

Part Six: Un Mundo en Guerra / A World at War

Chapter Fifty-Six

"Los Helados", named for their delicious homemade ice cream, was known for serving some of the best food in Ybor City and West Tampa. Fernando and Giuseppina didn't mind waiting for a table. Though it was a Tuesday afternoon, the dining room was filled to capacity. It was two days before Thanksgiving, 1941, and Fernando relished this yearly tradition. He would work half the day on Tuesday, and not return to work until the following Monday. He and Giuseppina would meet at "Los Helados" for lunch, and then they would shop for the food for their yearly Thanksgiving celebration, which had now become legendary. The last three years had been especially festive since Luciano would come down from Gainesville. At Giuseppina's insistence, since Luciano had been away at school, the holiday was now combined with celebrating Fernando's birthday. She cherished the special bond between her husband and her son, and this was an opportunity for Luciano to participate in honoring his father.

After eating more than they had intended, Fernando and Giuseppina walked two blocks over to La Séptima. Their first stop was "La Montañesa", arguably the best butcher shop in all of Tampa. Within

the Spanish community they were legendary for their traditional Spanish sausages such as chorizo, morcilla, and butifarra. Giuseppina had mastered the art of "fusion" cuisine for Thanksgiving, combining the traditional American foods with a few Spanish and Sicilian side dishes. After several more stops along La Séptima, they drove north along 15th Street. The choosing of the turkeys marked the traditional end of the food shopping. Their favorite poultry store actually had no official name. It was a combination hardware store, animal feed store, and poultry store, known among the locals as "La Pollería" ("The Poultry"). Located near El Barrio Candamo, the owner was a Spaniard known simply as "El Marqués" ("The Marquis"). No one seemed to know his actual name, nor did it matter. A man of few words, El Marqués exuded an air of superiority, almost to the point of arrogance. He was, however, indisputably the "Marquis of Poultry". Giuseppina wouldn't dream of buying her poultry anywhere else, especially the Thanksgiving turkeys. Within 35 minutes of choosing two of the best-looking live birds, Fernando and Giuseppina placed them, now plucked and dressed, in their new Frigidaire refrigerator. Fernando's next assignment was to stay as far away from the kitchen as possible as Giuseppina began the almost incessant cooking for the next 48 hours.

Luciano would be arriving at 7:30 p.m. that evening by train. Fernando was to pick him up at Tampa's Union Station. The afternoon was cool

enough that Fernando decided to build a fire in the fireplace, the first of this Florida winter. As he gathered some logs and kindling wood from the storage shed in the backyard, his thoughts wandered back to San Roman and his childhood. One of his favorite tasks was to gather "leña" (kindling wood) for the almost continuous fire that burned in the kitchen of his childhood home. Walking through the large kitchen, Fernando was sure that Pina was oblivious to his presence. Noticing that there was no available counter space remaining in the kitchen, Fernando remembered another yearly tradition. On the way home from the train station, Luciano and he were to stop at "Cafetería Mercedes" and bring home dinner. He smiled to himself, amazed and pleased at the passion with which Giuseppina expressed her love for her friends and family through food.

Fernando's planning had paid off. The previous spring, Fernando helped Ignacio and his sons remove several large oaks in order to expand their barn. His reward was enough firewood to last more Florida winters than he had left in his life. Wary of the summer rains and humidity, Fernando had meticulously stored the oak logs well off the ground and protected from rain. Within minutes the dry wood had produced a beautiful fire. Fernando laid on the couch, hoping to take a brief nap. His thoughts again drifted back to San Roman as an occasional downdraft filled the room with the smell of burning wood. As he began to drift off to sleep, he thought of his older brother,

Pelayo. Eventually, the International Red Cross had succeeded in obtaining information about his family in Spain. Pelayo had been killed during the Asturias Offensive of the Spanish Civil War in the fall of 1937. It was Pelayo who had shown Fernando how to build a good fire. The smell of burning wood would always remind Fernando of Pelayo, and the pain and suffering that wars inflict. Beneath the veneer of the good life he was enjoying lay the fear that the foolishness of men would soon engulf the entire world in turmoil. The war in Europe had been raging for two years, with no end in sight. He thought of Luciano, Rafael and so many other young men whose lives might soon be in danger. His mind racing, Fernando decided that sleep was not possible at the moment. He turned on the radio to listen to the NBC evening news at 5:00 p.m. The signature three gongs, "N...B...C", helped divert his thoughts away from Spain and Pelayo. Reality came back to haunt him as the first news item was read. Tensions between Japan and the United States were quickly escalating. In an attempt to halt Japanese expansionism in Asia, the U.S.A. had imposed a trade embargo against Japan, pushing that island nation to the point of desperation. Fernando switched stations. Raising the volume, "Big Band" music filled the air as he rushed into the kitchen. Pulling Giuseppina away from the large wooden worktable, Fernando began coaxing her into their version of the jitterbug. They began to laugh as Fernando pulled her close to him, hugging and kissing her. Their laughter increased as they saw that

Fernando's shirt and pants were white with flour. Fernando gave Pina another hug, then showered and changed his clothes.

"Papa, aquí!"

"Dad, here!"

Luciano's voice could easily be heard above the din of the busy train station. As he ran toward Fernando, the proud father, for the first time, realized his son was no longer a boy, but an impressive young man. Now twenty years old, Luciano bore a striking resemblance to Pelayo, his uncle that died while defending the Spanish Republic. Father and son embraced.

"Lou! Que tal, hombre! How are you doing?"

Rafael, speaking in that combination of Spanish and English so typical of his generation, warmly greeted Luciano. It was the day after Thanksgiving, and the Prendes family was hosting their friends and family with a "left-overs" party. As the women were organizing the food onto large buffet tables, the men gathered on the porch and around an outdoor fire. The conversations were largely centered around the increasingly tense international geopolitical situation. Much to Giuseppina's dismay, Luciano was obsessed with the possibility of

the U.S.A. entering the ongoing war. As a student at the University of Florida, he was required to participate in the Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC) program for a minimum of his first two years. He had elected to join the Army Air Corp program and voluntarily extended his participation to his current third year. He found himself drawn to the military culture.

Luciano and Rafael were sitting next to each other as they ate their lunch. Giuseppina and Sofia were seated nearby. Luciano continued rambling on, telling Rafael that it was inevitable that the U.S.A. would enter the war and that they should be prepared to volunteer to fight for their country. His recruitment effort was suddenly loudly interrupted by his mother.

"Luciano! Basta! Nun parra chiù de guerra!"

Giuseppina, normally reserved, yelled at her son in Sicilian. She told him that this was enough talk about war. After a few seconds of silence, Fernando went over to Giuseppina and hugged her. They went into the kitchen, followed by Sofia.

"Es que no quiero oír nada más sobre guerra. Ya perdimos a tu hermano, y no quiero perder otro hijo por las tonterías de hombres!"

Giuseppina, still upset, reiterated that she didn't want to hear anything else about war. They had already lost Fernando's brother, and she didn't want to lose another son because of the foolishness of men. The pain of losing her baby son, Gaetano, would always be with Giuseppina.

Luciano had come into the kitchen. He hugged his mother and promised her there would be no more talk about war.

Giuseppina regained her composure and returned to the dining area. Several other mothers approached her, sharing their mutual concerns. The festivities continued with no further discussions about war or the international political situation.

Luciano kept his promise to his mother for the rest of the holiday weekend. On Sunday, Luciano returned to Gainesville.

As usual, Fernando was concerned about being late.

"Pina, por favor. Ya son las once y cuarto y la comida empieza a las doce. Tenemos que reunir con Ignacio y Sofía a las doce menos cuarto."

Fernando reminded his wife that the lunch started at noon, and it was already 11:15 a.m. He also reminded her that they were to meet the Prendeses at 11:45 a.m.

It was Sunday, exactly one week after Luciano had returned to Gainesville after his Thanksgiving break. The Centro Español de Tampa was celebrating the 50th anniversary of its founding, which was on December 21, 1891. In order to avoid conflicting with Christmas festivities, the society scheduled the celebration two weeks early. The Centro Español had two clubhouses, one in Ybor City and one in West Tampa. A banquet and dance were scheduled today at both clubhouses. Fernando and Giuseppina agreed to join Ignacio and Sofía at the celebration in West Tampa.

The Centro Español clubhouse in West Tampa was on the corner of Howard Avenue and Cherry Street. Designed in the Spanish Moorish architectural style, it was an imposing three story brick structure, and considered one of the most beautiful buildings in Tampa. Fernando and Giuseppina arrived at the clubhouse a few minutes before Sofia and Ignacio. Surprised at the large turnout, Fernando suggested that Pina enter and hold four seats together. Within minutes, the Prendeses arrived. The banquet was being held in the casino area on the main floor. Tables had been placed end on end to form half a

dozen very long rows. Locating Giuseppina, they took their seats next to her.

For the next two hours they feasted on seemingly endless Spanish delicacies. The meal was catered by Las Novedades restaurant. Fernando and Ignacio reminisced about Fernando's first meal, which was also his first Cuban sandwich, at the now famous restaurant. This was two days after Fernando arrived from Havana, 41 years ago. They agreed that it really did seem like yesterday.

After a few more swigs of Anis del Mono, the Spanish anise seed liqueur, the two couples rose to their feet and began following the crowd. Ascending the beautiful marble staircase which led upstairs to the ballroom, Fernando could hear the strains of the popular Spanish paso doble ("two step"), "Que Viva España" ("May Spain Live"). This popular song had become the unofficial "anthem" for Spanish fiestas in Tampa, usually played at the start and end of festivities. Not wanting to miss the traditional first dance, the crowd hurried up the stairs into the large ballroom.

As couples two-stepped in the traditional large moving circle, the music suddenly stopped. Celestino Torrens, a member of the board of directors of Centro Español, was on the small stage. He held a

microphone in one hand. He raised and lowered his other hand, signaling for silence. He began to speak.

"Estimados damas y caballeros. Tengo un anuncio de gran y grave importancia. Hace como veinte minutos que anunciaron por la radio que las fuerzas armadas de Japón han atacado la base naval de Los Estados Unidos en Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. En este momento sigue el ataque, y los reportajes dicen que hay una gran pérdida de vida."

Mr. Torrens said that he had to make an announcement of great and grave importance. Twenty minutes earlier, a radio announcement said that the armed forces of Japan had attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. At this very moment, the attack was continuing, and reports indicate a heavy loss of life. Shouts and cries of anguish, confusion, outrage and disbelief filled the ballroom, then quickly subsided.

Giuseppina, grasping her face with both hands, yelled "Luciano! No!" Most of the guests simply froze in place, blank faces staring at each other. Others scrambled down the stairs and began gathering their belongings. Marina Ramirez, one of Sofia's friends, was screaming hysterically. As Marina's husband and Sofia tried to comfort her, she explained that her younger brother had written her two weeks prior

from Hawaii. He was a midshipman assigned to the "USS Arizona", and currently based at Pearl Harbor.

Fernando and Ignacio did their best to comfort their wives. Though no one spoke the words, it was clear that this meant war for the United States. The two couples slowly descended that beautiful marble staircase. The casino area was now almost empty. They gathered their personal items and drove home in stunned silence.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

Immediately after returning home, Giuseppina asked Fernando to telephone Luciano in Gainesville. Fernando tried to assure her that their son hadn't enlisted in the military. Giuseppina insisted, already having called Carmela and Pilar. Her maternal instincts told her to check on her brood. Rumors of an imminent Japanese invasion of California were causing near hysteria across the country. Fernando, secretly concerned as well, relented.

Luciano assured his parents that he was fine and had no plans to join the military, at least not at the moment. He reminded them that the U.S. was still a neutral country and perhaps negotiations could avert a war, though both he and Fernando knew this was not a possibility.

By Wednesday, December 10, 1941, the U.S.A. was formally at war with Japan, Germany and Italy. Life in Tampa and the entire country was changing by the hour. The war became more personal a few days later. Sofia called Giuseppina and told her that Marina Ramirez' younger brother, Francisco, had been killed during the Pearl Harbor attack.

“Apaguen las luces! Lights out! Apaguen las luces!”

Five days into the war, Tampa was having its first blackout drill. Cities along the Pacific, Gulf, and Atlantic coasts would soon be required to extinguish lights or drape blackout curtains on windows after sunset. Rumors abounded of German U-boats in the Gulf of Mexico. It was becoming difficult to distinguish among truth, fact, and rumor. What was certain was that change was coming, and coming fast.

It was clear that one of the few benefits of the war was a rapidly improving economy. While the cigar industry remained a major part of Tampa's economy, the city had begun to diversify in the late 1930s. Tampa had benefited from the industrial base established by the cigar industry. MacDill Air Force base had been established in 1939, in anticipation of the European war eventually involving the U.S.A. Similarly, Drew Field, an Army Air Corp base, had been established in

Northwest Tampa, adjacent to Ignacio's dairy farm. The Port of Tampa had been expanded with the addition of the McCloskey Shipyard which was building concrete boats for the United States Department of War. Tampa, like many other U.S. cities, was becoming a beehive of activity because of the war.

As the initial shock of Pearl Harbor subsided, a strange sense of a new normalcy took root. The rationing of certain items, such as gasoline, sugar, and meat, also served to unite the citizenry. People were bonding through a sense of a common purpose. Unfortunately, trying times also provide opportunities for the unscrupulous. Within days of mandated rationing, a black market emerged. Rationed items obtained through theft and other means could be purchased for hugely inflated prices. Fernando was reminded of the bribe they paid in Spain to obtain their transit papers. He avoided cynicism by focusing on fact that the vast majority of people were doing the right thing.

Santa Lucia, December 13, fell on the Saturday after the Pearl Harbor attack. Giuseppina and her family decided to have a more subdued celebration as a sign of respect toward the fallen Americans. Because Gaetano and Sebastiana were in their early 80s, the yearly celebration was now hosted by the Suárez family. Carmela and Pilar, Giuseppina's daughters, along with Rosa, her older sister, spent the day helping Giuseppina prepare the simple menu. Rosa had never

married and lived with her parents, helping to care for them. Luciano would be arriving for the Christmas holiday break that afternoon. Fernando, sitting in the living room, was reading "La Gaceta" and listening to the radio. He could hear the women speaking as they worked in the kitchen. He had become familiar enough with Sicilian to understand the gist of what was being said. Rosa asked Giuseppina if it would be possible to send Luciano to live in Cuba. Pilar said something about Gaetano's brother who was living in Argentina. Lowering the volume on the radio, Fernando put the newspaper down and focused on the continuing conversation. It was clear that the women were discussing ways that Luciano might avoid being drafted into the armed forces. Fernando considered going into the kitchen and confronting the women but decided against it. He admitted to himself that he had been having similar thoughts throughout the past week. On the other hand, he viewed the war as essentially a continuation of the Spanish Civil War, and an opportunity to finally rid Europe of the evils of Fascism. As patriotic Americans, they would do their part to assist their country.

Luciano's train was due to arrive at 4:30p.m. Though gasoline rationing was not yet mandatory, the authorities were strongly recommending voluntarily curtailing the consumption of the fuel, until the logistical details could be implemented. Fernando decided that rather than drive to the train station, he would take the streetcar. It

would be good to “practice” for the inevitable. He said goodbye to the women and walked five blocks south to Columbus Dr., formerly known as Michigan Ave. There he caught a streetcar to Nebraska Ave, where he transferred to another line which took him to Union Station.

By 5:30 p.m. Luciano was in the kitchen kissing and hugging his mother, sisters, and aunt. Fernando had forewarned his son about the conversation he had heard, and urged him to dodge any questions about his future plans concerning the military. As Luciano climbed the stairs to take his luggage to his bedroom, Fernando followed him. As Luciano was unpacking, Fernando closed the bedroom door behind him.

“Hijo, ya sabes lo que vas a hacer? Te han dicho algo?”

Fernando asked his son if he knew what he was going to do, and had they told him anything.

Luciano understood exactly what his father was asking. He replied that nothing was certain, but the War Department was apparently talking to the Air Corp ROTC about developing a special program for promising students. Those selected would be offered a direct commission as an officer. This would include the opportunity to compete for coveted pilot training positions. Luciano emphasized that

this was only speculation, and nothing was certain, or imminent. He told Fernando that he was almost certain he would finish his third year of college. Luciano promised he would not share any of this with anyone else. Fernando gave him a hug.

The Santa Lucia celebration went well. Giuseppina, now active in her neighborhood church, Our Lady of Perpetual Help (OLPH), invited Father Amorelli, one of the priests assigned to OLPH, to join them. A native Sicilian, he related well to the Ybor City community. He offered a special prayer for peace, while urging all present to remain loyal to their adopted country. Initially, Fernando was a bit puzzled by this, but then it dawned on him that Italy and Spain were two of the three major Fascist countries in Europe. He also wondered if Spain would be entering the war as an ally of Germany and Italy. In the last several days there had been numerous reports of anti-Japanese violence against many Japanese-Americans on the Pacific coast of the U.S., many of whom were American citizens. He wondered if this prejudice might eventually extend to Americans of German or Italian ancestry. Clearly, his family considered themselves to be Americans first, but perhaps there were those who felt conflicting loyalties. The myriad complications and implications of this war were only just beginning to present themselves.

Above the din of the Santa Lucia celebration, Luciano, talking with Rafael, heard the phone ringing. He raced over to answer.

“Hola. Quien hablo? Fernando?”

The caller, obviously speaking American-accented and incorrect Spanish, asked if he were speaking to Fernando. Luciano replied.

“Hi. I speak English. Would you like to speak with Fernando?”

The caller replied back.

“Is this Luciano? Luciano, this is Aaron Winchester! Do you remember me?”

Luciano, hardly believing his ears, could not contain his excitement.

“Captain Winchester, is that you? I can’t believe this! Where are you, sir? Rafael, get over here!”

Rafael, now standing next to Luciano, shared in the conversation, as Luciano positioned the telephone receiver between them.

“Phoenix’ is in Tampa for some needed repairs. As I promised you all five years ago, I’m calling with the hope that we can see each other while I’m here. Would that be possible? Wow, you must have a party going on. I know it’s the holidays and all, but....”

Luciano, interrupting Captain Winchester, explained that there was a pre-Christmas celebration going on. He apologized for the noise, assuring the captain that they would insist on seeing him. The captain was staying at the Hotel Hillsboro in downtown Tampa. Luciano explained that he would call him back shortly after speaking to his father. Hanging up the phone, Luciano raced across the living room to Fernando. Fernando, sharing in his son’s excitement, found Giuseppina and explained. She suggested that they invite him for a traditional Sicilian Sunday afternoon dinner the next day.

Luciano quickly telephoned Captain Winchester and extended the invitation. Asking for assurance that it was not an inconvenience, he confessed that a home-cooked Sicilian meal sounded perfect. They agreed that Fernando and Luciano would pick him up at noon the next day.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

Captain Winchester hadn't changed much over the past five years. However, the captain wasn't able to say the same about Luciano. The first ten minutes of the reunion was spent convincing the captain that the imposing young man embracing him was, in fact, the same person as that then 14-year-old kid who would never leave the bridge of "The Phoenix". After several more minutes of hugging and reminiscing, the three men left the hotel.

When they entered the Suárez home, Captain Winchester was greeted as a returning hero. Assuming it would be a quiet lunch for four people, the captain was overwhelmed by the number of people he encountered. The entire Suárez and Prendes families, as well as Gaetano, Sebastiana, and Rosa were present. It was a quick and enjoyable introduction to a typical Ybor City family Sunday lunch.

"Por favor, deja que el capitán respire! Please, let the captain breathe!"

Luciano, seeking to rescue Aaron from the onslaught of hugs and kisses, reigned in the reception. Fernando led Captain Winchester through the kitchen and onto the large concrete patio in the back yard. Several long tables had been set up beneath a trellis adorned with vines. Luckily, the weather was perfect for an outdoor meal. Captain Winchester, Fernando, Ignacio, Luciano, and Rafael sat near each

other at one end of a table. Within minutes the almost endless platters of food began arriving from the kitchen.

The captain was enthralled by the warmth he felt. He confessed that while he loves his job, there are times he misses the stability of a family life. He was now almost 60 years old and was thinking of settling down somewhat. While in Tampa, he was made aware by his company of the possibility of a new work assignment. The company was bidding on a five-year contract to haul phosphate from the Port of Tampa to Valparaiso, Chile. The return voyage would import guano for processing into fertilizer in Tampa. The round trip would take almost one month, and he would have an entire month ashore between runs. Aaron accepted the assignment, as it fit in perfectly with his desire to "semi-retire". He had grown fond of Tampa during his brief stay and was considering making it his home.

Giuseppina and her sister Rosa were seated across from Captain Winchester, with Luciano sitting beside them. Though the two sisters had a limited understanding of English, Luciano did his best to translate the conversation into Sicilian for them. At one point, the captain, noticing Luciano's efforts, apologized to the women for unintentionally excluding them from the conversation. Through Luciano, they assured him that no offense was taken. He returned their smile, with a lingering gaze focused on Rosa.

"Pina and Rosa, this was one of the very best meals I've ever eaten, and I've enjoyed food in some very good restaurants in Italy! Thank you so very much for your hospitality."

After the meal, everyone settled in for a quiet afternoon of conversation and relaxation. The young children played on the swings Fernando had bought for them, with their mothers close by. Fernando's and Ignacio's grandchildren had bonded as close cousins, assuring that the bonds between the two families would continue. Rosa, Giuseppina and some of the other women were in the kitchen, cleaning up after the meal. The men remained at the lunch table, awaiting their coffee and dessert.

Captain Winchester, enjoying a Cuesta-Rey cigar offered to him by Fernando, glanced around him, smiling.

"This is a good life, gentlemen. I've enjoyed seeing so much of the world, but this is not bad either. I'm looking forward to having a place to call home. Fernando, is your sister-in-law a single woman? I hope my question isn't out of place."

Luciano, sensing that his father didn't quite understand the question, clarified it for him in Spanish. Fernando, looking somewhat surprised, replied that Rosa had never married, and was devoted to caring for

Gaetano and Sebastiana, her parents. The captain admitted that he felt drawn to Rosa and wondered if it would be appropriate to ask her out to dinner at some point. Fernando explained that Rosa had led a somewhat sheltered life, having had few, if any, contacts with men outside her family and close family friends. Captain Winchester asked how he might best approach the situation, especially with the language barrier. Fernando said he would speak with Giuseppina and ask her opinion. Fernando then briefly commented on the delicate nature of Sicilian men and their daughters. Captain Winchester, with a smile, thanked Fernando. Several hours later, Fernando and Luciano drove Captain Winchester back to his hotel. They agreed that they would see each other again very soon.

That evening, as Giuseppina was brushing her hair and preparing for bed, Fernando sat on the bed near her. Somewhat uncomfortably, he fumbled through several efforts to broach the subject of Captain Winchester's interest in Rosa. Pina, putting down her hairbrush, laughed and turned toward Fernando. Mercifully, she asked him if Aaron was interested in spending some time with her sister. Looking both relieved and surprised, Fernando confirmed her suspicions. Pina then confessed that he had spared her the awkwardness of bringing it up, saying that the attraction between them was obvious. She confessed that Rosa, while they were in the kitchen, had asked her whether Aaron was married. After sharing a laugh, they agreed they

would play the role of Cupid, and probably that of chaperones. Pina reminded her husband that the rigid rules of a proper Sicilian courtship still applied, regardless of the woman's age. If there was to be a courtship, it would have to be a proper one. Gaetano and Sebastiana would insist upon it.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

The next day, Fernando called Captain Winchester and told him that he was invited to join Giuseppina and him for dinner at the Licata home on Wednesday, two days later. He also assured him that all was well, and that Rosa was very receptive to his overtures. Pina had talked with her sister that morning. She told Giuseppina that their parents had found Aaron to be very charming, and they all looked forward to seeing him again.

Captain Winchester was waiting at the entrance to the Hillsboro Hotel just before 12:00 PM. Fernando parked his car nearby and walked over to the captain.

"Captain Winchester, it is so very good to see you again. We will go to lunch and then to the Licata farm. I will show you around the farm this afternoon. How does that sound?"

Fernando thought it would be a good idea for the captain and him to have an opportunity to talk privately before their dinner at the Licata home.

"Fernando, that would be terrific. My uncle had a small farm just outside Amarillo, and I always enjoyed spending time there. By the way, please call me Aaron from now on!"

Aaron enjoyed the drive from downtown Tampa, around the port and south through Palmetto Beach. Palmetto Beach was essentially a small "suburb" of Ybor City. South of First Ave., it was a neighborhood with several cigar factories and many businesses tied into the adjacent Port of Tampa. Ethnically similar to Ybor City, many of its residents were Anglo, but some spoke and understood Spanish to varying degrees. Aaron turned to Fernando.

"Fernando, I can smell that mixture of salt air and diesel fuel. I feel at home here. Tampa continues to attract me in many ways."

After crossing the 22nd St. causeway and bridge, they arrived at the Seabreeze Restaurant. It was a favorite of local Tampeños, Latin and non-Latin as well. Fernando suggested a light lunch since dinner

would be more than substantial. The two men took their seats at a table next to a large window.

"Aaron, may I order for you as well?"

Aaron nodded in agreement. Soon the captain was indulging in a Cuban sandwich, a devil crab, and a Coke.

"Fernando, other than the Coca-Cola, I've never had any of this food before. It's fantastic, especially the crab croquette."

"Aaron, if you want to be a true Tampeño, you must call it a 'devil crab'. Never call it a croquette in English, and never, ever, a 'DEVILED crab'!"

Aaron was quickly learning that Tampa had unique foods and a unique way of saying certain things. He confessed he had always been drawn to the unusual, and this was reinforcing his attraction to Tampa.

Aaron was surprised at the size of the Licata farm and warehouse. Business was unusually brisk, as Christmas was only a week away. Restaurants and grocery stores were placing unusually large orders. Fernando wondered if, because of the war, people were preparing for

years of hardship by splurging on this particular holiday. Mandated food rationing was to begin by February.

Fernando led Aaron through the warehouse, dodging the numerous forklifts and employees that were hurrying about. They entered the quiet solitude of Fernando's glass-enclosed office. Aaron took a seat on the couch across from Fernando's desk. Fernando could tell that Aaron was impressed by his surroundings.

"Aaron, Rosa's parents have built a very good business, as you can see. If you intend to spend time with Rosa, you probably need to know more about the family."

Fernando then proceeded to offer Aaron a version of the same talk that Gaetano had with him on the night of his marriage to Giuseppina. Without revealing more than was necessary, Fernando, in general terms, revealed that the Licata business interests included untoward activities. Almost apologetically, Fernando clarified his own role, making it clear he had no direct involvement beyond the food distribution aspects.

Aaron, having listened intently, sat silent for a while. He then told Fernando that he had heard workers along the docks of Tampa talking about a powerful Sicilian family that practically controlled the local

longshoremen's union. Fernando, hearing this, pursed his lips and raised his eyebrows. Aaron got the message.

Fernando then delicately let Aaron know that none of this extended anyway into the lives of Fernando and his immediate family. The operations of that "other" part of the Licata business was handled by Rosario and Turiddu, Rosa's brothers. Fernando, now smiling, offered to take Aaron on a tour of the warehouse and farm.

Dinner was earlier than usual because the Suarezes, along with Rosa and Aaron, we're going to a late movie after dinner. This had been arranged by Fernando and Giuseppina, with Rosa's and Aaron's consent. All of Giuseppina's siblings and their families were at the dinner, a Wednesday evening tradition for the Licatas. As Fernando had predicted, Rosario was a bit distant, as usual. Turiddu was, as always, animated and engaging, and appeared to take a liking to Aaron. Aaron's introduction to the Licata clan appeared to go well.

The Tampa Theatre was Tampa's premiere movie house. Built in 1926, it was Tampa's first air-conditioned public building. Fernando and Pina enjoyed movies, and especially viewing them in this particular venue. Over the years they had developed a routine. They would usually attend in the middle of the week and their preferred seating area was the balcony. Since Pina's English was very limited,

Fernando would softly whisper to her, in Spanish, the gist of the plot. In order to avoid disturbing other patrons, they chose evenings and seating locations which almost guaranteed they would not be near others. As they were taking their seats, Fernando explained the routine to Aaron.

"Fernando, I'm learning that you folks in Tampa have very clever ways of adapting to the multiple cultures in which you live!"

Fernando smiled, thinking he understood this, but wasn't really sure.

With the two sisters seated between the men, the newsreel began. Naturally, most of it dealt with the new war, and the news was distressing. The feature movie tonight was Alfred Hitchcock's "Suspicion", set in England. Fernando was dismayed, as his understanding of English was always challenged by British accents. Aaron, always one for a laugh, proposed a four-way translation. He would translate British English to American English. Fernando would then translate this into Spanish, and then Giuseppina would relay it to Rosa in Sicilian. As this, itself, was being appropriately translated, the foursome broke into uncontrollable laughter. Giuseppina's heart was warmed as she saw Rosa the happiest she had seen her in years.

That same night, as Pina and Fernando lay in bed, they began discussing Aaron and Rosa. Pina sensed that her parents approved of them spending time together, as long as the relationship remained respectful. They both agreed that Aaron was a sincere and honest man of whom they were very fond. Pina lamented the fact that Aaron was living alone in a hotel during the holiday season. Fernando offered that he felt the same way. Hesitatingly, he asked Pina if she would be comfortable if they were to invite Aaron to stay with them until his ship was ready to sail again, which would be in approximately three weeks. Pina, smiling, said she thought that would be a good idea, as long as Aaron would accompany Fernando to work everyday. Luciano was rarely at home during the day, and, in her opinion, it would be inappropriate for her to be alone in the house with Aaron. This reflected no distrust of Aaron, this rule was simply ingrained in the Sicilian culture. Fernando agreed. He would speak with Aaron the next day.

Aaron was visibly moved by the offer. He initially declined, but after a bit of coaxing from Fernando, he graciously accepted, offering to help out in the Licata warehouse, as a courtesy. He confessed that hotel life was getting boring. That night he moved into Pilar's former bedroom, across the hall from Luciano.

The next two weeks went by quickly. An almost endless stream of Christmas and New Year dinners, parties and events were a welcome diversion from the bad news related to the war. Rosa and Aaron were becoming very close, somehow managing to overcome the partial language barrier. The Licata family embraced Aaron as, if nothing else, a new friend. Even Rosario seemed to fall under the captain's spell.

On the Saturday after New Year's Day, Luciano returned to Gainesville. Fernando had asked Aaron to chat with Luciano about his future plans, knowing that his son would share certain thoughts with the captain that he wouldn't share with his parents. While Fernando didn't relish the idea of "spying" on his son, he wanted to perhaps prepare Giuseppina for Luciano's inevitable entry into the military. Draft notices had begun arriving with regularity. Aaron shared with Fernando that his son was seriously considering enlisting in the Army Air Corp. Fernando decided to spare his wife this news, at least until it was more definitive.

A few days after Luciano returned to school, Aaron informed his adopted family that his ship, "The Phoenix", was out of dry dock and ready to sail. He would immediately be moving into his onboard cabin in order to prepare for his first roundtrip run to Valparaiso, Chile. He would be leaving Tampa in two days. The next day Aaron invited the

Suarezes and Rosa to a "farewell" dinner on board "The Phoenix". He had asked the cook to prepare a special feast for his very special friends. After a delicious dinner that lasted three hours, it was time to bid farewell to Aaron. As the guests began to disembark the ship, Aaron gently placed his hand on Rosa's arm, causing her to pause. Fernando gestured to Pina to continue walking ahead of them. A short distance ahead, the Suarezes stopped and turned around. They saw that Aaron had cupped both his hands over those of Rosa, and gently kissed her on each of her cheeks. Pina dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

Chapter Sixty

"Pina, Rosa ha oído algo de Aaron? Ya sabe cuando regresa a Tampa?"

Fernando stood, hugging and kissing Pina. He then asked her if Rosa had heard anything about Aaron. He wondered if she knew when he was returning to Tampa.

It was early February 1942. Fernando, exhausted, was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping café con leche, when Pina arose and came downstairs. Fernando had been up all night, helping out at the Licata

farm. A severe freeze and frost the night before had threatened the crops. Temperatures had fallen to the high 20s. To minimize damage, the staff had lighted smudge pots all through the night, salvaging what they could. Even Rosario and Turiddu, normally removed from the operations of the farm, assisted. The Licata financial security was now quite independent of the produce business. However, it remained a source of pride for Gaetano, and the family had decided to keep it going as long as possible.

"Hablé con ella anoche. Recibió un telegrama ayer desde Panamá, y parece que llegará en tres días."

Giuseppina told Fernando that she talked with her sister the night before. Rosa received a telegram from Aaron sent from Panama. He would be arriving in Tampa in three days. Special security measures were in place for ships transiting the Panama Canal, and Aaron had been delayed there for two days. Fernando was relieved to hear the news, but secretly remained concerned. The waters of the Gulf of Mexico had become the most dangerous waters in the world. German U-boats now regularly prowled the Gulf, seeking to sink ships carrying cargo into or out of U.S. ports. He did not share this news with Rosa or Pina, who preferred not hearing war news.

"Hola, amigos! Como están?"

Captain Winchester's voice was easily audible above the din of the heavy machinery unloading the guano from "The Phoenix". As he greeted Rosa, Pina, and Fernando, his pace quickened as he stepped from the gangplank onto the wharf. He immediately embraced Rosa, kissing her gently on her forehead. As Fernando was complimenting him on his Spanish, Aaron turned to Pina and him, quickly embracing them.

"Let's go to the Seabreeze Restaurant. I want devil crabs and more!"

At Aaron's suggestion, they were soon headed toward the Seabreeze for an early dinner. The timing was good, as it was a Saturday and the restaurant would be very busy that night. The captain devoured his food, while repeatedly saying how much he had missed Tampa. He also began to comment on the increased military presence at and near the Panama Canal. Fernando discretely kicked his foot underneath the table, signaling him to change the subject. Fernando was able to quickly redirect the conversation. After dinner, the two couples returned to the Licata home for dessert and coffee. Gaetano and Sebastiana had insisted on seeing Aaron.

As the women were clearing the dining room table, Aaron explained that his new sailing routine appealed to him, but safety was a big

concern within the maritime community. The Germans had already sunk several cargo ships sailing from Mobile and Galveston, and the risk was increasing almost daily. Aaron would be in port for three weeks before returning to Valparaíso. He confessed to Fernando that after this next run, he was considering retiring. Meeting Rosa and the start of the war had given him a new perspective on his future, as well as on life in general. Fernando understood, saying that the world is now forever changed due to the war.

Aaron's three weeks in port passed much too quickly. The relationship between Rosa and him had evolved into a wonderful combination of romance and friendship. His last evening prior to leaving was spent at the Suárez home. Pina and Rosa had prepared his favorite meal of lasagna and roast beef, along with devil crabs as an appetizer. That same afternoon, Luciano had arrived from Gainesville for a mid-semester break. The mood was split between happiness that Luciano was home and sadness at having to say goodbye to Aaron.

As the two women were in the kitchen finalizing dinner, the three men sat in the living room, listening to soft music playing on the radio. Aaron explained to Luciano that, as he had already shared with Fernando, this might be his last sea voyage. He would be making his final decision on this next voyage. He added that he had shared this with no one other than Fernando. Luciano, somewhat surprised,

understood and agreed not to divulge the information to anyone else. Continuing, Luciano confessed that his disappointment over Aaron's no longer piloting a ship was far exceeded by the happiness of perhaps having him in Tampa on a permanent basis. Aaron stood up, walked over to Luciano, and gave him a hug. As he was returning to his chair, Luciano suddenly spoke, his voice unusually soft.

"I've signed up to join the Army Air Corp. I took the exams and have been accepted into pilot training as a lieutenant. I leave for San Antonio, Texas in June, after the school year ends. I don't want to tell Mama or Tía Rosa yet."

Fernando and Aaron had been expecting this news. Since Christmas they had been well aware of Luciano's thoughts. However, the manner in which he blurted it out took them by surprise. Clearly, Luciano hadn't relished the thought of telling them. Fernando walked over to his son and hugged him tightly for several minutes. Aaron then did the same.

"A comer!"

Rosa had announced "Let's eat!". This was the standard way of calling everyone to the dinner table in the Suárez home. Fernando, Luciano, and Aaron were able to divert their thoughts away from their previous

discussion, focusing on the feast before them. During dinner, Pina couldn't help but think how Rosa had changed since meeting Aaron. Once extremely shy, she now often initiated conversations at the table. She had even agreed to allow the Licatas to hire a live-in assistant to help care for Sebastiana and Gaetano. She had blossomed later in life.

Luciano, his parents, and his Aunt Rosa stood on the wharf and watched as "The Phoenix" disappeared from view. Knowing that Aaron would return in a few weeks made the departure less sad. After lunch at Los Helados restaurant, Rosa was taken home and the Suarezes went home. Luciano and Fernando planned to tell Giuseppina about Luciano's joining the military. They would do it that evening, after dinner.

As Pina was preparing dinner, Fernando was reading the newspaper in the living room. Luciano was studying upstairs in his bedroom. Fernando could hear music coming from Luciano's radio. The music suddenly stopped, and Fernando became aware of an announcement being made in English. Fernando was not able to quite understand what was being said. Luciano came running down the stairs. He was crying.

"Papa, los alemanes han hundido el barco de Aaron!"

Luciano, stifling his sobs, said that the Germans had sunk Aaron's ship.

Luciano raced back up the stairs, Fernando behind him. As they entered Luciano's bedroom, Fernando closed the door behind him, so that Pina couldn't hear the radio, despite her limited English abilities. Fernando asked his son to translate since the announcer was speaking rapidly.

As the broadcast continued, Luciano would periodically relay, in Spanish, a synopsis of what was being said. Apparently, some residents of Pinellas Point, a neighborhood in the southern part of St. Petersburg, heard an explosion and could see a ship on fire not far from the entrance to Tampa Bay. They alerted the police who called civil defense authorities. The coast guard was able to verify that the ship was, in fact, "The Phoenix", and had been torpedoed by a German U- boat approximately one mile out into the gulf. A search for survivors and bodies was underway, and survivors were being transported to Bay Pines Veterans Hospital in St. Petersburg. As Fernando heard the news, his face, along with Luciano's, turned ashen in color.

This would not be the night to tell Pina about Luciano's decision.

Chapter Sixty-One

With a knot in his throat, Fernando rushed downstairs to deliver this devastating news to Pina.

“Bedda Matri!”

Pina screamed out as she clasped her hands over her face. She had called out to The Virgin Mary in agony. Literally translated to “Beautiful Mother!”, it is the quintessential Sicilian cry of agony and pleading for divine mercy. Fernando comforted her, fully realizing that, in just several months, Aaron had become a beloved member of the family.

“Tenemos que decir a Rosa, pero no por el teléfono! Vamos a la casa.”

Pina said they had to tell Rosa, but suggested they drive to the Licata home rather than telling her over the phone.

Fernando agreed. Luciano insisted on going as well. Within minutes they were in the car and headed toward Gary, where the Licata compound is located. Luciano sat in the front passenger seat, constantly monitoring the car radio for any updates on the tragedy.

There were now confirmed reports of survivors, but there were many fatalities.

“Che c’è!”

As soon as Rosa saw her sister’s face, she knew something was amiss. Her face turned suddenly pale, and she nervously blurted out the Sicilian phrase for “what’s wrong!”. As Pina broke the news to her, she let out a muffled cry, perhaps not wanting to alarm her parents. Her sister helped her to the couch in the living room. Fernando went upstairs to advise the caregiver what was going on and to check on Gaetano and Sebastiana.

Luciano had remained in the car, monitoring the news. He was now standing with Fernando a short distance away from Pina and Rosa. He suggested to his father that they drive to the hospital in St. Petersburg to see if they could get more information. Fernando agreed, but suggested they call the civil defense authorities first. Perhaps someone could assist them. Luciano went into the kitchen to use the phone there, preferring to speak with them in private.

After a few minutes, Luciano returned to the living room. Understandably, the civil defense officials were not able to discuss details over the phone. Their advice was to go to Bay Pines Veterans

Hospital and speak with personnel there. Fernando reported this to the women, suggesting that they remain behind, fearing that the news at the hospital would be grim. Rosa vehemently objected. If the news was bad, she would rather hear sooner than later. She couldn't stand the thought of waiting.

Within minutes Luciano, Fernando, Pina, and Rosa were enroute to St. Petersburg. As they crossed Tampa Bay on the Gandy Bridge, Fernando's thoughts drifted back twenty years prior, to the drive to the hospital after Luciano's birth. Luckily, this time there was no hurricane to drive through.

About 45 minutes later they entered St. Petersburg. Luciano, who was driving, stopped at a gas station to ask directions to the hospital. After a few more minutes they approached the vicinity of the hospital complex. Several blocks from the hospital a roadblock had been put in place. A police officer advised Luciano to turn around, as access to the hospital was being restricted. Luciano advised the officer that a "relative" was the captain of the ship and they, of course, were quite concerned. The policeman asked for the name. As he rustled through some papers on a clipboard, Luciano realized his heart was racing with anxiety. The officer looked up from the papers, addressing Luciano.

“Could I have his name and hometown please?”

Luciano, somewhat puzzled, answered.

“Aaron Winchester, Amarillo, Texas.”

The officer thanked Luciano and waved him through. Apparently, the authorities had obtained basic information on the crew from the shipping line. Only those relatives who could identify specific information about a crew member were being allowed access to the hospital. Luciano, while uncomfortable lying to the police, really did consider Aaron to be a relative.

The hospital lobby was overflowing with people, a combination of military authorities, the press, and anxious relatives. A temporary information desk had been set up at the far end of the lobby. Luciano suggested that Pina and Rosa take seats while he and Fernando check with the desk.

“The Phoenix” had been carrying a crew of approximately 50. Many of those were assigned from the local seafarers’ union in Tampa. Because of this, numerous local relatives were in line, hoping for more information concerning their loved ones. Luciano noticed that some people were asked to return to the seating area, while others were

being escorted away. Occasionally, a nurse would page some of those seated, and lead them away. He found this ominous, fearing that those led away would be told that their relative was not one of the survivors. As they got closer to the front of the line the procedure became more clear.

“Good afternoon sir. May I have your name and the name of your relative please?”

Luciano anxiously gave the woman the information she requested. His heart was racing as she leafed through several sets of papers. As she put the papers down, she began speaking quite rapidly.

“Mr. Suarez. At this time, we have no information concerning Captain Winchester. As rescue operations continue, information continues to come in quite frequently. Please have a seat and we will call you when we know more.”

Fernando, quite anxious, turned to Luciano.

“Que dice ella, que dice?”

Fernando desperately asked Luciano to clarify what the nurse had said.

Luciano thanked her and led his father away by his arm. As he guided him back toward Rosa and Pina, he explained what he had been told. This increased Fernando's anxiety, rather than easing it.

Pina and Rosa anxiously walked toward Luciano and Fernando, begging for information. As Luciano started to explain, Rosa began crying uncontrollably. After helping her back to her seat, the Tampeños began what seemed like an interminable wait. Rosa and Pina had their rosary beads and were quietly praying as they held them in their hands.

"The family of Captain Winchester! The family of Captain Winchester!"

After approximately 30 minutes, a nurse called for them. She asked the Tampeños to follow her a short distance down a hallway into a private room. She held the door open as they filed in, closing the door behind her. At this point, Luciano feared the worst. He could see the look of despair on his father's face. Rosa and Pina wept.

"Please. I have some relatively good news for you."

At this point, Luciano, somewhat relieved, asked if he could translate her words for his parents and aunt. She said that would be fine, and she would speak slowly, pausing to allow him to do so. He then

explained to his family what had just been said. Rosa clasped her hands to her face in anticipation of positive news. The nurse continued.

“We’re happy to report that Captain Winchester is alive. He has sustained injuries, including serious burns, but should survive. He will be here at Bay Pines Hospital for several weeks of treatment. Afterward, he will need a lengthy recovery period.”

Luciano, breaking into a smile, translated this good news to his family. Rosa broke into sobs and hugged Pina. He turned to the nurse.

“When will we be able to see Captain Winchester?”

The nurse elaborated that Aaron was still being attended to in the emergency ward. She assured them that he was conscious and lucid, though in pain. He would be heavily sedated after a complete assessment of his injuries. She suggested they leave a contact telephone number. She would personally see to it that someone contact them early the next morning for an update. She assured them that he would ultimately make a full recovery. After translating this for the others, he gave the nurse the Suárez phone number and thanked her for her assistance.

The nurse smiled, telling them they were welcome to remain in the room in order to regain their composure. As the nurse closed the door behind her, the Tampeños hugged each other tightly. After a few minutes they left the room, grateful beyond words that Aaron was alive. On the drive back to Tampa, Fernando realized that today had been the first of what would be many bad days during this war. He knew it was inevitable many families, including possibly his own, would be receiving the news that everyone dreaded. On this day in March 1942, World War II became very personal.

Chapter Sixty-Two

Aaron remained in Bay Pines Hospital for about two weeks. His main injuries were burns on his arms and legs. Of the approximately 50 crew members on “The Phoenix”, 22 had been killed in the attack. Survivors testified that Captain Winchester stayed on board until all of the survivors had abandoned ship, some in lifeboats. Aaron was regarded as a hero, having stayed with his ship until the end.

The Licatas invited Aaron to recuperate in their home. The shipping company provided nurses to attend to the captain during his long recovery. The grim reality of the war was now close at hand, and the spirit of cooperation was evident.

Rosa and Giuseppina decided they would dedicate this year's Feast of St. Joseph celebration to thanking Sicily's patron saint for sparing Aaron's life. St. Joseph's Day is celebrated on March 19. Many Sicilian families prepare a "St. Joseph's Table", or "Tavola di San Giuseppe". Resembling a shrine, a statue of St. Joseph is surrounded by flowers and mounds of many types of food. Two constants are no meat other than fish, and numerous loaves of bread laden with copious amounts of sesame seeds. The breads are in various shapes relevant to the celebration, such as a cross or a shepherd's staff. The celebration is, in essence, an "open house" where no one is ever turned away. Some celebrations are dedicated to healing the sick, or giving thanks for sparing one's life. Charitable donations are accepted, but not obligatory. The Licatas would be forwarding donations to a relief fund established by the local seafarers' union to assist the families of those who perished in the sinking of "The Phoenix". The Licata celebration was held on the Sunday closest to March 19. Hundreds of guests attended and thousands of dollars were donated to the relief fund.

The war news continued to be grim. The U.S. and its allies were sustaining heavy casualties. By April, many of the young men throughout the country had been drafted. Ybor City and West Tampa were no exception. Several businesses in the Latin neighborhoods had posters with photographs of the local "boys" who had been called

away. Fernando knew that he would soon have to tell Giuseppina that Luciano had enlisted in the military.

By late May, Aaron was almost back to normal. His burns were healing well, aided by several skin grafts. His convalescence in the Licata home had further strengthened his relationship with Rosa. The traditional Sunday afternoon lunches, which normally alternated between the Suarezes and the Licatas, were being held every week at the Licata farm. This was due to Aaron's limited mobility. This particular spring Sunday afternoon was sunny and beautiful. Fernando and Pina took their places at one of the two large tables in the Licata garden. Fernando was a bit on edge since he had decided to tell Pina about Luciano on the drive home from the lunch. He turned to his wife.

“Pina, algo parece un poco diferente. Ellos están muy ilusionados de algo. Que podría ser?”

Fernando, nodding discretely toward Rosa and Aaron, told Pina that something seemed a bit different. He found Aaron and Rosa to be very excited, almost manic, about something and wondered what it could be. As they were beginning to eat, the sound of a spoon tapping on a glass drew the diners' attention toward Aaron. The captain, now standing and holding up a glass of wine, began to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen. I have an announcement to make. I asked Mr. Gaetano Licata for his permission to ask his beautiful daughter Rosa to marry me. He did so, and I am honored and humbled to say that Rosa has accepted my offer. I want to thank all of you for your love and for accepting me into your family. I would now ask those who understand English to please make the appropriate translations for those around you!”

After a brief period of frenzied translations, everyone began clapping and shouting out with joy. Fernando and Pina rushed over to Aaron and Rosa. Hugs and kisses made the rounds of the whole family. Pina hugged Fernando, who now feared that telling her about Luciano would dampen her euphoria over this news.

The Sunday lunch ended later than usual. On the drive home Pina was excitedly talking about the wedding plans. Though an exact date had not been chosen, she suspected it would be soon. Aaron was resigning from his career and relished the idea of a permanent home in Tampa. Pina was still talking as they entered their house. Fernando took Pina by the arm, guiding her toward the sofa, where she sat down.

“Pina, tenemos que hablar de algo.”

Fernando told Pina that they needed to talk about something. He then simply blurted out what he had to say, explaining that Luciano had enlisted in the Army Air Corp and would be training to be a pilot. He added that their son would be home from school the following week, and would report to San Antonio, Texas on July 1st. They would have him home for about one month before he left for training.

Pina looked away from Fernando, tears filling her eyes as she began crying softly. Regaining her composure, she admitted to Fernando that she had assumed this was imminent. She then surprised Fernando by saying she had come to terms with Luciano having to serve in the military. The episode with Aaron made her realize the extreme danger the entire world was facing. She had put her faith in God, knowing that everyone needed to sacrifice for the greater good.

Fernando hugged Pina, reassuring her that all would be fine. She looked at Fernando.

“Quizás, quizás no. Solo Dios sabe.”

Pina replied: “Maybe, maybe not. Only God knows.”

Luciano embraced Fernando, thanking him for having told his mother about his joining the military. Luciano asked to drive home from Union

Station. As he drove, he pretended he was at the controls of an airplane, tooting the horn as they proceeded up 15th St. Fernando managed to share in the frivolity, despite his hesitancy at celebrating what he viewed as a serious situation. Fernando reminded himself of the feelings of invincibility that accompanies being young.

Giuseppina rushed onto the front porch, hugging and kissing Luciano until they both broke up laughing. Fernando, while relieved at her composure, wondered if it was an exaggerated way of masking her deepest fears.

After a hearty dinner, Luciano asked to see Aaron. Fernando had called Luciano several times per week to update him on Aaron's situation, but Luciano wanted to see him with his own eyes. Aaron was barely conscious when he last saw him, two days after the attack. Luciano was anxious to erase this image from his mind.

"Luciano! How about a big hug for your new uncle!"

Aaron, his voice back to normal, walked over and hugged Luciano tightly. Luciano pulled away, smiling.

"UNCLE? Does this mean what I think it does?"

Aaron had asked that they not tell Luciano about the marriage, wanting to tell him in person. Aaron nodded his head in the affirmative. Luciano hugged and kissed Rosa, who was standing next to Aaron.

“Luciano, we don’t want to rush things. However, since you will be leaving us on July 1st, we are getting married the Sunday prior, which will be June 28th. We couldn’t bear the thought of a wedding without you being present. Please translate to the others.”

Fernando, Pina, and the rest of the family celebrated this news. Rather than a large affair, the family and a few other guests would gather at O.L.P.H. church for a religious ceremony. Afterward, they would retreat to the Licata home for an expanded version of the usual family Sunday lunch. Rosa had insisted that the celebration also serve as a farewell dinner for Luciano.

The next several weeks passed much too quickly. Pina and Rosa focused on the wedding preparations, which also served as a distraction from Luciano’s imminent departure. Luciano visited friends, spending most of his days with Rafael, Ignacio’s son. Rafael had received his draft notice and was to depart soon for basic training in Ft. Benning, Georgia as an infantryman. A week before the wedding, the Prendes family hosted a farewell party for Rafael and Luciano at the dairy. The Prendes' house and barn were festooned with small

U.S. and Spanish Republican flags. Many within the Spanish community of Tampa saw World War II as a continuation of the fight against Franco and the fascists in Spain. Though Spain had formally remained neutral, there was outrage that German U-boats were given access to Spanish ports for refueling and repairs. In essence, Spain was a “silent” ally of Germany and Italy.

Several days after the party at the Prendeses, Rafael left for Ft. Benning. The Suarezes joined the Prendes family at Tampa’s Union Station. Two additional train cars had been added to accommodate the large number of recruits. Sofia managed to remain stoic until the last train car disappeared from view. As she began to openly sob, Giuseppina attempted to comfort her. As the two women embraced, Pina soon joined Sofia in her outpouring of grief.

Ignacio and Sofia, along with Giuseppina, Fernando, and Luciano walked silently out of Union Station. The grim reality of this war continued to draw closer and closer to the Tampeños.

Chapter Sixty-Three

Father Amorelli and Father Braun agreed to be co-celebrants in Rosa's Nuptial Mass. Both priests had served for many years at Ybor

City's O.L.P.H. Catholic Church. Father Braun, unlike Father Amorelli, was fluent in English. Though the Mass was primarily in Latin, Father Braun was to translate the homily into English. Rosa had requested this out of respect for Aaron, though the captain was not a religious man.

The Licata family and invited friends were enough to fill almost half of the relatively small church. The ceremony lasted somewhat more than an hour. The wedding party was small, with only Giuseppina as matron of honor and Fernando as best man.

The buffet lunch afterward at the Licata farm consisted of about 150 people, a small reception by Sicilian standards. Tradition mandated that if a woman married at an "older" age, the festivities should appropriately be scaled down. As the festivities were drawing to a close, Fernando and Aaron were seated together, enjoying coffee and traditional Sicilian desserts. Aaron turned toward Fernando.

"Fernando, I want to thank you for all you've done for me. When I first met you at the hotel in Vigo, never did I dream that I would one day be part of your beautiful family. I didn't plan on retiring under these circumstances, but something good has come out of a bad situation. I'm not a religious man, but I pray, in my own way, that Luciano and Ignacio get through this war OK. They're both like nephews to me."

Fernando, understanding the gist of what Aaron said, reached over and gave Aaron a strong hug.

Aaron went on to explain that Gaetano and Sebastiana had invited Giuseppina and him to continue living with them. After discussing it, they decided to take them up on their offer. Aaron confessed he had been somewhat hesitant, concerned that Rosa would prefer asserting more independence. Rosa, likewise, was concerned that Aaron would feel obligated to help care for her aging parents. Assisted by Turiddu's translations, their frank discussion was fruitful. They learned that they both preferred being part of the extended family. Assisted by hired help, as well as other family members, they looked forward to being the primary care givers for the elderly Licatas in the coming years. Fernando assured him that he and Pina would always be willing to assist as well.

Fernando, Giuseppina, and Luciano were the last to leave the wedding reception. On the drive home, Giuseppina's thoughts were focused on Luciano's departure, now only three days away. She had managed to distract herself preparing for Rosa's wedding, but now the harsh reality was close at hand. She found herself in the "bargaining" process so traditionally embedded in Sicilian Catholicism. In exchange for the future safe return of her son from the war, she was willing to

sacrifice some of her favorite pleasures in life. Almost obsessively, her mind was spinning as she tried to decide which sacrifices might most ensure Luciano's safe return. Her thoughts returned to the moment as Fernando turned into their driveway in El Barrio Candamo.

Wednesday, July 1st, 1942, was a rainy and stormy day in Tampa. The summer tropical weather pattern was clearly in place. As Luciano drove over the Brorein St. bridge and turned left onto Bayshore Blvd. it began raining heavily. Fernando, sitting next to his son, attempted to clear the windshield of the condensation moisture created by their breath. As the accompanying thunder and lightning increased, Giuseppina, sitting in the back seat with Rosa and Aaron, nervously wondered out loud why Luciano was being flown to San Antonio, as opposed to going by train. Her son tried to reassure her, saying that they would never allow the aircraft to take off if it wasn't safe. His attempt failed. She continued to nervously finger her rosary beads. As they drove past the turnoff for Davis Islands, she reminisced about their adventure six years prior. She desperately wished they were headed for Peter O. Knight airport for a flight to Havana. Instead, their destination was MacDill Field, now a U.S. Army Air Forces base. As they proceeded down Bayshore Blvd., a streetcar of the Ballast Point line was to their left, running parallel with them. The tracks were in the middle of the raised median which was attractively landscaped. Pina placed her hand on Fernando's shoulder.

"Fernando, recuerda cuando íbamos a bailar allí en Ballast Point? Tomamos ese mismo tranvía desde Ybor. Eso fue cuando empezamos a salir como una pareja. La pobre Rosa, siempre tenía que estar con nosotros, como chaperona."

Giuseppina reminded Fernando how, when they first started dating, they would take this same streetcar to attend dances. She chuckled as she remembered how poor Rosa would be required to accompany them as a chaperone. Rosa assured her that it had been fun. At the end of Bayshore Blvd, Ballast Point Park was a popular destination for people in Tampa. A large pavilion built over the water had been a popular dancehall for many years. Fernando squeezed Pina's hand, turning to her and smiling.

As they approached the entrance to MacDill Field, Luciano gathered the documents he had been given, along with his passport as identification. As they had been previously instructed, Fernando, Giuseppina, and Aaron had brought their passports along as well. Rosa had her alien registration card with her, which now included a photograph. Security precautions had become especially strict since the German U-boat attack on Aaron's ship, only four months prior. MacDill field was situated on the "Interbay Peninsula" of South Tampa. The waters of Tampa Bay surrounded the airfield on three

sides. The threat of an attack launched from a submarine was always a possibility.

After examining the Suarez' documents, the guard gave Luciano a map, directing him to the correct administrative building. The excited recruit chuckled to himself, wondering if perhaps this was his first examination, testing his map reading abilities! Within ten minutes they had arrived at the designated building.

Entering the facility, Luciano handed his documents to a receptionist. Soon a recruiting officer appeared, welcoming them. He explained that there would be a brief induction ceremony for the six recruits, then refreshments and time for goodbyes. An aircraft had been dispatched to several points in Florida to collect other pilot trainees, including Tallahassee, Jacksonville, and Miami. Tampa was the last stop, and the flight would be non-stop from here to San Antonio. The other trainees, like Luciano, were college students who had demonstrated academic excellence and passed the pilot training written exam.

As Luciano was translating what was being explained to him, an officer who had been standing nearby approached the group of Tampeños. He asked what languages they were speaking. Luciano explained the background of his family. The officer, smiling, responded.

"I would like your family to understand what we'll be saying. I know who can help you out. One of the civilian women that works here in our payroll department speaks fluent Spanish and Sicilian. I think she's from Tampa. Her name is Mamie. I'll go get her!"

Luciano was explaining what the officer had said when a beautiful young woman approached them, talking excitedly. In classic Tampa Sicilian she introduced herself as Mamie Mortellaro from Ybor City. As is typical in Tampa, within minutes the group had "connected the dots". Her mother was Rosalia Mortellaro, and Giuseppina had worked with her for a few years at the Sanchez y Haya cigar factory. The women hugged and kissed, as they continued to further connect the dots and introduce everyone. Aaron, smiling, shook his head in disbelief as the officer excused himself to prepare for the ceremony. Aaron turned to Luciano, who was also smiling.

"Son, Tampa never ceases to amaze me! It's not a small city by any means. Yet, everyone seems to know each other, or they know each other's parents. Tampa is the smallest big city I've ever seen. It's not the place to be if you value your privacy, but I sure do love it!"

The officer in charge announced that the ceremony was about to begin. He asked that everyone take their seats. Mamie gestured to Luciano's group to sit with her in the back row, away from the others.

She would, in a loud whisper, explain what was happening in both Spanish and Sicilian.

After a brief welcome, the six young men were asked to stand at the front of the room. With their right hands raised, they swore allegiance to the U.S.A., promising to defend their nation against all enemies. As this was translated by Mamie, Pina and Rosa began to cry softly. Mamie did her best to comfort them. As the ceremony came to a conclusion, each recruit was introduced to the audience. The Tampeños clapped loudly as 2nd Lieutenant Luciano Suarez stepped forward and saluted his superior officer.

The attendees were led into an adjoining room for refreshments. Mamie was allowed to accompany them. As a Tampa native, Mamie had become the unofficial ambassador from MacDill Field to its host community. It was Mamie who everyone at the airfield depended upon for any advice concerning Tampa.

Less than an hour later, an announcement was made. The guests were asked to accompany their recruit onto an adjacent tarmac for a final farewell. Luciano, with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder, began hugging and kissing his family, including Aaron. He thanked Mamie for her help, giving her a hug as well. Lastly, he again hugged Giuseppina for what seemed an eternity. Rosa, overcome with

emotion, had turned her face and stepped away, accompanied by Aaron, who was embracing her. Fernando gently drew Pina away from her son and put his arms around her.

Chapter Sixty-Four

As Luciano got to the door of the DC-3 aircraft, he turned and gave a final wave and a "thumbs up" gesture. Within minutes the two engines revved up and the aircraft began taxiing toward the departure runway. The rain and dark clouds had cleared from the skies. As the silver airplane rose from the ground, it seemed to glisten in the sunshine as it turned westward toward Texas.

The months following the departure of Rafael and Luciano seemed to pass mercifully fast. Their families agreed that the faster the days passed the better, putting the end of the war that much closer.

Fernando and Ignacio had volunteered to assist in the sale of war bonds in Ybor City and West Tampa. The food distribution and dairy businesses provided a convenient and efficient method of reaching out to the greater community. The commercial customers of both companies, such as grocery stores and restaurants, were happy to serve as vendors for the bonds so critical to funding the war effort. Fernando would accompany the salesmen on their routes, dispersing

bonds and collecting the funds to be forwarded to the federal authorities. His experience as an accountant served him well. Ignacio would hold periodic rallies at the dairy farm, providing food and entertainment while promoting the sale of bonds. The men were motivated by love of country as well as wanting to end this war as soon as possible, hastening the return of their sons. The immigrant community in Tampa had proudly earned the reputation of staunchly supporting the war effort.

"Prens!"

Rafael had learned to easily recognize the anglicized pronunciation of his surname. He stepped forward and collected his weekly mail. Today there were several letters and a sealed shoe box wrapped in brown paper. Sofia wrote a letter to her son every day and would occasionally send a box containing Spanish cookies or dried chorizo. His legal name was Rafael Gonzalez Prendes. In Tampa, the Spanish tradition of two surnames had caused confusion in properly identifying one's legal name. Therefore, the children of Spanish immigrants were legally named with their mother's maiden name as a middle name, followed by the paternal surname as their legal "American" surname. Rafael had excelled during basic training as an infantryman. His athletic prowess had earned him a position in the elite U.S. Army Rangers. While in training as a Ranger, Rafael's superiors

recommended him for Officer Training School. Upon graduation he would be a lieutenant and an instructor in the Ranger school at Ft. Benning, Georgia. Not only were Ignacio and Sofia proud of his accomplishments, but grateful that, at least for now, Rafael would be kept stateside and away from active combat.

Luciano had taken to flying as a fish would to water. Eleven weeks after beginning his training, he completed his first solo flight. The most coveted positions among the eager and confident young men were fighter positions. These were awarded to the top students. Though Luciano had finished his training in the top five percent of his class, he could not qualify for a fighter position due to his large size. The height limit for fighter pilots was set at 5'11", several inches shorter than Luciano's height. This was due to the limited amount of space in a fighter's cockpit. While disappointed, the Tampeño was grateful for the opportunity to fly and to serve his country.

"Compras tus bonos de guerra aquí! Apoya tu país!"

"Compra qui i tuoi titoli di guerra! Sostiete il vostro paese!"

"Buy your War Bonds here! Support your country!"

Above the din of the heavy streetcar and automobile traffic, the voices of the Suarezes and the Prendeses attracted the attention of those around them. In Spanish, Italian, and English they proudly and enthusiastically pleaded with their fellow Tampeños to support the war effort by purchasing U.S. war bonds. The corner of 7th Ave. and 22nd St. had always been a busy intersection. Although located toward the end of the most densely populated part of Ybor City, the very popular Columbia Restaurant was located here. Additionally, this was where several major streetcar lines intersected. Thus it was a major transfer point for passengers. Most importantly, the busy 7th Ave. streetcar line turned south on 22nd St. to serve a major portion of Palmetto Beach and the Port of Tampa. Because of the war, the various industries located in this area, such as the large McCloskey Ship Builders, were operating twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week. The result was that workers from all parts of Tampa would transfer here. The cafe at the Columbia Restaurant was open 24 hours a day and was always busy.

Every Friday evening Giuseppina and Fernando, along with Ignacio and Sofia, would sell war bonds near the entrance of the Columbia. The Hernandez family, owners of the restaurant, generously supported their efforts by allowing them to use the restaurant as a makeshift "office". Sales were usually brisk, as Fridays were the days most of the workers got paid. As funds were collected, they would be

transferred to the safe in the Columbia's office. Without exception, the businesses along La Septima were doing their part in the war effort.

At 7 p.m. the volunteers would stop selling bonds and retreat to "L'Unione Italiana", the Italian Club for coffee and sandwiches. On Friday evenings, the club's "casino" area, normally off-limits to women, was converted to a cafe, available to all. The proceeds collected would be used to purchase war bonds. The Tampeños looked forward to this Friday ritual.

"Oye, como hay gente hoy. Que bueno que la comunidad apoya tanto el esfuerzo para la guerra.

Cada peso ganado quizás puede cortar el tiempo de la guerra por unos minutos, quien sabe?"

Ignacio commented on how many people were at the club tonight and how good it was that the community was supporting the war effort. He went on to say that perhaps every dollar raised would shorten the war by a few minutes. It was clear that the war and what it would mean for their sons was constantly on the minds of the two families.

As the waiter was clearing the table, he asked if they wanted desserts. Fernando and Ignacio ordered flan and cannoli, while Sofia and Pina declined. Fernando, glancing at Ignacio, raised his eyebrows. It was

an affirmation of what they had suspected for some time. Pina and Sofia were notorious for their love of flan and cannoli, two popular desserts in Spanish and Sicilian cuisines. Since Luciano and Rafael had joined the military, neither of them had eaten these two foods. Their husbands were certain that they had promised God they would sacrifice this indulgence in exchange for the safe return of their sons. The concept of "bargaining" in the Spanish and Sicilian Catholic faith ran deep within the culture, especially among women. This was true even for those who did not regularly participate in Catholic ritual nor strictly adhered to Catholic doctrine. The practice had become engrained in the secular aspects of the cultures as well.

As the Tampeños were sipping their espresso coffees, a disturbance broke out several tables away from them. Two men, dressed in suits, approached a group of six people. Talking specifically to one of the men seated, they displayed what appeared to be badges. After a few minutes, they escorted the confused and elderly man out of the Italian Club. The remainder of the party immediately got up from their seats and quickly left the building as well. The room became almost silent, the only sound being that of whispers of curiosity.

"Hombre, que pasó allí? Esos hombres parecían como oficiales, verdad?"

Fernando wondered out loud about what might have just happened. He commented that the two well-dressed men appeared to be officers of some type.

Pina had noticed that the woman who had helped them at MacDill Field, Mamie Mortellaro, was seated on the far side of the room with her family. She thought if anyone would know about the episode, Mamie would. Pina excused herself and walked over to the Mortellaro table. After approximately ten minutes, Pina returned and sat down. She explained that the elderly man who was removed from the building is Giuseppe Sardegna, known as "Peppino". He was a bit eccentric, now living alone east of Ybor City on a small prickly pear farm. He frequently visited the Italian Club casino to play cards and dominoes with his friends. Apparently, several days earlier he had been heard commenting that, in his opinion, Benito Mussolini had brought some good changes to Italy. Being in his mid-80s, Peppino is of an age where he remembers Italy as a chaotic collection of independent kingdoms, prior to its unification in 1867. During a casual political discussion among friends he had commented that the current Fascist dictator was the kind of leader that Italians needed, someone strong and ruthless. Apparently, someone who had overheard his comments had contacted the F.B.I. and reported him.

Fernando, Pina, Ignacio, and Sofia quietly finished their espressos. Still silent, they paid their dinner bill and left L'Unione Italiana. The war continued to affect them and their community in ways they had never imagined.

Chapter Sixty-Five

“Pina, mira que salió en ‘La Gaceta’! Este artículo habla del señor que fue arrestado en el Centro Italiano. Bueno, ahora que leo más, no lo arrestaron pero le dieron una advertencia escrita, y quitaron su radio y sus escopetas hasta que termina la guerra. Parece que querían usarlo como un ejemplo de que están vigilándonos.”

Fernando, reading “La Gaceta” newspaper, told Giuseppina there was an article about Giuseppe

“Peppino” Sardegna, the elderly man who was escorted out of the Italian Club a week prior. The F.B.I. had received a report that he had been making positive comments about the Italian Fascist leader, Benito Mussolini. While he had been detained, he was not arrested, but was given a written warning. Additionally, his shotguns and radio were confiscated for the duration of the war. Apparently, he had been used as an example to send a message to the community that the

government was actively monitoring the populace for possible espionage.

“Es bueno que hacen eso. Todos tenemos que hacer todo posible para proteger nuestro país, y nuestros hijos. Somos Americanos.”

Pina responded it was a good thing that the government was doing. She explained that, as Americans, we all needed to do what was necessary to protect our country and our sons. Fernando agreed, leaning over and kissing her forehead. They both felt that nothing before had made them feel so “American” as this war. Many of their friends and family members had expressed the same sentiments. The distance between Tampa and their native countries had never seemed longer. Europe was fast becoming a distant memory for many immigrants in Tampa and across the U.S.A.

It was now almost six months since Luciano and Rafael left Tampa for the military. Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year’s Day were celebrated relatively quietly. The absence of many family members, along with food rationing, resulted in a rather somber holiday season for many families across the country. The Suarez, Licata, and Prendes families had bonded more tightly than ever, forming a network of mutual support during these harrowing times.

In early March 1943, a letter arrived from Luciano to his parents. Luciano, though very busy, managed to write to his parents at least twice per week, sometimes more often. Several months earlier he had been assigned to fly the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress aircraft and was now based at Maxwell Army Air Forces Base near Montgomery, Alabama. The aircraft was a four-engine heavy bomber designed for saturation bombing from high altitudes. As part of his training, he would, in two weeks, be flying into Tampa's Drew Field, located immediately adjacent to the Prendes dairy farm, in the far northwest part of West Tampa.

Luciano would be spending approximately one week at Drew Field for additional specialized training. Fernando and Pina cried as Fernando read the letter out loud. They had not seen their son for more than eight months, the longest period of separation between them. Luciano would be arriving in one week and would have some free time during the evenings of his stay. After hearing the news, Pina literally ran to the phone and called Rosa. Fernando understood enough Sicilian to know that the two sisters were excitedly discussing the dinner arrangements for each day of Luciano's visit.

Giuseppina, always apprehensive about flying, was grateful that the sky was sunny and cloudless. She and Fernando were told that Luciano would be landing at approximately 6:00 p.m. As Pina had

anticipated, Fernando was ready to leave for Drew Field at 4:20p.m., even though it was only a 20-minute drive to the base. Luciano had that evening free, having to return to the base by midnight. Rosa had arranged for a large family dinner at the Licata home. Pina and Fernando felt somewhat conflicted about inviting the Prendeses, concerned that seeing Luciano would be a harsh reminder of their own son's absence. To their relief, their dearest friends resolved the dilemma for them.

Ignacio and Sofia had asked if they could go along to see Luciano land the aircraft, wanting to share in the excitement and welcome him home. Fernando told Ignacio that he didn't think that would be possible since Luciano had been told that each airman was allowed only two on- base visitors. Ignacio, with a chuckle, told Fernando that Anselmo, their eldest son, would contact the base commander and try to arrange it. Fernando, thinking that Ignacio was joking, was surprised when Ignacio called him back and said they had gotten permission to join them.

Apparently, Ignacio had gotten to know the base commander due to a serious, yet somewhat comical, situation. The Prendes dairy's pastures abutted the perimeter of the eastern border of the air base. The flight path was such that aircraft taking off and landing passed directly over the pastures. The result was that the loud sound of the

aircraft engines startled the cows and milk production had decreased substantially. Wanting to maintain good relations with the surrounding community, the commander had arranged for the government to compensate Ignacio for his loss. As a result of the process, the commander, who had been raised on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, became well acquainted with Ignacio and his family. The commander had become a frequent visitor and dinner guest at the Prendes home.

Although the base entrance was an easy walking distance from the Prendes home, the Base Operations Center was located on the far side of the complex. They would meet Ignacio and Sofia at their home and then drive into the base and to the Operations Center. Afterward, they would all drive to the Licata farm for dinner. After dinner, they would drive the Prendes home and drop Luciano off at the base. As Fernando drove across the Columbus Dr. bridge, Pina reminisced about how frequently they've crossed the bridge enroute to visit the Prendeses and how close their families were, particularly Luciano and Rafael. She reminded herself to never again eat flan or cannoli.

By shortly after 5:00 p.m. the four Tampeños were at the main entrance to Drew Field. The base entrance was at the northern end of Dale Mabry Highway. This newly constructed major highway replaced the much smaller Vera Ave. and was built to connect MacDill Field with Drew Field. After showing the proper photo identification, the

guard gave Fernando directions to the operations center. The visitors were surprised at how busy the base was. The operations center resembled a small airport terminal, with aircraft arriving or departing every few minutes. Fernando approached an airman seated at a desk. In broken English, he explained why they were there, showing him a copy of their gate pass, which had Luciano's name on it. Checking a clip board hanging on the wall behind him, the man politely explained that Luciano would be landing shortly. He then led them outside and to a tarmac a short distance away. Fernando thanked him and the man returned to the office.

Across a low chain-link fence, aircraft were arriving. After the crew and any passengers deplaned, a ground crew would then tow the aircraft away. After approximately 20 minutes, a large aircraft stopped directly in front of, and fairly close to, the Tampeños. As the engines came to a stop, a small window in the cockpit was opened, and a man's face emerged through the window. The man, looking directly at the Tampeños, yelled out.

“Tengo hambre!! Que hay para comer??”

A collective cry of joy from the Tampeños startled those standing near them. The man was Luciano who had, in his usual booming voice, declared his hunger, and asked what was for dinner! Within a few

minutes, Luciano had exited the airplane, run across the short tarmac, jumped over the fence, and was hugging and kissing Pina. This was followed by hugs and kisses for the others as well. After managing to calm his family down, Luciano explained he needed to report to the operations office for routine paperwork and would rejoin them in a few minutes. They followed him into the waiting area of the operations office. As they were taking their seats, Luciano turned toward them.

“Mama, Papa. Tengo un buen amigo que es parte de la tripulación mía. Puedo invitarlo a comer con nosotros?”

Luciano had asked his parents if he could invite a good friend and fellow crew member to eat with them. Pina enthusiastically told him that of course he could! She explained that they were eating at Aunt Rosa’s and she always made more than enough food.

Luciano went into the office to complete his paperwork. After a few minutes, he returned, carrying his duffel bag. As the Tampeños rose from their seats, Fernando asked where his friend was. Luciano yelled out toward the office.

“Ralphie, let’s go!”

A man raced out of the office and, approaching the Prendeses from behind, placed his hands over Sofia's and Ignacio's eyes. At the same time, Pina let out a scream that startled everyone in the office.

“Hay suficiente comida para otro Tampeño?”

When the Prendeses turned around, the screams of joy became even louder. Luciano's friend “Ralphie” was none other than Rafael Prendes, and he asked if there was enough food for another Tampeño. Sofia and Ignacio threw themselves into their son's arms. Sofia and Pina were sobbing uncontrollably. Luciano, laughing uncontrollably, herded the group of celebrants outside, wanting to spare the others in the operations office from this joyous chaos.

Anxious to leave the base and make the most of his leave time, Luciano continued his herding all the way to the car, promising a detailed explanation once they were on the road. With Luciano driving, his parents seated next to him, and the three Prendeses seated in the back, the car headed east on Tampa Bay Blvd., toward Gary and a warm Tampeño welcome.

Chapter Sixty-Six

"Por favor! Déjame explicar lo que ha pasado!"

Luciano implored the excited and almost manic Tampeños to please settle down so that he might explain Rafael's presence. They complied with his wishes.

Luciano explained, with Rafael's help, that they had kept in frequent contact throughout each of their training periods. Good fortune intervened when Luciano was transferred to the Maxwell base for B-17 flight training. Located just outside of Montgomery, Alabama, the base was only a two-hour drive from Ft. Benning, which is adjacent to Columbus, Georgia. They had managed to occasionally visit each other whenever possible for the past several months. Fortunately, Rafael was able to arrange a leave that coincided with Luciano's week of training at Drew Field. Luciano was able to get permission for Rafael to hop a ride on his airplane to Tampa, and they decided to surprise their families. As Luciano was approaching Tampa, he had radioed the Drew Field Operations Center and they enthusiastically agreed to assist in their ruse. A good laugh was shared by all.

"Dios mío! Quien tenemos aquí?"

Rosa, in her somewhat broken Spanish, was overcome with emotion and surprise. She and Aaron had rushed over to hug Luciano, initially

oblivious to Rafael's presence. When Rafael stepped into the Licata house from the front porch, she exclaimed "My God! Who have we here?" A frenzied explanation of the surprise was offered as she and Aaron embraced and kissed Rafael. This was followed by an almost infinite round of hugging and kissing from the many other relatives who had gathered for this most special dinner. Many of those in attendance commented that Luciano and Rafael had left Tampa as boys, only to return as men.

Luciano's week of training was passing much too quickly for the Tampeños. They had established a routine which maximized the precious time they had left. Rafael, on leave, stayed with his family on the dairy. Luciano was usually free by late afternoon. Every evening a large dinner with various friends and relatives was arranged at either the Prendes or Suárez homes. Luciano was allowed a leave from duty on his last two days in Tampa, which fell on a weekend. On the Friday prior to Luciano's and Rafael's departure, the two men, along with their parents, gathered for an intimate dinner at the Prendes home. As the six Tampeños began eating, Rafael addressed the group.

"Luciano y yo tenemos algo que decir. En un mes, más o menos, nos van a mandar fuera del país. La verdad es que no sabemos adonde, pero sabemos que va ser afuera de los Estados Unidos. Además de

eso no sabemos nada hasta el último minuto. Y hasta que nos dan permiso, no podemos escribiros."

Rafael had informed his and Luciano's parents that in about a month or so they were both being deployed outside of the United States. They themselves probably wouldn't know where until the very last minute. He added that once deployed, they could not write to them until given permission. It was impossible to know how long that might be.

This announcement was initially met with silence, followed by Sofia and Pina weeping softly. Fernando and Ignacio comforted their wives. Luciano and Rafael followed with failed attempts at reassuring their parents that they would certainly be fine. They all knew no such guarantee could be given.

Luciano was scheduled to fly his plane back to Maxwell on Sunday, in the late afternoon. Due to heightened security, it would not be possible for visitors to accompany Rafael and him onto the base. The two families organized a large potluck lunch for midday Sunday. It was an opportunity for the many friends and relatives to see Luciano and Rafael, and to wish them well. At around 3:30 p.m. Rafael and Luciano said their goodbyes. Their parents escorted them on the short

walk to the main entrance gate of Drew Field. Sofia and Pina each had one of their arms around their son's waist.

As they got to the gate, Luciano told them that they would be taking off to the east, meaning they would fly directly over the Prendes pastures. This would happen in approximately an hour, and he promised that they would be able to recognize his airplane. Fernando wondered aloud how this would be possible. Luciano assured him that it would be. After lastly embracing each of their mothers, the two men turned and walked quickly to the guard shack, showed their papers, and disappeared from view. The two couples comforted each other.

Returning to the Prendes' home, the hosts gathered the remaining guests and ushered them outside and onto the pastures. Less than hour later, numerous aircraft began flying over their heads as they took off into the easterly winds. Still doubting Luciano's assurances, they waved at each airplane, thereby guaranteeing they would send their "boys" a personal goodbye. After a longer than usual pause between the aircraft departures, the Tampeños began walking back toward the house, assuming that the entire squadron had already taken off.

Suddenly an unusually loud sound of aircraft engines caught their attention. Looking upward toward the source of the sound, they saw a

B-17 at an unusually low altitude. As it passed over and beyond them it banked to the left and quickly completed a circular turn back toward them. As it passed overhead a second time, the plane dipped its wings several times in rapid succession and then began to quickly gain altitude. The Tampeños began jumping up and down, shouting out their love and good wishes for Rafael and Luciano. They knew this last airplane was Luciano's.

Three weeks later, Sofia told Pina that letters from Rafael were no longer arriving. Two weeks after that, Pina and Fernando stopped hearing from Luciano. Though this was expected, the silence and lack of information was more stressful for the families than they had anticipated. Several months passed, still with no word from or about Luciano and Rafael. While militarily the war was turning slightly in favor of the allies, the price paid was rapidly increasing American casualties.

On the home front, the shortage of able-bodied young men and women resulted in a labor shortage. Ignacio's dairy business had benefited from a lucrative contract with the military to supply milk and milk products to several military installations in the Tampa area. In the spring of 1943, the U.S. had sent troops to assist Britain in the battle against the Germans and Italians in North Africa, the first American ground troop deployment outside of Asia. As a result of this, the U.S.

was now receiving prisoners of war (POWs) to be housed on various bases throughout the eastern part of the country. This included Tampa's Drew Field.

Considered to be of minimum risk, many of the POWs were used to bolster the labor supply. POWs considered particularly "low risk" were allowed to receive day passes, allowing them to work off-base in varying capacities. Ignacio was able to secure the use of an Italian POW named Antonio Antinori, also known as "Nino". He was a native of Catania, Sicily. Prior to accepting Nino as a day worker, Ignacio had contacted Fernando, asking him if he thought Pina would be willing to act as a translator, explaining to Nino exactly what his duties would be. Fernando, somewhat hesitatingly, agreed. He anticipated that his wife would be opposed to any contact with "the enemy".

"Pina, Ignacio necesita un favor de ti. Hay un prisionero de guerra, un siciliano, que puede ayudar a Ignacio y Anselmo en la lechería. El problema es que nadie en la lechería habla siciliano. Crees que podrías ayudarlo como traductora? Ignacio dice que él entendería si no te sientas cómoda hablando con el enemigo."

Fernando explained Ignacio's request to Giuseppina, telling her that Ignacio would understand if she felt uncomfortable talking to the enemy. Pina's response both intrigued and pleased him.

"Como no, Fernando. Sería un placer. Los dolores y las pérdidas de esta guerra son iguales para madres en todos sitios. No tiene nada que ver con nacionalidades ni fronteras. Quiero creer que si Luciano o Rafael estuviera en una situación parecida, alguna madre alemana, italiana, o japonesa hiciera lo mismo para ellos."

Pina responded that she would be glad to help Ignacio with the translation. She said that the pain and losses of this war were the same for mothers everywhere and they had nothing to do with nationalities or borders. She told Fernando that she would like to think that if Luciano or Rafael were in a similar situation, some German, Italian, or Japanese mother would do the same for them.

Fernando reached over to Pina and kissed her on both cheeks. He had a new appreciation of Pina's devout Christian faith.

To Be Continued.....