

A scenic landscape of a valley with mountains and a lake at sunset. The sky is filled with warm, golden light, and the mountains are silhouetted against the bright background. The lake in the foreground is calm, reflecting the light from the sky. The overall mood is peaceful and majestic.

“A compelling and inspiring story of heroism and courage.”
—Kristin Hannah, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

THE LAST GREEN VALLEY

A NOVEL

MARK
SULLIVAN

Author of the #1 bestseller *Beneath a Scarlet Sky*

PRAISE FOR *The Last Green Valley*

“Mark Sullivan has done it again! *The Last Green Valley* is a compelling and inspiring story of heroism and courage in the dark days at the end of World War II. Fans of *Beneath a Scarlet Sky* will savor this novel based on an extraordinary and little-known tale of the war and its aftermath.”

—Kristin Hannah, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Nightingale* and *The Great Alone*

“Mark Sullivan weaves together history and memory in an epic journey of love and resilience. One of the most riveting, page-turning books I’ve read in a long time.”

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“Sullivan again demonstrates his gift for finding little-known embers of history and breathing life into them until they glow and shine in ways that are both moving and memorable.”

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THE LAST GREEN VALLEY

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The Games

THE LAST GREEN VALLEY

A NOVEL

MARK
SULLIVAN

LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

Though based on a true story and real characters, this is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Interior images courtesy of the Martel family.

First edition

For all the grateful refugees who renew this nation every day.

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With love in our hearts, there is nothing we cannot
overcome.

—*Chen Yeng*

People told me I would never find another untold World War II story like that of Pino Lella, the hero and basis of my historical novel *Beneath a Scarlet Sky*. I honestly believed I would, however, and paid close attention to the dozens of letters and pitches I received from people telling me other stories from that time period.

They were all wonderfully interesting in their way. But none of them matched my criteria, which were that the underlying tale had to be inherently moving, inspiring, and potentially transformative to me and so to readers.

Then, in November 2017, I was asked to speak about Pino to the noontime Rotary Club in my hometown of Bozeman, Montana. A retired dentist came up to me afterward to outline a story a local man had told him. It caught my attention immediately.

Two days later, I put the man's address in my GPS and saw it was less than two miles from my own. The closer I got, I felt odd, and I had no idea why. It wasn't until I pulled into his driveway and got out of my car that I realized I was no more than two hundred yards away from the home where I'd first heard Pino Lella's story nearly eleven years before. That story changed my life.

I went to the door, knocked, and my life changed again.

Within fifteen minutes of listening to the particulars of the story of the Martel family, I was more than interested. By the end of two hours, I believed I had a tale to tell that would be a worthy successor to the tale that inspired *Beneath*. And I'd heard it in the same little neighborhood where I'd first heard Pino's story. What were the odds of that?

For the next fifteen months after that first meeting, I interviewed survivors and researched and traveled to critical locations in the story,

including the ruins of an abandoned farmhouse in deeply rural, far-western Ukraine. From there, I retraced the dangerous and remarkable journey of a young family of refugees on the run westward in a wagon with two horses, often caught between the retreating German armies and the advancing Soviets in the final chaotic year of World War II.

I trailed the Martels' route through present-day Moldova, Romania, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Poland, where the way split: one continuing west and another doubling back east more than eleven hundred miles to the former site of a deadly Soviet POW camp set in the bleak postwar rubble near the Ukrainian border with Belarus.

Along the way, I interviewed participants and eyewitnesses to the "Long Trek," as well as Holocaust, military, and refugee historians, who helped me to understand the context in which the Martels' story unfolded and why. I also listened to the recordings of people, long dead, describing the ordeal and felt in awe of the grit, humanity, and spirit they showed in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges and odds.

Even though I had all that information and understanding when I sat down to write this book, there were holes in the tale not completely explained by the limited material I had to rely on.

To bridge those gaps, I have been forced to draw on my own suspicions and imagination to bring the story more fully to life. What you are about to read, then, is not narrative nonfiction, but historical fiction based on an extraordinary tale of World War II and its aftermath.

As I am finishing this novel, the world is engulfed in the crisis of a century, and the way forward seems as dangerous and unclear as it must have been for the Martels when they set out on their journey. It is my dream that their story will give comfort and courage to the afflicted and a better understanding of what ordinary people can endure and achieve even when all seems lost.

PART ONE:

Chapter One

Late March 1944
Romanian Governorate of Transnistria

A cold wind blew in the dawn light. Bombs echoed from the north and east. The rumble of war was getting closer by the minute.

Twenty-eight-year-old Adeline Martel struggled out the back door of her kitchen in heavy winter clothes, carrying a crate full of cooking utensils toward a covered wagon harnessed to two dray horses in front of her modest home in the remote, tiny farming village of Friedenstal.

A damaged German Panzer tank clanked and rattled past her in the early-morning light, upsetting the horses. Trucks filled with wounded German soldiers streamed after the tank. Adeline could hear their cries and tortured sufferings long after they'd passed, and she could see more trucks and more horse- and mule-drawn wagons like hers coming from the east, silhouetted with the rising sun at their backs.

"Mama!" cried her younger son, Wilhelm, who'd run out the back door behind her.

"Not now, Will," Adeline said, puffing as she reached the back of the large V-shaped wooden wagon with oiled canvases stretched over a wooden frame to form a bonnet for shelter.

"But I need to know if I can bring this," said the four-and-a-half-year-old, holding up a rock, one of his latest prized possessions.

"Bring your wool hat instead," she said as she found room for the crate along with a second one that held dishes, cups, and baking tins beside a third that contained crocks of flour, yeast, salt, pepper, lard, and other essentials for their survival.

Emil hustled around the other side of the house, toting a keg-shaped barrel with a lid.

“How much?” she asked.

“Eight kilos dried pork. Ten kilos dried beef.”

“I left space for it back here.”

Another tank clanked by as her thirty-two-year-old husband grunted, hoisted the small barrel into the back, and began lashing it to the wall of the wagon.

“I’ll get all the onions and potatoes from the cellar,” she said. “Bedding’s packed.”

“I’ll get the big water sack filled,” he said before another bomb hit to the northeast.

Their older son, six-and-a-half-year-old Waldemar, came out from behind the house, pulling a small replica of the larger wagon about a meter long with the same high sides and back and the same wooden axles and wheels with tin nailed around the rims.

“Good boy, Walt,” Adeline said, pointing at the wagon. “I need that.” She took the handle from him and turned the little wagon around. “Follow me. Fast now. I need your help.”

The boys followed her to the root cellar and helped her frantically dig up their stock of potatoes, onions, and beets. Then they moved them to the little wagon and hurried back to the larger one. There were more German trucks and crippled armored vehicles on the road now and dozens of covered wagons and horses, all heading west, all trying to outrun Joseph Stalin’s armies, which were on the attack again.

The air stank of horse dung, engine exhaust, spilled petrol, and toiling humans. The din, the cold wind that spoke of a coming storm, the sickening mélange of smells, and the nervousness of the horses all conspired to put Adeline further on edge as they loaded the contents of the root cellar into burlap bags while Emil lashed a large rubber bladder of water to the side of the wagon along with the bucket from the well.

Overhead and to the south several kilometers, a German fighter plane roared past them, belching smoke from its engines.

“Mama,” Walt said, “I don’t like all the loud noises.”

“That’s why we’re leaving,” Emil said as he loaded the burlap bags into the big wagon, then looked at Adeline in irritation. “We should have been up and gone with my parents.”

“We weren’t ready to go with your parents at four a.m., and as usual, they weren’t waiting for us,” Adeline replied sharply. “And . . .”

“And what?”

She watched another tank go by, took a step closer to him, and said quietly, “You’re sure, Emil? Running with the Nazis like this?”

Emil responded in a whisper. “We can stay and wait for the bear that we know will kill us, or rape you and kill me and the boys, or imprison us all in Siberia. Or we can run with the wolves that will protect us until we can make our escape west. Escape the war. Escape everything.”

Three days before, a German SS officer had knocked on their door and offered them protection if they would gather their belongings and move west. After the visit, they had argued for several hours. Now, Adeline gazed at him, still in turmoil over the decision, but feeling what she always did about Emil: his moodiness and quietness aside, he was not only a good man, he was a tested man, a fighter, and a survivor.

“Okay,” she said. “We run with the wolves.”

“What about our little wagon?” Walt demanded.

“We’ll find room for it,” Emil told him.

The raw wind gusted. A curled brown leaf from the previous autumn lifted from the dead grass to Adeline’s left, spun, looped, and danced across the stubble and around her and the boys in a curious, stuttering pattern before the gust sighed and the leaf tumbled softly to earth. It reminded her of a night long before when she’d seen money appear on the wind, a single crumpled bill that had danced before her in the same curious manner as this leaf, as if in response to some desperate and primal prayer.

Adeline went back to the kitchen one last time, finding the leaf and that memory all oddly upsetting, as bittersweet as it was mysterious, as awe-inspiring as it was frightful.

Like every big change in my life, blown by the wind.

Around the house, Emil finished tying the little wagon to the rear of the big one.

“No one steps on it, right?” he said to his young sons. “You want to come out the back, you wait until I’ve taken it down.”

Walt nodded. Will said, “When are we leaving, Papa?”

“As soon as Mama returns,” he said, “and your grandmother and aunt get here. Go use the outhouse if you need to.”

Both boys ran out behind the house while the two geldings, Oden and Thor, danced in place, again spooked at tanks passing so close. Emil had to soothe and coax them until they finally calmed. The horses were fit and well cared for. They were used to pulling plows and weight. If he slowed them down to handle the heavier loads on the steeper hills, and barring lameness or, worse, a wreck, Emil believed the pair would take his family a long way.

He paused to study the house he'd built single-handedly, fighting all thoughts of pity or remorse. A house was a house. There would be others. Emil had learned the hard way to detach from the idea of possessing anything for long in his life. But he stared at the roof for a moment, seeing himself two and a half years before, loading tin roofing sheets and trusses into his wagon in a town called Dubossary, some thirty kilometers to the west.

He shook off the memory and turned away from the house and that roof.

“If God giveth, Stalin taketh away,” Emil mumbled, and refused to give the home he'd built any more attention. In his mind and in his heart, the house had already crumbled to dust or been burned to ash.

Whoomph, whoomph. Artillery fire began to the north. *Whoomph, whoomph.* The explosions were not close enough yet to make the ground shake, but he soon saw plumes of dark smoke in the northeastern skies, no more than nine or ten kilometers away. For the first time, the true stakes of the journey that lay before him and his family became clear, sending him staggering, dizzied, against the side of the wagon. He was thrown back to a day in mid-September 1941, when he'd gripped the side of this same wagon, feeling relentless nausea and the noon heat and hearing the grasshoppers whirring as he gagged out the poison that had welled in his gut. He'd glared up in rage and shook his fist at the sky with such bitterness, he'd gotten ill all over again.

Remembering that day and still clinging to the side of the wagon, Emil gasped at the way his heart ached. *I remember this. How it felt to have my soul torn from my chest.*

Adeline ran from the house with a few more things. The boys were exiting the outhouse.

“Are we leaving now?” Will asked.

“Yes,” she said. She rounded the house and saw Emil hunched over, holding on to the wagon with one hand, gasping, his eyes closed, his features twisted with pain as his free hand clawed at his chest.

“Emil!” she yelled, and rushed toward him. “What’s wrong?”

Her husband startled and stared at Adeline as if she were part of a nightmare and then a desperately welcome dream. “Nothing.”

“You looked like something was wrong with your heart.”

“It hurt for a second there,” he said, standing up and wiping the sweat gushing from his forehead. “But I’m all right.”

“You’re not all right,” she said. “You’re as white as snow, Emil.”

“It’s passing. I’m fine, Adella.”

“Mama, here come Oma and Malia!” Will cried.

Adeline’s concern left her husband and lifted when she spotted her mother at the reins of two old ponies pulling her wagon at a steady clip through the loose and shifting caravan of refugees and defeated soldiers all heading west.

Lydia Losing’s face was harder and more pinched than usual, but the fifty-four-year-old was still dressed as she’d been dressed for the last fifteen years—in dark grays and widow black. As she was wont to do, Lydia was jawing at Adeline’s sister, who was thirty-five and leaning slightly away from their mother, nodding and smiling without comment, a common-enough posture between the two of them. Malia had been kicked by a mule as a fifteen-year-old, which had left her childlike in some ways and wiser than most in others. She looked at Adeline and winked.

Another cannon barrage began, this one close enough to shake the ground beneath their feet. Four German fighters ripped across the sky, followed by six Soviet planes on their tails. Machine guns opened fire above them.

“Whoa!” Will said, thrilled.

“Mama!” Walt said, and grabbed Adeline around the waist.

“Everyone in!” Emil shouted, and ran to untie his horses from the tree.

When he was up on the bench with the reins in his hands and had checked to see that Adeline was beside him and the boys under the bonnet behind him, he yelled to his mother-in-law, "Let's get as far away from the battles as we can today!"

"As fast as my ponies will take us!" Lydia called back.

Emil released the wagon's simple lever brake and clucked up the horses, which leaned hard into the load, the wagon rolling slowly at first, and then gathering enough speed to slip into a gap between other wagons and groups of refugees on foot who stood to the side, all their belongings in burlap sacks, staring in envy as the Martels passed.

At the west end of the village, they passed Emil's parents' home, his childhood home. The front door to the old place was open. There was nothing worth saving in the yard.

Emil refused to let a single memory of his childhood or their more recent life in Friedenstal come up. That was over. The person it had happened to no longer existed. As far as he was concerned, that fractured life was now rubble.



Next to him, Adeline gazed into passing yards, seeing the ghosts of relationships past, of children playing, and parents singing at harvest, their entire way of life tied to and celebrating the seasons.

She remembered a happier time: 1922, being seven, and bouncing in a wagon like this. Adeline had sat in the back by baskets of food her mother had prepared as they rode out to the fields where the men were cutting wheat. It was almost October, but the air was still warm and smelled of everything lovely in her life. She took the basket to her father, the chief of harvest, as he worked on a mechanical threshing machine.

Karl Losing had a soft spot for his younger daughter and grinned when she brought him lunch. They'd sat side by side in the shade of the thresher, looking out over the golden hills of grain, and ate fresh bread with dried sausage and drank cold tea.

She remembered feeling completely safe and totally in love with her surroundings.

"Will we always live here, Papa?" young Adeline had asked.

"Forever and a day, child," he said. "Unless, of course, the stinking Bolsheviks have their way, and we're thrown to the wind and the wolves."

In their wagon, rolling toward the far end of Friedenstal some twenty-two years later, Adeline recalled vividly being upset when her father had said that. For a time, she had walked around looking over both shoulders for fear wolves would burst from the forest and hunt her.

She felt the same way when they left the village, heading west with the rising sun and cannon fire still rumbling behind them, past fields waiting for plowing, and trees budding, and birds whirling and whistling above the bluffs, and dreams destroyed, buried by the realities of famine and war.

More German fighter planes raced across the sky, heading toward the battle lines.

“Where are we going, Papa?” Walt asked, sounding worried.

“West,” Emil said. “As far west as we can go. Across the ocean, maybe; I don’t know.”

“Across the ocean?” Adeline said, surprised and a little frightened by that idea.

“Why not?” her husband said, glancing at her.

She said the first thing that came to mind. “We can’t swim.”

“We’ll learn.”

Will said, “But *why* are we going west?”

“Because life will be better there,” Emil said.

A horse whinnied and then screamed in the shifting chaos of carts and wagons and tanks and trucks behind them. People began to yell and to shout. Walt scrambled to look back.

“Someone’s wagon got hit by a Wehrmacht truck, a few behind Oma’s wagon,” he said. “A horse, too. It all tipped over, and the horse broke its leg and can’t get up.”

Emil clucked to Oden and Thor, and they hurried to close the gap with the wagon ahead.

Will still seemed upset. He climbed into his mother’s lap, snuggled against her chest, and said, “Tell me what it will look like, Mama.”

“What?” Adeline said, hugging and rocking him.

“West. What will it look like?”

Stroking her son’s face, Adeline gazed into Will’s eyes, smiled, and said, “We’re going to a beautiful green valley surrounded by mountains and forests. And snow up high on the peaks. And below, there will be a winding river and fields of grain for bread, and gardens with vegetables to feed us,

and Papa will build us a house where we'll all live together forever and ever, and we'll never be apart."

That seemed to soothe Will. The little boy relaxed.

"I think there will be other boys to play with," he said.

Adeline smiled at his expression, so innocent and hopeful, it made her heart swell. She tickled him, said, "I imagine there will be many boys to play with, and lots of work to be done, too. But we'll be happy, and you and your brother will grow up to follow your hearts' desires."

"What does that mean?"

Emil said, "That you'll be who you want to be, not who you're told to be."

"I'm going to be just like you, Papa," Will said as his eyes drifted shut.

Adeline glanced at her husband, who smiled, and then over her shoulder at Walt, who had lain down and was dozing.

She looked back at Emil, whose smile had fallen into something more pained.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

He belched. "There, that should do it. Probably what I was feeling back there."

After a few moments, she said quietly, "We'll find it, won't we, Emil? A valley like that we can call home? A place we'll never leave?"

Emil's face tightened further. He wouldn't look at her when he shrugged and said, "Someone once told me that if you keep praying for something, you can't help but get it someday."

"I told you that," Adeline said, smiling. "And Mrs. Kantor told me."

"I know."

"It's grace, Emil. God's answers to our prayers. You still believe in grace, don't you?"

"Adeline, with what you and I have seen with our own eyes, there are days I don't know if God hears us, much less answers. But I'll tell you something I do believe in."

"What's that?"

"Wherever we end up, it's going to be better than the hell we've already lived through."

The caravan crested a rise onto a plateau and turned north, giving Adeline one last long look back at their abandoned life. The cold wind had

turned blustery. She heard cannons again and saw smoke rising from the ridges beyond the village.

“You’re right,” she said. “Anywhere will be better than that.”

Chapter Two

November 1929
Schoenfeld, Ukraine

The light bulb flickered and died. But fourteen-year-old Adeline Losing had anticipated the cut in electricity at the small school she attended. She had already lit the kerosene lantern above the sink in the school kitchen where she worked after classes were over.

Scrubbing the last big pot of the day, Adeline felt hungry, a common-enough state in her recent life. She glanced at a bag filled with fresh potato-skin shavings on the counter, wondered how her mother might cook them, felt even hungrier, and then dried the pot and put it back on the shelf.

Two hours, Adeline thought, drying her hands. Two hours of my life for a few rubles and a kilo of peelings. Is it worth it?

She'd no sooner asked the question than she told herself to stop that line of thinking. Questioning your work and what you got in return for it could get you in trouble if you said it aloud under the rule of Joseph Stalin. Even thinking about it too much might let the words slip out by accident. And then where would she be?

Thrown to the wind and the wolves, as her father liked to say. That was where she'd be. Thrown to the wind and wolves in some far and frozen place.

Adeline put on her heavy wool coat, a gift from a dead aunt, telling herself, *Not me. I am going someplace better in my life.*

She got emotional at the thought of a better place. Somewhere she and her family could lead a better life than the unfair and cruel one they'd been given. She didn't know much about this future life, but the simple idea of "better" made her smile and feel not as tired as she might have been.

Adeline wrapped her head in a wool scarf, picked up the lantern and her bags, and went to the kitchen door. She opened it and stepped out into a cold, dark night. Shivering, she locked the door, and then held up the lantern and set off west for the other side of town and home.

Hurry to it, she thought, and quickened her stride. *That's what Papa always says. If you want things, hurry to it. If you want things done, hurry to it.*

She'd never known anyone who hurried to it more than her father. He was up before everyone and last to bed, and in constant motion every minute in between.

Adeline kept up a steady, hard pace through the deserted streets of a farming colony that dated back four and five generations to when Catherine the Great reigned. Even in the late 1700s, the farmlands of Ukraine were among the most bounteous on earth, with rich, black soil that could yield bumper crops if properly sown and tended.

The peasants living there at the time, however, were poor agriculturists, and so the empress began approving the immigration of thousands of German families. These ethnic Germans, or *Volksdeutsche*, were given land and made exempt from taxes for decades in return for their agricultural skills and yield. They came in waves, farmed and prospered in self-imposed exile across Ukraine, providing wheat for Mother Russia for more than a century.

The *Volksdeutsche*, especially the so-called “Black Sea Germans” who lived between Odessa and Kiev, never fully assimilated into the Russian culture. They built their homes and laid out towns and villages like Schoenfeld as replicas of the ones they'd left behind in Germany, erecting churches to perpetuate their Lutheran faith and schools to educate their children and keep their native tongue alive.

But multiple generations removed, the Black Sea Germans had become isolated from Germany and its culture, almost completely disconnected from their roots. All in all, however, life was very good for the Black Sea Germans and for the roughly one million other *Volksdeutsche* living across Ukraine until 1917. Before the Bolshevik Revolution, Schoenfeld had been a thriving colony of ethnic Black Sea Germans who regularly produced high-yield crops that helped feed themselves and Russia.

But no longer.

By that evening, as young Adeline hurried through town, most of the other old families had been banished from the colony, thrown out of their houses and off their lands, replaced by people from the city who did not know how to farm at all. That was the main reason the Soviets decided to allow Adeline's family to remain in their ancestral home: her father was the only one left locally who understood how to bring in a big grain harvest. Without him, the idiots from the city would be doomed to one crop failure after another, and everyone around would starve.

But we're safe, Adeline told herself halfway through town. Mama said so. They need Papa, so we're safe for now. And we should have enough food for the winter.

Adeline stopped, lifting the lantern higher and peering at the form ahead of her, dark and lying still in the high dead grass. She took a cautious step, and then another. Reaching out with the lantern, she took a third step, and then froze.

The dog, a big mongrel, had been killed, its throat cut, and left to die in a halo of its own blood. The blood was wet, not yet frozen. It shimmered there in the lantern light, and that scared her even more. Someone had only just killed the animal.

Adeline raised the lantern and peered all around, seeing nothing but the pale skirt of light about her and shadows and darkness beyond. No movement. No sound but the beating of her heart in her ears and her own voice in her head.

Tell Papa!

She took off at a run, the lantern held out and to the side as she passed a horse barn that used to belong to her father's friend on the long lane before the final turn and home.

She spotted the second dead dog moments later, a small terrier, throat slashed and cast in the ditch. Adeline knew the dog, a friendly yapper, and wanted to cry. She'd seen him only just that morning on her way to school.

They killed two!

Terrified now, she ran even faster and fought dark imaginations, all of them feeding into another until her mind was flooded and swirling with the murder of the two dogs. She finally made the gate to her home, a beautiful wooden house her great-grandfather had built almost a century before in a modest Bavarian style, with a sweeping shake-shingle roof, two gables, and