

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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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 steelworker but a carpenter at heart. In his spare time, he built whirligigs 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 look down its length to see if it was straight and not warped. He would bring it down to check for knotholes and then look 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. If they were bad, he either stepped out of their way or if that wasn't possible, took the blows. Either way, I never saw him make a huge fuss. Things were just what they were. No more. No less.

He was drafted into the Army on December 7, 1917, one month after the Armistice. The government authorized the draft on May 18, 1917. He was probably one among the 2.8 million drafted. He was twenty-one years old at the time. He served two years, was promoted to sergeant, and was honorably 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 descended from English settlers who had come to America four hundred years earlier. Like them, he kept things simple by living and marrying within his own kind. My father broke the mold when he married my mother, a German woman whose family came to America in the mid-1800s. Unlike Thomas, I had a terribly complex life that got increasingly worse until a stroke hit me when I was forty-nine.

The complexity left me after that, but the detritus of my past lay all around me. It took seventeen years of muddling through the shambles without any purpose until I found some semblance of peace with Johann. He was a previously unknown, distant relative of my mother. That was in 2017. I had just crawled my way to retirement when I started researching my mother's family line and found him.

Johann was ninety years-old at the time and 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 and asked if he also fought in the Second World War. Rather than answering my question, he asked if I had served in the military. When I replied that I was in the Marines during the Vietnam conflict, he opened up and told me he was in the Waffen-SS.

When I heard that, I got ready to leave. However, his next remarks pulled me back into the conversation. He said that we shared certain similarities, all of which led to our fighting for two different countries in two different wars

stained by war crimes. His theory intrigued me and brought me back for several more visits to learn more.

We met five more times over the next several months. He became like a father to me as he listened and helped me deal with my past. He taught me about human nature as we explored what drove our countries to war and into committing war crimes. Together, we plumbed the depths of our shared history to understand the course of our lives. During the one-hour trips to and from his assisted living facility, I wrestled in silence with the complexities of my past. I struggled with untangling the knots of my past transgressions to find a way forward, a purpose in life.

It was during the sixth meeting when we finally reconciled with our pasts and found peace. We went outside afterwards to get some fresh air. We sat on our favorite bench, closed our eyes, and let the sun's warmth envelop us. When it was time to leave, I reached over to wake him only to find he had passed away. It was a hard loss. It had been a long time since I felt so close to someone. He had become like a father to me and now he was gone. The enormous sense of loss overwhelmed me. It felt familiar, but it was from a long time ago. I couldn't dwell on remembering when it happened or who was involved. All I could think of was my time with Johann. And now he, like all those others, fell into the dark, bottomless well inside of me.

When I arrived home, I told my wife, Cynthia, about Johann's death, and how a fellow resident who survived Auschwitz overcame her past to reconcile with him. She was

moved and then I asked her to forgive my past, which she did. And for the next few days, life was simple and peaceful.

A day or two later, Johann's son, August, invited me to the funeral. I first met August during my fourth meeting with Johann. He was devoted to his father. He went by "Auggie" and participated in our discussion. He enthusiastically supported each point made by his father and he, like me, learned something about human nature that day.

I accepted his invitation and took Cynthia. It was well-attended. The nursing home brought several of his friends from there to the service including Leon and Lena who both took part in my conversations with Johann.

I saw Auggie standing outside with the minister and waved. Cynthia and I walked over to meet Lena and Leon. I introduced everyone and Cynthia listened gracefully as we spoke about our time spent with Johann. When it was time for the service to begin, we walked inside with Cynthia whispering to me that she was finally glad to meet everyone I had been seeing for the past few months.

After the service, the family had a dinner prepared in the church hall. Everyone broke into groups and headed in that direction. Auggie came over to us and introduced his wife, Patricia, and their son, Friedrich, and his wife, Elaine. Friedrich, unlike Auggie, was no chip off 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 when I heard his first name; it was the same as my great-grandfather's. I was even more surprised by the fact that I had never heard about him from either Johann or Auggie.

While the ladies began chatting among themselves, I asked Friedrich what he did for a living. I got more than I expected both in terms of volume and presentation. He came across as a classic intellectual, using words you would never hear outside of a college campus. He was a professor of history at Ithaca College, which was a few miles from Johann's nursing home. I looked over occasionally at Auggie to see his reaction. He appeared proud of his son, but there seemed to be a level of detachment between them.

Auggie cut into the monologue as soon as the opportunity presented itself. "Friedrich, you should know that Willi is a distant relative and became good friends with your grandfather"

Friedrich looked at his father and then me with the same expression of disdain. Auggie, I learned from Johann, was a machinist. When he nodded without a reply, 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 engaged me on that topic. 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 as they steamrolled over them to get what they wanted. It was all so horrible. 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 because of what he said about his own grandfather. “Well, you should know that your grandfather apologized to Lena before he died, and that Lena told me he was a real *mensch* after he died. 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 was never a Nazi. He said he only believed in justice for his country. He tried to study all the events that led to the war. And do you know what else he said, Friedrich?"

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

I set my jaw and fired back a reply. "Well, I'll tell you. He said Lena was right when she said Germany was blinded by pride to the suffering of others; they struggled hard to overcome all the hardships imposed on them by the Allies after the First World War and when they prevailed, they lost their way as God-loving people."

Auggie sensed the rising tension and quickly intervened to tone things down. "Friedrich, isn't that wonderful that your grandfather said that? Isn't that how you approach this subject in your classes on the Weimar Republic?"

Friedrich cast his eyes back to us and set himself into a posture of authority by crossing his arms across his chest. "Thank you, Father. Let me tell you both 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 follow a 'special path' that led to Nazism? I take them through all the nineteenth-century wars that led

to the unification of Germany, then 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 events that happened during that time which led to the disaster that followed. I give them everything they need to answer that opening question.”

Auggie was beaming, but I wasn't. It sounded like Friedrich was spoon-feeding his students the answer to his question. I recalled how bitter Johann was over the end of the First World War and its tragic aftermath. I wondered how the good professor felt about that. “What about how the Allies treated Germany after the First World War, Friedrich? Do you discuss how they pushed Germany onto that ‘special path?’ Do you discuss how they deceived the Germans into signing the Armistice by promising to include Wilson's Fourteen Points in the Versailles Peace Treaty and then how they dropped those promised Fourteen Points and replaced them with severe terms and then extorted Germany into signing that Peace Treaty by continuing the naval blockade and threatening invasion?”

I gave him a long, cold stare then looked away. I felt Johann's presence; it was gently reminding me to rein in my temper.

Auggie swiveled his head back and forth between us. He looked shell-shocked by the interchange. “Please, gentlemen, let's not get into politics here. After all, this is my father's funeral.”

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 the latest findings in his research. You always left me behind as if I didn’t count.”

His voice became louder and louder until we noticed our wives were looking at us as well as other people. But that didn’t stop him. He leaned toward his father and whispered bitterly. “And, you know something, Father, whenever I tried to share what I heard from you and Grandfather with others, I was ridiculed.” He paused until everyone went back to what they were doing and then grabbed his father’s arm. “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. His face wavered between sadness and anger; it looked conflicted, as if he didn’t know how to respond to his son. Friedrich kept staring at him, awaiting a response.

It was my turn to break the tension. “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 act 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 Friedrich over carefully. His face exhibited little to no character. A bowl of pablum came to mind, soft and malleable.

“What I mean is can’t you stop justifying and supporting your father’s views on Nazism? Can’t you see it was antisemitic, racist, and nationalistic, not to mention militaristic? This has long been a big barrier between us, even when you didn’t talk about it. I’m tired of traipsing around the bush like this with you.”

My impressions of pablum were replaced by one of petulance. I almost stepped in, but Auggie quickly 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 all of that led to the Second World War and its consequences. And I think the German people understand that and quietly 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* seem to 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 my students learn."

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. Unlike the government before them, the party had a concrete program to rebuild the country and the German people enthusiastically supported it to regain their place in the world. And they were successful!"

Friedrich looked ready to explode with a verbal salvo, so I quickly finished my point before he did. "From what I have heard from your grandfather and have read most Germans were neither racist nor antisemitic. There's no doubt that key leaders in the party were, but the vast majority of Germans, from what I've read, weren't. And besides, racism and antisemitism were visible in the US and in other countries as well."

Friedrich reared back and pointed his finger at me. "You miss my point, Mr. Barnes. We're talking about Nazi Germany. Hitler and his cronies felt the German people were Aryan, superior to everyone else! And unlike those other countries you mentioned, they went to war to take what they wanted. And you should also know that those Nazi leaders profited terribly from their people's sacrifices both from rebuilding their country and from the war as well."
"

This guy had swallowed the Kool-Aid prepared by mainstream, post-war historians. “Wait a minute, Professor. You can’t make those statements without considering those other countries and what they did to foster those racist feelings. Look at America’s track record, for example. We treated Native Americans and African-Americans just as badly. And was Germany nationalistic? Sure! But a lot of other countries were as well during the Depression. They tried to rally their people around the flag to protect their economy from other competitors; they urged their citizens to buy domestic and imposed trade tariffs. What about militarism? 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 so despite their signing the Peace Treaty that obliged them to. Germany tired of attending all the disarmament talks while the arms race continued so they stopped attending and started rearming.”

Auggie jumped in. “Willi’s right. You can’t throw out the baby with the bathwater, 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 show more respect and 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 resentment or hatred lay buried within him. Was it directed toward his father's social class? 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 my last visit to Johann.

One of the last things he said to me was, “We shouldn't let any system separate us from God or from each other.” He felt all wars began because people didn't trust in God to provide them with justice. Instead, they took matters into their own hands and that's when conflict begins. And, over time, neither side wins; the defeated party seethes with hatred and resentment and seeks justice from the winning side. He left me with that Truth.

Intellectually, I understood that Truth. God will eventually sort things out. The wicked always reap what they have sowed. But, emotionally, I couldn't abide the Friedrichs of this world. They either ignore that truth or distort it to suit their own needs. I was still rankled by his views and attitude. He was teaching this swill to our kids and lambasting his father with the same odious mix to get back at him and his grandfather. It was all I could do to stop myself from grabbing him by the throat to make him shut up.

I walked up to the women and told them that their husbands would be back momentarily. Cynthia eyed me quizzically as we took our leave and headed to our car.

Part II: The First Pass

2023

*“And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever;
they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast
and his image ...”*

Revelation 14:11

Chapter 8: The Beginning of the End

Despite the best efforts of my agent, none of the mainstream publishers would touch the manuscript. It felt like a pervasive knee-jerk reaction to anything that ran contrary to the traditional view of Nazi Germany. Fortunately, she persevered and found a niche publisher.

The book received warm reviews from readers and critics. One critic, however, stopped me cold when he noted a minor flaw in the main character, whose life was 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.”*

His last few words hit like a gut-punch. I had just spent the last five years wrestling with that darkness and now this critic saw otherwise. But he was right. It continued to manifest itself after Johann died; first, it emerged with my angry outburst toward Friedrich; then, the recent flare up with Leon; and then, the lack of sensitivity I showed toward Lena. She had languished alone in her wheelchair for five years, as she waited for someone whom she considered a son.

There was no doubt about it. A lingering darkness still lay within me. An imbalance existed between what I thought about myself and how I acted, between my mind and my heart. I thought about that for several days until the word *Praxis* came to mind. I first heard that term used in a textbook during a Political Science class in college. It was

Paulo Freire's book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He used the term to describe the dialectic that needs to exist between a theory and its practical application in order to evolve from a state of oppression into what he called an "epoch" of liberation.

An epoch evolved through "*a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites striving toward their fulfillment.*"¹ Fulfillment, in his book, was the underprivileged overcoming their legacy of colonial oppression in South America. I had been through a similar "*complex of ideas ... in dialectical interaction*" with Lena, Johann, Leon and Auggie to overcome my sense of oppression. And while my mind may have finally realized a sense of "fulfillment" by coming to grips with my past, my heart apparently had not. There was still a lingering anger that threatened my peace and the peace of others. Did it come from the "*lingering darkness*" inside me that the critic referred to? Was it some sort of stain that blocked the light coming from a complete fulfillment? Was it preventing me from reaching that "epoch" of liberation? And, if that's what it was, how could I ever get rid of it?

I was beginning to feel like an alcoholic struggling with recovery, knowing I was only one drink away from a total relapse. I was walking a few days later when an idea came to me. I turned around and made a beeline to home. I didn't want to lose that thought and held onto it like a precious stone. As soon I arrived home, I hung my hat on the hall rack

and went straight to my study without saying anything to Cynthia. I couldn't afford to be distracted.

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

I quickly sat down at my desk and wrote “AA” on a stick note.

She was persistent. This time her voice was louder and 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 short-term memories. I resorted to writing things down on sticky notes to remind me of any number of things while I concentrated on writing my book. It was difficult, if not impossible, to break away and still retain complex thoughts or ideas that came up. We were 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. Since I felt like a recovering alcoholic, it may offer a solution. I found the website and began reading AA's Twelve Step Program. I made it up to Step Eight and paused, realizing that I had already accomplished the prior seven steps. When I read through Steps Eight and Nine, I stopped again and flinched.

The first seven steps were all introspective. They involved seeing and admitting my shortcomings and asking God to forgive them. Johann and Lena had helped me to 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 six years and found a conscious fulfillment. Now, I had to begin exercising my heart by reaching out to others to find some sort of total fulfillment.

Step Eight required me to make “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,” to take “responsibility for the well-being of others,” and to make “a vigorous attempt to repair the damage.”

I felt my heart open in response. I decided to not only undertake these steps but also to write about it. It would be a sequel to the first book. Whereas the first one came from my mind, the second would come from my heart.

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

As it turned out, it took less than a year for me to complete Steps Eight through Eleven. However, nothing turned out as I expected. As far as reaching Step Twelve, I knew what was waiting for me.

Chapter 9: The List

The rest of the day was spent fretting over what to tell Cynthia about writing a sequel. She wasn't happy with my writing the first book and she never read it, probably because it involved bad memories from our past. I wondered if it would be fair to put her through the process again? But I felt there was no choice. I had to do it. I dreaded telling her, so I put it off until later in the day, shortly before sunset. The sky would be clear, underscored by a beautiful amber sunset spread across the horizon. I wanted to soften the blow by setting the mood to be as mellow as possible.

It was late in the afternoon when I went out to the patio and lit the firepit. I went back into the house, grabbed a bottle of wine, two glasses, and then called Cynthia to join me outside. She emerged 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? Are you okay?"

"Well, first of all, cheers to you!" She smiled and we clinked our glasses together. "Well, it's about the book. I received several good reviews and I want to share one with you and get your opinion."

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.” I read her most of it: *“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. You should be pleased.”

“I am. With most of it, but the critic wrote that Will had a *‘darkness lurking inside of him.’* Will is me. He’s writing about me. Do you think I have some kind of darkness inside of 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 you even wrote it.”

She paused to grab her wine glass. She tilted her head back and took a long swallow while raising her other hand telling me to wait. She had more to say. “I agree. 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 whatever you think is wrong in this world. I don’t understand it. You can be so nice otherwise.”

I thought of my recent blow up with Leon. He looked 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 remembered thinking that I couldn’t and wouldn’t ever apologize to his son, Friedrich. I still remember wanting to choke him so he would shut up. Cynthia was right; there was something dark inside of me.

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

It was my turn to take a drink. I took a long pull, then looked up at the sunset and lowered my head to gaze at the floor. It reminded me of the monastery. I went there with the other confirmands shortly before my conversion to

Catholicism. I was 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 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?”

“Sorry, I was thinking about what you said. I have to agree with you. After reading this, I knew I had more to do and that’s why I want to talk with you about it.” I paused again to summon my courage. “I have to go back and make amends, Cynthia.”

“What?” She looked concerned and unsettled. “To whom?”

“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 and living off-base. She lived in the neighborhood and 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. When I left Japan, I never said goodbye to her. And I realize now how hurt she must have been.”

“That’s terrible, Will. How could you do that to a little girl who felt that way about 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. I was headed back to the world after spending three years in hell. Everything and everybody I knew from

my life before the Corps was gone, left behind. And everything and everyone I knew in the Corps was about to be gone. I didn't know what to expect anymore. And to be honest, I was scared. I couldn't face saying goodbye to her. I couldn't take anymore sadness. There wasn't anything left in me."

I paused to recall those feelings. They weren't pleasant. "I couldn't afford to let any more feelings out. But I really did care about her. And I loved living in Japan and leaving there also tore me apart. In a way, I never wanted to leave."

She turned back to face me with a sympathetic, but worried expression. "You never told me anything about that. I wish you had." 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 of it and the fact that I 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 only how and why I had left her.

"Well, I think I need to, but I'm not sure 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. You know I'm here for you, right, honey?"

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