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*For the children in the picture*

"A thousand words will not leave so deep an impression as one deed."

—Henrik Ibsen

# 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, 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 aspiration 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 chalk, didn't fully register until Ellis snapped the photo.



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.

Even, say, six 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 breadline 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 whole dollar when he could scarcely afford 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 that 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 grouching 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?