

SEVERED HEART

Prologue

TYLER

U.S. PRESIDENT: PRESTON J MONROE | 2021 -2029
Present Day

SWEAT SLICKED, A few drops glide down my temples before I lift my ballcap to clear it with the side of my glove. Laser-focused on the door, I idle in the bucket seat as a welcome breeze sweeps over me. The slight chill at the edge of it indicating the end of summer as it caresses my heated skin.

Closing my eyes, I can picture her so vividly, peering back at me from the porch. Feet bare, hand raised over her brow in a salute to shield her silver-gray eyes from the sun, as the windswept tips of her long, onyx hair dance along the small of her back. A serene smile lifting her lips as I drew near—her expression, combined with the look in her eyes, rendering me speechless.

Love emanates from her being, from her every pore, where she stands in summons to me only feet away.

A love so pure, so tangible, and unconditional bouncing between us. The only safe space I have ever truly known beating inside her chest as I draw closer to it, pounding over the wood planks to answer her summons and feast on a love that blankets me. A love that protects me and

brings me peace while keeping me whole. A love so mine, so ours.

A love and place we made together, against all odds. Our darkness mingling and molding, pouring our foundation, and erecting the frame while we decorated the walls with the memories we made. Filling every shelf and lining every cabinet, creating our forever home within one another.

The engine purrs beneath me as if telling me to get on with it while my recollection keeps me idle as I awaken memories. All of which I'm choosing to draw upon, bringing them from the recess of my mind where I've kept them safe and untarnished—not a second forgotten.

"Please don't mourn me."

As if I ever had a choice. As if either of us ever had control over anything in that respect—her ask impossible.

I know better now because I've lived long enough to know better. Which has me thinking that maybe she never discovered this secret before she left. Or maybe she did and just wanted to push her will and hope for me into her plea.

But on this, I consider myself the wiser of the two of us. I couldn't make or keep that promise any more than she could change her fate against the cancer that ravaged her before it stole her last breath.

Just like I haven't had a choice to breathe deeply since I watched her take it. I'm convinced at this point that my shallow breaths since her departure are part of the price for having such perfection. For having found true peace for a moment in time.

She once told me life could happen in a blink, but it's a series of blinks that brought us together. It was life *happening to us* which ended with the same close of the eyes, leaving me on the other side of it without her. I understand that now more than ever. Because I know the difference between living your life and life happening to you, and they are distinctly different.

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Living life is making choices—what to wear, when to eat, whether or not to cut your hair. These are the easy decisions we get to make—to have some say or a hand in.

Life happening to you is vastly different. It comes by way of a powerful reckoning force that cements your path for better or worse. It's only in the wake of it that you realize the easy decisions are the only choices you have any real say in.

The hard stuff—the really hard stuff—that's life *happening to you*.

And since I'm a contingency man, I've figured my way around allowing life to happen to me.

I've found the trick, the loophole, a way to take away the power it can wield over me, and now, *I happen to my life and the lives of others*. Not the other way around. At this point, it's up to me to remember the blinks of the days before and after I mastered it.

Blinks I'm choosing to remember now. Some of them slow and meant to be savored. Many of them so fast it doesn't feel like they're real, but delivered by a force so powerful, it's undeniable it exists. A force she prayed to and called God.

Something I never fought her on and still don't exactly disagree with. While her faith was unshakable, mine remains in her—in us.

Either way, as I ready myself to happen to life in the years ahead, I close my eyes, summoning every close and clear of them that brought me here—that brought us together—before I'm forced to blink it all away.

PART I

“**A** BOY BECOMES A man when a man is needed.”
—John Steinbeck

Chapter One

DELPHINE

US PRESIDENT: RONALD REAGAN | 1981-1989

I TURN THE DIAL on the radio to find our favorite new Johnny Hallyday song when a woman's voice sounds *very loud* through the speakers, making me jump. “. . . *le président Américain Reagan a été abattu devant un hôtel Hilton à Washington—*” *US President Reagan was shot in front of a Hilton in Washington—*

I turn it down so it doesn't wake Papa from his nap and jump when someone pounds on the front door. “Matiiiiis!”

He says Papa's name again like we do when we play hide and seek. “*Matiiiiss!*”

I move toward the door when the latch catches and stop when I see the man with the burnt face staring at me through the gap on the other side. “Delphine, where is Matis?”

When I don't answer him, he smiles at me with crooked teeth. I hate the burnt man. He always tries to touch me when Papa doesn't look, and Papa *never looks* when he plays cards.

“Open the door, Delphine,” he orders before he smacks the wood *hard* to scare me. I push at the door to show him he doesn't frighten me and to try to close it in his ugly face. “Go away, my papa is sleeping, and you're going to wake him up!”

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He laughs in a way that's not funny and yells at me to open it. When I don't, he disappears from the door, and I push it closed. Turning to get Papa, the burnt man kicks the door open, and it hits me in the back. Screaming, I fall to the floor. When the man reaches for me, I jump to my feet as Papa runs into the room and starts to wrestle him while shouting at me. "Delphine, to the barn! *Go!*"

I know I should follow his orders like his good soldier, but I see the shiny side of a knife in the burnt man's hand and warn Papa instead.

"The . . . barn, go!" Papa yells again, wrestling the burnt man for the knife as I look around for something to help him fight. Papa always tells me, 'a man who doesn't choose a side is a man in the way,' and I'll be in his way if I don't choose his side and try to help him. When the burnt man smiles at Papa, pushing the knife closer to his throat, my tummy flips. "Don't worry, Matis. By nightfall, she'll be a woman."

"Delphine, go!" Papa yells again the way he does when he's *really mad* at me while he pushes the sharp side of the knife away from his neck. Turning to follow orders, I crash into another man and hear him curse. Looking up and up, my head starts to burn as water drips down the back of it to my neck. The man tilts his head as he stares down at me, and Papa screams at him not to touch me. When I look back at Papa, I watch him push the knife toward the burnt man's throat before the man in front of me knocks me to the floor. My eyes go fuzzy, and I stop and wipe the water away with my hand so I can see. When Papa calls for me, I crawl toward his voice, but when I put my hand back on the floor, I see it's not water in my eyes—it's *blood*.

Feeling dizzy, I lay on the floor and try not to fall asleep as Papa and the second man shout at each other. Rolling on the carpet toward Papa's voice, I stop when I see the burnt man's open eyes staring back at me.

He's dead.

Papa killed him.

I'm glad. He is not a good man. Papa said so. He said he plays cards with bad men to find out their secrets.

Looking back up at Papa as he stands from the floor, I see he's very, very angry as the man he's yelling at kicks me in the stomach. "It's much too late, Matis. Your payment is due, and it's time to collect."

"The only thing you're collecting today, you fucking pig, is your death, one I'm all too happy to give you," Papa says through his teeth, his voice still very angry but very quiet. When Papa moves toward the man to deliver his death, I wonder if he's going to punish me for not following his order to go to the barn. Maybe he is proud of me for fighting. Before I can ask him, I fall asleep.

"Wake up, little flower. Please don't break my heart. *Please*," he whispers, his hand on my cheek.

"Papa," I call for him. "I can't open my eyes."

His breath tickles my nose as he does his tired sigh, like when I break a dish or dirty the carpet after playing in the creek.

"You can see, little flower. Open your eyes."

I try hard and open them to see that Papa's eyes are red and puffy. He's been crying. I know because he cried for a long, *long* time after Maman told us to 'rot in our filthy life.' I wasn't sad when Maman left like Papa was. She was mean to me and slept *all the time*.

Papa was the only one who would play with me. Brush my hair. Bring me toys. It was always Papa who read me stories and tucked me into bed.

"Papa." I wipe at the little spot of blood on his cheek. "Did you hit your head, too?"

"No, little flower." Papa closes his eyes and begins to cry. "Forgive me, Delphine."

"Matis, if you want to save her from your fate, we have to leave *now*." The voice comes from a man standing at

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my bedroom door. I try to look at him, but Papa uses his finger to turn my face to his. The light from the chandelier hanging above him hurts my eyes. Papa gave it to me as a birthday present and told me all princesses have rooms with chandeliers. I told him that I wanted to be the *prince* because they got to fight. He laughed and laughed before promising not to bring me anything else for a princess and brought me a sword the next time he came back from playing cards—my sword! I should have gotten my sword when the burnt man came.

“Delphine, do you remember when I told you one day you would have to be a soldier?”

“Yes, I am ready!” I tell him, trying to sit up, but he keeps me in bed.

“Good. I need you to follow orders now and do exactly as I tell you, understand?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“We have to go now!” the man shouts from my door. “I’m not dying for your kid, Matis!”

“I need you to go with this man and do what he tells you,” Papa says, lifting me from my bed. He walks over and puts me into the man’s arms, handing him my suitcase with the wildflowers that look like the flowers we dance in. The man stares down at me, and I decide I don’t want to follow orders tonight, but Papa shushes me.

“I’m begging you . . . bring her to my nephew. Francis will raise her as his own. Please get her there safely,” he tells the man. “I’ll pay you any price you ask.”

“As if you’ll survive,” the man tells Papa. “Making promises you can’t keep is what got you in this mess, Matis.”

“Forget how you feel about me, just this once, *please*.”

“I’m here, aren’t I?” He talks funny when he doesn’t speak French. Papa told me these people are called the British.

“Papa, I don’t want to follow orders tonight. My head hurts,” I tell him, and he jerks his chin to quiet me.

“Here.” Papa puts a roll of money in the man’s hands.

“This is all I have. I was trying to save enough to get her out of here, but I don’t understand . . . why aren’t they here?” Papa starts to cry again.

“Even now, you’re still maintaining the lie?” the British man says.

“I don’t have time to argue with you,” Papa sighs, wiping his face.

“You could try to run,” he tells Papa before looking at me like I’m filthy, “and save me the headache.”

Papa shakes his head. “It’s too late. They’ll never stop now. Above all else, just make sure you aren’t followed.”

“For old times’ sake, Matis.” He looks at Papa like he’s filthy too. “Honestly, those bastards are doing us all a favor by ridding the world of you, and you have my word that if it’s within my power, no harm will come to her tonight. Though for that to be a possibility, we have to leave right fucking *now*.”

“P-papa?” I whisper, looking at the man and back to Papa. I do *not* like this man or the way he talks to my papa, but he nods to the British man before he looks down at me, his eyes getting redder.

“I love you, little flower,” he whispers before bending and kissing my head next to where it hurts so much. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. Forgive me.” Papa does the sign of the cross on my forehead with his finger, closes his eyes, and speaks English to the British man. “Take her. Go.”

“N-no, no, Papa!” I scream as the man starts to walk away, and Papa cries into his hands. “Papa, no, no orders tonight. Please!” I shout, feeling sleepy again as the man holds me tighter to him, walking faster.

“P-please, Papa!” I wiggle in the man’s arms. “I’m ready to be *your soldier*, not *his*!” I shout over the British man’s shoulder as Papa comes out of my room and grabs my hand, following the man holding me down the hall.

“Close your eyes, Delphine,” Papa orders me so I won’t see the men he delivered death to in the living room. Closing my eyes, I hold Papa’s hand really tight so he

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can't let go. When we are outside, snow hits my nose and cheeks, and the wind makes my head hurt more. "I'm sorry I didn't go to the barn. I'm sorry," I tell Papa. "I'll be good. I promise. I'll follow orders, *your* orders!"

"Wait, *please* . . . one more minute," Papa cries to the man.

"Enough with the melodrama, Matis! It's probably already too late!"

Papa cries harder and follows us down the creaky porch steps before kissing my hand. "Remember what I taught you?"

"Yes, Papa."

"Remember, little flower. Remember everything I told you. Never forget!"

"I'll remember, I promise!"

Closing his eyes, Papa kisses my hand one more time before he lets it go, and I scream for him as the British man starts to run with me in his arms. Papa calls after me through the snow and tells me that it's okay. That it's all going to be okay and to go with the man—that he will keep me safe. That he loves me. That I'm his good soldier. That he's sorry, but he cries the whole time! If everything is okay, he wouldn't cry so hard!

"No! Papa!" I slap the British man's face, and he curses and drops my suitcase. It falls open on the ground as the man puts me into his car. I kick at him over and over as he gathers my clothes, cursing as he pushes my legs and suitcase inside. "Papa, please don't let him take me! I'm sorry I didn't go to the barn! I'm sorry!"

"Delphine, be my soldier and do as you're told!" Papa yells through the wind, but I can't see him anymore through so much snow! The man slams the door on me as lights flash through the window of his car.

"They're here!" the man calls back to Papa before he gets into the car.

"Get her out of here!" Papa yells, and the man starts to drive away before I throw up on the floor.

“Oh, bloody fucking hell,” the British man says, his eyes on the lights coming through the glass before a loud bang comes from the house behind us. I know that sound. Papa is shooting from his big, *big* gun. The cars with lights have more bad men coming, and Papa is shooting at them to stay away. He’s fighting again.

“I have to go back!” I scream at the British man. “I have to fight!”

I pull at the car door handle, but the man pulls my arm to keep me inside and goes faster.

“Come on, Matis.” The man says Papa’s name like he’s praying as another loud bang comes from the house and shakes our car.

Papa shoots at the lights coming again and again, and one car lights fire before it goes into the river. More lights come as the man goes faster and faster, turning this way and that way.

“Take me back!” I order like Papa does.

“Shut up,” the British man tells me as he turns the wheel. “Keep going, Matis, just a little longer,” he whispers, looking into the mirror on the glass.

“Are you stupid?” I tell the British man. “He can’t hear you whisper!”

He laughs like I told him a joke before I count three cars turning onto our road. The man drives faster and faster, and I close my eyes to ask God to give Papa enough bullets for the big guns to shoot all the bad men.

“Don’t look back,” the man tells me as he starts to drive *really, really, really fast*. Snow makes it hard to see through the window, and my tummy hurts when I can’t see our house anymore.

“We go far way now!” I shout in English. “I am Matis soldier! Not for yours! Take Delphine back house, help fight!”

The man continues to drive, and I know I said the words right.

“You understand my English!” I yell at him. “I tell you

to back!" When he doesn't listen, *again*, I curse at him. "Imbecile!"

"Definitely Matis's daughter," the man laughs, and I know he's making fun of me and Papa. I decide I do not like British men.

"I am Matis soldier!"

"Sure you are, kid." He says this as if he doesn't believe me. But *I am* a soldier. Papa taught me how to march and salute. How to make fires. How to fish. How to shoot—not the big gun yet. How to skin a rabbit and take out its entrails. To cook. Which mushrooms are poisonous, and which flavor food. He taught me tactics and intelligence he learned when he was a special soldier. He taught me that keeping clean keeps you close to God. He reads to me the stories of other soldiers. Of wars. Of the news. I decide the man driving does not know Papa. I stare at the side of his head as I speak more English. "You make Delphine *very* angry."

He smiles. "Get used to it."

He is not a nice man, but I know he doesn't want to hurt me like the burnt man did. Papa says he will keep me safe, and I believe him.

"You soldier, like Matis?" I ask in English.

"Yes. Long ago, when he was a *respectable* man." The British man goes faster, screaming when his car spins round and round before it finally stops. He curses when I throw up on his floor again and on my clothes and my suitcase. I wipe my mouth and look around to see lights shining through the back window of the car.

"The bad men are chasing us!"

"I'm aware, Delphine, *Christ*, be quiet! And I'm taking you away from the *bad man*," he yells back, rolling down his window. He shoots a gun at the car chasing us over and over again until we can't see the lights anymore, and lets out a long breath.

We drive for a long, long time before the British man stops the car and tells me to get down in my seat while

he watches the road for more lights. After a long time, I try hard not to fall asleep when he finally speaks.

“Your father might have borne the worst luck, but as it seems, you won’t be suffering the same tonight. Looks like you live to see another day.” He presses his hand to his face. “Christ, that was close.”

“Take Delphine back house. Matis need . . .” I try to think of the English word. “His medisis-medicines spoon. *I* know where. Only *I* help him.”

“Life is cruel, and it would do you a bit of good to learn it early.” He turns in his seat toward me. “As intelligent as you might be for one so young, you’re utterly ignorant in judgment of allegiance because your papa *is* the *bad* man, *little flower*. A weak, pathetic drug addict.” The man curses and shakes his head as he turns the key. “So weak that he made another bad bet because he didn’t have anything to fill his precious spoon.”

“Papa *not* bad man,” I whisper, staring at the side of his head. I hope he can see he’s making me angry and that I think he is an imbecile. “You tell lies.”

“You don’t seem to be a soldier that follows orders” — he looks down at me in my seat — “so maybe that’s why he *bet* you.”

Chapter Two

TYLER

US PRESIDENT: WILLIAM J. CLINTON | 1993-2001

“BARRETT, OVER HERE!” I holler before climbing up a few steps of the ladder Mom told me *pacifically not* to climb. She won’t see me now because she’s too busy going goo-goo, ga-ga over my twin cousins Jasper and Jessie.

All I know is that babies make adults act *stupid*. That’s all I know. Barrett and I have been able to get away easy today from our parents’ eagle eyes because they can’t stop gushing over how cute they are. I don’t see the big deal. All they do is cry, poop, and throw up all over everything. Jasper pooped and throwed up on *me* when I held him.

“Barrett,” I holler louder, and he drops the stick he was poking the dead squirrel with and runs over to me as I try to figure which apple to pick. We came to the farm today because Mom, Dad, and my aunts and uncles spent all day helping clean and fix up the boarding houses to get them ready for the laborers.

During harvest, all our ’stended family comes from Georgia and Florida. Daddy doesn’t let Barrett and me come to the farm when they’re here because he says a lot of them ‘don’t have the sense God gave them,’ and they drink and curse too much.

Barrett squints up at me from where he stands at the bottom of the ladder as I reach as high as I can from the middle of it.

"Tyeeelerrr," he whines, "Uncle Carter said *not* to pick apples." He looks over to where our parents are grilling chicken and drinking beer next to a big bonfire. Right now, the smoke is risin' to the sky and giving us some needed cover.

"They aren't payin' us no attention. Uncle Grayson's talkin' about that Kurt Cobana guy again, who shot his own head, but Daddy's going off about the Major League strike. 'Sides it's just *one* apple, and PawPaw said this land is as good as ours, and if we want to be real farmers, we need to start getting our hands dirty *early on* and work our land."

"Well, you can be a farmer, but *I'm* not gonna be no *alfalfa desperado*."

"You don't even know what that means." I roll my eyes.

"Yeah, I do. I'm not gonna be just a farmer who grows apples and vegetables. I'm gonna raise *livestock* too, so I can be a *real cowboy*."

"Well, I won't have time to be a cowboy 'cause I'm going to be a *Marine* like Uncle Gray, Daddy, and Pawpaw."

"Then you're gonna be just a farmer. *Alfalfa desperado!*" he teases, pointing at me.

"Shut up!" Tired from reaching, I wiggle my shoulders. "I guess I could be a cowboy, too. Maybe I can put a horse and cows on your land, and you can watch after 'em while I'm a Marine?"

"Maybe."

"Until then, we have to be grunts," I tell him.

"What's that?"

"I don't know. I think a laborer. Grunts have to start with apples."

"Fine." He looks back towards the bonfire. "But if your daddy catches us, he's going to smoke our butts."

"So what?" I swat a fly from my nose. "I can take an ass-whoopin'. I don't cry like you do."

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"I don't cry," he calls up to me.

"Yeah, you do. You cry louder than Jasper and Jessie when you get a whoopin'. Bet they could pick apples better than you anyway."

"Shut up." Barrett wipes his nose with his shirt. "They're just babies. They don't know they own land yet or even have apples to pick because they have baby brains. *Duh.*"

"Which means I'm the oldest cousin *and the boss*. Now hold my legs, crybaby, and hurry up."

"I don't cry," he lies as he reaches up and holds my legs. Twisting the apple on the branch, it finally comes free, and I hold it down for Barrett. "See, no big deal. They'll never know one is missing."

"Let me pick one," he says as I start to climb down.

"You have to work your *own land.*"

He scrunches his nose as I take the last step down. "Where's my land going to be again?"

"Gah, you never listen." I nod toward the other side of the highway. "Over there. From the road, up the hill, and then some behind Pawpaw's house."

"We can't go over there! It's 'cross the highway. If we go 'cross the highway, we'll both get whoopin's."

"It's not a highway," I tell him. "It's just a road, and you're *always* scared."

"Am not, and Mom says I'll be as big as my daddy someday."

"We're not big like them yet 'cause we haven't hit our growth spurt."

"What's that?" Barrett asks.

"When you get hair in your armpits," I tell him, "and," I whisper low, "I heard Uncle Grayson say our balls will drop."

"Drop where?"

"I dunno." I scrunch my nose, wondering where my balls will drop to.

"Till my balls drop, Tyler, let me pick one of your apples on *your* land."

"Nope," I say, wiping my apple on my shirt before taking a bite. "You have to work *your own land*. Those are the rules."

"Fine," he puffs. "But you got to help me carry the ladder 'cross the highway."

"Why? I can carry it by myself."

"Liar, I saw Uncle Carter carry it over here!"

"Boys!" Mom calls. "Dinner!"

"Shit," I mumble. "You're gonna have to wait."

"Come on, cousin," Barrett whines, "let me pick one of your apples. I'll be quick."

I toss my apple and cross my arms. "What are you going to give me for it?"

"I don't have any more money in my piggy bank. You already took it all," he huffs out.

"Fine." I tug down my ballcap. "You owe me two dollars next time you have money. Spit shake on it."

"I'll never have any money if *you* keep *taking it*."

"That's tough shit," I say like Daddy does. "That's the price of pickin' on *my* land."

Barrett moves around me to get to the ladder, and I block him and shake my head. "Nuh uh, spit and shake on it. Two dollars."

"Fine. Two dollars."

We both spit in our hands and shake to make it a real deal between men.

"All right. Get on up, and I'll hold your legs."

"I should make *you* pick it for two whole dollars."

"Barrett, you want to be a real farmer who works his land or not?"

"Yes!" he shouts as I shush him when Mom calls us again for dinner.

"Coming, Mama," I holler back, ducking so she can't see where we are in the orchard. "Tell her you're coming and hurry up," I order Barrett. He hollers at them and climbs the ladder. When he gets as far as he can with me holding him, I point out one he can reach.

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“Almost . . . got . . . it,” he says, stretching to grab the apple. When he finally picks it, I lose my grip on his legs, and he screams as he starts to fall. Daddy appears and catches him before he hits the ground. I straighten my spine as Daddy turns toward me with Barrett wiggling in his arms, Barrett’s eyes as wide as mine.

“Daddy, that was *so, so* fast,” I tell him. “How’d you get here so fast?”

“Nice lecture, Son,” Dad says in his ’thortive tone. “This boy was a foot away from his first break,” he says in a way that tells me I’ve earned a whoopin’, and it’s going to hurt. I lift my hand to the sun to see how mad he is and can only see him shake his head. That means he’s disappointed. “For a boy who likes to give orders, you sure have a horrible salute.”

“Sorry, Daddy,” I say, putting my hand down. “I wasn’t salutin’. The sun was in my eyes. I was just . . . well, Barrett—”

“Best think a little longer before lying to me, Tyler,” Daddy warns.

“I was just—”

“Oh, I heard what you were telling him,” he says in the same way he does when he’s playing with me. I squint at him as he tosses Barrett around, making him giggle.

“Every single word, Son, including your curses.” He sounds like he’s playing with me again, and I swear I see him smile, but the sun blocks it. He spins Barrett ’round one more time, and Barrett squeals before he lets him down.

“Thanks for catchin’ me, Uncle Carter. I’m sorry we didn’t listen. I tried to tell Tyler we would get in trouble. Are you gonna whoop me too?”

“We’ll see. You can spend dinner thinking about what you’ve done.” Daddy puts a hand on Barrett’s shoulder. “Now, go get washed up and take your seat at the table for grace.”

“K,” Barrett says, making big eyes at me behind Daddy’s back.

“Sorry, what was that?” Dad calls after him.

“I mean, *yessir*,” Barrett shouts behind him as he runs toward the porch.

Daddy kneels next to me and picks up the apple I bit into and tossed on the ground. “Son, if you’re going to take responsibility for being the oldest and in charge, you best know what you’re doing before you start doling out orders and lectures.”

“But I’ve been watching you, Pawpaw, and Uncle Grayson, so I know what to do.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “Is that right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right then. Tell me, son, how much is an apple?”

“Pardon?”

“Buying time and being polite won’t give you the answer. So, I’m going to ask you again. Do you know the cost of an apple?”

I swallow and swat a fly away from my nose. “No sir, I don’t.”

“And why is that?”

“Because we don’t have to buy them.” I smile and stretch my arms out. “We own a farm!”

“True, but we *do* have to *sell* the apples to make money, and you just cost your Pawpaw the money for that apple, which you will pay for.” He picks up Barrett’s apple. “Think we can sell a bruised apple?”

“No, sir, I’m sorry—”

“Your apology doesn’t count, Tyler. You’re not apologizing because you’re sorry—only because you got caught. If you want to be a real man, apologize when you mean it, or it never will count for anyone. And don’t think you can fool them. People know when you mean it and when you don’t.”

“Yes, sir.”

He lifts my ballcap and ruffles my hair. “You’ll be a man soon enough, but until you are, you have no business

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lecturing another boy on how to be something you aren't. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," I tell him as he pulls my cap back down.

"Now come on, your mother's called you *twice* for dinner, so if you want to keep some hide on that butt, I suggest you get washed up and to the table."

I nod as we start to walk toward the patio where the family sits on picnic benches. "Hey, Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"How much will be mine? You know . . . when I become a man?"

Stopping, he lifts me above his head and onto his shoulders. I laugh because I know I'm getting too big, but he's so strong he can still carry me. Everyone says I'm the spitting image of him, and I know I'll be as strong as him one day. He points toward one of the hills ahead of us. "Straight ahead up that valley—"

"Twelve o'clock," I tell him, knowing it'll make him proud.

"Exactly. See that tree line out there?"

"Yes, sir."

"From twelve o'clock to four o'clock and then all the way to the back of Uncle Grayson's house, to the road, and back where we're standing right here."

"That much is all mine?"

"Yes, son, it will all be yours."

"Why don't you want to work on our land? Pawpaw said you didn't take your share to work it."

"I guess I wanted to be a Marine more."

"Do I have to choose?"

"Nah, you can be both if you want."

"Pawpaw was both," I tell him.

"Yeah, well, Pawpaw is a better man than me."

"No way he's not," I say, ruffling his hair like he does mine, and he laughs.

"That's what I'm going to do. I'm going to be a Marine and cowboy, not no friggin' alfalfa desperado neither."

“Out of the mouths of babes,” he laughs as he lifts me from his shoulders to stand in front of him. “It’s something I couldn’t manage, but I believe if anyone can do it, it’ll be you. But do me a favor for a bit?”

“What?”

“Stay a boy just a little while longer, for your mom and me? Think you can manage that?”

“If I stay a boy for a bit, can we play catch after dinner?”

“Always the barterer,” he laughs and tugs my ballcap down over my eyes.

“What’s that?”

“Your nature,” he chuckles as I put my hat back right. “And it’s a deal, but try not to break any more of your cousin’s bones this weekend and apologize for cursing in your prayers tonight.”

“K . . . so . . . are you going to whoop me? Cause Mom told me ‘pacifically to stay off the ladder.’”

“That’s *specifically*, and no whoopin’ today, but now you know better.” He grabs my hand as we walk toward the porch, and I hold it tight. He stares down at me as we walk, and I can tell by his eyes that he’s proud. “Love you, son.”

“Love you too, Daddy.”

We walk a few more steps. “Daddy?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks for saving it for me . . . the land. I can’t wait to be a Marine and cowboy.”

“Welcome.”

“Hey, Daddy?”

“Good Lord, son, what now?”

“How much *is* an apple?”