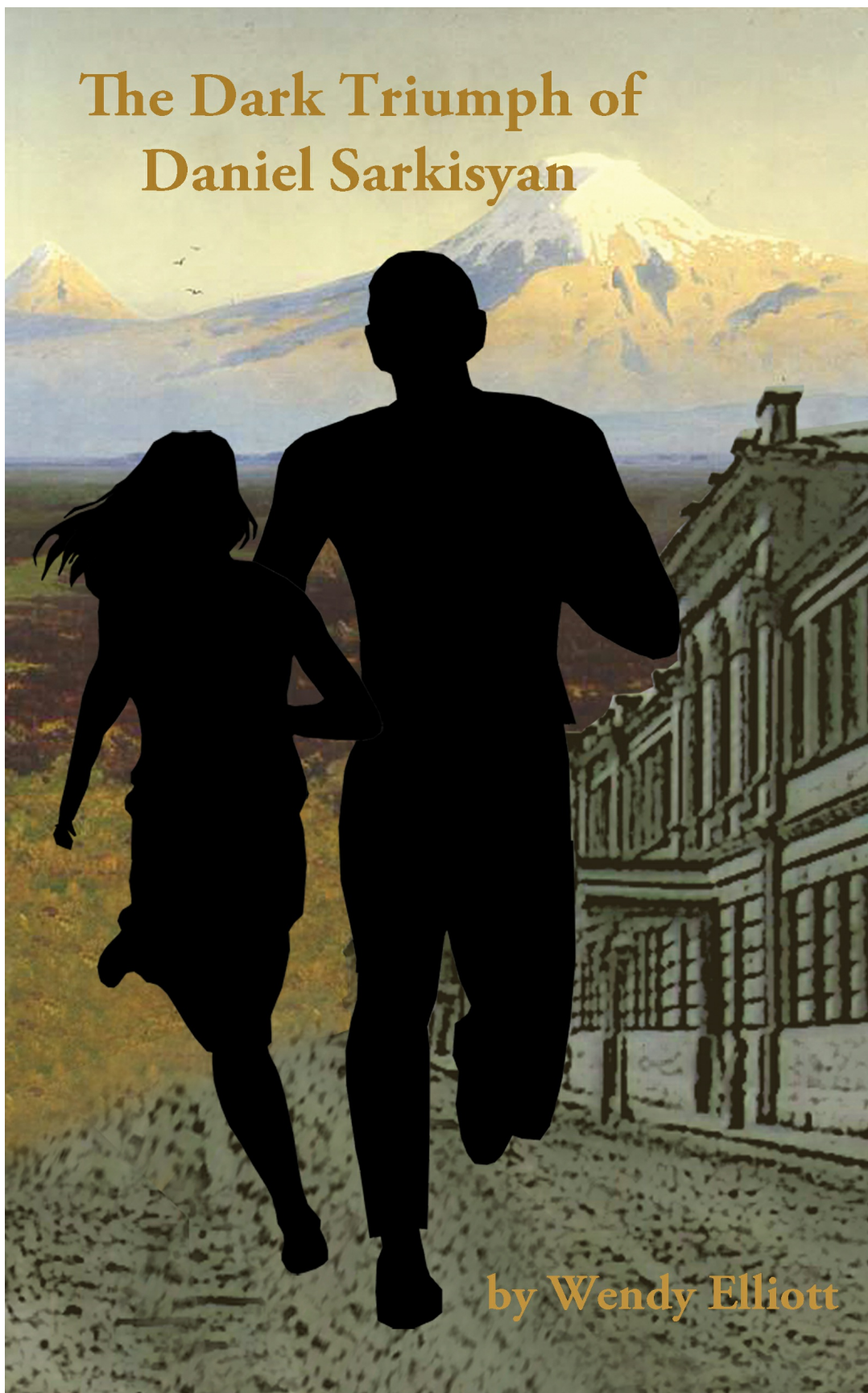


The Dark Triumph of Daniel Sarkisyan



by Wendy Elliott

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*To Mary Hakobyan and Mariam Mailyan, two darling, beautiful, independent little
girls who were the inspiration for Mari Sarkisyan*

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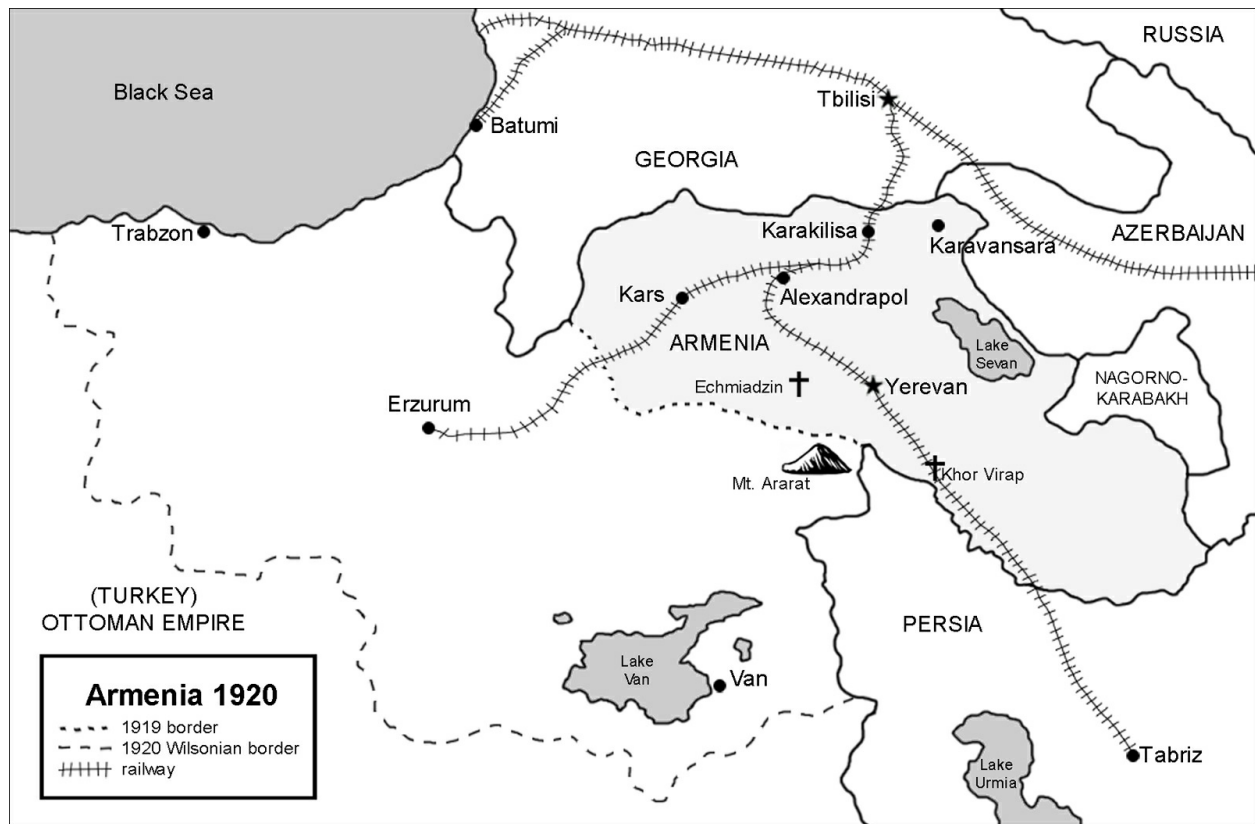
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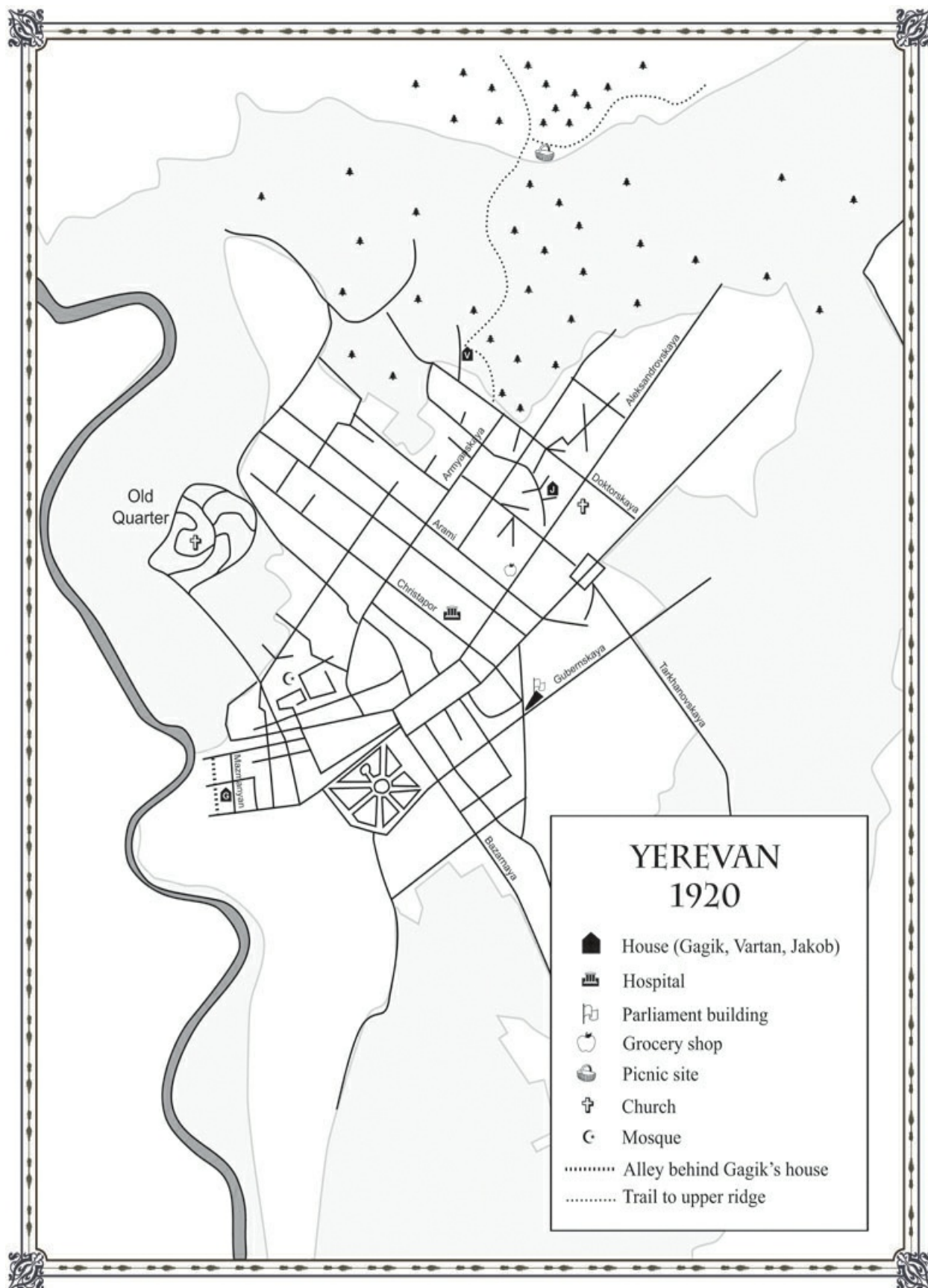
[Author's Note](#)

Maps





Note: Armenian surnames end in *yan* or *ian*, both pronounced YAN. The emphasis in a name is always on the second-to-last syllable. For example, Daniel's last name, Sarkisyan, is pronounced Sar-KEES-yan.



Chapter 1

Is it better to be a good dead person or an awful live person? Before the twentieth of December 1919, I had never stolen anything in my life. Nor had I ever told a lie. On that day, I did both. I remember the date because it was my sister's birthday. I remember the day because that's when I first met Vartan Ohanyan and Gagik Gasparyan. I've done so many bad things in the last year that I wonder if I've turned into a monster. A very kind man warned me about that possibility. But there was nothing else I could have done. I guess that I'll just have to learn to live with the consequences.

My journey into the dark side began because I wanted to eat an apple. I was hungry. I hadn't eaten anything in a day and a half, and the pain in my stomach was growing. I'd been searching for a job throughout Yerevan all morning and long into the afternoon. No one was hiring. By the time I saw the pile of apples on a table in a grocer's window, I was desperate.

I had no money to buy an apple, so I decided to steal one. It's that simple. I cannot blame Vartan or Gagik for this first step into crime, because I hadn't met them yet. I don't know where the plan came from. It just popped into my head. One minute I saw a nail sticking out of a snow bank at the side of the road, and the next minute I was attaching it to a long piece of string that was in my pocket. I carefully wound the string into a loose ball and concealed it in my hand. When I entered the shop on Aleksandrovskaia Street, the grocer was behind the wooden counter talking to a customer—a tall boy only a few years older than I. Another customer, an old woman, was walking down the aisle toward me. She had several kinds of vegetables in her basket, and I was pretty sure she was heading for the apples. I stuck the nail in an apple at the bottom and back of the pile, and let the string loosen from my hand as I slid away. I was about two metres away when the woman arrived at the table. Just as she reached for an apple, I yanked on the string, and the whole pile tumbled to the floor.

The grocer and the boy looked up as the woman screeched, and madly tried to grab the flying apples. They could see me clearly, just an innocent bystander, far from the pile, looking on in horror.

"I'm so sorry," said the woman, kneeling on the floor to gather the fallen apples. "I don't know how it happened."

As the grocer rushed out from behind the counter, I moved in quickly. I pulled hard on the string, yanked the nail from the apple, dropped the nail and string into my pocket, and lightly kicked the now-blemished apple toward the door.

"Don't worry, madam," said the grocer. "Accidents happen."

The three of us picked up the apples, and the grocer carefully piled them on the table again. I 'suddenly noticed' the pierced apple lying by the door. I picked it up.

"Look here," I said, pointing to the jagged hole in the apple. I poked the skin and flesh deeper with my dirty fingernail. "This one was cut open with something."

The grocer inspected it, and handed it back to me. "Keep it, son. Thanks for your help."

“Oh, thank you, sir,” I exclaimed, as wide-eyed and grateful as I could manage. “My sister will be so happy.”

The grocer took another look at my dirty face beneath my threadbare woollen cap, and at my old, oversized winter coat. He knew a starving urchin when he saw one. He reached for another apple. “Here’s one for you, too.”

I beamed my gratitude, and bowed my way out of the shop. I put the good apple in my pocket, and barely restrained myself from running down the street with relief. As soon as I rounded the corner, I bit into the marred apple. It tasted like heaven.

“Nicely done,” said a voice over my shoulder. It was the boy from the shop.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, come now. None of that. We both know what you did and how you did it. I admire finesse.”

I ignored him, and continued munching.

“I just expressed admiration for your skill as a thief, and you’ve got nothing to say?”

“I’m not a thief. The grocer gave me this apple.” Wet spray and tiny chunks of fruit escaped my mouth in indignation, landing on his finely tailored, navy blue coat.

He grimaced and swept away the spittle with his leather glove. “Don’t forget the apple for your dear sister, too.”

“I don’t have a sister,” I said, turning away. I started to walk down the street.

“A thief and a liar,” he said, strolling beside me. “Impressive.”

“Go away.”

“Are you interested in a job?”

I stopped ignoring him.

“I’m looking for someone who’s resourceful. You certainly are that. Can you read and write?”

I nodded, but added, “I want honest work.”

We were standing in front of a café on Arami Street. He pointed to it and said, “Come on. I’ll buy you something to eat, and we can talk.”

He didn’t have to ask twice. We sat at a small table. I ordered a cup of tea, and he ordered a coffee and two pastries.

“My name is Vartan Ohanyan,” he said. We shook hands.

“I’m Daniel Sarkisyan. You should know that this was the first time I stole anything. And it wasn’t really stealing—in the normal sense of the word.”

Vartan smiled, clearly amused by my self-justification. If he hadn’t had a chipped front tooth and a few pockmarks on his face, he would have been movie star handsome—like a young Charlie Chaplin. He pulled a small pouch from his pocket and rolled a cigarette. He licked the paper to seal in the tobacco, stuck the cigarette in his mouth, and lit it. He inhaled deeply, pointed with the cigarette, and asked, “Do you want one?”

When I shook my head, he said, “So, you’re not a thief. Not a liar. Not a smoker. What are you, Daniel?”

“I’m a hungry, honest, hard working boy. What kind of job do you have?”

Just as he was about to speak, the waiter arrived with our drinks and pastries. My mouth watered instantly. I took a drink. The tea was hot and sweet. I took a bite. The pastry was warm and gooey. I was starting to feel almost normal again.

“The man I work for needs someone to do some paperwork,” said Vartan. “Like writing and keeping track of payments.”

"Like a secretary?"

"Sort of. But you'd be making deliveries and pick ups, too. Odd jobs, now and then."

"I can do that."

"Where did you go to school?"

"My papa was the school master in Van. I learned math, sciences, languages, the usual. He taught me until... until he died," I said.

"In 1915?" Vartan asked. When I nodded, he said, "My father died then, too. My whole family died then. In Erzurum."

Everyone knew of Erzurum. It was a major deportation centre. But Armenians in that centre were forced to march south into the Syrian desert, not north into Armenia. "You escaped," I guessed.

Vartan shrugged. "I survived. I made my way to Yerevan, where I met Gagik, my boss. I've been working for him ever since. By the way, don't ever call him by his first name. I just think of him as Gagik. I always call him Mr. Gasparyan."

He noticed my empty plate and pushed his uneaten pastry towards me. "I'm not hungry. Have mine."

I thanked him. It didn't take any effort to devour a second helping.

"Gagik was born in Russia. His father was Armenian, but I think his mother was Russian," Vartan said. "He often has correspondence in Russian. Do you speak Russian?"

"My Russian is not as good as my Armenian and Turkish, but I can get by," I said. "My grandmother continued as my teacher, after Papa died. She'd been his teacher, so it was natural."

Vartan smoked for a while, watching me eat the pastry. He asked if I had any questions.

"Just one. There are so many men out of work in this city. Why would Mr. Gasparyan want to hire a boy?"

Vartan flicked an ash to the floor. He thought for a long time. Finally he said, "His business dealings are discreet. He needs someone who won't be easily noticed... I used to do the job before I grew up."

"It looks like you've been grown up for a while."

"Yeah, well, Gagik hired one boy after another to replace me. They didn't work out." Then he grinned. "I might be irreplaceable."

"He would accept me as your replacement, just like that?"

"He trusts my judgement. You fit the bill. You're educated enough to do the paperwork, and with that little demonstration in the grocery shop, you've shown me that you've got enough wiles to survive—especially to survive Gagik's temper. If you pay attention to what he says, and do it, you'll have no problems. Of course, it's up to him, but as far as I'm concerned, the job is yours if you want it. What do you say?"

I wiped my fingers carefully on my napkin. I was smart enough to know what he meant by 'wiles': trickery and deception. It was not flattering. But I couldn't afford to turn down a job, even a wily one. I extended my hand to him. "I say, thank you, Vartan."

My fate was sealed.

Chapter 2

It was almost dusk by the time Vartan and I arrived at the south end of the city to meet Gagik. Although Yerevan is one of the world's oldest cities, it really isn't much of a town. Who knows why it was chosen to be our new capital? Before the 13th century, Armenia had a proud history, including being the world's first Christian nation. But after 1230 or so, Armenia ceased to be a kingdom. It got tossed around by one empire or another for centuries. First it was the Mongols, then it was the Ottomans, then it was the Russians, and lately it's been the Ottomans and the Russians. Back and forth, back and forth like a football. But last year, when the World War of 1915-1918 ended, and Russia's attempt at creating the Transcaucasian Democratic Federative Republic failed—that's the mouthful name for the federation of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan—when it failed, some Armenians decided to create the first Republic of Armenia. And they chose Yerevan as the capital. As I made my way through its muddy, icy streets, I had to wonder at their audacity. Perhaps a better question would be: Will this republic survive?

In the distance the sun was setting on Mt. Ararat. It sat like a giant frozen triangle plunked down in the middle of the vast Ottoman plain. I tried to ignore the tug on my heart to what lay on its other side—my beloved Van. A place I wondered if I'd ever see again.

I scurried to keep up with Vartan. Through the frosty fog of my breath, through the leafless trees in the huge park, I could see a small fire surrounded by a handful of men who were trying to keep warm. While everyone else was wrapped in several layers of old coats and gnarly scarves, one man stood alone. He looked like a large, round Cossack, one of the old Tsar's guards. His long, black coat had a pristine fur collar, and he wore a large, black fur hat. As we approached, he raised his head. From underneath a set of wild bushy eyebrows, he stared at me with glistening black eyes. I knew immediately that this was Gagik Gasparyan.

Vartan pointed to me. "This is Daniel Sarkisyan."

"Come," Gagik said.

We followed him out of the park and down several blocks toward the Hrazdan River. He stopped in front of a two-story, black stone house, went up the steps to the door, and inserted a key. He motioned for us to enter behind him. The large entry hall and dining room beyond were sparsely but expensively furnished. Immediately inside the front door, on the left, was a staircase going up to the second floor. On the right was a wooden armoire, and beside it stood a delicately carved chair. Tucked into the corner between the stairs and the doorway to the dining area was a small table that held an ornate, silver candelabra. Only one of the nine candles was lit, but it cast enough light for us to see to remove our boots and coats. I took off my cap and winter coat that had once belonged to my great uncle. I kept on my father's old woollen jacket with the leather elbow patches. Vartan and I laid our coats on the chair. I tried to ignore the holes in my socks.

Gagik hung his coat in the armoire and put on a pair of soft slippers. He took off his fur hat and placed it on top of the armoire. He had a full face, plump body, and almost no hair on top of his shiny, bald head.

"Masha!" Gagik called as he picked up the candelabra and carried it into the dining room. "Bring food for three," he said in Russian.

A thin, grey-haired woman, dressed entirely in black, with slippers on her feet and a shawl around her shoulders, appeared at the far end of the room. She bowed slightly and disappeared into what I assumed was the kitchen.

Gagik spread his arms wide, making the candlelight flicker as he moved. "Welcome to my home, ah—"

"Daniel," I said.

"Yes, yes. Daniel Sarkisyan," said Gagik, smiling. "A good, strong Armenian name." A gold tooth sparkled from the back of his mouth, and he smiled even wider, as if to give me a better view. He set the candelabra down in the centre of the table, and lit the other candles with the burning one.

"Come. Sit," he said.

Vartan and I walked across a lush, thick carpet that would rival the finest hand woven carpets in the world. We sat across from each other. I couldn't help but admire the carpet that was hanging on the stone wall behind him, like a beautiful tapestry of reds, blues, yellows and golds.

Gagik brought a decanter from the sideboard and placed it at the end of the table nearest the front hall. He also set down an ashtray and three drinking glasses etched with gold. From his pocket he withdrew a slim, gold-plated cigarette case. He opened it, took out a hand-rolled cigarette, which he lit from one of the candles, and sat down.

"So, Vartan, you found me an honest boy, yes?" Gagik asked. I don't know if he squinted because of the cigarette smoke drifting near his eyes or because he wasn't sure of the answer.

I wasn't sure of it either. I watched as Vartan slowly inhaled on his cigarette, and just as slowly exhaled. He smiled wryly, clearly enjoying my predicament. "I did."

"Good, good." Gagik turned to me. "You can read?"

"Yes, sir."

"And write? I need a boy who can write well. Vartan can't write."

"I can write," said Vartan, sheepishly. "But it looks like chicken scratches."

"My penmanship is legible," I said.

Gagik tilted his head back and roared with laughter. "'My penmanship is legible.' Such big words for a little boy."

I pulled back my shoulders and sat straighter. "I may be small for my age, sir, but I am not so little. I'm fourteen and a half years old."

"And a half," he said gravely. "You will start with accounts. Can you do your sums? Adding, subtracting, and so on?"

"Yes, I know arithmetic. I was also studying algebra, trigonometry and geometry before... before —"

"Before," said Gagik, knowingly. He picked a fleck of tobacco from his tongue, and casually asked, "Do you have any family left?"

"No," I lied.

I don't know why I lied. I had told Vartan that I lied about having a sister. As far as he was concerned, I was now telling the truth. It doesn't really matter. All I know is that, at that moment, despite his friendly tone, it felt as though Gagik's piercing black eyes were staring into the depths of my soul. I clenched my hands together under the table. I held my breath, half expecting him to leap up from his chair and demand the truth. Instead his gaze drifted away, as if he were lost in thought. "It can be hard, not having any family," he murmured.

Then he blinked and reached to uncork the decanter. He poured some clear liquid into the three glasses and passed them around.

"To survival!" he said, as he raised his glass and swallowed the contents.

"To survival," Vartan and I echoed, as we did the same. My throat was immediately set on fire. My eyes filled with tears. I slammed the glass to the table, and opened my mouth. I coughed. I gasped. I coughed again. I sputtered and tried to suck in as much air as I could.

Gagik and Vartan laughed hard. Vartan said, "Vodka will put hair on your chest, Daniel."

"It's made from the finest Armenian apricots. The smoothest. The best brand. Famous the world over," said Gagik. "But I think it was your first, yes?"

Tears streamed down my face. "And my last," I managed to say.

Fortunately, at that moment, Masha provided a distraction. She brought in a large tray piled high with assorted food and dishes. Laying it down near Gagik, she set before us a platter of cheeses and sliced meats, glass bowls heaped with pickles and canned vegetables, fancy little containers of sauces in colours of red, orange and white, a plate of sliced carrots and something green, and a basket that overflowed with bread. She also put a small plate, fork, knife and napkin in front of each of us. She did all this without saying a word or looking at any of us. She left as quietly as she had entered.

The sight of such a magnificent spread of food made my stomach growl. Obviously the apple, pastries and tea had not been enough. I wanted to eat every last morsel on the table as fast as I could. However, I politely waited for our host to signal for us to start. He did so by picking up his fork, rising slightly from his chair, reaching across the table, stabbing a piece of meat, and flinging it onto his plate. He repeated this action with the cheese, vegetables and sauces, and only sat when his plate was fully loaded. In the middle of his efforts, he sang out, "Dig in, boys. Don't be shy."

And so we did. The food was delicious. The red sauce, I discovered, was made from cranberries and the orange sauce was made from apricots. There was boiled beef and goat and lamb, and some sort of salted fish, too. When I thought I couldn't possibly eat another bite, Masha brought in some sweets. In one hand she held a plate of fruit that she had cut into pieces and arranged like beautiful flowers. In her other hand, she had a small plate of chocolate pieces, piled five high.

"Eat, eat," Gagik said to me, as he placed a gooey chocolate between his teeth and bit down hard. "You eat like a bird. No wonder you're so little. You should eat like Vartan. Like a man!" In fact, I had eaten as much as Vartan, maybe more.

"Mr. Gasparyan," I said, "I am so full, I couldn't eat another bite. Thank you so much. This is the best meal I've had in many months."

Gagik swayed slightly and beamed. Though I had earlier declined his offer of anything more to drink, Vartan had been sipping vodka throughout the meal, and Gagik had been guzzling it.

"You should eat well every day, a growing boy like you," he said, now slurring his words. "I'll pay you well, and you'll eat well every day, yes?"

He stood up, steadied himself, and pulled from the pocket of his trousers a stack of rubles. He handed me one fifty-ruble bill and two tens. It was a very generous salary. "There're your wages for a week." He gave me another twenty rubles and said, "That's for expenses. Buy a pen, some ink, and a small notebook. You start tomorrow. Very important business."

Before I could utter my thanks, he shoved the rest of the money back in his pocket and left the room. We could hear him stagger down the hall past the kitchen, and enter a room at the back of the house. He fumbled for a bit, and then we heard a sharp click of a lock being turned. Vartan immediately snatched four pieces of bread, several slabs of meat and cheese, and hastily made two

sandwiches. He handed them across the table to me and whispered, "Quick. In your pocket. For breakfast!"

I had just managed to put one in each jacket pocket, and a piece of chocolate with them, when we heard a cupboard door being closed and locked, and Gagik's returning footsteps.

He slipped a letter from a small envelope and handed it to me. "Read it," he said, as he sat down.

I unfolded the letter. It was handwritten in Russian, dated exactly a year before: December 20, 1918. I started to read it, but Gagik suddenly slapped his hand on the table. "Aloud!"

"My dear Gagik," I began, translating it into Armenian as I went. "The extraordinary commission is proving to be an extraordinary success. You can play a vital role in the commission in Armenia. I will contact you soon to inform you of the details. Sincerely yours, Felix."

Gagik's eyes were closed. The expression on his face was one of rapture or ecstasy or, at the very least, extreme pride. I looked at Vartan and mouthed the words, "Who's Felix?" Vartan looked puzzled.

Gagik opened his eyes and gestured for me to give him the letter. "One day I will tell you both about the great Felix and his extraordinary commission. But not yet. Not until the time is right." It took three attempts for him to fold the letter into the envelope and tuck it into his pocket. He was very drunk. "You'll be proud to be working for me then, my boys."

"Mr. Gasparyan," I said sincerely, "I am grateful to be working for you now."

Vartan stood up abruptly. "Come, Daniel. It's late. We should be going."

Gagik nodded and stood also. "Yes. Busy day tomorrow."

After we said our goodbyes, and Vartan and I were once again walking through the dark, frozen streets of the city, I thought about how truly lucky I was to have met Vartan and been hired by Gagik. When I told Vartan this, he stopped suddenly, grabbed my lapels, and gave me a very strong shake. "Grow up fast, Dani boy," he said gruffly. "You can't afford to be naïve any longer."

Chapter 3

Knock, knock, knock. Pause. Knock. Pause. Knock, knock.

"It's me," I whispered. "Open up." Nothing. I repeated the secret knock. Still nothing.

"Come on, open up! It's freezing out here." I was about to start hammering on the door of the little shed when I heard it unlock from inside. I entered and quickly closed the door. I was immediately shoved back against it by a small, mummy-like creature, who began to pummel me with tiny but powerful blows. "Ah mith ah roo! Maw kud roo boo ih ah moo!"

"Oof" I cried out, laughing. "Who are you and what have you done with my sister?" My hands were full of stuff I'd found on my way home from Gagik's, so I couldn't push her away without hurting her. "Please! Stop! Enough, Mari."

After one final punch to my gut, she stepped back. She folded her arms across her chest and glared at me. Only her dark brown eyes with their long black lashes were visible. She had wrapped her head and face in multiple scarves that extended down her arms and covered her hands. She must have been wearing every piece of clothing she owned.

"You look ridiculous," I said. "Like a creature from a Jules Verne novel."

"Ah morm," she said.

"I can't understand you."

She yanked down the cloth that covered her mouth. "I'm warm. And I'm mad at you!"

"No fooling."

"You left me alone all day, Dani. All day! I was afraid that you weren't coming back."

"You know I'd never leave you."

But it was true. I'd left in the morning and it was now dark. She had locked the door behind me, so she'd been safe. She had had food to eat—the last of our stash—a chamber pot to use, and books to read. It was necessary for me to go out until I found work, and she knew it. Still, it must have been a lonely day for her.

"I'm sorry, Mariam." I help up my arms to show her my found items. "But I brought you a present. Happy birthday!"

She looked at them, but didn't change her sour expression. "Gee, thanks. A broken table leg and an empty vodka bottle."

I stepped passed her and put them down on the dirt floor next to the small woodstove. "Think of them as the gift of warmth." I reached for the hatchet and began chopping up the table leg.

Mari leapt onto our makeshift bed and sat down, her little legs dangling over the edge. In the dim light of the solitary candle that stood in the sconce on the wall, she looked like some weird little pixie. "I don't want to spend my days like this, Dani. I'm bored."

"I know, sweetie. But we don't have any choice. I can't afford to send you to school, and you can't wander the streets. Even during the daytime, it's not safe for a girl."

"I want to be a nurse." This was typical of Mari. She often switched gears as fast as a hurricane.

Fortunately my back was turned and she couldn't see me roll my eyes. "I know. But not yet. You're ten years old."

“I don’t mean now. When I grow up. But I could work in the hospital now. To prepare. And before you say no, listen to me. A woman who lives in Jakob’s house is a nurse. I saw her uniform below her coat when she went to the outhouse this morning. And she had on a nurse’s cap. She could take me.”

Our little shed sat behind a house that was owned by Jakob, our distant cousin. For the past year we had been living on a farm with our great uncle near the old monastery, Khor Virap. He died in November and we had to move because the government took his land for taxes. We had packed up our belongings, tied them onto a goat, and boarded the train to Yerevan. Our uncle had told us about Jakob, so we went to him for help.

Jakob was not unkind, but he had no more room in his house. Twenty-two people were crammed in there with him. They included his immediate family and distant relatives who had gone to him when they migrated to the city. But rather than turn Mari and me away, he offered us the use of his garden shed. Our only other option would have been to go to an orphanage. We couldn’t do that. We’d have preferred to sleep on the streets than be separated from one another. Besides, we would have had to do menial labour for extremely low wages. That would have been awful. No, we were happier together, even if we were living in a shed.

It took a full day for us to clean out the place and make it our home. We had put the garden tools and pots in a pile under an old door, which became a platform for our bed. I’d sold the goat and bought fresh straw, which we stuffed into flour sacks that Mari had sewn together to make a mattress. There was a small stove in the corner of the building, and a tap in the garden for fresh water, though know one knew when it would flow. Water was a huge problem in Armenia. Not because there wasn’t enough—there was. The country was inundated with hot springs, so there was clearly an adequate underground water system. But that was God-made. The man-made infrastructure was old, leaky and unreliable. There was no rhyme or reason as to which day Yerevan would have water, nor how long it would run. So, like everyone else in the country, we stored water in pails in our home.

We’d brought a few blankets, dishes and pots with us from the farm, and bags to hold our clothing. It wasn’t much, but it was as homey as we could make it. Mari had suggested that we tell Jakob about our problems, but I refused to ask for charity. I would work to support us, just as our father had once done.

I’d been searching for a job for weeks. Yesterday we’d run out of money. When I left Mari that morning, I’d left her with the rest of our food supply. There was no more. Running into Vartan had been our salvation.

“I’m not sure about you going to the hospital, Mari,” I said. I stoked the fire. The wood was starting to burn nicely.

“I knew you’d be against it! But Dani, just listen to me,” she said. “I have it all worked out.”

“No, you listen to me. You’re still recovering. You shouldn’t be working.” Mari had almost died the previous year from typhus. Millions of people had died throughout the world from this disease, during the World War and immediately after. Three million had died in Russia alone.

Mari raised her arms, like a weight lifter, and made two fists with her tiny hands. “Strong like bull.”

“Not a good idea.”

“I could earn some money, too, working in the kitchen, peeling vegetables. Or I could sweep the floors or wash and fold bandages. Or read to patients.” When she saw me hesitate, she tilted her

head, pouting and smiling at the same time. "Please, Dani, pretty please. Otherwise I shall die of boredom."

This time she saw me roll my eyes. I gave an exaggerated sigh. "I'll sleep on it."

She clapped her hands. "Goody. In the morning we'll ask the nurse to take me with her." I had learned through painful experience that it wasn't worth replying.

I filled a pot with water from the bucket under our little table, and set it on the stove. As I lowered my hands to my sides, I felt my bulging pockets. "Oh, I almost forgot. I really did bring you a present." I pulled out the chocolate and handed it to her.

"Marvellous!" Her face lit up with delight. She took it carefully, licked her lips, and then looked at me skeptically. "Where did you get it?"

"I forgot this, too—I got a job!"

"What?" She rushed over to me, wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me hard. "Oh, Dani, I'm so happy! What is it? What will you do? Where is it?"

I pried her arms off of me and walked her backwards. I picked her up and set her down on the bed. "Eat your chocolate and I'll tell you about it."

Mari frowned. "Did you wash your hands before you took this, Dani? Of course, you didn't. Wait a minute."

Mari had become fastidious about hygiene ever since she'd read about Florence Nightingale, the British nurse in the Crimean War who preached the importance of cleanliness.

She set the chocolate down on the bed, took a cup from a nail on the wall, and dipped it in the water pail. She poured the water into a small, chipped washing bowl, and used a sliver of soap to wash her hands. She then took a washing cloth and wiped the chocolate carefully before popping it into her mouth. "Mmm-mmm! Now, tell me all."

I told her, but not everything. I left out the bit about the apple. I described my conversation with Vartan in the café and having dinner with Gagik. Then I pulled out from my pockets the apple, sandwiches and money. "We're going to be all right, Mari."

"I know we are, Dani." Mari always believed that things would work out. She had total faith. Even losing our parents and siblings, our grandmother, and our great uncle, did not destroy that belief. I, on the other hand, was not so naïve, despite what Vartan had said. I knew that there were many things you didn't have any control over. And some of them were downright scary. I turned to the stove. The water was boiling. I poured it into the vodka bottle and inserted the cork.

"Ta-dah! A hot water bottle!"

Mari laughed and scrambled off the bed. She picked up the apple and sandwiches, and put them in the large glass jar that kept our food safe from vermin. I put the money back in my pocket.

She held back the blankets as I rolled the bottle between the sheets. "Time for bed. Before we lose the candle light and while the bed is still warm," I said.

"We will brush our teeth first," she said firmly.

After cleaning our teeth, we quickly stripped down to our underwear. Mari climbed into bed. I snuffed out the candle and crawled in beside her.

She kissed my cheek. "Good night, Dani. Thank you for a lovely birthday."

I kissed the top of her head. "Good night, Mari. Sleep well."

She soon drifted off, but I remained wide awake. I hadn't told her about stealing the apple because I knew how she would have reacted. She'd have been horrified. She'd told me how disappointed our parents would have been. She'd have been right. They would have been ashamed of my behaviour. I

was ashamed of my behaviour. But it had gotten me a job. Now, with a job, I would not have to steal to eat.

I thought about Vartan's last action. He had shaken me, literally and figuratively. What did he mean, I couldn't afford to be naïve? Naïve about what? I was sure it had something to do with Gagik, and maybe even with Felix, though I'd bet my life on Vartan not knowing who Felix was. I replayed the dinner conversation over and over in my mind, but could find no evidence of Gagik being anything but a good host. About an hour later, I finally fell asleep knowing that only time would supply the answer.