



May 31, 1944

Dearest Evelyn,

I'm forbidden from revealing my current whereabouts, but feel safe knowing I am not in harm's way. I can tell you that as I write, I'm staring out to sea perched high above a lonely coastline, with only the screeching gulls to break the hypnotic rhythm of the pounding surf. Our unit had been bottled up in barracks for the past week; the rain falling in sheets as storm after storm lashed the coast. Today, in fact, was the first we've seen of the sun. Though it's such a tepid thing, it barely radiates the warmth of a porch spotlight.

I had to get outside though and fill my lungs with some fresh air. Between the claustrophobic conditions and trepidation about what lies ahead, we're all starting to get a little stir crazy. All the

guy's feel something big will soon be upon us. Even my buddy Ed - the one from Chicago I told you about - has taken up smoking to help ease the tension.

Since I last wrote, I've been promoted to Corporal and now cook exclusively for the General and his staff. He's a bear to be around - the pressure, I guess - but you can rest assured knowing I'll now be a little further removed from the front lines.

I sure do miss you and little Arthur; it makes me sad knowing I'll miss his first birthday next week, but, as you know, I'm here to make sure he sees many more birthdays in the future.

Well, I must go now, duty calls. The General wants his dinner served each evening on the stroke of six. I'm starting to think I was selected more for my punctuality than cooking skills.

I love you and give Junior a kiss for me. I'll write again soon.

Your loving,

Arthur

I placed the battered leather-bound journal on the tray table before me and rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Between the monotonous drone of the jet engines and lack of sleep that precipitated making my 6:30 flight, I was finding it hard to concentrate on my Grandfather's cramped handwriting.

His journal of wartime observations and correspondence had arrived by courier earlier in the week. Shipped from his lawyer's office in Livermore, it was the only possession – as stated in his will – that was not to be included in the estate sale, rather forwarded to me upon his death.

Arthur Coventry, born April 1922, passed away a week after his 95th birthday. As stout as one of the wine barrels that lined his barn, and stoic as the eucalypts that fronted his property, he'd died peacefully – I wanted to believe - in his sleep in the small farmhouse where he'd lived for more than seventy years. The week of his birthday had been a hectic one for me at work. On the day, between meetings that, on reflection, meant not a damn thing, I'd placed a quick phone call to wish him well. A week later I was flying across the country to attend his funeral.

My father, Arthur Junior, had passed away twenty years earlier. At his burial, I saw - for the first time in my life - Grandfather shed a tear. As we walked from the gravesite, he draped a sinewy but still powerful arm over my shoulders; muscled, like cords of steel hewn from decades of working the northern California soil. Though rather than for my support, it was as if I could feel the entire weight of the world pressing down. The weight of a Father losing a son. He told me, in a faltering voice that cracked with emotion; it wasn't in the natural order for a Father to bury one of his children, committing the cardinal sin of living too long.

Over the years, the two had had a tenuous relationship. My father solely raised by his father, just the two of them, in a three-roomed

farmhouse nestled cozily in the lush rolling hills of California's Livermore Valley.

Arthur Junior had lived with the old, cantankerous bastard – as he had called him – for the first twenty-five years of his life. My grandmother – her name forever banished – had deserted the family before my father's second birthday.

The story of Arthur returning home from Europe to find his wife's possessions packed in two small suitcases had spread like wildfire throughout the small, close-knit farming community. She had stayed just long enough, so the story goes, to deliver the dire news to a distraught Arthur before fleeing in the dead of night.

As the years passed, Arthur's pain subsided to a dull ache that he learned to live with; but his son's - my father's - torment was only just beginning. The schoolyard taunts aimed at the boy unwanted and abandoned by his Mother hounded him for years.

Proving the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, or more correctly, it's best to flee as far as possible from poisoned stock, my mother called it quits on her marriage during my junior year in high school. Unwilling to put our family's checkered history to the test, to this day – which I'm sad to report is the wrong side of forty - I've remained single.

- *Would you like something to drink?*

The flight attendant hovered above me with a smile copied and pasted directly from her training manual.

- *Sure. Coffee would be great.*

She moved off without the slightest hint of acknowledgment, though with ceramic smile remaining firmly affixed.

Arthur Senior spoke very little of his war years. A hastily scribbled note that accompanied the journal, and dated a month before his death, cryptically hinted that “it” would help me understand. I didn’t pay too much attention to the note. His mind had been “playing tricks” - as he described it – for the past few years. And though I still doubted the journal would shed new light on a family that had precious little to offer, I was enjoying the glimpse into a time when the world balanced precariously on the edge of a knife.

I flipped through the journal to where I’d left off and resumed my reading.

June 21, 1944

Dearest Evelyn,

I hope my letter finds both you and Arthur doing well. I’m sorry it has been three weeks since my last letter, but, as you’ve probably read in the newspapers, much has happened since then. I’m writing from a small village in France where my division has established its headquarters. Fighting remains fierce with the Germans, but with our beachhead established, I’m told, we are slowly but steadily pushing those Nazi bastards back towards Paris.

We landed on the coast of Normandy, at a place called Omaha Beach, the day after the initial invasion. My first glimpse of France was not the

vision I had expected. I'll spare you the details as I don't wish you to worry, but it was a scene I'll never forget, no matter how hard I try . . .

The flight attendant returned with my coffee and wordlessly offered a thimble of milk and a sachet of sugar. I smiled and quickly took both before her porcelain smile cracked and the pieces rained down upon the row of seats.

. . . no matter how hard I try. Even the devil rising from the fiery depths of hell would have turned his head with shame.

This morning I awoke to discover a thick fog had rolled in from the coast, and for a moment it reminded me of home. It even muffled the ground-shaking thud of artillery fire off in the distance, making it sound more like a distant thunderstorm that would cleanse the earth.

The sun will soon burn through the leaden shroud forcing its retreat offshore. But instead of unveiling the rolling green fields of home, spread as far as the eye can see will be the remnants of the worst humans can do to one another. It's at these times when I wish I were home wrapping both you and Arthur in my arms never to let go. But I know this horrid war is not yet over, and our job here not yet complete. I just pray it will all end soon.

Give Arthur a hug and kiss for me. And to you my love, I . . .

- Sir, may I take your drink? And please raise your tray table in preparation for landing.

The clipped words of the flight attendant followed by the “clunk” of the landing gear lowering pulled me back to the present. I stowed my Grandfather’s journal into a worn backpack, slid it under the seat in front, then peered out the window just as the aircraft broke through one last bank of clouds. Below, the slate-grey waters of the San Francisco Bay swam into view. Rushing up menacingly as we continued to descend, threatening to swallow the aircraft whole. Just when it appeared the jet’s wheels would inevitably clip the highest white-caps whipped up by a strong northerly, a jut of land swept into view followed by landing lights and the familiar markings of an airport runway.

- Welcome to San Francisco International Airport. The local time is 8:45 a.m. We know you have a choice when you fly and we appreciate . . .

With my backpack slung over one shoulder I joined the slow shuffle of humanity making its way towards the front of the aircraft. A brisk sea breeze sidled through the gap between jetway and aircraft cabin. The accumulated torpor of the four-hour flight was instantly whisked away as my olfactory senses delighted to the familiar scents of my childhood. The sweet smell of pine and eucalypt floated through the air mixing with a sour undercurrent of marine life. And

all borne on the back of the marine layer's bone-chilling dampness. That ever-present shroud would hover over the city, whiling away the morning hours, until an afternoon sun gathered enough strength to send it scurrying out to sea. There, to lay in wait, like an invading army, waiting for darkness, before once again laying siege to the coastline.

I slung both backpack and roller bag into the trunk of the rental car, then took a moment to adjust seat and mirrors. Soon enough I was heading south on Highway 101 making my way slowly in traffic towards the San Mateo Bridge.

The drive east to Livermore was one I knew by heart. Growing up in Santa Cruz, where Father taught at the university, we'd make the sixty-mile trip once or twice a month. Later, once I was old enough to drive, I'd spend my summers there working in the fields. I was little more than a nuisance to the migrant workers my grandfather hired to till and fertilize the soil, who harvested the golden grapes from the vine when Grandfather determined them ripe for picking, and then crushed and pressed them in the time-honored fashion. But to him I was indispensable.

Whereas I was the apple of his eye, I never truly understood the simmering animosity between Father and son. I had a lingering suspicion it had everything to do with my grandmother, each blaming the other for her desertion. Junior, searching the only face before him for a sign of guilt; for driving her away. And Senior, seeing glimpses of his wife in the only face before him. Father's emerald green eyes, his Mother's eyes, staring back, a constant reminder of her betrayal.

Just west of Dublin, Interstate 580 crests the ridgeline of the Dublin Hills and the thick gray blanket of cloud overhead melted away in an instant. Laid out before me, under a cloudless blue sky, was the smooth rolling terrain of the valley floor as far as the eye could see. A patchwork quilt that God had shaken out like a picnic blanket and then left frozen in mid-air.

Livermore had managed to retain most of its quaint small-town charm. The ubiquitous shopping malls had sprung up on the outskirts, yet the old town center appeared little changed. I found a parking spot a short walk from Grandfather's lawyer's office, fed the parking meter, and noticed I was ten minutes late for our meeting.

- *Grant, glad you could make out. I trust you had a good flight?*

Mitch O'Donahue had been Grandfather's lawyer – and good friend – for the better part of fifty years. Ten years his junior, he'd been too young to fight in WWII, but had done his part in the latter stages of the Korean conflict. Mitch retired from practicing law as the world said goodbye to the 20th Century, but had kept his mind sharp by helping my grandfather with the occasional piece of legal work over the past few years. Settling his estate would be Mitch's final act for his last client.

- *You know there was no need for you to come back to town one last time. The transfer of title could have been taken care of by courier. And we can accomplish the transfer of funds by wire transfer.*

I smiled, perhaps he'd forgotten about Senior's final request.

- *Come on, Mitch. You think I'm going to disobey old Arthur's note from the grave asking that I'm present when the place comes down?*
- *I don't know why he put that stipulation in the will. It seems a little morbid. And between you and me, who's to know?*

He began a cackle that quickly turned into a full-throated hacking fit. I looked for something to divert my attention as he struggled to catch his breath.

- *Damned emphysema. It'll be the d . . .*

Mitch looked up, his rheumy eyes swimming with tears as he battled to regain his composure.

- *Sorry, Grant. Damned imprudent of me under the circumstances.*
- *No need to apologize, Mitch. You were more than a good friend to my grandfather.*
- *Thank you, Grant. Your Grandfather could be quite the piece of work, but I know he adored you. And your Father, too . . . in his way.*

His words brought me back to the journal, and if somewhere in the scramble of pages I'd find some hidden meaning to a life lived.

- *Why the journal, Mitch? From what I've read it seems pretty mundane.*
- *The war changed your Grandfather, Grant. In ways that not even he was able to comprehend. After I had come back from*

Korea, we talked about things, things that only other soldiers could understand.

- *From what I've read, he seems to have seen limited action. A cook for the General's staff, behind the lines for the most part.*
- *Sometimes the aftermath of a battle can be more difficult to comprehend than actually being at the pointy end. When the dust has settled, and you're moving through towns strewn with body parts; Where villagers are fighting over the carcasses of animals for a bite to eat, searching bodies for something of value to sell. Finding friends that you'd shared a laugh with days before lying broken before you. And wondering why them and not you, beginning to believe it should be the other way around . . .*

Mitch's thoughts had drifted off to another time and place. We both sat silently for a time; he with his ghosts, me inexplicably uncomfortable knowing I'd never been called on to make that sacrifice. Not qualified to make a relevant comment.

- *You know, it's why he started the winery.*

The change of subject ignited a small spark in Mitch dragging him back from memories of a lifetime ago and blowing away the suffocating pall that had descended. I'd heard the story on countless occasions, but gave Mitch free rein one last time.

- *When he took over the farm from his Father – this was right before the war – it produced wheat and corn. Buoyed by his new-found prosperity, he married not long after, and your Father was on the way within the year. Old Arthur had over fifty acres back then. The first vines he brought back as*

cuttings from France in a small wooden box. He nursed those first tender off-shoots as if his life depended on it. In fact, so much so, that he lost interest in the rest of the property and it soon fell into disarray. Periodically he'd need money to buy the necessary equipment to produce, bottle and store his wine; so, over the years, he sold off an acre here and there until all that remained was the homestead and barn on the two acres you see today.

- *It seems quite the gamble. Thinking he'd make more money in winemaking.*
- *True, but it wasn't about the money. It was about bringing something back from over there. For all of those brave men who'd fallen, who'd never get to come back.*

My grandfather defined the word taciturn. If words cost money, he could have survived on the coins collected from my childhood paper route.

We didn't often speak of his war years. He found no joy in recounting battles from long ago. To him each city liberated, ridgeline crossed, or bridge fought over, only elicited faces and names of those lost along the way.

Wounded in Belgium's Ardennes Forest at the beginning of a battle that later became the Battle of the Bulge; his war ended just a few months before the madman who started it all grudgingly accepted defeat by getting intimate with the business end of his own Luger.

And I knew for what *Remembrance Wines* stood.

Nestled in his kit bag, in a small wooden box lined with rags to retain moisture within the rich, chalky soil, were the cuttings he'd collected. By the time he made it back to California, only the *Sancerre* shoots from the Loire Valley, and cuttings taken north of Reims from a *Chardonnay* vineyard had survived.

After signing a few final documents, I bid Mitch a quick goodbye knowing we'd meet up again later in the afternoon at the farm. He'd earlier declined my invitation to lunch, citing a previous engagement, so I wandered off down First Street searching for a bite to eat.

A trattoria that featured *Remembrance Wines* caught my eye. I asked the waiter for an outside table, took his recommendation on the pasta special and ordered a bottle of Grandfather's *Sancerre*. While I waited for the food to arrive, I sipped the deliciously chilled straw-colored wine that was my grandfather's masterpiece. His *Sancerre* was a little drier than the varietals grown along the coast, yet retained the fruity undertones and floral aromas that marked a quality Sancerre.

I closed my eyes for a moment and savored the taste before digging the journal out of my backpack and resuming where I'd left off.

August 1, 1944

Dearest Arthur,

I was so glad to receive your letter letting me know you are safe. It's been almost two months since the European

invasion – the newspapers are calling it D-Day – and with the mail being so slow, I was worried sick.

The news is full of so many having lost their lives in this horrid war; I'm embarrassed to say I was fearing the worst. Every time I hear a car pass by out on Mines Road, I pray it doesn't slow and make the turn into our driveway for fear of it being the Army bearing bad news.

Little Arthur continues to grow like a weed in springtime; you'll barely recognize him by the time you return home. He's forever pulling himself up on the furniture and trying to walk. I spend most of my day trying to keep him out of mischief.

To help fill in the long hours in the evening, and keep my loneliness at bay, I've taken to volunteering at the USO office in Pleasanton. Last Thursday a nice man from San Ramon spoke to our group about his work at the Richmond Shipyards. The poor fellow is working such long hours making sure the yards are meeting the Navy's needs. He also spoke of his disappointment at being turned down for active service because of his eyesight. He said it is a shame he'll have to bear for the rest of his life.

How I wish your eyesight weren't so damned perfect, then you could be home with me where you belong. I'm sorry Arthur, I know you are doing your part, but it is so hard on little Arthur and me. I pray every night for you to stay safe and to come home soon.

All my love,

Evelyn

September 5, 1944

Dearest Evelyn,

Your news of home life is such a breath of fresh air. How I wish to be home helping with the harvest rather than traipsing across the dusty fields of France following our advance from one charred village to the next.

The good news is we have the Krauts on the run. The bad news is that our advance is stretching our supply lines to such a degree that I have to scrounge amongst the villages for enough food to serve the General staff a decent meal.

Our boys, along with the Canadians, kicked the Germans out of Rouen this past week, so we're catching our breath for a day before we push on to the northeast and into Belgium.

Kiss little Arthur for me. I love you both very much.

Arthur

The pasta bowl lay empty. I'd made a serious dent in the bottle of Sancerre, and was now more than halfway through the journal. And still wondering when the relevance of his strange bequeathment would materialize.

Each letter, carefully saved for prosperity by my grandfather, appeared much the same as another. Apropos of nothing I was amazed that there had been a time where it took almost two months for a letter to travel across the Atlantic. Grandfather's efforts at keeping the letters aligned in sequence made for much easier, though no less humdrum, reading.

August 10, 1944

Dear Arthur,

I'm so glad that you are getting to see so much of the French countryside, it sounds very much like our Livermore valley. Well, life here continues with little change. Old Mr. Parsons doesn't seem to mind working double-duty in taking care of his crops and ours while you're gone. He tells me the corn will be ready for harvesting in the next few weeks; I hope he'll be just as reliable when it comes time to split the proceeds when sold at market.

I told you about my helping out at the USO office, well we were saddened to learn this week that Mr. Barnard - the nice man from the shipyards - had an accident at work. He'll be laid up for a bit with a bum leg, but it could have been much worse, he tells us.

I'm thankful you're out of harm's way cooking meals for that General of yours . . .

September 22, 1944

Dear Evelyn,

I write to you from a small village in Belgium, just 5 miles from the German border. We've been granted a week of rest before we push on into Germany.

The end is in sight, and barring a counter-attack, we have the bastards on the run.

But at such a cost. I spoke to you of Jerry from New Jersey. I'm sorry to say; we lost him to a grenade in a booby-trapped farmhouse he was tasked with clearing. So many sacrificed. So much death and destruction scattered across the rolling fields of this blighted country.

A couple of weeks back we crossed the battlefields of the Somme where over half a million soldiers lost their lives in the last war. Looking out across the lush vineyards and fields that now cover the carnage, it's hard to believe that such a tranquil scene masks the worst of what man can do to one another. And, alas, here we are again.

The local farmers say that the roots of the vines feed off of the blood and gore plowed into the earth and take only the goodness of their souls - both ally and enemy alike - to produce the finest wines. I'm not sure I believe them, but when our God above seems to have failed humanity, I guess you have to believe in something.

*Hug and kiss Arthur for me, and I pray he'll never
have to live through a time in his life like this. . .*

A combination of the mid-afternoon sun, a hearty bowl of pasta, this morning's cross-country flight and an empty bottle of *Sancerre* had my eyes drooping. Fighting off the siren call to retreat to my darkened hotel room, I packed away the journal and prepared myself for one final journey to Grandfather's farm.

Arthur senior's Father had quickly tired of farming after the death of his wife, so he turned the farm over to his son and spent his twilight years staring out to sea from a bungalow at Half Moon Bay. Grandfather once told me, back in those days, all the roads leading off the main highway from Oakland were merely dirt tracks. A few years later the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory was built, and new money poured into the town.

Over the years, one by one, the small family-owned wineries of the valley were bought out by larger corporate ventures that mass-produced wines from grapes gobbled up from vineyards scattered far and wide; the Livermore Valley, the Central Coast region, Sonoma, Monterey, Napa. The accumulated harvests coming together to produce wines for the thirsty American public at a more affordable price, and much improved profit margin.

Remembrance Wines was one of the few remaining pure vintage wineries. From vines scattered over little more than an acre, Grandfather produced barely 1,800 bottles each year. Those 150 cases were spoken for before the labels had time to dry. He eschewed

awards; it wasn't why he was in the business. But it was common knowledge among the experts in Northern California that, year after year, it was rare to find a finer vintage of either his *Chardonnay* or *Sancerre*.

Smooth bitumen now covered the dirt roads of his younger days. And dotting the landscape were golf courses, country clubs and mega-wineries housing corporate retreat facilities where once only small vineyards nestled amongst the rolling farm land.

It was one of these mega-wineries that had acquired Grandfather's farm. He'd held out for years - turning down offer after offer - as the conglomerate owned by a Chinese businessman slowly encroached on all three sides. Finally strangling him in a pincer movement that would have made Sun Tzu proud.

Morning Dew Wines, the new owners, had no need for Grandfather's homestead, nor his barn. His winemaking equipment and aging barrels had been sold separately to a winery up on the Russian River; and household effects at an estate sale, what remained was given to charity. Even the vines that had been Grandfather's life for close to seventy years held little allure to the new owners. With over 5,000 acres of vineyards under their purview, 150 cases of pure perfection held little commercial value. Their primary objective was filling-in the missing piece to the perfect property rectangle of their vineyard-cum-country club along this section of Mines Road. And providing a new eastern access road for maintenance personnel far from the prying eyes of their guests.

Turning off of Mines Road into the small gravel driveway of my grandfather's farm my stomach churned and my heart skipped a beat.

Gone was the barn and farmhouse, just two large piles of wooden remains littered the ground close to where they had once stood. Visible behind two bulldozers loading his home's skeletal remains into the bed of a dump truck was the vineyard. The acre of vines glowed a translucent light green in the afternoon sun; coming to life from their winter's slumber promising a new crop of grapes that they would never deliver.

I parked and walked towards the still form of Mitch O'Donahue who appeared to have aged ten years since just a few hours earlier; his shoulder's rounding, and neck arched forward as if his entire body was forming a question mark asking "why."

- *This is tough to watch, isn't it?*

Hearing my voice, he turned from the sight of a backhoe approaching the oldest of the vines, unwilling to witness any further desecration.

- *Indeed. I'm just glad Arthur isn't alive to see this.*

- *But we're here, just as he requested.*

- *Yes. Yes, we are. Have you finished the journal?*

- *Almost. Still no epiphany.*

Mitch gestured towards a couple of camp chairs the workers had set out under a large eucalypt.

- *Let's take a load off, and you can finish that journal.*

August 17, 1944

Dear Arthur,

Terrible news. You remember the Watanabe's - their farm is just a mile down the road - they were taken away months ago, of course, to the detention center in Stockton. Well, the authorities moved those interned in Stockton down south to Manzanar, but word is a number of the younger adults have escaped and are hiding out in the mountains. One of those that escaped is the Watanabe's son!

I'm so scared, Arthur. What if he returns to their farm? What if he's desperate and comes to our farm? The news is full of the horrors the Japanese are inflicting on their captors.

I don't want you to be mad, but I've asked Frank - Mr. Barnard from the shipyards - to stay here with Arthur and me until they've captured the escapees. With him being off work - because of his leg - it'll give him some purpose. I do feel so sorry for him. He wants to do his part for the war effort, but circumstance always seems to be against him.

And do you know he receives white feathers in the mail? How can people be so cruel? Mr. Barnard is no coward. In fact., the ships he helps build our beating back the Japanese out in the Pacific . . .

October 2, 1944

Evelyn,

What the hell are you thinking? Who is this man you've invited into our home? I hear stories all the

time from the guys about the sniveling cowards back home trying to move in on their women, but I never thought you would be so naive.

Why could you not have moved to the Parson's if you were so scared?

I want him out forthwith. . .

A dust cloud drifted by as the dump truck, now fully loaded, departed. I wiped the grime from my eyes and watched the drivers of the bulldozers gather over bottles of water and cigarettes. On my lap sat a cloud of another sort, the beginnings of a storm cloud that, if I were correct, would shatter a marriage.

I couldn't help feeling like a voyeur peeking through a veil that separated two generations, but I was too involved now to turn away.

November 20, 1944

Arthur,

I'm so disappointed in the angry tone of your last letter. You have no reason to feel jealous, nor to call someone you've never met those names. Frank is just a friend that has been kind enough to help me in my time of need.

You are not here to protect little Arthur and me, and I must do what I feel necessary to protect our family. And it's not as if you're on the front lines. Unless of course searching for

eggs amongst the French villages to make the General's morning omelet qualifies.

Only the final letter pasted into the journal remained. I noticed it was dated December 20, so with the delay in the wartime mail it was written before he had received Grandmother's last letter.

The rumbling noise of the backhoe tearing through the vines and into the soil bored into my brain as I began the last page.

December 20, 1944

Evelyn,

I do not wish to alarm you, but I am writing from a field hospital near Bastogne. As I feared, the Germans manned a counter-attack and are attempting to punch through our lines. Our divisional headquarters came under artillery fire, and I collected a bunch of German shrapnel, but the Doctors tell me I'll heal just fine with time.

The good news is my war is over. I won't get to see our boys hang the stars and stripes from the top of the Reichstag, but I'm fine with that. I'll be shipping out from Le Havre within the next few weeks, and they tell me I'll be home within the month.

I also wanted to apologize for my last letter. I should have trusted you and not jumped to conclusions. This war alone does terrible things to your mind. And

*being separated from the woman you love. . . well,
I'm sorry.*

*I can't wait to get home and hug and kiss you and
little Arthur. I'll have a little surprise with me as well
- fingers crossed; they've made it this far - I hope
you'll approve. It's for the farm, for what I want our
farm to become, and for my buddies that won't ever
be able to make that final trip home.*

Your loving,

Arthur

Like many things over the years, Grandfather spoke little of his war wounds. Nothing was visible to the naked eye, though he did walk with an ever so slight limp and leaned to one side as if continually being blown off course by a strong gale.

I'd reached the end of the journal and was no closer to understanding its importance; of why it was essential for me to read it and why I was required to be here, at the farm, on this day.

Beside me, the sound of Mitch's snoring was drowned out by the idling backhoe whose driver was stepping down from the cabin. I was about to close the journal when I noticed a protrusion under the back flap. It was in the shape of a rectangle and as I peeled back the case cloth an envelope appeared.

In the top right-hand corner, bore an ink stamp from the Livermore Post Office stamp dated January 16, 1945. The French divisional

address of my grandfather's unit was crossed through and "return to sender" written in its stead.

A letter arriving in France after his departure, and that had finally caught up with him, back where its journey began, some months later.

An envelope that appeared to have never been opened.

I warily tore open the flap and began to read.

January 16, 1945

Dearest Arthur,

*This letter is the most difficult that I've ever had to write.
But I know in my heart, I am making the correct decision.*

*I pray that this ghastly war will soon be over and that you
return home safe and sound. However, when you do, I will
not be here to greet you.*

*I've heard it said that absence makes the heart grow fonder;
alas, mine has been found wanting, and has instead been
stolen by another . . .*

Grandmother's ultimate betrayal. A goodbye letter mailed to her husband fighting overseas.

But if he'd returned home . . .

Above, two wagtails flitted amongst the branches. The backhoe had fallen silent and the melodic song of a lark drift by on the breeze.

. . . Frank and I have decided to start a new life together away from the small-minded people of Livermore, in fact, far from California. I will not tell you where as I don't want you searching in vain, nor holding out hope that you can change my mind.

Home.

Before her and that man had made their escape with Arthur's eighteen-month-old son in tow.

The foreman of the work crew was striding purposefully in our direction. I awoke Mitch with a slight nudge and continued reading with an acute sense of foreboding.

I will be taking little Arthur with me; I feel it best for him. He adores Frank and, I'm sorry to say, at his age, has little recollection of you. In time, I will talk to him about his real Father and, I promise, will let him decide if he wishes to see you.

And please do not attempt to find us, your efforts will only cause more heartache for all concerned.

Evelyn

Home.

To find another man had taken his place.

Suddenly thrown off-kilter, breaking loose from its orbit, is the world I'd known to be true. A dull throbbing pain in my head gathered momentum as the abject realization of Grandfather's dark secret enveloped me and stole the air from my lungs.

- *Mr. O'Donahue? We have a problem. We've uncovered something under the vines.*
- *So? Why is that our concern?*

A phrase from an earlier letter came rushing back, and I silently mouthed the words.

. . . the roots of the vines feed off of the blood and gore and take only the goodness of their souls.

- *Bones, Mr. O'Donohue.*
- *Animal of some sort, I'm assuming.*
- *No, they're human. Two bodies, in fact!*