

Chapter 1

Apartment Kitchen, Sacramento, California
Tuesday, September 16, 1947

Lynn plopped into a chair across from me and slapped the kitchen table. “Confound it, Ray, get a job. We can’t live like paupers.”

Had my wife gotten out of bed on the wrong side?

The red clock above the window reached the half-hour.

She flexed her hand and glared. “And get one today!”

I rotated the newspaper and pointed to yesterday’s want ads. “Come on dear. There hasn’t been steady work for the past two months, only an occasional day job. I can’t dig trenches with my bum knee and haven’t the foggiest idea how to safely cut down a tree.” My pencil scratches encircling the newspaper ads resembled a half-finished crossword puzzle.

Lynn grumbled, “We’re flat broke and you mope like a cur with a tail between her legs.”

She was definitely in a bad mood. “Dear, I don’t sulk and yesterday I called on five businesses. Nobody ...” I tapped the paper, “is hiring.”

My wife snatched the empty Skippy peanut butter jar from the counter and swiped a finger inside the rim. The oily scent flooded through the room. “The boys asked if there’s something else to eat besides sandwiches ...” She pointed at the bowl of last night’s stale kernels. “... or popcorn.” Her brown eyes squinted. “Find a job Ray or I’ll take the boys back to Texas.” She banged the jar down. The spoon beside my cereal bowl wobbled.

I cringed. Dark circles protruded under her eyes, she hadn’t been sleeping well. She always made me the fall guy for our problems. “Lynn, I’ve been walking the streets every day, knocking on doors, and answering ads for any kind of work. Nothing’s available. You know that already.”

Her face grew red and her neck veins turned purple against her pale skin. “You better try harder or I swear, I’ll hitchhike back. The police will love it if I talk about what happened. They’ll blame you for—”

“Stop it!” My hands balled under the table. “We agreed not to discuss what they did!”

Our fathers had colluded in their illegal activities. The local newspapers were filled with allegations of them stealing from clients. The stories dominated the headlines. No one would have discovered anything except for my unexpected intrusion into the scheme. If Lynn returned home, the authorities would implicate me by association.

Her eyes hardened into slits. “Watch me. Our situation is that bad.” She tapped Dad’s diary perched on the table beside me. “If you hate him so much, why do you read his journal? He’s dead.”

“Because some of his advice is solid, like this line: *Never seek a job through newspaper adverts.* But I’m forced to do it anyway.”

“I mean it, Ray. You better find a job.” She tucked a strand of blond hair behind her ear as her lips thinned.

Edward R. Murrow’s voice crackled from a radio in the apartment next door.

“I’m looking for work. You know that.”

“Maybe you should accept the janitorial job at the warehouse,” she said, fiddling with her wedding ring.

“No. You said you didn’t want me cleaning toilets after midnight. You and the boys wouldn’t see me with those work hours.”

She leaned forward and squinted. “You have to swallow your pride, Raymond. We need money, and we need it *now*.” Her final word exploded like a gun blast.

Her mood was more unsettled than I thought. She never called me by my first name.

Our need for money was a correct assessment. She couldn’t handle the stress of being poor, at least not very well. In Dallas, money was never a problem. Since moving to California, the past two months had distorted me into a freeloader with a family. We were paupers possessing sixteen dollars and thirty-five cents, all jingling in my pocket. The rent was due in a week, our food would be gone before then, and the car’s tank was empty. What were my choices?

I said, “I’ll fetch today’s paper. Let’s pray to the Lord he’ll open up something.”

“Yeah, good,” she sneered. “Go buy one. But that god of yours has absolutely nothing to do with getting a job. He’s nothing more than a fairytale in the wind.”

My Christian faith was a point of contention between us. Would she ever understand?

“I’m going.” I shrugged into my denim jacket with the tattered collar and ignored her glares boring into me. She could stare holes through a stone wall.

I passed our boys in the other room. Four-year-old Dennis remained focused on his favorite picture book, and little Joel, two years younger, smiled up at me.

Outside, the nippy air bit my ears as I trudged toward downtown Sacramento. A gray 1941 Dodge whizzed past, towing a cloud of leaves and spinning them in a whirlwind. As always, the tawny mutt growled from behind the picket fence in front of a neighbor’s green clapboard house.

The past two months had been difficult. Because our fathers were deeply involved in the firm’s shady dealings, we decided to leave Texas. My wife couldn’t stomach the blackened family name.

I sauntered along a row of gray, ticky-tacky prefab houses. Two women chatted while hanging laundry on ropes threaded between their two buildings. Further down the street, the new soda

fountain at the Rexall Drugstore looked busy. If we had the money, I'd take the kids for an ice cream cone, get Lynn a cherry Coke, and myself a root beer float.

A block later, at a corner on Sixth Street, a scruffy, unshaven street vendor with down-at-the-heel shoes pocketed my coin in exchange for the most recent edition of *The Chronicle*.

I rubbed my chin whiskers. How long before my appearance equaled his? If I didn't find a job, my car would be our rusty residence under the bridge. I lifted my eyes to the sky. *Lord, we need help and we need it now.*

The newspaper's headlines screamed about people in the film industry being subpoenaed before the HUAC for anti-American activities. The whole nation was in an uproar, and Congress was on an active quest for Communist sympathizers.

After a quick turn to the last two pages in the newspaper, I browsed the want ads. My finger froze mid-page on two lines of block type.

WILSON INDUSTRIES. IMMEDIATE SALES OPENING.
CALL FOR AN INTERVIEW. PH CH3-8331

My heart leaped at the possibility, no matter how remote. *Help me, God.*

Chapter 2

Sacramento, California

Tuesday, September 16, 1947

I sat rigid before an enormously girthed Willard Wilson. A narrow band of brown hair encircled his large head. Blue eyes twinkled above rosy cheeks, carrying an intelligence surpassing anyone I knew. If this man had sported a white beard, a red floppy hat, and clamped a pipe between his teeth, he could pass for an overgrown jolly elf.

Wilson's head canted sideways like a loose banister knob as he examined my application. Perched a scant inch from his cocked elbow, a stack of papers threatened to topple. Strewn about the room were stacks of boxes and books which would take a week to organize. A light breeze flirted through the curtains behind him and carried a hint of cinnamon, probably from the bakery down the street.

He glanced at me. "Sorry about the messy office. We moved here earlier this week and are still getting settled." He resumed reading. "Hmmm. Interesting. You have lots of sales knowledge." His low voice and soft rumbling words carried a gentle tone.

My rehearsed spiel of five years of sales experience almost tumbled from my mouth. He resumed reading, so I sucked back the words and sat square-shouldered with my hands folded. *Lord, I'm begging you to let this man hire me.*

Mr. Wilson's oak desk contained enough scratches, dents, and cigarette burns to look as if it came from a Salvation Army thrift shop. The absence of ashtrays or smoky haze implied he was a non-smoker. Would my avoidance of tobacco be an advantage in acquiring this job?

He eyed me from over his wire-rimmed glasses. "Are you married, Mr. Petriani?"

"Yes, and we have two boys."

He pursed his lips, returned to the document, and said, "There's a gap in your work history. What have you been doing for the past two months?"

"We traveled from Texas to California. I've been looking for work since we arrived."

Wilson's finger traced under something I'd written. "Why did you leave your other job?"

I tensed. "Because it was time to move on." Had he noticed my hesitation?

His head remained down, but I sensed he'd stopped reading. "You can be headstrong."

He'd opened a verbal shot. Job or no job, a man has his pride. But I'd never lie like my father. "Mr. Wilson, maybe I'm headstrong, but I always tell the truth and would follow your instructions."

I liked his candor, soft demeanor, and self-assurance. He wasn't a proud man, only someone with a precise understanding of his abilities and limitations. But would he think my experience matched the job's requirements?

Wilson read for another minute before shoving away from the desk. He leaned back and his chair groaned under his massive weight. He steepled his hands atop his rotund belly and tapped his chubby fingers together. "This says you're more than qualified. How many contracts have you negotiated?"

I thought back. "Just shy of a couple of dozen."

His brows arched. "You're kind of young for that many."

Did my youthful looks belie my job history? "Mr. Wilson, I'm twenty-six." I pointed to my application. "If this is about honesty—"

He held up his hand. "I'm a fair judge of people. Your truthfulness wasn't in doubt. However, it's a bit unusual for someone your age to have this amount of negotiating skill."

"The number of my contracts is more than twenty. If you need an exact count, I can dig it up for you."

"No. That's not necessary."

The pendulum clock on the wall ticked away. I figured he measured me against a mental yardstick.

He tapped the application. "Your skills are exactly what I'm looking for and I'd like to put them to use. The job is yours if you want it."

Want it? I'd be his delivery boy. "You haven't discussed pay. Is it on commission or a salary?"

"You'd begin with a base salary. The bulk of your earnings will be from a percentage of each sale. From the looks of your application, you'll do well."

"When do I start?"

"Tomorrow morning. I'll personally train you because there's a special job in the future."

"Thanks for giving me this chance, Mr. Wilson."

He flicked his hand. "Call me Willard. Since you're new to the area, I invite you and your family to my farm on Saturday. It'll give Ruth and me a chance to meet your wife and boys."

"We'll be there." Lynn would be ecstatic that I'd found work. Tonight, we could splurge for a restaurant meal. The boys could enjoy a dish of vanilla ice cream, and Lynn her Cherry Coke.

That evening, Lynn's whole demeanor altered when I came home with the news. The next morning, she shooed me out the door and said it was time to start my new job with a regular income.

Wilson tutored me in his style of business. The man was a marvel at analyzing people, almost like he could read minds. His best skill was anticipating market trends and capitalizing on minuscule swings of the economy.

I would work hard to surpass this man's every expectation. He'd placed his trust in me, I wouldn't give him anything but my best.

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