

Karl Meade
127 Leslee Drive
Salt Spring Island, B.C. V8K 2R3
Canada
1-250-538-8389 (mobile)
karl@karlmeade.com
115,000 words

BRICKBURN

A NOVEL

BY KARL MEADE

The sun never knew how great it was until it hit the side of a building.

– Albert Kahn

The Life, Death, Life
of Albert Livingston Alberti
by Melonie Alberti

December, 1983
Calgary, Alberta
The Alberta Hotel

No one except Detective Wood ever asked me what happened that night. Adults would look away, or smile weakly at somewhere above my eyes—as if to look me directly in the eye was to imagine the unimaginable for their own family. When I returned to school, the other kids gave me a five-foot buffer zone, like I had a contagion, but I still heard their whispers: *that's her... Melonie Alberti... the invasion girl.*

It happened the night of my grandfather's annual Christmas Ball, the biggest charity event in the city—the great Alberti Architects fund the Calgary food-bank: my grandfather Albert Alberti, my father, Livingston Alberti, and my aunt, Aeolia Alberti. It seemed all I ever heard about in my family were buildings and projects and designs, and who did what to whom to build them.

That night, I was sitting in the mid-restoration mess of my parents' Alberta Hotel, on a teetering wooden stool in front of a wooden saw-horse plank, with a tiny mirror perched on it, brushing on my baby-blue eye-shadow. My mother—Sara Chagall—stood two sinks away, powdering her forehead, deep in thought, facing a wall of three roughed-in sinks, opposite a wall of three roughed-in toilets, with no stalls or doors. Only one sink and one toilet had running water. The place was a disaster.

'Why do we have to go to this boring Christmas party anyway?' I put away the eye-shadow and opened the foundation powder. I didn't want her to see the eye-shadow until it was too late to take it off. Which meant I'd have to remain blink-less around her until we left for the party.

'It's only once a year, honey.' She was an architect too, but kept her maiden name, because the last thing this city needed was another Alberti architect. 'Your grandad likes to show off his family, all dressed up.'

I couldn't tell how she'd meant that. I'd never heard her say anything bad about anyone, but my grandfather Albert wasn't just anyone. All three of them—Livingston, Sara, Aeolia—had at one time or another worked for Albert, partnered with Albert, and left Albert.

I dropped the foundation brush on the dusty floor, bristle-side down, and sighed loudly. 'Why do we have to live like this?' Sara opened her lipstick and hand-mirror, ignoring me. I shook the brush in the air. 'None of my friends live in a renovation,' I said. 'They live in real houses, with walls and bathrooms and everything. Like real life.'

Sara pressed her lips together, puckered them at her hand-mirror, and said: 'Mount Royal is not real life, honey.' She slid the lipstick into her plastic cosmetics travel-bag, which hung on a temporary hook on the back of the temporary door.

‘It’s more real life than *camping out* in a hotel,’ I said, wide-eyed, trying to hide my eye shadow.

Sara smoothed her long white dress in a half-length mirror nailed to a plank beside the sinks. ‘Living in a renovation is not my idea of fun either.’ She smiled at me in the mirror, conspiratorially. ‘Just don’t tell your father I said so.’

I tried not to smile back, but she had a way of softening me. At thirteen, I didn’t see why we had to live in this mess, in what my father called the Alberta Hotel’s “historic” restoration. All I knew was that they were ruining my life—to build a homeless shelter, no less.

‘Tell your father what?’ Livingston Alberti folded his arms and leaned his hulking frame in the bathroom doorway, oblivious to the white dust smearing the shoulder of his black tux. His wide forehead and two-tone gangster-shoes shone in the fluorescent construction lights.

I got up, turned away from him, and stood beside my mother in the half-length mirror. ‘I hate this place,’ I said, dragging a brush through my hair.

‘How can you say that, Mel? I *love* this place.’ Livingston cast his big arm around the large, soon-to-be lobby-bathroom, then toward the vast open atrium behind him, lofted to three full storeys in century-old stone and brick. ‘We’re going to feed and house the homeless. And I get to do this while living with the two most beautiful women on the planet!’

I dead-eyed him through the mirror. ‘There was a stone in my makeup. A huge chunk of *stone*.’

‘That’s prime Alberti sandstone, Mel. You should be proud to wear it on your face.’ He stood behind me now in the mirror, with a big fake smile as he copied my brushstrokes, pretending to brush his own shoulder-length brown hair. I rolled my eyes at him, forgetting the eye shadow. His brow furrowed at the flash of blue above my eyes.

I was saved by my five-year-old brother, Jack, wearing a fitted miniature tux on his four-foot frame, as he took a two-foot slide across the dust into the bathroom doorway, his hands splayed out like a surfer. His wavy blonde hair fell to his shoulders, like Livingston's, and he wore miniature two-tone shoes, like Livingston's.

Nearly vibrating out of his shoes, Jack said, 'When are we going, Livingston?'

'As soon as the ladies are ready, buddy.'

Sara squatted in front of Jack, bunching her white dress on her thighs so it didn't touch the floor. 'And here we have the most handsome man in the world.' She straightened his bow tie. 'What do you think, Mel? If he's this handsome at five years old, just think of when he's twenty.'

'He'll be five times as handsome,' Livingston said. 'Just like his father.'

'*Four* times,' I said, flatly. 'Five times *four* is twenty.'

'Five times five is twenty-five,' Jack said, brightly.

Livingston shrugged a smile at Jack. 'Four times is still pretty handsome.'

'Don't worry,' Sara said. 'Your dad has other skills besides math.' She stood and brushed the dust from Livingston's shoulder. 'Maybe you two should've worn white.'

My father placed his hands on her waist and gently kissed the nape of her neck, pushing her hair aside with his nose. Her shoulders rose and her face bloomed into smile.

I stuck my finger down my throat toward Jack, through the mirror, and made a puking sound. Jack made one too.

My father mumbled into my mother's neck: 'I'll wear anything you want, later, baby.'

'God, really?' I said. 'We're standing right here.'

My mother leaned her head back to look at my father. ‘Is that a promise?’ She fluttered her eyelashes, teasingly, her warm brown eyes shining.

He gave one of his guttural growls and leaned in for a kiss. She stopped him with a finger to his lips.

‘Only if you promise me one thing.’

‘Anything.’

She leaned into his ear. ‘If you don’t argue with your father tonight, you can have anything you want.’

He buried his face in her neck again and blew a loud raspberry, gazing wide-eyed down at Jack. Jack beamed up at him: ‘Can I blow one too?’

My father picked Jack up and thrust his body through the air like an airplane toward my mother. She fake-screamed as Jack snuggled her neck and blew a sloppy raspberry.

She locked eyes with my father, her hands on Jack’s torso. ‘I’m serious,’ she said. ‘For just one night. *Please.*’

My father’s eyes flashed, and he put Jack down. ‘It’s not up to me.’ He threw a hand up toward the bare rafters. ‘Albert’s the one who left us in this mess. Remember?’

‘It *is* up to you. It takes two.’

* * *

The four of us walked the two snowy blocks—like a winter wonderland—down historic Stephen Avenue to Alberti Architects’ offices, housed in the old courthouse built in 1912 by Filippo Alberti, my great grandfather, the city’s first grand stonemason.

We were greeted by my grandfather, Albert, at the sandstone fountain inside the door. He limped toward us with his big arms spread, wearing his signature bluestone tuxedo with his great mane of white hair flowing over his shoulders. Albert was a *man* if ever there was one: a rockface of a forehead, with dark straight eyebrows over steel blue eyes, and a wide nose down to deep brown lips. One architectural reviewer had called him the Paul Bunyan of architects, with shoulders and hands of a giant, hewer of stone instead of wood: his footprints hadn’t created the Great Lakes, but they shook every landscape he moved through.

‘Grandad!’ shouted Jack.

He ran at Albert and gave him a body-slam of a hug. Albert caught him with one arm and lifted him like a sack of cement, with his other arm extended toward me. ‘Don’t play cool with me, young lady. Get in here.’

I sidled over and gave him the turned-away, one-arm hug of a teen. Albert squeezed me into Jack and turned toward The Tribune’s cameraman just as the flash went off. Still holding Jack in his arms, Albert released me, turned to Sara, squeezed her shoulder, then looked past Livingston toward The Tribune reporter beside the cameraman.

‘Three generations of Alberti stone, in tuxes,’ he pronounced. ‘Let’s get this on the record.’

He waved Livingston over, without looking at him, and held Jack between them as a buffer. Livingston smiled, tightly, while Sara and I stood aside, watching.

‘Tuxes and hair manes,’ Sara said, quietly to me.

‘They look like rock stars.’

‘No pun intended,’ Sara said.

I groaned. ‘*Really*, mom?’

‘But it was still a good one.’ Sara smiled as I leaned gently into her. ‘Almost good enough to let the eye shadow go.’

Albert lowered Jack to the floor and squatted in front of him, pointing a massive hand toward the main hall. ‘There is a *hu-uge* buffet waiting for you over there, young fella.’ Then he turned to his next guests, waiting at the door behind the ushers.

The rest of the night I’ve pieced together over the years. Livingston took Jack’s hand, and Sara and I followed them into the crowd. A string quartet played in the corner. Servers wandered with champagne-laden trays. Albert had gutted the walls between the four courtrooms to create one vast two-storey vaulted space for his architects and draftsmen. He kept a glassed-in wall of private offices at the back for himself and his partners.

An hour later, the mayor and Albert had finished their speeches, and Sara stood at the long buffet table gathering Jack-friendly food onto an hors d’oeuvre plate: four carrot sticks of optimism, two chicken tenders of reality, and a dozen french-fries of bribery. She looked up and there stood Aeolia, in her black pant-suit, open white collar, and jet-black, cropped hair.

‘*Aeolia*.’ Sara put Jack’s plate down and they kissed cheeks. ‘I didn’t expect to see you here.’

‘I’m trying to take the high road.’ Aeolia had the classic Alberti forehead, straight as a cliff. Her blue eyes were direct and blunt, not the type to look away. Even as she later told me her part in all this—she never looked away.

‘Maybe you could give your brother a pointer or two.’ Sara nodded toward the side of the stage, where Livingston had intercepted Albert after his speech. Both men’s arms were stiff at their sides, as if forcing their hands to stay down.

‘Actually I snuck in the back.’ Aeolia glanced toward The Tribune cameraman and reporter now circling through the crowd. ‘So I’m probably not the best one to give advice on high roads.’

From across the room, Livingston’s voice rose.

‘What are they arguing over this time?’

‘It’s probably the hotel again,’ Sara said. ‘Livingston says Albert deserted us to bid on that big Centennial project for the city.’

‘The Sandstone Novella?’ Aeolia stared across the room at Albert. ‘I didn’t know he was actually doing that.’

‘Or maybe the Alberti land titles.’ Sara put a cheese stick on Jack’s plate. ‘They’re always arguing over those.’ She glanced toward the entrance, where I was failing at my assigned task—penance for my eye-shadow—to keep Jack out of trouble, as he tried to scale the sandstone fountain.

‘The *land titles*?’ Aeolia said.

Sara’s shoulders dropped. ‘I don’t know. I shouldn’t have said that. I was just guessing.’

‘Which titles?’

‘None,’ Sara said. She looked back at Albert and Livingston across the room. They’d moved into the far corner near the glassed-in offices, both of them gesticulating now. ‘I’m just so sick of it all.’ She picked up Jack’s plate. ‘I better go over there.’

She strode to the fountain, handed me the plate, and told me to give Jack the carrots first. As she started towards Albert and Livingston, Jack shouted: ‘Yes! French fries!’

A space had cleared around Albert and Livingston. Guests watched, furtively, uneasily, as the two men stood face-to-face in their tuxes, voices seething, a mirror of lifelong resentment: strong-boned foreheads, deep-set eyes, long wavy hair.

Sara reached them just as Albert recited one of his stock, lecturing lines: ‘We are what we choose,’ he growled, jabbing his forefinger at Livingston. ‘What separates the great from the meek is simple. They *choose*. And they act.’

‘Excuse me, Albert, I don’t mean to interrupt,’ Sara said, standing beside them now. ‘But Livingston, we need to—’

Livingston raised his hand to quiet her. ‘So this is what *you* choose? To fight Victor Wyle your whole life? And desert us!’

‘The Albertis are builders,’ Albert said. ‘Not social workers.’

‘*Livingston*.’ Sara placed her hand on his shoulder. He stepped aside to shake her off.

‘I *am* building,’ he said. ‘For people who need it.’

Sara grabbed Livingston firmly by the arm and began to lead him away.

‘Leave the homeless to those who know something about it,’ Albert called after them.

Sara looped her arm through Livingston’s and smiled casually at the other guests as she led him through the crowd toward Jack and me at the front fountain.

‘God, Livingston. We talked about this.’

‘I’m sorry.’ He waved to a friend, as if nothing was the matter. ‘But he’s just so stubborn, so completely senseless.’

Sara smiled at a passing colleague. ‘Who’s really the stubborn, senseless one?’

‘He’ll never see it,’ Livingston said. ‘Unless someone makes him.’

They reached us at the fountain and Jack nearly fell in with excitement. ‘Livingston!’ he shouted. ‘This is *so* cool! The water shoots right out of the rocks, like magic!’

‘Can we go now?’ I said, releasing Jack.

‘Yes.’ Sara looked pointedly at Livingston again. ‘It’s time to go.’

She returned from the coat-check to find Livingston halfway across the room, striding toward Albert. She helped Jack with his coat and hat and mitts, and the three of us left Livingston and walked back to the Alberta Hotel.

* * *

An hour later, my father trudged down Stephen Avenue through the icy night, cursing Albert. At the wide, stone entrance to the Alberta Hotel, he paused to smile at the footprints in the snow—a flurry of small, child-like steps, and a dozen mitt-prints and snow-scoops. He imagined Jack throwing snowballs at Sara and me all the way home, with one final, frenzied assault at the door.

From inside, he heard a muffled shout, probably Jack overtired. If he missed his regular bedtime, he got so wound up he had to howl it out of his system. Livingston knew the feeling. His head ached. Sara was right, as usual. He should’ve left with his family.

He cursed himself as he opened the large wooden door to the mid-restoration tangle of plastic sheeting and exposed beams and stone and dust and tools. In the foyer was a scree pile of

brick where he had demolished a 1920s brick wall—made from Wyle brick from Brickburn—to restore the original Alberti stone from 1888.

He stepped past the brick pile and stopped dead: Sara and Jack and I sat on the plastic-covered atrium couch, still in our winter coats, with duct tape over our mouths, our hands behind our backs. His entire body froze. Something moved to his left. A man standing at the grand stone fireplace, wearing a black balaclava and hood, and a long, black wool overcoat, clasped his black-gloved hands in front of him.

On the couch, Jack blinked his teary, brown eyes at Livingston, begging him to help. I kept my head perfectly still, crying, trying to breathe through my running nose. Sara's eyes motioned wildly at Livingston to look behind him.

Before he could turn, a second man pushed him from behind, while a third stepped from behind a stone pillar beside the couch. Both men wore hoods, their faces covered by handkerchiefs.

Livingston raised his hands to shoulder level, palms open, and backed toward the brick pile. The two men flanked him, five feet away on either side. One held a stone hammer, the other a baseball bat. They looked big, fit, and agile.

'Don't even think about it,' said the man at the fireplace, in a fake deep voice. He was much smaller than the other two, but clearly in charge.

'We don't keep any money here,' Livingston said. 'Only our wallets.' He slowly extracted his wallet from his back pocket and tossed it on the stone floor.

No one moved.

He nodded at Jack and me that it was okay, then at Sara. She shook her head.

The man at the fireplace moved toward the couch. 'Every man has his place,' he said. 'And this is not yours.'

Livingston raised his hands higher, his heart pounding. 'What do you mean?'

'You don't belong here. This is *our* territory.' The man stood behind the couch and waved his arm toward Stephen Avenue.

'You can take anything you want.'

'We will, thank you.' He casually placed his hand on my shoulder, like ownership.

I flinched, and a sob escaped me. My streaming nose plugged and I sucked hard, then exhaled hard, trying to breathe.

Livingston's chest surged. Something in him said *now*, but he forced himself to breathe, to stay cool.

'Tonight,' the man said, 'and every week, we'll come by to collect.' He lifted his other hand and laid it on Sara's head.

And that was it. Livingston lunged at the stone-hammer man and rammed the butt of his palm up into the man's chin, then turned and lunged at the other man, whose bat was up, in backswing, and shoved him in the chest backward into the brick pile.

He turned toward the couch and shouted: 'Run!'

The balaclava man tried to grab me as I wriggled down and away off the plastic cover, wheezing. Sara and Jack struggled up from the couch with their hands behind their backs.

Livingston charged and tackled the balaclava man over the side of the couch. The man was so thin beneath the overcoat that Livingston's arms almost missed him, like a ghost. He shoved the man away like a dog, then scrambled back and ripped the tape off my mouth, grabbed me by the jacket and shoved me over the back of the couch.

‘Run!’ he said.

There was a snap in his ribs and he buckled over. The other two were on him, his face shoved into the couch corner. He writhed sideways, pushed one man off, and as he turned onto his back his kneecap exploded. He blinked up and saw me running up the stairs, my hands awkwardly behind me. Over the arm of the couch, down the hall past the kitchen, he saw the open back door. He hoped Sara and Jack had made it into the alley. He heard a truck’s horn, a scream, and then everything went red.

* * *

Three months later, when my father awoke, they told him the rest. Sara and Jack had burst into the alley, but the asphalt was pure ice. Jack slipped and fell. Sara tried to pull him up, with her hands taped behind her, and fell beside him. A delivery truck slid into them, angled, trying to stop.

Livingston was beaten unconscious with the stone hammer. His blood was everywhere, but nobody else’s. The hooded men disappeared into Stephen Avenue without a trace.

Passersby heard two screams: a muffled cry from Sara, before the truck hit them; and a blood-curdling *no!* from the lone witness to Sara and Jack’s deaths under the truck—me from an upstairs window.

Police found me two blocks away—I’d ripped my hands free on an exposed metal door frame—running down Stephen Avenue toward Alberti Architects, covered in blood, having

briefly held my mother's and my brother's heads in my lap in the alley, and my father's head on the couch.

I struggled away from the policemen, ran into the stunned crowd of the party, and flung my bloodied self into Aeolia's arms.

It wasn't until much later that I heard all the murmuring talk. Not just *that's her, Melonie Alberti, the invasion girl*—but about my father and grandfather arguing at the ball, about my mother and aunt at the buffet table, even about Jack in the fountain. And my lack of tears when I flung myself into Aeolia.

'How odd,' they said. *'She wasn't even crying.'*

Two decades later, even after I'd changed my name, I still heard the stories. Everyone had their favourite version, it seemed, except me. Finally, I had to figure it all out for myself, and for you, my son. Just as my father tried to do for me.

So here it is. Our story. My version.

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