

Reflections of the Future

by Joe Scavetti

CHAPTER ONE

The wind swirled snow through the beams of the Audi's headlights. Even for a Sunday morning, traffic was light. The overnight accumulation of snow crunched under the tires as the car pulled into a parallel parking space across the street from the large brick house on the corner of 84th and Evans. Undisturbed snow covering the other cars confirmed that most of the neighbors were sleeping-in this morning. Robert shut off the engine and sat for a moment enjoying the warmth of the car, knowing that it would be a cold thirty yards to the front door of the house. He was glad he had left the heat turned up when starting for home last night.

With snow drifting against the sides and corners of the house, it seemed old and tired. A house really is old at eighty-eight, he thought. Grandma's house had always been a favorite place for him - especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas. The family had never been large but they had always gathered at Grandma's for special holidays.

Her death, four years ago, had changed this along with many other things. A heavy sense of loss washed over him as he remembered why he was here this morning. Dad was dead, too. Robert's family consisted of a brother in Chicago, their alcoholic, senile uncle somewhere on the West Coast and himself ...the end of the line. Unless his brother paid more attention to his wife and less to making money, the Frazier family would be history in the next generation. Certainly children were not part of his future. Wishing Scott had stayed long enough to help with this task,

Robert T. Frazier III pushed open the car door and stepped into the four inches of snow that covered the street. Scott had taken time to come to their Dad's funeral. That in itself was something- Dad and Scott had been estranged for years. Perhaps his appearance should be enough for Robert or any brother - family commitment fulfilled.

He sat immobile and exhaled deeply. After a full minute of silence, he steeled himself. "I'd better get on with this," he said aloud hoping the sound of his words would dispel his fugue. As he walked toward the big house, he snuggled into his coat and held the fuzzy wool lining of the lapel against his nose and mouth. It was so cold it hurt to breathe deeply.

Dad had often talked about a park across the street from the house. Now, through the falling snow, Robert could see an apartment building there. Already past its prime, the building showed

signs of renter neglect. Time passes so fast, he thought, and people show the passage as much or more than these buildings. Gone was the park and soon the structure that replaced it would also be gone. Grandma was gone and now Dad, too.

Even in the cold, the latch on the iron gate worked freely. Dad kept everything in order. Order was a way of life to him - a way of living. Snow added softness to the five stone steps leading to the wide porch. Snow blew around the base of the pillars- white tendrils snaking across the wood flooring. Robert had painted that porch one summer. He painted himself, Scott and Grandma's cat in the process. Afterward, Dad always hired a painter to do the job.

Frost etched a new pattern on the large oval glass inset of the front door. Robert reluctantly pulled off his right glove and searched his pocket for the key. The well-oiled tumblers worked smoothly as the deadbolt slid aside. He noted the irony of the strong lock intended to keep out intruders when the large glass could so easily be broken allowing a person to step through. Sometimes security only needs to be a state of mind and not a reality. The physical condition of the neighborhood had deteriorated with age but crime had not yet become a problem.

The warmth of the house hugged him as he closed the door. Clouds were still hiding the sunrise and he wished he had thought to leave on some lights. He stamped the snow from his boots as he switched on the hall light. The oak of the coat tree had darkened with repeated polishing over the past eighty years but the brass hooks gleamed like they were new. He hung his bulky coat and woolen scarf on the nearest one then sat on the bench in front of the mirror to remove his boots. These he carefully placed on the throw rug as the snow turned to water and ran over the edge of the soles. The same old parquet flooring repeated its pattern of alternating stripes from wall to wall. Although he had seen the hallway countless times, today he felt as though he were seeing it for the first time. Mums and fern fronds on the wallpaper greeted him. The gleaming wood of the banister disappeared into the darkness that engulfed the second floor landing. The carpet on the stairs showed wear.

He was seeing everything from a different viewpoint now. All the decisions were his to make. He must review the treasures and clutter of two generations and preserve or trash them. It was useless to wonder why Dad didn't go through all of his parents' things before he moved in and added his own personal baggage to the collection. Dad hadn't been good at facing emotional issues. Except that he was the only one available to do this task, Robert knew that he wouldn't be here today himself.

The living room took on a soft glow as he flipped another switch beside the double sliding doors. He couldn't remember a single time when those doors had been pulled shut. The living room or "parlor" as Grandma had called it was always open and inviting. Yesterday Robert had visited the banks and opened the safety deposit boxes. The paid-up life insurance policy and the letter addressed to him had been the only surprises. Dad had added Robert as a signer on his and Grandma's boxes soon after her death. Curious, Dad hadn't consolidated the contents into one.

That was probably more emotional pain that he had chosen to avoid. It was less painful to just pay the box rent each year than to sort and transfer the contents.

Flat cardboard packing boxes were stacked next to the fireplace. The things to be kept would be packed and sealed in these and taken to a storage facility. Scott had made it clear - he didn't want anything. Dad's will had made it more clear- Robert was the sole heir and beneficiary of everything. Robert wasn't sure why he was storing any of this. Storing for whom? Who was he saving it for? Maybe that was the same problem Dad experienced- how could he throw away things that had meant so much to someone who meant so much to him? The clothes would be sent to Goodwill and the Salvation Army. China, silver, lamps, photos, paintings- decisions that would have to be made as he came to them. All of this didn't have to be done now. It was enough that he was starting.

Robert's attention came to the "Johnny" table. The center drawer of this thin legged lamp table had always been the catch all, the junk place, of the room. As he pulled out the drawer, the aroma of cedar reached up to him. Yes, Great Granddad's hand carved miniature table and chairs were there. Through a miracle of handicraft and carving skill, "Papa Brewer" had created a set of two chairs, an ottoman, a bench and a table that nested together as one block of wood.

He lifted the four by four by six-inch block from the drawer. All his life he had been intrigued by this creation. He carefully took the pieces apart and set them on top of the table. Grandma's Dad had carved this play set for her when she was a little girl. Robert never knew why this was called a "Johnny" table. It had simply been a fact and he never questioned why- until now. Grandma had different terminology for a lot of things. A skeleton key, a tube of menthol arthritis cream, several packets of flower seeds, a 1978 wall calendar, two bookmarks, some coupons and a punched card slid around in the drawer. The card was a newspaper payment record. The delivery boy had punched each weekly payment as it was made. The last punch was for the first week of April but there was no way to tell what year.

On the mantle above the fireplace, he had left the box of trash bags. He pulled out the first one and emptied the drawer into it. After reflecting, he reached into the plastic sack and retrieved the key and dropped it into his pocket. The wooden play set was reassembled and placed gently on the crochet doily on the coffee table. The bookshelves would be left for later. In a need to feel some accomplishment, he dragged the trash bag through the room stuffing it with outdated newspapers and magazines.

Dropping the bag in the dining room, he pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen. This hard work required coffee. Most days he needed two cups to get going and this morning he'd had none. The sun was making its presence known- sending a muted light through the clouds as Robert turned on the overhead light. Grandma wouldn't have had so many lights "burning" at one time. She considered such luxuries as light too expensive to afford on a continuing basis. Robert knew that there were oil lamps- filled and ready to use- standing on the shelves of the

pantry. As the gas burner heated the water in the percolating coffeepot, he returned to the task in the front room.

Hoping the sunlight would dispel the gloom inside the house, he pushed aside the drapes. The snow was still gently falling and the drifts had nearly covered his tracks across the porch. The end table drawers were next. Memories were everywhere. Photos were lying loose in the drawers. Robert found newspaper clippings and even sports medals from his and Scott's high school days. As the only grandchildren, all their activities and accomplishments had been important to Grandma.

As the clock in the hall struck ten, he realized that he had been filling boxes but not trash bags. The living room had been packed except for the books. He really wanted Thurston to look through them first. Many were first editions and some could be of historical value to the University. He would wait for help with that chore. The bedroom off the entry hall would have to wait, also. That was the room that Dad had chosen as his own when he moved into Grandma's house. It was the room in which he died. Robert knew that the second floor had been closed for several years ...not literally closed, but left unused. In fact, only one bedroom had been used in a great number of years. When she became too feeble to climb the stairs, Grandma had moved downstairs. Three bedrooms, a sitting room and a small office had been abandoned. The office had been locked since Granddad disappeared in 1921. Robert had never seen the interior. Dad had told the boys the story only once. Granddad was an architect. He was just beginning a private practice when World War I swept across Europe and engulfed America. That he didn't become one of the "doughboys" wasn't for lack of desire. Granddad was a flag-waving patriot who believed in God and the American Dream. Most second-generation immigrants had such feelings.

Graduating from Harvard was a real accomplishment for a young man whose grandparents had fled hunger and poverty in southern Scotland with one suitcase and a Bible. In a Rugby game against Dartmouth he had broken his left wrist. He ignored the injury and endured the pain for too long. When he did go to the infirmary the physicians couldn't reset the break. It knitted but he lost the ability to move his hand at the wrist. This, the Surgeon General said, made him "unfit for military service".

Grandma had been glad and relieved. She was the realist in the family. She had a home and two babies to care for and didn't want her husband maimed or killed in some foreign place she couldn't even pronounce. When the war ended, money became scarce. New construction came to an abrupt halt. An enterprising new architect had to become creative to keep busy. Granddad started doing remodeling and interior redecorating for homeowners as well as commercial and retail establishments.

One day, he went to work and didn't return. No note to Grandma or the boys, no clues ...he just vanished. Grandma's hopes that he would return with a plausible explanation waned as the

months passed. When hope was gone, her grieving began. She locked the office door and never opened it again. She stayed in her bedroom for almost a year. During that time, Dad had taken care of himself and his brother as best he could.

As Dad explained, she just woke up one morning and was her outgoing, positive self again. She took charge of her life and joy returned to the house. From that point on, she referred to Granddad in the past tense. "Before your father died..." she would say to her boys, and then tell some story or another. Photos of him stood on the mantle and the bookshelves. Robert had boxed them this very morning. Savings kept them together until Grandma was able to have Granddad declared dead. She finally forced the insurance company to honor his life insurance policy.

As Robert stood in the entry hall at the foot of the stairs, he heard the snow crunching as a car passed. The world was alive outside the house even though there seemed to be only silence and memories inside. If in the future, children ever climbed these stairs or the walls echoed their laughter they wouldn't be Fraziers, he thought. The stairs creaked under his weight. He moved slowly, almost as in a dream. He wanted to see the second floor rooms but, somehow, he was afraid- a dread mixed with fear of further memories he might have to face.

At the landing, he realized that he hadn't flipped the light switch at the bottom. He trudged along in the semi-darkness to the top step then felt the papered wall until he found the other switch. The light was faint and yellow. Grandma always used the lowest wattage bulbs she could find.

All the doors along the corridor were closed. Their dark finish added to the gloom. He opened the first one on the right. It was Grandma's former bedroom. The furniture had been covered. A film of dust was on everything. Heavy drapes shut out most of the light. Grandma had surrounded herself with this darkness while she was grieving the loss of her husband.

Robert sneezed as he inhaled the dust from the drapes. He pulled them aside and placed them behind the ties. Muted light filled the room. If cleaned, the sheers would probably fall apart, Robert mused. Under the dust covers he found sturdy wood furniture, lavish needlepoint cushions and velvet seats. This was an antique dealer's Heaven.

A door led from the bedroom to the sitting room. More covered furniture. Fine inlaid burl woods attested to the craftsmanship of those who built the large table and buffet. Was joy ever here? It all looked unused. It was obvious that the other rooms had been the boys' bedrooms. Pictures on the walls were of baseball players in 1930's style uniforms. Which had been Dad's? Not hard to tell, two trophies on a bookshelf were engraved to "Bobby Frazier." The titles of identically bound volumes spoke of the innocence of the age; Treasure Island, Little Lord Fontleroy, Kidnapped, Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. On one shelf he saw a Boy Scout handbook and a compass. Dust overlaid everything.

Suddenly overcome, Robert collapsed on the bed as his eyes overflowed with tears. “Dad, Dad, why is life so pointless? Why am I so alone?” Sobs shook the bed as he cried. His hands were clasped behind his head as his elbows came to rest on his knees. His body unconsciously assumed a fetal position. Time drifted as Robert Frazier III cried and rocked, surrounded by the memorabilia of his father’s childhood. Depression and loneliness filled his heart and his mind. No thoughts came ...only these feelings ...overwhelming feelings.

In time, the sobbing stopped and his breathing returned to normal. He sat motionless for several more minutes. When he stood, he walked straight to the door, down the hall and descended the stairs two steps at a time. He strode across the entry hall and opened the door. He stood there in the doorway, breathing in the cold air feeling the icy sting of the tears that streaked his face and covered his hands. He had mourning to do. He sat and pulled on his boots then took his scarf, hat and coat from the pegs. As he locked the door, he knew he had left on several lights. That was all right, he just couldn’t stay another minute. Some emotions are just too intense.

He had to get to his refuge. Across the river, his condo was warm and waiting. The memories there, even of Dad, were bright and positive. The Audi sprang to life and Robert pulled into the street as tears again filled his eyes.

Robert Frazier decided to take the long way home. He drove left on River Road then west for two blocks on Commerce to the entry ramp to the Ben Franklin Bridge. The sun was still hiding behind the clouds but, at least, the snow had stopped falling as he headed east to Camden. In his mind, more than the river separated Philadelphia from Camden. The University had become his real home. Living almost adjacent to the Liberal Arts Building and the University Library on Westchester Road, Robert had successfully insulated himself, both professionally and personally, from the modern, chaotic world others habited. Never one for change, Robert had followed his high school interests in history right through college and then as his profession.

The University provided him with a safe harbor where he was secure to pursue his interests without much interference or responsibility. He often wondered what pleasure Scott found in his high pressure, roller coaster, corporate existence. The faculty had become his family of choice- particularly Thurston Thompson, the Chair of the English Department. He and Thurston shared the same interests, intellectual curiosity and sense of humor. In fact, they were more like brothers than he and Scott.

Despite an occasional feeling of loneliness, Robert Frazier III was very satisfied with life. He turned the Audi into the drive and pressed the garage door opener as he passed the condo. He always kept the car in the garage. It was a protection from vandals and pranksters as well as preventing weather damage to the finish.

Walking to classes was a pleasure from this location. He stopped in the utility room that held the washer, dryer and hot water heater. He slowly removed his coat and scarf and hung them next to

the door. Sunlight came through the small window and reflected off the enameled whiteness of the walls. Having slipped off his boots he sat and thought about the morning. He had not allowed himself to think about the house, the sorting he had done or his Dad since leaving there. He knew he wouldn't be able to hold back the tears. Now he wished that he had stayed ...had gotten more done. He didn't look forward to going back and wished that the whole thing was behind him. His body felt heavy. A real effort was needed to raise himself off the narrow bench. A smoke would help his mood. He started for the living room where his pipes and humidifier were waiting on the sofa table. He had left the tobacco at home this morning without a conscious thought - no one ever smoked in Grandma's house. She wasn't there to scowl at his nasty habit. Which was greater, he pondered, the habit he had just recognized of pleasing Grandma or the habit of smoking? Which was he likely to give up first?

The students returning for the spring semester had spent all their cash on Christmas gifts, trips, parties and, in some cases, all three. Robert had no trouble finding four able and willing packers to help with the house. They would probably have worked free but he considered volunteer labor a perk only used by less principled professors. He wouldn't put himself in a position of "owing" any student. Most of all, his policy kept grading simple and above board. He pulled to the curb and waved the Accord behind him into a space just ahead. The two boys and two girls weren't an "item" as the phrasing was used on campus, but they knew each other. As the compact car passed, he noticed that they had paired off and were laughing and gesturing. That, he remembered, is a part of youth.

Approaching the house he had fled six days ago, he remembered that the heat and the lights were still on. Good. It would be comfortable inside. The cool air made frost of his breath but the snow had almost disappeared. "Professor," the driver of the Honda called as they followed Robert across the street. "Cindy and Connie don't believe that you're paying Brad and me sixty dollars for packing today and only paying them thirty." Having promised them each thirty dollars for the day's work, Robert recognized the joke.

"That's right girls ...and a deal is a deal. However, you can leave at four this afternoon and the guys will work 'til midnight." The girls' laughter echoed down the street and back. Robert had the key in hand as they approached the house. A gust of warmth met him as he opened the door. "This is it," he said as they entered the hallway. "Hang your things on the coat tree and look around if you like- then we'll meet here in the living room and decide where to start." Robert walked into Grandma's Parlor as his helpers struggled with their coats, scarves and hats. He surveyed the small amount of work that he had done last Sunday and heard the stairs creak under the weight of four healthy college students.

Where should they start? He checked his watch. Eight-thirty. Thurston should be arriving at ten. The books would be left until he had time to prowl through them. The voices from upstairs were audible but hushed. The loud joking and laughter had subsided. He hung his own coat on the

brass hooks as the four youngsters came down the stairs, single file. "Professor, this is a wonderful old place," Connie led the procession. "How long has it been closed?" "The upstairs hasn't been used for several years. The lower level has only been closed for about a month." It's been the longest month of my life, however, Robert thought to himself.

"I thought this was your Grandmother's house. Whose are the two rooms on the north side of the hall?" Brad was the psychology major. The group was spreading out into the living room and dining room. "My Dad and Uncle had those rooms until they moved away. Dad went to college and then started his own family. My Uncle went into the Army and never returned here to live."

He never returned at all. Robert's thoughts raced through the family history. His Uncle started living in a bottle after his military service in the Pacific and only surfaced sporadically in the years that followed. Dad had sent him a telegram when Grandma died. Uncle Marvin called once after that but was too drunk to make any sense.

He just cried for several minutes and then hung up. Robert remembered his Dad holding the telephone as the dial tone buzzed and tears rolled down his cheeks. That was the last time Dad talked to his brother and even then they hadn't talked.

Robert's telegram had been sent to the only address he knew in San Diego but was undelivered. Marvin didn't know that his brother had died. Maybe Uncle Marvin was dead too.

"Come look at this!" Gary's voice was muffled and Robert knew he had discovered the pantry. "This is like a museum. Oil lamps - and they're still filled. Canned goods and glass Mason Jars - I've never heard of some of these brand names. This salt box must be fifty years old!" His excitement was contagious and the others joined in. The pantry was examined as though it was a vault filled with rare gems. Nothing, from the "strike anywhere" wooden matches to the rubbing liniment, escaped their attention.

Robert began to clean the coffeepot that had sat for a week and put fresh coffee on to brew. He checked the supply of Pepsi in the refrigerator and decided that it was sufficient for the day. Having taken their tour, the four settled into the tasks Robert outlined for each. He went from one to another to see that they had understood their assignments. As he passed Brad, the youngster nodded his head in a gesture that asked Robert to come closer and almost whispered, "There was one room upstairs that was locked. Is it another bedroom?"

"No, that was my Granddad's office. It's been closed longer than any other part of the house. He disappeared without a trace in 1921 and Grandma locked the door with everything just as he left it."

Robert recounted the story as it had been told to him.

"No offense, sir, but your grandparents were a bit strange, weren't they?"

“I can’t argue that, Brad.” Robert turned toward the stairs as he replied. In a voice loud enough for them all to hear above the rattling of packing paper and ripping of tape he said, “I’ll be upstairs for a while. Yell if you need me or when Professor Thompson arrives. Pepsi in the refrigerator - but make it last all day!”

Abandoning his coffee cup, he trudged up the stairs wondering why he had said they should make the Pepsi last all day. These were college students, for Christ’s sake, not elementary school kids. He had gotten in trouble with Grandma one summer for drinking a week’s supply of Coke in one very hot Saturday afternoon. The scolding was nothing compared to the stomachache he had. Grandma never knew that he had already thrown up before she started her lecture.

He noticed the mums on the wallpaper as he continued to climb. They were brighter today than they had been last week. Having young people in the house made a difference in his mood. The house was much less depressing. From his left pocket, he retrieved the skeleton key that had been in the “Johnny” table drawer - the key he had almost thrown away. It fit perfectly in the lock of the office door. The bolt hadn’t been turned in years. Unlike the gate and the front door, Dad hadn’t oiled this one.

He once said that he couldn’t remember ever being in this room. Grandma had effectively sealed off this part of the past. The bolt complained and made a scraping sound as it finally released. Still, the door wouldn’t open. It had warped in place. He could see that the last coat of paint applied to the frame had filled in the gap between frame and door and acted as a sealer.

Applying his shoulder to the upper part and his knee at the middle, Robert broke the barriers holding the door and it burst open. He was met by total darkness. He groped along the side of the doorframe for a switch, found it, flipped it, but no light came on. The bulbs had probably gone bad many years ago. The thin light from the hallway revealed a lamp on a desk facing the left wall. Carefully, he tiptoed toward it. Success- a dim light responded to his pull on the chain. It was more like candlelight than a lamp but, at least, he could see.

A window opposite the door - it must face onto the back yard, he thought - had been covered with heavy drapery material. This had been nailed to the window frame so that it sealed out all the sunlight. Robert wondered if it was Grandma or Granddad who had gone to such lengths.

The contents of the room were shrouded in a fine dust. A wooden desk, with matching file cabinet, drafting table with T-square and drawing materials in neat order, a leather covered desk chair with rollers, a settee, coffee table, two stuffed armchairs, a naval map case, a floor lamp and a metal wastebasket completed the furnishings. It was a room from another time, another place and it exuded both mystery and sadness.

On the top of the file cabinet, he saw a personalized coffee mug and a piece of square tubing. He picked-up the tubing and blew away the dust. It being light in weight made him think of plastic-but that would have been a rarity in 1921. He replaced it and examined the mug. The single word “Dad” was enameled in gold on a burgundy background. The settee and armchairs matched the ones in the main bedroom. Their maroon velvet upholstery and needlepoint pillows showed both artistry and patience in production. The room was orderly. Everything was in its proper place. Magazines on the coffee table were arranged in a line so their titles showed one above the other. The desktop held only two sheets of paper, a fountain pen in its holder, the lamp and a brass key. The papers were yellowed and brittle along the edges. Even in the closed room, they had oxidized over the eighty years since they had been placed there.

The lamp cast shadows onto the wall and across the ceiling. Part of the room remained in semi-darkness. This must be a fifteen-watt bulb, Robert thought. He sat in the leather chair and pulled it near the desk. Laying his arms along the desktop, it occurred to him that he was probably the first person to sit there since his Granddad. What had been the man’s thoughts as he sat there? Was he planning to leave? Did he know he would never return? There were so many questions that likely would never be answered.

The key fit the center drawer of the desk. Robert opened it and found more order. The few papers there had also been neatly stacked. A wooden tray built into the front of the drawer showed a dark stain. Probably where a fountain pen had leaked. The papers were routine. An estimate from a carpenter for adding a garage to the back of the house was dated June 17th, 1921. A cover letter to a proposal from Granddad to Samuel J. Sanderson and Sons written on July 2nd stated that a section of warehouse space was to be converted to retail use. The plans that were to be attached weren’t there.

Papers were filed in the right hand desk drawer. These were the usual accounting functions of receivables, payables, bank statements

...and a package wrapped in green oilcloth.

Robert placed the package on the desk and pulled at the knotted bow in the hemp twine that surrounded it in two directions. The twine dissolved in his hands. Folding back the green cloth, he found three journals bound in blue linen with red leather spines. Each was identical to the other two. Opening the first, he saw it to be a diary with dated entries. He was both excited and apprehensive. These might contain some clues about Granddad’s disappearance.

He resumed his exploration with rekindled curiosity, but the remaining desk drawers and the file cabinet revealed nothing unusual. Normal correspondence, sketches and drawings as one would expect in the office of an architect.

Normal, yes, but exciting too. Exciting because it was old and because it provided an insight to the daily life of an ancestor who had only been an illusion, a shadow, throughout Robert's life. The map case was very much like those Robert had seen aboard the USS Constitution. Opening the cover door, he found architectural plans instead of naval charts. This was a great adaptation of what must have already been an antique when it was put into use in the '20s.

Plans had been rolled and stood in the square wooden compartments. Some he found to be in very good condition. Here were plans to remodel Emerson Elementary School and several private homes. One project was to add a separate entrance and convert a bedroom into examining rooms at the home of a Dr. J. Patterson. The biggest roll was the Sanderson Warehouse. Several sheets showed different options for the arrangement of retail shops. Evidently this had been a major project for Granddad. He had spent a lot of time at the drawing board to prepare these various renderings. At that time everything had to be drawn and copied by hand. Blueprints from tracings were new and certainly not a part of this low budget operation.

If he delivered the proposal, he had sent another set of plans - and, according to the cover letter, just three days before he disappeared. Loud voices from below broke his reverie. It sounded like Thurston Thompson had arrived. Robert would have the contents of this room packed separately and the boxes delivered to his home. He would, however, take the journals with him tonight.

He went down to greet his old friend and show him the books to be evaluated for possible donation to the university library. After he had time to examine the papers from the office, he would share any unique and interesting ones. For now, they seemed too private for even someone as close as Thurston to peruse. The stairs creaked under his tread as his mind struggled free of the dark, depressing mysteries of 1921 and returned to the present.