

Better is the End

A Novel by Curt A. Canfield

*“Better is the end of a thing than the beginning thereof,
and the patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit.”*

Ecclesiastes 7:8

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Table of Contents

<i>Part I: The Beginning of Things</i>	5
Chapter 1: In the Beginning	6
Chapter 2: Cynthia	15
Chapter 3: Auggie	20
Chapter 4: Lena	26
Chapter 5: Leon	32
Chapter 6: Immersion	38
Chapter 7: The End of the Beginning	45
<i>Part II: The First Pass</i>	50
Chapter 8: The Beginning of the End	51
Chapter 9: The List	54
Chapter 10: Alicia	58
Chapter 11: Hector	62
Chapter 12: Zeke	66
Chapter 13: Cindy	69
Chapter 14: Not Getting Any Easier	76
<i>Part III: The Second Pass</i>	80
Chapter 15: Cindy Redux & Friedrich too	81
Chapter 16: A Downward Spiral	86
Chapter 17: Prep for Friedrich	91
Chapter 18: Friedrich	96
Chapter 19: On the Edge	102
Chapter 20: Sayed	106
Chapter 21: Going Broke	112
Chapter 22: The Spike	119
Chapter 23: <i>Katsura Mono</i>	122
Chapter 24: Dennis	131
<i>Part IV: The Ending of Things</i>	138
Chapter 25: Low Tolerance	139
Chapter 26: Saving Grace	147
Chapter 27: Keiko	153

Chapter 28: *Interregnum* 158
Chapter 29: *Manuela* 166
Chapter 30: *The Arrival*..... 170
Chapter 31: *A Walk in the Park*..... 176
Chapter 32: *Replanting* 182
Chapter 33: *The Departure*..... 187
Chapter 34: *The Law of Progress*..... 192
Chapter 35: *Wisdom is a Good Thing*..... 198
Epilogue 201
End Notes..... 202

Part I: The Beginning of Things

2017-2022

*“Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom:
and with all thy getting get understanding.”*

Proverbs 4:7

Chapter 1: In the Beginning

My grandfather, Thomas Barnes, was a simple man, in the best sense of the word. He was a first-generation steel-worker but a carpenter at heart. In his spare time, he built whirlygigs and birdhouses. He took me to his lumber yard and showed me how to pick out wood beams. He would lift one up shoulder-high and looked down its length to see if it was straight and not warped. He would bring it down to check for knotholes and then looked at the grains to make sure they were tight.

He took things as they came. If they were good, he humbly accepted them and was thankful; he never made a huge fuss. If they were bad, he either stepped out of the way to avoid them or took the blows if he couldn't. He went into the army at the age of twenty-one, enlisting on December 7, 1917, one month after the Armistice was signed. He served two years, was promoted to sergeant, and discharged in May of 1919.

He married a good woman, Emily, in 1922. She was twenty years old then and he was twenty-six.. She graduated from college, a rarity for women in those days, and became a teacher for many years. They had three children and were married for thirty-nine years until Emily passed away.

Thomas, like his descendants, kept things simple by living and marrying within his own kind, English settlers who came to America over four hundred years ago. My father broke the mold when he married my mother, a German woman whose family came to America in the mid-1800s. Unlike Thomas, my life was terribly complex and got worse until a stroke came when I was forty-nine.

The complexity left me after that. It took another seventeen years of oblivious indifference before I finally found some semblance of peace and simplicity with Johann, a previously unknown, distant relative of my mother. It was 2017. I had just crawled my way to retirement and started researching my mother's family line when his name sprang up.

Johann was ninety years-old at the time and, fortunately, lived close by in a nursing facility. Our initial meeting started out rocky. He seemed wary of me. I tried to break the ice by remarking that he was the same age as my father. I asked if he also fought in the Second World War. Rather than answering my

question, he asked if I served in the military. When I replied that I was in the Marines during the Vietnam conflict, he opened up and told me about his service in the Waffen-SS. When I heard that, I got ready to leave. However, he pulled me in when he said that we shared certain similarities, all of which led up to our fighting in two different wars for two different countries that were stained by war crimes. His theory intrigued me and brought me back for several more visits to learn more.

We met five more times that were spread over several months. He became like a father to me as we explored what drive us into fighting those wars and our countries into committing those war crimes. Together, we plumbed the depths of our shared history and human nature to understand the course of our lives. While I made the one-hour trip to and from his facility, I wrestled with the complexities in my life and my past transgressions to find a way forward, a purpose in life.

During our sixth meeting, we reconciled with our pasts and found our peace. He passed away as I sat next to him. And my life became simple after that. Or so I thought.

What happened after his death was equally insightful and it started with Johann's son, August.. I met August when he came to visit Johann during one of my meetings with Johann. He went by "Auggie" and was devoted to his father. He participated in our discussion and was kind enough to send me an invitation to Johann's funeral service.

I called him to accept and made one request. It was to have someone sing *Ich hatt' einen Kameraden*. I would reimburse him if he made the arrangements. He agreed but said he would handle the expense. This was an old German song played at military funerals that Johann mentioned several times. I listened to it on the Internet. I couldn't understand the words, but the tone and tempo were moving.

Cynthia, my wife, went with me to the funeral service. It was well attended. The nursing home brought several of his friends from the nursing home to the service including Leon and Lena who joined in our conversations. I saw Auggie with the minster and waved. Cynthia and I walked over to meet Lena and Leon

and made introductions. We spoke about our time with Johann until the service began. Cynthia listened gracefully and told me that she was finally glad to meet everyone I had been seeing the past few months.

After the service, the family had a dinner prepared in the church hall. Everyone broke into groups and began heading in that direction. Auggie came over to us and introduced his wife, Patricia, and their son, Friedrich, and his wife. Friedrich, unlike Auggie, was no chip off of the old block.

Both Auggie and Johann had slender builds and full heads of hair. Friedrich, by contrast, was slightly paunchy, balding, and sported a neatly trimmed moustache and goatee. I was surprised to hear that his first name was the same as my great-grandfather's. I was even more surprised that I had not heard Johann or Auggie mention him before now.

While the ladies began chatting among themselves, I asked Friedrich what he did for a living and got more than I expected. He presented himself as a classic intellectual, using words that no one would ever use outside a college campus. He was a professor of history at Ithaca College, which is a few miles from Johann's nursing home. I looked over at Auggie and could tell that he was proud of his son, but there seemed to be a level of detachment between them.

“Friedrich, you should know that Willi became good friends with your grandfather”

Friedrich looked over at me with the same expression of disdain he expressed towards his father, a machinist.

Auggie added, “You two may hit it off as well since Willi is quite a history buff himself. You majored in history in college, didn't you, Willi?”

I smiled. “Oh, that was a while ago, Auggie. But I did enjoy learning new things about history from Johann. He really opened up my eyes about the events that led up to the Second World War.”

Friedrich gave a knowing nod. “Interesting. He never spoke about history to me. And yet, here I am!” He lifted his arms and chin skyward. “A professor who teaches the history of Imperial and Weimar Germany.”

I was impressed. “Too bad you weren’t there with us. We also had a third person sit in with us. Do you see that woman in the wheelchair over there? Her name is Lena. She is an Auschwitz survivor. She taught us both a lot.”

He looked over and grunted. “I hope you and he learned something from her because that is where all his ideas about National Socialism lead.”

I looked at him askance. “What do you mean by that, Friedrich?”

“I mean, the Germans in that period, including my grandfather, were so focused on their own superiority that they treated everyone else in the world like their inferiors. Or they were indifferent to them or even worse, like they were vermin that needed to be eradicated. It was all so horrible, and I try to avoid anything having to do with that period of history.”

I did a double-take. I couldn’t believe my ears. Not because of what he said about Nazi Germany, but what he said about his own grandfather. “Well, you should know that your grandfather apologized to Lena before he died, and that Lena reconciled with him. She told me she was sorry that history got between them.”

I saw Auggie’s jaw drop. “You never told me this, Willi, but I am glad to hear it. You were with him when he died, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was. And he went in peace. He told me he never considered himself a Nazi. He said he only believed in justice for his country. He tried to study what went wrong to see what led to the war. And do you know what he said next, Friedrich?”

Friedrich tilted his chin up and looked down as if he were expecting an answer from one of less informed students.

I set my jaw and fired back a reply. “Well, I’ll tell you. He said that Lena was right when she said pride had blinded the country; they were only thinking of their own survival under the pressure of the Allies after the First World War.”

Auggie sensed the rising tension and quickly intervened to tone things down. “Friedrich, isn’t that wonderful that your grandfather said that? Is that how you approach this subject in your classes on the Weimar Republic that led up to National Socialism?”

Friedrich cast his eyes back to us and settled into a posture of authority. “Thank you, Father. Let me tell you how I conduct my classes. At the beginning of each class year. I task the students with answering one question by the end of semester: Did the German people take a ‘special path’ that led to Nazism? I then take them through all the nineteenth-century wars that led to the unification of Germany, the First World War, the abdication of the Kaiser, and then the rise and subsequent fall of the Weimar Republic. We cover all the social, political, and economic trends during that time that led to the disasters that followed. I give them everything they need to answer my opening question.”

Auggie was beaming, but I wasn’t. Friedrich sounded like he was spoon feeding his students the answer to his question. I recalled how bitter Johann was over the end of First World War and its tragic aftermath. “But what about the Allies, Friedrich? Do you discuss them and how they led Germany on that ‘special path’? Do you discuss how they deceived the Germans into signing the Armistice of 1918 by a promise of including Wilson’s Fourteen Points in the Versailles Peace Treaty? Do you discuss how the Allies dropped those promised Fourteen Points in the Peace Treaty and then extorted Germany into signing it by continuing to blockade the country and threatening invasion?”

I gave him a long, cold stare then broke it away. I felt Johann’s presence gently reminding me to rein in my temper. Auggie, in the meantime, was swiveling his head back and forth between us. He looked shell-shocked by the interchange. “Let’s not get into politics here, gentlemen. This is a funeral after all.”

Friedrich fired back. But it was not at me. “No, it’s not politics, Father. This sort of talk always stood between us since my childhood. You and Grandfather always broke away from the rest of the family to discuss what he found in his research and his views of history. I was always left standing there as if I didn’t

count. And, you know, whenever I tried to share what I heard you and Grandfather talking about with others in school or with my friends, they ridiculed me.”

His voice was growing louder. Our wives stopped talking and looked to see what was going on. Other people began to look in our direction.

Friedrich put his hand on his father’ shoulder and pulled him aside. “We should go outside, Father. I want to put an end to this.”

Auggie’s face went cold. I knew he adored his father and would never say anything against him. He looked conflicted, as if he didn’t know how to respond to his son. Friedrich kept staring at him, expecting a response.

I tried to break the ice. “Well, perhaps I should excuse myself.”

Auggie looked over at me. “No, no. I think you should stay, Willi. After all, you’re family as well.” He probably wanted me to come along as a buffer. I was glad to oblige.

Friedrich raised his head and addressed our three wives. “Please excuse us, ladies. We’ll only be a moment.”

We walked in silence out the door and stopped under a large oak tree.

Auggie faced his son and was the first to speak. “Now, what do you mean by putting an end to this? I don’t understand what you mean, Friedrich.”

I looked over Friedrich carefully. His face showed little or no character. Pablum came to mind.

“What I mean is that you should stop justifying and supporting Nazism. Can’t you see that Germany was antisemitic, racist, and nationalistic at that time, not to mention militaristic? This has been a big barrier between us, even when you didn’t speak about it. I’m tired of traipsing around this with you.”

Petulant came to mind. I almost stepped in but then Auggie replied. “It’s not Nazism that your grandfather and I were justifying, Friedrich. It was Germany. I was born in Germany. I have German blood.

I'm proud of what the German people did to save their country after all the deceit and deprivation that the Allies imposed on them after the First World War. It's tragic that it all led to the Second World War and its consequences. And I think the German people understand that and accept it. But it seems you don't.. How can you say such things about me?"

Friedrich stood there, open-mouthed in amazement. "That's all you have to say? Can you go back into that building and tell that to everyone there? Nazism was built on hate, Father. That's what you and Grandfather *don't* understand. It was hatred and distrust of the West and the East that drove them to Nazism. That's the 'special path' they were on and that's what I teach to my students."

Auggie's face grew flushed, and he was about to lash back, but I stepped in. "I don't mean to speak for your father or grandfather, Friedrich, but you are misrepresenting them. Before the war, the vast majority of German citizens supported National Socialism. The party laid out a concrete program to do so and the German people enthusiastically supported it to regain their place in the world. And they were successful!"

Friedrich looked like he was ready for an outburst, so I quickly finished my point. "From what I have heard from your grandfather and have read most Germans were neither racist nor antisemitic. There's no doubt that several key leaders in the party were and some of their followers were and some were violent as well. But the vast majority, from what I've read, weren't. And besides, racism and antisemitism existed in the US and in other countries were as well."

Friedrich reared back and pointed his finger at me. "You miss my point, Mr. Barnes. We're talking about Nazi Germany. They felt they were Aryan, superior to everyone else! And unlike those other countries, they went to war to take what they wanted."

This guy had swallowed the Kool-Aid. "Wait a minute, Professor. You can't make those statements without considering what those other countries did to foster those feelings. Look at America's track record. We treated Native Americans or African-Americans just as badly. Was Germany nationalistic? Sure, but a lot of other countries were as well during the Depression. It drove many

governments to rally their people around the flag to protect their economy and their citizens from other competitors. Was Germany militaristic? Well, it was the Allies who started the arms race during the late Twenties and early Thirties. Germany had to disarm after the First World War and they complied, but the Allies never did despite their signing the Peace Treaty to do so.”

Auggie jumped in. “Willi’s right. You can’t throw out the baby with the bath, Friedrich. National Socialism, which started years before Hitler came to power, was good for the country at the time. And the German people are, for the most part, good and strong-working people. Look how they recovered after both world wars.” He paused to eye his son. “And, after all, you should listen to me. I am your father!”

Friedrich was having none of it. “The Nazis took the country into disaster. And the German people followed their leaders, who were criminals. They violated the world order. They were fanatics who tried to overthrow civilization as we knew it.”

I couldn’t take much more of Friedrich’s views or his attitude. Some kind of hatred lay buried within him. Was it due to his father? His social class? Or was it a generational thing? It didn’t matter; it left a bad taste in my mouth. I said a quick goodbye and walked back to Cynthia thinking about Johann and my last visit with him.

One of the last things Johann said was, “We shouldn’t let any system separate us from God or from each other.” He arrived at the conclusion that people don’t trust in God to provide justice. Instead, they take matters into their own hands and that’s when conflict begins. Johann departed this world with that Truth. Neither side wins in any armed conflict. It just breeds more fighting regardless of who wins. The victor and the defeated just exchange roles over time as one seeks justice from the other.

Intellectually, I understood that Truth. God eventually sorts things out. The wicked always get their just desserts. But, emotionally, the Friedrichs of this world still rankled me. They either ignore that truth or distort it to back up their own view of history. My heart was still seething from the exchange. He was

teaching this swill to our kids to puff himself up and get back at his father and grandfather. I wanted to go back and grab him by the throat to make him shut up.

I told the women that the men would be back momentarily. Cynthia and I took our leave and headed out the front door to our car.

Chapter 8: The Beginning of the End

Despite the best efforts of my agent, none of the mainstream publishers would touch the manuscript. I felt like it was like a massive knee-jerk reaction to anything questioning the traditional view of Nazi Germany. Fortunately, several months later, she did find a niche publisher who made it available on several electronic platforms and did a reasonable job of marketing it.

The book received warm reviews from readers and several critics. One critic's remark, however, stopped me cold when he noted a minor flaw in the main character, whose life happened to be modeled on my own: *"Readers are allowed unpredictable glimpses into his struggles following his return from Vietnam—and only intermittent exposure to the darkness lurking inside of him."*

The last few words in that statement hit like a gut-punch. I had just spent the last five years wrestling with the darkness in my past and finding peace with Johann and now this critic saw otherwise. And he was right. Things continued to surface after Johann died; my anger towards Friedrich; the recent flare up with Leon; and then, the lack of sensitivity toward Lena as she languished alone in her wheelchair for five years, waiting for someone that she considered a son.

There was no doubt about a lingering darkness that lay somehow in the bottom of my heart. An imbalance existed between what I thought and how I acted, between my mind and my heart. The thought stayed with me for several days until the word *Praxis* came to mind. I first heard the term used during college in three different classes: Philosophy, Asian Religion and Political Science.

In Philosophy class, I read that the ancient Greek philosophers used the term in schooling their students on ethics, economics, and politics. The students learned that *Praxis* meant that theories and ideas were useless without any practical application.

My Asian Religion class took a slightly different spin, viewing theory and action as opposing, but complementary principles expressed as *yin* and *yang*; both were incomplete without the other and together they constituted the whole. Therefore, action without knowledge cannot be called action; it is merely

random motion, without any purpose. Conversely, knowledge without action cannot be called knowledge for it is vacuous, without any value.

It was in Political Science class, however, where I first appreciated its relevance and value. One of our textbooks was Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He gave an example of employing *Praxis* to turn a theory into practical application and thereby create an epoch.

He described an epoch's evolution as "*characterized by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites striving towards their fulfillment.*"¹ Fulfillment, for him, was the underprivileged overcoming oppression in South America. I had been through a "*complex of ideas ... in dialectical interaction*" with Lena, Johann, Leon and Auggie to overcome my sense of oppression. And while my mind may have realized fulfillment by reconciling my past thoughts with my past actions, apparently my heart had been left behind to simmer and stew. But how does one fix it? How does one get rid of that darkness?

As I reached this conclusion, I felt like a recovering alcoholic, only one drink away from another setback, another failure. There was still something inside that was oppressing me, keeping me away from ever reaching that sense of fulfillment. A few days later, I was on a walk and then an idea came to me. I made a beeline toward my house, holding onto that idea like a precious stone. I hung my hat on the hall rack and went straight to my study without bothering Cynthia. I could not risk being distracted from writing down my idea.

"Will, are you okay?" She shouted from the family room.

I quickly went into my study and wrote down "AA."

She was persistent. This time her voice expressed concern. "Will?"

"Yeah, yeah Sorry, but I had to write something down before I lost track of it. You know what that's like."

We both were losing our memories. I resorted to writing things down on sticky notes to remember any number of things while I was writing my book. It was difficult, if not impossible, to retain complex thoughts or ideas then, but the problem continued after I was done. I was getting old.

“I’ll be out in just a few minutes, honey. Give me a moment.”

I went online and searched for the AA website. If I felt like a recovering alcoholic, then they may have a solution. I found their website and began reading their Twelve Step Program. I made it to Step Seven and stopped, seeing that I had already made it this far. When I read through Steps Eight and Nine, I flinched.

The first seven steps were all introspective. They involved seeing and admitting my shortcomings and asking God to forgive them. Johann and Lena helped me do that. Steps Eight and Nine, however, required that I step outside of my thoughts and begin acting upon them. I had exercised my mind for the past five years. Now, I had to begin exercising my heart.

Step Eight involved making “*a list of all the people we have harmed and become willing to make amends to them all.*” Step Nine required a “*readiness to take consequences of our past,*” taking “*responsibility for the well-being of others,*” and making “*a vigorous attempt to repair the damage.*”

My heart responded to this prescriptive medicine. I not only decided to stop reading and undertake these steps but also to write about my progress in doing so. While the first book came from my mind’s eye, this second book would be a sequel of sorts, written from the heart.

I went back to quickly read through Steps Ten and Eleven. They also seemed achievable. However, the Twelfth Step made me pause. It referenced that I would achieve “a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps.” Would a “spiritual awakening” dispel the “darkness lurking inside” and allow me to find fulfillment?

As it turns out, it took me less than a year to complete Steps Eight through Eleven. However, nothing turned out as expected. As for Step Twelve, I was certain how that would turn out.

Chapter 9: The List

I spent the rest of the day fretting over what to tell Cynthia about writing a sequel. She wasn't happy about all the time spent writing the first one and never read it, probably because of all the bad memories from my past. I wondered myself if it would be fair to put her through the process again? But I felt as if there was no choice. I decided to speak with her later in the day, shortly before sunset. The sky would be clear and offer up a beautiful red- orange sunset spread across the mountains in the distance.

It was late in the afternoon when I went outside to light the firepit on the patio. I came back into the house to grab a bottle of wine, two empty glasses, and then called her to join me outside. She came out in her long, plaid flannel nightgown and slippers. She seemed to be in a good mood. "So what's the occasion, Will? This is unusual, but nice."

"Well, I have to talk to you about something."

"Oh, no." She sat down and eyed me carefully as I poured her a glass of wine and raised mine to hers. "What's going on?"

"Cheers. Well, it's about the book. I received several good reviews and I wanted to share one of them with you and hear what you think."

Her face brightened up. "Well, that's good news! I'm excited for you! Let's hear it."

"Okay. I'll read the whole thing and then we can talk about the part that concerns me. Here goes:
'Plot/Idea: This promising plot revolves around conversations between a Vietnam veteran, a World War II German veteran, and an Auschwitz survivor, exploring humankind's culpability for evil acts. An allegory about human nature, the book starts off strong ...

'Prose: ... the prose flows smoothly and allows for deeper insights—especially regarding the protagonist Will ...

‘Originality: The novel shows great promise, and using three distinctive characters, each possessing divergent perspectives and life experiences, is a gripping concept.

*‘Character/Execution: ... mimics the trauma aftereffects of war in the novel's partial access to its characters, particularly with Will; readers are allowed unpredictable glimpses into his struggles following his return from Vietnam — and only intermittent exposure to **the darkness lurking inside of him**. Johann is less relatable, but Lena is a riveting character: an Auschwitz survivor caught between righteous anger while desperately wanting to be at peace, she is a definite standout.’”*

“Well, that sounds pretty darn good, Will. What’s the problem with that?”

“The problem is that the critic wrote about *‘the darkness lurking inside of him.’* He’s writing about me. What do you think? Do I have some kind of darkness inside me?”

She looked at me with a deadpan expression. “You know, Will, I never had any desire to read that book. In fact, I was surprised that you even wrote it.”

She paused to grab her wine glass. She tilted her head back and took a long swallow from the wine glass, raising her other hand to signal she had more to say. “I agree with that critic. There is a dark side to you. You show it every time you get angry and lose your temper. It shows up whenever you get frustrated and start cursing and banging things. There’s an ugliness inside of you that makes you lash out at the world whenever you think something’s wrong. I don’t understand it. You can be so nice otherwise.”

I thought of how I recently blew up with Leon. He looked at me as if I had become unhinged as I railed against what was happening in our country. And then, after apologizing to Auggie for my behavior at the funeral, I remember walking away thinking that I couldn’t and wouldn’t ever apologize to his son, Friedrich. I still remembered how he had riled me up to the point where I almost got physical with him. Cynthia was right; even though the selfish urges from the beast were gone after the stroke, there was still something dark lingering inside.

She shook her head from side-to-side. “You have a real tough time letting anyone in, Will, even me. I don’t know how you can fix it unless you get some help.”

It was my turn to take a drink. It was a long pull as hers was. I finished, put the glass down, and looked up at the sunset and then down to the floor. It reminded me of the monastery. I was there shortly before my conversion to Catholicism and resting on a kneeler with my eyes closed when a vision came. The floor opened up beneath me, revealing a cobblestone well that I fell into. Every cobblestone that passed by me represented one of the many sins that I had committed in my life. There was nothing below but a pool of darkness.

“Will? Are you all-right?”

“Sure. I agree with you. After I read this, I knew there was more for me to do and that’s why I wanted to talk with you.” I paused again to gather my courage. “I have to go back and make amends, Cynthia.”

“What? To whom?” She looked concerned and unsettled as if she was afraid of what was coming.

“To Alicia and one other person. Her name is Keiko. She was just a kid when I last saw her, maybe seven or eight years old. I was stationed in Japan, living off-base, and she lived down the road from me. She visited me whenever I was off-duty. I became sort of like a father to her. Her real Dad was American, but he was long gone. And when I left Japan, I never said goodbye to her.”

“That’s terrible, Will. How could you?” She turned away from me as if she didn’t know who I was anymore.

“I know it was bad. But, you have to understand, I was burnt out by that time. I was headed back to the world after three years of hell. Everything I knew was left behind and everything I learned in the Corps was about to be gone. I didn’t know what to expect anymore. To be honest, I was scared and couldn’t bear to say goodbye to her. I couldn’t take anymore sadness. I didn’t have anything left in me.”

I paused to recall those feelings. They weren’t pleasant. “I couldn’t afford to let my emotions out, But I really cared about her. And I also loved living in Japan. In a way, I never wanted to leave.”

She turned back to face me with a blank expression. “You never told me anything about that.” Her face turned sad while she reached out for my hand.

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I never talked to anyone about that. I locked it up. I wasn’t proud about it and couldn’t deal with it.”

“But what about Alicia. Do you really want to open that can of worms?”

Cynthia knew the bare minimum about Alicia before we were married. She knew how and why I left.

“Well, I think I need to, but I don’t quite know how to approach her, much less find her.” I drained my glass and set it down on the table. “I hope you understand.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think I do, but it’s your call, Will. I trust your judgment, but please don’t get yourself into something you can’t handle.”

And then my thoughts turned back to Friedrich. Maybe I should just swallow my pride and apologize to him as well. After all, I did upset him at his grandfather’s funeral. I think Johann and Auggie might appreciate that if I did so.