

Chapter 1

Athens, Georgia, 1943

Sara Barrett glanced at the clock with rusty edges ticking on the wall behind her. One minute before break. Close enough. She folded the last army shirt in her bundle and laid it on the table. After motioning to her best friend, Rose Davenport, she and Rose rushed to the break area of the Perry Shirt Plant.

They each bought a Coke and scooted behind a corner table. Flaky layers of gray paint covered the walls in the small room. Some of the crust turned upward, while others gave in to high temperatures, and fell to the floor.

“I want a man who’s honest, kind, unselfish, and romantic. That’s not too much to ask.”

“No argument here,” Rose returned. “Hey, we might get lucky.” She waved a slip of paper under Sara’s nose.

“Yeah, sure.” They’d been sending out these slips of paper inside the pockets of soldier’s shirts with their addresses for months. What did they receive in return? Letters from soldiers who wrote dirty. Did any man on planet earth have romantic thoughts?

“One more time, okay?” Rose pleaded. Then a mischievous gleam came into her eyes. “Hey Sara, why don’t you put your picture in this one? If I was as pretty as you, I would.”

Rose sounded crazy. Why would she think a picture would attract a better class of soldier? “No, I don’t have but one.” Sara wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead, lifted the cold bottle, and pressed it firmly to her cheek.

“Ah, come on,” Rose urged. “I dare you. Go ahead. Put your picture in one of those pockets.”

There would be no shutting her up. Rose could talk the ears off a rabbit. Besides, Sara could never pass up a good dare. She pulled a bright red lipstick from her purse, pushed it up, and rolled it across her lips. “Okay, here goes!”

Removing the picture from her purse, she kissed the backside, and wrote a short message. She and Rose walked back to the folding table. Sara stuck the picture in the shirt pocket of the army fatigues on top of the stack. Who knew, she mused, and she might get lucky.

”I hear Stan will be back from his business trip today,” Rose said.

“So?”

“Sooo, he’s still trying to date you, isn’t he?”

“Not interested,” Sara said. “He may be the only bachelor left in town, but I still have standards. He’s pompous, stuffy, and boring.”

“I think you could snag him if you tried,” Rose insisted. “Sure, he’s not too handsome, but he’s rich. That makes up for a lot. As his wife. . . .”

“Wife!” Sara’s hearty laugh cut her short. “Stan Howell would never marry me. All he wants is to get me in the sack. When he marries, he’ll choose some high-society girl who’s as stuck-up as he is.”

“I don’t believe that. You’re high-society. You have gorgeous blonde hair, and curves in all the right places. Give him a chance. You might be wrong.”

“I’m not.” Sara sniffed and swallowed the last of her Coke. “I haven’t dated much, but I can size men up. I know what I want.”

“And that is?”

She hardly sat down when she heard a mouse of a voice. “Sara, is that you?” The sound of Stan Howell’s voice made her skin crawl. He could be nice sometimes, but he didn’t excite

her. Rich? He was that, but who pressed his suits? He always looked like he rolled out of the trunk of a car. Why were all the women so interested in him anyway. . .money, right?

“Sara, I just got in from Atlanta. I’ve missed being around you. Would you like to go out on a date?”

If the truth were known, she could picture herself married to him. With all his money, she could have anything she wanted. She’d be in a position to help her parents. She didn’t know why she didn’t like him. Maybe it was because he had everything, and didn’t appreciate any of it.

She looked up, and tossed another shirt into the box. He always bragged about his trips. How he traveled here and there, done this and that, stuff that didn’t matter to her. “Stan, why don’t you go do something constructive, like cool this place off?”

“I can do that. I can get you and Rose another standup fan, and will, if you’ll go out with me.”

“And if I don’t.”

“I’ll get the fan anyway.”

Sara’s personality didn’t allow her to take something for nothing. Her parents raised her differently. It felt hot as hell with the heat of July creeping in every window. What did she have to lose? “Okay, Stan. Pick me up at the boarding house tonight.” With most men off to war, she hated to admit how much his admiration cheered her. “I’ll be there at seven.”

“Seven’s fine.”

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Several months later and half a world away from Athens, Georgia, Jesse Greene and Clay Gibson were preparing for their first battle. They had been friends since early grade school.

Now eighteen, and World War II going strong, both joined the Army on the buddy system and were stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia. For three weeks, they suffered through combat training, been immunized against the worst diseases, and had their teeth repaired.

From Fort Benning, Jesse and Clay arrived at Fort McClellan, Alabama, to receive medic training at the Branch Inmaterial Replacement Training Center. Afterwards, they headed to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, the home of the 101st Screaming Eagles. Their first sergeant said they'd be at Campbell for only a week. An extensive one-week parachute training exercise would prepare them for a top-secret maneuver.

Near daybreak, Jesse and Clay arrived by commercial bus. After finding their barracks, the two went straight to bed. A few hours later, the offensive uproar of their new drill sergeant blasted Jesse from a sound sleep. "Get your asses up. Get up dammit. Where the hell do you think you are? Get up! In the trucks. Thirty minutes, that's all you have. Eat and out front. Thirty minutes. In the damn truck."

Jesse flung his green, wool blanket aside. He scratched the red blotches on his arms where the rough fabric grinded into his skin. His mama and pa may have been dirt-poor farmers, but his current sleeping conditions felt pathetic compared to the warm featherbed at home.

After breakfast, Jesse and Clay hustled to Supply to get flight suits, Red Cross armbands, and pot helmets made of steel. Being medics didn't add much to their expectations of survival. Like sitting ducks, they were expected to go in unarmed, to do whatever necessary for the wounded, and get them back to an aid station.

After looking at the Geneva Convention pamphlet on the bus the night before, Jesse had wadded it up, and tossed it on the seat. The guidelines for wartime treatment of the sick, wounded, and medics were too strict to protect yourself. He didn't buy it. Medics without

firearms didn't make sense. Trying to maintain good relations with the enemy was like trying to woo an alligator.

Never having heard of a medic being court-martialed for carrying a concealed weapon, he and Clay both picked up a bootleg, Army-issue, Colt .45 Semiauto. He didn't intend to let this secret be known, and it certainly wasn't anything to brag about. The .45 would only be pulled out for self-preservation.

Coming out of Supply, they headed for the barracks to load up on the truck. Jesse saw a German Shepherd hop into the back of a drab green and brown camouflage deuce-and-a-half with wooden side rails. A canvass canopy stretched over the top of the flatbed.

"That damn Moonshine's always the first to load up. She loves this shit."

Jesse turned around and looked at the speaker, a private first class bearing the last name Freshwater above his pocket. Freshwater obviously meant the dog. Jesse didn't see anyone else in the truck.

"What do you mean?" Jesse asked.

"She's crazy about jumping."

"From the airplane?"

"No. . .into the truck." Freshwater shook his head as if having a hard time digesting Jesse's idiotic comment. "Yeah. . .from the airplane, the Gooney Bird."

"Damn. That's hard to believe."

"You'll see it today. Her puppy, White Lightning, she's crazy about it, too. We don't let her jump alone, but she jumps with one of us. You want White Lightning to jump with you? It's my time. I don't care."

"How do you do it?" Jesse asked, taking a good look at Freshwater. He stood short of

stature, and like salami, showed a blotchy complexion. His fatigues, pressed stiff as cardboard, looked bulletproof.

“Snap her in your coat good. That’s all there is to it.”

“Sure.” Jesse heard the bark of a puppy, and saw the small canine watching him from the bed of the truck.

“My name’s CD.”

“I’m Jesse.” He waved his thumb toward Clay. “Clay Gibson.”

Clay extended his hand. “Nice to meet you, CD. Aren’t you afraid?”

“Hell no. Nothing to it. Just step from the door. Count to one thousand and three, and pull the ripcord. If your parachute doesn’t open, pull your reserve. If it doesn’t open, kiss your ass goodbye because that’s the last thing you’ll see.”

Jesse crawled into the back of the truck. He captured a seat on a wooden bench bolted to the right side. Clay and CD scooted in beside him. Within seconds, the truck filled up with soldiers. The motor turned over, and the truck bed shook back and forth, vibrating the wood beneath Jesse’s feet. The noise of the engine stifled all existing sounds, and the smell of diesel infused the air.

Out of the side of Jesse’s eye, he saw CD motion with his forefinger to one of the troops. From one soldier’s hands to the other, White Lightning passed toward him. Jesse looked at CD and nodded thank you. Moonshine, White Lightning’s mother, padded energetically behind each pass and stopped directly in front of Jesse when Clay handed him the pup. The puppy’s coat was predominantly black with a feathering of light brown on the back of its legs, on its belly, and on the underside of its tail.

Jesse snapped the puppy in his jacket. The deuce-and-a-half truck rolled forward. His

helmet flopped back and forth on his head. The face of the puppy popped out between Jesse's upper button and his collar. The small dog nudged its cold nose against Jesse's chin.

Jesse rubbed the shepherd's head. "White Lightning, I'm going to take good care of you." Moonshine, the small dog's mother, stared at Jesse curiously, wagged her tail, and barked three times.

Two military trucks jerked in behind Jesse's truck as his driver turned onto the main highway on post. Jesse looked at the homes, shops, bowling alley, and theater as their vehicle flashed by.

He'd never been scared by much of anything, but felt his adrenaline reaching extremely high levels. He didn't ask to jump, and didn't desire too. He looked to his friend, hoping to find reassurance there. But Clay's jaw looked clinched into a hard line, and he knew Clay felt uneasy about it too.

A few minutes later, Jesse heard the squeal of tires, and braced himself, as the truck braked and came to a halt. He looked at CD. "What about the pup?"

"Leave her in the truck. She'll be fine with her mother."

Jesse unsnapped his jacket, placed White Lightning on the wooden flatbed, and stroked her head. He piled out with the other soldiers, and single-filed into a training room. Jesse took a seat in a chair similar to the one he sat in during high school.

He recognized the jumpmaster's voice right off as the man who woke him up just an hour before. The sarge's body resembled his voice, hard, like a block of granite, the muscles of his arms and back stood out beneath his fatigues. What hair he had was blonde and an artery in his forehead bulged like a snake.

"I'm Sergeant Denny. You're a part of the eighty-four additional medics who are going

to be dropped by night.”

Denny’s words drifted into Jesse’s ears. The sergeant talked about every detail of parachute jumping, and what conditions to expect when they hit the ground. But Jesse wanted to know more about the mission.

“It was a dog that made the first drop by a parachute in 1785 from a balloon,” Sergeant Denny said. “And the dog in the truck goes by the name of Moonshine. Make friends with her. It wouldn’t hurt for her to know your smell in case you drift behind enemy lines. She’s trained as an attack dog, can sniff you out, and save your ass. White Lightning, her pup, is going for the ride.”

“What’s this all about?” Jesse asked.

“All I can say is that the medic’s reserve is dangerously low. It’s top secret, mount up.”

The men walked back to the trucks. Jesse looked up at the bruised and swollen sky that shielded the sun. The half-digested meal in his stomach felt like he’d eaten at a greasy-spoon joint. Maybe a big storm was coming, but it wouldn’t stop the parachute jump. In a few minutes they’d be aboard the Gooney Bird, and soon after, his feet would be back on ground. He kept telling himself that if the others could do it, he could too.

Hearing a dog whine, Jesse saw Moonshine bound out of the truck, and she immediately began sniffing everyone’s feet. She’d turn one way then the other, slapping their legs with her tail. When she calmed down, she chose to go to Sergeant Avery, her trainer.

White Lightning stood at the end of the tailgate, whining and wagging her tail more furiously than her mother. Jesse picked her up, placed her inside his jacket as he climbed aboard the truck and sat by Clay and CD.

The medics made their practice jumps without incident, and Jesse felt surprised at how

much he enjoyed the challenge. He couldn't describe his feelings, and felt it had never been accurately described. One second, total icy fear, and then when the parachute opened, total euphoria.

As the last day at Fort Campbell rolled by, they packed their gear, and loaded up on the C-47. When Jesse entered the aircraft he saw no extravagance, but instead twenty-eight canvas seats folded up against the fuselage wall.

From aloft, Jesse unzipped the collar of his flying overalls, then peeped out of the porthole. Absentmindedly, he stroked White Lightning's head. A farm off the road glittered like a picture in a photo book. Twin silos pointed toward heaven reminded him of the farm he grew up on. The fields looked like squares of a chessboard, and the trees and houses resembled doll's furniture.

The trip over took five days, and they stopped at Langley Army Airfield, Bermuda, and the Azores for refueling.

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"Listen up," Sergeant Denny hollered and stood. "Great numbers of landing ship tanks have cast anchor near a beachfront in Licata, Sicily. A German dive-bomber has scored a direct hit on an American ammunition ship. The moment of truth is outside that door. Put your chutes on. In twenty minutes, we'll be over the target zone. When you get my signal, get your asses out that door."

Jesse dropped White Lightning on the floor, leaned over and picked up the chute he'd placed at the foot of his seat minutes before. Straightening, he moved the harness of strong webbing over his shoulders, around the body, and between his legs. Then, he attached the brass rings. Once he jumped out that door, chances were that he'd never see White Lightning again.

“Man your positions,” Sergeant Denny hollered. “Avery, go ahead, hook up Moonshine’s static line. She goes out the door first, then you. Jesse, you and Clay behind Avery. Everybody else single-file behind Jesse.”

Jesse picked up White Lightning. He scratched her gently behind the ear, and placed her in the hands of a flight engineer who wasn’t jumping. “Take care of her, Wayne. She’s a sweetie.”

“No sweat, Jesse.”

Jesse stumbled down the narrow corridor and took his position.

White Lightning’s tail wagged nonstop, and she squirmed to get loose from Wayne’s grip.

“Hold her tight, Wayne,” Jesse said loudly, alarmed. Sergeant Denny opened the door. The noise from the engines and the wind deafened all sounds. Jesse had eaten very little all day, but his stomach felt full of apprehension. He looked one last time at White Lightning, then at Clay.

Jesse felt as if his nerves were stretched tight, like strings on guitar pegs. Glancing at Clay one final time, he saw his friend’s complexion turn gray, gray from fear, from what lay below. He felt the throttle cut back.

“See you downstairs, buddy,” Jesse yelled, and straightened his helmet.

“I’ll be there,” Clay hollered.

Sergeant Denny gave Avery the thumbs-up, then without hesitation, with parachute on her back, Moonshine jumped by herself. Behind her, Avery disappeared into darkness. Then Clay tumbled out the door.

“White Lightning, no!” Wayne yelled, as White Lightning jumped out of his arms, and

bolted past Jesse, hitting Jesse's leg. Realizing what was about to happen, Jesse dove for the pup. As he did, White Lightning, without a parachute, leaped out the door.

"Get up, Jesse," Sergeant Denny yelled, grabbing him by the arm, and yanking him to his feet. "She's gone. You can't help her. Jump! Jump! Jump now, dammit!"

White Lightning. White Lightning gone. . .like the shadow a fire made, or like her name. . .gone. . .White Lightning gone.

"Go Jesse," the sergeant yelled.

Grief settled heavy on Jesse's chest.

Sergeant Denny's face contorted. "Jump, dammit! You're screwing it up," he said, and pushed Jesse through the doorway.

Jesse felt himself falling at a crazy rate, the wind howling about his ears. "One thousand, two thousand, three thousand," he mumbled to himself, and jerked the ripcord. He felt a rumbling, tugging sensation as the chute deployed. Air streams hit him like cold water, cutting into him like glass.

He looked down, knowing he wouldn't see any signs of White Lightning, but looked anyway. His eyes filled with tears that he tried to blame on the rushing wind in his face. Hell, he needed to get over this. He was going to war. He'd see a lot worse. She was only a dog.

Feeling detached from the universe, he saw Clay, sailing to the right about fifty yards out, a pale blob against the dark. He felt they were going down hard, and accepted that he might die a horrible death. Closing his eyes, he said a desperate prayer. The roar of the three Gooney Birds sounded distant, replaced by the nearing sound of artillery fire below.

Some trees flashed into view, demanding his immediate attention. His parachute swung from side to side. Reaching up, he pulled on the shroud lines. The pendulum motion stopped.

He pulled his Colt .45 to prepare for battle. The ground seemed to bounce closer. He swung right over the treetops. With one leg extended, he ricocheted off a single tree, and plunged into the ground like an iron anvil.

He lay still for a moment, checking his position. Seeing no movement, he quickly placed his pistol in his holster, and jerked out his pocketknife. In a few minutes, he'd sawed the tangled parachute webbing from his body. He tried to stand, only to find everything spinning sickeningly around. Tilting his head down, he inhaled deep breaths.

He reeled in his parachute, and then hid it under some brush. With the toe of his combat boot, he kicked some leaves over the canopy. He didn't know which direction to go, but a vague feeling whispered to go forward. Staggering off drunkenly, he began to search for Clay and the others.

As Jesse walked through the dark cold, he regained his sense of balance. Although grateful to be alive, his mind kept returning to White Lightning. Considering how many lives had been lost by war, it felt petty to mourn the demise of a pup. But hell, he just couldn't help it.

Concentrate on the present. Find Clay. Find his best friend. Jesse felt stranded, as if some solid security had left him, as if he had ruthlessly thrown away the compass that for years had kept him straight and true.

He heard a persistent rumble of gunfire to his left, but chose not to head toward it. What good could he do, one man, one pistol? He needed to keep looking for the others.

Where was Clay? He couldn't have drifted that far. Hell, it was his own crazy idea to join the Army. He suspected that was why Clay enlisted in the first place. Clay always tried to protect him.

He felt guilty for getting Clay into this and knew that one mistake could cost him his life,

and possibly Clay's. Easing by a tree, he pushed some limbs away from his face, and continued moving forward through what looked like a small forest. Did he drift behind enemy lines? Suddenly, overcome by a spine-chilling feeling, he felt like someone was watching him, wanting to bring him harm, desiring to bring him down.

It didn't seem possible that someone in the dark could be pointing a gun at him, something hideous and merciless hovering in the dark waiting. . .stalking. . .tracking. . .looking for him. An unknown foe, who knew nothing about him, but wanted him dead. A light rain began to fall around the thicket and large trees.

Bringing his watch closer, he made out the time. Just a little after three o'clock. He heard a bark, or thought he did. Could it be the wind howling? It didn't sound far, maybe fifty yards or so. Hard to distinguish the sounds through the bush, trees, and thickets.

If it were Moonshine, she'd be looking for him. Oh my God, he hoped Moonshine didn't find White Lightning. What a stupid thought. Dogs weren't supposed to have feelings like humans. Anyway, the poor dead pup could be miles from them. Jesse stepped over a downed log.

He heard voices, faint as the buzzing of a bee's wings. Were they Americans? Were they friendly? Frantic, he crouched, steam puffing from his nostrils like tiny exhausts. He lay in a prone position, pulled his .45, and squinted his eyes to see. The gun felt great in his hand, the way the handle curled neatly into his palm.

If spotted by Allied soldiers, he'd have to hide his pistol. If more than two enemy soldiers saw him, he'd have to hide his weapon in the bush. He hoped they'd honor the guidelines set forth by the Geneva Convention. He'd show them his Red Cross arm patch, but he couldn't see them honoring it. They'd probably just blow his brains out.

Everything turned ink-black, and he felt only aware of what centered directly in front of him. He steadied his trigger finger. Voices. . .again he heard them. Voices. . .thin as a sheet of Prince Albert's rolling papers.

"Jesse has to be in the direction of our troops." Jesse recognized CD's voice.

"I wish we had Moonshine," Clay said. "She could find him."

Relieved, Jesse pushed himself up from the ground. "Clay," he said, in a low voice.

"Jesse?"

"Over here. Where's everybody?"

"Who knows? Could be anywhere."

"Which way do we go?" Jesse asked, catching up with them.

"CD made radio contact." Clay pointed to his left. "The firing over that ridge is friendly. They know we're coming in. It's a mile or so. Move out."

Lightning winked across the sky, and its answering thunder sounded like a far-off cracking of the earth. The three medics walked silently for a half an hour, and when they single-filed up and over the ridge, Jesse couldn't believe his eyes. The firefight between friendly and unfriendly forces could now be seen clearly in the night air. Men lay dead everywhere. . .and the ocean, the insistently crashing sea, mixed its smell in with the stench of death.

Flash after flash of lightning erupted, brighter and sharper than before. The downpour fell greater than anything he'd witnessed in Georgia. Ammunition whistled all about his head as he made his way toward the shoreline. As he knelt by his first wounded soldier, a stray bullet hit the soldier in the head, exploding blood, tissue, hair, and bone fragments into the ground. The smell of fear poured out of every pore of Jesse's body, but something told him to keep moving.

Rising up, Jesse stepped over another dead soldier, his guts torn out and strewn across the

soft, wet dirt. The top of the soldier's head had been blown off above the eyes, and a piece of his scalp hung over his ear like an upturned bowl. Nausea tore into Jesse, touching a deep and primitive level where nothing ever reached him before.

One GI blasted through the air as if a rag-doll. Brass shells lay in a heap, and made it impossible not to step on them as Jesse rushed for cover.

Because the battle started the moment the ground troops hit the water, no field hospital could be set up. There would be no field hospital until the Americans moved the Germans and Italians back far enough so that one would be fairly safe from shelling.

For the time being Clay and CD were still by Jesse's side, but he knew this was short-lived. They would soon be separated, and the thought made his blood pound hard against his eardrums.

A mortar fragment nicked his helmet, and knocked him to his knees. Lying prone, with his body hugging the ground, he began to crawl. To protect himself from incoming shells, he found a degree of protection behind a fallen comrade. He placed his fingertips on the soldier's throat, searching for a pulse in the carotid artery. Dead. The soldier was dead.

Black faces with powder burns, red eyes from battle stress, all told the same story. Disaster. Total disaster. The lifeless littered the ground, yet infantrymen in front of Jesse moved forward and he hoped they would speedily overrun Western Sicily, according to plan.

He heard the call for medics everywhere. Separating from Clay and CD, Jesse attempted to make his way toward the cries of the wounded. Hearing the roaring and whistling sound of an incoming shell, he saw a sudden blue sheet of flame flash, and an arm winged him in the thigh. The bloody arm beached ten feet before his eyes.

The taste of wet dirt felt thick in Jesse's mouth as he crawled, but he continued crawling

toward a wounded soldier. The soldier's shirt still smoking, he lay only ten yards away. Jesse made the next ten yards and saw blood gushing from a terrible wound where an arm had been attached. It had to have been the arm that hit him in the thigh.

It rained heavier, and droplets blasted Jesse like bullets of tin. He began to shudder, not because of the cold clothes he wore, but because a series of inner chills swam through him like a school of wiggling eels.

The Germans and Italians had been driven back far enough that a field hospital was being setup by the U.S. Army Medical Corps approximately a hundred yards in the rear.

With dripping wet fingers, Jesse grabbed a rubber tourniquet out of his medic bag, and secured it to the remains of the soldier's arm. A bone jutted sharply from the soldier's shoulder, his arm muscle was sliced open, and looked like raw hamburger.

After hastily examining him for other wounds, Jesse injected him with a Morphine Syrette to relax his breathing, reduce his panic, and ease his pain. The soldier's blanched face, white as sun-cured bone, told Jesse the wounded soldier had lost a great amount of blood, and was in shock. He needed to get him back to the aid station fast.

Throwing him over his right shoulder, fireman style, he began treading his way around the dead. The stony landscape made advancement difficult, and numerous craters and depressions made by artillery provided Jesse with imagery of the moon. As the fighting continued, the sounds of gunfire and shelling became distant.

He didn't see Clay for over an hour. Looking over his shoulder, he saw his best friend, with the assistance of another medic, bringing a wounded infantryman down a small hill using a poncho for a stretcher.

Jesse continued trudging forward, around the dead, around body parts. A naked foot lay

by itself, an outstretched hand its companion. He dodged almost dead men with their insides oozing out, and the craters, the helmets, and weapons abandoned in the carnage. The battlefield looked as if it had been hit by a series of tornadoes.

Jesse entered the aid station. “Lay him down. . .here. . .on the cot,” a doctor shouted, “we’ll do the rest.”

“Yes sir,” Jesse said. He laid the soldier on a cot. “I gave him thirty milligrams of morphine.” Jesse’s gaze raked about the olive drab tent at the ravages of war. A shattered leg, fragments hanging on by shreds of skin and flesh. Gunshot wounds to the head, another wounded in the foot, one with a crushed bone sticking out of his leg, and a neck bleeding profusely.

The doctor wiped some blood off his own face and glared at Jesse. “Dammit soldier, put the used Syrette in his right pocket so we’ll know. We can’t remember everything. Go do your damn job.”

As Jesse turned to walk away, he looked back at the comrade one last time, and tried to give a reassuring smile. “Good luck.” The soldier never said a word as his eyes rolled back in his head.

The wounded came in from different directions. Some walked in, but medics, who labored over them, carried most. Jesse waited a minute for Clay to get to the aid station. “Let’s stick together.”

“Yeah, it’s up to us to save our asses. Have you seen CD?”

“He’s around somewhere.”

They made their way back up and over the small hills. Jesse heard the muffled growl of twin engines of a Gooney Bird to the left. The sound immediately changed to a loud roar. He

and Clay turned in unison. By the light of the moon beneath the clouds, Jesse saw a glider in tow behind the larger airplane.

The Gooney Bird, in all its camouflaged majesty, was about to release the glider so that it could slip in behind enemy lines, without the roar of engines, to drop its bombs. As Jesse breathed in this magnificent sight, three enemy fighter planes shot into clear view.

Jesse and Clay hit the ground as the enemy fighters delivered direct hits. The sky lit up. The flaming Gooney Bird and glider exploded in mid-air. With volcanic wrecking force, it spewed a white-gray cloud of smoke upwards, scattering, raining, and orbiting pieces of metal, and cascades of yellow and blue sparks lit the night sky. Just as quickly as the aircraft appeared, the plane disappeared into the darkness, leaving behind the acrid stench of burnt powder.

Witnessing the one-sided dogfight made Jesse feel vulnerable and weak in his knees, but fear became his unshakable companion. Could he learn to flow with it? Flow with fear. Fear become his friend? Fear could keep him alive. Jesse walked past the chopped debris, small chunks tangled in such surreal shapes that his baffled eyes couldn't reconstruct any part of the Gooney Bird or glider.

He followed behind Clay as the two men continued to advance up the small hills. Stumbling over a log, yet another, he picked himself up, and made his way behind Clay over a slope, and charged on.

His nerves numbed with adrenaline; occasionally he looked back for enemy fighters. An apocalyptic silence fell between them as they plodded further. It was a perception thing. Jesse knew that. The perception of death, with dead all around, on the land, and the smell in the air, made breathing difficult. He tried to say something to Clay, but his tongue hung in his mouth like a dried banana chip.

The moist, heavy cold sunk through the thick, wet wool of Jesse's coat, causing him to shiver uncontrollably, even worse than fear. The air felt frigid with a harsh wind that cut to the bone. It seemed as if he'd been cold forever, and couldn't remember the last time he'd truly felt warm. His teeth chattered so loudly he wondered if he was chipping enamel.

Crouching down, Jesse tied the bottom of his pants-legs with the attached strings and stood. Suddenly, a young soldier stumbled in front of him, his uniform ripped, his face cut and bleeding. He fell face down.

Tumbling him over, Jesse ran his hand under the soldier's coat, over his stomach, and to his chest. His fingers found the wound. It felt wet, big, and round. With two fingers, he pressed the pulse on the GI's neck; it wavered and faded until no sensation could be felt.

Jesse stood up. An officer with his leg blown off below the knee climbed out of a crater with the aid of his rifle and said, "Please, help me."

Jesse reached out his hand, and as he did he heard a screeching, sizzling sound, and found himself gagging on a piece of human tissue that landed in his mouth. The officer who had spoken had vanished before his very eyes.

Gagging, he spit it out. He shook his head violently, and when he and Clay crossed the next hill, still dazed, he saw a makeshift field hospital. The Red Cross on the top of the tent easily distinguished it. They immediately reported in, and were fast put to work.

The operating unit contained forty cots and a recovery unit. As soon as the patients were able, they were moved from the hospital to the aid station down the hill, assessed for appropriate care, and then moved out.

He and Clay assessed and rated wounds on a number system. The lower the number, the more severe the wound, and the quicker the soldier would be seen by a doctor.

Several hours later, taking a break in the medical tent, Jesse still shook with chill and fatigue. His clothes were soaked with blood and rain, and his eyes burned dryly from smoke and lack of sleep. “Hey Clay, we need dry clothes and socks. Any ideas?”

“How about the five and ten?”

“Get serious.”

“I am serious. We need dry clothes.”

“I don’t know. I imagine that footlocker you’re sitting on, marked ‘fatigues,’ might be a good place to start.”

Jesse grinned. Good ol’ Clay. Even at a time like this, he could still count on Clay to look after him and make him laugh.

Using helmets as washbasins, the young men cleansed themselves as much as possible and put on dry clothes. Feeling better, they opened their c-rations, a canned field ration from the U.S. Army, which consisted of Spam, bread, chocolate pudding, and a small pack of Lucky Strikes.

The food didn’t taste bad, Jesse thought, and felt grateful to have a cigarette. He struck a match, and held it to the tip. Taking a pull, he blew a perfect smoke ring.

Trying to put the small pack of Lucky’s in his shirt pocket, he found that it didn’t quite fit. Something else lay in his pocket. He took the pack out, reached into the pocket, and pulled out a picture. He stared at it and lost all sense of time. Mesmerized, he couldn’t look away, away from her sparkling eyes and delicate cheekbones. Her head, capped by a mass of bronze-gold hair, tumbled past her shoulders.

He felt stunned. His heart hammered so loudly that he wondered if Clay could hear it. A strange feeling washed over him as he stared at the wholesome good looks of the young women.

He felt as if he had always known her, and that finally their paths crossed. But, their paths didn't cross; she was over there, somewhere over there, and he was over here, at least five thousand miles away, in this wretched, barren, torn, and bloodied land.

What was he thinking? Hell, he didn't care. Somehow he knew fate brought them together, and it didn't matter he was in Licata. It didn't matter that he was in World War II, and it didn't matter he felt tired. Nothing mattered, except her picture.

Instinctively he turned the picture over and saw the kiss imprint from the lady's lips and read the following message: "Hello sweetie. I only have this one picture and decided to send it to you. I hope your day hasn't been so rough with all that army stuff, if you like, you can drop me a line or two. Sara Barrett, Boarding House, 299 Hancock Street, Athens, Georgia."

My God, that's only seven miles from my hometown, he thought. Lord. . .you're going to have to help me with this one. What's happening here? Am I losing it?

Jesse grew weak in the knees, trembled, and could barely work up enough spit to speak. He wiped away fine beads of cold sweat broken out along his hairline. His eyes swam in and out of focus, and a tingling sensation ran through him as he felt the blood leaving his head. He seemed to be on a merry-go-round, faster and faster, and wanted to stop it. Stop the nauseating spinning, the tent, and everything around.

He felt faint and the black blanket of darkness reduced his vision to a blurred spot, a star, a half of a star, a tip of a star, then a mere pinpoint. "Help!" Jesse yelled. After that the world became peaceful, still, white, and silent.

