

PROLOGUE

OUTSIDE THE GUARDED ENTRANCE, reporters circled like a pack of wolves. They wanted names and locations, any links to the Mob, every newsworthy detail for tomorrow's front page.

The irony wasn't lost on me.

In the hospital waiting area, on the same chair for hours, I raised my head when a doctor appeared. He spoke to a nurse in a hushed tone. His full mustache, peppered like his temples, vibrated with his words. My shoulders coiled into springs as I searched for a look, a suggestion of the worst. Tension heightened around me from others fearing the same. The sudden quiet was deafening. But then the doctor resumed his strides, his footfalls fading around the corner. Once more I sank into my seat.

The air reeked of disinfectant and bleach and the cigarettes of nervous smokers. From the tiled floor came a shrill scrape, a chair being dragged in my direction. Tiny hairs rose on the back of my neck from more than the sound. Upon learning of my involvement, an officer had warned me a detective would soon be here to talk.

That man now sat down to face me.

“Good afternoon.” He removed his brimmed hat, an act of casualness, and rested it on his lap. From his pin-striped suit and tidy haircut to his perfect white teeth, he was a recruitment poster for J. Edgar Hoover.

I didn’t catch his name or the formalities of his introduction—my mind was muddled from waves of worry and lack of sleep. But I could guess what information he wanted. No different from the journalists amassing on the street, ever eager to pry. Hungry for answers I hadn’t fully grasped.

If only I could escape—from this place and moment in time. How nice it would be to leap forward by a week, a month. The unseemly rumors would have long been buried, the puddles of blood mopped clean, the outcome of this day endured. I envisioned myself then in a dim corner of a café, being interviewed by a young reporter over coffee. His fresh-faced zeal would remind me of the person I once was, back when I first moved to the city, convinced that enough aspirations and success would crowd out the darkness of my past. The sense of not being worthy.

“What a relief,” he would say, “that everything turned out fine.”

For some, of course. Not all.

Then I heard “Can you tell me how it all started?” The reporter in my head blended with the detective before me. I wasn’t entirely sure which of them had asked. And yet, as if through a lens, I suddenly viewed the past year with astounding clarity, saw the interwoven paths that had delivered each of us here. Every step a domino essential to knocking over the next.

With no small amount of regret, I nodded at him slowly, remembering as I replied.

“It started with a picture.”

PART ONE

“Photography is the art of observation. It has little to do with the things you see and everything to do with the way you see them.”

—ELLIOTT ERWITT

CHAPTER 1

August 1931

Laurel Township, Pennsylvania

IT WAS THEIR EYES that first drew Ellis in.

Seated on the front porch of a weathered gray farmhouse, among the few homes lining the road surrounded by hayfields, two boys were pitching pebbles at a tin can. Ages six and eight at most, they wore no shoes or shirts. Only patched overalls exposing much of their fair skin tinted by grime and summer sun. The two had to be brothers. With their lean frames and scraggly copper hair, they looked like the same kid at different stages of life.

And then there were their eyes. From as far as twenty feet away, they grabbed hold of Ellis Reed. They were blue, like his own, but a shade so light they could have been cut from crystal. A striking find against the blandest of settings, as if they didn't quite belong.

Another drop of sweat slid from Ellis's fedora, down his neck, and into his starched collar. Even without his suit jacket, his whole shirt clung from the damn humidity. He moved closer to the house and raised his camera. Natural scenic shots were his usual hobby, but he adjusted the lens to bring the kids into focus. With them came a sign. A raw, wooden slat with jagged edges, it bowed slightly against the porch, as if reclining under the weight of the afternoon heat. The offer it bore, scrawled in charcoal, didn't fully register until Ellis snapped the photo.

2 children for sale

A breath caught in his throat.

He lowered the camera and reread the words.

Really, they shouldn't have shocked him. Not with so many folks still reeling since the market crashed in '29. Every day, children were being farmed out to relatives or dropped off at churches, orphanages, and the like, hoping to keep them warm and fed. But selling them—this added an even darker layer to dire times.

Were there other siblings being spared? Would the brothers be separated? Could they even read the sign? Ellis's mind whirled with questions, all lacking presumptions he would have once made.

Say, even five years ago, at barely twenty and living in Allentown under his parents' roof, he might have been quicker to judge. But the streets of Philly had since taught him that few things make a person more desperate than the need to eat. Want proof? Sit back and watch the punches fly at just about any headline when the last of the day's soup is ladled out.

"Whatcha got there, mister?" The older of the boys was pointing toward the small contraption in Ellis's hand.

"This? Just my camera."

Actually, that wasn't altogether true. It belonged to the

Philadelphia Examiner. But given the situation, clarifying seemed unimportant.

The small kid whispered to the older one, who addressed Ellis again as if translating for his brother. “That your job? Makin’ pictures?”

Fact was, Ellis’s job of covering fluff for the Society page didn’t amount to much else. Not exactly the hard-nosed reporting he’d envisioned for his career. A gopher could do the same work.

“For now.”

The older boy nodded and tossed another pebble at the can. His kid brother chewed on his dry bottom lip with an air of innocence that matched his eyes. They showed no hint of knowing what life held in store. Probably a good thing.

While children who were adopted as babies were often raised as real family, it was no secret how kids acquired at older ages were valued. The girls as nannies, seamstresses, maids. The boys as farm and field hands, future workers at the factories and mines. Maybe, though, it wasn’t too late for these two. At least, not with some help.

Ellis peered at the front windows of the house, searching for movement beyond the smudges. He strained to catch the clinking of pots or a whiff of boiling stew, any indication of a mother being home. But only the distant groan of a tractor and the earthy smell of farmland drifted in the air. And through it all came thoughts of reason.

What could he possibly do for these two? Convince their folks there had to be a better way? Contribute a few bucks when he could scarcely pay his own rent?

Both brothers were staring at him, as if waiting for him to speak.

Ellis averted his attention from the sign. He scoured his brain for words with real meaning. In the end, he came up empty.

“You boys take care of yourselves.”

At their silence, he reluctantly turned away. The plinking of rocks on the rusted can resumed and then faded as he retreated down the country road.

Fifty yards ahead, the Model T he'd originally salvaged from a junkyard waited with windows open. Its radiator was no longer hissing and steaming. Somehow its surroundings, too, had changed. The sprawling acres, the crooked fencing—only minutes ago Ellis had found them interesting enough to photograph for his personal collection. A decent way to pass time while his engine cooled from the August heat. Now they were mere backdrops to another tragedy beyond his control.

As soon as he reached his old clunker, he tossed the camera inside, a little harder than he should have, and retrieved his jug of water. He refilled the radiator and prepared the motor by adjusting the levers and turning the key. Back at the hood, he gripped the fender for leverage and gave the crank a hearty jerk. Thankfully, a second attempt revived the sedan.

Once behind the steering wheel, he chucked off his hat and started on his way, more anxious than ever to return to the city. In less than an hour, he'd be in a whole different world. Laurel Township would be a speck of a memory.

Spread over his heaped jacket beside him, his map flapped against air breezing through the car. Just this morning, that wrinkled page, penciled with notes and circled destinations, had guided him to his latest rousing assignment: a quilting exhibition by a ladies' auxiliary of the American Legion, headed by the sister of Philly's mayor. No doubt much of the needlework was impressive, but Ellis had grumbled with every click of the shutter. The fact it was Sunday had further soured his mood, as he still needed to develop the photos and draft the article for his deadline tomorrow morning. So much for a day off. Yet now, humbled by that pair of boys, he felt ashamed of grousing over a job many would envy.

Though Ellis tried to push the kids from his mind, they circled

back again and again as he rattled down the highway and out of Chester County. Still, not until he approached the *Examiner's* building did he note the real reason they'd resonated so deeply.

If Ellis's brother had survived, he wondered, would they have looked just as similar? Would they both have been wanted?

CHAPTER 2

ARRIVING AT HER DESK, cloche hat still on and purse in hand, Lily cringed at what she had done.

Or had not done, rather.

On Friday afternoon, a labor reporter had been waiting for his photographs to dry, despite looking miserable from a cold. Lily's boss, Howard Trimble—an editor in chief who ran the paper with all the rigidity of a commander preparing for battle—had demanded to review the images first thing come Monday. Since the reporter would be away on a story then, Lily volunteered to help. *I'll turn in the photos*, she had promised. *You go home and rest.*

She wasn't one to make promises lightly, yet in the whirlwind of other tasks, she had forgotten. Now it was Monday morning—a quarter to eight. Fifteen minutes until the chief's regular arrival.

Lily tossed her handbag aside and hastened across the half-filled newsroom. Mumbled conversations traveled across the desks, each butted up against the next. In a regular changing

of the guard, the *Examiner's* daytime staff was edging out the remnants of the night crew.

Beside the elevator, she climbed the stairs—a faster route when ascending a single floor—and emerged in the composing room on the fourth level.

“Morning, Miss Palmer.” A young, long-limbed fellow stood to her right with an armful of files. The name of the new hire escaped her.

She responded with a smile, only slowing when he pressed on.

“Supposed to be another sweltering week ahead.”

“Apparently so.”

“You do anything over the weekend?”

She had made the two-hour trek to northern Delaware as usual—to her real home. Not the ladies' boardinghouse nearby where she resided during the workweek. But the purpose of those trips, like so much else in her life, was not something she could share.

“I'm afraid I'm in a hurry at the moment, but enjoy your day.” With another smile, she proceeded past him to reach the door in the corner. Fortunately unlocked, it led her into the pass-through. The sign on the second door—*Do not disturb*—was flipped backward, indicating that the darkroom was not in use and safe to enter.

Inside, a thin chain dangled from a light bulb overhead. She gave it a tug, illuminating the small, rectangular space with an eerie red glow. The air smelled of developing solutions that filled an assortment of trays, set among supplies on the counter lining a wall.

More than a dozen photographs hung from a wire that stretched the length of the room. Toward the end, just past shots of women proudly displaying quilts, Lily spotted the three pictures she had come for. Scenes from a steelworkers' union meeting.

She quickly retrieved an empty folder from the counter and unclipped the trio of photos. She had just finished storing

them when a sight pulled her gaze. It was a simple picture of a tree—unless a person looked closer. The old oak stood in a field, alone, almost sad. Its branches reached forward as if longing for something unseen.

She surveyed the next image, of initials carved into a splintered fence.

k.t. + a.\

The last letter was unfinished, leaving strangers to imagine its intended shape. And more than that, its story. She moved on to another picture, then another. A discarded bottle cap pressed into a road. A single flower standing tall in a patch of dry weeds. From the way each photo conveyed a tale, she knew who had captured them.

Since starting as the chief's secretary the spring before last, Lily had stumbled upon Ellis Reed's personal photographs on two other occasions. Every image bore an intriguing perspective, a depth of detail that most would have missed.

Although few men in the business were willing to write for the women's pages, nor settle for the pay, Ellis persisted with diligence. Like Lily, he had clearly been relegated to a job that bypassed his true talents. She never made mention of this, of course, as their periodic exchanges rarely surpassed basic cordialness...

The thought fell away as she turned.

Amid the red haze hung a photo of a sign. Two children on a porch were being offered for sale. Like cattle at market.

All at once, a tide of emotion rushed through her, unearthing old sediments she had worked to bury. The fear, the pain, the regrets. Nonetheless, she couldn't look away. In fact, even as moisture clouded her eyes, she pulled the picture from its clips for a closer view.

A flash of light jolted her.

The door had opened and immediately shut.

“Sorry!” a man called out. “It wasn’t locked, and the sign’s not flipped.”

Lily recalled her mission. “Be right out!”

She collected herself before starting for the door. As she reached for the knob, it occurred to her that Ellis’s photograph remained in her hand.

A dark part of her wanted nothing more than to shred and burn the copy, along with the negative. But an internal voice supplied another idea. She could make something good out of the utterly horrible. She could bring children too easily forgotten to the foreground, a reminder that each of them mattered. A hard-won lesson from her past.

Without another glance, she added the picture to her folder and opened the door.

CHAPTER 3

THROUGH THE LUMPY MATTRESS, the bedsprings voiced a throaty creak.

Ellis tugged the pillow off his head and squinted against sunlight pouring through his window. He'd left it open to relieve the heat. City noises and the stench of fumes and sewage made for an unfortunate trade-off. He rolled toward his two-bell tin clock on the night table that doubled as a desk, blinking hard to clear his vision.

A quarter after ten. Fifteen minutes past deadline.

Shit. He must have shut off the alarm in his sleep. It was no wonder, what with the bickering couple upstairs keeping him awake half the night.

He clambered to rise, his sheet already pooled on the rough wooden floor, and cursed his urge to piss, requiring time he didn't have. In a few steps he reached the door—the lone benefit of an apartment the size of a broom closet—and joined the line for the bathroom, stretched halfway down the hall. Another downside of the nation's massive unemployment. Two years ago

at this hour on a workday, hardly anyone but mothers, tots, and the elderly would have been home.

“Come on, already,” he muttered. A scuttling mouse was the only one who budged.

In front of Ellis, a trio of middle-aged women ceased their conversation. Their pointed glares delivered a revelation: he had nothing on but his drawers.

“Jesus. Sorry.” He reflexively covered himself. Though his average build had gained decent muscle through the years, in that moment, he reverted to the puny kid he’d been before puberty ran its course. A moderate stickball hitter with no hope of making the majors, a track runner whose confidence, and thus speed, always left him a few paces shy of a trophy.

On the upside, the need to relieve himself had subsided. Enough to wait anyhow. He hightailed it back to his flat, the women’s gripes over his indecency and language echoing down the hall. At his washbasin, he splashed his head and body with day-old water, then threw on his laundered work clothes from the rope that halved the room. Shoving his article into his worn leather satchel, cradled like a football due to its missing handle, he dashed out the door. Someday he’d commute in style, not fretting over the price of gasoline. Until then, he’d sprint to catch the teeming trolley.

On board, passengers fanned themselves with folded newspapers or brims of their hats. Ellis noticed he’d forgotten not only his fedora, but also to tame his hair with tonic. The black waves were a short yet unruly bunch. Another reason to avoid a grand entrance.

The rails squeaked and the bell clanged as the streetcar rolled on, slow enough to catch headlines shouted by paperboys.

“Lindberghs landing in Japan!”

“Young bandit slain, detective shot!”

“Runaway bride reunites with groom!”

Through the lingering haze—from mills and factories that

coughed and sputtered, straining to stay alive—City Hall came into view. Limestone and granite formed the majestic building. Atop its clock tower, a bronzed William Penn scowled over the unacceptable hour.

Ellis hopped off at his stop, barely avoiding a horse-drawn truck. He hustled down Market, weaving his way through pushcart peddlers and shoe shiners. He didn't slow until he'd entered the stony, five-story home of the *Examiner*. It was no *Evening Bulletin*, but with more than twenty years under its belt, it was still a respectable contender for nightly readership.

After a quick visit to the closest bathroom, Ellis boarded the elevator, joining two men from the proofing room. "Third floor," Ellis said.

The stooped lift operator completed his yawn before initiating the ascent, and the proofers rambled about dames they'd met the night before, a couple of shopgirls at Wannamaker's. The operator opened the door a foot above the third floor—more often it was a foot below, remarkably never level—inviting in the sharp scents of coffee and ink and a sea of cigarette smoke.

Ellis stepped down into the city room, the nerve center of the paper. In the middle of the desk-filled maze, editors of the four major departments were rigorously working in their seats. Thankfully, no sign of his direct boss, the managing editor, Lou Baylor. The stout man's bald head, often flushed from stress, made him easy to spot. Closer to deadline, he became a jittery ball of red.

Ellis slid right into the midmorning din. Rising chatter, from both the staff and portable radios, competed with trilling phones and clacking typewriters. Copy boys zipped about, everyone playing catch-up from the weekend. A perpetual race with no ultimate finish line.

A few strides from his desk, Ellis felt a tug on his elbow. He swung around to find Lily Palmer, a coffee mug in her grip.

"Goodness, Mr. Reed. Where have you been?"

"I...just... My alarm. It didn't ring."

The gal was a beauty, though not in the typical Jean Harlow way. She wore her auburn hair neatly pinned up. And her nose, slender like her lips, was dusted with light freckles. Today, though, he noticed her eyes the most. Not for their green-and-copper coloring but for their spark of urgency.

“Chief’s been asking for you. You’d best get in there.”

Ellis scanned the wall-mounted clocks spanning four time zones. The local hour read 10:42. Had word of his gaffe already gone all the way to Trimble?

At most papers of this size, the editor in chief would leave the managing editor to wade through the daily weeds. But as the oldest son of the retired founder, Howard Trimble rarely encountered an issue too minor to address, particularly when it warranted reproach.

Ellis dreaded one of those searing rants now. “Sure. Just need a minute to put my things—”

From the chief’s office in the far corner came a bellow. “Can I get some coffee here, or do I gotta do *everything* myself? And where the hell’s Reed?” Trimble’s door was only half-open, but he could likely be heard all the way to the basement, where even the printing presses would be challenged to drown him out.

Lily sighed and arched a brow. “Shall we?”

Ellis nodded—as if given a choice.

Together, they made their way across the room, past lines of desks bookended by pillars of newsprint. In her low heels and straight black skirt, Lily walked without speaking. Ever graceful yet on the primmer side, she was never one to make idle conversation, though her silence now seemed daunting.

And then came the glance, an odd look. Maybe she knew something he didn’t.

“What is it?”

“Mmm? Oh...nothing.”

“Miss Palmer.” Ellis stopped her a couple yards from the door, where she hesitated.

“You...look like you had a rough night is all.”

He suddenly saw himself for the mess he'd become—face unshaven, mop unkempt, suit slapped together. Dapper as a hobo from an alley.

At least he had on more than his drawers. He shrugged a little. “Undercover story,” he offered.

She smiled, the joke of it sadly obvious. Then her lips lowered as she turned for her boss's office. Ellis smoothed his hair, spiked and still damp, and followed her inside.

On the low file cabinet by the open window, the blades of a mechanical fan ticked with every rotation.

“It's about damn time,” the chief barked from his seat. A tad round in the middle, he was rarely seen without a bow tie and spectacles on the edge of his nose. With eyebrows as thick as his beard, he resembled a kindhearted grandfather—until he opened his mouth.

Ellis perched on the visitor's chair. He propped his satchel against his shin, anchored for a tornado. As usual, the desk before him appeared to have been hit by exactly that. Letters, folders, scraps of notes. Memos, circulars, clippings. The mound was almost thick enough to bury a body.

A former writer's, for instance.

“Don't forget about your eleven o'clock,” Lily was saying to the chief, handing off the mug. “Also, your wife phoned. She wants to know where you two are having dinner on Friday.”

The chief halted midsip. “Christ. I forgot to make reservations.”

“In that case, I'll tell Mrs. Trimble it's the Carriage House. They can seat you at seven. I'll let the *maitre d'* know it's your anniversary so they'll have flowers and something...special for the occasion.”

The reference to alcohol was only lightly veiled, as it wasn't unusual to trade a generous tip for wine or champagne at even top-notch restaurants. For all its good intentions, Prohibition had swelled not only the public's desire to drink, but also corruption

by mobsters now living the high life. A full week didn't pass without a headline about the likes of Max "Boo Boo" Hoff or Mickey Duffy or the Nig Rosen gang.

"Well then...good." The chief's tone actually bordered on pleasantness. But a moment later, he waved Lily away, and his hard gaze angled to Ellis.

"So," he said. "Reed."

Ellis straightened in his seat. "Yeah, Chief."

As Lily passed, her eyes seemed to say *Good luck*. Then she swung the door closed, rattling the glass pane, and the chief set down his coffee with a small splash. "Apparently, you've been taking some *interesting* pictures."

Thrown off, Ellis struggled with the implication. "Sir?"

"How 'bout you explain this." From a folder, the chief tossed a photograph onto the desk. It was of the boys on the porch, their gut-wrenching sign propped out front. The chief must have seen the other photos too. As the matter became clear, a weight dropped to the pit of Ellis's stomach.

"Chief, these were just... I had to kill time after the Auxiliary event. It was hot out there, and my engine..."

There was no reason to go on. Nothing was going to justify using a camera and film owned by the paper to take personal pictures, only to develop them with company supplies.

The chief leaned back and thrummed his fingers on the armrest of his chair, either contemplating or gearing up. It seemed best for Ellis to stay quiet.

"You've been working here...what, four years now?"

"Five."

A technicality. Ellis winced at the unwise correction, but then his own words sank in.

Five years wasn't eternity, though still a respectable chunk of time. After first toiling away in the morgue—an apt nickname for the windowless, dust-ridden archives room—fittingly followed by a stint of punching out obituaries, Ellis had pleaded

for a promotion. *I'll cover anything*, he'd said. As timing would have it, one of the paper's two Society writers had just quit after getting hitched.

Ellis had pushed his male ego aside. The job was a bridge. Plus, it helped to know he'd be reporting directly to Mr. Baylor, who'd been picking up the slack since the Society editor left to care for her mother. Howard Trimble was never a bigger fan of efficiency than when it cinched the paper's purse.

That was two years ago. Despite subsequent requests for a shot at real news, Ellis was no higher in the chain. Mercifully, most assignments that required detailed descriptions of cake and chiffon belonged to his matronly Society colleague. But that still left Ellis with an endless series of gallery exhibitions and uppity galas, occasional celebrity sightings, and—his personal favorite—charitable fundraisers hosted by elites who ignored street beggars every day while strolling to shop at Gimbel's.

If anyone deserved to gripe, it was Ellis.

He raised his chin, bolstered by pride. "That's right, it's been five years. And all the while, I've put in a hundred percent. Working near every weekend at any event I'm assigned. Never complained once. So, if you're hitting me with a reprimand, or want to can me over a few lousy pictures, you go right ahead."

Logic fought to rein him in; it was hardly a good time to be out of work, and Lord knew he'd never crawl back to his father for help paying the rent—but the hell with it.

There was no emotion in the chief's face. "You done?"

Ellis fended off any inkling of regret and issued a nod.

"Splendid." The man's tone remained level but taut. Like a wire that reverberated with every syllable. "'Cause the reason I'd called you in here was about writing a feature. A family profile to go with this photo of yours. If that isn't too much trouble."

The ticking fan seemed to suck all the air from the room.

Ellis forced a swallow and resisted the urge to loosen his

collar. Humility shrank him to the size of a jockey. Switching gears, he attempted to act natural. Deliberate. Less like a jackass.

“Sure thing, sir. Swell idea. I’ll get right on it.”

The chief said nothing.

Ellis jumped to his feet and grabbed his satchel, almost forgetting the photograph, and turned to leave before the offer was quashed. He barely made it through the door when a smile overtook his face. All the banal pieces and hollow events, the years of patience and fortitude. They’d finally proven worthwhile. Or could, rather.

Through the bedlam, he marched toward his desk, bridling his enthusiasm. No feature was guaranteed. The actual piece would still require approval. Everything about it had to be stellar. Strong quotes, pointed observations, all of it supported by facts. He was already planning his drive to the farmhouse when he reviewed the picture. The two brothers, helpless and scruffy, stared with their crystalline eyes.

Ellis’s feet slowed as the scene came back.

The idea of interviewing those boys, or even their parents... Something about it felt wrong.

He tried to bat away the notion—reporters like Clayton Brauer wouldn’t hesitate to charge after a good scoop—but the truth clung to Ellis: these weren’t politicians or movie stars or anyone else who’d invited the spotlight, people fully prepared for widespread judgment. And that judgment could be loud and critical, to put it mildly, should an ugly truth belie the family’s plight. Say, if the father was a drunk who’d gambled away the rent, or the mother had simply tired of her burdens. Depending on the story, the kids could suffer the most.

Ellis preferred not to take that chance. He just needed an alternate tack, free of harmful particulars. But he needed it soon. Wait too long and the chief’s interest would wither, along with the offer.

Ellis checked the clock. There was still time before the chief’s

next appointment, though not much. Before second thoughts could take hold, he strode back to the corner office. He formed an appeal as he went, acutely aware of the risks.

The chief's attention had moved to a pile of paperwork. He spared the quickest of glances at Ellis, who eased in with a disclaimer. "You know, Chief, there's just one wrinkle. See, I'm not so sure this family would appreciate me bombarding them with questions." He got no further before a response flew back.

"Then jot down where the house is. I'll assign another writer."

"What? No. I didn't mean..."

A light knock sounded, and Lily poked her head in. "Sorry to interrupt, Chief, but the commissioner's here for your meeting."

The chief regarded his watch. "Yeah, yeah. Send him in."

She nodded and left the room.

Panic briskly climbed through Ellis. His big break was slipping away. "All I'm trying to say is that, well...this picture's about more than one family." Over his shoulder, he could see Lily and the commissioner closing in. He pushed onward, despite the chief's look of growing irritation. "After all, there's folks hurting everywhere. The bigger story is why this stuff's still happening. Other than the crash, that is."

During the lengthy beat that followed, Ellis clutched his satchel under his arm, the photo still in hand, waiting.

Finally, the chief shook his head, as if disapproving of his own judgment. "Fine. Write it up."

Ellis sighed, relief washing over him, but he knew better than to stay and celebrate. "Thanks, Chief. Thanks a million." He nearly backed into Lily, who'd just arrived with the commissioner. Ellis moved aside to allow them passage before returning to his desk.

Mind abuzz, he'd nearly forgotten all about his Society piece. He retrieved the article and paired it with a quilting shot from the darkroom. After turning them in, luckily without backlash, he sank into his chair.

On a typewriter two desks over, Clayton Brauer's pointer fingers were engaged in rapid-fire hunt and peck. True to his ancestry, the guy had fair features and broad shoulders and the precision of a German machine. As always, a half-burned cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth with a hint of smugness.

In the world of news, the vast majority of even hard-hitting stories went unsigned, a standard practice for any reputable paper. But thanks to flashy accounts of crime and corruption, the credit *By Clayton Brauer* had appeared in the *Examiner*—even making it onto Page One—more times than Ellis cared to tally.

Obviously, Ellis's feature wouldn't be a front-pager, but he was a hell of a lot closer to a coveted byline. More than that, to finally writing a story of import.

Ellis scrolled fresh copy paper into his Royal. Seeking inspiration, he again studied the photo. There were a variety of slants to consider. His fingers hovered over the keys, waiting for the words to come. Something provocative. Something newsworthy.

Maybe even...creative.

CHAPTER 4

IN THE BOARDINGHOUSE the following week, while returning from the bath one evening, Lily had overheard her name. Her ears tuned right in out of habit. Behind a partially opened bedroom door, a couple of new tenants had been sizing her up.

She's a bit snooty, don't you think?

Oh, I don't know. Just seems too prim and proper to me.

If only they knew.

With a tendency to keep to herself, Lily could scarcely take offense. She was no old biddy at twenty-two; her priorities were just different from those of all the other young boarders. In the evenings, they would moon over celebrity rumors, or the newest talkies, or which boys they had eyes for at the last community dance. Early on, some of the girls had invited her on outings, yet she always declined. They learned not to waste their efforts.

Now, on a shaded bench at Franklin Square, she was starkly reminded of where her own interests lay. All around, smitten couples and cheerful families were prattling and strolling through the lunch hour. She drew a breath and rubbed the oval locket

at the hollow of her neck. She envisioned Samuel's latest kiss goodbye, his sadness mirroring her own. *It won't be this way for much longer*, she'd told him, a phrase repeated so often she began to doubt her own promise.

The thought squelched her appetite.

She stuffed her lunch into her pail. Together with her book, she headed toward the paper. Perspiration and humidity glued the stockings to her skin. Despite having time to spare, she cut through the city park. She was just passing the central fountain when honking and shouting broke out. A cabbie and an ice-truck driver were clashing over right of way. After a moment of gawking—their colorful language made them difficult to ignore—she spied a familiar figure seated at the base of a large maple.

Using a palm-size notebook, Ellis Reed appeared to be penciling and scratching out words in equal measure. Pages lay crumpled on the browning grass. Such doggedness made perfect sense to Lily, as she had acted much the same way in her proud days of working on the school bulletin.

All week, since learning of Ellis's opportunity, she had been tempted to inquire about his progress—his photo of the children still haunted her deeply—but his agitation had supplied the answer. It was clear the situation wasn't improving as he now wadded another page and threw it with force. Startled by the disruption, a lone mallard quacked and fluttered its wings before waddling off.

Ellis slumped against the tree, hands on his knees. His hat toppled to the ground, joining his pencil and pad, surrendered in defeat. Even his suspenders sagged heavily, bound to the dark trousers he wore with no jacket, his white sleeves unequally rolled.

Sensibility warned her not to involve herself—but far too late. She was, after all, largely responsible for his predicament. The least she could do was offer encouragement.

Nearing the tree, she navigated his rejected pages and corresponding demeanor. “You do realize,” she said, nabbing his attention, “if you’re looking to take out that poor duck, a shotgun would be considerably more effective.”

His features relaxed as recognition dawned. He glanced toward the bird and murmured, “Only if he’s made of gelatin.”

She tilted her head, not following.

He appeared about to explain but shook his head. “Story for another time.” A faint gleam shone in his eyes, blue as a robin’s egg. After a beat of silence, he asked, “Would you... care to sit?”

Lily had no plans to stay long but felt odd looming over him as they spoke. When she agreed, he grabbed his strewn jacket and spread it out beside him. She eased herself down to sit properly in her skirt—oh, how she missed her girdle-free weekend wear—and set aside her belongings. Ellis was making a half-hearted attempt to straighten his black tie when his stomach growled, loud as a revving engine. Despite her best efforts, she couldn’t hide her amusement.

“Guess I missed lunch,” he said, a smidge embarrassed.

She reached into her pail and produced the last half of her sandwich. “Pastrami and Swiss on rye.”

He hesitated only briefly before accepting. “Thanks.” His smile delivered a pair of curved lines, like parentheses, to his cheeks. They brought to mind Samuel’s dimples, which bore equal charm. Ellis’s complexion even had a similar olive hue.

She returned to her purpose. “I take it things aren’t going well with the article.”

Ellis swallowed a mouthful of sandwich. He swiped crumbs from his lips with the back of his hand with an air of frustration. “I just don’t see what the chief wants. Fine, he didn’t like my first take. But I put everything I had into the next one. Spent almost a week poring over every blessed word.”

Lily hadn’t read either of his attempts, but she’d caught

enough of the chief's responses to gather the gist. *As stale as week-old goddamn toast*, he'd so eloquently told Mr. Baylor, who had submitted Ellis's second version. It went without saying that the feature wouldn't survive a third strike.

"So, what was it about?" she asked.

"The last draft?"

She nodded, genuinely curious.

"Well...mainly it blasted the Smoot-Hawley Tariff."

Her confusion must have shown because he squared his shoulders to her before presenting his case. "Look, a bunch of DC lawmakers—they swore up and down that tariff was going to be great for all Americans. Plumb out of solutions? Tax 'em. Because that worked just swell for the Brits."

Lily wasn't opposed to his stance necessarily but failed to grasp the link. "And...the picture you took?"

"Don't you see? It's blatant proof of how wrong they were."

The correlation was a million miles from the personal chord the photograph had struck with her. When she failed to respond, Ellis's face dimmed, though he managed a weak smile. "I take it you're not a fan either."

She should have continued right on through the park. Her attempt to help was only worsening the matter. "I'm sure another idea will come," she said, a paltry offering. "Don't give up yet."

He looked almost puzzled. "Give up? On this? Not a chance."

She worried the implication had offended him, but just for an instant. He was merely resolved to reach his goal.

Perhaps for that reason, she sensed she could prod—an act she normally avoided—to expose the raw relevance of that heart-rending image. Not for her, of course. For others.

"If I may ask, Mr. Reed, what does that picture really mean to you?"

His brow knotted. The question was unexpected.

"Because I would guess," she ventured, "that while you were

taking that photo, you weren't musing about some tariff or the lawmakers in DC. When you first saw those kids, what were you thinking?"

He opened his mouth, then promptly closed it, his answer reeled back in. She thought he would leave it at that or regroup with another economic stance. Rather, he gained a light rasp as he replied, "My younger brother. How he might've been."

Lily nodded, attempting to hide her surprise. It was clear his sibling had passed, but, more tellingly, Ellis was accustomed to keeping this part of his past tucked away. A relic in a dusty attic.

"I didn't realize it at first," he went on, "but that's what drew me over to that house. And then I saw the posted sign." He shook his head as if recalling its words. "Sure, I could've been appalled, wondering how a parent could do that. Sell them off like that. But I didn't feel that way."

"No?"

"As I drove off, I just kept thinking about those boys. They didn't ask for the bum score they're getting, but somehow they'll make do. Adults, we're all so busy griping about our tough breaks, and kids like them, their lives change in a split second and you hardly hear a peep. Not about the big things anyway."

Gaining conviction, he quickened his pace. "Even when life's downright lousy, most kids are still so resilient because...well, I guess 'cause they don't know any different. It's like they only realize how unfair their lives are if you tell them. And even then, all they need is the smallest amount of hope and they could do just about anything they set their minds to..." Trailing off, Ellis appeared to have voiced far more than he had intended.

Lily couldn't help but smile. There was such passion and honesty in his words. As with his photos, he had captured a perspective, a profound depth in details, that people often missed. A view that needed to be shared.

"I believe, Mr. Reed, you've found your story."

He narrowed his eyes. As he shifted his frame of reference,

his face lightened. His gradual smile was the infectious sort, lined with just enough warmth to unsettle her.

“Well,” she said, “I’d best be off.” She gathered her belongings as she got to her feet. When he politely started to rise, she urged him to remain seated. “After all, you have a lot of work to do.”

“You are right about that.” He laughed a bit. “I sure owe you one, Miss Palmer.”

“Nonsense. It was my pleasure.” With that, she left him to scribble and ponder.

True, she hadn’t been forthcoming about her own reaction to the picture—about what had compelled her to pass it along to the chief, ushering the image toward publication. Perhaps at the root of her efforts, more than all else, was a yearning to feel less alone with choices she had once made.

Whatever the cause may have been, there was no reason to elaborate. She had said enough to help.