

**BLOOD ON THE CONSTITUTION**

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## Chapter 1

*August 22, 1927, 11:30 a.m. - Acmetonia, Pennsylvania*

“Sacco and Vanzetti, though innocent, face execution tonight not so much for the crime, but for being poor, passionate Italian radicals in an era of fear and repression. Many around the world share this opinion, including the Pope. Our Holiness used his power to intervene, but to no avail. Let us pray.”

The speaker, a Catholic priest — young, dark, intense, with a Roman nose — finished his speech and led the group in prayer. Bruno Bartolli joined in, repeating the recitations, but found his mind adrift with other thoughts. The protest meeting had been organized with haste only the day before by the Sacco and Vanzetti defense team. What good would it do? Despite all the efforts to save them, the men would die.

At the final Amen, Bruno crossed himself and glanced around the grove to locate his wife and young son. He marveled at how quickly the mood of the crowd returned to its previous level of amity, the renewal of friendships and family ties.

Under the bright August sun, picnic hampers and blankets dotted the grassy sections between clusters of trees along the banks of the Allegheny River just north of

Pittsburgh. Gentle breezes cooled the picnic grounds to a comfortable temperature, creating a perfect day for the outing, warm but not hot.

Families from nearby coal mining towns packed the grove. Ragtag children in clean patched trousers and ill-fitting handmade flour sack dresses chased each other around trees and let out gleeful squeals as they evaded capture.

Toddlers, egged on by adoring parents, sang “Ring around the Rosy” as they held hands and circled, peeling out in delight when falling down on cue.

New mothers, lounging on blankets, held hungry infants to their breasts as they visited with sisters, cousins, and aunts seen only on rare gatherings like this one. Older groups of women chatted in a cacophony of languages to catch up on gossip. Some paused occasionally to discipline their rowdy children. Bruno thought the jovial atmosphere contrasted sharply with the solemn intent of the occasion - boisterous young life commemorating the deaths of two martyrs in the union cause.

Italians made up the majority of the picnickers, although many other nationalities also attended to show support for Sacco and Vanzetti - two men tried, convicted, and sentenced to the electric chair for robbery and the murder of a paymaster and his guard. Many around the world, including Bruno, shared the opinion that the men faced the ultimate punishment merely to send a message to other radicals or anyone else even considering rebellious activities.

A new speaker ascended the podium and announced her identity. The din hushed, and faces turned somber once again as people remembered the reason for the gathering. A dark cloud passed over the sun and kicked up a quick breeze that filled the air with smells of algae-infested river water, damp grass, and a tinge of garlic.

Bruno turned his attention toward the railroad tracks separating the picnic grove from the main road. A short string of boxcars following behind a slow moving engine caught his eye - most unusual for this time of day. Fear gnawed at his senses. Uneasy, he glanced away to locate his wife and spotted her on the far side of the grounds where a spit of earth slopped gently to the water.

Surrounded by her Harmarville relatives and engrossed in conversation, his wife didn't notice him waving his arms or the significance of the approaching train. Their young son played in the rocks by the river and attempted to emulate his older cousins skipping stones across the surface of the water.

Bruno shouted the boy's name. He pushed through the crowd along the edge of the steep river embankment. He needed to get to his family, grab them, and run. The train inched along the track and stopped, blocking access to the main road and trapping the crowd between the boxcars and the river. A shiver moved up his spine as he stumbled over, around, and between the picnic goers. Suddenly, all activity paused, frozen in the moment, only to erupt into a violent swirl of motion as parents moved to gather up children, spouses, and belongings.

Bruno sprinted through the trees, his progress hampered by upturned picnic baskets, crumpled blankets, and people rushing away from the river. Before he could reach his wife and son, the boxcar doors opened and bedlam ensued.

Mounted troopers swarmed from the cars followed by agents on foot, all swinging clubs, some in State trooper uniforms, others dressed as Coal and Iron Police. Most of the foot men wore plainclothes but sported badges on their jacket lapels. Horses, men, women, and children merged into a maelstrom of frantic activity.

A smoke bomb exploded near Bruno's feet. His eyes burned and watered, and everything around him transformed into a liquid blur. He used his shirt to wipe away the tears as he pushed through the pandemonium, shouting for his wife and son. Fathers scooped up toddlers to race away from the troopers. Mothers with infants still pressed to their breasts pulled their other children along in escape, all the while ducking blows as they weaved through the terrified mob.

Bruno reached out for an old man who tumbled to the ground and rolled him away from the approaching hooves of a mounted horseman. Troopers and thugs churned around them as he helped the old timer to his feet.

Frantic, Bruno wiped his burning eyes once again and searched the crowd. He glimpsed a group of boys scurrying under a boxcar, dragging a younger one behind. "Joey!" he shouted, and lit out after them. Two strides from the car, wham! The blow knocked him to his knees; his jaw numbed. He struggled to regain his footing, but another blow to his shoulder made him lose balance and hit the dirt. He rolled to one side, crawled under the nearest car, and made his way toward the main highway.

At the intersection of the Pittsburgh and Russellton Roads, Bruno stopped and waited with the expectation that his wife and son would come that way. A group of men raced toward him. He recognized one as being from Harmarville, stepped into their path, and grabbed the man's arm.

"My son, my wife," he started in Italian, but his mouth wouldn't open wide enough to form the words. He firmed his jaw, clenched his teeth, and tried again. "My wife, my son, have you seen?" He used hand gestures to help them understand.

"No," said the man from Harmarville. "But I help you look."

“Bruno,” another man said. Bruno rubbed his eyes and squinted to identify the speaker as his wife’s cousin. “What happen you face?”

Bruno didn’t care about his face; he wanted his wife and son, to know they were safe. A neighbor from Russellton shouted a warning not to linger. He dashed past with two state troopers close on his heels. Before Bruno and the other men could move, the first trooper was on them.

“Disperse, disperse,” the officer shouted. “It’s against the law to gather.”

Bruno attempted to tell the man about his wife and child, but the words came out as broken gibberish. Hand gestures only seemed to frighten the trooper, who aimed a gun at Bruno’s chest. Bruno pushed it away. Three deafening shots rang out; wet droplets spattered across his face and arms. The trooper dropped at his feet, and blood darkened the dirt where it spurted from the wound.

Bruno rushed away and sprinted down the road toward Russellton, to his home. Bullets from the second trooper’s gun kicked up gravel at his heels. Shards embedded into his calves, but Bruno never looked back nor slowed his pace.

Where the road dipped into the swamp just before Rural Ridge, Bruno raced cross country toward the narrow rail tunnel on his left. The marshy ground slowed his progress. Thoughts exploded in his brain. Where had the first shots come from? Only one came from the trooper’s gun. Of course, what did that matter now? He would be the one accused, and he refused to accept the same fate as Sacco and Vanzetti.

Once through the tunnel, Bruno clambered up the backside of the hill to the tracks along the ridge with a clear view of the main road to Russellton. He glimpsed a horseman about to enter the valley near the edge of the swamp and dove down the steep incline feet

first. He took off up the narrow dirt road that eventually led to the Rich Hill wagon path, running as fast as his body allowed.

Bruno paused at a branch far up the road. His jaw ached and the swelling on the side of his face had completely closed his left eye. Bruno rested a moment until he could catch his breath. Then it hit him, his swollen face marked him a killer. If he went back to Russellton now, he'd be a dead man. No, he needed a place to hide until his face healed.

What to do? Should he go left to Indianola and the police or right through a sparsely populated farmland and strange territory? He decided to lie down in a sheltered patch of grass not visible from the road. As he lowered to the ground, his face ached. He settled for leaning against a tree sitting in an upright position and closed his eyes to wait until the sun lowered in the sky. Despite being lax about religion and God, he prayed for redemption.

## Chapter 2

*August 22, 1927, 12:30 p.m.--Murdy's Knob, near Russellton*

Home. The best of places and the worst, welcoming yet hostile, warm but often cold, a place of sanctuary filled with sadness, the site of fond memories and those of the other kind. The prodigal son returns. Would they kill the fatted calf or force him to eat crow?

Albert Gall moved a calloused hand across the red stubble on his chin and stretched his arms high in the air. His white rumpled summer shirt hung loose over his travel creased light colored trousers. It had been a long trip. His body, trim and trained with strong well defined muscle structure, ached with fatigue from hours of inactivity. High cheekbones and a strong jaw line bestowed a rugged handsomeness to the face. His pale gray eyes that usually sparkled with curiosity, humor, and intelligence watered now with lack of sleep.



From the apex of Murdy's knob, Albert's childhood world spread out before him. He feasted on the view. The knob, an elevated grassy bald area atop one of the highest points in West Deer Township, north of Pittsburgh, provided a 360 degree view of the surrounding countryside. From there, he could see all the way to Russellton No. 2, the mine, coal tipple, the patch of company houses that stepped uphill, and the wagon road traversing the ridge to end at his parent's farm.

His eyes rested on a long level field of golden hay--the land he loved, dreamt about during his travels away, the end point of an arduous journey, the place he aspired to settle in someday, but was always forced to leave for one reason or another. He moved his gaze toward the narrow valley, a slice of dark green that edged the blowing grain like a shadow separating the field from the surrounding hillsides. The dense foliage of the treetops acted as an elongated roof to obscure the family homestead, the place that held his heart and contained his loved ones.

In his mind's eye, he could picture the buildings: the three story barn, narrow farmhouse, sheds, and the Ragman's Cottage, all perched on the hillside above a creek that snaked through the ravine towards Russellton No.2 to join the larger Little Deer Creek that fed into the Allegheny River flowing south towards Pittsburgh. He was usually excited to return, but why did his arrival home always end in conflict?

He loved his family. He worshiped his mother Emma and shared a love of the land with his father August. Being the youngest and active as child, he looked up to his older brothers—the rounder Paul, the hot head Will known as Ragman, Hubie with the logical mind, and the tall but gentle carpenter Irvin. Intellectually he and Katherine

shared the same style of thought often expressed in frequent correspondence. Despite all that, somehow every visit home ended with him being shooed away like a black sheep.

Albert dropped to the ground and leaned back on his elbows to take it all in. His eyes drooped, heavy with exhaustion. After a long day working as a farmhand, he and his buddy, Preager Fish, started out at midnight from Conneaut Lake for a trip to West Deer. Fish decided to throw in the towel, asked for a lift back home, and mentioned something about being tired of eating beans. Fortunately, Albert's jalopy only broke down twice during the usual five hour journey that this time took eight. Fish's parents invited him to stay for breakfast to express joy at their son's return.

After filling his belly and saying his good-byes, Albert headed for home, but decided to stop at Murdy's Knob to take in the view and delay his arrival. Should he stay or go?

If not for the need to see his mother, most likely he'd drive on by and head back up north. He planned to stay only a week or two at the most to help his father with the harvest of corn, vegetables, and hay. When finished, he'd head to Conneaut and his job as a farm hand for an older couple he had recently met. When the work ran out after the November hog butchering, he'd figure out what to do next.

Albert yawned, a light breeze ruffled the grass, and big puffy white clouds dotted the deep blue sky overhead. He unfolded the blanket of his bindle (the bedroll carried on his back), and spread it on the ground. After one more covetous glance at the land, he rolled onto his back. His eyes stared at the sky and followed the clouds that drifted in direction of the farm.

He hadn't been home in months, not once since the boxing fiasco in the spring when the union organizer acting as his manager got busted. The ruse worked well for most of the circuit, and Albert's wins drew larger crowds and heavy betting. Their luck ran out in Nanty Glo.

Albert stalled the match. He hoped to putter at least eight rounds with the town's best fighter to allow the organizer time to finish his meeting. Unfortunately, an unlucky punch KO'd the palooka in the fourth. Company thugs caught the organizer red handed, worked him over, dumped his bloody battered body into the promoter's car, and escorted the group out of town. The police warned them never to return. Blacklisted from the coal fields and chastised by his family for collaborating with union Reds, Albert lit out for Conneaut Lake along with the Fish boys for jobs at the Oakland Hotel.

Albert pursed his lips. Every time he returned home trouble seemed to follow and chase him away. He remembered being twelve the first time his father, August, told him to leave. They had fought over school. Albert asked to continue after sixth grade and live with *Tanta* Anna and Uncle Julius in Etna to continue his education at the high school there. His father had refused. After a heated exchange of opinion, Albert hopped a coal car to Cleveland. His mother tracked him down a few days later and dragged him back to the farm and a job at the Bessemer store in Russellton No. 1.

Ordered to leave again at fourteen for fighting with his older brother, he spent four hungry months on the bum before joining the army. Despite ill feelings, he signed up to have all his pay allotment sent home to his parents. Honorably discharged a year later, his welcome home lasted only a few weeks. "While you were gone, all remained peaceful

here,” his father said. “Since your return, all is turmoil. If you cannot get along and keep things calm, then leave.”

After months on the road and tired of an empty belly, he joined the Marines. That changed his life. In addition to receiving an education, he learned discipline, how to box, how to race life boats, and laundry skills. Again, he sent his entire pay home to help his family and worked at odd jobs for the officers to earn money to send to the International Correspondence School for lessons in Mathematics, English, and History. Except for one spell of leave at the farm when he first met Betts and fell instantly in love, he stayed away for four years. He especially avoided home after learning that his brother Ervin had moved in on Betts and decided to woo her.

Discharged on the west coast, he invested his train fare into a Laundromat venture with a Marine buddy. The business, ahead of its time, went bust shortly after it opened. Broke, Albert signed aboard a merchant ship, and five months later finally arrived home.

With no jobs around Russellton, he migrated to Powhatan Point, Ohio, where his older brother, Hubie, got him on as a loader in the mine. “Remember; keep your nose clean, no union business. It could get me fired,” Hubie cautioned. But unsafe conditions at the mine pulled Albert towards the union, despite his older brother’s warnings.

Hubie, the mine’s master mechanic, lived on Bosses Row and feared Albert’s activities might jeopardize his job. He ordered him to leave, and that very same day Irvin arrived to take his place. Back home, Albert joined up with boxing promoter Pinky O’Shea, and after his short ill-fated career in the ring, headed north.

Albert yawned, his eyelids were heavy, and he was ready for a rest. He willed his mind to relax. If not for helping out Fish and the possibility of seeing Betts again, he’d

still be in Conneaut. How will home greet him this time? Minutes later, fanned by warm breezes and lulled by singing birds and distant bleats and moos, he soon fell asleep.

Thoughts of Betts filled his dreams.

## Chapter 3

*August 22, 1927, 3:30 p.m.--Rich Hill Road near Russellton*

***August 22, 1927, 2:30 p.m.***  
*Rich Hill Road near Russellton*

Unable to nap any longer, Bruno Bertolli resumed his journey through pasture and woods, grateful not to encounter anyone on the road. He traveled this way only once before with a friend just after the strike started. Bruno decided it would be best to walk that way.

He would stay on the road as far as it took him, and then decide what to do. From there he could sneak back into Russellton, and surely his wife's sister, Angelina, and Vito, her husband, would hide him in their root cellar under the house. But then what? He couldn't hide there forever and only put them in danger. Possibly, he should just turn himself in to Constable Rube Dembaugh and be done with it. Only God could help him now.

Bruno crossed himself and prayed for guidance only to be interrupted by the sputtering of a motor car. He said a quick “Amen,” ready to jump into the nearby brush to hide, but paused when he recognized the sound. Only one machine made a noise like that, the heap of rusty bolts and spare parts belonging to Albert, the son of local farm owners near Russelton. Bruno thought it strange for him to be on the road just at this time, and took it as a sign.

He waved; the vehicle stopped. A young rugged face topped by reddish blonde hair poked out the window. “Bruno,” it said. “What are you doing here?”

“Alberto, I say same for you,” Bruno mumbled through his teeth, “Me, I be in big trouble.” He moved closer, near enough to give Albert a clear view of his face.

“My God, what happened to you?” Albert leaped from the truck. “You need to see Doc Dickey; let me give you a lift.”

True, the company doctor might help, but Bruno deemed it best not to be seen in Russelton. “No,” he protested. “No safe to see Dickey. Like I say, I in big trouble. Must go, far away, you take?” His jaw hurt with each word.

True, the company doctor might help, but now Bruno deemed it best not to be seen in Russelton. “No,” he protested. “No safe to see Dickey. Like I say, I in big trouble. Must go, far away, you take?” His jaw hurt with each word and only allowed him to blurt out his troubles in short spurts.

Albert’s strong arms helped him up inside the machine, part truck and motor car, odd parts pieced together with bailing wire and imagination. Albert, unlike his vehicle, appeared sturdy, sinew and sleek honed muscle, strong, tough, but smart and trustworthy.

Bruno settled into the seat beside him and struggled to get out all the events of the day. His speech emerged in a halting jumble of unclear words aided by hand gestures to express his fears and confusion. Albert listened with a sympathetic ear.

“I’m afraid you’re right,” Albert finally agreed. “It’s not safe to go back. If you hide out and get caught later, it’ll be worse for your family.”

“Take me to train, Alberto, one away from Russellton,” Bruno pleaded. “I hop boxcar and hope for best.” The words surprised him. Where would he go? How to survive? He’d never been to Pittsburgh before or even New Ken or Tarentum. Bruno’s world since after he arrived from Italy remained confined to the coal towns surrounding Rusellton and the nearby river towns of Harmarville or Springdale. The thought of the city or being away from family and friends, people of his own kind frightened him.

Albert agreed to take him to the railroad just north of Etna, but first made him promise to allow the doctor in Dorseyville to look at his injuries and patch him up. Bruno groped at his trousers. He didn’t have money to pay. In fact his pockets contained only coal dust and lint. Albert apparently noticed his distress. “Don’t worry, Bruno. I’ll spot you.”

Dr. Mock was out on a house call, but a kind nurse attended to the cuts and advised Bruno to go to a hospital. Albert promised to take him, slipped the woman a few dollars, and led Bruno out the door.

“Take me to train,” the injured fugitive insisted. “My face, it heal on own.” He shuddered as they pulled out onto the main road away from his previous life, his wife, his son. He remained silent for many bumpy miles and thought about God, fate, and prayer.



Finally, he broke his silence, “Alberto, I thought you work at fancy hotel up north. I no expect you on Rich Hill.”

“The hotel canned me but I got another job working for a farmer,” Albert said. “My buddy Fish threw in the towel, so I gave him a lift back home. Imagine my surprise at seeing you.”

Bruno readjusted his position in the seat. All his muscles ached now, but not as much as his heart. “Today hold many surprise,” he conceded. Of all the people to cross his path, Albert proved to be a salvation, the answer to his prayer, at least for now.

At the end of Saxonburg Blvd. Albert turned north a short distance up the Butler Plank Road, turned, crossed some tracks and parked in an open area. Bruno and Albert hiked across a high grassy field and hid in brush close to the tracks.

“This here’s a siding,” Albert said and pointed. “The trains stop for a short time to let another one pass. North takes you to Butler and South to Pittsburgh. When you hop into a boxcar, if anyone follows you aboard or is already in the car, just do this and smile.” Albert made a sign with his hands. “IWW stands for Industrial Workers of the World, kind of a password for safe passage. Most of the riders, former IWW hobos, refer to themselves as Wobblies. They’re folk who’ll help you survive.”

Although his brain remained muddled, Bruno shook his head to show Albert he understood. Everything happened so fast. The thought of catching a moving freight car terrified him; but, boarding a *stopped* train relieved some of his anxiety. Attempting to survive the ride on his own also frightened him so the advice about the IWW pushed another worry aside.

Bruno heard a rustle in the nearby brush and froze, not allowing a single breath to escape his bruised lips. Again, Albert noticed his unease. "I'll wait with you, Ok?"

Albert offered. "So which direction will it be?"

"First train," Bruno stuttered. "Fate, I let her decide." He spotted two men emerging from a field not far up the tracks.

"Wait here," Albert said. "I'll be right back." Bruno watched Albert saunter over to the men, greet them, speak, gesture, and point. Moments later he returned. "You're in luck," he said. "That older guy over there is Wobbly. The next train goes to Pittsburgh, and he'll look after you. You can either stay there or move on to some other direction." Albert handed him a slip of paper. "It's a safe phone number to call to get a message to Russellton, Mrs. Branzette in Springdale, Louie's mother."

Relieved, Bruno expressed his gratitude. At least he wouldn't be totally alone in this new strange world. "Alberto," he said. "With all you travel in this country, which place you go if you me?" Bruno heard many times about Albert's adventures both in the military and on merchant ships around the world and both coasts of America.

"If Italian like you, California," Albert answered. "In the San Joaquin Valley a man can grow a garden all year round, and even grapes. On the slopes of the foothills of the Sierra Mountains, that's where they flourish. A lot of fellows like you live there."

"California, too far," Bruno shrugged and sighed. A piercing whistle in the distance signaled the train's approach to the siding. "My wife, my little boy, you tell them, you tell them I safe."

Albert promised and pulled a few bills and coins from his pocket. "This should tie you over for a few days." He placed the money in Bruno's palm, closed his fist around it,

and waved at the two men up the track. “Best you join the other guys now; they’ll show you what to do.”

“Alberto, thank you,” Bruno choked. “Someday, someday, I pay back.”

The train slowed. Bruno made his way towards the others. He said a prayer of thanks for Albert and also one for his wife and son to have safely escaped the mêlée earlier that day. For now, he needed to trust God on that. The train slowed to a stop, and Bruno scrambled behind the other men up into the nearest car.