

Kevin Mullin

A watercolor illustration of a young girl's profile, facing right. She has long, dark hair and freckles on her face. She is wearing an orange top. The background is light and textured with faint pencil sketches of circles and lines. The overall style is soft and artistic.

**Finding
Home**

FINDING HOME

Kevin Mullin

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PROLOGUE

We all think we live ordinary lives, but every one of us is different and unique, with different families, friends, and experiences. We make choices that lead us to adventure or boredom, adversity or harmony, hate or love, or maybe emptiness or fulfillment. Each of us has a story to tell and if we're lucky, an audience who wants to hear it. My great-grandmother, Amy, thought she lived an ordinary life but as I got to know her, I discovered that she was a truly exceptional woman. She lived a life that, in today's world, would be considered heroic and extraordinary.

Throughout my school days, when I had to do written assignments on subjects such as what living person do I admire, my paper would always focus in on Gramma Amy. Interviews of people who lived through World War II or Vietnam, or monumental events like the assassination of Kennedy were all adventures with her. She was born in 1920, so not only did she live through most of the 20th century, she was able to capture her memories and bring them to life for me. I could almost see the worlds she remembered. Her love of life simply emanated from her recollections into my pen, earning me an 'A' on every paper.

By the time I entered my senior year, the English teachers in my school had all read my papers and sometimes shared them with the rest of the faculty. There

were some teachers who I never met, that occasionally stopped me in the halls to encourage me to keep writing. The papers starring Amy Collins Webb, Super-Gamma, were all show-stoppers. My senior year creative writing teacher, Mr. Hill, suggested I expand a bit and write an entire biography about her.

“If done right, Jenny,” he said, “You could capture how an earlier generation lived. It would be such a shame to let all those stories be forgotten.”

“But Mr. Hill, there’s so much I don’t know.”

“Most likely the boring stuff. Ninety percent of a human’s life is spent being bored. We look at things to occupy our time, whether we watch television, read books or whatever. You can fill those missing gaps with educated guesses. Just enough to keep the story flowing.”

“But it wouldn’t be a true biography.”

“No, it would be creative writing.” He pointed to the header on the classroom door that reiterated: *Creative Writing*.

It made sense. I remembered her reminiscences. I had her old letters and diaries. She broke her leg when she was 90 and moved in with us and we spent a lot of time reading and rereading them and she would tease out old details.

“From that energetic young girl to this bedridden old woman,” I heard her say once, “How did that happen so fast?”

But when I was with her, she had no time for melancholy. There was still life for her as long as someone else wanted to be with her. And that someone was me.

Her story had it all—the uprooted child, the fight for acceptance, her discovery of who she was, and her place in the world. As an adult, she was an army nurse during World War II and a Hollywood actress. She never let us call her a

movie star. She called herself a ‘with’ or an extra who spoke. But she considered her highest calling to be a mother of five.

Mr. Hill reasoned that a well written volume about such a woman could generate real interest. It might also inspire people to try to make life better for themselves and others.

The following pages are my attempt to do just that. I will admit to taking some liberties with her remembrances. As she told her stories in the first person, I chose to write the book that way. I don’t try to imitate the New York or Southern accents, since I think such attempts ultimately make the story more difficult to read and understand. Gramma Amy rephrased most of her conversations because in those days, a lot of people swore or called people derogatory names based on race or creed. What she did repeat by accident, I leave out by choice. Please remember that when we deal with people, we do not deal with perfection.

CHAPTER 1

MY FIRST FAMILY

In the early days, both my parents worked. It was unusual to have a working mother during the Roaring Twenties, but our situation required it. And although my mother may have preferred to be with her children, she never made that preference known to others. We needed the income, so it had to be done. She worked in a doctor's office and that's what kept us afloat the first few years of their marriage. She told me that she worked through her pregnancy with me and then my younger sister, Julia.

My father was as wonderful a man as you could ask for. Whenever he met someone, he introduced himself as, 'Michael Collins, but not *that* Michael Collins.' The adults always laughed or smiled. It took me a few years to understand that there was a famous Michael Collins in the Old Country, who fought for Ireland's independence.

He always had time, attention, and love for me. He treated us all fairly and equally, but I felt there was a special attachment to me. It made sense. After all, I was the oldest. He knew me longer than my siblings.

During this time, Papa had no troubles *getting* a job. It was *keeping* a job that proved to be the challenge with his fiery temper. He worked on the docks and was fired for

fighting. He got a job in construction but hit his foreman for some reason and lost that job. He worked as a day laborer most of the time but rarely at the same place twice. And a man with his reputation was never any employer's first choice.

He would get an occasional call for a temporary position and leave us to shovel coal, trim hedges or anything he could do when opportunity knocked. Sadly, opportunity usually slunk quietly past our door more often than not.

Not long after Julia's birth, my father met some new people he called his "Italian friends." They found him occasional work in one of the speakeasys, which was a natural fit for him, even though he gave up drinking. More accurately, *especially* because he gave up drinking.

This was during the Prohibition era when alcohol was illegal. Nobody could make, drink or sell it. A speakeasy was a place where you could buy liquor even though it was against the law. If you spoke about it in public, you were expected to use a soft voice so no one else could hear. Thus, the term 'speakeasy.'

The speakeasy work was inconsistent, but he liked that sort of thing. Sometimes, he would drive a truck and make deliveries to various underworld establishments. Other times, he would stand around and look tough, which was easy for him. They needed him often because of his work ethic but seemed to forget about him a lot more because of his temper. He could be working from early morning to late at night every day one week and then be searching for a day laborer job the next. Usually with no success.

It was nice to have him home on those weeks. We always had time together, just the two of us. We called it our 'alone time' and I never witnessed any of his temperamental outbursts. Julia got the same amount of

time, but he found me easier to talk to. I think that was because when he spoke to me, the conversation was about him. When he was with Julia, it was about her.

He spent hours with me and my sister, making us feel important and loved. We cuddled, played games and walked around; the things fathers and daughters do. He loved telling me his battle stories from The Great War. It was an exciting time in his life. He was quite the hero. He took out a machine gun nest towards the end of the war and saved the lives of four fellow soldiers. He also received the Bronze Star for bravery.

“You were so successful in the army,” I said one day, “Why didn’t you stay? I bet you could have been a General.”

He laughed, but it was a forced, sad sound. “I had a difficult time figuring out who the enemy was,” he finally replied. And that was as true a statement as was ever spoken.

“You see, the war was over, but we were still in France. Just sitting there drinking wine. I prefer beer but I can develop an appreciation for wine when it’s the only thing available.”

“I didn’t know you ever drank. Isn’t it illegal?”

“It was legal then and it was legal there. But I had this cocky little Major who decided the base was going to be dry from now on because where he came from was dry.”

“Dry?”

“No booze allowed,” he explained, “And he told me to pour out a freshly bought bottle of red wine with some Frenchy sounding name. It was France, after all, so the name would sound Frenchy.”

He paused to sip his seltzer water.

“No, sir,” I said to the Major all respectful and polite.

‘You don’t have that authority to turn a base dry or a man into a teetotaler.’ ‘That’s insubordination,’ he yelled. Then he called the MPs on me. So, what could I do? I obviously lost the wine now because of him, so I said, ‘That’s not insubordination. This is.’” He swooshed his fist through the air like he was hitting an invisible enemy.

“And I broke his nose.”

He was dishonorably discharged from the army after that. Because he was such a hero, they didn’t put him in jail, but that dishonorable discharge followed him. He blamed it for his inability to get a job, though my mother blamed his temper. He was sent to Fort Anderson, near Faucette, Louisiana, where he was formally discharged in the summer of 1918.

In Faucette, he met Mary, my mother, and fell hopelessly in love with her. Sadly, the Major he hit was married to my grandfather’s sister. If that wasn’t bad enough, my grandfather was also an army Major. How embarrassing. It certainly didn’t endear him to my mother’s family.

From what little I was told, Papa found out about the family connection *after* he met, fell in love with, and started calling on my mother. Of course, everyone in her family disapproved of him. He was bellicose and belligerent. He was highly impressed with his own limited intellect and opinionated with the wrong opinions. The family viewed him as an aggressively stupid Irishman with no prospects.

“It’s one thing to be stupid,” my grandmother told my mother, “But it’s not good enough for him to just be stupid. He has to be aggressive about it and make sure everybody around him knows he’s stupid.”

And that was quite a bit kinder than anything my grandfather had to say about him. Of course, being of

genteel southern society, they were polite and kept their opinions to themselves when he called to visit my mother. Whether that politeness was born out of noble upbringing or self-preservation was a point my Mama and Papa discussed upon occasion with no agreement ever forthcoming.

My Papa tried to make amends. He did little chores around their house without being asked. He helped at her grandmother's restaurant but wasn't allowed anywhere near the kitchen. Gramma Morris, the matriarch of the business, told him anyone who dated her granddaughter couldn't know anything about food and therefore was not welcome in her kitchen. He socialized and tried to make friends around the town to no avail. He even quit drinking to make my mother happy.

Regardless, my grandparents saw no benefit and much disgrace for their daughter if they allowed her to fall any further under the spell of his charisma. For her own good, my mother was forbidden from seeing him. So, the lovers did what all young people do in the face of such intolerance: they eloped.

They moved back to New York in the early spring of 1919. The only one in the family who kept in touch with them was her sister, Cassie, who would become my second mother. In fact, Aunt Cassie was there to help after I was born in January 1920. She did not come to help when Julia was born in December 1920. Those two sisters loved each other very much, but they loved each other more with 1,300 miles between them.

Papa made Aunt Cassie uncomfortable, I learned later. I never saw it, but Papa was an intense and angry man. That was a mystery to me because, in my eyes, he was such a blessed young man. He had a pretty, young wife, a nice

family, and a good job. And at six foot three, he was very good looking with reddish brown hair, laughing blue eyes, and he had the gift of Irish blarney. He was such a smooth talker, all the charm in the world, he had. He would have gone far if only he could have controlled his temper.

Everybody loved him when they met him, but as they got to know him, not so much. Most people agreed with his in-laws regarding his aggressive stupidity and narrow opinions. He yelled and screamed at and pushed and shoved anybody who dared disagree with him. Towering over most other men, he was strong and knew how to win a fight. When he couldn't win an argument with thoughts and ideas, which was often, he won with his fists. He embarrassed my mother a great many times, but he didn't care because winning a fight proved he was right. And being right meant a lot to him.

Even so, he was wonderful to me. I never saw his rage. I saw a father who loved and provided for me, and who more than protected me. He taught me how to protect myself. As I was a bit smallish as a child (and as an adult), he was afraid that when I went to school, I'd run into bullies. So, he taught me how to fight when I needed to. He showed me how to make a proper fist and he'd hold out his palms for me to hit.

“If it comes to punching some boy, don't pull back. Follow through. End it as fast as you can. Always aim for the nose. Nothing ends a fight faster than a broken nose.”

Actually, walking away might work better, but he never thought about that.

By late 1921, Mrs. Carnahan moved in upstairs from us. She was a retired governess who worked for Teddy Roosevelt's cousin. She'd been pensioned off and, to my great benefit, she wound up being our neighbor. Mrs.

Carnahan, having nothing to do with herself, volunteered to take me to her apartment while my mother dealt with Baby Julia. She said it would be good for her soul. This led to my special relationship with her.

She was so good with children, especially me. It was nice to have my own adult, no sharing her with my sister. I wished she was my real mother. I sometimes thought my mother wished Mrs. Carnahan was my real mother too.

She made learning fun by singing alphabet songs to me and playing little math games. Her favorite was a story about a sparrow that sneezed so hard, he blew off all his feathers. Now he was unhappy because he couldn't fly. A wise old owl flew down and told him he needed to gather up 1,000 feathers and attach them back. His friend crow found three and his other friend rabbit found four. I had to figure out he now had seven. Every day another friend came in with some feathers, and I was adding numbers together until I became quite good at it.

If I had problems, she used pencils. Two pencils on the table. Two more equals four. That three-dimensional way of learning until I was used to adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, all of which I learned before starting school.

She taught me how to multiply in my head. Double digits and triple digits. Easy if you know how. First multiply by tens then ones. I was soon able to do it all the time, like it was second nature.

And I was reading before I started school. I could read *The Wizard of Oz*, *Anne of Green Gables* and other books for youngsters. My mother and Mrs. Carnahan both thought I'd be the head of the class as soon as I was in school. Mrs. Carnahan was quite proud of me, while my mother was more neutral.

My mother was always a bit indifferent to me. Almost always critical. She favored Julia. I always thought that was because she was younger, much prettier and needed more attention, but it was more than that. I learned that with any disagreements with Julia, I was always at fault and she could do no wrong. She took advantage of that until I started school and she began to miss me. Once she realized that she loved me and I was important to her, we were more than sisters. We were friends. She even defended me when my mother was overly harsh about some small little crime I may or may not have committed.

By 1923, my little brother, Patrick, was born. His crib was a dresser drawer for the first few weeks, until he was too big for it and my old crib was repaired and set up for him. When he was walking, he was by my side every minute of the day, unless I was at school or Mrs. Carnahan's apartment. So, even with a father who was gone a lot of the time and a mother who always seemed overwhelmed by keeping house, we were a close and happy little family. My early childhood may not have been perfect, but I was thankful. I had a wonderful neighbor, a sister and brother I loved, and a father who treated me like gold.

Most of my school days are long forgotten, but the first incident I can remember clearly was from second grade. We had a field trip to the art museum. They were having a retrospective of the pre-war modern art of Europe. We were honored to view some of the works of the great modern artists of the day—Picasso, Braque, Matisse, and Cezanne.

Most of the exhibit was Cubist art. Squares and rectangles, circles and triangles slapped together to almost seem like something. A host of art greeted us, but as children used to picture book illustrations, our appreciation

of the great works in front of us was limited.

“What is that supposed to be?” Timmy Harper, one of my more aggressive classmates, asked while observing a colorful work. A long rectangle that appeared to be supported by two cylinders with triangular bases with rectangle posts shooting straight up and ovals leaking sting-like lines to the original rectangle.

“It’s a painting of a bridge,” our tour guide, a young art student with unruly orange hair and crooked teeth replied.

“Did the artist ever see a bridge?”

The next painting fared no better.

“That doesn’t really look like anything,” a girl said. It was a huge canvass with three humanoid figures with flat arms and grotesque faces with painful expressions and anguished eyes.

“It’s a portrait of three young women,” came the answer, “We have the camera now. The great men here decided it was no longer important to paint what they *see*. They painted what they *feel*.”

“If they felt like that, shouldn’t they have gone to a doctor?” I asked.

The tour guide closed his eyes for a couple of seconds, then looked at my teacher, who had her face buried in her hand while glancing at the floor. I thought it was a practical question and I had the support of my classmates. It received no answer.

I was content to be silent during class discussions after that. My grades in school were stellar, due to Mrs. Carnahan’s tutoring. The other students all liked me, possibly because although I almost always knew the answers, I only raised my hand when no one else did. After all, nobody likes a know-it-all, especially children. Mrs. Carnahan made sure I knew that and I took it to heart.

But if anyone asked me for help, I would always work with them to understand the lessons. A couple of the boys wanted me to *do* their work for them, but I said ‘no’ and had nothing more to do with them. Timmy pushed me against the wall one day because I wouldn’t do his math homework. My father’s lessons were not in vain, and although I didn’t break his nose, he certainly had a fat lip.

I got a punishment at school, and later at home by my mother. Timmy’s mother so very kindly spoke to my mother about it without including those boring details about me refusing to do his homework and him pushing me first. Some women have an overabundance of maternal instinct and an underabundance of impartiality.

My father told me I did just fine. I could hit hard; therefore, there were better victims for Timmy to find. My mother harrumphed about it, even though she did admit that she was annoyed with the demand for free homework and the push against the wall. She was especially irritated that these minor little details were omitted by Mrs. Harper.

“It’s different here than where your mother comes from,” my father explained to me. “There, people have manners and class. In New York, we have assertiveness and passion. Here, manners and class get you nowhere. You have to be aggressive to succeed. Some guys do whatever it takes to get to the top. They will use and abuse you if you let them. You have to nip it in the bud or it becomes a real problem.”

“Girls shouldn’t fight,” my exasperated mother exclaimed. “What will people think of us? And what about Julia?”

“What about her?” My father was confused, “She’s got a real fine left hook.”

“I don’t care about her left hook.”

“I do. Her right cross is kind of weak and she leaves herself wide open.”

My mother sighed in frustration. “What will the neighbors think?”

“They’ll think, ‘Wow, those girls can punch. We better play nice.’ What do you want them to think?”

“I don’t want them to think our children are going around hitting people all the time.”

All the time? It was once. And it was self-defense.

“If either of them *start* the fight, I’ll make them regret it,” he said simply, the implicit threat striking fear into both of us. “But it was a life lesson for the lad. We have to teach children life lessons all the time, that’s our job. We use words with our children and they work. Some people’s kids need something a bit more...memorable.”

And his words worked with me and Julia. Patrick would need a bit more physical encouragement to behave, but that was natural with boys, my father said. With me, he just handed over advice and lessons to help me through life. Sometimes *very* loudly.

My mother’s life lessons were more into the whacking part of parenthood. When I said or did something not to her liking, she used to whap me on the top of my head with a serving spoon. Julia never got the spoon treatment because she would start crying at the sound of a harsh word. When she misbehaved, she was consoled, hugged and comforted.

But such soft treatment was not for people outside of the family. My father occasionally stopped at the cafes and was quick to argue and never hesitated to get in a fight, which he always won, as far as I know. Sometimes he came home with injuries, usually bleeding knuckles or a blackened eye. His opponents were usually carried home.

He was not a man to take lightly.

So much of my life changed in 1927. Prohibition was in full force for over seven years by then and the people rejected it completely. The citizens wanted their alcohol and weren't going to stop drinking. The bootleggers couldn't furnish enough booze. The police couldn't destroy it fast enough. The gangs and mobsters fought over territory and couldn't meet demand. Men were gunned down in the streets as the bosses fought for control. And there was lots of money for everyone in the supply chain.

Papa was soon to be in that supply chain.

CHAPTER 2

A NEW JOB

My father's big break came one day right after he was paid for cleaning fish for a restaurant supplier. It was one of his less desirable jobs. No matter how much he washed, the smell of fish followed him. But the man gave him a fair day's wage for his efforts and told him he could come back the next day. Papa smiled a thanks, pocketed the cash and made his way home.

He always walked home to save the subway fare. His path traveled through a corner of Little Italy, where some of his Italian friends lived. He was familiar and comfortable with the area. After he walked a few blocks, he felt a pull on his jacket. When he looked down, a little Italian boy started running away from him. Papa quickly realized the boy had his wallet and chased him down. He caught up to him in an alleyway between two sooty brownstones where the boy was shielded by two young toughs carrying lead pipes.

The older boy was obviously well used by the streets with several nasty scars running down his face. To his right, the younger one couldn't have been older than sixteen, with a determined, fearful expression on his face which told my father he was desperate and capable of anything.

My father gave them a disarming smile. “Now boys,” he soothed with his lilting, almost singing voice, “Just to let you know, I’m a war veteran, and you can give me what’s mine and we can forget this ever happened.”

The younger boy said something in Italian. Whatever it was, his voice was more than a little disrespectful. My father’s smile was replaced by a warning scowl. It was his signal that he was ready for a fight, though those two didn’t know that. They also didn’t know my father was not the man they wanted to fight with.

“You go home, Mick,” the older one said in bad English. “This is America. Finders keepers, losers weepers.”

‘Mick’ was a name people used to call the Irish in those days and it was not meant to be a particularly friendly or respectful term. Most Irishmen had last names that started with ‘Mc.’ It was the Gaelic way of saying ‘son of.’ If Papa’s name was McCollins, that would mean ‘son of Collins.’

“Really?” my father’s voice switched into warning mode. “You know what I just found? Two lead pipes, two broken punks, my wallet, and a pickpocket stuffed headfirst in a garbage can.”

“Tough talk, Mick.”

My father feinted to the left, towards the younger one who lunged forward, swinging the pipe like a baseball bat. Papa wheeled out of its path and grabbed his arm, twisting it behind his back so high his shoulder dislocated. He screamed in pain while his friend swung his club at my father, who pulled back, holding the young thug as a shield. The pipe smashed into the victim’s other arm, breaking it near the shoulder. He was crying in pain and completely out of the fight, unable to do anything with his ruined limbs.

My father quickly dropped his prey and grabbed the other punk's wrist, twisting it until he dropped his weapon. Then he smashed his fist against the bone side of his elbow, enjoying the crunching sound of the bone and cartilage. The punk just howled in pain and defeat. Papa grabbed him by his collar and threw him up against the dirty brick wall headfirst to shut him up. He stared at the little pickpocket next, who threw his wallet at him and started to run but stopped when he looked behind my father.

My father heard a click behind him and saw two big Italian men strolling towards him. One had a .38 pointing at him while the other had his hands in his pocket as he surveyed the scene. The latter one seemed to be in charge. He had smooth swarthy skin with even features and twinkling eyes. The other had an acne scarred face that appeared to be the aftermath of a cannon battle. His brown eyes slightly drooped and his eyebrows had grown together but he took everything in at first glance.

"I can't believe I'm seeing this," the first man said to Droopy Eyes. "Can you?"

"I'm just stunned, boss."

Boss yelled something in Italian and the two conscious thieves stepped forward, while Droopy Eyes kicked at the third. He whimpered at first but stopped when he saw who he was looking at and simply stood up. The child stood just a bit behind the two beaten thugs who were in no shape to do anything else but obey. Boss yelled out some more Italian, and then they all walked by them, heads hung in shame or fear, while nursing their wounded arms.

Boss told my father, "Pick up your wallet. Make sure it's all there. Then I want to talk some business with you."

Boss nodded to Droopy Eyes who holstered his revolver. They walked a bit further into Little Italy. My

father told me afterwards that the smell of pasta, sauteed garlic and roasting tomato made him hungry at the first whiff. And the smells seemed to change a bit with every footstep.

“You’re Irish, right?” Boss continued, “I bet you come in here and it’s all the same to you. But Italians are all different. Just take a sniff. Someone from Naples is cooking. Smell the tomatoes and beans? A few steps down and you’ll have sausages and artichokes, lots of zucchini. Sicily. A bit further, there’ll be rice and cheeses with shellfish. Rome. All different. All good. All better than boiled potatoes.”

Papa gave the man a withering eye. “We Irish eat more than potatoes.”

“Cabbage ain’t no better,” Droopy Eyes said, laughing at his own lame joke.

Boss threw him a withering look and continued, “Do you now? With no regular job? Just a day laborer and taking whatever comes along? You don’t got no steady dough coming in, do you? I can tell. You dress like a worker. Clothes don’t matter to you or other things matter more, right? You got a family to provide for, right? Wedding ring gives that away. I bet your wife works, right?”

“So, you do whatever comes along. Grunt work. Honest day’s pay for honest day’s work, right? Just a guy taking care of himself. But you can be more than that. You got brains, guts. Granted, taking on a couple of punks like that may not be that great, but you dispatched them so quickly, it impressed me. We can use a man like you, right Jimmy?”

“That’s right, Boss.”

Now that wasn’t an idle question. Jimmy was agreeable because he was seeking approval. The boss was young but

obviously an important man. Jimmy was younger and just wanted to be important. A goal he would never reach.

My father was impressed with the boss. His grammar was atrocious, but the diction he used was sound and his vocabulary implied more education than his speaking indicated. Boss also had a holster bulging under his jacket, which automatically commanded respect.

“Well now,” Papa replied, “I’m glad to be meeting your approval, friend. But I must say, I think you could have said all this back there. We must be walking down here for some other reason. And I’m hoping it to be beneficial to a poor man like me.”

“Very perceptive of you Mister...”

“Michael Collins, but not *that* Michael Collins.” My father offered a hand which swallowed the boss’s as they shook, but the boss’s grip was every bit as firm as Papa’s. It was obvious he didn’t understand the reference. My father didn’t bother to explain.

“Frank Costello and a friend of mine, Jimmy Yalata.”

“Costello, is it? Good solid Irish name, but ya know, you surely don’t look Irish to me my friend.”

Costello pointed to his chest with a sly smile. “I am in here and that’s all that matters.”

“It truly is, indeed,” my father agreed.

“We took one look at you handling those...*amateurs*,” Costello spit the word out, “and I said, ‘You know, Jimmy, that guy handled those two punks in seconds, and didn’t even break a sweat. Mr. Dwyer could use a man like that.’ Isn’t that right, Jimmy?”

“That’s right, Frank.”

“You’ve heard of Big Mike Dwyer, haven’t you?”

“Well, now that we’re talking about him, I wish that I did,” my father replied.

They looked at each other, caught off guard by this. Jimmy smiled and stopped in front of an old brownstone building. There was a bakery on the first floor and apartments above. Drying clothes were hung on one of many lines that crossed the street. Children screamed in Italian while playing in front of the tenement building.

“Mr. Dwyer just happens to need a man like you. And you just happen to need him more. You’re a guy who knows how to use his fists when needed. Mr. Dwyer knows how to give good pay for good work. It’s a regular job with regular pay. Interested?” Costello asked.

“Indeed I am.”

“My kind of guy. Let’s go meet Big Mike.”

They walked through the bakery and around the counter to the back. Jimmy knocked on a door that led to the basement.

A peep-door opened and a gruff voice responded, “Yeah?”

“A.R. sent us,” Jimmy whispered.

The peep-door closed and they heard a bolt slide back. The door opened to a small landing where the guard was stationed. He was another big man, fortyish and balding. At first, he eyed my father suspiciously but then smiled when he saw Jimmy and Frank.

“Well, hi, guys,” he said with a smile showing off yellowing teeth. “How’s things?”

“Good, Tommy. Real good,” Jimmy replied. “Big Mike around?”

“In his office.”

“Big Mike runs this club,” Jimmy said. “It’s for members and friends of members only. It’s got stuff that people want, you know, the stuff that used to be legal that

ain't anymore. Things that make a party a real party. Get it now?"

"I believe I do, sir," my father replied. "When a man has a thirst for a good time, he goes to Big Mike's club. A secret club it is, so not just anybody can get in to cause trouble."

"And that's where you come in," Frank said. "Big Mike needs a peacekeeper. Someone who can throw people out *gently*. You know, so they still want to come back the next night. We don't want any fights or people getting stupid on us. They get loud and stupid; you throw them out. They don't want to pay the tab; you *encourage* them to pay up."

"It's a bouncer you want."

"Big Mike don't like that term. He prefers customer liaison."

"It's a customer liaison you want." Papa shrugged. It was all the same to him.

"Yeah, you know, nothing physical unless they deserve it. *We* decide if they deserve it. But if we say so, give it to them and let them know if they come back, they'll be sleeping with the fishes," Frank explained.

"Let's meet Big Mike," Jimmy concluded, obviously growing bored.

The meeting went well and our circumstances changed immediately. My mother stopping working and spent time with us, or more accurately with Julia and Patrick. We moved to a bigger apartment, coincidentally, right next door to Mrs. Carnahan so I still spent most of my time with her.

She considered me her own daughter. She started teaching me to play the violin now that we were so much closer. She had all the patience in the world and had me doing scales and playing simple songs. She even let me take

it home and play for the rest of the family. My father loved my playing.

Most mornings, we would have oatmeal cooked in last night's dinner pot of boiled cabbage. We always had boiled cabbage with dinner, and the morning oatmeal always tasted like cabbage. I hated cabbage. So did everyone else. But it was cheap and easy to cook.

After we gagged down the putrid breakfasts, I would play the violin for Papa and then we would go to the neighborhood diner for coffee. This was on the sly because my mother's rule was no coffee for anyone in the house under 13. And since Papa preferred the diner's coffee to my mother's, we had our together time—just the two of us. He drank his black so he could enjoy the bitterness, while I poured as much sugar and milk in mine as the cup would hold. And he enjoyed my company and the coffee. As I recall, he never had a bad word to say about my mother, but never said a good word about her coffee.

Mrs. Carnahan gave me that violin at my seventh birthday party. It was a monumental gift for such a little girl. My mother was speechless. I don't think she enjoyed my squeaky beginning, but my father was proud as punch. I always had to play a song for him at least once a day when he was home. That meant a lot of practice. And I loved practicing because Mrs. Carnahan always praised everything I did. I even showed Julia how to use the bow and she was asking for lessons.

Oh, and Frank Costello and Jimmy Yalata were also at my party, along with some classmates of mine and Mr. Costello's business partner, a small man with a big smile named Meyer Lansky. Many negative things were said of these men, probably all true. I can only say they were kind to me. Mr. Lansky brought a cake and Jimmy gave me some

hair ribbons, which I profusely thanked him for, even though I already had hundreds.

The cake was particularly appreciated, since the last two times Mama baked cakes, they were not well received. The first was black like charcoal. The second looked nice on the outside but was raw batter on the inside.

Frank got me a small stuffed bear, who I immediately named Little Frankie, and it was the perfect size for a seven-year-old girl. They were such good friends to my father and they treated all of us like family.

It didn't take us long to figure out that Jimmy was never going to be much more than what he was now—a little man in a big city. Frank and the diminutive Meyer Lansky ran the show and they were wildly successful. They operated several gaming tables in or around the speakeasys. Gambling was not entirely legal in those days, but my father figured that so long as nobody was being dragged into the club and forced to drink and play the tables, the law be damned.

“Hey, Little Amy,” he said to me one day while Julia and Patrick were in the other room playing marbles. “I was thinking it might be time for me to be teaching you how to play poker.”

“What?” Mama almost screamed, “Are you crazy? Poker?”

He ignored her. “Your mother thinks games like poker are a CARD-inal sin, so to speak,” his eyes twinkling, “But I think you should learn the basics. Now, what do you do if a big red bird lands on the table and tried to steal the cards?”

“I'd poke her?” I already had a feel for my father's sense of humor and enjoyed our bantering.

“Ha, ha,” Mama said. “I’m serious, and bad jokes won’t get you anywhere.”

“That was a great joke,” he replied, taking fake offense, then he looked at me. “You and me love to play on words, but your poor mother finds them to be an absolute punishment, so to speak.”

She went to the other room to see how the marble game was going while Papa showed me the basics of five card draw.

As the money flowed in, Mr. Dwyer invested in legitimate businesses and slowly left the unsavory world of prohibition behind. Frank Costello bought out his booze and speakeasy businesses. He was now a big man in New York City. Maybe not the big boss, but someone you’d want to be on side, or at least not against you.

Not long after that birthday party, Mr. Costello gave my father a different job that paid even more. He drove a truck from New York to Buffalo with Jimmy. Papa told me that they transported whiskey from the Canadian border to the city.

“It may be illegal,” he said to me, “But in my mind, it’s the Volstead Act that’s really illegal.”

The Volstead act was the law that made alcohol illegal.

“Michael, I don’t think this conversation is appropriate for her. What if she says something?” Mama asked.

“I won’t,” I promised.

“She won’t,” Papa agreed. “What happens at home never leaves the home or the guilty ones leaves the home. Never to come back.”

“Still...”

“Don’t you go worrying about her. She needs to know. Something might happen. I don’t want her to be surprised. It’s gainful employment and life will be better for us all.”