

**JOHN
DESIMONE**

**THE
ROAD
TO
DELANO**

rare bird books

los angeles, calif.
This is a Genuine Rare Bird Book

Rare Bird
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To my Huckleberry friend.

With much love.

Sugar

1933 Sugar Duncan was known around Lamoille County as a gambler who could farm, but Sugar called himself a farmer who understood a sure bet. He grew up a plowboy on a hardscrabble patch of Vermont hill country and had calluses before he knew he had brains. It was in the seventh grade, in Pete Colburn's barn, waiting out a driving rain that he found his power. While playing seven-card stud he could see the patterns, he understood the odds. He lived by the bluff, and he lived well as far as a child of the Depression could. Before he reached high school, they were calling him Sugar because he was sweet about taking their money.

While his college buddies baled hay and slopped pigs to pay their way through Ag school at Vermont U, Sugar found it more profitable to relieve the hooligans and rumrunners of their easy fortunes at the card table above Markham's Grill over in Providence. After four years of playing cards and a new degree, he left town to farm where the land hadn't been wiped clean of its strength.

Sugar rode west to California's Central Valley in a Pullman with a new pair of tan and white brogues stuffed with cash packed in the bottom of his steamer. FDR had just signed the Cullen-Harrison Act ending Prohibition, and a fifth of whiskey was now as cheap as an acre of California farmland. He hadn't any choice. Returning to Vermont would mean he'd starve. With gasoline a luxury, his father had resorted to using mules to plow his hundred acres. Milk and corn prices had fallen so sharply, a farmer could live better by killing his cows than by selling their milk. California was the place he could make a living. And he intended to make that living as a farmer— eventually.

A couple of weeks after arriving in Frisco, Sugar stood on the running board of a dusty Model T on the road leading into Delano and surveyed the flatlands of the valley planted in golden September wheat. He removed his hat, wiped his brow with the sleeve of his seersucker suit, and his instinct told him *there* was a sure bet.

He ensconced himself in the Fairmont Hotel on Nob Hill. Each night around six, he made his way downstairs to a back room where he took up residence with a fresh deck of cards and a new bottle of Jim Beam, thankfully back in production, and waited. It didn't take long for his table to fill. About a year later, he bought his first section of land.



On a mission to see an angel, Sugar debarked the Nob Hill trolley at Taylor and California on a foggy Sunday morning, after a long night of wagers and bluffs. Grace Cathedral's carillon was in full melodic stride, pounding out a hymn he hadn't heard in years. He paused midway up the ascending concrete steps, the tip of its campanile obscured in thick fog, trying to recollect its name. He'd not heard that song since he'd left the Methodist church as a teen. The Methodists didn't have bells that could sing like this stone and stained glass beauty now emerging from the mist of the rising morning. Neither did Methodists take kindly to boys who gambled.

The crowd swelled up and carried him along in a cavalcade of San Francisco's best citizens in their finest clothes. The building itself was a monument to European Gothic, with soaring stained glass windows, buttresses, candelabras of beaten silver, and hard oak pews. Striding down the wide center aisle, he nodded at several men

he'd become acquainted with in the back room of the Fairmont. The altar was a majestic slab of marble, adorned with satin cloth and golden candlesticks. Three stained glass Palladian windows rose four stories behind it.

In the warm umbra of the early light, he waited to see for himself what Mr. Dalton, a colleague in cards, had meant by angels appearing during the service. Not that he disbelieved in the possibility of divine intervention, he just wanted to witness it for himself. The choir assembled in a rustle of white robes trimmed with red satin stoles.

According to the Order of Service, they began with "*Jesu, meine Freude*" and while it wasn't ordinary, it wasn't angelic to Sugar's tastes. At least not in the way Dalton had described a divine manifestation. At the refrain, a raven-haired singer stepped forward, a few light steps and she settled in a sliver of light from above. The choir hushed. The congregation quit their fidgeting. She lifted her voice, and something inside him ascended along with her, sweeping him up, so even the German lyrics took on a secret meaning. The importance of the lyrics magnified by her conviction, a message from God, undecipherable, but absolutely true. Her music expanded to fill every cubit of the vault. When she finished the quietness of the miraculous settled over the congregation, a hushed moment of wonder. She melded back into the white-clad choir. A part of Sugar refused to return, still soaring high, shiny and lit by the sun. He perused the Order of Service again: Soloist Miss Shirley Gray. Now here was a dark-haired angel he had to meet.

Shortly after purchasing his fourth section, Sugar drove his shiny black Model A back along the road to Delano, with a lovely and satisfied Miss Shirley Gray bundled in the seat next to him. She wore a white cotton dress in the new style almost to her knees and a silk scarf to tamp her beautiful black hair down against the sweep of dry valley air rushing across the flatlands. And she had the long slender fingers of a pianist, the daintiest of hands that Sugar wanted desperately to hold in his.

Sugar parked along the shoulder of the dusty county road. He helped her out, then led her through the scrub and mesquite. Not a tall man, but neither was he short, he had the build and stride of a man who had worked the land, though his hands had gone soft from playing cards. His black hair was swept back under a new fedora, and he was dressed in a new Brooks Brothers suit, with a pleat cut to the pants and two-tone white and tan oxfords. Shirley picked her way, slipping her slender legs through gaps in the brush; with dainty steps she skirted the holes and dips.

Not far off the road, they stopped on a gentle rise to survey the sparse landscape in silent awe. His suit jacket flapped in the breeze. Water in Spring Gulch that cut across the southwest corner glistened blue in the brightness. The sky appeared so translucent he considered the possibility of seeing straight through to heaven. She pushed her hair under her scarf and had to work to keep her skirt from flying up. Her hand shielding her dazzled eyes, she turned full around taking in the flat expanse and let out a low sigh.

"This would be a nice place to build a house," Sugar said.

"A farmhouse?"

He turned to her. "Why a farmhouse?"

She couldn't conceal her smile. "I always wanted to marry a farmer and live on a farm." Her cheeks now blushed. He took up her hand in his, fresh and light, the skin of her palm as smooth as a baby's face.

"What about marrying a gambler?"

"Never." She stepped away, letting his hand go before he could read her eyes. For all of his acumen in divining the facial expressions of card players, he was at a loss to understand the game she was playing. Driving home, he thought of explaining his view of gambling and farming, how they both entailed managing risks, calculating odds, and the subtle art of placing a bet. But she'd already revealed her hand. She would marry a

farmer. He realized then that if she had said she dreamed of marrying a gambler, he would have no use for her. He had every intention of playing his last game—soon. He just needed a better stake.

A few days later Sugar visited the offices of Collette and Sons and signed a contract to build an impressive Victorian home on the site that had made Miss Shirley Gray sigh with undeniable pleasure. Something like the grand mansions that stood on Nob Hill, he told old man Collette, who listened while stroking his heroic mustache.

Mr. Collette built the three-story Victorian with two turrets, gabled roof with dormers, and a wide veranda on the rise Shirley had enjoyed, in the southeast corner where Spring Gulch swept by. A natural spring ran in a culvert fronting his acreage, bequeathing the riparian land rights.

In March of '39, he escorted the new Mrs. Shirley Duncan down the aisle of Grace Episcopal Cathedral. Descending through the gauntlet of rice to their waiting Cadillac, he now owned four thousand acres of the most fecund soil west of the Mississippi. When he proposed to her, she had reminded him that she wouldn't tolerate any more gambling. He sealed the deal with a promise that he had played his last card game and would plant his land that spring.

So the year before their wedding, he had planted all his land in durum wheat. When Sugar wasn't watching his supervisor, Isidro Sanchez, work a crew of men plowing in John Deere tractors from an hour before dawn until an hour after sunset, he spent time in his farm office on the second floor planning and figuring. Across from his office, Shirley set up her sewing room with the new Singer machine her mother gave her as a wedding gift. When she wasn't sewing dresses and shirts or a new buckskin jacket for Sugar, she played her Steinway grand in the parlor, running through Chopin and Schubert. In the late afternoon, Sugar would lean against the doorway in the hall, one foot across the other, his planter's hat askew on his head like a man on the hunt. She'd break into a high fevered Benny Goodman or his favorite jazz piece, and he'd sit close by, tapping his foot to the time and smiling like a man who'd eaten ice cream his whole life and was better for it.

In the evening, when the heat had dried out every ounce of a man's efforts, Sugar took Shirley's hand and led her into the parlor and stacked their favorite albums on the phonograph. The sound of jazz and swing filled the house. They fox-trotted across the floor, their bodies swinging and pulsing to the beat. Her scent a promise of her treasure. Sugar held her close as a certainty against all the uncertainties. And they kissed in the vanilla moonlight that streamed in through the tall windows, her slimness against his, warm and powerful and urgent.



One day Shirley brought coffee on a silver serving tray up to his office. She wore a new spring dress, white with purple violets splashed across it from the hem to the collar, one she made herself. Sugar introduced her to a well-dressed man with slicked-back hair black as coal. He rose when she entered, a tan planter's hat in his hand. She set the coffee service down on a Queen Anne side table and poured two cups, and took one to her guest.

Both of the men stood. "Shirley, this is Herm Gordon."

Herm held out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Duncan. Sugar's told me a lot about you."

"And what do you do?"

"I'm with Lacy's Farm Equipment," he said while fingering the brim of his hat.

"Herm says they're coming out with a new combine that'll harvest fifty acres an hour," Sugar said.

"You say so," she said.

"Three times faster than what we have now," Sugar said.

"You say so." She handed him the cup and saucer.

He took the coffee. "I do," Herm said a broad smile on his face.

"Do you take sugar, Mr. Gordon, or cream?" She motioned toward the tray.

"No, thank you. I always drink mine black." He stirred the coffee with the silver teaspoon, tapped the rim once, and set it on the saucer.

"Herm's been selling farm equipment in the valley for years. He's seen it all. He thinks our place will be one of the most productive around."

She handed Sugar his cup and saucer and looked over the salesman one more time.

"Yes, Ma'am," Herm nodded. "Usually farmers aren't too friendly to new ways, but not Sugar."

"You look way too young to have seen that many harvests, Mr. Gordon."

Herm smiled, and two dimples formed in the center of his cheeks, both fired with a flash of blush. "Good food and fresh air. It keeps me young."

"Herm also said we might look into planting grapes. There's a trade group over in Delano that's made up mostly of grape growers.

He thinks I should join."

"You think so, Mr. Gordon," she said.

"Grapes are the biggest cash crop. It's the future of Delano as long as labor's so cheap and we get the water."

Sugar set his cup down and looked at her inquisitively as if wondering what she would say.

"Well," Shirley said, touching her throat. "Then maybe we should plant some grapes."

"A couple of hundred acres in the east sector to start." Sugar pointed toward the large plat map on the wall.

Herm nodded, and Sugar smiled, and he asked her to sit with them as they talked of hardiness and climate and varieties. Sugar favored wine grapes, Herm table grapes.

"I love Thompson Seedless," Shirley said. "I could eat those forever."

The men gave each other knowing looks. "Well, then, let's start with Thompsons," Sugar said.

Sugar prospered during the war years because everything that could be eaten was in high demand. The US military coveted his high-protein durum. And his land had the highest yields an acre of any in the valley. Shirley took advantage of the good years and had a half-acre set aside behind the house. She reminded Sugar she didn't want any planting up to the porches just to maximize the yields. He had a wooden fence built around her parcel where she planted a garden. Shirley in her woven sun hat and pedal pushers, she laid out neat rows of vegetables and flowers and she purchased seedlings for apricot, peach, and orange trees. And in the heart of the garden, she built a grape arbor, cool and shady, where she often rested from the afternoon heat.

Around the oak in the front yard, she sowed Bermuda grass that would take the heat and wear of the large family she and Sugar were working on, but that hadn't taken root yet. Soon the tree would spread its thick limbs, and she'd hang a swing from it and rock her boys in the silent rhythms of the Central Valley breezes.

The year the Sears and Roebuck opened in town, Shirley bought a brand-new Singer sewing machine, one that could do thirty different stitches, and had a foot pedal. She enlarged her sewing room on the second floor by taking over a second bedroom and turned out dresses and shirts for farmers' wives who came to the house to be measured and choose patterns.

It seemed every few days she had a new dress—winter dresses with heavy fabrics; spring dresses white with flowers; bright summer dresses, light and swishy; and autumn always brought out the burnt oranges and browns. She sewed dresses to dine in, to dance in, and to listen to music in, and practical dresses to work in, which had all the elegance of the city, but with large pockets for gloves and scissors and trimmers and small spades.

Shirley didn't like the cars being covered in dust from the wind that often blasted down from the foothills. So Sugar built a car barn on the east side of the house, in the same style of the three-story Victorian. They painted it tan with dark brown trim to match the house whose two turrets, dormer windows, slender brick chimneys, and peaked roofs with gingerbread trim rose three stories above the parched brown fields, a castle on an isolated plain.

In the years after the war life settled in for them and Sugar sold every bushel he grew. By 1950, Sugar's first table grape harvest had grown to two hundred acres, and he knew the future was in grapes. Prior years he'd sold them to winemakers because their appearance didn't matter. But table grapes were different. Appearance and sweetness were as important as price, and table grapes cost three times what vineyards paid.

Some of what he knew about grapes he learned at the dinner table. Shirley would only set her table with grapes that were the sweetest tasting, had a consistent golden hue, and had the fewest marks of rot and pests. If he could please her, he could satisfy any woman in America. His Thompsons pleased her immensely.

"It's like eating raindrops coated with sugar," she said one night at dinner, after plucking a few damp golden grapes from a bowl. There was a sweet satisfaction that ran across her smile that traveled right up into a happy squint in her eyes. If he could grow the best grapes in the Central Valley with his own brand, he could ship them all over the world. But he'd need a completely new way of farming. The work and cost to convert his land would stretch every financial resource. He'd have to do it soon because wheat just didn't bring the profit it once had.

Though anything a man planted around Delano seemed to grow taller and thicker than in other parts, Shirley didn't get pregnant until early 1950. One evening, both of them sat in the parlor, after she'd learned she was expecting their first child, listening to Benny Goodman on their Victrola when the announcer broke in. Shirley crocheted. Sugar read a book. They both set down their work at the sound of President Truman's voice. The president spoke in a grave tone, one that matched his declaration of a national emergency because of the North Korean Communist's attack on peaceful South Korea. He had considered using an atomic bomb to stop them.

Shirley stifled a gasp. "An atom bomb," she said, shaking her head, "again?"

Sugar shushed her with a hand, and he bent to the radio. She pursed her lips and listened.

"He's sending MacArthur to kick them damn communists' butts," Sugar said when the radio address finished.

"But a nuclear bomb, honey? If he used it the whole world would be in flames again."

Sugar smirked at the sly grin that crept across her face. "See, already you understand the difficulty communist subversives would have in our own community," he said. "We got MacArthur on our flank ready to reap havoc, Truman in DC ready to drop the A-bomb, and the mothers of America protecting our farms. Those dirty Reds can't win for nothing."

She laughed and held out her hand, and he took it. She drew him toward her, and placed his warm palm on her stomach, and went back to crocheting. "We'll soon have more to think about ourselves." Comfortable beside her, Sugar felt warm with that consideration.

Later that year she delivered a 7lb. 4oz. boy on the third of December around midnight, as the silvery moon rose full over the land. She wanted to name him Jack, after her grandfather, but Sugar wanted Paul.

"Paul? You don't have any relative named Paul."

"I like Paul. It's from the Bible."

She looked at him, her head askance. "I know that."

"I spent a lot of time reading the Bible when I was younger. It's a good book."

The baby made one of those sucking noises that distracted both of them. Shirley pulled him away and gently held him while Sugar placed a cloth diaper on her shoulder. She settled the boy on the white square and lightly tapped his back. After he burped, she held his tiny body in front of her.

“I think he looks like Jack? But then I can see Paul too.”

Sugar brushed at a tiny wisp of hair on his head. “You’re right about that. He’s going to be a man among men, well-trained in the ways of the land.”

After all the baby’s noises ended, she held him under his arms and lifted him high in the air, letting his little feet dangle. “Well then, how do you do, Mr. Paul Jack Duncan? Welcome to Duncan Farms.”

Sugar smiled and touched her cheek with the back of his hand

Sugar and Shirley soon began calling their son Jack. Like his father, he took to the details of farming. One cold morning, after the final wheat harvest, Jack rode the tractor with Isidro as he prepared the land for planting grapes. Year-old vines were stored in their canisters on the north side of the ranch. When spring warmed the air, they would begin planting. Jack rose early during that spring planting to watch the men loading the young plants on flat trailers before leaving for the fields. Rising early became second nature to him, like every good farmer. Before school, he fed the chickens in the small coop his mother built behind the car barn and brought in fresh eggs before catching the bus on the county road.

Summer evenings, with the land resting in the heat, the family would sit out on the large porch that wrapped around the front and side of the house. They watched the fireflies light up the night air and listened to the croaking of tree frogs under the starlight while they drank sweet lemonade squeezed from the fruit grown in Shirley’s own garden. Sugar told jokes and stories as the three of them rocked back and forth on the porch swing, Jack squished between them like a ripe watermelon aching to break open, while they swirled away the still evenings.



The year Jack turned eight, just after the grape harvest, Shirley sat at the kitchen table, one hand on her stomach the other over her mouth, a glass bowl on the table in front of her. Jack brought her a glass of water and set it on the table. Jack was hoping for a baby brother. She’d told him they wanted so many more brothers and sisters, but it had been hard for her to get pregnant. The doctor had advised extra caution, afraid she would miscarry as she had before. So she had decided to stay home when Dad went to the annual Association meeting in San Francisco where he’d been invited to speak.

On that Friday in November, after Dad turned out of the driveway on his way to Frisco, the phone calls started up again.

They’d changed their number three times over the past year and a half. Each time the calls would stop for a while, then a month or so later start up again. Every time the phone jangled in the hall or the kitchen, Shirley would sit up real straight and get this far-off look in her eyes as if she already heard what was being said on the line. She never told him who called or what they wanted, but Jack knew they disturbed her. Dad never said much about them either. But one night after Jack went to bed, when they thought he was asleep, he could hear the two of them up late talking about something. There was a sternness in their voices, so he knew it was something important. At times they argued. Then it would be quiet till the deep darkness of the morning, the phone would ring again, and between each metal jangle the house took on a vacant silence. He imagined his parents lying awake down the hall, staring into the darkness, holding their breaths, hoping it would stop. But it kept on. Then they would stop for a time. And they all breathed a sigh that maybe whatever had caused them to ring in the first place had passed by them.

Friday evening, Jack ran to answer it in the kitchen, but she called to him. He pulled up short, wishing he could lift the receiver to hear that voice. Maybe he might recognize him. He'd shoot his eyes out next chance he had, just for causing all this fear.

"Leave it alone." She called to him in her don't-mess-withme voice.

Jack held up, waiting for it to stop. Dad planned on returning after the banquet on Saturday night. He didn't want to be away too long with Shirley needing him as she did. So in a day or so this ringing would pass.

When the kitchen phone rang later that afternoon, they both stared at it.

"That could be Sugar." She stared at the black rattling instrument. "He's probably in Frisco by now." She rose and answered it. She listened for a while, her eyes turning frightened then angry. "Stop calling here." Her voice was controlled, but Jack knew she was afraid. She dropped it on the cradle. From the slump of her shoulders, he could see her fear. She had one hand to her forehead, another on her mouth.

"Who is it, Mom? I'll kick his butt."

"You'll do no such thing."

He thought she dabbed at her eyes before she turned to sit back down. Jack ran upstairs to his room, loaded his BB gun, pumped it up, and leaned it against the wall by his bedroom door. He knew where Dad kept his hunting rifle and shotgun in the bedroom closet if he needed them. At the bottom of the stairs, he stood where he could see into the kitchen one way and another way to the front door.

When she didn't hear from Sugar on Saturday morning when he promised to call, she paced the kitchen, a worried look on her face. She kept saying as much to herself as to him that everything was okay. After the Association meeting, Dad would probably make the rounds at the jazz clubs in Frisco, probably listened until the sun came up. Jack kept thinking to himself that Dad was just fine, having fun somewhere, telling jokes, laughing and smoking cigars. He would call soon.

She kept up a constant patter of reasons why he hadn't called. When the phone rang Saturday at midmorning, she hustled to the hall extension on the second floor. She gave a cheery "Hello." Jack could tell by the sudden tightening of her face, the voice on the other end wasn't Dad's. She held the phone in the air for a moment, then dropped it to the cradle as if it was contaminated, wiping her sweating palm on her dress.

"Who was that, Mom?" Jack stood a few feet down the darkened hall. When she didn't answer, he asked again. "Just a wrong number."

After church on Sunday, she paced the hall by the telephone, forgetting the time until Jack called to her that he'd made a dinner of tuna fish sandwiches and lemonade. There were more calls, and out of her anxiety, she answered them all, but after listening for a few moments, she'd slam the receiver down hard on the cradle.

Late Sunday she called his hotel. He always stayed at the Fairmont, but they had no record of him checking out. They called back later to tell her his belongings were still in his room, but none of the hotel staff had seen him since Saturday. Was he home and forgot to pack and check out? Did she want his clothes shipped?

Monday she spent hours calling the hospitals. He hadn't been admitted to any of the local ones, but one woman asked if she'd called the police. She did and was switched to a detective who handled missing persons. The man kept her on the phone, which made her wonder if they'd found his body and this cop was trying to figure out a pleasant way to deliver the news.

Tuesday she sat on the rose-patterned sofa in the parlor with her face in her hands when Jack left for school. When he got home, she still had not risen from her place by the phone. She asked him to make some lemonade and maybe sandwiches for them. When he brought in a tray full of food and drink, she took the glass he offered in one hand and ran the other through his longish brown hair, but she didn't take a sip.

Wednesday he didn't go to school. She sent him to the door when neighbors stopped by. Later that day, she heard men talking to Jack at the door, voices she didn't recognize. Men in police uniforms—one tall and thin, the other short and stocky—stopped asking questions when they saw her. When she noticed the brown Plymouth parked behind them in the drive, something came untethered, and she moved around as if she was trying to float away. She squeezed Jack's shoulder, and he held her hand tightly.

"Can I help you?" she said, talking to them through the screen.

"Mrs. Duncan," the first man said in uniform, touching the brim of his white Stetson.

"I'm Sheriff Gates. Can we talk?" "I'm listening," she said.

"We're here about Sugar."

She folded her arms and turned from the door. The two men stood on the polished wood of the cool hallway, hats in hand. The short one built like a whiskey barrel nodded toward Jack. She stood in the hall considering for a long moment. She invited them into the parlor and turned to Jack.

"Honey, come over here." The two stood together in front of the sofa. "He's a part of this." She fixed her eyes on the two.

"If you say so," the sheriff said. He introduced Detective Sergeant Kipps of the San Francisco PD.

"All the way from San Francisco, Detective Kipps?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I was asked by Sheriff Gates to report on your husband's stay at the Fairmont Hotel."

"What did you find?"

Kipps hesitated. Sheriff Gates nodded at him. Kipps cleared his throat.

"We have his belongings from the Fairmont in the car, Ma'am."

She bit her lip. "Where's Sugar?"

"That's what we've come about," the sheriff said. "We found his car on Highway 7, heading east, right over the Kern County line."

Mom's eyes turned suddenly hard as if she was tightening up expecting a big blow. "Yes."

"As close as we can tell, he ran off the road and crashed into a deep gully."

"Where's Dad now?" Jack nearly shouted.

Neither of the men said anything; their eyes turned furtive.

"We found him in the vehicle," Sheriff Gates said in a consoling whisper. "There was nothing we could do for him." From his low tone, almost like a voice you'd use when telling someone good night, Jack wasn't at all certain what he was saying.

Mom closed her eyes and stood motionless. All the air of expectation seeped out of her as if she could sigh right through her pores. Her whole spine went slack, and she slid right onto the sofa. Jack sat beside her, and she clutched his hand. The two men took a step forward, but she held up her hand. Her eyes were downcast for a long while as if she were gathering her thoughts.

Dad in a car wreck? People got in wrecks and were fine. But these men were acting strange, and Jack wanted to know where he was now. If they found him then why wasn't everyone happy about it? There was a light tapping at the screen door.

"That's Sugar's luggage," Sheriff Grant said. "You want him to bring it in now?"

"Why didn't he check out himself?"

Kipps cleared his throat. "Witnesses report he spent the evening at the tables in the backroom of the Fairmont all night after his speech. He never went back to his room. Rumor is he ran into some trouble at the tables."

“Sugar gave up gambling twenty-five years ago, Mr. Kipps,” Shirley said, getting her matter of fact tone back under her. She squeezed Jack’s hand tighter till the little bones in his knuckles hurt, but he didn’t say anything. Jack tried to figure where Dad might be, and why they couldn’t help him, and why the sheriff would have to bring Dad’s luggage all the way out here.

“I doubt if those rumors are true.” She put a finger to the corner of her eye and wiped something away.

“All five men who played with him had the same story,” Kipps said.

“He’s not a gambler, Mr. Kipps.”

There was another tapping at the screen.

Shirley glanced up. “Let the boy in.”

The sheriff went into the hall and returned with a young fellow carrying three pieces of luggage and a leather briefcase. He settled them on the floor right in the doorway between the hall and the parlor then straightened up. The nameplate on his breast pocket read Cadet Earl Kauffman.

While the sheriff whispered to Shirley, Jack fixated on his father’s suitcase. If that was Dad’s stuff, then he wasn’t coming back. And the house around him that’d been so full of everything he could ever want was suddenly empty; a vast place opened inside, dark and vacant. His world slowed, and snippets of the talk reached him— “car crushed...gambling and drinking...morgue...must identify the body...sorry for your loss...”

He shot up from his seat and turned to his mother’s Steinway behind him, where Dad used to stand and listen to her play, and smile while he tapped his foot. And Jack thought he saw him there, holding his hat, brimming with satisfaction after a day of work, nodding at him to come over and join the fun, the room emptied, and he knew.

Scalding streams flowed down his cheeks, and he ran, banging through the kitchen. Mom’s plaintive voice, calling for him, faded as he slammed out the back door into the yard, trounced across her garden, and bolted flat out into the vines, screaming as he tore into Dad’s fields, green and freshly brushed by the afternoon breeze.

Chapter 1

The Combine

1968

The voices from the fields woke Jack early on Saturday. The musky odor of grapes sifted into his bedroom even though his closed window was shut to the morning cold. He pulled back the drape and row upon row of trellised vines emerged from the gauzy twilight. They stretched to the horizon on three sides of his house. He thrust the window up and leaned out, and a biting wind chilled his face. Thick dark clouds filled the sky, and the voices of workers trimming and bundling echoed in the morning stillness. In these quiet moments, he imagined the land calling to him. Did it matter anymore that all of it was gone?

“Jack, you up?” his mother called from downstairs.

Off to the east, a red bruise ran across the rugged spine of the Sierra peaks. The air heavy with moisture, it was time to get on the road before a storm rolled in.

Jack slipped into his jeans and plaid shirt, tall and sinewy, hardened from work and sports. Ella, his girlfriend, always told him he never fought his clothes like some guys; they moved with him. He didn’t know what to say when she said things like that. He brushed back his blond crew cut and stooped to tie his boots, then he snatched his sheepskin coat off the hook by the door. His mother called again.

The day was already half gone from the tone of her voice.

In the kitchen, he grabbed a piece of toast, slurped some coffee, and bolted outside.

He mounted the cab of his father's dirt-splattered combine parked by the rickety porch of the Victorian, now tired and sagging. Jack fired it up and the engine idled under his throttle foot. The strong pulses surprised him after all those years of sitting idle. He revved it up, ready to make its last run into Delano.

The cab of the boxy, once-bright yellow combine, now the peeling paint, was pocked with rust, perched over the rotary thresher blade in front, raised for road travel. The square separation box that stripped the stalks of their grain pods hunched behind him. Most of the gauges worked—fuel, oil, temp, volts. He flicked on the headlights in the gray morning, two above on the cab's roof and two below, illuminating the rusting threshing blade.

"Mr. Lacy's waiting for you." His mother stood on the porch, her arms crossed over her chest. Her back erect, and her gray hair pulled back in a ponytail, still marked with the leanness of one who worked the land.

Despite his sheepskin coat with the collar up and a knit cap over his crew cut, the damp chill sunk through. He tugged on the rim of his cap, snugging it tight, ready to go. The importance of the moment weighed on him. She was counting on him. He eyed the road at the end of the drive.

"I'm expecting you back by ten." Tall and pensive, she studied him with her steely gaze. Fatigue, worry, or both, Jack wasn't certain, had settled around her eyes, etching thin branches that fanned out to her temples. "Don't stop for anybody. If any of those strikers get in your way, just plow through them, you hear?"

He nodded, but he wouldn't be plowing through anyone. With this beast on the road, folks naturally gave way.

Standing on the porch with an expectant look in her eyes, she suddenly appeared younger, fresh-faced and fearless, the way she must have looked to his father before he went off to work his fields. Before their life had become unraveled and they had to sell everything, down to the last working piece of the old ranch to keep a roof over their heads.

He ran his hand over the control panel. This is where his father used to sit. He gripped the wheel. Somehow, it had become a measuring device for what his father had missed all these years. The baseball games he had never seen Jack play, the fun they never had together. He pushed down hard on the brake pedal and fiddled with the front rotor switch. If he spun these blades, would they speak to him? Maybe there was some lever here he could pull that would fill in all the blanks in his life, that would tell him why his father had left them to their own fates. He shook his head. He was just fooling himself—there was no way of knowing what his life would have been like with his father around. Now was an excellent time to be rid of this memory-laden contraption.

A shaft of brightness broke through. Shielding his eyes, he squinted into the sun peeking from behind an ominous bank of blackbottomed clouds. He had to get moving before the sky broke open.

Ella waited in her black-and-gold trimmed El Camino under the spreading oak tree at the front of the yard. She had agreed to follow him. If the machine broke down, she could drive him into town for help. Ella waved, and her long brown hair caught in the rising wind, covering her face. They had met their sophomore year, and now they both were graduating in June. He signaled back, released the brake, and eased out the clutch, which gave off a whiny clank as he shifted into first. The boxy contraption rolled forward, rattling and jiggling, out of the yard.

He turned into County Road 33, a hard-packed dirt road. A chill damp wind kicked harder against his face. He passed the Dakota family's fields that already sprouted a spring crop in some of the straightest rows he had ever seen. The air smelled of dark earth, freshly upturned and dark with moisture. The sun ducked in and out from behind a bank of black-bottomed clouds blowing right at him.

He had driven in this weather. It wasn't pleasant, but the land had never swallowed him whole. It was eight miles to Delano and Lacy's Tractor dealership. About an hour and a half drive if he trotted this beast.

The wind whipped his face. At one time, the cab had side windows, but they had long ago disappeared. The windshield had one working wiper. The rubber blade had rotted away, but it might help some. He pressed the accelerator, taking it up to six miles per hour, but the motor cowling behind him vibrated violently, so he eased off.

His mother's angst over driving these roads in a rickety combine wasn't hard to understand. These weren't the easiest of times around Delano. She wouldn't stop reminding him of what had happened just last week down the road. Thugs had waylaid a carload of strikers and busted out their windshield, their headlights, and threatened their lives unless they left the county. But no one would bother a guy in a combine going about his business.

A muddy road was the biggest threat. If the combine got stuck in the mud, it would take a couple of tow trucks to yank it out. Something his mother couldn't afford. She needed every penny to open her shop.

After crossing over Highway 99, County Road 33 turned into Cecil Road. The road was a straight shot into town, but the combine was too wide to take directly into town, so he would need to hang a right on D Street, and then turn left onto Kelly Avenue. Lacy's Tractor Dealership was right on the corner of Kelly Street and F Street. It would be an easy drive.

Ella drove close behind with her lights on. He made the turn on D Street, and it was a straight run down a freshly graveled dirt road that gently undulated with the land. It sliced through pastureland. Drainage gullies ran along each side.

The rain began in sporadic windswept sheets. He buttoned up his jacket, pulling the sheepskin collar tighter against him. Heavy rain beat in slanting waves on the thin roof. The wind whipped water into his face, soaking his jacket, running down his jeans. He gritted his teeth and leaned forward peering into the gray. Already runoff gathered in shallow pools in the road.

He switched on the wiper. It smeared the water around in a blurry mess, so he shut it off. The road softened, and the big machine wobbled on the uneven road, threatening to bog down. He gunned the motor and squinted to see through the deluge. Once, then again, the tall slick tires slipped in the soggy earth, and the cab rocked in the wind. He willed the machine to keep moving, hunched forward over the wheel, face to the stinging wind.

The clouds lowered and heaved toward him. He held the machine steady on the center crown. If the motor didn't die on him, he could make Delano before he froze or drowned. He plowed slowly through a puddle halfway up the tires, feathering the clutch and gas to keep moving. Not too fast so the tires wouldn't dig in.

At a deeper depression, he trotted the combine down the muddy slope, slow and steady, keeping his progress firm, until the left rear tire lost traction. A swift current pushed him to the right. Downshifting to first, he throttled it up, easing the clutch out until the front wheels of the boxy machine plowed on. The motor strained as he gassed it. The rear wheels grabbed, and he slushed forward up and out of the mud onto the graveled road.

The El Camino stopped at the opposite edge. He halted and leaned out of the cab. She would never make it through. Ella yelled at him from the half-open door. The rain swiftly plastered her hair to her face. She would backtrack to the 99. Get off the dirt road, and wait for him where Kelly Street crossed under the 99. That's where the pavement began. He waved her off and moved on. If he stayed in one place too long, the combine would sink. He had to push on.

Rain pelted him in windswept sheets, obscuring his sight to just feet. Creeping along he saw two red eyes staring at him off to his right through the watery veil. He cupped his hand over his eyes, blinking away the water. Could be a driver standing on his brake pedal, run off the side of the road. He rolled closer. Sure enough, it was

a white Cadillac, late fifties, with a black landau top. Its rear taillights were two bullets of red in the gloom, and the front wheels were off the road in the water-filled gully. The tail fins stuck out into the road like an artifact from space half buried in the mud. He crept up beside it. Was someone hurt?

The driver door opened and a man in a three-piece suit stepped into the downpour. He wore a black fedora that shed water off in sheets. Obscured by the brim of cascading water, the man stood tall in the rain as if it were a sunny day, grasping a silver metallic attaché case like Mr. Franks his math teacher at school used.

A fool city boy for sure. He would drown out here behaving like that. Jack inched the machine closer to the tall, lean man, dressed like a slicker among the pastures. The rain slacked a bit, and the man lifted his chin and gave Jack a steady gaze. He did not seem at all distressed.

Jack leaned toward him. "You look familiar, Mister. Do I know you?"

The man touched the brim of his hat, "Herm Gordon. I've known you since you were a child, but you probably don't remember me. I was a friend of your father."

Sure, the man in the photos with Dad in the farm office. The guy with his arm around Dad in the plowed field. Jack set the brake. The combine idled. A bright beam broke through a patch of dark sky.

He clambered down into the muddy road. Herm extended his open palm ignoring the fact he was being soaked by a downpour. They shook. "Pleased to finally meet you, Jack."

"If you need a lift, hop on the running board, Mr. Gordon. I can take you into Delano."

"I don't need a ride, Jack. I have something for you." He held out the silver briefcase. "Could you step into my car for a few moments?"

I want to show you some important documents that pertain to your father. Then you can be on your way."

He patted the case. Water dripped off his flat brim down his shoulders. "We don't have a lot of time, Jack."

Jack shook his head at the craziness. The rain slowed, and he sighed thinking about stopping for some fool in an ill-fitting suit. But this wasn't just any old guy. Herm Gordon was a longtime friend of the family. He looked the same from the photos, only with creases down his cheeks.

"I've got to get this machine into Delano before it floods. Do we have to do this now?"

"I need to show you this before you sell the combine."

Jack stepped back a pace. "How'd you know about that?"

"Heavens, Jack, Chuck Lacy over at Lacy's Tractor is one of my best friends. I worked for him for more than forty years. He mentioned your predicament to me. I knew you'd come right down this way since this is the most direct route into Delano for big farm equipment. Besides—," his voice broke off for a moment as if lost in a memory, taking in the creaky machine that idled just a few feet from him. A note of sadness flickered across the man's eyes.

"Besides what, Mister?"

"I sold this thing to your dad. What, thirty years ago, now." The man turned to the road. "We drove it right along here to get it to your place."

"And you know why we have to sell this?" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Everyone knows, Jack. The county published the tax sale notice in the papers. But that's not the point. Lacy told me you'd be bringing it in today, so I figured this is where'd I'd get a chance to talk. I know why you shouldn't have to sell it."

Jack edged forward. "What?"

“Time’s slipping away, Jack. If you don’t show up soon in Delano, your mother will be on the phone with the sheriff. But before you sell that machine, I have some information for you. You need to know the truth about your father. Besides, it looks like the suns coming out and the road will be drier soon if you wait it out a bit.”

Jack lifted his cap and wiped the water from his face. What good would it do to bring that up now? He had to get to Delano. Jack stared at the man. He couldn’t completely stifle his curiosity about his father.

“What do you know about my dad?”

Herm Gordon patted the case and turned to the Cadillac DeVille. The big car angled off the road with its right front wheel in the ditch and the left on the lip of the slope. To reach the drivers’ door, you had to step into the muddy ditch, but the back door was an easy step right off the road. Herm opened the DeVille’s back door, the interior dark and inviting. He motioned for Jack to enter.

“How long’s this going to take?”

“Not more than five.”

Jack studied the road ahead. The rain had lifted, and the car and combine lay in a patch of warming yellow light. Ahead, clouds of fog gathered on the road. If he waited five minutes, the way would firm up, and the mist could blow off. But he’d need to get going before the Tule fog set in.

The combine’s motor sounded strong and would idle just fine for five minutes. Jack slid into the back seat and sank into the plush upholstery. The air smelled sweet like cherry tobacco.

“I’m sorry about the water and the mud, Mr. Gordon.” The car was warm and dry and felt comfortable after that jittering ride.

“Don’t worry about that, Jack.” He settled in and slammed the heavy door. The dark brown upholstery with brocade ropes across the back of the seats made him feel like he was in a rich man’s limousine. He had seen cars like this in town but never been in one. He glimpsed the combine out the back window, but he couldn’t hear it. The quiet was eerie but pleasant.

Herm took off his fedora and tossed it in the front seat. He wiped back his gray hair, wringing out the water. He retrieved two hand towels from the front seat, handed one to Jack.

“Take off your coat and dry yourself off,” Herm Gordon said. “You’ll be more comfortable.”

Jack didn’t want to, but it had become soggy. He shrugged out of it and laid it on the front seat, then dried his face and hands. Herm flopped down the hand rest between the seats and put the case flat between them. He snapped the two latches, lifting the lid toward Jack. Gordon rifled through papers inside the case, looking for something, his eyes crinkling with concentration.

“Here it is.” Herm pulled out a thick manila envelope.

Jack fidgeted. Had he made a mistake getting in the car? He should go right now, get on with his trip.

“What’s so urgent I’ve got to see it right now?”

“Patience, my boy.” Gordon opened the flap. With one eye on Jack, Herm slid out a document, stamped with official seals and signatures.

“This is a copy of San Francisco PD’s police report.”

“Why don’t you come by the house and show this stuff to my mom? She’s the one who would want to see it.”

Herm spoke low and deliberate. “Your mother’s seen it.” He slid the police report back in the envelope and set it on top of the silver case. “I think you ought to know the truth about your father.”

“What truth?” Jack ground his teeth as he studied Herm’s face. This man knew his father well. There were photos of the two all over the farm office wall. It was likely the man knew something his mother would never tell him. His mother probably had already told him everything she planned to say about his father. She had a reluctance to give him too many details about how they lost the land. That had always bothered him. Here in the oddest of place, at this crucial moment, the truth just happened to meet him on the road.

He tried to figure if Herms showing up here was a coincidence or an answer to what he’d always craved.

He turned and eyed the combine through the back window. He couldn’t hear it, but he could see it vibrating as it idled in the road. The machine would be just fine while the road dried.

“Jack.” Gordon fixed his tan eyes on him, clear like the wind sweeping over a ripening wheat field. “You need to know how your mother lost her land.”

“She always told me Dad lost it in a card game.”

“He never gambled that night.”

“What night?”

“The night he died,” Herm said. “He gave up gambling when he married your mother. I know that for a fact.”

Jack caught himself gaping at the man’s words. His mother had always told him his father had fallen into his old habits of gambling and drinking. There was something strange about her story and that old man Kolcinivitch would end up owning his dad’s 4,000 acres of grape fields over a card game.

“Tell me, Mr. Gordon. Was my dad drinking the night he died?”

Herm tapped the document. “Read the police report and decide for yourself what he was doing.”

Jack slowly lifted the report. “What does this all have to do with me selling the combine today?”

Gordon tightened his lips. “You’re a lot like your daddy, Sugar, you know?”

“No, I don’t know.”

“I’ve watched you play, Jack. You’re good.”

Jack had seen him at some of his games, watching from the top of the bleachers. In a town with little entertainment, it wasn’t unusual to see farmers, kids, and families satisfy their love of sports watching where they could.

“You have the tools to be good, Jack, and you know it. You’re so much like Sugar at times it takes my breath away watching you.”

“He was a gambler. He lost everything.”

“Farming is the biggest gamble of all time, young man. Every farmer in the valley risks a dollar to make a nickel. He was a good man. A real good man. He tried to stand up to what’s been going on in the valley a long time now.”

“What about his card playing?”

“It was a gift. You should be so lucky.”

Jack scoffed at that and turned to the window. This old man had a loose tile or two. Jack opened the door a crack edging over to leave. Herm gripped Jack’s damp arm and held him tight.

Gordon narrowed his gaze at Jack. “Just take a minute and read this police report. It’ll clear up some stories you’ve heard about your father.”

“Let go of my arm.” Jack didn’t fear for his safety, he could break this old coot in two if he had to. With the door open, he could hear the combine’s motor purring strong. He tried to twist away, but the old man’s grip was solid.

With his free hand, Herm Gordon opened the case and then slammed it shut. “Here’s what you need to get back your land.” He slapped something down on the case but kept it covered with his hand. Jack ceased struggling, eyes glued to the case.

Gordon slowly removed his hand and released Jack at the same time.

A deck of Bicycle playing cards. “They’re Sugar’s.”

More clouds rolled in and the day turned gray, a low mist lingering on the road.

“What do I do with those?”

“You’ll know soon enough.”

Jack gave him a hollow smirk. “You’re crazy.”

“Give me your baseball cap?” Herm said, his eyes now bits of coal.

He hesitated, but the old man fixed him with a hard stare until Jack handed it over.

Gordon took the cap then set the cards in Jack’s lap. He tapped the report. “Read the first couple of pages. It’s a long report. They interviewed a lot of folks. Then you can be on your way. The sun is out. It’s better you waited. You’ll make good time to Delano.”

Jack slammed his door shut. The quietness returned. The air thickened with the closeness of something he always feared, knowing the truth. Herm eyed him. Jack scanned the first page. Under the logo of the SFPD was his father’s name and address. His pulse quickened. Why hadn’t he ever seen this?

“Jack, this’ll take just another minute,” Herm Gordon said. “I have something in the trunk to give you before you leave. I’ll be right back.” Herm’s door opened and slammed shut.

Jack leafed through the thick report. So many details here from the night his father died. The trunk popped. A commotion of thuds and clangs sounded like Herm throwing junk around looking for something. What did he have in there?

He stared at the cramped writing on the first page. He held it up to his window to read it. By the second page, hotness seeped out of his gut and settled in his upper chest. By the third page, it smashed upward into his throat and face, flushing his cheeks.

If this was true, she had been lying to him for the last ten years. His father hadn’t been gambling. The night he died, he had given a speech that made people angry. The report wasn’t clear why they were angry.

A fight broke out. Someone had punched his father, who fell. The hotel staff called the cops.

What followed was page after page of eyewitness accounts. His father had been seen leaving the conference hall in a heated conversation with a group of men. What men? It didn’t say. There were no reports of gambling or drinking as Jack had always been led to believe.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. All the baseball games Dad had missed. Why? A sharp pain filled him as if he had opened the door to a room he dreaded entering.

Who were these men? He didn’t know how long he sat in the darkness, eyes closed in a rigid fear. Why would his mother keep all of this from him? What was that speech about that bothered so many of the men? Peering through the front windshield, he caught the tail end of green and yellow smudge far down the road on its way to Delano.

He scrambled out of the car just in time to see the combine, faded green and yellow, disappearing into the swirling mists of the billowing Tule fog that swallowed the road.

Yanking the driver's door of the Cadillac open, he reached to start the engine. No key in the ignition. Frantically he searched the floor, the glove box, in the crevices of the seat, everywhere he could think. It took him another minute to realize even his coat from the front seat was missing. He climbed out and stared up and down at the empty road. Not a sound. Man and machine had disappeared into the mist. Jack could chase him for days and never find him. The county was a spider web of innumerable farm roads, spreading in every direction. But he had to find that combine.

He stooped to pick up something on the road. A suit jacket. Herm Gordon's jacket. What was that guy up to? Why would he take Jack's sopping jacket and hat and leave his suit coat? He dropped it in the mud. How did he explain this to his mom?

"What have I done?" he said loud enough so that the black and white mottled-faced Holsteins by the wire fence lifted their heads and stared at him with their milky eyes.

Thank you for reading the first chapters of The Road to Delano...there's much more to the story...

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