get flushed out as a result of severe diarrhea."

"Why does it get inflamed and burst, causing infection?" asked Tony.

"Something gets in there where it shouldn't be, like stool, is the short answer," replied Franky. "Do you want the long answer?"

Just then Edie came by with our food and filled up our cups. "News of your appendectomy, Nicky, has spread far and wide. You don't look any worse for wear."

"Thanks, Edie. I feel better than I've felt for a lot of months."

"That's not unusual," added Franky. "It was inflamed and causing problems in the neighborhood as well as in your whole body."

We dug in. It was a pancake day for me, and everything tasted extra good. Franky broke the silence. "It's been a year since Trump was elected. It seems like yesterday that we were sitting at the restaurant waiting for the results to come in and knowing deep down that there was no chance for Harris. Since then, I feel like we've been wandering around in a haunted house

attraction at an amusement park. Your kids have had their businesses blown up, our family homes have been under threat by an Indian tribe, the country's government has now been shut down for thirty-eight days and counting, but we're all still here. Most of the killing in Israel and Palastine has stopped. It goes on in Ukraine, but no nuclear bombs have fallen—at least not yet. The stock market continues up in spite of all the tariffs. Trump continues to give his friends get-out-of-jail cards, while trying to put his enemies behind bars. And now a thirty-some-year-old semi-rich kid born an Indian Muslim in Uganda and talking like Vladimir Lenin has just won the mayoral election for the most important city in America.”

“Reality has become weirder than fiction,” said Tony. “I don't think we are any closer to setting a benchmark for what will be the new normal. It started to get really fuzzy when Trump was first elected, and the four Biden years kept the needle stationary until a year ago. As far as New York is concerned, did you talk to Michael and Jean about who they voted for, Franky?”

“Jean wouldn't vote for Cuomo because of the MeToo stuff, and couldn't bring herself to vote for someone who is supported by Bernie Sanders. Michael figured it wasn't worth the hassle of lying to her if he gave Cuomo his vote, so he didn't vote either.”

“There were 2.8 million New York City registered voters who voted in the presidential election,” said Tony, “and Trump got only 30% of those votes. There were a lot of folks like Michael and Jean who stayed home for this mayoral election. Just a little over 2 million voted in the mayor's race, and Mamdani won just over 50%, with Cuomo getting 42% and the red berret guy getting around 7%. So, half of the people who voted in the election picked someone else. Ed Koch got 75% in his election for a second term in 1981, and then 78% in his third bid four years later. Eric

Adams beat the red berret 67% to 28%. The City's been backsliding ever since Bloomberg, and I don't think this kid's going to make matters better."

"I feel like I need to take a retreat," I said. "Once every year, Pa used to go on weekend retreats up the road from here in Darlton, starting on Friday evening and coming home late on Sunday afternoon. He really enjoyed them. He wasn't super religious, but he went by the book. The Ten Commandments were life's general guidelines. I think I need at least a week."

"I think I've gotten to the point where I don't care what's happening in the world beyond our own little corner of it," said Franky. "The only reason for even thinking about New York City is that Michael and Jean and my grandkids live there. I wish they'd move. I don't at all enjoy going in there anymore. Donna and I used to go on cruises for the same reason people go on religious retreats, but they are not relaxing anymore. After our last cruise when almost everyone of the boat caught a stomach virus, we said that was our last."

"Typical signs of malaise of cynicism and despair," scolded Tony. "Snap out of it, my boys. This is not the time to abandon ship, put into port, and lead the lives of hermits. We owe it to ourselves, our families, and to our country to be ready with answers to how to defeat both the plagues and the alien invaders when they arrive. It's got to be clear to you both after all these years: if we can't, who can?"

"We don't have a Nobel Prize to show for our efforts after all these years," I said. "Not even a nomination."

"Our prize will be our escort by the Valkyries to Valhalla, where we will prepare for the final battle at Ragnarok," countered Tony.

“I thought you didn’t get to go there unless you fell in battle,” said Franky, now smiling.

“All the more reason for not giving up the fight,” parried Tony. “Be brave. Fight with honor and integrity. And practice your skills with both words and weapons.”

“Okay. More dedication,” said Franky. “Are we going to get our government back next week so that the IRS can process my refund?”

“It looks like that is going to be the case,” replied Tony. “Bernie will be the first one to criticize any deal that doesn’t include extensions to Obamacare subsidies.”

“I never really understood why it all happened,” I said.

“Like every story, there’s two sides,” answered Tony, “but the reason there will be Democrats crossing the aisle next week to reopen the government is because they admit that even if they get what they wanted before the shutdown, which is another emergency extension to funding of the Affordable Care Act so that most people can get subsidies and pay for their healthcare, the costs for Obamacare are rising so fast that it won’t be long before they would have to allocate more money. It was the Democrats who put an end date of 31 December 2025 on the emergency funding they passed in 2022, when Joe was President. The costs keep rising, and nothing the government has done since it was passed back in 2010 has made health care cheaper.”

“But it’s more expensive for everybody, not just the poor,” said Franky. “We have multiple systems for health coverage here, both public and private, compared to most other countries, and we have a lot of regulations. We have market-based pricing for drugs with no government control. We have higher salaries for

medical personnel, from doctors to orderlies, double-to-triple the amounts paid in other countries. Our hospitals are profit-driven, whereas in many countries they are not. And our tendency to sue doctors and hospitals for malpractice pushes up the costs even further.”

“I read that the members of Congress are guaranteed a paycheck even when the government shuts down,” I said. “I also read that ABC News did a survey of the Senators and found that about half of them, split equally between Republicans and Democrats, are either not taking their salaries or donating them. The other half didn’t respond, including Sanders and our two Senators, Fetterman and McCormick.”

“About 670,000 government employees are furloughed without pay, and 730,000 have been forced to keep working without pay,” said Tony. “Senators who don’t take their salaries or donate them should be commended, but they have a choice. The rest of the government workers don’t.”

“So you think the Senate and the House are going to vote to open up the government?” asked Franky.

“Yes,” replied Tony, “and the Signer in Chief is going to make a big deal about all the damage and suffering the Democrats caused by voting to shut the government down, and most people are going to agree with him.”

When Tony and I settled into the Jeep for the ride back to DC, and as I reached out with my finger to push the play button on the CD, Tony said “Wait! Let’s listen to this for a little more inspiration.” He pushed the play button on a YouTube app. “Dat dada daah da. Dat dada daah da. Dat dada dah da. Dat dada da.”

”What is it?”

”Richard Wagner. ‘Ride of The Valkyries’. I want you to make sure they play this at my funeral. Promise?”

“Promise.”



A UPS van arrived as I was going out the door for my late morning Dunkin’ run. The driver handed me a large box, about the size of a moving carton. It was very light. I took it inside and opened it. On top of the box full of popcorn polyester was a letter-sized envelope. I sat down at the kitchen table, sliced open the envelope, and took out a letter. It was from Ray Halbritter, Oneida Indian Nation Enterprises CEO, and the Tribal Counsel. It was addressed to Nickolas Fabriano and all the residents of The Orchard, Drake’s Crossing, Pennsylvania.

*To all the residents of The Orchard,*

*This is a letter of apology. We the people of the Ondida Nation wanted to do this properly, which is why it has taken so long for this letter and the contents of this box to reach you. Inside the box is a wampum belt that we made. It is a record of what has occurred between our people and yours, and contains an agreement from us that we shall never again make a claim on your land. We failed in our duty to verify the truth of claims that were made by people we should not have trusted, and by doing so, we caused unhappiness among the families who are living on The Orchard. We hope that this agreement will serve as a counterweight to the unhappy thoughts that you hold for us.*

*From the People of the Standing Stone, the Turtle, Wolf, and Bear Clans, on this day, twenty November 2025.*

*Ray HalBritter and the Tribal Clan*

I sifted through the polyester and found the wampum wrapped in a cloth woven with bright red, yellow, blue, and

green colored threads. Inside was the wampum, about two feet long and three inches wide consisting of black, grey, and white beads strung together with red and black threads and forming patterns along the length of the belt.

I'll be darned. Pa always said that before I made a judgment about a person I should let the thought ferment at least as long as it takes for red wine to be ready, two weeks. I judged Ray and the tribe too quickly. I wanted to share this with everyone, but everyone was either working, at school, or doing something else. Carmy, I thought. He was at the new place working on getting it ready. I picked up my phone and called him.

"Are you ready for a coffee break? I've got something to show you."

"Sure," he said. "Greg's here with me. The crew will be here this afternoon."

"I'll swing by Dunkin' and be right there."

They had made a lot of progress in the past week since I was there last. Carmy had hired a specialist crew to install the workshop for both battery electric and standard gasoline and diesel engines. Carmy and Greg were in what was the hardware store when it was DC Lumber. It was perfect for a car parts shop.

"It's coming along really well," I said as I walked into the shop.

"It's like this place was built to be a car repair and car parts business," said Greg.

"I could never figure out why it sat empty for so long," said Carmy. "Maybe the Guado family knew that someone on The Orchard would eventually want to take it over."

Carmy was able to reach one of Livia Navaro's sons who was the caretaker for the property. They reached an agreement on the price, and they signed the papers a week ago.

"Shall we have coffee in the old break room, in the basement?"

"It's a bit musty down there, but sure," replied Carmy.

We walked down the stairs and I felt like I was being carried back sixty years. It looked exactly the same, except for a thick layer of dust covering the table and chairs positioned around it. I gave a pull on one of the file cabinet handles. Locked.

"I met your mother out front on my first day of work here sixty years and five months ago," I said, "and the next day I drank my first cup of coffee right here in this cellar. Feels like yesterday."

"What was it that you wanted to show me, Dad?"

"It's proof that we should never judge people too quickly."



"I'll be fasting starting tomorrow," said Franky. "Not a full fast, but a fast like the ones during Lent. Two meals don't equal one and no meat. I want to be in good shape to enjoy a fully loaded Thanksgiving Day table."

"The key is to pace yourself," suggested Tony. "We should take a tip from the Swedes. They have their their big schmorgesborgs on Christmas Eve, Easter Sunday, and around the summer solstice in June. They scope out the table before they start to load up their plates, figuring out how much they can take of all the foods they want to eat. That's what we should do at Thanksgiving."

“And when was the last time you ate a schmorgesborg in Sweden?” I asked.

“It’s the wonders of technology, my boy,” answered Tony. “You don’t have to actually be there to experience it anymore. You just watch a YouTube video, and you’re an expert.”

“I’m going to do what I always do,” I said. “Make sure I save plenty of room for pumpkin pie with lots of whipped cream, and enjoy the leftovers during the following week.”

“Sounds like we all have our plan of action,” laughed Franky.

It was five days to Thanksgiving. All the local teams had been eliminated from from the Northeastern Pennsylvania high school football championships. I remember when the last game of the season was on Thanksgiving. Every team played its rival. No matter how good or bad the season had been, you had to win that last game.

“Did you like playing on Thanksgiving, Franky?” I asked.

“We played in the afternoon, and it pretty much ruined the whole Thanksgiving Day. The two other city teams played each other at the stadium in the morning, so they could enjoy the afternoon dinner. I don’t know why we couldn’t have alternated every other year, but it never seemed to come up for discussion. I was happy for the kids when they decided to end the season a couple of weeks before Thanksgiving and have a playoff for each district.”

“First thing I heard this morning when I turned on NPR was that Marjorie Taylor Green was resigning,” said Tony. “She’ll be missed by exactly no one. She did her best to piss off all the Democrats as well as all the Republicans who were not MAGA storm troopers. Then she put on the MeToo uniform like she was

campaigning for the feminist vote and demanded that all of Epstein's emails should be released when Trump was saying they would be released over his dead body. Trump called her a traitor, then he changed his tune about releasing the mails when he realized he was going to be overruled. A loser in winning, MTG crawls out of the wrestling ring."

"I just remember her heckling Joe when he was giving his State of the Union addresses," I said. "I was hoping someone in the chamber would run over to her and hit her with a cream pie in the face."

"Maybe she'll switch parties, win a seat, and then become part of The Squad," said Franky.

"The Squad'll have to rewrite the byelaws to allow people of non-color," quipped Tony. "No, she hasn't changed her stripes; she's just gone off the head bull in the herd. She won't go quietly into the night, and I'll put money on her acting like fly paper, attracting others in the party who already see the Trumpster as a lame duck."

"Remind me, when did women get the right to vote?" asked Franky.

"1920 in the United States," answered Tony, "and once they could vote, they could run for office. But there was one woman from Montana who was elected to take one of their two seats in 1916. Montana made voting for women legal in the state in 1914. And true to form, when the vote came up on whether the U.S. should enter World War I, she voted against it."

"I was watching a report from the climate conference in Brazil," said Franky. "It seemed like a big majority of the delegates were women."

“Nope,” said Tony. “The cameraman might have been trying to make a statement, but he—or she—delivered a false picture. Only 35% of the delegates were women, and only 39% of the delegations had more women than men. I made a point of looking this up because there is a feeling that the reason there isn’t more progress being made is that the men are holding everything back. It isn’t much different from when it all started in 2008, just a few percentage points more for the women. If it were run by women, all the oil wells would be plugged up, all the gas pipes sealed shut, all the nuclear plants closed, and all the factories closed because there would be no electricity to run them.”

“It’s a good thing Jenny’s not here to hear this,” said Franky.

“I come to breakfast with you guys once a week rather than paying a shrink,” said Tony. I don’t think he was being ironic. “Jenny and I represent the two opposing views of how the world turns, and inside the walls of our house, the world turns in only one direction, and it’s Jenny’s.”

“Do you think Trump sees himself as a lame duck?” I asked, directing my question to Tony. “I thought you were convinced he was going to fix it so he could run for at least one more term.”

“I’m certain he’s going to try, but there are already some signs that there are headwinds blowing. Liz Cheney snubbed Trump when she didn’t invite him to her father’s funeral, and there were plenty of the old guard Republicans there, like George Bush the Younger, Mike Pence, and Dan Quayle, and they were shaking hands and rubbing shoulders with Biden, Harris, and Gore.”

“Bill and Barack weren’t there,” pitched in Franky.

“They were both invited, but I guess they figured there was neither a political or social reason to attend,” answered Tony. “But there are some cracks of vulnerability forming in what looked like an invincible wall just a couple of months ago. It looks like the Epstein thing has shaken him. There is a limit to what the Christian right will put up with, and if they figure there’s a decent replacement for him if he is toppled off the wall, like Vance, they’ll abandon him. What happens next with the Epstein mails is going to decide what his next three years are going to be.”

“There’s one last thing he has to do before the end of the year,” said Franky, “and that’s getting Russia and Ukraine to agree on a proposal to stop the fighting.”

“I don’t see how that’s going to happen,” I said. “The Ukrainians don’t want to give up any land and they want Crimea back, and Russia doesn’t want to give up the land they control, including Crimea. Russia is never going to agree to leave any of the land they control, so the only way fighting stops is if Ukraine admits they lost.”

“Trump’s said from the start that Ukraine has to accept the current land control situation,” said Tony, “so, for the past eleven months since Trump has been President, their conversations have been Trump telling him to give in, and Zelensky telling him that he won’t. At the same time, Europe has been backing Zelensky, rather than siding with Trump, and they have been trying to take Russia’s frozen assets and give it to Ukraine so it can buy more weapons to defend itself and do some more damage to Russia.”

“It’s become more and more clear to me,” said Franky, “that we’re here now because of what we, the United States and Europe, didn’t do in 2014 when Russia took Crimea.”

“Right,” said Tony.



Except for the fact that Connie isn't here, we have a lot to be thankful for this Thanksgiving. The Oneida Nation cloud that had been hanging over our heads for most of the past year had blown away. The constant threat from the Luccatellas that our families had lived with for the past century seems to have been neutralized by a stronger force threatening them. We'll see how that develops. Carmy is close to opening up his new shop in the old lumber yard, and Sal and Rene are making good progress on turning the old train station into what is going to be a place worthy of the terrific food they are making, carrying on the tradition of their parents. We don't have any police, immigration agents, or National Guard troops coming into Drake's Crossing because there are just too few illegals living here for them to bother. Trump won Pennsylvania, so it's off the Trump radar, compared to other big states like California, Illinois, and New York. John Fetterman, our pragmatic Democratic senator, is keeping Trump out of our state. And I think Donald is uncertain about what would happen if he tried to go head-to-head with our Jewish governor, Josh Shapiro, who is an uncompromisingly strong supporter of Israel.

But I still wake up in the morning feeling like something bad is going to happen. Russia's going to nuke Kiev. China is going to invade Taiwan. We learn that aliens really do exist when they land their spacecraft right on top of the White House without any warning, and everyone inside, including the President, become part of history.



It's cold and there's snow on the ground. It feels like the 1950s and 60s when temperatures dropped right after Thanksgiving and stayed below zero until well into March. We could ice skate on the ponds, and build snow forts that would turn grey and then black from the coal dust pouring out of every chimney until a new layer of snow fell. For the past thirty years, no one trusted the ice even if it looked frozen, and the ground has been bare for most of the winters. Yesterday, I actually saw some kids skating on the shallow pond out at the western edge of town. It's just as well that our local kids are not part of the high school football playoff picture. The Eastern teams that are left are mostly from the Philly area. It's ten degrees warmer in Philly right now.

This is the third Sunday in Advent, less than two weeks to Christmas. The second reading at mass this morning was about patience. The farmer has to wait patiently for the rains. Complaining that they don't come does no one any good, and it is a sign that the farmer is criticizing God for not bringing the rains, that he is judging God. Being impatient with our family members and neighbors is a form of judgment, and if we are harsh in our judgments of others, we can be judged harshly as well when it's time for God to judge us. Not all of the readings offer such good practical advice.

As I sat and listened to the readings, I thought about what had been happening this week. If anyone in the Trump White House had attended a Christian service, I wonder what they were thinking. There are no signs of patience or of abstaining from harshly judging those who have been our friends. Trump's team seem perfectly capable of excusing the Russians for killing innocent civilians, bombing hospitals, schools, apartment buildings, and the infrastructure that's needed to keep the lights on and the heat flowing. They keep criticizing Zelensky for not

accepting a cease fire and a peace settlement based on the Russia keeping all the land it has taken. Trump called African countries shitholes in his first term, and he's back doing it again. Now, he's starting to call European countries weak and woke and crime-ridden and destined to collapse. On Friday I read that he was targeting several countries, like Hungary and Slovakia, to leave the European Union and join in an economic and security alliance with the U.S.

After mass, we drove in two cars to the the cemetery. I sat in the back of Mike and Ellen's car with Annamaria. Carmy and Mary with Joey and Nicky followed. Tony and Jenny were already there. Annie, Guy, Sal, and Rene were arriving as we parked. I thought of the day Connie was buried. Snow covered the ground as well as the sides of the gravestones and trees that faced north, but there was no sun on that day. Today, it's sunny, and the grey sky has been replaced with one that is clear and blue. I looked at my name on our gravestone. I still feel strong, but I can feel and see the changes that age is bringing. My skin is hanging where there used to be toned muscles. I can't eat as much as I used to, and I'm losing weight. We fixed the spruce branches covering the front of the graves, and adjusted the wreaths that had been pushed around by the wind. It was too cold for flowers. I'll wait for a couple of warmer days to bring some cyclamen.

We all moved around slowly, visiting every grave, saying a silent prayer, brushing the snow off the stones with our gloved hands. After we had visited every grave, we got into our cars and drove to Tony and Jenny's place for dinner. Jenny makes great manicotti, and she makes her own shells, light and tasty. The Eagles are playing the Raiders and the Giants are playing the Commanders. We won't be lingering long at the table.

Sometime between when we finished the manicotti course and started on the roast chicken, Mary put out a question to the table: "Is this the first time America is shooting at boats in international water and killing the people in them? I was just wondering if this is something our government did before we committed ourselves to the United Nations and world peace." I always think of Annamaria taking after her grandmother. I looked at Mary while she was talking and then after she had finished. It was as if I had not seen her before, really seen her. There was something there that reminded me very much of Connie. Not the way she looked, but the way she talked and how she held her head, chin up, a slight smile on her lips. Carmy must have seen this the first time they met.

Before Tony could answer, Joey said, "We talked about this in history class on Friday. President Lincoln ordered a blockade of Confederate ports in April 1861. He did this without asking for approval from Congress. The Union never declared war against the states that seceded because it would have given them recognition as a sovereign nation. The Union said that the seceding states were domestic entities engaged in an unlawful rebellion. So this made the normal war powers given to the Congress and the Executive more difficult to interpret. It's the Congress that has the power to declare war, raise armies, and regulate the military, according to Article 1, Section 8 in the Constitution. The President is the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, according to Article II, Section 2, who has the power for urgent defense action."

"He got his history gene from Mary," said Carmy, "because I don't have a single one in my body."

"What I thought was most interesting about this," continued Joey, "was that a group of Northern ship owners brought a

suit all the way up to the Supreme Court while the war was still going on. In 1863, the Court heard the case in which the ship owners whose ships had been confiscated claimed the blockade was illegal because Congress had not declared war. The Court said that a state of war did exist, even if there was no formal declaration, because the scale of the rebellion meant it was a civil war. It ruled that President Lincoln, as Commander in Chief, had the authority to put down the insurrection.”

“Just since the end of World War II, there have been nine orders of military action ordered by the President without the approval of Congress,” added Tony. “In 1998 by President Clinton ordered Tomahawk missiles to be sent into Afghanistan and Sudan against al-Qaeda.”

“I guess 911 was payback for that,” I said. “What were the other actions?”

“Clinton bombed Yugoslavia in '99,” answered Tony. “Reagan had his Grenada in '83, George Bush the Elder had Panama in '89, George the Younger had Iraq, Obama had Libya in 2011, and the Donald had Yemen and Syria in 2017, Syria again in 2018, and Iran with the big, bad, beautiful bombs in June of this year.”

“What about the first invasion of Iraq in 1990?” asked Ellen.

“George was going to authorize it, but he was threatened with impeachment,” replied Tony. “Then Congress issued a resolution so that resolved the problem.”

“And now we have what’s happening around Venezuela,” said Mary.

“Trump says the strikes are being made on drug running boats. Supposedly their goal is to protect Americans from the

drugs these boats are bringing in, although so far, there has been no evidence presented that the boats were carrying drugs. The people killed are given the name “narco-terrorists”. The “terrorist” label makes them viable targets for summary execution, according to the President’s men and women.”

“Everybody outside the White House says that the reason is to force Maduro to resign,” said Mary.

“Or we want to take their oil,” added Jenny.

“Back in October,” said Tony, “Trump said in one of his on-the-fly news conferences that his justification for killing people on the boats is that drugs killed 300,000 Americans last year, and that gave him legal authority to do what he has ordered. No one believes that’s the reason. He’s after Maduro, and one way to get him is to cut off his oil sales.”

Annamaria jumped in. “What he’s doing is not legal. Stopping drug running does not come under U.S. Code Title 10 that lists the President’s authority regarding the armed forces. I read that the White House is describing the strikes as military self-defense operations under U.S. Title 10. It was enacted in 1956 to make the responsibilities of everyone involved in defense of the United States clearer. Drug running is nowhere defined as a legitimate military target. If the Congress were controlled by Democrats, he would have been forced to stop these attacks after the first one.”

“I read that more than half of Americans either approve the strikes or don’t have an opinion,” said Nicky. “Most Democrats disapprove and most Republicans approve.”

“I have mixed feelings,” I said. “Anything that cuts the supply of drugs is good, but executing people without a fair trial is not something our Constitution supports.”

There was a pause in the conversation while Tony brought the chicken to the table and everyone helped with the rest. We kept the talk light while we enjoyed our Sunday dinner. Jenny’s other specialty is glazed carrots. You would think that a dish with four simple ingredients and a few spices could never be anything special. Carrots, brown sugar, butter, and garlic with salt, pepper, and parsley. Jenny got the recipe from Connie, who had gotten it from her mother. She used the small carrots and cut them into one-inch pieces. She cooked the carrots first in water until they were tender. Then she drained them and put them in with the melted butter, garlic, brown sugar, and spices. It was a matter of getting all the pieces well-coated, and Jenny did what Connie and Helen had done, stood over them with tongs and turned every one of them. I looked up other recipes for glazed carrots, which included making them in the oven, using maple syrup or honey, adding them to a pan with fried bacon. Helen’s and Connie’s and Jenny’s glazed carrots were simply the best.

“I just finished reading Jill Lepore’s latest book, *We the People*,” said Tony as we were finishing up our second helpings of everything. “It’s a history of the U.S. Constitution.”

“Didn’t you just read the other book she wrote,” asked Guy, “the one you thought was a history of America from the perspective of slaves, women, and Indians? You said it was long and repetitive, but it was full of things that you were certain were true and that you had never heard or read before.”

“That was *These Truths*. *We the People* is only seven hundred and twenty pages versus nine hundred and sixty for *These*

Truths. It's still long, it is a bit repetitive, and it is also filled with stuff I had never heard of before. But it is really, really good and worth reading. The story's the same in both books. We're living with the compromises that were made by the eight northern colonies when the country was founded to keep the five southern colonies from going their separate ways. We're living with the compromises the Union states made after the Civil War to get the Confederate states back in the Union. And, most of all, we're living with a document that defines how our government is supposed to work that has been very difficult to adapt to a world that looks much different today than when it was ratified in 1788 and first went into effect in 1789. The biggest problem, according to Dr. Lepore, is Article V, which defines how the Constitution gets amended. There have only been twenty-seven amendments, and the first ten were part of the original document. They're called the Bill of Rights."

"Those are the ones protecting individual liberties, like freedom of speech and religion, right?" interjected Joey.

"Right," said Tony. "So we have seventeen that were added since 1787. One was prohibition and another repealed prohibition. So now we're down to fifteen. Three of them came as part of the Civil War, the thirteenth abolishing slavery, the fourteenth guaranteeing citizenship and equal rights to everyone born in the U.S., and the fifteenth guaranteeing the right to vote irrespective of race, color, or whether the person was once a slave. The southern states made a joke of all three until 1965 when the Civil Rights Act was finally passed. Her biggest complaint in the book is the Electoral College. Why can't we just elect the president directly, she asks."

"I agree," said Jenny.

One after the other, everyone said “Me to”, except me.

“Wasn’t the whole idea with the Electoral College to give the smaller states more of a say so that the bigger states didn’t dominate?” I said. “Wasn’t that why they invented the Electoral College?”

“The whole idea with the Electoral College,” replied Tony, “was that the founders didn’t trust the people doing the voting. Direct democracy was a very new idea, even though the number of people who could actually vote was limited. White males with land. No women; no Indians; no white males without land.”

“Women couldn’t vote until 1920,” said Jenny. “Native Americans couldn’t vote until 1924.”

“If there were reasons for distrusting direct elections in 1789, there are no reasons for it today,” said Tony. “Lepore says that abolishment of the Electoral College has been supported by a large majority of citizens and members of Congress for the past hundred years, but it has been impossible to get it through as a constitutional amendment.”

“I think there should be term limits on Supreme Court justices,” said Mary, “and I definitely don’t believe the justices should be appointed by the president.”

“Lepore doesn’t say that directly,” said Tony, “but everything she describes about how the judges have acted over the years, and how their political leanings before they were appointed affected their actions while they were sitting on the bench, leads to that conclusion. Supposedly, the Senate approval process eliminates people who are not qualified, but if the Senate is controlled by the same party as the president, they’re going to approve anyone he—or maybe at some point in the future—she appoints. The reason she gives the Supreme Court so

much ink in her book is that it's their job to interpret the Constitution and decide whether laws passed by the Congress follow the Constitution or whether a law has the effect of changing the Constitution, which is what an amendment is for."

"How can one group of justices decide that abortion is allowed by the Constitution because the Constitution says people have the right to privacy, and another group of justices say the opposite and overturn *Roe versus Wade*?" asked Annamaria.

"When you become a lawyer, honey, you'll be able to explain that to all of us," said Mike. "I can't make any sense out of what I've read."

"It was the Court's Italian-American, Sam Alito, who wrote the majority opinion," offered Annie. "I know that much. He said the decision in *Roe versus Wade* was wrong from the start."

"Privacy isn't mentioned in the Constitution," said Tony, "but it's implied in amendments, and had been used before *Roe* in certain cases. One in '65 ruled that Connecticut could not prohibit the use of contraceptives because that violated the right of marital privacy."

"I remember a case in 1969," I said, "that ruled a person could have and look at pornographic material in their own home. The judges compared banning pornography to banning books."

"I wonder what the judges sitting on the bench today would do with that question?" asked Ellen.

"I have a feeling the court is going to be very busy this coming year," said Tony. "If Trump is going to try to run for a third term without a replacement for the twenty-second amendment, he's going to have to come up with a workaround that Congress will pass and the Court will uphold."

“The bruise on his hand will spread to his entire body,” said Joey, “and the makeup he’ll use to hide it will melt in front of the cameras as he debates other candidates running against him, including Marjorie Taylor Green. He’ll faint from embarrassment, and have to be carried out on a stretcher.”

“You should audition for a spot on Saturday Night Live’s script writing team, Joey,” said Guy.



Christmas Eve dinner last night was at Annie and Guy’s, as usual. No one can do fish like Guy. Christmas Day dinner this year is at Carmy and Mary’s. It’s the fifth Christmas without Connie. Where did this year go? Where did these four years go? I feel like it was just a few days ago that I kissed Connie good-bye, and last night’s dinner felt like it was a continuation of Christmas Eve dinner the year before. There were two differences last night: no one mentioned *Festa dei sette pesci* or asked for *cappuccino* instead of *espresso*.

Everyone but me went to midnight mass. I left around ten when Franky and his family went home to get ready for mass in Darlton at the church Franky and Donna have belonged to since they moved out of the city. I was in bed by eleven, which is late for me, but I still gave my latest book, Guns, Germs, and Steel, half an hour before turning off the light. I don’t know how Tony finds these books. I never read anything before I retired, and now I feel like I’m part of a New York Times book club. Tony reads them, then Franky and I read them, and then we talk about them at the Club on Saturdays. Connie and I always went to mass on Christmas Day, and I have not changed that routine since Connie died. If the sun was shining and it was cold with

snow covering the ground, it was a bonus. That was the case today. After mass was over, we always visited the manger at the side of the altar, lit candles, and then went up to the cemetery.

“Was the candle still burning?” asked Carmy when I came in. Had the batteries he put in the lantern two weeks ago on Connie’s grave lit their last light, he meant. There is a light sensor in the lantern, so it only lights when it’s dark.

“I checked, and it’s still working,” I said. “I liked the heather you and Mary put on, so I added another one.” A quick knock on the door was followed by the entrance of the Malatesta and Donatelli families. Franky and Donna would not be coming. They were with Donna’s family at Donna’s sister house for a traditional Irish Christmas dinner. I’m not sure what that means, something with cabbage maybe, but we promised to save a plate of the Italian delicacies for Franky.

“Did everyone get what they were expecting for Christmas?” I asked. I gave up trying to find presents that I thought my kids and their kids would like. Everybody gets money into their bank accounts and a card telling them it’s there and who it came from. Annamaria, Nicky and Joey each get a small box, neatly wrapped, which sits under their tree with a tag: *From Babbo Natale*. It contains a single lump of chestnut-sized coal. It’s to remind them of their roots. I gave them a quart-sized Ball Mason jar on their first year to put them in. The gloves and socks and sweaters I receive each year I put in my Christmas present drawer. Carmy and Mary usually give me a box of flies that they order from Orvis, and, if I’m lucky, I have a few of them left after the fishing season is over to carry me into the next season.

“This is what I asked Santa for,” said Annamaria, holding up a powder blue camera. It was a Fujifilm Instax Mini 11. Mom

got one of the first Polaroid SX-70s when they came out in 1973. She took tons of photos, and saved every one that she didn't give away. There wasn't much left to see when I went through the box where she had kept them after she died. They were all faded.

"Santa confirmed that he got the letter," added Ellen, "and sent it with a special elf driving a delivery van a few days before Christmas.

"Nicky got a mini drone," said Joey, "and I got a new wireless gaming headset."

"I thought that's what you each got last year," I said.

"Technology marches on," laughed Carmy.

Tony and Jenny's sons, the twins, Louis and Thomas, were there with their families. Louis married a girl from Carl's Summit, Emily Carlsson, who was from a Swedish family. The father had come over to work for a Swedish company that had its US headquarters there, and he and the family liked it so much, they decided to stay. Louis and Emily have two girls, Ebba aged twelve, and Emma aged fourteen. Thomas married a girl named Jane Thomas. They have a son named Thomas, Jr. aged fifteen and a girl named Debbie aged sixteen. We didn't get to hear about their Christmas presents because Carmy called us all to the table.

"There are no surprises," said Mary. "We are starting with *cappalletti in brodo*. You should know that I had lots of help making the cappalletti, so you have big little hats and little little hats and some hats in between. Then we have *agnello arrosto*, roast lamb, *patate al rosmarino*, potatoes with rosemary, grilled peppers, zucchini, and cauliflower sauted with onions and garlic, our Thanksgiving favorite, candied yams, and Tony's absolute favorite, *spinaci in olio d'oliva e aglio*, spinach in garlic.

“And since it would not be Christmas anywhere on The Orchard without *pinoccate*,” added Sal, “Mom and Rene made enough to feed the entire street.” It has to be one the simplest recipes ever invented. It has three main ingredients, water, sugar, and pine nuts, and then cocoa. The cocoa is added to half of the dough that is made when the pine nuts are added to the syrup produced from boiling the sugar in water. You know the syrup is ready for adding the pine nuts because you can pull the syrup into a thread. You add the pine nuts and mix it into a dough. Half of the *pinoccate* are white and the other half are black. You stretch out the dough on a marble surface that has been greased with butter, let it cool, then cut it into shapes, like diamonds or rectangles.

Just as we were about to sit down, the door bell rang. “Are we expecting someone?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Annie. “It’s a surprise visitor.” She got up to open the door. A few minutes later two surprise visitors appeared, Ginger and Rich. Annie introduced them to the kids, and then there were hugs from everyone.

“I sent Ginger a letter telling her that there was nowhere to send her Christmas card, and if she received the card she and Rich should come to us on Christmas day for dinner and her Christmas cookies. And here they are.”

“We rented a car instead of driving our own,” said Rich, “and we wore our hooded parkas and kept the hoods up when we got close to DC, just in case.”

“Let’s talk while we are eating,” said Annie. “You are just in time for Christmas dinner.”

Two more place settings were brought in from the kitchen by Nicky and Joey, and we all sat down. I could have made a meal with just the soup, but I did my best to pace myself. I'd see how well I did tomorrow. Light on the wine. It was small talk around the table. The Eagles chances to make the playoffs took up a lot of the discussion. What happened to them this year after winning the Super Bowl last year? It wasn't until we were drinking coffee that the elephant walked into the room.

"I guess you have no idea what has happened to Eedo," said Ginger.

We all shook our heads "No".

"The plan was to get him out of the country and to one of the islands in the Gulf," said Ginger. "He didn't make it. The Santorini family, Gosnick's real last name, mainly Barney Bellomo's sister who was Bob Santorini's mother, wouldn't let her son's killer get away. She went to her brother and told him that she would hunt Eedo down personally if he let him go. She told him that she wanted to be there when he went down just to make sure that it really happened. He got the same treatment he gave Gosnick, somewhere in Queens."

"What's happened to Ricky?" asked Annie.

Ginger didn't answer directly. She looked over at Rich, and Rich looked at her. Then Rich said, "He was with Eedo in the trunk of the car. Barney knew it was his only choice. Sooner or later he would have to do it if Ricky didn't find him first with a bullet."

"So, that's it for the Luccatellas," said Carmy.

"Yes and no," said Tony, and he looked at me.

“Eedo doesn’t have any kids, and he was the last in Ricky’s line,” I said, “but there is one more Luccatella who has been living in Vermont for the past sixty years. He changed his name to Gary Long. His real name is Genaro Luccatella.”

“He’s the one who came to give you a pile of money, isn’t he?” said Ellen.

“And you didn’t take it,” added Carmy.

“Right on both counts,” I answered. “He had really changed from the lazy juvenile delinquent he had been in high school, after his father was...” I stopped and looked at Ginger.

“I’ve been saying Hail Mary’s for these sixty years as penance for what I did,” said Ginger.

“And we’ve been sending you Christmas cookies during all that time for what you did,” said Annie.

“It’s covered by the Doctrine of Double Effect,” offered Rich. “I considered becoming a priest and took philosophy of religion courses. Thomas Aquinas came up with the doctrine that said you could do something good that leads to something bad, but not the other way around. There are four principles in his doctrine, and first three say that bad means can’t justify good ends. The fourth is what I have always told Ginger is her card to play when she meets St. Peter at the pearly gates. The good effect outweighs the bad effect by tons.”



It was Saturday morning, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January. Franklin was busying himself with the peanuts in their shells I had put out for him. While I ate a slice of toast and drank my coffee, saving my appetite for our Breakfast Club meeting, he shucked and ate peanuts. He made regular trips back to his nest with his cheeks

full of them. He had just come back from one of his supply runs when Ellen came in.

“Did you hear?”

“Hear what? I haven’t put the news on yet.” I had gotten into the habit of not turning on the radio until after I ate breakfast. I chose peace over information. I felt like I was wasting the best time of the day getting angry over the stupid things happening all over the world.

“Maduro, the President of Venezuela, along with his wife were captured by American forces and they are on their way to New York to be charged with drug smuggling.”

“You mean U.S. forces invaded Venezuela?”

“As far as I know, they just went in to capture Maduro. I don’t know if there are any troops that have stayed, or if anyone was killed or injured.”

“What in God’s name is going on?”

I turned on the TV to hear the news on CNN. After about ten minutes it was clear there was no more information than what Ellen had already told me. There were some photos of a night sky punctured by light flashes that could have been bombs or could have been fireworks. There was a photo of someone who could have been Maduro dressed in grey sweatpants and sweat-shirt, blindfolded, holding a water bottle.

“I’m turning it off and I’m going to sit down and read the thumbnail version of the news that we get in the Saturday paper, finish the coffee I brewed, and then get ready for the our Breakfast Club meeting. Maybe by that time our government will let us in on who decided we were going to be in the overt regime

changing business after 250 years of being in the covert regime changing business.”

“Don’t forget Manuel Noriega,” said Ellen, as she walked out the back door.

I picked Tony up at 10.30. Everyone on the street could set their clocks by the time I parked in front of Tony and Jenny’s house and Tony walked out of his door and got into my Cherokee.

“You heard?” he said.

“Ellen came over to tell me while I was enjoying my first breakfast and watching Franklin eat his. The Trumpeter in Chief had made it clear that he was going to do something, but I didn’t think in my wildest dreams that kidnapping Maduro and his wife was one of the options.”

“We continue to underestimate his seemingly unlimited ability to cause trouble. It’s like catching a two hundred-pound shark when you’re out in a dingy fishing for sea bass and hauling it into the boat. What the hell do you do when it starts flapping and chomping? And there’s all those sharks that you didn’t catch, still in the water, that are going to start attacking the dingy to get their buddy back.”

“Ellen said I shouldn’t forget Manuel Noriega.”

“On this exact day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January, thirty-six years ago, Noriega came out of the Vatican’s embassy in Panama City and surrendered to U.S. troops that had entered the country in late December. George Bush the Elder was president. Like Trump, he didn’t ask for permission from Congress. He sent in twenty-four thousand troops. Twenty-three U.S. soldiers died and another three hundred or so were wounded. We killed two hun-

dred civilians and three hundred of their soldiers. He was convicted of drug trafficking and served seventeen years of his forty-year sentence, was extradited to France, who returned him to Panama to serve a 60-year sentence for murder, corruption, and embezzlement while he was ruling Panama. He died in 2017 while he was serving that sentence.”

“So, how did Bush justify that presidential grab, and has Trump used Bush’s playbook?”

“Noriega had been on the CIA’s payroll while Bush was head of the Agency. Noriega’s job was to fight drug trafficking and to push U.S. interests in South America. He did that, but it seems he was working both sides of the street. The day after Bush ordered forces to Panama, he went on air to tell the nation why. I remember watching his speech. He kept saying the lives of American citizens were in danger. We were still in control of the Panama Canal at that time. We didn’t give up control for ten more years. He called Noriega a dictator, and said that he declared Panama to be in a state of war with the United States and threatened American lives. Putin used the same language when he sent troops into eastern Ukraine.”

“Trump has been pushing the drug button. He used it this morning in his speech when he brought up the killing of a young girl in Houston a couple of years ago by members of a Venezuelan gang. The ones who were charged were in the country illegally. Trump claims that the gangs have been sent by Maduro. There’s no proof of that, but that is what he’s claiming. He also said that the U.S. is going to run Venezuela for an unspecified amount of time, and we’re going to take back control of the oil assets that Venezuela took from us.”

“They didn’t take the oil assets back from the foreign companies, they just made it too expensive for the companies to take the oil out of the ground. Their state company took over 60% of the profits from the oil. They thought that was fair.”

Franky was in his usual position at our table with the newspaper spread out in front of him. Naturally, there was nothing in it about the Venezuelan caper, since the paper is printed at least a day before. Sometimes it feels like there are at least two days of news missing.

“I know we’re going to talk about Venezuela, but I thought we could start on a lighter note. It says here that George Clooney has gotten French citizenship and that he and his family have moved to a farm in Southern France.”

“I always liked Clooney,” I said, “partly because his aunt was Rosemary Clooney and I liked her. But then he married an Arab and...”

“She’s not Arab,” corrected Tony. “She was born in Lebanon. Her mother’s Muslim and her father’s Druze, which is a variation on a Jewish-Christian theme. She grew up in the UK. She’s definitely not a friend of Israel’s.”

“Okay, she’s not Arab,” I said, “but he went from being a decent actor to being his wife’s husband, showing up at Democratic Party fund raising events in expensive suits or tuxedos. And then he thought because he was giving the party lots of money, he had the right to decide who should and who should not be President of the United States.”

“They backed the wrong horses,” said Franky. “His wife was behind the indictment by the International Criminal Court of Justice of Netanyahu for war crimes. The Democratic Party, with

the possible exception of Kamala Harris, is not thanking him for his criticism of Joe Biden after the debate with Trump. I think they left the country because there were too many people who decided to make their lives here uncomfortable, especially the MAGA crowd.”

“We shouldn’t feel too sorry for them,” said Tony. “They can probably live out their lives with the money they made on selling their houses in California and Mexico, even if George loses his Nespresso contract.”

“Nespresso’s part of Nestlé, and Nestlé’s a Swiss company,” said Franky.

Three days later, on the fifth anniversary of the insurrection at the Capitol, the news media was filled with claims by Trump and his hangers-on that the desecration of the nation’s capital was a patriotic act. The former leader of the Proud Boys, Enrique Tarrío, led a march from the White House to the Capitol. He had been sentenced to twenty-two years in prison for seditious conspiracy, and he was among the 1,500 felons who were pardoned by Trump the day he was inaugurated. There were only about a hundred people who showed up for the march. I kept thinking of all the things I would have liked to see happen to those marchers. My favorite would be spraying them with liquid manure like they do after cutting the alfalfa fields. I know it’s wrong to think these thoughts. The reading this morning was love one another, because if we don’t love even our enemies, we don’t love God. Some of these readings are pretty hard to follow. How could anyone love what these jerks did? I wonder if Eedo would have been there if he didn’t end up as charcoal.



On Inauguration Day, the 20<sup>th</sup> of January a year ago, it was so cold in Washington, DC that the organizers of the Inauguration, probably with a push from the incoming president's wife, decided to move the whole show inside the Capitol's Rotunda. The next day, Tony, Franky, and I started walking from DC to Coney Island Lunch and gave up because we were turning to icicles. This year, it was even colder here and in DC, and today, Saturday the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, it was down in the teens with a forecast of a major snowstorm coming in on Sunday. Tony, Franky, and I decided to invite Jenny, Donna, Annie, and Guy to our meeting to sum up the year since Trump's inauguration. When we were all seated, and Edie had poured coffee for everyone and taken our orders (waffles for me), Tony said: "I have to hand it to Trump's people. They have a lot of creativity. Someone on the Nobel Peace Prize committee probably told someone on the President's staff that he should give up any hope of ever being given the Prize, so they figured the only possibility for their boss of ever having his ultimate dream fulfilled was to take one from someone who already had one."

Four days earlier, in a ceremony at the White House, Maria Corina Machado had presented Trump with a gold-framed wall hanging that contained her Nobel Peace Prize medal, and a dedication: Presented as a personal symbol of gratitude on behalf of the Venezuelan people in recognition of President Trump's principled and decisive action to secure a free Venezuela."

"Wait!" cried Franky. "Are you going to tell us that the entire Venezuelan operation was about getting Maria Corina Machado's medal?"

"Yep," answered Tony with his best imitation of Trump's shit-eating grin. "Right from when she was awarded the medal

on the 10<sup>th</sup> of October. They had already started sinking Venezuelan alleged drug-running boats in September. Grabbing the medal just gave them a bigger incentive to keep doing it. They had to smuggle her out of the country so she could pick up her medal. They had probably made the medal swap a precondition for springing her. She had to have it so Trump could get it. Can anyone believe that the United States would risk getting Americans killed to help someone like Machado go to Oslo to collect a prize that Trump believed he deserved? I'm really surprised no one has put these obvious pieces together."

"Brilliant!" exclaimed Franky.

"Sick," said Jenny. "It's like buying a set of war medals at an auction and displaying them in your home as if they had been awarded to you."

"Typical," said Annie. "Then he writes a text message to the Prime Minister of Norway and blames him for what he's doing. 'If you gave me the Nobel Peace Prize, I would have been happy, but you didn't, so now I'm going to get back at you by taking Greenland.' Whine, whine, whine, snivel, snivel. The Nobel Peace Prize committee chairman's comment says it all: 'Pathetic'. And they said the medal can change owners or be shared, but the title of a Nobel Peace Prize laureate cannot, so it's meaningless."

"Something only a criminal mind could dream up," commented Guy.

"You should write it up and send it to the New York Times," added Franky.

"I'd be dead before the ink was dry on the paper," answered Tony. "Let this be our little secret."

“This pretty much sums up what has happened during the year, I guess,” I said. “He got revenge on the Nobel committee, and he got revenge on Maduro.”

“He also got revenge on Russia and China for using the Venezuelan ships for beating the blockade set up to punish Putin for his invasion of Ukraine,” added Tony.

“Is something retribution if you have to steal it?” I asked.

“No,” answered Tony. “It’s theft.”

“He seems bent on stealing Greenland,” offered Donna.

“He says it’s part of his Donroe Doctrine,” said Franky. “Tony, you said he had made this part of his thinking during his first term. Russia gets Europe, the U.S. gets North and South America, China gets Asia, and Africa is where all three sell their weapons so they can be battle tested.”

“That’s right, and Greenland is officially part of North America, not Europe,” added Tony. “There are only around 50,000 people living there. Scranton’s bigger in population, but if you laid Greenland over the U.S., it’s about as large in area as all the states east of the Mississippi. And it’s mostly covered by an ice pack which is over a mile thick. The U.S. had seventeen military bases on the island during and after World War II. Now, there is only one. Nobody told us to close them. Denmark didn’t kick our butts out. We left when we thought that Russia was going to be our buddy and before China had a navy that was going to be bigger than ours. Why should we pay to defend a place that didn’t need defending, especially if we didn’t own it, our government said. Then the Chinese show up sniffing for minerals, and the Russians show up looking for places to dock their subs, and suddenly we need it so we can defend ourselves because we know

Denmark sure as hell isn't going to stand up to either Russia or China, and we have to have it or else we are going to take it, one way or the other, as Donny said."

"Donny didn't know anything about all this when he was doing his New York deals and finding new wives," said Jenny. "He's had horse whisperers giving him the secrets of world politics. He's just telling us what they told him, but he's speaking in parables."

Eddie came by with coffee refills. "How come one of you never became a politician?" she asked.

"Because we'd have to move to Harrisburg or the other DC and we wouldn't be able to come here for our club meetings every week, that's why," answered Tony. "We're looking out for your economy and our stomachs."

"I suppose that's a good enough reason," answered Eddie, "but maybe you should think about taping your meetings and sending them to the people who do get elected so they could have a better idea of what they should be thinking about when they're voting."

Eddie left and we were quiet for awhile. Why don't we ever see our politicians in here, I thought. We could invite them over to talk, get their opinions on what's happening. Maybe we are thinking along the wrong lines. Maybe they could explain how things really work.

"As we were driving here we heard on the radio that there was another shooting by an ICE agent in Minneapolis," said Donna. "Like the shooting of Renee Good a couple of weeks ago, this was not an immigrant but a U.S. citizen protesting against ICE because of what they are doing."

“Remember Kent State in May 1970?” asked Tony. “Four students were killed and nine injured by bullets fired by the Ohio National Guard. The Mayor of Kent called the Governor to ask for help to control demonstrations that started when U.S. and Vietnames troops went into Cambodia. The Governor sent the National Guard. Then the protesters began to protest against the National Guard, throwing rocks at them. The Guard started lobbing tear gas, and the crowd lobbed the canisters back at them. While this was going on, the ROTC building on campus was burning itself into a pile of ashes, set aflame by one of the groups that, for some reason, decided to make Kent State the focal point of peace protests. It seems like one of the Guardsmen decided he had enough, pulled out his pistol, and started shooting. Other Guradsmen joined in, aiming and shooting their rifles.”

“I had just gotten back from Vietnam,” I said. “Connie was in her last semester at Sacred Heart. I had spent three years in captivity and came home alive. Then I hear that four kids, two boys and two girls, were shot in Ohio by kids their same age. I turned off my ears and shut my eyes. I could not watch or hear anything about what happened.”

“You put people with guns in a place with people who had gotten so used to acting like there were no laws because police were pigs and soldiers were murderers and politicians were corrupt liars,” continued Tony, “and eventually something bad is going to happen. It happened in Kent State and now it’s happening in the streets of Minneapolis for exactly the same reason.”

“Nixon set up a commission to investigate the whole thing in Kent State,” said Franky. “Do you remember who led that commission?” Silence. “It was then-Governor Bill Scranton. It was called the Scranton Commission. The report said the shootings were unjustified, and that the Guard never should have had

live ammunition. It also said that the those who engaged in rock throwing and arsen were criminals who bore a share of the blame.”

“If Trump had read that report,” said Donna, “he would have thought twice about setting up ICE in the first place and sending it into cities.”

Tony added, “If the mayor of Minneapolis and the state’s governor, Tim Walz, had read that report, they would never have said the kinds of things to incite the normal citizens of the city and the state to believe they had the moral right to actively and physically engage the ICE agents in an aggressive way. Both sides a are wrong.”

“Just after Trump was sworn in the second time we talked about something you said during the summer after Biden was elected,” I said, “the night Connie made the last ragu from the fall’s deer hunt. Franky asked what would happen if Trump—he said the Joker—gets back in office. It would be good for Donna, Jenny, Annie, and Guy to hear what you said now five years ago, and think about what actually did happen.”

“Yes. I said it was no mystery. He would pardon everyone who was convicted of attacking the Capitol, and make them into his personal White House Guard. He’d dress them up in special patriotic uniforms, I said. He’s done the pardoning and he has created his personal guard, except instead of horsehair plumes and red tunics, the uniform is commando garb, facemasks, and the letters I.C.E. on their backs. I also said he would fix it so he could serve at least one more term, direct the Department of Justice to bring charges against every state that he didn’t win in the last election, and put all the election officials in jail. He’s trying to do all that. As the cherry on the cake, he would withdraw the

country from both NATO and the United Nations. Those items are next on his list. His Board of Peace, with him as chairman for life and with the sole right to designate a successor, is a blatant power grab that aims at replacing the UN.”

“Who the hell gave him that right?” demanded Guy.

“The UN,” answered Tony. “but they got totally fooled by Trump. What they authorized in a National Security Resolution in November last year was the deployment of a temporary international stabilization force in Gaza. The U.S. Congress had nothing to do with either authorizing any participation in such a force or allocating the money to do so. Trump has turned the whole thing into a private club and started taking billion dollar so-called donations from countries. These are really just the price of being able to sit at the table that he chairs. He says their money will be used to rebuild Gaza, but who knows what he’ll do with it. Maybe he’ll build a new White House in Florida. The gold-colored logo his crew came up with for his Board of Peace is a globe centered on the United States inside a shield that’s bordered by olive branches. It’s almost a copy of the UN logo, except it’s gold instead of blue, because as we know, gold is the Trumpster’s favorite color and type of ore, and it shows only North America instead of all the continents except Antartica.”

“Incredible,” said Donna.

“Sick,” said Jenny.

“Typical,” added Annie.

“We are back in the gilded age,” said Tony, “before the huge influx of southern and eastern Europeans, but after Donna’s ancestors arrived from Ireland. First the Irish took over the running of America’s cities, and then the Italians and others got into

the act. Before long, the Catholics and Jews outnumbered any single Protestant sect. This new gilded age is led by a group who have no connections whatsoever to the nation's founders. Daughters and Sons of the American Revolution need not apply for membership. It's loaded with Catholics, some who just converted and think they know Canon Law backwards and forwards."

"We've been Catholics all our lives and I doubt any of us can be sure we know even the basics of Canon Law," said Donna. "I wouldn't want to generalize, but it seems that many of these people, like Vance, miss the basic message of Catholicism, that it is the poor and the meek who will get into heaven before the rich and mighty. Their leader, Trump, is the complete opposite of the poor and meek, and especially Jesus. I read that in some voting districts in Texas almost one hundred percent of Christians, including Catholics, voted for Trump. It doesn't make any sense to me."

"Bush the Younger promoted himself as a born-again Christian," said Jenny, "having given up drinking and carousing and becoming a church-goer. That won him lots of points with the Christian crowd. But Trump was their real hope for the one thing they wanted most, a ban on abortion. And he's delivered. Next come the prayers back in the schools and the ten commandments on the walls."

I looked over at Annie as she listened to her sister-in-law. Annie wants the prayers back in the schools and the ten commandments on the walls. She was happy when the Supreme Court overruled Roe versus Wade and said that the federal government has nothing to do with making laws for or against abortion. She and Jenny love each other, and they never argue over what they disagree about most.

“I heard on NPR that Trump has ordered a military buildup in the Middle East that is the largest since the 2003 invasion of Iraq,” said Donna changing the subject.

“Something’s going to happen there,” offered Guy. “People over here don’t realize how close to Europe Israel, Lebanon, and the rest of the Middle East are. If Trump invades and starts bombing Iran, Iran is going to send its drones and missiles flying everywhere. They can reach Turkey and maybe even Greece.”

“I remember when Bush the Younger decided he was going to invade Iraq, there were only a few politicians who told him he was making a mistake,” said Franky. “President Carter was one of them. If I remember correctly, his letter to Bush was printed in the New York Times. He said nothing would be gained, there was no reason to do it, and only bad things would come from it. He was right on all counts. Tony Blair bet his career on backing Bush, and he lost. France told Bush he was making a big mistake, and Bush backers renamed French Fries to Freedom Fries. Everything bad that has happened in the Middle East, especially the whole ISIS thing, is because of that stupid mistake we let Bush make.”

“Bush tried to justify it by saying Saddam Hussein was building nuclear weapon capability and we had to stop him,” said Tony. “Trump’s using the same argument now with Iran. He says if Iran gets the bomb it will drop it on Israel. Israel already has the bomb and it will make sure it drops it on Iran first. It’s more that Iran is arming and financing so many anti-rigime groups around the Middle East and in Africa, like the Houthis. Trumps not sending all those forces over there just to strengthen his bargaining hand. He’s going to use them.”

“Last week,” said Donna, “Trump told the protesters in Iran to keep protesting, that help is on the way.”

“There has to be a better reason for Trump to risk his presidency by attacking Iran,” said Tony, “and it comes back to America over everyone. There’s got to be a connection to beating China by attacking Iran. I haven’t figured it out yet.”

“You don’t think it’s as simple as the reasons they are giving,” I asked, “like preventing it from developing the bomb or making it impossible for them to continue to arm and fund terrorists groups all over the world?”

“No,” answered Tony. “I don’t think it’s that simple. There has got to be a connection to China and Russia.”

“We have some news,” said Donna suddenly.

“You’re pregnant?” quipped Tony.

“You’re moving to New York City to be closer to your son and his family,” guessed Annie.

“Our news is about moving,” answered Franky, “but we are not moving to New York.”

“Please tell us you are not joining George Clooney in France,” added Jenny.

“We’re moving to The Orchard,” replied Donna.

There was a brief silence while we let this news sink in.

“You’re serious?” asked Tony.

“Yes,” replied Franky. “We decided we wanted to be close to our closest friends. We bought the Guado homestead a week ago.”

"We're neighbors!" exclaimed Annie. "It's been empty for years. I didn't know it was even on the market."

"It's in rough shape after being empty for so long," added Guy. "How did you manage to buy it without any of us hearing about it?"

"It wasn't easy," answered Donna. "We swore Molly Statuto to secrecy. We wanted it to be our surprise."

"Well, it's a surprise, all right," said Annie. "A wonderful surprise."

"You all went through hell this past year," said Franky, "first not knowing whether you were going to have a place to live and then your kids having their livelihoods stolen from them by the same gangsters who have been plaguing your families for a century. All we could do was offer words of support and our prayers. We've been thinking about this for awhile. We don't have any real ties to Carl's Summit or Darlton. Are closest ties are on The Orchard.

"It's only one-half of the surprise," added Donna. "Michael and Jean and the kids are moving into the other side of the house."

"They're leaving Brooklyn and the bright lights of New York?" said Tony. "How did you work that magic?"

"Michael was offered the job of Provost at the University," answered Donna, "and Jean applied for and got the job of VP of administration at the medical school in town."

"Renovations are starting in a week," said Franky, "which is why we figured we better tell you now so you weren't surprised

when we showed up to tell the contractors where to start working. "Michael and Jean gave three months notice, so they'll start packing in June and will hopefully move in during the summer."

"Does this mean we should move our clubhouse to somewhere near The Orchard?" I asked. "We've been coming here for what, thirty-three years?"

"I think we can make the run up from DC as long as we can still drive," answered Tony. "Besides, when else we have a chance to listen to The Four Tops."

"I agree," said Franky. "We know there's nothing like it anywhere within a hundred miles, and Edie's got at least ten more years before she retires, if they let her. What about expanding the membership of the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club to all those present?"

"Great idea," answered Tony. "If all present are interested in slicing out a piece of their Saturdays."

"Long overdue," I chimed in.

"What about a name change?" added Franky. "Any ideas?"

"Since we will now all be living on The Orchard, how about something like The Orchard Breakfast Club," suggested Donna.

"Let's use that as a working title and see how it feels," said Tony. "Next meeting is in six days and twenty-two hours. I call this last meeting of the Lumberyard Breakfast Club adjourned."



## EPILOGUE

WHAT DID I suspect would happen by the end of the first year of Donald Trump's return to the White House when I began to write this running account in real time? I didn't expect he would win the Nobel Peace Prize, but I could never have imagined that he would get someone to trade for it. "I get you out of Venezuela if you give me your medal." He dropped a dozen large bombs on Iran in June in his Midnight Hammer caper, something many people in the U.S. government have been itching to do for the past fifty years, but never thought a president would ever order it to be done. He kidnapped Venezuela's president. He's had his name plastered on buildings all around the capital, like a dog marking his territory. He sicced Musk and D.O.G.E on the Federal beauracacy. He created his own, personal military force, like Russia's Wagner Group, and called them I.C.E., We can wonder what their next assignment will be once they have rounded up all the foreign infiltrators. There are around 15 million of those infiltrators. If they were all put in one place, the place would be bigger than the combined population of the country's top three cities, New York, LA, and Chicago.

I compared Donald Trump's working method to a snowball fight in which he prepares a couple of dozen snowballs, packs them very hard—maybe putting a rock in the middle of them—and then starts the fight by lobbing a few toward his adversaries, throwing them high up in the air. While they are looking at the ones he's lobbed, he picks up others and fires them straight at

his foes, aiming for their heads. Not all of them are on target, but those that are do major damage. There doesn't seem to be plot or a plan to the events orchestrated by the President and all of his men and women; it feels like a continuous snowball fight. And yet, there was and is a theme, more like the theme in a piece of music. Think of DrumDrumClap-DrumDrumClap in Queen's "We Will Rock You" playing continuously, preceding Trump wherever he goes. Or imagine Trump as a red-caped, red-masked Darth Vader wearing a red and white MAGA baseball cap. Whenever he appears, or whenever something that he has set in motion is going to happen, the main notes of the Star Wars "Imperial March" are played: DumDumDum-DumDiDum-DumDiDum. DumDumDum-DumDiDum-DumDiDum.

Trump's theme is simple: America Over Everyone. It guides every decision he makes, from kidnapping country leaders and bombing countries with which we are not officially at war to gilding everything in the oval room and how he treats other country leaders. Continuing the musical analogy, there is no score for what Trump and the Trumpeters are doing, no document that contains all of the musical writing that a composer intended so that the piece can be played. (There are those who say his script was written for him by the Heritage Foundation-led Project 2025 initiative in its Mandate for Leadership; it might provide a loose guideline, but Trump follows no one's plan for what he should do.) His presidency is not a symphony with four distinct movements. There is no single melody, a sequence of notes that are singable and memorable. The theme plays continuously in the background, while different melodies play in the foreground at different times.

What happens next, during the coming three years? There is nothing that has happened during this year which indicates

there will be a change in the theme. He lobbed all of his first batch of snowballs up into the air during his first few months in office, and he has been firing the rest of them straight at anyone he considers a foe since then. His domestic political enemies have neither a theme, a melody, nor a score. They are a cacophony of messages; what they say oozes dissonance. None of the possible Democratic opponents to a Republican presidential candidate, who may well be Trump if he has his way, have even a leitmotif of their own that has captivated a following large enough to form an orchestra. California Governor Gavin Newsom is trying, but does anyone really think a California slicker has a chance of pulling the Christian vote away from whoever is put forward by the Republicans and motivating the non-progressive Democrats to even cast a vote?

Some might think it will be hard for Trump to make an encore in '26 to his first year back in office during his second term. He shouldn't be underestimated. There's more to do in Iran, Cuba is preparing for its time in the spotlight, he hasn't forgotten Greenland, and midterm elections will bring lots of surprises. I was tempted to just keep on writing, but I felt I made my point. People like the Lumberyard Boys and their families have their own lives, and no matter what one man and his 23 hand-picked team of cabinet members and other yes-men and yes-women decide to do, people will do their best to get on with those lives—even in the countries where he is wreaking havoc, including the U.S.

In spite of all this, I have hope, and I have instilled this hope into my main characters. Nicky may worry, Tony may appear hopelessly cynical, and Franky may seem unengaged, but they all believe, deep down, that the good guys will eventually win. What has changed for me and for Nicky, Tony, and Franky since my

and their summer in the DC Lumberyard is that we have a much clearer idea who the good guys are. They are not the firebrands on either side of the conservative-socialist divide. They prefer reform to revolution. Their theme is Rhapsody in Blue. DaaDaaDaaDum-DaDaDa-DaDaDaDa-DaDaDaDa.

The Lumberyard Boys have decided to convene at Sal and Rene's new restaurant on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November when most of the midterm elections will be held. I'll be there to pick up the story, starting with a summary of what occurred in the intervening ten months. I hope you will join me.

*The End*

# THE CHARACTERS

## Nicky

Nickolas (Nicky) Fabriano (born July 14, 1947). He is the narrator of the story. He had a summer job at the DC Lumberyard the summer after he graduated from Drake's Crossing High School. He was drafted right after graduation from high school, and served in the Army in Vietnam, where he was captured and held as a prisoner for three years. He was freed in a rescue operation, returned to Drake's Crossing, and became a policeman in the local police force. He retired as Chief of Police at the age of sixty-five, and has been meeting weekly with the other members of the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club, attending mass, visiting the cemetery, and spending time with his children and grandchildren.

Contessa (Connie) Malatesta Fabriano (born October 1948 – died December 17, 2021). Nicky and Connie went steady from the summer of 1965 until they were married in 1970. She went to Sacred Heart College in the city, and then attended Temple Law School in Philadelphia. She practiced law and was then appointed a judge, a position she held until a year before she died of cancer when her treatments made it difficult for her to concentrate.

Carmen (Carmy) – Son. Married to Mary Montefiore. Works in the bank as a loan officer. Sons Nicky and Joey. Carmy took over his grandfather's car repair shop after he graduated from high school.

Ellen – Daughter. Married to Mike Scalia. Daughter Annamaria. Teaches at Drake's Crossing Senior High School.

## Franky

Frank (Franky) Antonelli (born July 28, 1947). His mother, grew up on The Orchard, and he visited his grandparents weekly when he was growing up in the city. He worked at the DC Lumberyard the summer after graduating from high school. He accepted a full scholarship to Penn State to play football, broke a leg, and became a doctor, practicing in the city hospital. He retired at sixty-five and has been improving his golf game ever since while never missing a Lumberyard Boys

Wife – Donna Keegan, who was in the same high school class as Franky. Graduated from Sacred Heart College and then attended nursing school. She was a nurse in the same hospital where Franky was a surgeon, and retired the same year.

Son Michael and his wife Jean live in Brooklyn. Children Gabriel and Raffaella.

## Tony

Anthony (Tony) Malatesta (born July 9, 1947). Tony was the original lumberyard boy who went to work in the DC Lumberyard just after he dropped out of high school at the age of fifteen. He was drafted when he was eighteen, but was rejected due to dyslexia. He took part in experimental tests to help compensate for dyslexia, attended college, and became a history teacher in the DC high school. He retired at sixty-five

Wife – Jenny Williams Malatesta. Two years younger than Tony, graduated from Mother of Mercy College in Luzerne County, earned a graduate degree in social psychology from Sa-

cred Heart College, and met Tony at a mixer when he was attending the University. She worked as a child psychologist for the city school district until she retired.

Children – Twin sons: Louis – Married to Emily Carlsson, with two girls, Ebba aged 12 and Emma aged 14; Thomas – Married to Jane Jones, with a boy and a girl, Thomas, Jr. aged 15 and Debbie aged 16.

Sister - Anna (Annie) Malatesta – Born in 1942 to Helena d'Assisi and Enrico Malatesta. Worked as a waitress in Donnatelli's restaurant. Married to Gaetano (Guy) Donnatelli, who was a visiting worker from a small town south of Naples named Torre del Greco. They have three children, Guy, Annie, and Silvain. Sal and Rene and their three children, Guy, Annie, and Silvain—Rene's father's name—living on the side where Franky's uncle Giuliano and his wife Adele had lived, and Annie and Guy still living on the side they moved into shortly after Franky's Nonna Rosa died.

Gaetano (Guy) Donnatelli – Born in Torre del Greco, Italy in 1939. His grandfather and Guido Donnatelli are first cousins. Took over Donnatelli's restaurant from Guy's Uncle Guido, and ran it together with Annie. Handed it over to their son, Sal and his wife Rene.

## Others

Danny Eans lives in Carl's Summit, but has his law office across from the county court house. He clerked for Connie when he finished law school. He went to Temple, like Connie.

Greg Stancheck – Carmy's partner in the car repair shop

Kenny Walsh – Trainee in Carmy and Greg's shop

Gail Phillips – Chief of Drake’s Crossing Police

Richie Bianchi – Neighbor to Nicky and Ellen

Lilly Bianchi – Richie’s daughter, works at high school with Ellen

***Where everyone lives***

Nicky Fabriano lives on one side of the house built by his mother’s parents, Umberto (Berto) and Conselia Serra. It is a side-by-side duplex. When Nicky grew up, his grandfather Berto was still alive and he lived on one side, while Nicky and his parents, Carmen and Virginia, lived on the other side. When Nicky and Connie got married, they moved into the side where Nicky’s grandfather had lived. When Ellen married Mike, they moved into the other side when Nicky’s mother died.

Tony and Jenny bought a house that was built by Nicky’s mother’s mother’s sister and her husband, who had been among the first settlers from Sigillo on The Orchard.

Franky and Donna lived in a house in the city close to the hospital where they worked, then moved to a bigger house in Darlton until a few years after they retired. Then they downsized to a two-storey condominium in Carl’s Summit, not far from the Lumberyard Boys Breakfast Club clubhouse, the Carl’s Summit Diner.

Carmy and Mary moved into Nicky’s father’s parent’s homestead, which is a single-family home. Nikola and Giovanna Fabriano had two sons, Carmen, who was Nicky’s father, and Alberto, who worked with his brother in his car repair shop. Alberto lived there alone after his and Carmen’s parents died, and then with his wife, Helena Malatesta after they were married. When they died, Carmy and Mary moved in.

