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Sulphur and Lilacs

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By

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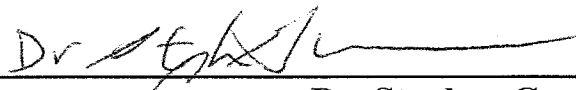
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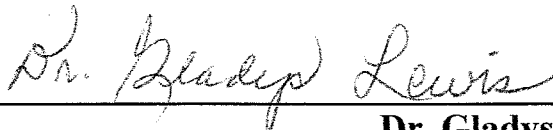
Sulphur and Lilacs

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF
ENGLISH

April 14, 2011



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Sulphur and Lilacs

Chapter One**1937**

The Medal of Honor seemed to glow as Cal reverently wiped off the last drip of polish and nested it back in the case with its companions, the blue, starred ribbon he folded carefully so it wouldn't obscure the rest of his dead uncle's Marine Corps insignia.

It seemed a sorry homage to the man to keep them spotless when they stayed hidden in the top of the hall closet like some kind of horrible family secret. Still, they were the only vestiges that remained of the man he could never meet, a hero no one wanted to talk about.

Cal moved the case to the top of the stack of newspapers and National Geographic Magazines that threatened to overrun the rickety desk in his bedroom. Exotic names peaked out from yellow-framed covers. The war in Spain hollered from the pages of smudged newsprint up top.

Cal would have to slip the case back into the closet later, before his old man noticed it was missing and went on another rant against the Great War. He sat back in the chair, humming the opening bars of *Rhapsody in Blue* as he reached for the April National Geographic and flipped past the article on restoring Colonial Williamsburg to the one that had caught his eye first, "The Salzkammergut, a Playground of Austria."

The squeak of the old wooden stairs chased the melody from Cal's mind. It was his only warning before a series of solid thuds landed on his door. "Calvin, I want to talk."

Cal barely had time to snap the lid of the case shut and turn around before his father came in. "What do you want?" Melvin Fisher rarely intruded on Cal's space, cramped as the room

was.

His father's suspicious gray eyes flicked in his direction. Cal suspected he was looking for some sign of trouble in the making. "I brought you this," he said, holding out a small sheaf of papers.

Cal reached out to take them, but as soon as he saw the words *West Virginia Junior College, Over 40 years of Academic Excellence* on the header he let them slip right through his fingers and drift to the floor. Not this again. "Forget it."

Melvin's face reddened until it almost matched the faded brick of his flannel shirt. "Why do you have to go arguing about this?"

"Because you don't listen," Cal retorted. "I ain't going to no junior college."

"You going to waste your time then?" Melvin asked. "Work in the mines? Waste your grades on a no-count crap pay job?"

Cal's palm prickled, his fingers clenched tight. "Well I ain't going to waste it thar!" A junior college, the very idea was insulting to his intelligence. If he ever made it to college, he'd go someplace worth something. Was that really all his old man thought he could achieve? "I'm still enlisting."

"No you ain't!" There it went, Mount Melvin erupting. "No son of mine is joining the damned Marines if I ha- have a—" A dry hacking cough cut into a tirade and his tall, thin form doubled over.

"Quit shouting," Cal felt little sympathy. Shouting always made Melvin cough like that.

It took a moment for the coughing to subside. As he straightened up and straightened his suspenders, Melvin's eyes narrowed as his head turned towards Cal's desk and the still exposed

medal box. “What are those doing out?”

“I was cleaning them.” Cal’s neck hairs bristled.

“You should have left them.”

“I’m not ashamed of having a war hero in the family.” Cal was proud of his uncle. Why did his father have to be such a jerk about his brother?

Melvin’s flinty glower returned. “You didn’t know him. Daniel was brash, and foolhardy and—”

“And brave enough to win that!” Cal pointed at the case.

“He died!”

“We won the war.”

“At what cost?”

“You were there. How can you say these things?” How could he have fought in the war and hate his brother for doing the same?

Melvin nodded emphatically. “I was there. You weren’t. It was a senseless death.”

That was one man’s opinion. Cal shook his head. “Better that than a pointless life.” Better than a wasted life, stuck in some sulfurous hole in the ground, coughing up black, or mopping a grocer’s floor every morning.

“That *pointless* life has fed and clothed your ungrateful backside! Learn a little gratitude.”

Cal stepped right up in his father’s face. “Or what, you’ll beat it into me?” Near nose-to-nose he had two inches on him now, and several pounds, despite being stuck with the same lean build.

“Maybe I should.” His father didn’t give a step. “We’ve been too lenient with you. You’re too much like Daniel was.”

Thank God even his old man didn’t see much of a resemblance. Cal shrugged his shoulders. “If I’m so much like him, what makes you so sure I’m yours?”

The red in Melvin’s face vanished into his thinning dark hairline. “How dare you suggest your mother might—?”

“God, Dad, can’t you take a joke?” Of course he couldn’t.

“If that’s your idea of a joke I—”

There went the next coughing fit. Cal didn’t wait around, he ducked around the old man and out his bedroom door. He hopped the squeaky stair out of habit and descended into the well-worn, cramped kitchen in the back of the house. His old man’s grocery took up most of the front, leaving room only for a tiny living room and the kitchen. The white-washed walls and the worn blue and white linoleum looked run down, even though his mother liked to call them “homey.”

“Going out, Calvin?” His mother asked. She stood by the sink, a frail woman with graying brown hair in a severe bun, and a house dress of pale yellow. Violet suited her, she always seemed to shrink and vanish in a room. Instead of washing dishes, she was looking at him expectantly.

“Yeah, I thought I might,” Cal shrugged casually. His mother wouldn’t stop him. “I told Reid I’d drop by and I finished all my deliveries this morning.” Saturday grocery deliveries up and down the steep hills of Rocky Creek were something he tried to finish quickly just to get them over with. “I’ll be back later. You might want to take Dad up something to drink. He’s coughing again.” If she did that, he would be free to go.

“I heard you both,” his mother’s forehead wrinkled in concern. “You shouldn’t go hollering like that. You make his lungs act up awful.”

“He started it,” Cal objected. “Does he think I’m dumb?”

Violet took a dish towel and dried her hands as she filled a cup with water. “He just cares about you.”

Cal glanced towards the kitchen table to avoid her disapproval. The only guilt he felt when he fought with his father was how upset it made her. The newspaper lying on the table caught his attention. “If shouting is caring I’ll take less love thanks.” He went over and picked up the paper. There was a large, if fuzzy, picture of what he was sure was a plane. *On the twenty-sixth of April bombs rained down on the city of Guernica, Spain. General Franco-*

“Calvin.”

He tore his face away from the paper. “What?”

Violet sighed as she headed upstairs. “Please don’t go angering your father. Humor him about school.”

“I’ll think about it.” He would at least humor his mother a little longer, until he was done with school, until he was eighteen. What was a couple of months now? “See you later.” He rolled the paper up under his blue-and-white flannel sleeve and headed out the door before his mother could complain he was in his faded Levis instead of proper pants.

* * *

The chilly damp air ruffled Cal's already messy sandy curls as he pushed his bangs out of his face and continued uphill towards Hudson's Mechanics. Reid might still be working. It wasn't all that late in the afternoon. The sun was still well above the dusty pale green of the trees on the mountains. It glanced off the gray and brown roofs of the houses and small businesses that lined the road up the hill between the main town and the clusters of homes up top that made neighborhoods. Little wood-sided houses sat back on the hills up little twisted paths, where they perched awkwardly like geriatric sheep.

Near the top of the hill the road bent sharply to the right before it leveled out, leaving a deep cleft that nothing could be built on, giving a clear view back down to what passed for downtown, huddled along the shore of the rock-bottomed creek that gave the town its name. Glancing down through the rocks as he passed, Cal could see the town square, marked by the church steeple, and the shorter buildings that made up the city hall, courthouse, and police station. The main street stretched out either side until it ran into the base of the cliff at one end, and the twisty hill-road at the other that vanished in the trees, leading down the mountain.

The view vanished again within a few steps. Spring was coming. Cal just wished it would hurry up and get warm. The piles of packed snow had finally melted, but the muck left in their place was no improvement. It was dark, thick sludge that stuck to everything and got tracked everywhere. He mopped it out of the shop at least once a day – twice or more on weekends.

Not that it was much different from the fine layer of coal dust that seemed to coat everything in town, making the whole place smell a bit like bad eggs. That got trekked down from the Kline Coal Mines a few miles more up hill.

The Mechanic's shop could be heard well before Cal came around the next corner. There was always some repair going on in there – cars, bikes, and mining equipment. Mr. Hudson worked on anything with parts that moved it seemed like.

“Hello?” Cal called as he walked through the garage door, past piles of paint and racks of spare parts, the scent of machine oil and gasoline overwhelming even the sulfur in the air. “Reid? Mr. Hudson?”

“Calvin?” A clang was followed by a rolling sound, and Mr. Hudson appeared from underneath the chassis of a Model-T. His broad face broke into an immediate smile.

“The boy's already out back.”

“Thanks, Mr. Hudson.” Cal hurried through the shop and out the crooked back door. Way back behind the shop – beyond the pile of tires, the other cars in need of repair, or just for scrap, up on the hill was the old shed. It was a pretty dilapidated building, white-wash peeling and extra nails holding it together, the concerted efforts of two once-eager boys. *In the Mood* poured jauntily out of the cracked glass window.

“Refuge!” he sighed in relief as he passed through the door.

Reid – dark haired and ruddy faced as his old man – laughed. “Outside is refuse, but inside, paradise. I thought you'd never get here.”

“Had a bit of a row with my old man,” Cal shrugged, tugging the paper out and unrolling it. “But then I found this! Did you read this morning?”

“Why would I?” Reid asked with a knowing grin. “You always give me the rumble whether or not I want it. So what is it?”

“This!” Cal dropped the paper on the table, shoving a mix of motorcycle screws and a couple of empty bottles out of the way so he could display the photo. “Doesn’t that look like a German Junker to you?”

Reid bent close and squinted at it, immediately as interested as a blood hound smelling prey. Anything mechanical got his attention like that. “Lousy photo, but yeah, I think you’re right.”

“German planes in Spain,” Cal bent over the paper to read the article in detail. “Franco controls Guernica and Hitler’s backing him.”

“And why do we care again?” Reid asked in that tone that said he was mostly humoring his friend. He walked to the back wall of the shed where his amateur brewing set-up took up a couple of tables, looking like a comic villain’s laboratory, all made up of copper pipes and glass jars.

Why did they care? “How is Germany able to afford to build them, forget helping out Franco. Didn’t you pay attention to the history lesson where they talked about the limits on Germany after the Great War?”

“Of course I didn’t.” Reid chuckled. “That’s what I’ve got you and your notes around for. And your taste buds, here, try this.” He held out a plain brown bottle. “I think this is the one I’m going to have old Mr. Spencer taste as my sample.”

Cal pried himself away from the news long enough to take a hold of the bottle and sniff Reid’s latest concoction. It smelled unusually sweet. “What’s in it?” Knowing Reid, it wasn’t just a basic recipe.

“Taste it.”

Cal tipped the bottle up and took a short swig, letting the light, almost golden liquid rest a moment on his tongue before he swallowed. The flavor was more than just the malty flavor of beer, and it was very familiar. "It's honey... and spices?" He couldn't point out which ones exactly, cinnamon maybe?

"Never tasted anything like it, right?" Reid's pride in his work showed in his smile. "I found a real old book in the library talks about fermenting honey. It even said old timers used to mix it with beer so I figured on trying it out. Spencer said something good he hadn't tasted before would get me hired and I figured on it maybe working."

"Well you got me sold," Cal assured him, taking another drink.

Reid nodded as he perched on the edge of the table. "I'm figuring on being in Charleston before summer's out."

"You still reckon Margie will go with you?" Cal asked. He couldn't see Reid leaving without his girlfriend.

Reid's grin widened enough to split his face. "Sure she will. Soon as I'm a made man I'll give her a proposal good and proper. What girl wouldn't like big city living?"

"Charleston ain't so big." Cal leaned back against the wall next to the half-built motorcycle.

"Well it ain't New York or Paris," Reid conceded. "But it's bigger than here. You go on and join up and have yourself a time. I can see you and Valerie in London and all those stylish places though. She's the type for it."

Valerie's type was money type. "She'll make do on a Marine's pay," Cal agreed. "Higher I get, more she gets to spend right? She can live big like she wants." A big bass blare accented

the word big. Convincing Valerie would be easy by now. It was getting their fathers to agree that was the real problem. Cal wasn't looking forward to either one of those hot heads finding out, but there wasn't much time left.

“You got that face going,” Reid warned. “Don't let it bug you, Cal. Come on,” he stood up and went over to the motorcycle. “Let them Europeans and old dogs growl at themselves. Let's you and me get some more work in on this baby.”

Leave it to Reid to lump Cal's personal family feud story in with the war in Spain. Cal set the beer down on the table and grabbed a hammer. “You calling my old man Hitler or Franco?” he asked curiously as he bent to knock the dents out of a back plate.

Reid shrugged. “Does it make a difference?”

“Nope.”

“I didn't think so.”

* * *

If someone had wanted to bomb Rocky Creek, Cal was pretty sure it would have fallen even easier than Guernica. The street and storefront were dark when Cal wended his way home. No one peered out of their houses in fear or watched for enemies. Cal doubted they even thought about it.

Aside from the occasional mining accidents there wasn't much danger to fret over. The loudest fights happened in the town hall meetings over items of *critical importance* like how Kline Mining wanted to buy up even more land and extend the mines again, or how dogs

shouldn't be allowed to bark outside the church during Sunday services. If it wasn't a matter of heaven, hell, or money, it certainly wasn't a matter of life and death.

If someone had wanted to bomb Rocky Creek, Cal didn't think the world would miss it.

Cal opened the kitchen door as quietly as he could. He had oiled the hinges recently. It made his mother happy to see him do something around the house, and it had the added benefit of making his comings and goings less obvious.

He was halfway across the kitchen when there was a squeak from the wooden floor in the living room. A light clicked on, and a soft yellow glow spilled across the kitchen floor. "Home a little late, ain't you?"

Of course, tonight his father decided to wait up for him. He only did that when he was angry about something. "It's only after midnight," he quipped. "Technically, you could say I'm home early." If he was going to get a tongue-lashing he might as well deserve it.

"Don't start with that." His father appeared in the doorway, but didn't come any closer. His nostrils quivered and his eyes narrowed. "You're always out wasting time, wasting money, and you come home and mouth off at me and your ma. Have you forgotten who puts this roof over your head?"

So it was going to be one of those lectures. "No, I haven't."

"Who pays you for work you could be doing out of family loyalty?"

"You do." *So loyalty and obligation are the same to you, huh pops?*

"Who feeds you?"

"*You*, all right," Cal replied, not bothering to hide his exasperation. "Is there a point to this, Dad?"

His father's wrinkled scowl deepened. "You need to grow up and learn a little respect instead of smart-mouthing you ungrateful bastard."

So now I'm a bastard? You want to tell Mom that? "Maybe if I had a better example."

"I never taught you to come home smelling like beer!"

Damn the man and his keen nose. "Just cause you don't doesn't mean I can't." Cal had never seen his father drink. The only explanations for why he didn't that Cal had ever gotten was that it was a matter of principles, according to his mother, and his father's rants about the evils of alcohol. Cal would have bet a whole nickel his father had been one of the men who thought Prohibition was a good idea.

"You can't cause I say you can't!" Melvin replied. His father turned suddenly on his heels and headed for the stairs. "You be up at six. There's a delivery coming that needs unloading before the runs can be made."

A delivery truck that was easily unloaded most weekends by the truck driver and his father, so that was his punishment this time. It would tack at least an hour onto Cal's work load. Cal waited a few seconds before going upstairs. The last thing he wanted to do was extend the fight. It was bad enough sharing a house. *Just think about Valerie, Valerie and getting out of this hell hole.*

Chapter Two

The sound of footsteps and voices outside the kitchen door interrupted the quiet ticking of the kitchen clock. Cal looked up from his writing assignment lying on the table.

“Town meeting must be out, at last,” his mother commented as she set the sock she had been darning in a basket with a mended pair of coveralls and several other socks.

“Three hours ain’t so long,” Cal replied. The town council meetings were usually long-winded.

The door opened, and Melvin backed in out of the night air, waving at someone in the street. “All right, Frank. Yes, yes, you’re welcome!” A rare smile stretched his thin-lined mouth. He removed his felt brimmed hat and hung it up as he pushed the door shut behind him.

“Everything go all right?” Violet asked.

“For a change.” Cal’s father hung his jacket up with his hat and took the remaining chair at the table. “We managed to vote down Kline’s offer to buy the school almost two to one.”

“You voted it down?” Cal wasn’t sure he believed his ears. The building needed repairs, they needed new books, and the council voted down money for the school?

Melvin’s satisfied expression melted away as he reached for the pot of coffee sitting on the table. “Of course we did.”

“Have you seen how badly the school needs money?”

“Not Kline’s money.” Melvin sipped his coffee.

Cal had to bite back the urge to shout in his resolute face. Was his old man trying to drag the entire town into their personal feud? “Don’t you think maybe this whole grudge with you and Mr. Kline is out of control?”

His mother's expression paled. "Calvin—"

"Oh, don't shush him, Violet," Melvin looked at Cal. "Let him speak his foolish ideas out loud. Then when he realizes how dumb he sounds, maybe it will learn him something."

Insufferable bastard. Cal's back stiffened. "So what do you think I'm missing here?"

His old man's face turned serious. "What do you think would happen if Kline bought the school, boy? Him owning the building and all the land it sits on. You think he'd let the town kids keep going there for long? Camp schools is just that, coal camp kids only. Only reason they ain't built a Camp school before now is the Klins are too cheap. Letting the kids come to the town school was easier when there wasn't as many of them."

Cal followed so far. "So why would he pay so much to buy the school?"

That earned him a derisive snort. "All Kline's offered in cost and funding ain't barely half of what it would cost him to build his own. He just wants control of it 'cause the teachers ain't lax on the older boys who work the mines."

Cal couldn't argue that. He'd heard those boys grumbling about trying to fit work and school in enough, if they bothered to study much at all. "I didn't think he cared about his workers that much."

"Oh, he don't," his mother cut in with one of her patient, sad sighs. "All Bernard wants is to get more out of them in the mine."

"That, and to buy up the land between the mine and the school," Melvin added. "If he cut off and bought out Frank Bevins and old Whitman he'd be able to expand the mine back this way down the mountain. He's already had pressure on them to sell for months."

"I didn't know that," said Cal. Not that he had given the matter much thought.

His father stood and rinsed his cup in the sink. “Of course you didn’t. Always got your nose in one of them damned magazines or the papers. Forget the war in Spain, Calvin. If you want something to fight for, there’s plenty to set right here.”

“Did Frank take the loan, Melvin?” Violet cut in as Cal’s mouth opened to retort.

“With his and Sally’s thanks.” Melvin turned around. “Should be enough to pay off what they owe in medical expenses, so they won’t have to sell to settle accounts.”

His father, the penny-pincher, offering loans? “Is that a good idea?” asked Cal.

“Good business, good politics, and good neighbors,” his old man replied with a flat stare. “It keeps Frank, Sally, and them little ones put in their home, and that Mine as far from here as we can keep it.”

Cal’s mother looked up from the next sock. “Did Frank try to talk you into running?”

“Half-way up the hill.” Melvin wiped his cup out and put it up. “The usual speech on how I should of run for mayor this term, and the one before that. How I’m the only one with the backbone to get things done that’s good for the town.”

Cal folded up the paper he had finished and stood to go upstairs. He’d heard his old man’s *I’m just a shopkeeper* speech before.

“Well they trust you, Mel,” his mother replied.

Melvin was silent for several seconds. “I know. That’s why I’m thinking he’s right. Maybe this round I ought to run.”

The pencil slipped out of Cal’s hand and clattered on the floor. “You’re joking.”

“This ain’t a laughing matter.” His father’s irritated gaze followed Cal as he bent to retrieve his pencil. “And I can’t leave it to you. There wouldn’t be a town left.”

“Sure there would be.” Cal straightened up and turned away. “It’d just belong to the Coal Mine, like almost every other town.” Most of those towns had sprung up around the coal mines. Mining was where the real money was in West Virginia. You didn’t have to like them to know that much. As Cal headed for the stairs, he heard a chair scrape back away from the table again.

“Bloody and beaten, That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.”

Cal didn’t bother to respond. Of course his father was over-reacting. The mining wars had never come to Rocky Creek. Besides, his old man *mayor*? He doubted it would happen.

* * *

The Uphill end of Rocky Creek might as well be a whole different place. Two story houses with better wood siding, freshly painted white, with clean trim, lawns and small fenced yards. Farthest from the mine road, the little neighborhood stayed pristine compared to the rest of town. Cal tried not to feel out of place when he biked up the street, grocery bags in the basket on the back. He couldn’t look rushed either or someone would probably ask his father and he would get chewed out for a lack of professionalism.

Cal always saved the Klines’ delivery for last, and thanks to the extra work, he would barely make it before he had to head to the Wednesday night church service. He cut around behind the house to the side kitchen door – the standing instruction – and knocked.

Laura, the housekeeper, let him in. “You’re late,” she replied with mild derision. With a face as stiff as her starched apron, she was hardly endearing. Cal was otherwise ignored as he set the two sacks on the counter and spent a moment pretending to catch his breath. He didn’t have to wait long.

Already dressed for church in her best blue dress, Valerie came in with anxious haste.

“You’re late,” she spoke softly.

Cal smiled and reached for her, keeping his voice down too. “You missed me? Or were you just worried.” His heart beat picked up at the sight of her.

Valerie stopped and stepped backwards. “Don’t muss me,” she scolded, pushing her honey hair out of her eyes.

Cal gave up on the hug. Women could be so particular about clothes. “It’s been days,” he replied softly, reaching for her hand instead.

Valerie didn’t reciprocate. “My father’s been in a bad mood.”

“Isn’t he always?”

Even her frowns were cute. “You shouldn’t stay. He was fuming about your Dad and last night’s meeting.”

“All right,” he agreed reluctantly. It must really be something for her to be so agitated and worried for him. “Meet up tomorrow afternoon?”

Valerie shook her head. “No, I can’t.”

“Is your family doing something?” They had dinner parties or went into Charleston sometimes.

“You could say that.” Her eyes seemed unable to meet his, no matter how Cal tried to catch them.

“Well, what is it?” He couldn’t argue when she had family obligations, much as he wanted to. The downside to keeping a relationship a secret from all but the people he trusted absolutely was he had to take second seat to anything Valerie’s father insisted on her attending.

Valerie certainly didn't look happy about whatever it was. Her hands clenched until her knuckles turned white. "I have a doctor's appointment."

Concern filled him. "Are you okay?" He reached for her again, but met with another stinging rebuff when Valerie pulled away. A sense of dread began to crawl into his stomach. "Is it serious?"

"My mother thinks I'm sick," Valerie replied irritably. The skin around her eyes was tight, as if holding back tears.

"Well, are you?" Why would she think if it she wasn't? Or why would Valerie go along with it if she felt fine?

Anger flashed in her eyes. "You are so dense, Calvin," she hissed. "I think I'm pregnant."

The entire world fell crashing through the earth beneath him. For a moment, Cal wondered if he would ever breathe again. "Y-you're?"

Denial was refuted by the sense memory of petal-soft skin under his hands, the scent of her shampoo as hair tickled his nose, the sounds of huffed little gasps. He hadn't thought... well yes, he had. *This can't be happening now! We're kids. I have to get through training and get an assignment and we ain't married and....*

His silence was met with a petulant glare. "I ain't making it up for my own amusement."

"Sorry," Cal replied, feeling guilty. It wasn't like he got her pregnant on purpose! This complicated things, but... it didn't ruin them. It might even simplify convincing her father they should get married if she was carrying his kid, right? He managed to coax a smile onto his face despite the torrent of panicked babbling in his mind. "Well, we'll just have to get married then, won't we?"

In all the scenarios in his mind where he had said those words, the expression of disbelief on Valerie's face had not been in any of them. "Is that supposed to be a proposal?"

"Yeah, it is." So much for expecting joy or pleasant surprise out of her, Cal just hoped she said yes!

"You're still planning on joining the Marines." There was no question.

"Of course I am," he assured her. He could take care of a family.

Valerie frowned. "So you won't even be home."

"I told you, you could come—"

"Keep quiet!" Valerie cut him off. "Daddy'll hear you."

"Let him! I'm not a coward. I'm not going to run away from this. I want you to be with me. If you're carrying my kid, he's got to agree right?" Cal couldn't imagine why he wouldn't. That's how it always went down.

"Calvin... I don't think—"

A door closed somewhere down the hall. "Just a second, Bill. I need a drink."

Valerie shoved him in the chest. "Go!"

"Look I'll talk to—"

"Get out! If he finds you with me..." Her lower lip quivered then Valerie turned and fled from the room.

For a moment, Cal stood rooted to the floor. He had more to say! They could work this out. There had to be an answer. Then he heard Valerie's father. "Valerie, is someone in the kitchen?"

"Just the delivery boy, Daddy. He's come and gone as usual."

Mr. Kline harrumphed. "Late today."

Cal didn't stay to hear more. He left the bags and hurried quietly out the back before he could prove Valerie a liar. It was only rational anyway, if he didn't know that Valerie was pregnant yet, that having that news and a proposal come out of Cal's mouth would probably get him shot instead of welcomed into the family.

He grabbed his bike and pedaled toward home as fast as he could, decorum be hanged. Cal knew he was going to be late for church, but he didn't care. *Shit... I'm going to be a father.* What if he was as lousy at it as his old man?

* * *

"You're sure that's all you want for dinner, Calvin?" His mother looked concerned as he stood up, his plate only half empty. A lump of uneaten meat loaf and mashed potatoes remained.

Cal nodded. "Sorry, Mom. It's good. I'm just not very hungry."

"Something wrong?" His father looked up, his eyes searching Cal's face as if he expected to be able to read his mind, or that Cal would actually tell him.

Cal shook his head and headed for the stairs. "No. I just have a lot of work to do for school. I should get back to it. It's due tomorrow." He had no illusions about really being able to concentrate on it. How could he? Valerie had studiously avoided making eye contact with him in church, and his afternoon chores had been spent worrying about her, alone when her parents found out about the baby.

A knock on the door downstairs made him pause. His hand tensed on the knob to his bedroom.

A chair scraped on the linoleum and he heard his father's heavy steps on the floor, then his irritated voice. "Bernard, what are you doing here?"

Bernard... shit. Valerie's father was downstairs!

"I want answers, Fisher!" Bernard Kline's voice boomed through the small kitchen, painfully audible even where Cal stood, feeling suddenly exposed.

"Answers about what?" His father continued in annoyance. "Was the last delivery of salad greens not good enough?"

"Damn it, this has nothing to do with produce. Where's that worthless boy of yours?"

God... please let me get out of this alive. I swear, if you do, I'll start really paying attention in church.

Apparently his father had had enough as well. "Just *what* do you want with Calvin? Did he step on your wife's precious begonias?"

"Begonias! That bastard has been having carnal relations with my daughter!"

"And how do you know that?" His father growled back, undeterred.

"Because she says he made her. You calling my daughter a liar?"

Two weeks, God.... No, make that months. Wait... was he being accused of forcing himself on Valerie? Kline hadn't mentioned the baby.

Silence descended. Cal could hear the ticking clock on the wall. Funny, he had always thought that when a bomb dropped it would make more noise.

"Calvin!" His father barked sharply. "Get down here!"

Forget the Marines. He wasn't going to live that long. But he couldn't ignore that shout. Sound carried too well in the house, and the enemy – such as it was – was downstairs. Cal couldn't leave Valerie to face this alone. Trying to work the knot out of his throat, he swallowed as he made his way back downstairs. Well, he had tried to talk to the man earlier.

The scene had changed very little, but the room felt a lot warmer. Bernard Kline – a gorilla of a man in a suit – loomed in the doorway, face closer to purple than red. Melvin's expression was nearly as furious. Cal's mother still sat at the table, silent and owl-eyed.

“Yes, sir?” Cal looked at his father, refusing to look at Valerie's. The anger radiating his direction was palpable. Cal's heart was pounding so heard in his ears he almost couldn't hear.

“Bernard says you've... been with his daughter. Calvin, is this true?” Despite his ferocity, his father's voice was eerily quiet.

Semper fideles. That went for girls too, right? Cal's mouth had gone completely dry. “Yes.” If no one had mentioned the baby, he wasn't going to bring that part up now.

His mother squeaked, but Cal didn't dare look in her direction. He kept staring into his father's eyes. The same stormy gray eyes as his, though right now they looked more like a hurricane blowing in. His father's nostrils were flaring, and his mouth worked like he had a lot of things he wanted to say, but wasn't entirely certain what to let out of his mouth first. “Get upstairs,” he said finally. “Your room, now, and stay there. I want to talk about this.”

“Now wait a minute!” Mr. Kline stepped further in the doorway. “He admitted it. I've got a piece to—”

“This is *my house*, Bernard!” Cal’s father rounded on the man, standing squarely in his way. “I don’t give a damn if you’ve bought up half the town! This is still *my house*, my son, and *I will decide what does and does not happen on my property!*”

Cal had never seen his father shoved by anyone until the moment Bernard Kline slammed him into the kitchen table, sending the rest of dinner flying as the table hit the back wall.

His mother shrieked and scrambled out of the way as Kline shoved past to get at Cal. “Stop it, Bernard. Please!” She came forward, a pleading hand clutching the back of his jacket.

Kline tugged his jacket away, though his spine stiffened at her touch. “Stay out of it, Violet. I’m not going till I’ve had my say.”

“But—” Her eyes welled with tears as she stumbled, thrown off-balance by Kline’s backhanded shove. She fell into Cal’s father’s arms before Kline blocked Cal’s view.

Kline loomed over Cal, despite not being much taller. The predatory glare definitely made a difference. “I always knew your family was dirt, Melvin, but I never figured on your boy being this much of a cur. How dare you ruin my daughter!” His full fury turned on Cal.

“Shut up!” Cal bristled. Forget diplomacy. “Who the hell died and made you god? You ain’t nothing but a bully with a lot of lettuce to throw around! Valerie ain’t ruined! I love her!” His legs quivered, but he willed them not to buckle.

Kline’s little bull-like eyes bulged. His mouth worked, jaw straining, for several seconds before any sound came out. “You go anywhere near Valerie again and you’ll be even sorrier you dared cross me.”

Cal met the glare with one of his own. “It had nothing to do with you.”

The wind of an angrily swung fist was all Cal felt as he barely dodged it. *Okay, wrong thing to say.* Cal brought his own arm back and let fly in defense, and he watched it connect with the side of Kline's head... and skip off as Kline's other hand got a hold of his collar.

Chapter Three

"You know if you hadn't fought back I wouldn't be taking you in," Officer Hillman commented as he finished making a note and stuck the paper back in his pocket. "So much for a simple noise complaint."

"Yes, Officer," said Cal, sitting on the old faded-blue living room couch. His head ached from where he'd taken several buffets from ham-sized hands. If the neighbors hadn't called the police about the shouting, Cal suspected he would hurt a lot worse now. Assault and rape charges, how had it come to this? "You going to cuff me?"

"Only if you intend to resist," Hillman said. His serious, distant expression was a far cry from the playful grin Cal was used to seeing at church picnics.

"I wasn't planning on it."

"Good. We'll go on down to the station. Chief Warren's probably about done talking to Kline by now."

Cal stood to follow, and couldn't hold back a shudder. He didn't want to talk to Warren. It would be like trying to talk Kline himself around to his side. Though Cal waited until they were outside – away from his father's frown and his mother's teary expression – before he dared to ask anything. "So is Chief Warren going to be the one questioning me?"

Hillman nodded, heading downhill towards the police station on foot. “Yep. Though this late he may hold off until morning. Don’t worry, we got a nice, comfortable cell.”

Now he was spending the night in jail. Cal couldn’t take back his actions, and he didn’t want to. How dare the man call his own daughter ruined, and storm in like he owned Cal’s home, and scare his mother. He forced his fists to relax again. Losing his temper was only going to get him in more trouble. “You think I did it?”

“Raped Kline’s daughter or punched him in the face?” Hillman asked. He didn’t wait for an answer before adding, “I saw the welt. It’s already bruising.”

Cal felt a few welts under his shirt himself. “It was a lousy shot.”

“True,” Hillman nodded as they passed now-closed store fronts, plenty with lights on above. “If you had connected properly, the fight would have been over.”

A dog barked, and a couple of neighbors stuck curious heads out. Cal tried hard to ignore the looks of confusion and surprise on their faces. If he hadn’t gotten into it with Kline, the Jenkins’ wouldn’t have called the police over the noise. Cal bet they hoped Kline would get in more trouble, but he doubted he was that lucky. “Are you saying I should have hit better?”

Hillman did not look his direction. Maybe Cal imagined the look of amusement in his eyes. Night was falling quickly. “I’m saying your technique needs work.”

Cal waited for nearly a minute before he realized no further answer was forthcoming. Hillman wasn’t going to say a word on the other matter. Cal couldn’t decide if that was a bad sign or reassuring. He stayed silent for the rest of the walk. Hillman took him inside, past the desk where Officer Tillotson was moored. The room and the hallway smelled of coffee and burnt toast. Warren’s office was dark.

There was no one else in the jail in the back of the station that night. Cal waited while Hillman opened a cell and stepped aside. “Sweet dreams, kid.”

Cal stepped into the white-walled coffin and sat down on the thin bench along the back wall. “Very funny, sir.” The cold from the bench ate through his jeans in seconds. Cal doubted the cotton-ball of a pillow would provide much comfort.

The cell door creaked closed and Hillman left without another word. *What is it honesty gets you, ten to fifteen?* Cal’s temples joined in the pounding of his heart and the wrenching of his intestines. He picked up the small square of white and punched it a couple of times, trying to give the pillow enough life to use.

One more hard thwack and Cal decided the pillow was about as fluffy as it was going to get. He set it down at the end of the bench and tipped over on his side. His whole life was tipped over. No way had Valerie told her father it was rape. She would come around, and her father would give in and let her marry him. Jimmy and Rachel Smith had gotten married last year, and their son Tim turned up barely eight months later. No one said a word about it outside of kitchen gossip. This time would be the same. In a few months it would all be forgotten.

Or so he would continue to tell himself so he might manage to fall asleep. Cal rolled over on his back. His feet hung off the edge of the bench. Sleep was going to be a long time in coming. Headache and heartache, tomorrow was going to be a hell of a day.

* * *

Cal was grateful to be let out of the cell. The crick in his spine was testament to the comfort of jail beds. “Where are we going?” he asked Officer Hillman as they headed towards the front of the building. He didn’t think he was being released that easily.

Hillman looked grim as he opened another door and let Cal pass through it. Cal stopped sharply on the other side. There was a man standing in the front room in a dark blue three-piece suit, talking to his mother, who looked small and scared. The man was all comforting smile and bright red tie.

“Calvin, this is Mr. Tom Matthison,” Hillman gestured towards the man. “He come up from Charleston this morning, and he’s the attorney they’ve assigned to take care of you.”

Matthison offered his hand to Cal for a shake. “By which he means I’m your defense.”

“That’s good,” Cal shook the offered hand. “I’d hate to think he meant the other meaning.”

Matthison’s chuckle was warm and seemed sincere enough. “They’ve prepared a room where we can talk in private,” he gestured for Cal to precede him, then paused when Melvin frowned and started to follow. “You’re not required to have anyone hear my council besides yourself.”

Now that was news. Cal looked at his old man, ready to go after Kline’s throat like a fighting dog.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Cal agreed quickly. He wanted to make these decisions on his own. He didn’t care what his old man thought, because he had a pretty good idea.

Cal's father was clearly put out. "I'm his father and he's only—"

"Seventeen is old enough," Matthison replied calmly. "Private council is just that, Sir, and he is my client."

Cal didn't bother hiding his grin as he left his father standing, grumbling, in the outer office.

"Sit down please, Mr. Fisher," Matthison gestured to one of two chairs on either side of a small table in an otherwise empty, gray walled room. "We need to go over a few things before your arraignment hearing."

"Arraignment hearing?" Cal didn't know much about the ins and outs of law, not more than enough to know what the laws were and not to break the big ones.

Matthison sighed. "They can't just let you out of here with rape charges against you. Judge Taylor will ask you if you're guilty or not and then we'll argue for a low bail."

"Then what?"

"Then you either sit in a cell or get to go free until the trial," Matthison replied. "At least unless we can reach a plea bargain." Cal must have looked as confused as he felt. "That means if Polanski – the prosecuting attorney – and I can reach some sort of agreement out of court."

"Wait," Cal held up a hand. "Won't it be Mr. Haney? He's the Coal Company's lawyer. He lives right here in town."

"The charge makes the case you versus the State of West Virginia. Kline and his daughter will speak for the prosecution, but the State has its own lawyers, and using one in the employment of the man doing the accusing ain't legal."

So maybe this would be a fair trial after all. Cal blew out the breath he'd been half-holding and smiled. "So I ain't dead yet."

Matthison's smile was gone. "That all depends on the evidence. You're going to have to tell me honest, Mr. Fisher, just what you and Miss Kline have or have not done."

He put it so nicely, asking Cal if he was guilty or not. "We've been seeing each other, in secret, for months," Cal admitted. "There's bad blood between her dad and mine, goes way back. Yeah we were... intimate but it weren't rape. I'd never of forced her if she said she didn't want to."

"You think you're the only one she's been with?"

Cal's pride bristled. "Yeah, I do. You better not be suggesting Valerie's loose." She wouldn't cheat on him.

"Easy there," Matthison held up a hand. "No offense meant. My job is to keep you out of jail. That's a lot harder if you'd done it. It sounds like its Kline that's after your hide for wounding his pride and family reputation, not the girl."

"Of course she wouldn't," Cal agreed. Valerie wouldn't lie. What good would it do them now? "So... this hearing, you said I only have to say I'm not guilty. That's kind of simple isn't it?"

"That gets you out of jail, that's all," Matthison shook his head. "The only question Judge Taylor is going to ask you today is whether or not you're guilty. All you're going to say back is not-guilty, got that? Don't elaborate. Don't try and explain. No matter what happens, that is the only thing you have to say, and until we have more time to talk this through, I don't want to hear anything out of your mouth that we'll regret later."

“I can hear.” Cal didn’t like how real the whole situation was starting to feel. He was about to walk into a court room, charged for raping the girl he loved. The whole thing was messed up! “I’ll keep quiet.”

“Good,” Matthison stood up. “Because it’s time for your hearing.” He pulled a comb out of his pocket and tossed it at Cal. “See if you can do something with that mop on your head.”

“Don’t I have more important things to worry about?” Cal caught the comb, but did as he told. The comb caught immediately on a snarled clump of curls.

“Right now, looking like a clean cut kid is part of your defense.”

* * *

Cal had forgotten that the town courthouse was a public building. He knew Judge Taylor – and the Bailiff, Mr. Dawes – both from church, though he hadn’t ever seen them look so blank faced, like playing poker but without the game. It was the other two dozen folks in the room that made his stomach turn flips. Nearly all of them were members of the town council. At least half were friends of his father’s. The rest worked for Kline. His swarthy head foreman, Dave Johnson, sat near the front, his perpetual scowl branded in place.

His parents in the front row were reasonable enough to expect, he thought as he followed Matthison to the little table to one side and sat down as instructed. Reid’s friendly face was a relief. Bernard Kline’s dominating presence – welted cheek and all – ruined the sense of security Cal felt briefly. Valerie sat between her parents, demurely quiet in a navy blue dress, looking scared. Sitting next to her father, who wouldn’t?

Curiosity was the only reason Cal could think of for anyone else to be there. He hadn't thought it important enough that roughly two dozen people would show up in the morning for something like this. How many of them thought he was guilty?

Cal was grateful his back was to the gallery. He didn't have to look into anyone's faces. It was bad enough he could hear them buzzing behind him. Words like rapist, scoundrel, selfish, and ridiculous reached his ears, but Cal could not make out if they all referred to him or not.

The hearing went exactly the way Matthison said it would. Cal sat stock still as Judge Taylor called the court to order. Then Mr. Dawes was asked to read the charges. "The people of the State of West Virginia versus Calvin Eugene Fisher, on the charge of rape in the third degree."

Taylor looked down at Cal. "How does the defendant plea?"

Cal opened his mouth to speak, but his dry tongue stuck in his mouth. He swallowed.

"My client pleads not guilty," Matthison spoke up smoothly.

Cal nodded in agreement and decided to keep his mouth shut. Behind him he heard shuffling and a derisive snort.

That seemed to be what Judge Taylor had been expecting, because he nodded. "Would the Secretary please enter the defendant's plea into the record." He turned and looked at the man Cal assumed was Mr. Polanski, the prosecuting attorney. He wore his hair slicked back and a dark blue bowtie and had an air of sophisticated confidence that worried Cal. "Do the people wish to speak on the subject of bail."

"I would your honor." Even Polanski's voice was oily. "The prosecution believes two-thousand dollars is an appropriate bail in this circumstance."

Cal almost choked. Where on earth would his family ever find two-thousand dollars? His palms were slick, but he refused to wipe them on his pants. There was no way his father would pay it. He would be stuck in jail until the trial, he—

“Does the defense accept this?” Judge Taylor looked at Matthison.

“My client is hardly a flight risk,” Matthison replied with a magnanimous smile. “His record proves him a good student, with no prior crimes or misdemeanors. Last night’s report shows he came along willingly. I believe five-hundred dollars bail will be more than enough.”

Cal’s pounding heart filled his ears, till he could barely hear the debate going on right in front of him. Huge amounts of money under discussion, two-thousand was as much as his father made in a year when business was *good!*

Numbers flew back and forth, with reasons behind them. Cal heard Matthison going on about limited resources and Polanski scowled repeatedly. Finally, Judge Taylor nodded and his gavel hit the desk. “Bail is set at One-thousand dollars. Do you wish to post bail at this time?”

Too high, Cal would never be able to raise that kind of money. Why couldn’t Matthison have talked them down lower? “I—”

“We do.”

It must be the end of the world. Cal jerked his head around –Kline be damned– and stared at his father.

Taylor nodded. “Very well then. See the clerk.” His gavel hit the desk and turned away from Cal entirely. “Next case.”

Simple as that, it was done. Cal was dumbfounded as he was led from the court room. “How could you have let them set bail that high?” he hissed at Matthison as the door closed behind them.

The lawyer’s grin was unexpected. “High? You weren’t going to get lower than that, Calvin. I talked him down exactly where I wanted him.”

“But you started with—”

“Hasn’t anyone ever taught you how to barter?”

“Well sure,” Cal objected as they stopped outside the clerk’s office. “But I don’t know how my folks can be expected to pay that much.”

“Before we go in,” Matthison’s voice dropped. “I need to know something.”

“What?”

“How would you feel about joining the military?”

Cal almost choked on his tongue. Part of him wanted to blurt out that it was his dream, but the rest was suspicious. “Why do you ask?”

“Because it could be important,” Matthison replied, straight-faced.

Cal struggled for several seconds trying to come up with a good answer. He wasn’t sure how much to trust the man, but since he was supposed to be Cal’s lawyer, he supposed he’d have to be at least somewhat honest with him. “I’m definitely interested,” he replied as calmly as he could manage. “I’ve considered joining the Marines for years, and becoming an officer.”

“Oh really?”

Cal frowned. “What, you don’t think I’m Marine material?”

“No that’s not it,” Matthison’s face broke out in a smile. “Who knows about this plan of yours?”

“Only Reid –he’s my friend– and my folks, and... Valerie,” he admitted. “Unless she’s told anyone.” If her father knew, would it make a difference?

“I see.” Matthison opened the door to the clerk’s office, leaving Cal wondering why his military aspirations were so important.

Cal’s parents were already inside. Melvin looked grouchy, but his mother immediately wrapped him in a hug more forceful than he had thought possible. “Calvin! Oh I thought we didn’t have a hope.”

“It’s all right, Mom,” Cal pat her back awkwardly.

“Don’t be so dramatic, Violet,” his old man snorted. “Get on home and open the store. Bad enough to open late for something like this.”

“Of course.” Cal’s mother stepped back, dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief from her purse, and left.

“Calvin.” Matthison tapped on his shoulder. “We need to speak more later.” He turned and headed for the door.

“Where are you going now?” Cal asked.

“To have a word with Polanski.”

Cal waited for Melvin to finish posting his bail. Neither man spoke until they left the room. “So, why did you pay my bail?” It would have been easier on his father to just leave him in jail, wouldn’t it?

Melvin shrugged stiffly. “So I wouldn’t have to listen to your mother cry for a week. So you’d better show up or you’ll cost us the store. You had better win this too.”

He’d put the entire grocery up? Cal stopped and stared at his father’s retreating back. Was it a political move to keep him out of jail? That was the only thing that made sense, siding with Cal because of his disagreements with Kline. It probably had nothing to do with family loyalty, just town politics. That was all his father cared about, wasn’t it? Town versus Coal Mine.

Reid was waiting for him outside the door, leaning against the wall. “Cal! Oh man, you had me worried! I’ve been trying to get in to see you since last night. But they wouldn’t let me.” He straightened up and clapped Cal on the shoulder with one hand. “You okay? That was something else, wasn’t it?”

“Something all right,” Cal agreed. Just what, he wasn’t entirely sure yet. He felt wrung out like his mother’s wash, but Matthison seemed to think it had gone well.

“Calvin!” His old man stood a few yards up the street, glowering. “Hurry up.”

“I’ll walk with you,” Reid promised, dropping into step beside him as Cal did as his father ordered. At the moment, he owed the man more than he ever wanted to. “You reckon on being at school this afternoon?” They were both horribly late already by this point.

“I ‘m thinking that’s up to my jailer,” said Cal. He wasn’t fond of the idea of facing any of the fellas and girls in their class straight out of a night in jail. Not with all of them knowing why he had been there. Or at least thinking they knew.

Reid glanced up the hill at Melvin. “Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow I bet. Dad only let me off long enough to be there for you at the trial. He’ll kill me if I skip the whole day.” Clearly he wanted to.

“Don’t worry about it,” Cal forced a smile. “It ain’t goodbye and I ain’t beat.” Even his old man wouldn’t object to Reid coming over to study. He liked Mr. Hudson too much, even if it was for the fact they both had stood out against being bought out by Kline.

“Oh I know you ain’t,” Reid chuckled. “You ain’t dead.”

Yet. Cal knew he couldn’t be put to death for what he was charged for, or they wouldn’t have let him out on bail. But that didn’t mean Kline or his associates wouldn’t have it out for his family even worse than ever. “Nope, and I sure as heck ain’t going to play possum neither.”

Chapter Four

A week, how could it take a whole week to work out next to nothing? Cal scuffed his shoes in the dirt as he walked up the hill towards the town’s four-room schoolhouse. The white-washed wooden siding no longer looked welcoming under the towering old oaks. Nothing he had learned under that roof had really prepared him for the turn his life had taken.

“Oh cheer up,” Reid nudged him in the side with his elbow. “You said Mr. Matthison said he’s got it under control, right?”

“If you can call nothing to show for it under control,” Cal retorted. “He says he won’t let it make it to trial, but I have no idea what this plea bargain he keeps talking about really means.” He tried to understand, he knew it meant a deal that would keep him out of prison, but Matthison said the terms were still being worked out. Close he said. Soon he said. Why wasn’t any of it happening *now*? “I’m sick of being told to behave and be patient.”

"Hey, Fisher."

More ominous words were never spoken. Not when they came from Andy Johnson’s

smug mouth. Cal stopped just outside the school yard. It sounded like Andy wanted to take another jibe at him. *Just don't get into a dust-up now.* A fight would get him in even more trouble. He turned around, hoping Reid's presence and their proximity to the building would keep things from getting rough. "Make it quick, Andy."

"Oh this won't take long," Andy sauntered up, flanked on each side by two of his buddies. His unfriendly smile was so even Cal had always wondered if a kid could have false teeth. They were too white, his smile too perfect. Today it was belied by fiery dislike that flickered in Andy's eyes when Cal met his gaze, unflinching. "I heard what you did to Valerie. But you know that, don't you?"

"I do." *Get it over with already. You're a bully like you're old man.*

"Then maybe you'll listen when I tell you that if you go anywhere near her again you'll wish you were still safe in a cell."

"Not the most original threat," Cal commented glibly, "But I get the point." Sure he did, Andy was jealous. He didn't care if Valerie was a virgin. He just hated that Cal beat him to her.

"Good." Andy glanced past him then stepped backwards. "I guess I'll see you later." Then he turned abruptly and walked away.

"What was that about?" Reid stared after him as Andy and the others hurried up the stairs and vanished in the schoolhouse.

Cal glanced behind him and spotted Officer Hillman walking up the street. No wonder Andy hadn't stuck around for more than a threat. Not that Cal wouldn't mind sinking his fists into Andy's face sometime, but now wasn't the time for it. He nodded at Hillman when he saw the

cautionary look in the other man's eyes. *No, I wasn't causing trouble officer. Though I can't say I wouldn't finish it given the opportunity.* "Let's go."

Reid nodded. "Yeah, let's go before we're late and get in trouble."

"Yeah," Cal started moving again. "Andy would like that too much."

* * *

Two weeks in hell would be a nice vacation, Cal thought as he sat on the worn bench at one of the tables in the school yard watching the cold cuts in his sandwich turn greasy. It would certainly be better than the last two. He was sick of dirty looks and veiled threats from Andy and his cronies.

"It's not going to get better with age," Reid pointed out as he finished the submarine sandwich his mother had packed.

"Nothing does," Cal retorted. He wasn't hungry. Though he should probably be more grateful that more of the school wasn't openly degrading him.

Reid shook his head "Some things do," he replied with a knowing wink.

"Okay, sure, some things." Cal wasn't getting any of those lately either. His old man was even more of a slave driver than before. If Cal was five minutes late getting home he found his father waiting on the porch with extra work already heaped on the list, making up for the fact that until the case was over, Cal was off delivery duty. Little Tommy Carson had been happy to make a little money doing Cal's runs.

Cal picked up his sandwich, stared at it, and put it down, letting it rest in his hands. The

table in his peripheral vision was far more interesting, there the school princess was *holding court* on her first day back. Valerie sat amidst a circle of female classmates who had followed her around all day. She hadn't shown up once since the arraignment until now. So why now? "If I could just get near her..."

"You'd cause a scene if you tried it here," Reid finished the thought. "Don't do it, Cal. You don't know why she hasn't been in school. She hasn't even tried to talk to you."

"She's afraid to be seen with me." Cal was sure of that. He couldn't blame her either after what happened with him and her father. "She shouldn't be."

There was doubt in Reid's eyes. "With Mr. Thunderhead for her father?" Though I don't think that's it."

"Then what do you think it is?" Cal asked, snapping. His temper had been as short as his leash lately.

Reid hesitated, then put down his cup of water. "I don't think she's just afraid. I think she doesn't want to."

White bread squished easily as Cal's grip tightened. "What do you mean she doesn't want to? She's my girlfriend."

Reid's resolve seemed to solidify, though his response was earnest. "Well she doesn't act like it, not like she ever did. Think about it. She wasn't even happy about you *proposing*. Besides..." his voice got even quieter, "Margie told me this morning she heard Valerie's only back now because she's... not feeling sick anymore," he finished vaguely, though the words held much heavier meaning.

An icy lead brick slammed into Cal's stomach. *Valerie's not pregnant?* "Why didn't you tell me?" he hissed angrily. "There's no way." It was a lie. It had to be, right? There was just no way he had gone through the fight, jail, being found out and treated like a miscreant, fought for her, for what?

"Because I couldn't blurt it out in class," Reid frowned. "It's not like I know who said it first. I just thought you ought to know what folks were saying."

"I don't know," Cal shook his head and stood up. He had to find out the truth. "But I'm going to find out."

"Shit. I hope you don't regret it." Fortunately, Reid didn't stop him. Cal was glad his friend knew when to give up.

Cal didn't reply as he walked over to the table where Valerie sat amidst her friends, all decked out in spring floral colors now that the weather was more agreeable. The laughter went silent as they spotted him. Cal focused on Valerie, whose face went from smiling to wide-eyed shock as she became aware of his presence. Two years of discrete school-ground avoidance outside of casual comments to avoid suspicion was rendered pointless as he stopped in front of the table. *Why haven't you been in school? How do you feel? Why did your old man claim you said I raped you? Do you really love me?* "Hi, Valerie. Can we talk?"

He could have been a large, furry spider, like the kind he had read about living in South America. That was the momentary look of horror that crossed Valerie's expression in the time it took Cal to blink. Then she looked uncomfortable. She drew herself up slowly, regaining composure. "No, we can't."

Cal wasn't sure he would ever have another shot at this. Common sense said walk away. His heart said otherwise. "Look, if this is about your father, I didn't mean to get into it with him. I'm sorry. I couldn't stand what he was saying about you! I can't believe you-"

"Stop!" Valerie's horrified cry brought him up sharply as she stood up. "Are you crazy?" she asked, then looked around at her friends. "Excuse me. I'll be right back." She came around the table and grabbed Cal by the arm, dragging him off towards a corner where no one hung out. Cal didn't have to turn around to know how many pairs of eyes were looking curiously in their direction. There would be more rumors before the end of the day no matter what they said to each other. Too bad God didn't order the tongues cut out of gossips or poke out there eyes. "What do you think you're doing?" she hissed, rounding on him. "You can't talk about that here!"

"Then where would you like to talk about it?" Cal asked, frustrated. What was with her? "It can't be your house now, and it can't be mine. I know this is rough on you. I wish it wasn't. But we can make this work if you'll just stick by me!"

Valerie's face flushed crimson in the cheeks. It would be beautiful if the glare that went with it weren't so unpleasant. "No, Cal, we can't."

"Why not?" he pressed. "I told you, I have a plan! I love you. What's wrong with that?"

Valerie shook her head and pushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes with her fingers. "You are."

The lead weight in his stomach lurched. "What do you mean?"

It was clear that Valerie didn't want to say it in public. She fidgeted, and her lip caught briefly in her teeth. "I mean you're not marriage material. What we had was... fun. Right? But it would never work."

Cal didn't want to believe what he was hearing. Her father had been feeding her this line. He had to be. "What's this about, Valerie, money, status? Don't tell me we're too different." That was what she liked about him... or so she'd said.

"Fine, I won't," Valerie said, her arms crossing under her chest. "I'm not in love with you. I thought maybe once, but I was wrong. You're not my type and you're not worth hurting my family over. We're over, Calvin. Please, just... get used to it and stop talking to me." Despite her furious posture, there was a brief softness in her hesitation. Cal didn't dare believe it meant anything.

"Fine," he blurted out. "If that's what you want. But I'd like to know what you plan to do about our kid?" That much he needed to know. He was torn between half-hoping the rumors were just that and that they weren't true. If they were, he didn't have to do anything for the girl he had been so wrong about. She'd lied about loving him! What else had she hidden from him?

Valerie turned, averting her eyes. "There's no baby," she said softly as she started to move away. "I lost it."

Chapter Five

"The capitol of North Dakota is..."

"Valerie."

"Try again, genius."

Cal looked across the blur of geography notes in front of him at Reid, who looked more concerned than irritated. Whoops. "Sorry. What was the question?"

Reid put his notes down and leaned against the worn kitchen table. “You know it’s the end of the world or something when I’m doing better at studying than you are. You want a drink?”

“I might think better,” Cal nodded, aware of the irony. How was he supposed to focus on trivial facts? His mind was a muddled whirl of guilt and betrayal, but he wasn’t even sure how he was supposed to feel right now. Losing a child was a horrible thing, but what about if it was a child no one was sure they wanted? He had barely had time to get used to the idea before it was ripped away. Reality was fickle.

Reid stood and went to the pantry and pulled out one of his homebrewed beers and two dented metal cups. “Don’t you push yourself too hard. Today was rough, having all that dumped on you.” He set the cup down in front of Cal with a sharp clink.

“But... what if her father just made her say it?” Cal asked as he picked it up. The question had bugged him all day. He believed the miscarriage, a lie there would be too obvious in months.

Reid’s brow furrowed over. “Don’t kid yourself, Cal,” he replied with unexpected sharpness. “Valerie ain’t a bad girl but she never was no angel neither. I’m pretty sure she meant every word of it, and she ain’t stood up for you once yet has she?”

Cal hadn’t seen Reid look so serious since his mother died. “Well no.” As far as he could tell, Valerie had no intention of defying her father.

“Good,” Reid sat down again. “At least you ain’t del... delu... in denial.”

“Delusional,” Cal said, and he wasn’t entirely sure he wasn’t, or at least going a little crazy. He should hate Valerie right now, right? Or pity her, or... something. He was angry, and he felt betrayed, but he couldn’t call it hate.

If he didn’t want to storm down her father’s door and run off with her, had it ever really been *love*? Old hero stories didn’t cover what to do if the woman didn’t want to be rescued. Cal tilted the cup back and drained it quickly. “You’re right. I can’t win this if keep hoping there’s a chance with her.” A woman’s word wasn’t worth as much as he’d thought, or at least, one woman’s word. “I’ve got to look out for me first.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to have to visit you in prison,” Reid agreed.

The word sent a shudder down Cal’s spine. “You won’t,” he promised, gathering his notes. “I should get home. No use pissing off my old man.” Melvin wouldn’t let Cal go over to Reid’s house to study if he thought it might cause problems.

“I’ll meet you at your place in the morning,” Reid said.

Cal stood. “See you then.”

* * *

Halfway back to his house, Cal got that niggling feeling in the back of his mind that made him suspicious that he was being followed. Picking up his pace just slightly, he swung a quick right into the nearest side street... and gasped as a hand grasped his collar and dragged him further into the lane. “Hey, Fisher, I’ve been meaning to finish that talk with you.”

“Oh, really, Andy?” Cal jerked backwards, getting his shirt free of Andy’s grasp. “You

didn't have to go through all this trouble, you know."

Andy's scowl deepened. "Shut up. I told you not to talk to Valerie again, but you didn't follow orders, did you?"

"Maybe that's cause I don't take orders," Cal pointed out. Several figures resolved themselves slowly in the shadows as his eyes adjusted, five or six guys he thought without being able to see directly behind him. Cal was surrounded.

"Right. You're not smart enough," Andy replied. A couple of his cronies chuckled in the shadows.

"I'm not rising to the bait." Cal fought to keep his tone even, while his temper raged inside like a kicked dog on a chain. On top of everything else, Andy wanted to pick a fight now, and he wasn't even man enough to do it one on one.

"Oh right... *rising* is saved for other guys' girls."

Cal's temple twitched. "She's never been yours."

Andy's crossed arms tightened. "See, that's what I'm trying to figure out. I have her Daddy's approval. You don't. I have the family connections. You don't. I have money." He snorted derisively. "Why, in a weak moment, Valerie chose you is beyond me."

"Like most things," Cal quipped. A weak moment, was Andy aware of how long Cal and Valerie had gone together?

"You don't get it. I want to have a serious conversation here!" Andy snapped.

"I got that from the brute squad." It was a matter of when Cal got beat down, not if, he realized. There was something oddly exhilarating in that surety. Why hold back if anything he

said was going to get him pounded anyway?

Andy's eyes narrowed. "Are you calling me a coward?"

Cal shrugged. "I'm not the guy who needs backup." Standing as close as they were, Cal saw Andy's confidence slip, just for a moment. *So maybe you're not as in control as you think you are.*

Surprise became disgust. Andy took a step back as if to turn away. "That's what you think."

The eruption of excruciating pain in his nose made Cal stagger back a step. *Where the hell did that come from?* His hands blocked the next instinctively, and Cal let the kicked dog loose. "Bastard!" He punched back, his fist connecting with something that yielded with a crunching pop. Cal hoped it was Andy's nose. Half-blinded by throbbing agony, he could see nothing in the dim light.

Dirt scuffling under feet was his only warning before a blow connected from behind, sending Cal staggering forward. His swing at Andy missed. Another blow landed solidly in Cal's ribs. He spun. His fists connected with someone fleshy. Cal swung again.

A second punch to the face from a particularly burly set of knuckles and Cal felt something wet on his upper lip. The metallic smell of blood worked through his burning nostrils. "You really are a coward, Andy," Cal growled as he tried to find his enemy in the dark, but they had him surrounded now. "Letting your pals do your fighting... for you," he coughed and barely avoided another punch. He'd bet those fists belonged to Paul Hines.

The next one landed anyway. A rib cracked. His shoulders were white-hot agony. The pounding made it impossible to tell where to strike. Surrounded, he couldn't block them all.

“Hardly,” Andy’s voice was distant now, well away from the circle that pressed in on Cal. “It’s called delegating. Look it up.”

“Get... get back here!” Cal snarled. It was Andy he wanted to beat purple and bloody!

“Can’t do that,” Andy commented above the thud and grunt of fists and boys. “I have plans for tomorrow.”

Cal knew he was gone when the beating picked up. None of his assailants said a word except to laugh or jeer –or cuss when Cal connected with someone’s teeth or elbowed them in the gut. He couldn’t stop. He wasn’t sure how many of the guys he was actually fighting, though he knew who they were. The sons of mine workers, either their fathers had supervisory positions or they were kids who sided with Andy to keep their family on the good side of Kline and Johnson. They all worked in the mines.

Fear rose up in his throat. What if they killed him? With a renewed rush of energy, Cal laid into any arm, leg, stomach, face, or crotch he could get his fists or feet against. *Survive, survive* his blood pumped in rhythm.

“That’s enough,” Cal heard someone –Jerry White probably– grunt soon after as he staggered, gasped for air, and bounced off someone before hitting his knees in the dirt. Lungs screamed for air. Dizzy-light in the head, the world seemed disconnected. “Leave him.”

Afraid of murder charges you pikers? Cal braced on hands and knees and kept his mouth shut. Fear fled. Rage fled. When the adrenaline left him, he collapsed in the dirt, vomited, and lay still as the world spun around him in the dark. *Of course not*, he changed his mind. *That’d be the easy way out of this case.*

* * *

Eventually, Cal felt the urgency to move, even without much inclination. As the world settled once more underneath him, he staggered upright and made the stiff, agonizing walk home.

Cal had no illusions about his parents not finding out about the fight. The hot swelling lump on his cheek had to be bruising. His nose felt cracked. At least the blood had stopped running. Tenderized beef was in better condition than the rest of him.

Cal slipped inside quietly but made no attempt to sneak. He turned the sink on little more than a trickle and soaked a dish towel under the icy stream before gently holding it to his face. Being dead right now would definitely have been getting off easy.

There was a click, then footsteps on the stairs. Cal moved the cloth away in time to see his father, in blue flannel pajamas, glaring irritably in the diffuse light from the stairs that made a golden streak across the dark kitchen. “What took you so long? I have a–” Melvin pulled up with a start, squinted at him, then stepped back in shock. “What happened?”

What answer do you want, old man? That I fell down some stairs? I staggered drunk down a mineshaft? Why not just tell him straight out? Cal was already in for it tomorrow. “A few upstanding youths beat me up. Happy?”

Frown lines formed in his father's face. “Why would I be?”

“To prove I’m as worthless as you're always telling me I am.” Cal turned back to the sink to avoid his father's expression as much as to finish cleaning himself off. An involuntary hiss escaped his lips as the cloth touched his skin again.

"Bullshit."

Cal almost dropped the wet towel. "What?"

Melvin turned away for a moment and went to the freezer. He proceeded to pull out a chunk of ice and wrap it in another hand towel. "You're an arrogant, irresponsible, brat, but you're not worthless."

It was the strangest compliment Cal had ever gotten, if it was one. "Thanks. I think."

"Put this on your face," his father dropped the towel covered ice in his hand. "You look like the losing end of a pie eating contest."

Cal snorted, but did as instructed. For a moment the pain flared, burned, and then it began to numb. "Cherry or blackberry?"

"Humble."

Was that... a joke? Cal stared at his father for a moment, but Melvin's expression gave away nothing. Melvin Fischer was not a joking man, and yet... "I've got to give you that one," he finally admitted. It felt awkward, conversing without the usual shouting or condemnation. Icy rivulets dripped down his face. His nose throbbed to his heartbeat.

"So who did it?"

"Who do you think?" Cal returned. "Andy Johnson and his mining buddies."

"Did you report it?"

"Looking like this?" Cal asked incredulously. "Don't be stupid. I'd get arrested again just for looking like trouble."

Melvin rested against the kitchen table, his expression contemplative. "So you're just going to let it go without getting even."

"Sure am." Cal refrained from nodding. It hurt his face. "I've got enough trouble. Besides, I earned it." He suffered the pain to grin. Every bruise, every crack, they weren't humiliations. They were badges of honor. Looked at a certain way, he hadn't really lost that fight. Cal hadn't thrown the first punch, though he fought to the last. He had damaged Andy's pride and hopefully his face. He would not go about looking ashamed, but proud. He was bloodied, not beaten. "It was worth it."

"I heard Bernard's daughter was back in school today."

Cal wished he understood what his father was trying to get at. Was he hunting for information? "She was."

"Did you speak with her?"

"...Briefly."

"What did you discuss?"

"Can't a guy have privacy?" Cal snapped, lowering the ice packet despite the pain. "Fine, you want to know? It's over between us and she lost the baby, all too damned late to avoid this mess." If she had miscarried sooner, none of it would ever have come out and he wouldn't be staring at bars every time he closed his eyes.

His father's eyes were like searchlights, hunting for truth instead of ships. He seemed to find it. "Then I'll see you for work in the morning." He stood up away from the table and headed towards the stairs.

That was it? No lecture, no condemning tirades against the Klines and Andersons? He hadn't even said 'I told you so.' It was probably best to just let it go and not question his good fortune.

Except that his father wanted him at work in the morning. "Like this?" Any customer looking into his face tomorrow would probably lose their appetite. It was a good thing Cal only had to help stock shelves before school. The store opened about the time he left the house.

Melvin vanished around the corner on the landing. "Wear a clean shirt. That one needs bleaching." The light went out upstairs.

Cal finished cleaning up and took the ice pack with him to bed. Had that entire conversation been meant as comfort or a lecture? It fit neither based on family historical precedence. *I'm never going to understand you, old man.*

Chapter Six

It took every shred of stubborn pride in Cal's body to get out of bed and get ready the next morning. The ice pack had lessened the worst of the swelling on his face, and other than a black eye and the puffy bruising of his nose, Cal passed for reasonably presentable. Stiff muscles and deep bruising on his ribs was more immediately uncomfortable as he dressed early and headed downstairs. He stocked the shelves as efficiently as possible before washing up for school.

It was tempting to go back to bed, but Cal changed into good tan pants and a light green flannel shirt instead. He felt like last week's meat special, but he wasn't going to give Andy and his buddies the satisfaction of imagining Cal suffering at home. They would probably brag about the whole thing, but claim he'd attacked them. After all, rubbing his reputation in the mud seemed to be the new town sport.

Cal put on his suspenders and pulled on his socks and shoes again before going back

downstairs. The table already held bacon and biscuits with apple butter, the butter was a rare indulgence these days. Obviously, his mother had been warned that he might not be feeling well. He took a good long sniff, and immediately wished he hadn't when his stomach turned over with nausea instead of pleasure.

Violet's worried expression could have told him she'd been warned. His mother's eyes seemed to expand in surprise anyway when she looked at his face. "Oh, Calvin! Sit down and have some breakfast." She pulled out a chair.

"I can't," Cal apologized. "I'll be late for school."

"You sure you're all right to go like that?" Violet replied, disbelieving. "You look green."

"I'll take a biscuit," Cal promised. It was easier than telling his mother her cooking made him feel ill. She'd be convinced he was too bad off to go anywhere. He could always give it to someone else. There were always hungry kids at school these days.

Violet looked resigned. "Your father didn't sit to breakfast either. All right," she stretched up and kissed his cheek. "If you're going, don't be late."

Cal took a biscuit, grabbed his canvas bag, and left the house. Rain had moved in overnight, and while it wasn't falling, the damp wind felt soothing against his battered face when he paused on the porch.

"What the hell happened to you?"

Cal looked down at Reid's horrified expression. "I took a wrong turn on the way home. Ran into a few fists."

“Shit, I’m sorry! Man, I should of walked you home.” Reid apologized.

“I’m not a little girl,” Cal said, heading towards school.

Reid fell into step behind him. “Yeah, but I should have known someone would try something dirty. With Andy’s old man running things up at the coal camp half the time so Kline don’t have to live up there all week it’s no wonder he thinks he just gets Valerie too.”

If not for the animosity of regular townsfolk towards the coal company, Cal was sure more of them would be giving him a hard time. It was a strange thing to feel grateful for. “Well I’m not exactly in the way anymore,” Cal pointed out, trying not to sound bitter. He wasn’t going to show weakness in front of anyone, especially not Andy. He might not have any claim to Valerie, but that didn’t mean he was going to lie down in the dirt!

He and Reid arrived at the school before the bell. Most of the students were still milling about outside. Cal had to make himself not look straight at Valerie. She looked pale, but it only made her prettier, like a marble carving he saw once in a National Geographic. The marble woman hadn’t smiled either. “Where’s Andy?” he asked loudly.

An unnatural quiet fell. Finally, Paul Hines stepped forward. His beefy hands were stuffed in his pockets. “He’s not here,” he commented gruffly. “He ah... said he had a sore shoulder after working the mines yesterday. A rock fell.”

Of all the pathetic, transparent excuses, Cal shook his head. Possible as it was, the idea of Andy working the mine himself was laughable. Why bother to hide his disbelief? “That’s too bad. I wanted to thank him for last night’s conversation.”

Cal kept his gaze evenly leveled at the larger man’s eyes. He had already been beaten half to death. He couldn’t see any reason to be afraid of the guy in broad daylight, or any of the

others he could see in the crowd with telltale signs, a bruise here, a too-quickly averted eye there.

He might have won that fight after all. The eye-ball tennis match ended abruptly. Cal turned and spotted Andy, a thick white bandage over his forehead, entering the school yard.

Cal couldn't resist. "I thought the rock hit your shoulder."

Andy glared at him, momentarily confused. Then his expression darkened as he shot a glance at Paul. Whatever story of woe he'd planned would have to be rewritten. "No, it was my forehead. It was dark. I'm sure Paul just couldn't see clearly."

"No one else either?" Cal asked, feigning surprise. "Give it up, Andy. What's under that bandage anyway, a scratch? I thought you were delegating that kind of thing to your pals." *Yeah, that's right. I'm calling you a coward and a liar. What are you going to do about it?*

It would have been immensely satisfying if Andy had popped right there on the spot, but he had too much experience in hiding his feelings. His face flushed briefly purple, then Andy regained control and forced a smile back at Cal. He opened his mouth to speak just as the class bell began to clang above them.

"It's all right, I understand," Cal chuckled as he turned to head inside. "Some things a man has to do for himself."

In the swarm of chattering children any reply Andy might have had was lost. Cal went inside with everyone else and going into the high school age room, taking his seat as Mrs. Engles called the class to order. Beside him on the next row over, Reid gave him a thumbs-up behind his desk.

Margie smiled as she moved passed him to her desk, two rows up. "Well said," she whispered.

A congratulatory slap of a hand on his shoulder came from Josh Brigham, the carpenter's son who sat directly behind him. "It's about time someone took him down a peg."

"All right, everyone, settle down," Mrs. Engles sighed. She looked around the room, a puzzled expression behind her thick-rimmed glasses as she caught sight of Andy, and probably his friends. They were a motley group this morning, and made up nearly half the students. She blanched when she saw Cal. After a long few seconds, she tore her eyes away. "Everyone get out your English textbooks and turn to page seventy-three. I want you to do the second writing exercise."

Cal pulled out a pencil and paper as he flipped open the book. The headache, the cracked ribs, the feel of eyes boring into him from behind, it was all absolutely worth it.

* * *

A grocery store was a surprisingly dangerous place for a busted nose. Cal figured out quickly Saturday morning that cleaning off anything below natural eye-level was a recipe for disaster. He smacked his face on shelves or counter edges three times in the course of the first two hours of work, and conditions did not improve. *Maybe my depth perception is messed up.*

Sweeping was safe. Scrubbing the floors was not. Wiping glass hurt only muscles sore from being pummeled. Stocking shelves guaranteed shocking jolts or bumping his entire head into the hard wood.

The coal dust and dirt was particularly thick that morning, thanks to the return Friday evening of many of the men who lived the week up the mountain in the coal camp. Cal got up and down, emptying and refilling the water bucket, scrubbing in the vain attempt to keep the

place as clean as his mother's reputation. The brush scratched roughly across the rough-sanded wood floor.

The radio behind the check-out counter was Cal's only companion as he worked, and he liked it that way. When his father wasn't there to dictate what was playing Cal picked jazz or swing, turned down low, like now, as Duke Ellington bopped through the produce. They said music helped plants grow. Cal wondered if he could make a case for it keeping vegetables fresh longer. It was amazing the things people would believe.

Cal was down in the back aisle near boxed goods when the door bell jingled, and at least two pairs of heeled shoes clicked on the floor. *Midtown women in for the weekend sales.* A glance around the corner confirmed his guess. Two women stood just inside the door wearing rayon dresses, one gray the other light blue, too stylish to be middle aged, too comfortable to be single. It was too bad, given the figure on the brunette. Cal remembered Grace before she had finished school and become Mrs. Evans. The other woman, Maureen Walker, was her older cousin.

"Good morning, ladies," his father's voice carried as he came into the front of the store. "What can I help you with this morning?"

"I need a half of a pound of that imported Swiss cheese you had last week, and a leg of mutton," Mrs. Walker replied in her snooty alto. "That is, if you have mutton."

"Of course, Mrs. Walker." Heavier steps moved across the floor, Cal's father heading for the refrigerator. *She must be planning Sunday dinner,* Cal thought. Or maybe the Walkers were having a dinner party. He couldn't imagine wasting money these days on mutton and imported cheese without someone important coming over.

As his old man vanished into the back, Cal heard cans and jars clunking into the hand-held baskets the store provided.

"Have you seen the Fisher boy lately, Grace?" Mrs. Walker asked.

Cal froze mid-stroke of the brush.

"No, but I heard," said Grace.

"I did yesterday. He looked hideous." She chuckled. "It's hard to feel sorry for him though, after what he's done."

"You think it's true?" Grace sounded stunned. "You sure Mr. Kline ain't exaggerating? You know what it's like at that age."

"They arrested him. From what Bill said last night, the trial's a sure thing for the state," Maureen replied matter-of-factly. "He saw that state lawyer leaving the Klines' last night on his way home."

Now there was news. The prosecuting attorney would, of course, have talked to the Klines, but he'd stayed for dinner? Cal swallowed and stayed silent.

"Well he'd have to talk to them, wouldn't he?" Grace asked reasonably.

"Probably wanted to ask Miss Valerie about what Calvin did to her," Mrs. Walker agreed in low tones.

"If it's true," Grace objected.

"Oh please, Grace," Mrs. Walker snorted "It's so obviously-"

"Calvin!" Melvin called from the back. "Get back here and organize these shelves!"

The two women went momentarily silent. Bracing for a reaction, Cal stood up. Looking over the shoulder-high shelves of produce, he nodded briskly. He had nothing else to say to the

woman who believed he was guilty. He smiled warmly at Grace. “Good morning, Mrs. Evans.” Then he picked up his bucket and followed directions.

“Well I never,” he heard Maureen Walker huff as soon as he was out of sight.

Grace said nothing in response. “Oh look, Maureen! They have strawberries early this year.”

Someday he was going to properly thank that woman. Cal appreciated the reminder that not everyone in town sided with the money.

“Something wrong?” His father asked.

Cal shook his head. “Just feeling sore this morning.”

Thankfully, Melvin seemed to take the comment at face value. He continued into the front of the store. “Here you are, Mrs. Walker. I hope you enjoy them both. We pride ourselves on the quality of our selection.”

The shelves in question required surprisingly little attention aside from some basic straightening. It made Cal wonder if his father had interrupted the conversation on purpose to make Mrs. Walker uncomfortable.

The door bell rang again, followed by a loud “Calvin!”

He could already feel the headache that would be worse by afternoon. Why did today have to be a busy one? Cal returned to the front only to find that it wasn't a customer standing inside. “Morning, Mr. Matthison.”

“Good morning, Calvin,” Matthison smiled. Cal hoped that meant good news. “Can we talk, privately?”

Standing behind the counter, ringing up the two women's items, Melvin frowned. Cal

was suddenly grateful Mrs. Walker was there to demand his old man's attention. "Sure. Come on back." He led Matthison into the storage room. "I just heard Polanski went by Valerie's yesterday," he blurted out as soon as they were in private.

Matthison shook his head. "Nothing's a secret around here long is it?"

"Most things," Cal replied, not in the mood for chat. "So what's going on?"

Matthison pulled up an empty milk crate and motioned for Cal to do the same. "Well whichever gossip you get your news from, he or she isn't wrong. Polanski had a long talk with Kline yesterday, and last night we worked out a plea bargain that seems agreeable."

"Does that mean I'm not going to jail?" Cal interrupted, half-sitting on his milk crate.

"If Judge Taylor agrees," Matthison said, nodding. "Either way, if you agree not to force Miss Kline to get up on the stand and tell the truth, this is about the only option left."

"Well I ain't wanting our relationship talked about in sick details in front of half the town either," Cal pointed out. Hurt and angry or otherwise, he'd rather keep what was personal *personal*. "What's the deal?"

"You plead no contest to the charges, and agree to join the military and not return to Rocky Creek for at least five years," Matthison explained. "Polanski said the state will accept that in place of jail time."

Cal nearly toppled off the back of the milk crate. "What branch?" he blurted as he righted himself. So that was why Matthison had asked him about the military.

Matthison's sly grin belied his answer before he even replied. "Well the Marines were willing to take you, but then, they're known for taking fellows in deals like this."

"You're not yanking my leg?" Cal stared at him.

“A recruiter will be up from Charleston in two days to take you when the hearing’s over,” Matthison said. There was nothing joking in his expression now. “You’ll be out of here and a Marine. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

It was and it wasn’t, Cal realized. It was too good to be true, a bitter irony. He’d get the Marines, but it meant leaving without defending his honor. It galled, but it was better than worse disgrace for him, or for Valerie. It wasn’t like he should even care what the town thought, right? Stay, fight it out, maybe lose, or leave with whatever he could take hold of and make a life out of it. “It is,” he nodded. “Just not the way I wanted to get it.” The whole town would never know the truth. His father would hate him more for not fighting for his innocence.

“Well, I don’t blame you for that,” Matthison nodded, standing up again. He offered Cal a hand, which Cal shook as he rose from his crate. “This whole situation ain’t how it ought to be, but better this than fighting the coal companies.”

“Kline’s lawyer would never let me off this easy,” Cal agreed. If it hadn’t been a state offense charge, the case would be a lot nastier, and mostly for him. Not that Cal ever planned to thank Valerie’s father for charging him with rape. “What do I need to do for the hearing?”

“We’ll talk it out in detail when you get off work.” Matthison said. “But mostly it boils down to wear your best suit, be on time, and let me do the talking like last time.”

Cal smiled. “I think I can handle that.”

Chapter Seven

“You knew about this from the start didn’t you?” Melvin bellowed, thrusting his finger in Cal’s face before he began to cough. “This was... all... a plan...”

“Of course I didn’t plan this!” Cal shouted back. “You think I *wanted* all of this to happen? It was Matthison who came up with the plea bargain!”

“And you suddenly *have* to join the Marines.” His old man didn’t back down, but he lowered his voice. “How terrible for you.”

“I should have known you’d take it this way,” Cal broke eye contact first, turning away in his irritation. “You could at least be happy I’m not going to jail.”

“You’re letting Kline win!” Melvin grabbed his shirt sleeve. “And for what? To protect the man’s daughter?”

Why had Cal ever thought this conversation could go differently? He rounded on his father again long enough to yank his shirt out of his hand. “No one has any reason to be madder at Valerie than me! So why am I the only one with the decency to care about her feelings? You’d protect Mom wouldn’t you?” Cal didn’t consider it a rhetorical question either.

Offense flooded Melvin’s purple face. “Your mother and I never would have gotten into this kind of situation.”

“That’s not the point!” Cal turned back to the table he was supposed to be setting for dinner. Reid and his father should be over soon. He hoped they hurried. “Is this even about me to you? I hate how it happened as much as you do, but at least I ain’t turning tail and Kline ain’t winning! Can’t you see that?” He glanced sideways as he watched his father go from purple to red and back again, like a sunset that couldn’t quite make up its mind.

“I don’t see how he’s losing,” Melvin grumbled, dropping stiffly into his chair and coughing into his hand. “He gets rid of you, I lose my only employee. Seems like I’m the one losing on both ends.”

“Employee?” Cal knew how little his old man thought of him, but really! “Is that all I am to you?” He almost threw the last fork down next to Melvin’s plate and, finished, headed for the stairs in disgust. He had packing to do. “I guess that’s all I should have expected.”

“Don’t you walk away from me when I’m talking to you!” The last cut off in a series of coughs.

Cal didn’t turn around. “What are you gonna do? Beat me?”

Only hollow hacking followed him upstairs.

* * *

“That’s all you’re taking?” Reid asked, leaning forward and resting his arms on the back of Cal’s desk chair. The only light in the room was the splash of orange sunset across Cal’s bed.

Cal folded his last undershirt and laid it in the battered suitcase his father had dug out of a closet for him to use. “I’m not gonna need much,” he pointed out. “Not even half of this probably once I get there. They assign uniforms and all equipment and personals. Everything’s the same.”

“So much for individuality,” Reid quipped. “But that’s not the point is it?”

“Nope,” Cal agreed as he shut the case closed on the clothing that would get him to basic training and the very small number of personal items he couldn’t bear to leave behind. “Break ‘em down and build ‘em up into the men they need.” Given the mess his life had been lately, it

was probably for the best.

Reid eyed at him for a moment. "I was thinking, I ought to come with you."

"Why you want to do a fool crazy thing like that for?" Cal sputtered. "You got plans! What about Charleston? What about Margie? Everything you want is here." Reid wouldn't leave his girlfriend, would he?

Reid blinked, unfazed, like he had been expecting that response. "Who's gonna make you see sense when you get steamed cause you don't like what you're told to do?"

Cal snorted. "They call them Drill Instructors."

Reid chuckled. "Don't people get mad at them too?"

"That's the idea," Cal retorted. The whole idea of Reid coming was crazy. Sure having his best friend would be better than going alone, but it made him uncomfortable. It felt wrong. "Look, would you be offering if none of this had happened? If I was going cause I signed up like normal? Or is this because of what happened with Valerie, and her old man and all?"

Reid opened his mouth, then closed it again with an irritated scowl. "No, I guess I wouldn't," he acknowledged. "But it's not like the rest of my plans couldn't wait five years. Margie would come with me anywhere."

"Only the situation's changed," Cal insisted. "I ain't gonna let you put everything off just to waste time. Do you know the chances of them keeping us in the same unit?" Practically none as Cal understood it. "And I'd never forgive you if you got killed. You ain't the military type, Reid. Don't try to be."

Reid stared at him for a long moment before shaking his head. "You're right. I shouldn't have offered."

“I didn’t say that.” Even the offer meant a lot. No one else had ever made that much of a gesture of loyalty toward him. “I just can’t let you do it.” He couldn’t be that selfish, tempting as it was.

“Boys!” Reid’s father bellowed heartily up from Cal’s mother’s kitchen. “Dinner!” The boards of the house seemed to shiver.

“We should get down there before he shakes the house apart,” Reid grinned, standing and heading for the door.

“A serious threat,” Cal agreed, following. “If the place falls down my old man will probably find a way to blame me for it.”

* * *

“Out of respect for Miss Kline’s privacy, my client pleads no contest and accepts the proposed action to join the United States Marine Corps and to not step foot within the city limits of Rocky Creek, West Virginia for a period of five years.”

The chair under Cal felt hard and hot as he tried to look calm and put together under the gaze of Judge Taylor and the crowded courtroom. Cal had worn his Sunday best as instructed, and he had even tried to tame the tousled curls on his head into something presentable.

Taylor averted his gaze and looked at Polanski. “Does the Prosecution find this acceptable?”

“Yes, the Prosecution finds the proposed terms acceptable,” Polanski nodded.

Cal felt ill, but he forced himself to remain conscious. Passing out in the courtroom wouldn’t look good. It didn’t matter that things were going right, he felt over-warm and queasy.

Taylor looked back at Cal, then out past him to the audience behind. What were the expressions on their faces? The tension was tangible, clinging to the wooden benches and white-washed walls like gelatin. “This Court accepts Calvin Fisher’s plea and the proposed sentence. The Court also adds the further condition that Calvin Fisher must complete his school exams tomorrow morning.”

For all Cal really heard in the rush of pure relief and the thunder of whispers and shifting chairs, the Judge could have declared war with France. Cal didn’t care. He wasn’t going to jail, and as much as exams sounded like a sentence, he knew better. Even though it meant taking exams a week early, as long as he passed he’d get his diploma.

“The Defense accepts the condition,” Matthison replied.

As Cal walked out of the courtroom several minutes later, he was a free man, in a matter of speaking.

Reid and his parents arrived in the hall only moments after he and Matthison came out out of the room. Reid was grinning broadly.

Cal’s mother, teary eyed with relief, pulled him immediately into a hug. As he returned it, Cal chose to pretend not to see his father’s neutral scowl. “It’s all right, Mom.” He could think of nothing profound or really comforting to say in that moment.

“I know it is,” she sniffed. “I’m just... happy is all.”

Cal knew better, but he didn’t contradict her. “Right.” He straightened up as she let go. “It’s all over.”

“Or starting,” Reid contradicted him as they all moved toward the exit. “There’s exciting times ahead.”

The Marine waiting by the door was evidence enough of that.

“Calvin, this is Sergeant Allison,” Matthison introduced them.

The Sergeant offered a hand and Cal took it, startled by the iron firmness of the other man’s grip, though he didn’t think the man was trying to shake very hard. “Fisher, I’ll be in charge of getting your enlistment paperwork taken care of and putting you on the bus in Charleston.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Cal returned the shake as firmly as he could manage without trying to look like he was competing. “I’m looking forward to it.”

“So Matthison tells me,” Allison smiled. Cal had to wonder how old the Sergeant was, it was tough to tell when the man had almost no hair to speak of and dressed sharp in the khaki brown working uniform. He turned to Cal’s parents and nodded respectfully. “Good afternoon Mr. Fisher, Mrs. Fisher. Now don’t you worry about your boy here. He’ll make a fine Marine.” He offered Melvin his hand.

Cal’s old man looked at the hand like he’d rather shake a rattlesnake’s tail, but he took it begrudgingly. “I don’t doubt it.”

Judging from Allison’s return smile, Cal figured the Sergeant had no idea that coming out of Melvin’s mouth the comment was an insult. “I’m sure he’ll make you both very proud.” Then he turned his attention back to Cal. “So are you ready?”

Cal nodded. “My bag’s packed and ready to go back at the house.”

“I’ll pick you, and it, up tomorrow afternoon,” Allison replied.

Now that the excitement was over, the towns folk outside were heading back to their daily routines, but they were chattering excitedly. Cal noticed that the people smiling his

direction were all in quiet opposition against the Coal Company, and Kline's associates looked disgruntled.

Cal watched Kline get into his car. Valerie was nowhere in sight. Had she ever really agreed with the charge of rape? And had she ever said a word about Cal's dream to be a Marine? She knew about it, but if she had ever told her father, he couldn't see how Kline would have ever made so little of a row over it. It definitely made Cal want to go over and shove that fact up Bernard Kline's nose!

He was two steps in that direction before a hand landed on his shoulder. "I wouldn't go over there." It was Matthison.

"But I just—"

"Got extremely lucky," the attorney replied flatly. "Let it go, Calvin. You've exams tomorrow, and you're now required to leave town. Don't make things harder on the people in this town who were rooting for you."

Cal swallowed his misgivings and unanswered questions and followed the rest of the group towards the house, away from the mixed expressions on the faces of the other town's folk. It was hardly a satisfactory result for anyone hoping to see Kline brought down, or the town-boy vindicated.

Cal was grateful he had done most of his packing though. If he had to take all his exams tomorrow, it was going to be a late night of review. Studying would hopefully help take his mind off everything else.

* * *

Cal stood on the street in front of the grocery, next to Sergeant Allison's beat-up Ford. Anyone who cared to see him off stood around the vehicle. It didn't amount to much of a crowd, just his parents, Reid and Mr. Hudson, and Mr. Matthison. Cal preferred it that way. It was easier to hold himself together.

"Here's where we part," Matthison shook his hand one last time. "I hope you're happy with the outcome."

"It's what I asked for," said Cal. "I guess I'll just have to see how it turns out."

Reid tackled him next with a back-slapping hug, emotional, but not too touchy-feely. "You'd better write. I wanna hear about all the places you go."

"I'll make it to a few swing clubs," Cal promised with a half-hearted laugh. Reid might be the only guy in town who deserved to hear from him. There was no way Cal would forget. The reality of his leaving slipped inside him, and he could feel the door closing. "Tell you all about the latest music before it gets here. But you better be writing me back."

"Of course. Stay cool."

His mother burst out in real tears and clung to him much longer now that it was down to final goodbyes. "Be careful."

"I'll be perfectly safe," Cal promised, stifling the guilty confidence in his mind that he was lying. It didn't matter if America was at war officially or not. Where there was conflict, there were usually Marines. "I'll probably end up on embassy duty in some country where there's absolutely nothing interesting going on." *Or I could end up in Spain.* Given the option, Cal would rather be where he would be most useful.

"We all know better than that," Melvin shattered the moment's peaceful illusion. "Just

don't die without a damned good reason."

"Thanks." Cal let go of his mother and turned to get in the truck. Stories always had great goodbye lines. Cal didn't feel poetic enough to think of one that hadn't been used, so he left it at that. Besides, it seemed to say everything he felt, real gratitude towards a small few, and the opposite to his old man.

He got in the car, and didn't look back as Sergeant Allison put it in drive and headed back down the hill towards the main part of town, where it ran along the only truly flat area around along the banks of the creek for which it was named.

A few people watched from the porches of their wood-sided houses, and a couple of kids waved, but that was it. Then they were past the neighborhoods perched on the hills, and following the main road that wound down the mountain, a road Calvin had only been down a handful of times in his life, and usually not far.

"Pretty town for a coal town," Allison commented when it was behind them.

"Only because the camp's further up the mountain," Cal replied. Out the window, yellow asters and wild blue phlox dotted the thin strip of grass along the road before it turned into a tunnel through the dense forest.

"So you're not going to miss it."

"Not a bit," Cal replied, turning his eyes to the dirt of the road instead. The colors of the flowers bothered him. They looked too much like someone he'd be better off forgetting. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing a stray curl out of his eyes.

"Won't have to worry about that much longer," the Sergeant chuckled.

Cal turned to look at him. "What?"

Allison was grinning. “Before you get on the bus tomorrow, those golden locks are coming off. Hope you’re not too attached to them.”

“No, not really,” Cal put his hand down. He had, in the chaos of the past weeks, not given the fact much thought. Girls seemed to like his hair, but it was always a bit of a mess. Maybe he should have just chopped it off before, but Valerie would have killed him. *And just look how much heartbreak that saved me.*

“Good,” Allison replied. “Now, so you’re up to date on things, the bus will show up tomorrow after lunch...”

Cal tried to relax as he listened to the Sergeant start in on a general list of times and things to be done before Cal headed to basic training tomorrow. It was hard to concentrate though. As quick as everything had happened he’d hardly had time to think. Now he remembered a book he would have liked to bring, the name of a song that had played on the radio the other day that he wanted to see if he could find on a record somewhere, and that he had never gotten around to repainting the shutters like he promised his mother.

“Do you have questions?” the Sergeant finally asked.

“You ain’t from West Virginia,” Cal said. “Not with that voice. So where you from?”

Allison chuckled heartily. “Philadelphia.”

“And you’re here on purpose?” Cal couldn’t imagine why.

“I’ve been recruiting out of Charleston for about six months,” Allison nodded. “And yes on purpose. I like the landscape out here, and it’s a lot quieter than the city.”

“Charleston’s a city.”

The Sergeant’s amused expression made Cal feel mildly insulted. “Not a big one. If you

ask most people where Charleston is, they'll tell you it's in South Carolina.”

That wasn't really a surprise. Cal vowed silently to appear as little like a back-hills boy as possible. The town had no pride in him, nor he in it. Cal wondered if he could put everything behind him as easily as the mountains. He would probably miss Reid and Margie's wedding, whenever that happened. His mother would write, but he doubted his old man would bother to send even a word. Heck, he would probably get more sympathy from the men in town out of the mess than Cal had. *Poor Melvin Fisher, losing face in front of his political rival because of his boy.* He could almost hear the town gossips in his mind, clucking like hens in a roost.

And Valerie... Well, he couldn't do anything about her now. Cal's throat constricted. He swallowed hard. “Hey... there a good bar near where we're staying?”

The look on Allison's face spoke plainly that it wasn't an unexpected question. “Yeah. Just a couple of blocks. They've got a pretty good selection of beer and liquor.”

Near the Marine recruitment office, Cal bet they did good business too. “Great.”

Cal looked up from the road, hoping to see something around a corner that would signify the increasing distance. The rolling mountains had leafed out while he was too occupied to notice, and now they looked, he thought, like giant mounds of fresh broccoli, the way it looked from kids-eye level in the store.

Sulfur scented broccoli, five years be hanged, Cal didn't really care if he ever came back to West Virginia, forget Rocky Creek.

* * *

It looks like I did it... it looks like I didn't want to fight Kline and took the coward's way out. For all Cal could feel sure, maybe he had. Funny how a little whiskey put the universe in perspective. *Even if they ain't sure of it now, half the town will probably be talked into believing it.* It was a good thing he wasn't planning on coming back.

Amber droplets clung to the sides of the glass that sat on the wooden bar in front of him. "Bartender, more bourbon."

No one asked, but the looks he had gotten all evening said they same thing. They were all sure his misery had to do with a girl. It was there in the mix of sympathy and cynicism. Thankfully, no one asked. They just let him drink. Barely eighteen counted. *My misery don't matter to them.* After the constant attention it was almost a relief.

Except that what they didn't know, was the same things no one else knew. Cal's mind was stuffed with a whirl of unpleasant questions. Did Valerie even understand why Cal hadn't let the case go to court? Would she ever even know he had done it to protect her? Kline wouldn't tell her and, as far as Cal could tell, Valerie hadn't done anything to protect *him*.

Was his honor misplaced?

The glass was refilled, and Cal embraced the burning comfort it brought. *She gets the sympathy of being a victim. If it's all my fault, and there ain't no kid... she's still a pretty, rich girl.* Valerie could still find a good marriage and move on.

As the glass and his mood fell lower, Cal's thoughts descended with them. Kline could use Cal's possible guilt, his being sentenced to leave, against Cal's friends and his family. What would this do to Reid's reputation? What would they say about his mother who had raised him? His old man probably didn't have a shot at mayor now.

Why the heck didn't I think of any of this sooner? Cal hadn't thought he could feel lower. Sure he'd made it out of town, he was joining the Marines, but he'd left a real mess in his wake. *Maybe I'm not as good a guy as I thought I was.*

Chapter 8

1939

The day the ocean liner put into port at Le Havre was sunny and windy above decks, but Cal packed his bag and headed up to watch the French shore grow closer. He had missed most of it during the night and he was looking forward to getting back on dry land, however foreign, and getting to Paris. The days on the ship had been long. He had spent most of them reading the latest National Geographic and the papers he had picked up in port in Baltimore. Now, he was here for his first duty posting as a Marine officer: the American Embassy in Paris.

Cal's orders said a car from the embassy would meet him at the port, but finding the car proved harder than Cal had expected. After clearing the authorities and providing the appropriate paperwork, he moved out of the building and onto the busy street, where people pressed in on each other and shouted in a din that was both familiar and utterly strange at once.

Cal shouldered his bag squarely and pushed his way through the crowds towards the row of vehicles along the road. Most appeared to be taxis. The signs were, of course, in French, and it suddenly struck Cal that he still didn't understand at least half of them. "*Excusez-moi,*" he spoke to one lady. "*Ou est le... le parking pour l'embassie?*" He really had no idea what he was looking for or even what type of vehicle. He couldn't even guess, given he didn't know what half the French cars were called! *I bet Reid knows.* While his friend was in the beer business now, he still enjoyed mechanics.

The woman shook her head. “*Je ne sais pas.*”

“*Merci.*” Cal sighed and kept pushing, hoping that whoever was looking for him would find him first. He was wearing his class-Bs, so he should be recognizable.

“Second Lieutenant Fisher? Over here!”

Cal stopped and turned his head around, looking for whoever had just shouted out in English. Finally he saw another man in Marine uniform, standing next to a nice looking black vehicle Cal didn’t recognize. Cal turned and made his way over. “Thank goodness! Is it always this chaotic?”

The dark-haired Marine grinned and held out his hand. “Only when the ships come in. First Lieutenant James Long.”

“In other words, always,” Cal smiled back as he clasped the other man’s hand firmly.

“Exactly.”

They tossed Cal’s bags in the back and climbed into the car. Cal was just glad he wasn’t driving as Long pulled them slowly out into the chaos of port traffic. Compared to early-morning Baltimore’s empty streets, late-morning Le Havre was a milling press of bodies. If there was a pattern to people’s movements, Cal couldn’t see it. Not yet. “How long is the drive to Paris?”

“A few hours,” Long replied. “Get comfortable.”

Cal looked at his knees, not *quite* in his face in the small French vehicle. “You have to be kidding me.”

* * *

Paris was crazier than Le Havre, an incomprehensible swarm that Cal couldn't imagine how he would ever navigate on foot. The narrow, winding streets in parts looked choked to the point where the houses themselves might suffocate as they rose several stories above the streets, then seemed to lean towards each other for support. Then they opened on wide boulevards lined by monoliths of granite that towered stories above the street. These buildings wore the grandeur of Paris' history in their every crevice and carving.

Cal recognized inspirations for parts of D.C. in those structures, in the columns and styles of doorways and windows. Only here, time was worn, draped across the entire city like a cape, nearly tangible with the weight of it.

"How do you navigate around here?" Cal asked around the cigarette in his mouth. He tried not to appear wide-eyed at it all as he took in everything and tried to read the signs along the streets.

"Practice," Long grinned as he wove through streets, somehow managing not to hit any of the vehicles, bicycles, and pedestrians that seemed to move in and out of the way without any warning. "Can you drive?"

"Decently," Cal replied. At least, he'd learned how in Virginia, but he'd never had to tackle city traffic.

"Good. Driving is part of the job."

The rest of 'the job' was explained at some length by a Major Travis Everett after Cal was safely back on solid ground and inside the Embassy building, the Chancery, an elegant, white stone building on the Place de la Concorde.

"Driving, security details in the building and when the Ambassador is in meetings and

official functions,” Everett said as he finished. He handed Cal a half sheet of paper. “This is your work schedule for the first week. We’ll see how you do.”

“Yes, Sir.” Cal glanced down at the scrawled information in his hand. It looked like he would be primarily assigned to the Chancery perimeter and interior. He supposed that the Chancery was the lowest-risk area since it was the easiest to control, just the place for a new officer to get used to his duties as both security detail and giving proper orders to the enlisted Marines assigned to most of the actual door details themselves.

“Any questions, Second Lieutenant?”

“No, Sir.”

“Good.” Everett looked pleased. At least, Cal thought he was pleased. The man hadn’t smiled yet. “I’ll introduce you to your subordinates and you can get right to work.”

No “go ahead and get settled,” no “have a look around.” Nope, it was get to work and do your job, it was oddly reassuring that in an unfamiliar city, Marines and duty remained the same. Cal just hoped he would have enough time off-duty to really get to know the area and the locals. What was the good of being stationed in Paris if he didn’t get to experience the lifestyle?

* * *

The interior of the Église de la Madeleine was the most intricate work of art Cal had seen yet. The fluted, gilded columns and the repeating gold-and-blue decorated squares that lined the undersides of the ceiling arches glowed in the daylight. Layers of intricate paint-and-gilt designs lined the walls and circled up the domes in the ceiling. They weren’t painted on flat surfaces entirely either, he noticed, but carved designs in swirling leaves in some places and geometric protrusions in others, mostly cubes and small ledges.

Yet all that decoration did not diminish the sense of open space that made the stone ceiling seem suspended as light as the air itself. There was no sense of weight at all. Cal wandered underneath the marvel, and it wasn't even the biggest such church in Paris! He had a feeling Notre Dame would feel like he was being swallowed. Cal was grateful there were very few people in the nave at the moment. It was hard not to gawk at the amount of marble and gold in just one building. The altar at the front was made of intricately carved grey-white marble with towering angels and even more gilded detailing.

And Napoleon had this whole thing commissioned in honor of his military glory. Cal doubted it was a generous or magnanimous act towards the church. What he knew of the man from military history suggested it was much more likely a symbol of the man's own pride, no matter what form it came in.

When Cal emerged back out into the sunlight and faced the street lined with thick-leaved summer trees and tall white buildings, and crammed full of people, he felt as if the world had resumed more normal proportions.

Cal strolled down the Rue Royale towards the Seine, thinking that his first day flying solo in Paris was going pretty well. He had only gotten lost once, and while the Arc de Triomphe had been impressive, he felt the Champs-Élysées would be more interesting when he had enough money to actually spend in the shops and knew enough French to make a transaction without feeling like a fool.

The locals, while not friendly, were respectful enough. Cal would have to thank Long for the tip about wearing his uniform instead of trying to blend in.

“Your French is terrible,” Long had warned him. “They’ll peg you for American immediately, and they respect our military men more than our tourists.”

Most of the people he had addressed had been more understanding of his stilted and lacking vocabulary when he apologized and said he had just been assigned. Simply not being arrogant and staying respectful went a long way with them. Cal already felt foreign enough without trying to alienate the locals.

Cal’s stomach began to grumble as he carefully skirted the edge of the Place de la Concorde, avoiding the crazy traffic. It had been quite a while since he breakfasted on croissants near the Arc. He had never seen them so delicate before, light and soft and decadent in smooth sweet cream butter.

It was definitely time for lunch. Cal had heard there were plenty of stalls selling all sorts of things along the quais by the Seine, and the already much-folded map he had bought got him there without getting lost again. He walked along the river eastward, grateful he had decided not to attempt the Louvre today when he noticed the crowds going in and out.

There was no reason to hurry, and indeed none of the French seemed to be. Cal found the people as interesting to watch as the scenery. While he knew there had to be working folk in Paris, and plenty of poor, here they were all dressed well, particularly the ladies, who smelled really good anytime they strolled by, any number of perfumes wafting behind them like chiffon scarves.

Despite the number of people going places, there was little hurry. Men in business attire and plenty in more casual clothes sat at cafés or even on the benches or grass along the stone-shored river, reading the paper, books, or having animated conversations as if they had not been

at work before and would not have to be back in the near future. They would get there, he was sure, but they would not worry about it in the time between.

By the time Cal made it down to Pont Neuf, he had managed to pick up another amazing loaf of bread. It was thicker than the croissants, but so smooth, not a bit grainy in the least and soft in the center when the crust crackled open. A liter of white wine and something called *friture* finished off his impromptu meal. The latter he was assured by the vendor were a local dish, small fried fish that were usually caught right out of the Seine.

Cal hadn't thought much of the fishermen down by the river until then. He settled down on the edge of a bench under an elm tree to watch them and eat his meal.

"Watch it, chap."

"Sorry," Cal apologized before he realized that the man on the other end of the bench had spoken in English. "I didn't see you."

The man on the other end was probably not much older than Cal, with an easy smile, ruffled brown hair, and a pad of paper in hand and pencils and pastels cluttered his lap. "Well now you do. So chew without wiggling the bench if you'd be so kind," he commented. He looked forward again, coloring madly as he glanced between the scene in front of him and the paper on which he drew.

Cal devoured the bread and most of the little fried fish before he felt companionable enough to try conversation. It was a relief to speak with someone who didn't immediately start speaking very rapid French. "Drawing something on the island?" he asked curiously.

The artist shook his head. "You see that couple there?"

Cal glanced at the other bench just a few yards away. A man and a woman sat together,

heads close, speaking animatedly but low, and far too rapidly for Cal to even try and make out what they were saying. “I see them.”

“They have been there for nearly an hour now, talking just as intimately as they are now. Now, what do you see?”

Besides a couple having a conversation? Cal took a more critical approach, sizing them up as he might a military opponent, looking for details. “Well, she’s done up fashionably like almost all the other women I’ve seen in this part of town.”

“And he looks like you’re average working stiff, doesn’t he?”

Now that the artist mentioned it, he did. Cal nodded. “Lovers?”

“Perhaps. It could be a classic tale of star-crossed lovers, doomed for all time by their class difference, or perhaps a chance meeting today and he’s making an apparently successful attempt at winning her attention. There is certainly heat there.”

The man had both of the woman’s hands clasped in his, naked desire plain in his eyes.

Cal wondered if he had looked like that when he first secretly confessed his feelings to Valerie. He twitched and took a drink of his wine. “Definitely. What will you do if they get up and walk away?”

“I have most of the details of the people already,” the artist replied. “I can work the scenery even after the subject has departed.”

“Can I see?”

“When I’ve finished.”

Cal finished his fish and wine before the couple finally stood and walked off, arm in arm. “Lucky bastard,” he muttered.

“Indeed,” his companion laughed as he quickly finished up. “A successful endeavor whatever the story behind it. What do you think?” He held up the drawing.

Cal found himself looking at a vividly colored, slightly impressionist work that seemed to catch the feel of what Cal had just witnessed. “It’s good. Are you a professional?” It certainly looked like something he could see hanging in someone’s house. He wasn’t sure about art museums.

“Near enough,” the other man replied. “I’m a student at the University. I could wish my professors were so complimentary.”

“They don’t like it?”

“They have a preference for more classical styles.”

Cal thought of the classical paintings on the walls of the churches and all the grandiose architecture of the palaces and half of the other buildings in Paris. “This seems more approachable to me. I’d rather hang something like that in my place than some of those older paintings, no matter how valuable they are.”

“Well, thank you.” The artist held out his hand. “Felix Hardin, pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Cal was rewarded with a hearty shake as he took the offered hand and introduced himself in return.

“So you would be one of the chaps up the Embassy then.” Felix began to put the clutter in his lap back in order. “I thought as much. Well, as you’re new, is there anything I can do to be of service? Any questions you might need answered?”

“Yes, actually,” Cal said. “Do you know where I can find books and magazines in English?” There had been very few of those in the book-sellers carts so far.

Felix chuckled. “I recommend Shakespeare and Company. It’s on the Ile de la Cité.” He gestured to the island on the river in front of them. “It is both a bookstore and a lending library.”

“You go there often.”

“It is also the closest to the University.” Felix grinned. “But I think you will find it has the best selection of English reading material in the city.”

The most affordable as well. The idea of a lending library in the city with books he could actually read was a fortunate discovery. “Can you give me directions?”

“If you promise to tell my fellow students how much you like my work if we run into each other there sometime.”

The way he said it implied it was almost a certainty. Cal smiled. “I could be convinced.”

Chapter Nine

It was the soothing lure of jazz music wafting out into the street that pulled Cal into the café on the Boulevard du Montparnasse just as the sun was going down. The front of the place read *La Closerie des Lilas*.

It was clean and dark despite decent lighting, all mahogany stained hardwoods, and padded leather bench seats for the tables that didn’t stand in the middle of the floor. The place had a pleasant mingling scent of tobacco, alcohol, cooking beef, and a sweet overtone of lilac.

The tables that were taken were mostly those closest to the low stage further back by the bar, where the musicians were jamming away to the audience’s enjoyment and their own pleasure. It was a small band, a piano, clarinet, saxophone, trumpet, and two violins.

Cal moved through the crowd, looking for an unoccupied seat closer to the musicians, where he could hear without straining over the sounds of the people chatting in a language he barely understood.

His ears caught syllables he recognized, spots of English in a sea of French. Few of them sounded American, but it was reassuring to hear words he understood. The words clued him in to the nature of the place, it was full of artists and writers talking about their craft. He spotted the only open seat he could find, one right by the stage.

It was at a table that was already claimed by a pretty brunette in a pleated gray skirt and a soft-green collared blouse that gathered at the bottom. Cal glanced around cautiously, but she didn't seem to be with anyone. "Excuses-moi, mademoiselle," he said. As she turned to look up at him, his mind blanked on how to phrase his question. "I ah... may I sit here?" Her green eyes betrayed amusement. "Sit down, soldier," she said in well-spoken American.

"Thank you," Cal took the offered seat with a sense of relief. "It's so nice to find someone who actually speaks English."

"You don't speak French?"

"I'm learning," said Cal. The feeling of someone looming above him made him look up sharply. It was a waiter.

"*Deux verres de Merlot, s'il vous plaît,*" the woman ordered.

The waiter nodded and moved off. On the stage, the musicians took a break between sets, and it was easier to talk.

"Thanks," said Cal. At this point, he would drink whatever she suggested. At least he had heard of Merlot.

"How did you know I was military?"

“The hair cut and the clothes.”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?”

“Nothing. They’re quite serviceable as long as you don’t care about fashion. But then, you’re a Marine. Fashion sense isn’t required.”

“How did you know I was a Marine?”

“My Uncle’s a Marine,” she continued. “I know your type.”

That explained a few things. “What’s his name?”

“General Edwards.”

A small shudder ran up Cal’s spine at the memory of critical eyes and a sharp, commanding voice that had punctuated officer training regularly. “I know him.”

“I figured,” she smiled. “So which one are you? I assume you’re assigned to the Embassy.” Their wine arrived and she picked up her glass.

“Second Lieutenant Cal Fisher at your service.” Cal returned the smile. Maybe this evening would turn out well after all. She certainly seemed friendly enough. “May I have the pleasure of your name as well as your company?”

“I’m Alice.” She took a sip. “And your lines need work.”

“Alice!” One of the musicians descended upon their table with a friendly smile. “Claire told me you were in town.” he continued in thickly accented English. “Did you come here just to hear us play?”

“Of course, Henri,” Alice beamed, tossing her arms around his neck in a friendly hug. “I wouldn’t miss it.”

Cal felt a jealous twinge as they both started babbling in French, then wondered why he felt jealous at all. Maybe it was how readily she smiled at him, and the familiarity of this French

musician with the American girl. “So.. you know each other.”

Henri and Alice looked at him, and Henri’s grin got even wider. “My apologies, *monsieur*. You should introduce me to your friend, Alice.” He offered Cal his hand to shake.

“Henri Fournier, pianist.”

Cal took the hand and shook it firmly. His question hadn’t exactly been answered.

“Henri is Claire’s brother,” Alice explained. “Claire and I went to school together.”

“Alice is like a sister to me, too,” Henri laughed, a hearty and unreserved sound. His handshake, however, was more like a vice grip. *Hurt her*, it said, *and you get hurt*.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Henri,” Alice cut in. “May I play in the next number?”

That got both their attention. “But of course, *chérie*,” Henri let go of Cal’s hand and turned away, an oddly tender expression on his face. “Your favorite?”

“Yes, please.”

“I will tell the band.” Henri straightened up and stepped back up on the stage.

It was clear that there was something Cal didn’t understand, but he had the feeling if he asked he would be butting in on some private matter. “What’s your favorite?” he asked instead.

Alice took another sip of her wine before standing. “Rhapsody in Blue.” She moved up onto the stage and took the clarinet a tall, skinny man offered her and sat down in a chair. No one had sheet music.

Well she was either unbelievably cocky, or really good. Cal took another drink and sat back to find out which. The group didn’t have an oboe, so that meant the entire woodwind opening would rely on the clarinet.

Then he knew, as the clarinet opened with that quick fluttering run that slid up into a

long, lonely wail that arched, and grew until it felt like it was one soaring curve that would rise up right through the roof, before it dropped into its saucy triple-notes and moved on.

The technical accuracy was definitely high quality, but that wasn't what caught Cal in the music. It was watching Alice as she played, the way her fingers moved precisely on the silver keys, but her expression carried itself into the music. The crying wail was internal pain, the attitude that followed seemed to tell the world to take a hike or take her on, if it dared.

Then it moved into the frenetic feel of the city, pumping and moving and Cal was lost in the sound as the rest of the band came in, the piano taking over the melody. The song wasn't about the Clarinet, but Cal found himself drawn to pick it out from amongst the other instruments. That tonal voice came and went, sometimes swallowed up and other times clear and distinct over everything that tried to shout it down.

When it was over, Cal felt like he had traveled half the distance of the world in someone else's soul.

As the clapping around them died down, Alice rejoined him, face flushed with exertion and pleasure, though otherwise looking not a hair out of place. "Well?" she asked as she sat down.

"It was great," Cal assured her.

Alice smiled and drank. "Thank you, but that's not what I meant." She eyed him expectantly.

Cal felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. "I don't play an instrument." He seriously doubted a couple of bugle lessons in his off time qualified him for something like this.

"So sing."

In public? "I haven't had enough to drink for that."

Alice waved at one of the waiters. “So have another glass, and sing something for me.”

“Like what?” Cal asked as he found his empty glass refilled right in front of him. “I don’t think anyone here wants to hear what we sang in the barracks.” Even if they didn’t understand it, half the songs he knew were probably not fit for public ears.

“Oh, pick something you like.” Alice gave a carefree little shrug.

“We can play just about anything,” Henri butted into the conversation. “Humor the lady.”

It wasn’t quite like being bullied, and yet Cal couldn’t see a way out of this without looking either cowardly or like he was insulting a woman. Did Alice want him humiliated? He couldn’t imagine why. “All right.” He drained half the wine and stood up. At least no one from the Embassy was here tonight to watch him make a fool out of himself.

“*Vous êtes plus courageux que je pensais,*” Henri said as he made room on the stage.

“What?”

Henri shook his head. “You’re brave.”

Cal nodded. Of course, bravery was why he was already sweating. Good thing it was warm enough that he probably wasn’t the only one. “What can you play?” he asked quietly.

Henri sat down at the piano. “What can you sing?”

Just about anything I’ve heard on the radio. Cal racked his mind for a moment before he hit on the perfect song. He glanced at Alice as he asked, “how about ‘The Lady is a Tramp’?”

That earned him a momentary stare, followed by another short laugh. “Brave, or foolish. Yes, we know that one.” He gestured to the front microphone. “Take your place, American.” He turned to speak to the rest of the band as Cal did as he was told.

Cal barely had time to swallow the lump in his throat and pray he remembered the words before the music started. No one was really looking at the stage at the moment. Cal hoped it

stayed that way. He took a deep breath, counted measures, and opened his mouth. “She gets too hungry, for dinner at eight...”

Apparently the American accent worked like a magnet. Dozens of pairs of eyes looked in his direction. Cal averted his eyes, stared out over their heads, and tried desperately not to look like he had never done this in his life. “She hates California, it’s cold and it’s damp.” One hand stuck in his pocket, he snapped along the rhythm with his right fingers, and kept going.

By “Won’t dish the dirt with the rest of those girls,” he began to feel steadier. They weren’t laughing, booing, or throwing things. A sideways glance at Alice told him she was watching him closely and a little surprised. *That I can sing, or that I picked this number?*

When he wrapped the song up, Cal felt like he’d done a ten mile forced march. He retreated from the stage to a scattering of applause over the conversation, and took down the rest of his wine as soon as he was safely back in his chair, waiting for the adrenaline to stop pumping.

“Not exactly a romantic choice,” Alice teased.

“Was it supposed to be?”

Alice looked down at the table, where she traced patterns in the ring of water with her finger. “No. It wasn’t. Thanks for humoring me.”

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t need my dignity.”

“What do you mean? You sing just fine.” She looked honestly surprised by his response.

“Well, thanks.” Cal’s irritation lessened. He felt a little light-headed before he realized it had been hours since lunch. “If you don’t mind, I think I’ll get something to eat.”

“You haven’t eaten?” Alice’s eyes widened. “Go ahead.”

Then the band started playing another instrumental number, and it was difficult to talk.

* * *

A meal of sausage and mashed potatoes, and the fresh lilac imbued air of the garden that gave the café its name went a long way toward improving Cal's mood. It was quieter outside, despite the city all around them. The bushes reached well above his head, and kept the rest of the world at bay.

Standing under one of the lights in the garden, Alice sniffed thoughtfully at the lilac blossoms.

"So," Cal broke the silence. "Where did you learn to play like that?"

Alice looked up. "Some friends and I got together in school and played for fun."

"You got that good just playing for fun?"

"I had years of violin lessons before that," she admitted. "My mother wanted me to take up the flute when I started high school. I talked her into clarinet instead."

Her family had to be rich. Cal couldn't imagine how they managed to cover not only two musical instruments, but the lessons to go with them. "And you didn't like the flute because it doesn't get great parts in jazz and swing music?" he hazarded a guess.

She graced him with an unexpected smile. "That's it exactly. Now, since you seem to know something about music, why *don't* you play?"

"Never had time to learn, or the money for an instrument."

"That's a shame." She paused, looking at him contemplatively as if she didn't really care if it made him uncomfortable to be considered so openly. "I've been trying to place your accent all night, but I have to admit it has me stumped."

Nice to know I'm less obvious. "West Virginia," he answered. "And you're from

Virginia, like the General.”

“Alexandria,” Alice nodded.

“So how did you go to school with a French girl?” She’d said that Claire was a schoolmate.

That earned him a funny look. “It’s a private school.”

Money and then some. “So, what’s it like?” Cal asked. “All uniforms and nuns?”

“Where did you get that idea?” Alice moved away from him along the bricks that edged the bushes. “Uniforms yes, but no nuns. It wasn’t a religious institution.”

“Then what was it?”

“You might call Madeira progressive.”

He wasn’t sure what to make of that. “How do you mean?”

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “The school believes that women are just as capable as men are of doing well, pretty much anything, no matter what career they might like to pursue after college.”

“You went to college?”

She stopped moving. “Does that bother you?”

“Well, no. I’m just surprised. There just weren’t a lot of girls going to college where I’m from.” Had he insulted her? She definitely didn’t seem stupid. “What did you study?” Maybe she was a teacher or something.

“I have a degree in nursing.”

Cal felt an odd sense of relief he wasn’t sure he wanted to think about too closely.

“That’s great. Where do you work?”

“I’m in the army.”

Cal tripped over his own foot and barely caught himself by planting his hand on one of the outdoor tables scattered across the garden. “The army?” He looked her up and down. He supposed her confidence and poise could be military trained, but he wouldn’t have guessed.

Alice’s hand was over her mouth, but her shoulders still shook with laughter. “I’m sorry.” Her hand moved to his arm. “You looked so funny! Yes, I’m a Lieutenant in the Nurse Corps.”

Cal left his glass on the table as he straightened up and checked for wine spots on his clothes. At least she was another officer. Fraternization was a serious offense. *What am I thinking? This isn’t even a date.* “Well I guess if I ever get injured, I know whose care I’d like to be under,” he flashed her his best grin and tried to feel less idiotic.

“Your lines still need work.” Her lips glistened as the light caught them.

Now Cal felt warm, and he knew it had nothing to do with the night air, just the attractive, talented woman in front of him. She wasn’t like Valerie. Maybe there could be something between them. “May I kiss you?”

She gazed up at him, moving a tentative step closer. Then she stopped and looked away. “No. You may not.”

Cal didn’t resist, but he felt a keen disappointment. “Why not? Did I do something wrong?”

Alice shook her head, but she looked flustered. The moment was gone. “No, it’s just... I’m here in Paris because I’m getting over someone. I’m not looking to get involved with someone else.”

“Excuse moi.”

Cal turned around. It was the clarinetist.

Alice stepped further away from him. “Yes, Marcus?”

“Your ride will be here shortly, Madame Williams.”

“Thank you.”

Cal felt an odd chill as he looked back at Alice. *Madame Williams?* “You’re married?”

Her back was to him now. “No. Not really.”

“Explain that.” Had he just spent the entire evening with an engaging, interesting woman to find out she was unavailable? Had she been flirting with him or not?

“You don’t have to sound like it’s a personal insult,” she replied sharply, though her voice broke at the end. “Vincent and I are... divorced.”

Now there was a word Cal didn’t hear often. “What happened?” She seemed like such a nice woman.

Alice looked surprised by his response. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes, I do.” She looked distressed.

Cal fetched his wine and offered it to her.

“Thanks.” Alice took a sip. “It’s not a complicated story. Vincent got caught cheating by a subordinate while I was on duty. He was court-martialed and discharged from the army.”

“So you got divorced.”

“I couldn’t trust him, and my superiors backed me up. They insisted I was a good officer and vouched for my character. Otherwise I wouldn’t still have my position.”

Divorced in the military could be a death sentence on a career. Cal shook his head. “You must be an awfully good nurse, and he must be a damned fool.”

His words won him a smile. “You’re kind to say so.”

“When did all this happen?”

“He was caught six months ago. The papers were finished last month.” Only from the

angle of the light on her face could Cal see the open pain expressed in the lines of that beautiful face. It made him want to hit the man who had caused her pain, on principle even if he had no right to.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked to kiss you.”

“It’s not as if you knew.” Alice finished the wine, and gave him back the glass. “And I think we’ve both had too much wine. You seem like a nice guy, Calvin. Under different circumstances...” She didn’t finish.

“Right.”

A waiter poked his head out of the doorway. “*Madame! Votre auto est ici.*”

Alice stood up slowly. As he watched, she seemed to pull herself back together, almost like a string-puppet gathering itself until once more she stood calmly. “I’m glad I met you tonight,” she said after a moment. “It was fun.”

“How long are you in Paris?” He asked as he followed her towards the street.

“Only a couple more days.” Alice paused as the car door opened.

“Where are you stationed?”

“California.”

Then she was in the car and gone.

Cal stared after the car for several seconds, well past the time it was gone, feeling as if a whirlwind had just blown in and out of his life, leaving him dizzy, confused, and disappointed. It wasn’t like he was looking for a long-term relationship right now. So why did he feel like he’d missed out on something?

It was late. Reluctantly, he turned his feet towards the embassy-owned housing, the night’s music mixing in the head in a muddle of thoughts and wine. *She hates California, it’s*

cold and it's damp. That's why the lady is a tramp.

Chapter Ten

1940

“Bon matin, Calvin. Leves-toi,” the sweet voice tickled the inside of his ear.

Grabbing the edge of his pillow, Cal rolled over and hid his face from the unwelcome morning sunlight. “Not now, Rosalie,” he grumbled, not wanting to let go of the last sweet wisps of dream in his head. Mornings were for songbirds and drill sergeants.

A finger found his ribs with a quick jab through the blankets. *“Tu es paresseux!”*

“C’est mon day off!” Cal argued, flinching away.

A chuckle above his head was Cal’s only warning before the pillow was ripped away.

“That is... just too bad, as you say,” Rosalie stood above him, haloed in morning sunshine around her dark curls, still in only her short, satin nightgown, smiling triumphantly. “We dance all evening. We talk. I let you sleep in my bed, and you do not even have the, ah... *decency*... to have coffee with me?” Her full lips turned from smile to pout far too quickly for Cal’s liking. It made them difficult to defend against!

Blinking against the invasive light, Cal gave in. *“D’accord! You win.”* He smiled, and rolled over. “For you, I’ll have coffee.”

“Quelle horrible destin,” she sighed dramatically, dropping the pillow on top of him.

“Let us go down to the café then before they are busy.”

Cal got up and pulled on the civilian clothing he had worn the night before to go out after

his shift ended. He supposed he could have left clean clothes in Rosalie's apartment, but that implied a level of commitment he didn't want to contemplate.

"Are you ready?" he asked, knocking on the bathroom door when he was finished.

"*Dans un instant.*" A moment later Rosalie stepped out in a soft sage green sweater, and a dark gray, straight-line skirt that stopped just below the knees. "You approve?"

Cal looked back up past her legs. "*Oui,*" he grinned. Of course, he had yet to disapprove of any outfit he had seen her in. Rosalie made the clothes, not the other way around. Still, he'd only been spending time with her for a month. Surely he hadn't seen every outfit she owned... right?

"*Merci.*" Rosalie smiled and they headed downstairs and out into the narrow street below. "I do not know how you could sleep in on a beautiful morning like this," she commented as they walked the short distance to the café.

"Practice," Cal teased.

"I knew it," Rosalie said. "You are lazy."

"Just practical," Cal objected. "If you work strange hours, you've got to sleep when you can, right?" After working both night and day shifts, he was fairly certain he could sleep through just about anything.

"*C'est vrai,*" Rosalie acknowledged the point.

"It is a beautiful morning," Cal finally agreed a moment later. Last night's storm had passed, and so close to the café, everything smelled of rain-washed stone and pavement, coffee, and baking pastry. Later, the streets would become a crush of people and noise, smoke and exhaust. Cal loved the night life, but something about the surprising hush of a city in the early

morning made him feel peaceful.

The café was starting to fill up when they arrived, and Cal preferred to sit outside. French coffee, he had decided, tended to have cream not because the French were fonder of cream than Americans, but because their coffee was weak enough it seemed to require it. “*Extra fort, s’il vous plait.*”

Behind the counter, Laurent smiled. “*Votre café habituelle.*”

“Too strong for me,” Rosalie shook her head and ordered hers normal strength, with cream.

“*Il va prendre une minute.*” Laurent turned to make the coffee, flipping on the radio as he did so.

Rapid French filled the air, but Cal didn’t pay much attention as he sat down at one of the little wrought-iron tables with Rosalie. He could catch about half of what was broadcast if he did, but all he cared about today was that he didn’t have to worry about work.

The table jerked, and he looked up into Rosalie’s wide-eyed face. “What’s wrong?”

“*Ecoutez!*” she replied softly.

Cal focused on the radio report, trying to make sense out of it. *Germany ... Occupation of Luxembourg. The Maginot line has been circumvented. First Army Group sent...* Even after months, the rapid French was too much for Cal to catch more, but he didn’t need to. Around him, the locals waiting for their morning coffee had hushed. Worry and shock became tangible. A baby that began to cry was hushed sharply by its mother. *What in hell is going on?* Cal wanted more information, and he knew he wasn’t going to get it from the news. He bolted to his feet.

“*Calvin, ton café!*” Rosalie called out as he took off.

“Hold it for me!” he called back, heading for the Embassy at top speed. If he was going to learn anything useful, he hoped they knew something. He had a really bad feeling about this.

* * *

Out the white stone framed Embassy window, Cal could see the people on the street. No one strolled calmly. They all hurried, keeping their heads down, faces showing either fear or determined focus. Cal suspected the latter were deciding if they could do anything about the situation, even if it was only to flee. It was odd, how some fled, and others adamantly refused to leave, staunchly going about their everyday business as if the Germans weren't marching towards Paris. Ironically, most of the bustle he could see outside was the evacuation of the French government itself. People in cars, or on bicycles, or even on their feet with carts or packs, made an inconsistent but noticeable stream towards the west edge of the city. “I can't believe they're just running away.”

“Frenchmen are getting shot just for being French,” Long commented, seated behind his desk in the office space that they shared. He looked too calmly at the book in his hands. “I can't say that I blame them for running.”

“If it was just civilians I wouldn't mind so much.” Cal turned away from the window and tried to focus on the schedule he was supposed to be making for Embassy perimeter duty for the next two weeks. “It's ridiculous that the government's just handing over the entire country!” He dropped into his chair with a satisfyingly sharp thump. He'd like to thump Reynaud, Petain, and the entire Council.

“We don't have to like it,” Long said. “We just have to protect Bullitt and make sure the

Germans don't decide to shoot him."

"That's the part I really don't like," Cal admitted. Why the American Ambassador had agreed to help hand over France to Germany was something he just couldn't fathom. The other Embassies were mostly empty already, abandoning France like cockroaches in front of a light bulb. "Why in hell are we still here?"

"Because we've been told to be here," Long looked up at him. "If we let anything happen to Bullitt, we'll have failed in our duty. Besides, isn't it better that the Germans take control peacefully instead of coming into the city shooting?"

Images of Rosalie and Laurent gunned down in the street came unbidden into Cal's mind. Blood pooled beneath them, ran in the cracks of the older cobbled streets. "Of course," Cal shook his head, even though he knew the movement wouldn't really clear it. "But it feels traitorous to hand Paris over to the Germans."

"We're not handing anything over," Long disagreed. "Reynaud is. Bullitt's just doing his job as a neutral Ambassador, it's a favor to the French government."

"It's a betrayal of the French people."

Long scowled. "Don't let anyone else hear you talk like that, Fisher. It's not our place to have opinions about what the Ambassador does."

"I know, I know." Cal stifled a sigh and bent to his work, writing up the next week of duty rosters for the Embassy guards. If Roosevelt had ever tried to give over the States, or even just D.C., there would have been rebellion and rioting. Outside he could see the fear in people's eyes, and feel the tension in the air, but it wasn't nearly the open outrage he felt there should be. "I'll keep my mouth shut." Not because he wanted to, but because he had no other choice. Cal

wasn't stupid enough to think that his speaking out of turn would make a difference. He didn't have the authority. "I just wish I knew why it had to be Bullitt."

"Probably because the last thing Germany wants is to piss off FDR," Long quipped. "They can't have forgotten what happened the last time they messed with us. Bullitt's the safest person to have handle the job, and once Germany's in control, we'll be able to leave without any trouble."

"You really think the German army will let us just walk right out of here?"

"As much as you believe the French government is letting *them* just walk right in."

* * *

Cal's sense of foreboding refused to lift. "I really wish you'd leave Paris."

Sitting across from him at the little café table, Rosalie shook her head. "*Non. Maman* refuses to go, and I will not leave her here alone."

"Can't you talk her into leaving?" Cal hadn't met Rosalie's mother, but if it were him, he would drag his mother out of town by any means necessary.

"She has never left Paris," Rosalie replied. "Not since *papa* died. Besides, where would we go? The rest of our family lives in Reims. I do not think that you are suggesting we go towards Germany."

"Of course not." Cal reached out and gave her hand a squeeze. "You could go to Bordeaux." That was where newly-resigned Prime Minister Paul Reynaud was going.

A sad smile played on Rosalie's lips. "You sound concerned, Calvin. I thought we were not supposed to be *serieuse*."

She was teasing, he realized. "Damn it, Rosalie. I'm not that heartless!"

The smile vanished. “*Je sais*. I am sorry. I did not mean that you were.” Her head cocked slightly to one side, like a cat considering something. “Perhaps it would be better if you were less concerned. This is not your fight.”

“As far as I can tell it’s no one’s fight.” The fact that everyone kept telling him the encroaching army was none of his business did not change how he saw it. “France has already given up.”

Delicate eyebrows met in a sharp V. “Do not mistake a few men for a whole country.”

Cal held up both hands in a placating gesture. “My apologies.” He gave her a sheepish smile and tried to defuse the situation. “Maybe the French women will succeed where the men haven’t?”

It seemed to work. Rosalie’s scowl softened. “You should know by now, that French women can do anything.”

* * *

Cal stood with the rest of the American security detail and Ambassador Bullitt and his aides on the steps of the government building, waiting in silence for the coming Germans. The bombings had ceased, and Paris had fallen without putting up a fight. How could the Parisians put up a fight with most of their military already circumvented on the border? Civilians, including many school children, had been casualties of those raids. People trying to flee had been strafed by the German planes if they made it outside the city.

On the trip from the Embassy over, Cal had seen many of the remaining Parisians lining the streets already, as if for a parade, except for the unnatural quiet as people spoke softly, nearly in whispers, or not at all. Many faces were unreadable masks, while on others lips trembled, and

some people cried openly. Tears streamed down the cheeks of as many men as women.

Bullitt stood quietly composed. He wore a dark suit, black tie, and a somber expression. The sun glinted off the ambassador's forehead, but today the light held no cheer. Cal could only wonder how the older man felt at this moment. Bullitt was the same ambassador who had once tried to establish relations between the States and the Bolsheviks, and had spoken against the Treaty of Versailles. Insisting on remaining when the French government fled was just another daring political move on Bullitt's part. Cal wished he knew the man's motivation.

Cal heard the Germans before he saw them. In the distance, growing like thunder, came the approaching sound of triumphant military music, and the sounds of hoof beats, and thousands of feet marching in near unison. Then they appeared, entering the square in front of the building, ranks upon ranks of mounted officers, followed by their soldiers.

Cal felt every muscle from neck to ankles tighten. His hands clenched his rifle, but he held it still. They couldn't look like they were going to shoot, orders had been clear on that.

As if I was going to shoot into that. He might, if he wanted a quick death. For the first time, Cal understood just what 'overwhelming numbers' looked like. Row after row of German soldiers neared, then formed wider ranks as they filled every available spot in the road. He had to admit they made an impressive show.

As the sea of Germans filled his view, Cal was reminded of the Independence Day parade he had seen at Quantico, flags unfurled and music blaring in patriotic celebration. This wasn't really all that different, except that the circumstances were anything but pleasant.

Never before had an upbeat march felt so sinister. Cal shuddered and tried to school his face into a semblance of calm neutrality. They weren't America's enemy this time so he should

have little cause for concern, they wanted to meet the American ambassador and claim Paris. So, naturally, Cal trusted the military in front of him about as far as he could run with his feet bound.

“Ease up, Fisher,” Long whispered beside him, his lips barely moving.

Cal forced his fingers to relax, his locked grip on his M-1 released just enough that the weapon no longer quivered.

The music swelled in a great crescendo, and then stopped with such precision that the silence was more distinctive than the sound had been moments before. The German officers at the front of the Army strode forward fearlessly, away from the unending waves of gray behind them.

They came to the top of the steps, and then the highest ranking General turned and addressed his troops sharply in German. Cal didn't understand a word of it, but he could make an educated guess. It was probably something like the victory speech most conquerors gave their men after a city well taken. *Good job, men. Easy wasn't it? Now that we've mowed over these sissies let's have beer and sausage and move on to the next town.*

When he finished, the soldiers remained at parade rest, silent and as calm as if they did this every day. Cal had expected at least a cheer of some kind.

The General turned to Bullitt then and said something in German. Cal paid no attention to the words, focusing instead on keeping an eye out for anyone who might be aiming at the Ambassador. Bullitt's expression remained calm as he explained, in French, that he had been given the authority to see that Paris was handed over as peaceably as possible.

The exchange finished, and Bullitt turned and led the way inside, followed by the General, a handful of German officers, and half the American security detail.

“Keep an eye on things out here,” Long commented to Cal before leaving him and half a dozen others standing on the steps guarding the door.

And do what? Cal wondered. *Sure, no problem. I’ll just stand here and keep out the entire German army.* The more he saw, the less he liked them. They were almost too professional. Maybe they’d liven up a little with some good entertainment. Too bad any of that would be at the expense of the locals. Somehow Cal didn’t see German business really being all that *good* for business.

Chapter Eleven

“First Paris, now all of France,” Cal snorted in disgust as he packed only critical files in a box. Their work done, it would soon be time to leave Paris while they could.

Long fiddled with the radio knob. “Are you really surprised?” he asked. “The French army just can’t hold up against this.” Static hissed and spit, cut into briefly by a garbled symphony before he found the right station. Almost at once an American voice came over the airwaves. “There we go. It doesn’t sound like it started yet.”

“Good.” Everett commented as he, followed by several other officers and enlisted crowded into the office. “I want to hear this.”

Cal didn’t point out that there were other radios in the building. Theirs was on, and it had already proven to have the clearest reception.

CBS reporter William Shirer’s voice came over the radio again a minute later, describing the scene as Hitler and the others got out of the car in Compiegne. Cal knew the park in question. It was a memorial to the German surrender in 1918, which had happened on that location. Cal

and a couple of the other fellows had driven out to see it on one of their afternoons off. It was a circle cleared out of the woods, with a quartered, circular lawn in the center. At one side stood the railcar where the Germans had signed their surrender, and in the center of the circle there was a large, flat granite block on the ground that read "HERE ON THE ELEVENTH OF NOVEMBER 1918 SUCCUMBED THE CRIMINAL PRIDE OF THE GERMAN EMPIRE ... VANQUISHED BY THE FREE PEOPLES WHICH IT TRIED TO ENSLAVE."

Everyone in the room shushed as they listened as Shirer moved on to Hitler's face itself. "It is afire with scorn, anger, hate, revenge, triumph. He steps off the monument and contrives to make even this gesture a masterpiece of contempt. He glances back at it, contemptuous, angry - angry, you almost feel, because he cannot wipe out the awful, provoking lettering with one sweep of his high Prussian boot."

"The Germans stride over to the armistice car. For a moment or two they stand in the sunlight outside the car, chatting. Then Hitler steps up into the car, followed by the others... Hitler takes the place occupied by Marshal Foch when the 1918 armistice terms were signed. The others spread themselves around him. Four chairs on the opposite side of the table from Hitler remain empty. The French have not yet appeared. But we do not wait long... they alight from a car. They have flown up from Bordeaux to a near-by landing field. ...Then they walk down the avenue flanked by three German officers. We see them now as they come into the sunlight of the clearing."

Cal could envision Petain's thickly mustached face, and that of the other French officials going to their humiliation. He felt sympathy, furious as he was at them for handing over their country and running. *But then, didn't I do the same thing? I didn't even fight to clear my name. I*

took the deal and ran.

It felt wrong that something horrible could happen on a beautiful day. Of course, that seemed to be the theme of Cal's own life too. Nothing good seemed to come from nice weather.

The radio crackled. "...It is a grave hour in the life of France. The Frenchmen keep their eyes straight ahead. Their faces are solemn, drawn. They are the picture of tragic dignity. They walk stiffly to the car, where they are met by two German officers, Lieutenant-General Tippelskirch, Quartermaster General, and Colonel Thomas, chief of the Fuhrer's headquarters. The Germans salute. The French salute. The atmosphere is what Europeans call "correct." There are salutes, but no handshakes."

"Tippelskirch?" A sergeant laughed out right. "Sounds like a bad drink."

"Or an exotic dance," another sniggered and elbowed the Sergeant.

"I think you'd have to have the drink to appreciate the dance," Cal replied with a straight face. He wasn't bothered by the snarky comments caused by the tension in the room. It was how Marines dealt with the stress of the situation.

One man in the room wasn't being sarcastic however. Cal couldn't help looking at Bullitt, who had joined them, standing solemnly beside Everett. The Ambassador looked no more pleased with the turn of events than anyone else, despite his part in the matter.

There was another harsh round of shushing as Shirer's commentary returned. "Hitler, as far as we can see through the windows, does not say a word to the French or to anybody else. He nods to General Keitel at his side. We see General Keitel adjusting his papers. Then he starts to read. He is reading the preamble to the German armistice terms. The French sit there with marble-like faces and listen intently... we see Hitler stand up, salute stiffly, and then stride out of

the drawing-room, followed by Goring, Brauchitsch, Raeder, Hess, and Ribbentrop. The French, like figures of stone, remain at the green-topped table. General Keitel remains with them. He starts to read them the detailed conditions of the armistice.”

“I can’t believe he didn’t even stay!” A corporal burst out angrily. “Arrogant bastard.”

“Did you expect him to dignify them with his presence any longer than necessary?”

Everett asked. “It’s all about humiliation and control.”

“Hitler and his aides stride down the avenue towards the Alsace-Lorraine monument, where their cars are waiting. As they pass the guard of honour, the German band strikes up the two national anthems, Deutschland, Deutschland uber Alles and the Horst Wessel song. The whole ceremony in which Hitler has reached a new pinnacle in his meteoric career and Germany avenged the 1918 defeat is over in a quarter of an hour.”

The broadcast ended and Long turned off the radio. For a minute, the room was silent. The flippancy was gone, it was done. They were sitting in an occupied city, in an occupied country, in an Embassy to a country that technically no longer had a government in power to negotiate with. “Well, that’s it.”

Cal looked up to find that Bullitt and Everett had already left the room. Several other men were moving towards the door.

* * *

The streets of Paris looked, at first sight, almost normal. People went about their daily business as necessary, going to work, shopping at the meat market and the *boulangerie*. They stopped to eat at the cafés. It was the thick blanket of tension that pervaded the air, and the unsubtle reminders of conquest –Swastika flags hanging from the buildings and German soldiers

in the streets— that ruined the illusion of normality. Children did not run freely, sticking close to their mothers. Women, if they could, did not walk alone.

In civilian clothes, Cal walked the streets, doing his best to be inconspicuous and blend in as just another man going out for lunch with a colleague. He was just grateful that Rosalie's apartment wasn't along one of the major thoroughfares. Once they turned onto a side street, the number of German soldiers lessened considerably.

Lieutenant Long, also out of uniform, walked beside him. "So much for the pleasures of Paris," he sighed quietly around a cigarette in his mouth.

"You didn't have to come with me," Cal reminded him.

"You didn't have to come out here."

"Yes, I did." Cal hadn't heard anything from Rosalie in days, and in the hustle of getting ready to leave Paris, using the lunch hour on his last day in the city was his only chance to check on her. Given the number of people who had been shot attempting to flee—including Laurent, the coffee man at the café— he would rather find her safe in her apartment than find out she had died trying to do as he had begged her to do.

"You said she was just a casual lover."

"That doesn't mean I don't have a conscience."

"Ne me touchez pas!"

Cal's head whipped around at the sound of a woman's exclamation. He picked up his pace and rounded the corner by Rosalie's apartment.

Rosalie and another woman sat at a table at the small café on the street. Two German soldiers stood over them.

From his angle of approach, all Cal could see was that one of them had a grip on Rosalie's arm. In heavily accented, broken French, the soldier told her not to fight him.

"Laissez-la partir!" Cal growled as he crossed the street.

Both Germans turned around and scowled at him. Cal noted their rank, infantry the both of them. The one gripping Rosalie shook his head slightly. *"Non. Force moi."*

A hand landed on Cal's shoulder. *"C'est une mauvaise idée,"* Long warned him against getting involved.

Cal forced his fist to unclench. Fine, he would give the man a warning first, but damned if he would let them get away with molesting women on the street. *"Un bon soldat ne force pas une dame."*

Whether it was Cal's accent or lack of submissive behavior, the Germans looked at him with growing suspicion. *"Vous n'êtes pas français Vous êtes un Américain!"*

The closer German's hand dropped Rosalie's arm to go for his pistol. The other shoved him hard in the arm and growled at him in German then looked back at Cal. *"Êtes-vous un touriste?"*

Cal shrugged. *"Je suis un marin."*

That earned him raised eyebrows. The two Germans conferred. Cal didn't have to have a translator to get the message. Germany wasn't at war with the United States, and Cal wasn't a regular American civilian. They looked at Cal, then at Long. Reluctantly, they moved down the street. *"Laissez la France,"* one of them barked sharply as they moved.

We're leaving soon enough. Cal watched them go, then turned to Rosalie. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "*Oui.*"

"You idiot." Long cuffed him up the side of the head with his hand. "What were you thinking, Fisher?"

Cal turned and looked at the other Lieutenant. "Were you just going to let them bother these ladies?"

"We're not here to get involved. We were *told* to stay low and avoid confrontations with the Germans. After tomorrow it's not our concern."

"You are leaving?" Rosalie asked.

Cal looked down at her. "Tomorrow. I came to see how you were and if you were still here."

The older woman at the table was staring at them both. "*Rosalie, est-ce votre ami?*"

This must be her mother, Cal realized, before wondering if that particular *ami* was meant to translate to friend or love.

"*Un moment, maman.*" Rosalie shook her head. "We tried to leave, but it was too dangerous. If it becomes safer to try again than to stay, we will."

"We need to go, Fisher," Long said shortly. "I'm not sure those soldiers won't be back with reinforcements, if they don't just report us to their superiors."

It wasn't going to be pleasant if a German officer showed up at the Embassy complaining that American Marines were causing trouble for German men in the streets. Cal gave Rosalie a quick hug. "Take care of yourself."

She hugged him back. "*Vous aussi.* And do not worry about me. They are like that with

many of the girls around here. So far, it has been all talk, but *merci* for the rescue. *Au revoir.*”

“*Au revoir.*”

“I hope that was worth it,” Long said as they walked back towards the Embassy by a more direct route. “You know I have to report the incident.”

“I’ll report it myself,” Cal promised. “I’m the one who broke orders.” At least with them leaving tomorrow, he wasn’t likely to get much of a punishment, though he expected a note on his record. It was worth it for the bit of peace of mind to know that Rosalie was all right for now. He hoped it stayed that way.

* * *

“What do you mean reassigned?” Cal looked at the orders in his hands. They were clear enough.

Everett’s face remained impassive. “Just that, Lieutenant, you and some of the others are being assigned back stateside. You’ll be going by way of London and then ship home.”

“I understand, Sir.” Cal meant it, but he wasn’t entirely sure how to feel about it, not given the timing on the orders. They hadn’t been in Vichy for more than two weeks. Sure they didn’t need as much security if they weren’t covering the large building, but it was still an occupied country in a foreign war. What he really wanted to know was why him? The look on Everett’s face, however, did not encourage further questions.

“You will leave in two days,” Everett continued. “During your stop in London I expect you will be debriefed about the events in Paris and anything else you’ve noticed in France.”

Something about Everett’s expression made Cal wonder just what Everett expected Cal to

say at that debriefing. “Yes, Sir.” Would he be in trouble if he was asked to give his honest opinion about Bullitt’s actions in Paris? Word had come down that President Roosevelt was furious over what Bullitt had done and had wanted him to leave when the French did. It wasn’t definite, but it seemed a pretty solid rumor. He suspected he would learn the truth of it when he got back Stateside. “Is there anything in particular I should be prepared to answer?”

Everett looked miffed. “That information will be given to you when you need to know it, Lieutenant. Any further questions?”

In other words, you probably aren’t privy to that information. Well, Cal could guess, and it probably didn’t really matter much. “No, Sir. I’ll get packing.” Not that he had been given time yet to really unpack after their retreat from Paris to Vichy, or that he owned much.

“Good. Don’t expect to spend much time in London. New orders should be waiting when you arrive back in the States if they aren’t already in London.” Everett turned and left.

Cal returned to his duty shift, but it took effort to get his mind back on his work. Whatever his daydreamed plans to oust the Germans from France, he would definitely have no part in further events there. He hoped that, somehow, Rosalie might manage to talk her mother into leaving Paris after all. The others too, he hated the idea of having what few friends he managed to gain in life shot just for being themselves.

* * *

The hard plastic chair beneath Cal had put his backside to sleep over an hour ago. The least the Embassy in London could have done was provide comfortable seating.

“Did you agree with Ambassador Bullitt’s decision to remain in Paris and act on behalf of the French government?”

He’d been waiting for that question. Cal looked evenly into the eyes of the colonel on the other side of the table. “Yes and no, Sir.”

“Explain.”

“I do not agree that the French should have ceded Paris to the Germany army, nor do I believe the Ambassador was right in doing it for them.”

“So it’s a moral objection?”

Cal wasn’t sure he would call it moral. “Ethical maybe,” he nodded. “Strategically I don’t like the idea of surrender as an option when there are civilians involved.”

The colonel marked something on his notepad. “Do you feel the Ambassador acted against American interests?”

It wasn’t the first time the colonel had essentially reworded a question, though the meaning was always slightly different. “I don’t know what all of our interests are in Europe right now,” Cal replied honestly. Were they trying to get Bullitt in trouble? “I know we’re supposed to be uninvolved in the conflict.”

“Did his actions violate the American position?” The colonel’s flinty eyes narrowed.

Or maybe they wanted to make sure Cal hadn’t developed any kind of particular loyalty to the Ambassador that might make him less trustworthy. “No, Sir. I don’t agree with them, but as it was explained to me, what he did as a neutral third party was allowable according to his position as an Ambassador.”

The Colonel took much longer writing in his notebook after that comment. What Cal

wouldn't have given to see just what was written down besides his statements. "That will do, Lieutenant. See the Secretary down the hall for where you and the rest of your men will be staying tonight. I understand your next orders have also arrived."

Someone was on top of the paperwork lately. Cal stood and saluted. "Yes, Sir." He didn't wipe the sweat off his palms until after the door closed behind him in the hallway.

Chapter Twelve

It rained in London. It rained on the Atlantic. Cal was not at all surprised to find it raining in Virginia. It fit his restive mood.

Newspapers didn't give nearly enough information about what was going on behind him, and he hadn't been able to get word except when they briefly stopped at port in New York. Cal had forgotten how very little real information the common man really got on what was going on in the world. No wonder they were so ignorant of current events.

When he got out of the truck back on base, the rain had turned into a full blown summer thunderstorm. Cal shouldered his duffle as all the returning marines scattered to their own rooms, and trudged first over to report in.

It was a short meeting, confirming his orders to be assigned to Quantico until another assignment more suited to his talents was found, and the handing over of the insignia to mark him as a First Lieutenant. The promotion was possibly the only good thing about his changing assignments.

Cal begrudgingly stopped at the base post office on the way to his room. He hadn't received much mail overseas so he felt it was a safe bet that he had at least a couple of letters

from Reid and his mother.

“About time you got these,” the postmaster chuckled as he handed over three letters and a parcel.

Cal had no idea what was in the package. Two of the letters were from Reid, the rest was from his mother. The package was dated back in May. “Thanks, Earl.”

By the time he got his duffel up into his room in the barracks Cal had no interest in going to the Mess Hall for lunch, so he changed into dry clothes, and settled for a cup of coffee in the small lounge area down the hall. Since most of the others were on duty or at lunch he had the place to himself.

Dropping onto one of the rough-textured tan fabric couches, Cal started with the letters from Reid. The first one contained mostly news about goings on at the brewery and in Charleston. That was one thing Cal liked about Reid’s letters, Reid almost never mentioned home unless he was talking about his own father.

The second letter was a short, hastily scribbled note that made Cal smile.

Margie just told me we’re having another baby! Good thing I got that promotion isn’t it? We may have to get a bigger house. You’ve got to come visit sometime. We miss you and I think you’d like the place.

Cal reread the shorter note twice before he put it down. Reid’s excitement and success and family made him feel included and distanced for the same reasons. They stayed in touch, but their lives were totally different. Reid was settled with a family. Cal’s only responsibility was his duty. After that, his time was his own to do with as he wished. Yet he found himself feeling slightly jealous every time he got one of those happy letters. He would go visit though,

sometime.

Taking a sip of coffee, Cal turned his attention to his mother's letter. The package was likely to be less depressing, so he would save it for a mood lifter.

My dear boy,

I am glad to hear your still enjoying Paris. It sounds very pretty. I have heard of that Lisa painting in the museum there. You make it all sound like it's not so strange from here even though they talk different. When you come home in a couple years I hope you'll talk French for me. It sounds pretty in those old songs.

Cal knew he would have to promise to speak French to her sometime in his next letter. He never mentioned times in his promises, because he knew if he did he would almost definitely end up breaking them. He leaned back against the couch cushions.

Your father's cough is better than it was. He don't rest like he should, but he ain't never anyways. Mining Company bought the Callahans out this week. We're the only ones asides Hudsons left as our own business now on the hill. Your father's sure they'll start buying out downtown by the creek next. I ain't sure I can disagree anymore.

France and Rocky Creek were both losing without a fight. Cal wondered what it said about society that the little no-nothing town had held out longer. Of course, Rocky Creek had avoided the Mining Wars.

Cal forced his eyes and thoughts back to the page. If nothing else, he could at least give his mother's letters a complete read through.

The Woods have a new grandbaby down in Charleston. The family came up to visit last week. Most adorable little boy just like you was. Only thing your father said was it was cuter

than Kline's new grandson.

The paper was a crumpled lump by the time Cal realized his fist had clenched shut. He never asked to know about goings on, but he hadn't been able to bring himself to tell his mother not to tell him news, especially not involving Valerie. He picked up his coffee, for lack of a more appropriate beverage, and chugged the last burning dregs. He hadn't wanted to hear about Valerie and Andy Johnson's wedding last year. He didn't want to know they had a son. As far as he was concerned, their lives were as much of his business as he was of theirs.

Cal looked down at the mangled letter in his hand and unfolded it gently, glad his mother would never know how upset her words made him. It wasn't her fault.

Write back soon. I know I always say it, but I always like hearing what you're up to. Have you met any nice girls? The Quilting Circle girls say all sorts of dirty things about French women, but I don't imagine any woman being as sinful as they say. Look out though.

Love, your mother and father

Cal no longer snorted when he read her closing. He knew his father had nothing in the writing of the letters. Three years without a word spoke more than a novel about how the old man felt about his son the Marine. Well, maybe it'd stick in his throat to hear his son was now a First Lieutenant.

But replies would come later. Cal turned hopefully to the package, just praying it wasn't full of unwanted reminders.

Underneath a handwritten note card that said *for your birthday* Cal found two pairs of hand-knitted wool socks, two jars of black raspberry preserves, two jars of his favorite homemade apple butter, and something wrapped in a handkerchief that made a shifting clink

sound when he poked it. His finger found a hard, smooth surface. Curious, Cal unwrapped what turned out to be a picture in a frame.

Four faces –two couples– looked unblinking up from the dingy glass. Cal recognized three of them despite the obvious distance of years. Bright smile and conservative dress, his mother stood next to Cal’s scowling father. *At least some things never change.*

The two uniformed men were as different as coal and diamonds. Their hair was the same, and their general look marked them brothers, but there the similarities ended. Melvin Fisher’s disgust with his own Army clothing was stamped all over him. Standing inches taller, with a huge grin that started at the eyes, Dan Fisher looked perfectly at home in his Marine uniform. The stylish brunette smiling on Dan’s arm was probably his girlfriend.

Cal opened the card, hoping for an explanation.

Happy twenty-first birthday, Calvin. I don't know if they will send this to France with the food in it, but I hope so. The fruit was better than last year. I found the picture when I was cleaning out the closets. I ain't thought of it in years, but it's the only one we have of all of us before poor Danny died. Do you remember Miss Marion? She was Danny's sweetheart and she used to visit sometimes when you were real little. Last I heard she was still living in Virginia somewhere. Anyways, I thought you might like to have it since it's got Danny in it. I bet you do look as good in that uniform as he did.

Love, your mother and father

Aside from the familiar scowling face, Cal had to admit he liked the photo. It held hope and idealism in the face of coming war. If his father was in uniform the war had already started, and still the rest were smiling. It showed so clearly how little anyone had expected the Great War

to become the monster it had been, despite victory in the end over a despicable enemy. But here, frozen behind glass, none of that had yet happened. Really, it hadn't even been determined yet. In that moment, anything could have happened. Just like now, anything could still happen. He couldn't write off possibilities just because of some fatalistic hunch that things were going to turn out badly. He should try and keep that in mind.

Cal put the picture and letters in the box with the other presents. He would make sure to write his mother a good long letter this time. He knew that would be more meaningful than any simple thank you.

* * *

Tillman shook his head as Cal finished his telling of his time in Paris and took a long drink of his beer. "I guess we ought to be grateful it ain't us that's been invaded."

"Yeah, there's an ocean in the way." Cal grumbled. "Makes it pretty hard to have anything to worry about, us *sitting pretty* over here all smug and safe while folks get walked over."

"You shoulda talked the dame into coming back with you," Sharky commented.

"I told you, it wasn't anything serious."

"So?" Sharky grinned wickedly. "I like French dolls! Who doesn't?"

Hanging around in the officer's club was pleasant, if strange after so long away. Outside the Embassy, he'd gotten used to not hearing English everywhere he went. Everything looked, felt, and smelled both familiar and strange.

Sharky went back to drinking. "Why don't you just tell us more about the good parts of Paris? You've been going on all evening about the political mess."

“Yeah, you’re right.” Cal relaxed and leaned back in his chair. It was hard to get what he had experienced out of his head though. “Though I will say, pushing papers around here is a lot duller in comparison.”

“Well I don’t doubt that.” Tillman grinned. “But would you rather be here, or still back there?”

No immediate answer came to Cal’s lips and he drank to cover his hesitation. He wasn’t French. It wasn’t supposed to be any of his business, even less now that he wasn’t assigned to the Embassy. Would he rather be here, safe and bored, or there with the German occupation and bad coffee? Either way he couldn’t take action. “I guess that would depend on the situation,” he admitted finally.

“If I could actually do something about the Germans who are shooting French citizens, I’d be back there in a flash.”

Tillman looked thoughtful. Sharky grinned. “If we was over there we’d show them all right. It’d be over already.”

Sure it would. Not that they were going to get a chance to fight in that war. What good was being a powerful military nation and not using that to help out countries they had relations with? Cal didn’t understand how that was good politics. Or maybe it wasn’t, but he supposed he wasn’t likely to get much of an explanation anytime soon. Politics was not supposed to be his concern. “Of course we would,” Cal agreed. “Too bad you guys weren’t there to help me show them a thing or two. If nothing else, I wish they hadn’t sent me back so soon,” he finally admitted.

“At least you got promoted to First Lieutenant out of it,” Sharky said.

“Yeah, there’s that.” Somehow, as much as Cal appreciated the promotion, it felt a little hollow. “At least the training should be interesting.”

Sharky lit a cigarette. “Kinda funny that they want you to get more training in diplomacy and infantry command at the same time.”

After Paris, Cal didn’t find it funny in the least, his orders had reassigned him back to base, language, diplomacy, infantry command, even instructional courses on how to teach the things he was learning. Cal pulled out a cigarette of his own. “After what I’ve seen, I think the two go together a bit too well.”

Chapter Thirteen

1941

There was something satisfying about blowing a target to bits. The Remington Automatic Rifle in Cal’s hands was good for that. It wasn’t a weapon traditionally used by officers in the Corps, but if he was going to teach enlisted men how to fire it, Cal felt he ought to know the nuances of every weapon his men would be working with, and that he might have to pick up at any given point himself.

Given his target was now little more than scraps of paper held together by near-threads, Cal felt confident he could give any of the men he was helping train a good demonstration of what they ought to be aiming for.

“What did that target ever do to you, Sir?” One of the newer officer candidates grinned at Cal.

A deep warbling in his stomach made Cal look at his watch. It was well past noon.

The frost-stiffened grass crunched under Cal's feet as he left the range and returned his weapon to its locker. It hadn't snowed yet, but with Christmas less than three weeks away Cal sort of hoped it would. At least then the base would look festive for the holidays.

Christmas reminded Cal he still needed to buy presents for Reid's family, and for his mother. He didn't have long left before they would need to be shipped.

There were surprisingly few people outside as Cal neared the barracks and other base housing.

In the middle of the day the place was usually bustling. It wasn't empty, but the first man he saw was darting inside.

"Fisher!"

Cal's eyes turned in the direction of Tillman's voice. The other officer was leaning out his window.

"Get in here." Tillman waved frantically, his face pale.

"What's going on?" He didn't like the knot forming in his stomach.

"Pearl Harbor's being bombed, man!"

"Quit blowing smoke," Cal snorted. It had to be a joke.

Tillman wasn't kidding. "It's on the radio!"

"Jesus, Mary, and..." Cal took off for the door to the building, and practically slid down the hallway, hitting Tillman's door as he entered the room.

The radio was on. "...Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, from the air. The attack also was made on all military and naval activities on the principle island of Oahu."

"Well, what else have they said?" Cal stared at the radio. He felt sick. This wasn't

happening...except that it was.

“That’s it.” Tillman shook his head. “They repeated the message, but that’s all.”

“Damn it!” Cal’s hand was on the radio before he stopped himself. Smashing the machine wouldn’t do any good. “How bad was it ? How many of them were there? How the heck did they manage to bomb Hawaii without being noticed?”

“Like I know.” Tillman was staring at him. “Quit roaring, Cal. When the upper brass know something they’ll let us know.”

“I can’t wait that long.” Cal headed for the door, ignoring Tillman’s squawk of protest as he stormed out. He could think of only one General’s office he could barge into and demand information without getting himself busted for insubordination. Maybe.

Cal was stopped cold by the secretary in the hall outside Edwards’s office. “General Edwards is in a meeting and cannot be disturbed.”

“But Japan—”

“Why do you think the General’s in a meeting?” Her expression spoke plainly that it should have been obvious. “We will hear more in time, Lieutenant.”

For one brief moment, Cal considered busting into the meeting, but his common sense – and training– took hold a moment later. “Right. Thanks.” He turned and made himself walk away. For now, he would have to make do with the information coming through public channels. His disbelief turned slowly to feelings of dread and déjà vu. *Only this ain’t France. There’s no way we’ll just roll over and take it like a broken dog.* Who would stand for it?

Doubt nibbled at his soul as he returned to the barracks. Up till now, America had done nothing, but they weren’t like Europe, right? They wouldn’t try and appease the Japanese. The

situation wasn't the same though. It wasn't an invasion fleet. Only someone truly insane would try to invade the US.

Of course, the world seemed rife with insanity these days.

* * *

The briefing room was packed. Cal sat shoulder-to-shoulder with every officer on base who had managed to squeeze in. General Edwards and General Price stood at the front of the room. Neither man's face gave anything away. It was only military discipline that kept the room to quiet whispers that silenced as soon as Edwards stepped up to the podium.

“As I'm sure you've all heard by now, we are officially at war with Japan. However, earlier today, in response to other declarations of war against us, we are also at war with both Germany and Italy.”

After so long, Cal felt a thrill of exhilaration at the idea that finally they would be part of putting Germany in its place. He regretted the fact that they hadn't gotten involved in the war before this, and that it had taken a massive blow to American forces to stir them to action.

“All of our training the last few years in amphibious landings will finally be put to use,” Edwards continued. “While the Army and Navy will be split, handling both the European and Pacific fronts, the Corps will be focused in the West to clear Japan from the Pacific. In that time we will be recruiting and training as many Marines as we can. The President wants Five Divisions in the Pacific in a year.”

Cal kept his mouth clamped shut to keep from interjecting. The entire Corps was only two divisions! How were they going to more than double their numbers that quickly, even with the draft?

“Everyone’s training will be stepped up, Gentlemen. If you haven’t been through combat command in the last year you will be repeating the course, and you will pass. Every one of you will be leading men in combat.” A grim smile came to his face. “Of course, this is what we’re here for. Let’s give the Japanese a taste of just why they call us devil dogs.”

That elicited a cheer from men. Cal felt his own heart pumping strong. This was what they had joined the Marines for in the first place.

“Within the next couple of days, each of you will be receiving new orders. Once your own training is finished you will be working with the men in the units you’ll be assigned to. As always, perfection is our goal. We can’t afford less. Let’s get to it then. Dismissed.”

Cal had little choice but to shuffle out with the crowd, mind riddled with impatience and unaddressed concerns. A year seemed an eternity before they could do anything definitive about the Japanese, but to train up that many men, it seemed far too short.

Still, it was a far cry better than his fears that the States would turn out as cowardly and ineffective as what he had seen in Europe. Cal felt a grim determination. He would take a shot at any enemy. So what if it wasn’t Germany? Let the army have them. The Japanese had wounded American people directly and unprovoked, and he couldn’t wait to teach them just how stupid a mistake they had made.

* * *

“You asked to speak with me, Sir?” Cal stood at attention in front of General Edwards’ desk. This had to be about his next orders. For the past day all the officers above him that he knew had already received theirs.

Edwards picked up a sheaf of paper from the pile on his desk. “Yes I did, Captain.”

Captain? “Sir, I—”

“Are you going to correct a superior officer, Captain Fisher?”

“No, General.” He couldn’t take offense at Edwards’ smug expression either, but why would he... was he being promoted?

Edwards chuckled as he slid the paper across his desk. “From your expression I’ll assume you’re as quick as I think you are. Congratulations. Here are your new orders. Look them over.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Cal reached out and took the sheet. He scanned it quickly, noting both his promotion to Captain and his transfer to San Diego at the end of his current courses.

“I also wanted to speak with you directly.” Edwards did not give him much time to read it in detail. “I wanted to thank you for keeping your mouth shut the last few months.”

“You’re welcome,” Cal replied. He supposed that explained why the General wanted to give them to him directly. They certainly could have come to him from any superior officer.

“Permission to speak, Sir?”

“Permission granted.”

“Not that I question the sense of my superiors, but why me?” Cal watched the General’s face for any subtle sign that might give anything away. He hoped he might at least be indulged in a real answer.

It was hard to find anything behind the amusement. Edwards leaned back slightly in his chair. “The practical answer is simple. We need more officers in the command positions. With the number of Marines that will be going through training in the next several months we’ll need as many experienced and reliable men leading them into combat as we can. You’ve seen personally part of one side of this conflict already. You know what we’re up against and from

what I hear you won't balk from a fight."

"No Marine balks from a fight, Sir," Cal felt the need to point out.

"You demonstrated a good mind for tactical strategy in training and you can think on your feet. You think for yourself, but you don't disobey orders in critical situations," Edwards continued. "They say you're dangerous as a mountain lion. I could continue to quote from your performance reviews from your immediate superiors, but I don't think that's necessary."

"If you say so, Sir," Cal agreed cautiously. He still felt like that wasn't everything. "And the impractical answer?" He acted on his hunch.

A bit of the humor left Edwards' face. "Because letting a man who's passionate about his work and this war loose with a company of armed men against the enemy seems like a very effective strategy."

Chapter Fourteen

1942

Winter without snow had been nice at first, but Cal was beginning to miss cooler weather. San Diego in the winter reminded him of early summer. He suspected in the summer it would just be uncomfortably hot. If it weren't for the fact that the Naval Base was right on the Pacific, off which came a reasonable breeze most of the time, Cal was sure he would have melted already.

The pressing crowd of soldiers waiting on the street outside the post master's office for

their mail did nothing to cool the atmosphere. With Marines and Navy men currently crammed tight on the base, the lines for everything were longer, and tempers sometimes flared as hot as the weather. Cal was looking forward to when Camp Pendleton was finished and ready for the Marines.

“Dawson! This one looks pretty heavy there,” the post officer handed one letter off to one of the arms in the crowd. “All right there. Settle down boys! Dixon!”

“Expecting any mail today, Sir?” Lieutenant Owen Higgins asked as he joined the milling group of Marines.

Cal shook his head at his new company XO. “I never expect mail, but sometimes it shows up anyway.”

“No one special back home to hear from?” Higgins didn’t seem to believe it.

“Not a one.”

“Fisher!” The post officer called out Cal’s name and held up an envelope with a smile. “Looks like a woman’s hand to me. Lucky fella.”

“Oh really?” Higgins’ asked.

“Probably my mother.” Cal grumbled his way through the crowd, not that he believed it. If the name had been Fisher on the return address he wouldn’t have gotten teased.

“Hope she’s pretty!” someone hollered.

Cal snatched the letter and got out of the way, glancing at the name only after he had cleared the melee, *Mrs. Margaret Hudson*. What was Margie doing writing him instead of Reid?

“A letter from a woman?” a female voice asked curiously from behind him.

Cal jumped and looked up from the envelope to see Alice Williams standing there in her

army nurse uniform, smiling at him. “Alice, um hi.” *Oh, now that sounded smooth.* He supposed it still sounded better than blurting out *what are you doing here? I never thought I’d see you again.*

“Well there’s a fine hello,” said Alice, amusement evident in her eyes. “My apologies, Captain. I didn’t mean to fluster you.”

“Oh I’m not— I mean you just startled me.” Cal scrambled to recover, smiling back with as much confidence as he could muster. Women didn’t make him nervous. Why did Alice make him nervous?

“Apparently.” Alice’s eyes shifted to the letter. “So who is she?”

She thought he had a love letter, Cal realized. “Oh this? It’s just from a friend. I mean, his wife addressed the envelope.”

Beside him, Higgins was grinning broadly. “Friend of yours, Captain?”

Cal was rescued from an immediate response by the post officer’s shout of “Higgins, come get this package before it breaks my back!”

Higgins turned and pushed forward to get what really did look to be a good sized box.

Cal turned and walked away from the crowd. Alice fell into step beside him. “So, is this a coincidence, me running into you all the way out here?” Cal didn’t think Alice was particularly surprised to have run into him.

“I’m stationed here, remember? I did tell you.” Alice replied. “Well, in San Diego. I’m here with some of my unit picking up supplies from the port.”

“Why would you be at the naval base?”

“The same reason you are. All the military branches have to work together in the Pacific.

The Marines and the Navy may work together all the time, but the Navy doesn't have the capacity that the army does for transporting the injured, and giving them in-flight care until we can get them to a hospital."

"So you're a Nightingale."

"That's right." Alice nodded. "I'll be doing most of my work in the air, patching up everyone." Her cheerfulness seemed sincere, if slightly strained.

Cal paused by a bench along the sidewalk. "So, how've you been?"

She looked up at him. "Well enough, thanks. Duty keeps me busy. What about you?"

"The same, I guess." Cal hadn't given much thought to anything outside of duty since his reassignment. There just wasn't enough time. "I feel like we're really rushing recruit training. Maybe that's just because I know there's not much time. We're coming into this war so late." He sank down onto the bench.

Alice sat down beside him. "Were you still in Paris when the Germans arrived?"

"I was."

"I haven't heard from anyone I know there since the occupation."

"I'm sure they're fine."

"How can you be?"

"Because I don't want to think about the alternative."

A quiet chuckle escaped her lips. "You're odd, but I think you're right too." Alice looked up at the sky. "It's been a long time since I could be that much of an optimist."

"Oh, I'm no optimist," Cal shook his head. "It's just if I spend too much time thinking about it I get angry about it all over again."

Alice smiled at him and nodded at the envelope in his hand. “So, what does your friend say?”

Cal was grateful for the change of subject. He tore open the envelope.

Dear Cal,

I'm sure it's strange to hear from me instead of Reid, but everything has happened rather suddenly. Reid has been drafted into the Army, and left for training this morning. He promised to write, and when I know which unit he is with he made me promise to pass that information on to you.

Take care of yourself and don't do anything fool hardy. I worry about both of you. You're too heroic for your own good.

Sincerely,

Margie Hudson

Cal's stomach turned over and for a moment he felt like vomiting. He couldn't imagine Reid doing well in the military. The first thoughts in his head were images of his friend dead in the dirt.

Alice's soft hand touched his arm. “Calvin, are you all right?”

“A friend of mine's been drafted.” Cal stuffed the letter in his pocket and fished out a cigarette. “He's got a wife and little kids.” What would happen to Margie if Reid got killed?

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Alice replied. “Everyone has a family at home worrying about them.”

Cal reached for a match, but couldn't find one. He started searching other pockets. "I don't."

It was too late to take the words back. Alice had gone a bit pale herself. "I didn't know that."

"Of course you didn't. I don't talk about them." Cal couldn't find a match in his pants.

Her lips pursed. "I see. You don't get along with them."

"That's about the long and short of it, yes," Cal snapped, finally finding the small box in his shirt pocket. He tugged it out and opened it, no matches.

"I should go." Alice stood up.

"No, wait." Cal stuck the empty box in his pants with the letter, not entirely sure why he was telling her to stay. "I didn't mean to snap."

Alice looked back over her shoulder, her hair falling lightly over one shoulder. "I know that. I showed up at an awkward moment. It's okay. But I really do need to go. They'll be waiting for me to get back since our lunch break is about over."

"Right." She wasn't leaving because she thought she had upset him. He shouldn't have felt relieved by that, but he did anyway. "Look, I'm glad you took the time to say hello."

Alice's smile returned. "Me too. I hope your friend is all right." Then she hurried off.

Cal watched her go far longer than was good for him, until the hypnotic sway of her tiny waist vanished around the next corner. He hoped Alice's plane never got caught under fire. Images in his head of her dead were almost as disturbing as those of Reid. Maybe women didn't belong in the military after all. He didn't think he could stomach watching one die.

He turned and headed back towards the unit barracks. There was still training to be done

today, and he only had more reason than ever to want the war to end as soon as possible. The faster it was over, the fewer people he cared a lick about would have to die.

Cal was sure there were matches on the table beside his bunk.

Chapter Fifteen

“So is the boat named after a relation of yours?” Cal asked as he sat across from Lieutenant Higgins on the Higgins boat as it moved towards the ever-growing shores of Guadalcanal. The flat-bottomed troop carrier wasn’t graceful, but then it didn’t have to be. It moved with the water, jerking even as it rolled over the waves. The smell of the salt spray stuck in Cal’s nose.

“Neither, Sir,” said Higgins. He had a long, lop-sided kind of smile that made him look more like a country boy than Cal. “Though I’m told I got relatives on my momma’s side as helped make them.”

“Is your mother from Kentucky too?”

“Sure,” Higgins said. “But she’s got cousins that got the idea that they’d like to see the world and joined up. They’re good mechanics.”

“Good for us then.” Cal didn’t much care for the idea of getting dumped into the water by a faulty boat, not in enemy waters.

He just hoped that the months of training were enough for his men. Their objective wasn’t a simple one, and with their unit’s sudden change of target from Tulagi to Guadalcanal, he didn’t think the battle was going to be as quick as they had first assumed. Guadalcanal was

bigger, and they were supposed to take the airfields and major topographical features to hold the island. *Couldn't intelligence have found out about these airfields sooner?*

Cal didn't like the look of the beach. It turned almost immediately into a forest of palms, and other tropical trees he wasn't familiar with. Who knew how many Japanese soldiers were hiding in there?

He surreptitiously wiped the sweat on his palms off on his leg and tried to tell himself that his first time shooting at a real enemy was no different than training, except that this time he wanted the other side to die.

They disembarked on a long, white stretch of beach. Cal watched his company get in order under the instruction of his other officers and looked around. Not a shot had been fired at them. If there was anyone in those trees, they had no intention of making their presence known apparently, at least, not here.

The order came to move out, and they strung out in formation, marching off into the jungle towards the airfield. Cal kept a firm hand on his rifle, ready to drop and open fire at a moment's notice if they got ambushed. Around him, he noticed his soldiers doing the same. The soldiers with more experience looked grim but calm. The younger ones –many only teens– tried too hard not to look nervous.

The oppressive humidity weighed down on them as they tramped through the plants and splashed through creeks as they made their way uphill. Every once in a while, Cal thought he saw someone in the distance, but whenever he turned, there was no one. Not that he was inclined to believe that meant no one was there. Still, that wasn't at all what he had expected on his first military landing.

“Where are they?” Higgins asked quietly at one point.

Cal wondered if he should feel relieved that they weren’t under fire. Under other circumstances he might, but at the moment it made him wary.

They reached the airfield at the top of the ridge entirely without incident.

“Well if they just let us walk in, this isn’t gonna be much of a war,” a fresh faced private sniggered. “They might as well hang us up a sign now that says Welcome to Tokyo.”

“Shut your big mouth, Flynn,” his Sergeant grunted.

While Private Flynn didn’t look particularly chastised, he nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

“Keep an eye out,” Cal ordered. “There’s no way it’s going to be this easy.” There had to be an ambush on the island somewhere.

But after another hour, Cal seriously began to doubt it. Despite the tension in the air, nothing happened. Men patrolled the area, and Cal’s company held the ground to the West of the airfield.

Major Galloway joined them, striding away from a meeting with several other upper officers. He motioned to Cal and soon he and the other Captains were off to the side. “It looks like that’s it,” Galloway informed them. “The air field is ours. The buildings are empty and there appears to be no one in the jungle. Scouts have turned up nothing. We’re going to set up the base camp there,” he pointed to a relatively flat, clear area. “Have your men pitch camp. We will have another meeting this evening after I receive further orders.”

“Yes, Sir.” Cal and the others saluted together. His mind burned with questions, but now was not the time to ask. Besides, he doubted anyone else knew the answers. Why had the Nips just abandoned a perfectly good airfield?

* * *

The sound of bugs winging by Cal's face wasn't nearly as cheerful as the sound of a crackling fire would have been, but just because they hadn't had anyone try and stop them on the way in didn't mean the Marines, or the Army, needed to paint themselves as targets more than they already were.

Sprawled in his bedroll, Cal looked out at the sky that showed beyond the edge of the canvas. He was getting tired of jumping at shadows. An entire day without sight of the enemy, without the need to fire a shot, it just felt wrong. The general recruits, especially the youngest, seemed to think that it was the greatest thing since the invention of whiskey that they had taken the island without a fight. The more experienced soldiers, and the officers, weren't convinced that it wasn't going to turn into a bloody ambush. The fighting on Tulagi and the other islands had been reported to be brutal. It was odd for Guadalcanal to be so empty. Scout troops had found evidence of a few Japs who had fled the invasion, but nothing like the force they had expected.

Hence the lack of light. Cal could have used a smoke, but the idea of a sniper using even that glow to take his head off made it not worth the risk. He would have one in the morning, when it was less dangerous.

Cal hoped the engineering units got to work in the next few days. Being out under the open sky made him feel exposed, even with tents when he considered how effective the Japanese bombers were. Canvas didn't stop those.

To his right, Higgins snored away like a hack saw in hardwood. The other Lieutenants who shared the tent with them were far quieter. From the tent to his left, Cal heard nothing. Major Galloway must have been asleep too.

Other than the guards on duty around the perimeter, the majority of the men seemed to be asleep except for him. Cal shifted and rolled over, trying to find a more comfortable position. Normally he could sleep through anything. Maybe he was lying on a rock. Or maybe dinner hadn't set well. He wasn't fond of C rations. But neither seemed to be the right answer.

He was beginning to doze off when a sudden noise startled him awake again. It was wrong for gunshot. For a moment, Cal wondered if he had dreamed it, but another blast echoed off the hillside from somewhere in the distance, and he was no longer the only one awake.

Shouts were raised throughout the camps, and the boom came again, this time –glancing northward, Cal thought he saw something flash in the distance.

“They’re bombing the fleet!” someone shouted.

Cal leapt to his feet, though he knew there was nothing he could do to stop them the Japs from hitting the ships off the coast. He hadn't seen or heard any planes, but he looked up anyway. It was almost certainly part of the Japanese fleet. Still, he pushed through the mosquito netting around the tent, drawn towards the edge of the hill, where there was a clearer view back out across the foliage below to the beach.

He wasn't the only one. Cal was part of a small crowd up on top of the hill –most half dressed but still holding their rifles– watching as enemy ships bombed the heck out of theirs.

Major Galloway came up beside him, his expression grim. “Well, looks like we know where they’ve been hiding.”

* * *

“I can’t believe that moron just pulled out and left us!” Galloway stalked his tent like a tiger, hands clenched behind his back. “More than half our weapons, equipment, gone!”

“Do we have orders on what to do without the fleet support, Sir?” Cal asked. He was as angry as the Major. After last night’s defeat, it had seemed impossible that they were watching from the ridgeline when the transport ships pulled out, leaving them –rather literally– high and dry without the rest of their supplies. Moron was the nicest thing that coward of a transport commander had been called in Cal’s hearing this morning.

“Orders haven’t changed,” Galloway replied. “Hold tight, find any Japanese soldiers on the island and clear them out, and brace for invasion by sea.”

In one strike, the Imperial fleet had turned the American invasion into an American defense. “So you don’t think the island is empty either.”

“Of course it’s not,” Galloway snorted. “There’s too much of it we haven’t explored. It’s over seventy miles long and nearly thirty miles wide at this point, Captain. They’ll be in those hills and rocks back in the jungle. I’d bet my month’s pay on it, if I was a betting man.”

“And I wouldn’t bet against you, Sir,” Cal replied. “Do we know how long it will take to get reinforcements?”

“Not yet.” Galloway shook his head. “Depends on how quickly they can get past that blockade out there. We’ll likely have to wait for air based reinforcements.”

Which meant they had to get the Field complete without the engineering equipment that

had been on that damned transport. “We’ll do our best, Sir.”

For the first time that morning, Galloway cracked a smile. “Of course we will, Fisher. And that means we’ll succeed.”

* * *

Cal’s cheek stung and the alcohol-dipped cotton came away pink as the Corpsman set it down and pulled out bandaging. The rain dumping down around the edges of the tent and turning the ground to mud did little to improve his mood. “Aren’t you done yet?”

“Almost, Sir,” the man nodded patiently and didn’t speed up one bit. “You’re lucky it’s just a deep scratch.”

A derisive snort came from his left. Cal turned his to look.

“But I won’t be done if you keep looking away.”

Cal turned back, straining his eyes left instead to see a Major he didn’t know standing next to a cot on which an injured soldier was having his ankle bandaged. The man’s dark eyes met his without flinching. “Did you say something, Sir?”

“Not yet,” he replied with a condescending twist of the mouth. “But maybe your mother should have told you to be careful not to get your eye poked out by sticks.”

Cal felt his body go hot. It wasn’t his fault he’d run into the branch. He blamed the Jap ambush. “Maybe yours should have taught you to mind your own business.”

Any trace of a smile, sardonic or otherwise, vanished. “Watch your mouth, Captain. I won’t settle for insubordination.”

“Good thing I’m not under your command... Sir.” Cal looked back at the Corpsman who, wide-eyed, was finishing up the bandage on Cal’s cheek and pretending to ignore the

conversation.

“Then I’ll just have a word with your commanding officer.” He crossed the tent, looming over Cal, his short gray-blond hair seemed to bristle. “Who are you?”

Me and my big mouth. Cal sighed. “Captain Calvin Fisher.”

“He’s one of Major Galloway’s men, Major Richardson,” the soldier on the other cot piped up.

Richardson sighed. “Of course.”

“If you’d like to have a word about my man, Richardson, we can do it now.” Galloway said as he ducked under the rain flap into the tent.

“He’s a disrespectful ass, Galloway,” Richardson turned away from Cal to look at the newcomer. “What kind of discipline do you keep in your Battalion?”

“What do you expect from a wounded man?” Galloway replied with a shrug. “I’ll discipline him, Richardson.” He turned and looked at Cal with a very direct stare.

Cal swallowed his pride and to wet his throat. “I apologize for my rudeness, Major.”

Richardson gave a short, non-committal grunt. “Very well. It had better not happen again.” He turned back to his soldier. “See you in camp, Barnes.” Then he strode out into the rain as if it didn’t exist, or he couldn’t be bothered to acknowledge it.

Apparently Galloway really wasn’t done with him. He looked resigned more than angry, fortunately. “Did you have to lose your temper with Richardson?”

“I didn’t know who he was,” Cal said, standing up and gathering his uniform jacket.

“Thanks, Corpsman.”

“You’re welcome,” the man replied as he moved on to the next patient.

“Well he’s a stickler for command and respect, and most anything else by the book,” Galloway pointed out. “As you might have noticed.”

“He’s also a prick.” Cal put on his coat and followed Galloway out into the rain.

“That too,” his Major acknowledged. “But he’s still your superior, even if not directly. I’ll chalk this one up to a bad day, but I don’t put up with that kind of mouth and I won’t have anyone saying I do.” He eyed Cal sideways with a warning glint.

“I’m sorry, Sir.” Cal felt contrite this time. It had been a while since he’d let his temper get the better of him. “It won’t happen again.”

Galloway smiled. “You bet it won’t. If it does, I’ll make sure to let Richardson have you.”

It would be a hot day in Siberia before Cal let his tongue come unglued again, if he could help it.

Chapter Sixteen

“The good news, Captain, is that it isn’t malaria.”

Cal, half doubled over sitting on his cot, glowered at the Corpsman who looked at him with a deadpan expression in the sickly yellow lantern light. “Forgive my lack of relief.”

“Sorry, Sir,” Corpsman Greene replied. “You seem to have a mild case of dysentery.”

That explained the fever, abdominal cramps, and the fact that his digestive tract wanted to kill him. “What’s the treatment?”

“Drink a lot of water and let it pass.”

“Brilliant.” Cal grimaced as he stood up. “The Japs are landing troops right now and all

you can offer me is a glass of water?"

Outside, men marching rattled and clanked and thumped past.

"It could be worse," the Corpman shook his head.

Cal picked up his rifle and pushed past him. "Tell that to my intestines."

Greene followed him out into the ranks as Cal joined his men in the pre-dawn near darkness.

"Fisher! You've got the center of the Ridge," Galloway repeated the previous night's plan as he strode down the line.

"Yes, Sir," Cal barked back. Holding the center meant two things. One, they couldn't afford to fall, and two, it was going to be a blood bath.

* * *

By noon, Cal was beginning to wonder if being shot in the head would be more pleasant than suffering for several more hours in the dirt, his nostrils filled with the scent of cordite, and feeling like he wanted to crawl out of his fevered skin. *Damn it. Where's a latrine when you need one?*

There was no crawling away from a firing line for a latrine, no matter how bad he felt. Enough soldiers were lying in their tents far worse off than he was.

Cal ducked down, and reached for his canteen as he reloaded. Bullets first, then drink. Only a few drops met his lips as he tilted up the canteen for a swig. *Damn it.* Well, nothing for it now. Cal popped up again and resumed shooting. The Japs just kept coming. It didn't matter that

they kept mowing them down. Cal had heard they didn't surrender, but they poured over their own dead like ants, not even slowing down.

Half-deafened already by the rattling fire around him, Cal watched a line of Japanese fall, mowed down in front of him by a nearby machine gun nest. Cal capped the one who staggered to his feet, despite the slight shaking of his hands.

Below and in front of them, barely forty yards off, a terrible roar realized itself into a fresh line of Japanese troops, running, shooting, almost as if they were eager to die.

Cal calmed his pounding heart as it tried to rise in his throat. *Crazy or not, they're just men. They die like men.* "Hold the line!" he shouted out encouragement. "Don't let a man pass!"

Around him, Cal felt a rallying resurgence of confidence in his men. The volume of gunfire doubled as Cal leaned over, hoped no one saw him, and vomited into the dirt.

* * *

"Damned Japs! What are they, bats?" Higgins grumbled as he crawled back up to join Cal, who continued shooting into the darkness. Hours of shooting and still they came. Nightfall hadn't lessened the battle. Light or dark, the Japanese didn't seem to care.

"More like rabid wolves," Cal grumbled. Few animals would throw themselves into slaughter. He wasn't actually sure even a rabid wolf would be that insane.

"They're not going to stop coming are they?" Higgins pulled something out of his pack and shoved it in Cal's direction. In a flash from a nearby explosion Cal recognized the glint of an

open C-ration can and Higgins' canteen. "You should eat."

Cal shook his head. "Not until they're all dead. I really thought their fanaticism was exaggerated." Loyalty was one thing, this obsession with honor or whatever was just insane.

Higgins aimed his rifle and started firing. "Drink and eat... Sir."

"That an order?" Cal asked, dropping reluctantly down below the line of fire and reaching for the drink. Thirst burned like fire, and even lukewarm canteen water was as good as a fresh spring.

"A suggestion," said Higgins.

Despite the spastic pains aggravated by the introduction of something new into the system, Cal drained the canteen, and was still thirsty. He took one sniff of the biscuit and beans in the can and left it. His stomach could only take so much. He slid it under a palm leaf and hoped Higgins wouldn't see it. "Thanks," he said as he crawled back up into position. "I needed that."

Higgins nodded. "I know, Sir."

* * *

The men on the left of him were lying on their dead comrades to stay in position. To Cal's right, he could hear the groan of a wounded man. He knew more were dead. Twenty-four hours of dead and dying, when would it stop? It was beginning to look like it wouldn't, even though Cal knew that they had to run out of Japanese soldiers eventually. The entire island nation couldn't be charging them.

Apparently no one had told that to the Nips. Though Cal might be imagining it, he felt

like maybe they were slowing down. *That or I've started hallucinating.* More likely they were just gathering men for another charge, more waves of bodies to crash against American bullets.

If they held out that long, Cal had lost count of the number of men lost in even just his own Company. Dozens of men had died within his own sight and hearing, but they weren't all his.

There *was* a lull. The sound of enemy fire was slowing. Cal took advantage of the reprieve, closing his eyes for just a second. *Dear God, if I die in a puddle of my own puke and shit on this damned ridge I will never forgive you.*

"Praying, Sir?"

Cal opened his eyes and glanced over at Higgins. "Something like that." As he recalled prayers were supposed to be more penitent, or at least respectful. The best he could say for his was he meant it.

Out of the darkness came a roar from the heavens.

"What the hell?" Higgins looked up at the sky.

Training –and nausea— kept Cal from jumping in surprise. "Plane engines." Those were planes! Straining his eyes in the early dawn, he saw something swinging in over them.

Moments later, strafing fire lit into the trees below them. One plane, then another. Cal was almost sure they were the P-400s from Henderson's Field. "About damned time!"

Even though he couldn't see very well, the chaos erupting amongst the Japanese ranks was evident from the noise, the shaking of the trees, and the sounds of men running... and not all towards him.

From behind the line he heard Galloway's voice shouting orders to regroup, press the

line, regain ground. With a groan, Cal rose to a crouch. "Everyone forward!" This was the only chance they were going to have, and he refused to waste it.

* * *

"Those flyboys saved our asses." Higgins continued his glowing appraisal of that morning's fortunate delivery of ordinance from heaven as he moved around the tent.

His eyes hidden in the cool and dark of a wet cloth, Cal could only envision Higgins' lopsided smile. Lying still and quiet was the best feeling he'd had all day. Once the fighting had ended, the Japanese routed by the strafing planes and the Marines, he had been quite relieved to get back to the airfield. "Don't let them hear you say that," he said. "You'll ruin our reputation."

"Oh I won't tell them." Higgins promised. "But it'll be a great story to write my folks, and tell my nephews when I get back."

Cal could see that. "Of course you'll figure heroically in there somehow."

"Well of course."

"You alive enough to talk?" Galloway's voice entered the conversation.

Cal reached up and pulled the cloth off his eyes. "Yes, Sir."

"Don't get up," Galloway waved him down with one hand. The other arm was in a fabric sling. "After that battle we could all do with a rest. Take it while you can."

"What's wrong with your arm, Major?" asked Cal.

"Nothing critical." Galloway took a seat on the empty cot on the other side of the tent. I

thought you might like some good news.”

Cal looked across the intervening space. Higgins had apparently removed and replaced the small bowl Cal had left by his cot so he wouldn't have to run to a bush to throw up. *Talk about above the line of duty.*

“Once we get this damned Japanese fleet out of the way there's finally some real supplies coming our way.” Galloway drank from his own canteen. “The fighting almost certainly isn't over, but it looks like we've turned this whole fiasco around.”

So they could finally get the field properly operational and set up some real buildings. Cal liked that idea. “How long will we be here then?” he asked.

Galloway shrugged. “Another few months probably.”

Cal just hoped dysentery couldn't last that long.

Chapter Seventeen

1943

Even the swarming insects and the rain thundering on the metal roof couldn't ruin Cal's spirits as he shoved his way with the crowds into the wooden building to watch the USO show. He was just grateful he had been able to get an evening off in his schedule while the show was on the island. Entertainment on Guadalcanal was practically non-existent.

“I can't believe Artie Shaw's playing here, Sir.” Lieutenant Higgins grinned as he pushed in beside him. Everything was understandably crowded.

“Gives you something worth writing home about, doesn't it?” Cal shouted back over the

growing din as he pushed his way towards the front. Even music men joined the military in days like these.

Lower ranking men moved out of his way if they saw him. Plenty of others didn't, but given the King of Swing himself was playing, Cal chalked it up to excitement. Marines, Navy, Army, everyone was crammed into the building, making it feel even smaller than it was.

"Beer, Captain?" Higgins dropped down next to him on a bench, holding two bottles.

"Don't mind if I do, Lieutenant," Cal grinned. He claimed a bottle and took a slow sip. Out here, even bad beer tasted better than water, and definitely better than the hospital alcohol mixed with vanilla and pineapple juice he had been required to confiscate from some of the enlisted who got caught trying to steal more alcohol.

The talking died almost instantly when the band started up with "Any Old Times." Cal was more than happy to lose himself in the rhythm. It was like finding his center all over again. The island was full of beats –firing guns, blasting grenades, the tread of thousands of soldiers marching– but Cal's heart beat swing.

"Any Old Times" moved into "Everything's Jumping" into "Moonglow." Cal had heard them all on the radio before, but to hear them live, and watch every finger movement, every note coming out of the instrument and hanging in the air for his ears to catch, that was something special. Every nuance seemed sharper, the differences between this and the recordings evident in every flourish, every swell of sound coming out of that slim, black and silver instrument.

Cal finally pulled his eyes away from watching the instrumentalists' fingers and noticed that a very small dance space had opened up right there near the front. The tightness of the space was all right, given the few rare women to dance with were whichever Naval and Army nurses

happened to be have permission to be off the planes that had landed earlier.

Higgins looked like he wanted to jump right in, as eagerly as he was eyeing some of the nurses crammed into the dance space with a few lucky fellows.

“So why aren’t you out there?” Cal asked, elbowing him in the ribs.

“Me?” Higgins shook his head. “Naw. I’ve got worse than left feet, my hands are all lefts too.”

“That’s got to make directions interesting.”

“What about you, Sir?” Higgins grinned back at him. “You know the music, you’re good with the ladies. Or is that a rumor you started yourself?”

“Challenging a superior officer, Lieutenant?” Cal chided.

“No, Sir.”

“Then wipe that smile off your face.” Cal shook his head and stood. He wasn’t getting out of this one. Too many of his men were watching now for him to lose face. He finished off his beer and stepped over to the first girl who stepped off the floor with the end of the next song.

“Excuse me, Miss. Can I cut in?”

The blonde’s gaze flitted from his eyes to his insignia and back before she held out her hand. “Of course, Captain.”

Even with the limited room, Cal managed to show off a bit, tossing in a couple of the flashier steps he’d picked up in Paris that didn’t involve kicking anyone else in the shins in such tight quarters. Rosalie had taught him, and he wondered if she was doing all right. His partner was pretty good, if not as good as Rosalie had been. She kept up with him all the way through the number.

He was just turning to hand her back to the G.I. he'd borrowed her from, when another hand landed lightly on his arm. "My turn to cut in, Captain Fisher."

He knew that voice. He turned around.

"Well, aren't you going to ask me to dance?"

Had Alice's eyes always been that green? Cal turned and took her hand off his arm, letting it rest in his hand. It would be rude to refuse... and if he didn't then he would lose the opportunity to some other soldier. "Dance with me?"

Amusement lit up her face. "I guess that will do."

The first notes of "Dancing in the Dark" followed them onto the floor. Cal felt a nervous flutter in his gut. *You had to pick that one, didn't you, Artie?*

Alice didn't seem to find anything amiss with the romantic number. She followed his lead with a relaxed grace that spoke of plenty of practice and possibly other dance training. Cal wouldn't be at all surprised to find out that Alice had taken ballet as a little girl. That was what rich girls did, right?

Cal tried his best to think about the dance, the music, anything but the electric contact of skin on skin. It was dark all right, and they would definitely be *here and gone* with the end of the song. It was all true until the part about looking for a new love. There it was all wrong. New love was nothing but heartbreak waiting to happen.

The problem with slower numbers was it gave a man too much time to think and admire his partner. Even in bad lighting and military clothing Alice was pretty, though she looked less delicate. When they danced, her movements were as smooth as the Clarinet melody, though her hips were the swing of the brass.

“So you can sing and dance.” Alice smiled as the song ended.

They turned back towards Cal’s seat. Higgins was looking at Cal. “You sing?”

Cal shrugged. “*Je suis plein de surprises.*”

“Your accent has improved too.” Alice held his arm lightly.

“Thank you.” A sharp look was enough to make a few of the enlisted scoot over to make way for Cal and Alice. No one wanted to mess with an Officer. From that spot, they had a good view of the stage. “Hey, Higgins, you think you could scrounge up another round of drinks?”

“I’m on it,” Higgins promised as he vanished once more into the crowd.

Alice watched him vanish. “He’s very eager to please isn’t he?”

Cal nodded. “He’s a fantastic XO,” he said as the band struck up the next number. He watched Alice’s face light up as she immediately gave her full attention to Shaw and his band. Cal’s attention was torn between the two, until he decided that staring at Alice was probably not the most charming thing he could be doing, and it was making him miss too much. He gave himself over again to the rare entertainment opportunity in front of him, though he still couldn’t help remembering watching Alice play, and thinking that she might be almost as good.

Four songs later, the band took a break. “But we’re not done yet,” Artie promised. “Plenty more where that comes from.”

“That was amazing,” Alice said as the noise of the crowd increased around them. “Did you hear those runs in the last number? Did you see his fingering? Using that alternate B fingering was brilliant. Do you think I could talk to him after the show?”

“About technique?”

“Sure, why not?”

“You can certainly try.” Cal didn’t want to spoil her fun. Shaw was such a perfectionist he might just rather talk about his playing than listen to rabid fans. “Though I doubt you’ll get near him right now.” Men were standing, shuffling about finding drinks or trying to get out to use the privies during the break. “Why don’t we head outside for a little fresh air?”

“I wouldn’t mind,” she agreed, nearly shouting now to be heard.

Cal stood, but the pressing crowd was too thick to part even for a Captain. Alice stuck close to his side, and they made it half way to the door before they came into a clear spot of floor.

The reason for the space was evident as Major Richardson turned around and gave Cal a cool stare. Then his eyes flicked towards Alice. “Going somewhere in a hurry, Captain?”

“Just out for some air, Sir,” Cal replied.

“We aren’t in port, Fisher.”

“I’m well aware of that, Sir.” Cal bit down the urge to be rude. He didn’t like the derision in Richardson’s tone, or the implication he was making about Cal’s intentions, but Galloway wouldn’t save him if he heard of another infraction.

Richardson looked at Alice one more time as he moved away from them. “I’m not sure you are.”

“Cal, let’s go,” Alice tugged at his arm. “Don’t irritate him.”

Cal allowed himself to be led towards the door, still fuming inside. “All right. What was that about anyway?”

“Me, most likely,” she said softly.

“Why you?”

“The Richardsons have known my family for years. The Major likes tradition and thinks the whole world should follow the same rules. He knows about my history.”

It made sense that Richardson would be one of those traditionalists who didn't think highly of divorced women, no matter that it was her husband who had cheated. Some idiots would say it was the woman's fault he had felt the need to stray. “He's a fool then.” The fact that the insult was more Alice's than his only made him want to go back and tell the man off.

“He's a man of unbending principles.”

“You almost make that sound like a compliment.”

“He can't hurt me. Let's just forget about him.”

“I'd love to.” Cal stepped back out into the night. The smell of rich, dark mud and a damp mist hit his face simultaneously. There were no lights anywhere outside the building. As his eyes adjusted it was barely possible to see the wet, pitted sand at his feet, and the roots of tropical trees in the distance. Buildings were shadows in the mist. The rain still fell lightly, pattering on the roof.

“It's so dark.”

“You get used to blackout conditions,” Cal assured her. “Let your eyes adjust.” He moved away from the door and stood under the thin metal ledge of the roof. It was no use getting soaked if they didn't have to. He pulled out a cigarette and a match dry enough to light it. The walls of the building only muffled the sounds coming from inside.

Cal took another drag. As he exhaled, the smoke danced like ghostly butterflies before the wind resigned it to a drowned fate. “I was a little surprised to see you here tonight.”

“Me or all the girls?” Alice asked. “We unloaded supplies and loaded patients, but the

visibility's so bad tonight we're grounded until morning. No reason we shouldn't get to see the show while we're here, right?"

"It's dangerous here."

"No more here than sitting in a plane on the tarmac."

"I meant the whole island."

"It *is* a war." Her patient smile dared him to continue arguing the obvious.

"I just don't want to see you get hurt."

Alice looked out at the rain. "Is that concern for a comrade or is it just because I'm a woman?"

"Can it be both without being insulting?" Cal watched her pensive expression. "It's not that I don't think you could handle yourself." Even nurses had to qualify on the gun range. "But even the best soldiers can get killed, and I don't want to be the one explaining to your family why I couldn't keep you alive. Your Uncle would skin me."

"No he wouldn't." Alice smiled and her eyes turned back in his direction. "He might threaten to though. Daddy might actually do it."

"What does your father do, anyway?" asked Cal.

"He's an Admiral with the Atlantic Fleet."

Cal almost choked on the cigarette smoke he had just inhaled, coughing repeatedly. *Boy, can I pick them or what?*

"Is something wrong?" Alice moved closer. "Don't tell me his rank intimidates you."

"Cal got the coughing back under control. "No," he squeaked. "I was just thinking it would be just my luck to find a woman's father trying to lynch me again."

“Again?”

Shit. I shouldn't have said that. He had Alice's rapt attention now. “Let's just say my last real relationship didn't end well.”

“What happened?”

“I don't talk about it.”

“I told you my painful relationship story.”

Maybe the short version would be enough to satisfy her curiosity. Cal didn't want to start a fight over it. “We were involved and her old man found us out and trumped it up as a rape charge. He and my old man are political rivals, her father's the mine superintendent, mine is an independent town businessman. I think Kline, on top of being mad that I was with Valerie, figured that he could ruin my old man at the same time.”

Her eyebrows rose up into her bangs. “You weren't convicted, were you?”

At least she hadn't assumed the worst. “No. My attorney was fairly sure we could prove my innocence, but it would have meant putting Valerie up on the stand and dragging out the truth in front of the whole town. I didn't want her to get hurt anymore, so we worked out a no contest plea bargain, and I left.”

“You just let them walk?”

Cal wasn't sure what to make of the disbelief on her face. “It was tough enough on her,” he reiterated.

Alice shook her head. “You had a chance to set things right and protect your family name and you didn't do it because you didn't want to make *her* look bad? That's ridiculous.”

Cal dropped the last tiny nub of a cigarette into the mud and stomped on it harder than

was probably necessary. “I don’t see why.”

“I’m sure it looks like some noble gesture, but all you did was teach them both that they could get away with pushing you around,” Alice pointed out, hugging her arms against her in the chill air. “From what you’ve said, you probably gave this Kline guy the room he’d need to recover politically too if it still looked like maybe you did it. I don’t see why –Valerie you said her name was?— deserves any more sympathy than you do. She got involved with you, and then her father trumps up charges and she leaves you to rot!” Her voice got more emphatic with every line, until she was almost spitting. “At least, that’s what it sounds like.”

“Thanks for giving me room to defend my actions.”

“Well, did she try and stand up for you?”

“No.” Cal leaned back against the wall. “Actually, she broke it off before the trial.”

“Then why defend her? You’d have run another guy over the ringer for hurting a girl you knew, wouldn’t you?”

Cal fidgeted. Her accusations came uncomfortably close to his own misgivings about the mess he had tried to put behind him years ago. All of her arguments sounded familiar, and she stood there, waiting expectantly. “No, I wouldn’t.”

“So you let her off, and she knows she can get away with playing the victim.”

“How do you know she wasn’t one?” Cal rounded on her. “Just because I never hurt her doesn’t mean she wasn’t forced to do things she didn’t want. She was afraid of her old man.”

Alice looked unconvinced. “I have a pretty good idea of how women think.”

“Don’t you think you’re the one being unfair now?”

She relented, just a little. “All I’m saying is that you said she broke it off. If she cared

about you at all, don't you think she would have done *something* besides roll over and do what she was told?"

Cal shrugged. "What's she going to do, defy her old man?"

"Yes." There was new steel in her voice.

"Have you?"

"When I felt strongly about something, than yes." Alice's arms were no longer hugged together for warmth, but crossed under her breasts.

"He sounds pretty indulgent."

"Excuse me? Are my points somehow invalid because my father is a reasonable man?" Alice's finger jabbed him in the breast of his jacket.

Cal took a step backwards, hands up with the palms facing out. "That came out wrong. I just mean you're stronger than she was. Sleeping with me was about the only thing Valerie ever did her parents wouldn't like that I ever knew about. She was just a pretty little rich girl."

"Is that how you real feel about wealthy—"

A piercing tone cut through the air, rising higher and swelling as the air raid siren gained volume, drowning out the rain.

Alice closed her mouth, and inside the building behind them, shouts erupted as the whistling sound of a bomb in flight followed by a thud, and Cal braced as the concussion wave reached them and moved past in a rush. It was weak enough, he figured the bomb must have hit on the other side of the airfield.

In moments everyone outside was running, and men came pouring out of the building

beside them. The Bofors anti-aircraft guns opened fire, barking in the night as they tracked the sounds of planes in the air.

“Quick, to the raid shelters!” Cal grabbed Alice’s arm and pulled her in the right direction. Alice squeaked, but made no argument, keeping up with him despite the pace.

Another concussive wave shook them, and in the distance a red glow flickered eerily in the mist. Men vanished with surprising speed as they filled the nearest shelters, nothing more than deep trenches overlaid with logs with dirt piled on top.

The next wave caused Cal to stumble, and it was only a warning prickle on the back of his neck that made him throw himself to the ground, yanking Alice under him as a whistling reached his ears, and the hot blast of air ripped across his back, and a painful slam and a wet thud that sent a shock of agony through his right shoulder.

“Calvin?”

“Later.” Cal stood upright and pulled Alice up out of the muck. “Hurry.” He took off again, dragging her the last few feet to the nearest shelter, and staggering down the slanted earth into the shelter, where he pressed in among the couple dozen other men already there. Alice beside him.

“You’re hurt.” Cal couldn’t see her face in the dark, but she sounded grim. “Turn around.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“I smell blood.”

Cal felt blood, a warm trickle inside his uniform where something had lodged. “All right.”

Her hands were gentle as she reached up and found the object. “It feels like a splinter of wood,” she said finally. “A big one.”

“Leave it.” Cal turned around. “No good pulling it here.” All he’d do was bleed more and get the wound dirty. He could live with the pain.

“What now?” Despite the calm voice, Cal felt Alice’s hands shaking.

He turned and took them in his, and gave them a squeeze. “Now we wait. Either the Bofors will take care of them, or they’ll run out of bombs. Either way, it will end eventually.”

“How long will it take?”

“A few hours,” another soldier commented from beside them. “They tend to stay farther apart at night to avoid mid-air collisions.”

“Might as well get comfortable.” Cal lowered himself down to the ground.

Alice crouched beside him. He still held her hand. Then she sat closer, though they did not speak. Outside, the pounding continued.

* * *

“That’s better,” Alice said as Cal felt her remove the wet cloth from his shoulder. “It wasn’t nearly as bad as it could have been.”

Cal looked at the bloody splinter on the little table next to the cot he sat on in a corner of the crowded medical tent. His bloody uniform shirt lay beside him on the cot. The shard was only a couple of inches long. Given that one of the shelters had exploded, he was lucky it wasn’t worse. “It still hurt like hell.”

“At least it’s not infected.” Alice picked up a wad of gauze and the bottle of rubbing alcohol and stepped behind him. “Thank you.”

“First time I’ve been thanked for pushing a girl down in the mud.” Cal tried not to flinch as the gauze hit the cut in his back. His muscles twitched. “But you’re welcome. Are you all right?”

In a clean uniform and busy at her work, Alice didn’t look as if last night had bothered her at all. But Cal had felt her shaking. He knew better. “A little shaken,” she admitted, speaking quietly. “It’s not like practicing on the range.”

“No, it’s not.” The gauze was removed, and Cal relaxed as Alice’s soft hands bandaged him. They were a vast improvement over the rougher skin –and handling– of the Corpsmen.

“Does it make you wish you weren’t here?”

“No, not really. I wish none of us had to be here, but that doesn’t change the war.”

“Why become a military nurse? You could have been civilian.”

“I have a need to fix things, situations, problems... people. I can’t just sit by and watch, and many of the people I care about aren’t tucked away safely somewhere. What about you?”

“Me?” Cal reached out with his left hand for the canteen lying on the table and unscrewed it.

“Why the Marines? My father always said it takes a special kind of crazy to want to be a Marine.”

Of course he said that, he’s Navy...with a Marine brother. Cal shrugged gingerly. “At first, it was because I admired my Uncle. He was a Marine Officer, died in the Great War. Then because being in the military would get me out of the sticks. I’d see the places I could only read and dream about, and do something about the injustices I saw in the newspapers.” He wasn’t going to bring up the trial again.

“And now?”

“Now it’s personal.” Cal took a long drink from the canteen. “The world is no longer a series of abstract ideas laid on a map. France isn’t a web of lines and a pile of history books and a bottle of wine. It’s real. People I know and care about had their homes invaded, their lives threatened. Places that should have been filled with artists capturing beautiful summer days have been spoiled by the touch of hostile German boots. And I wasn’t allowed to do anything about it but stand by and watch.”

“We’re not fighting Germans here,” Alice stepped back around in front of him.

“No, but they’re still getting American lead in the teeth. We’re fighting the people who attacked us directly. This side of the war is just as important.”

“And so here we both are.” Alice smiled then. “I need to tend other patients.”

“And I must see to my men.” Cal grunted as he stood up and picked up his shirt and jacket. He saw Higgins then, returning with a new shirt in hand from Cal’s tent.

“See you.” Alice turned and walked off as Higgins reached them.

“Thanks.” Cal took the shirt, though he didn’t look away until Alice was out of sight.

Higgins was watching him, his expression oddly unreadable, but he didn’t say anything until they were outside. “You like her.”

“Yeah, I do.” Cal glanced sideways at his XO. Higgins looked uncomfortable.

“Maybe it isn’t my business, but I heard things, from some of the army fellas.”

So that was it. “I know she’s divorced, Higgins.”

“That don’t concern you?”

“Should it? She said it wasn’t her fault, and I believe her.”

“Well she *seems* right nice,” Higgins agreed. “But I just thought you ought to know. It could be trouble if you got involved.”

It was true, unfortunately. Cal ran the risk of losing chances at promotion, or prime career posts, if he got involved with a woman with a reputation, however undeserved. Richardson’s reaction –and he knew her family– was a prime example. “Well, what do you think I should do?”

“I’m not really sure, Sir.”

Cal shrugged, doing his best to seem casual about the situation. “Don’t worry about it, Lieutenant. We’re in the middle of a war. I don’t have time to get involved with anybody. Later can take care of itself.”

Higgins nodded. “Well as I can see, I think she likes you too.”

They were nearing their camp, finally. Aside from a few knocked down tents, it looked like they, at least, had been spared a direct blast. Men moved in the early morning light, ghosting through the remaining mist as they put things back in order. “I need coffee, Higgins. The strongest you can find.”

As he had hoped, Higgins dropped the subject. “Yes, Sir.” He hurried off.

Cal spotted Galloway over by one of the tents that was quickly going back up, and changed direction. The war was now. Anything else really could be decided later, as long as he lived long enough to think about it.

Chapter Eighteen

Cal finished cleaning his M-1 and set it down on the bed beside him. *I've spent enough time sleeping with you lately to make any woman jealous.* Too bad it wasn't soft like one. He put his cleaning kit and rifle away properly and then crossed the path to Galloway's tent for the nightly strategy meeting.

"Coffee, Fisher?" Captain Lauria of A Company offered as he entered.

Cal took the small cup gratefully as he joined them at the table. "Thanks, Lauria."

Galloway turned away from private conversation with the other two Captains and smiled.

"All right, let's get down to business. We've got Japs to shove off into the ocean on that west end of the island. But first, I've got a little bit of good news. We're getting shipped out of here. We'll be off Guadalcanal and in New Zealand by Valentine's."

Good news was an understatement. "New Zealand? Well that should be interesting." Cal hadn't seen the training grounds in New Zealand yet. Though compared to this tropical 'paradise' he figured it had to be better than the Solomon Islands.

"I been there once," Captain Heaney piped up. "It ain't much different from home, unless you's from another planet or something."

"Yeah, but do they have the essentials?" Lauria asked.

"Sure," Heaney said. "They got women and booze and all the other comforts of home."

"Hey, there we go!" Lauria gave Cal a friendly thwack in the chest. "Sounds like your kind of place. Mine too, come to think of it."

He tapped the map on the folding table between them. "So let's talk about how we're going to accomplish that task before you start figuring out how you're going to score your next

date.”

* * *

The part of Area of Operations where Cal’s units were camped during their time in New Zealand was fairly quiet when Cal returned from the nearby town. It was well past dark, and the only light came from under the roofs of tents. Several were dark, the men who slept in them out enjoying their first real freedom in months.

Despite the hour, Cal got back from the local town bar earlier than many of the men who had liberty that night. The blonde he had been eyeing in town had gone off with another officer, and he had drunk enough to get a warm feeling, but not too drunk to be capable of walking back to the Area. It was probably better to get back and sleep it off before morning.

Cal paused outside Major Galloway’s tent. The light was on and he heard paper shuffling inside. The man was obviously too fond of his work. He could have sworn Galloway had the night off. “Evening, Major,” he said as he poked his head in past the canvas flaps.

Galloway looked up from his little officer’s desk. As Cal had suspected, he had a small mountain of paperwork in front of him. He was paused, mid sip of something in a bottle, when he looked at Cal. “Evening, Fisher. You’re back early.”

“I know when I’ve had enough.” Cal chuckled. “It’s no fun shouting at men at o-dark-thirty with a head worse than theirs.”

Galloway nodded. “That’s the truth.”

“You had liberty tonight. What are you doing working?” Cal knew the work often couldn’t wait, but Galloway was usually on top of things.

The Major gave a casual shrug. “Sometimes it’s nice to have the place to myself while it’s quiet.”

“I guess I can see that.” For once the place wasn’t full of men talking, making jokes, or shouting orders. A quiet murmur from nearby was the only evidence of people in the area. It was definitely a change after six months on Guadalcanal. “Am I disturbing you then?”

“No. I was about finished,” Galloway admitted. Then he turned and gestured to the other folding wooden chair he kept in the tent. “Why don’t you join me? Want a drink?”

Cal took the offered seat but shook his head. “Any more and I really will be drunk.”

“Not on my stuff.” Galloway looked amused for some reason, picking up a second bottle from the ground next to his desk and holding it out into the light from the gas lantern.

Cal almost laughed when he saw the Coca-Cola label. “Funny, I figured all you Scots preferred whiskey.” He leaned over and accepted the bottle.

Galloway’s smile dropped for just a moment as he handed the bottle over, and his nostrils flared. By the time he was upright, he was smiling again. Cal wondered if he had imagined it, but no, he had seen that reaction before, when his father used to get in his face about drinking under age. But why would Galloway make the same expression. “I do. That’s why I’m drinking this.”

Well that was crooked logic. Cal’s mouth was half open when he shut it again. He thought he understood. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“It’s a blessing you don’t,” Galloway picked up his own pop again. He certainly swigged it like whiskey.

It sounded like there was a story behind that. Cal didn’t want to pry, but he figured he might as well ask. If Galloway didn’t want to talk about it, he would just tell Cal to mind his own

business, right? “Did it get you in trouble?”

“Nearly.” Galloway leaned back in his chair. He looked older in the stark lamp light.

“Almost got me discharged years back, but it’s not a unique or particularly interesting story.”

“Actually, Sir, I’d like to hear it if you’re willing.” Cal liked the Major. He was one of the least obnoxious men of his rank Cal had met, and a man who could command respect without shouting for it was rare enough. It was hard to see him as a drunk.

Disbelief lasted only a moment. Galloway nodded. “All right then. Really there isn’t much to it. I joined up near the end of the Great War, I was barely seventeen at the time and I thought I could do anything.” even make the Germans shit diamonds if I scared them enough.”

Cal couldn’t help but smile. “That’d hurt.”

“That was the idea,” Galloway said. “Only I turned out to be like so many other promising young officers, brave, well trained, and damned near immortal.” He finished the Coca-cola and put it down, picking up another out of the shadows. “The problem is, reality doesn’t see us that way. Life’s rough, and trying to be perfect can get men in trouble in other ways. Little mistakes ate at me. It was a lot of things, and it wasn’t all of a sudden. One day I just remember waking up in my own bed after a night on the town, eyes both black and blue, head spinning, and my Company XO telling me he’d pulled me out of a bar fight.”

“And you weren’t brought up for court martial?”

“No one ever told my superiors.” Galloway shook his head. “Turned out he’d been following me around and lugging me back for months, and I’d been too intoxicated to notice or really remember.”

You had to be a real idiot not to notice that, Cal thought but wasn’t stupid enough to say.

He figured what Galloway really meant was that he hadn't really cared. "So what sobered you up?"

Galloway's sad smile did not reach his eyes. "Ironically enough... my wife left me."

He was right. Cal couldn't see how having a woman walk out would make any man drink less.

His confusion must have been clear in his expression. Galloway nodded. "I know. Katherine moved out and she took both our kids with her. She told me if I sobered up, she'd come back, but not before."

Galloway was quite the storyteller. Leaving it there, Cal felt like he had to ask the inevitable question. "Did she?"

Galloway's smile returned. Instead of a verbal reply, he pulled out a much-worn photograph and handed it over.

The woman in the picture couldn't be older than her mid-thirties, if that. There was a boy, about nine Cal guessed, looking uncomfortable in a nice suit and hair combed within an inch of its life. A curly-haired girl just a bit younger grinned beside him, and in Katherine's arms was a baby in a boy's jumper. "How old is the little guy?" It seemed like a safer question than asking how long they had been separated.

"Turned one right before we deployed," Galloway replied with a hint of what Cal recognized as real fatherly pride. The photo vanished back into the Major's pocket. "I'm one of the lucky ones though. A lot of fellows don't have women as forgiving as mine." He stopped then, and snorted. "Damned I'm preachy."

"Yes, Sir. I mean... you're lucky." Cal caught himself. "Your wife sounds like a

wonderful woman.” There had to be something really there to get a couple through something like that. He had no idea how to find it.

“Oh, she is.” Galloway returned to his soda pop. “I’d like to keep her.”

It was no wonder Galloway declined to go drinking with the men. The next time one of them joked that their Major was too much of a prick to have fun, Cal was going to give them a good chewing out on respecting their superiors. Cal took a swig of soda. “Thank you, Sir. I’ll keep this quiet.”

“I know.” Galloway set his drink down and started organizing papers and putting them away. “Next time I’ll try and pick a lighter topic to burden you with.” It was a clear but not impolite dismissal.

So Cal was welcome to intrude on his peace and quiet. He stood up and stretched, feeling his back pop. He grinned, holding up his bottle. “And next time, I’ll buy the drinks.”

Chapter Nineteen

Cal’s rifle was still hot from the range when he heard the shout for mail call. The soldiers with him hurried their pace and passed him quickly. Cal didn’t bother to hurry. News, if there was any, wouldn’t be any better or worse if he rushed.

“Fisher, get over here!”

Cal looked over at Captain Lauria. “What is it?”

“Mail call.”

Cal pushed his way through the crowd and took the letter. Unless something had changed, it had to be from his mother or Margie. The return address told him it was Margie. That was good! Maybe she had news on Reid. “Thanks.” Cal turned to fight his way against the swarm of eager men.

Lauria followed him. “So who is she?”

“My best friend’s wife.” Cal didn’t want the other guy thinking the wrong thing. “He’s in Europe, and she’s my best source of news.”

“How lacking in scandal.” Lauria shook his head.

Cal ripped the end of the envelope and pulled the letter out as he walked back to the officer’s tent.

Dear Cal,

I hope this letter finds you well. I just got a telegram that says Reid has been injured in France. The letter says too little, except that he’s being discharged and that they are sending him home as soon as he is well enough to travel. I thought you would want to know.

I would like to be able to give Reid good news of you when I see him. Please write back, and pray for his health.

Take care,

Margie Hudson

“So what’s it say?”

“That you’re nosy,” said Cal, tucking the letter in his shirt pocket. His chest tightened.

Reid shot, but alive and discharged, it was a backwards blessing.

His fellow Captain put a little swagger in his step. “Wouldn’t you like to know how badly Miss Grace Bennett misses my company?”

Of course it was a love letter. “No, not really.” Cal ducked into the tent and pulled out the cleaning kit for his rifle.

Lauria dropped his pack on his cot and did the same. “Something happened to your buddy, didn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“Is he dead?” Lauria sat down.

“No.”

“Captured?”

“No.”

Lauria looked at Cal over the rifle on his lap. “Then he’s no worse off than we are.”

He had a point. Cal kept cleaning the barrel. “Better off,” he acknowledged. “He’s going home.”

“Oh well you should have said that sooner. Now I’m jealous.”

“I’m not,” said Cal. “I’m not sure it’d be worth getting shot bad enough to be discharged just to go back.”

“Speak for yourself.” Lauria shrugged. “The way you tell it you’ve got no one waiting.”

“That’s correct.”

“So what about this buddy of yours and his wife? You get letters from your mother too don’t you? Shouldn’t they count for something?”

Cal rammed the cleaning rod down the barrel a little harder than he intended. “Shouldn’t you mind your own business?”

* * *

“Not sure I’ll ever get used to November being summer,” Higgins commented as Cal walked beside him up the hill to the mess.

“You have something against warm weather?” Cal asked. The white and yellow wildflowers along the road waved and tossed in a light breeze. “There’s probably snow on the ground by now back where I’m from, or getting close to it.”

“My insides still tell me winter harvests are in and we ought to be having hot cider and snuggling under blankets.” Higgins’ lopsided smile took on a mischievous glint.

“I don’t care what time of year it is, I’m not snuggling under a blanket with you, Lieutenant.”

Higgins chuckled.

“Hey, Captain Fisher, wait up.”

Cal paused and turned on the path. A Sergeant was trotting towards him. “What is it?”

“Galloway wants you at command immediately, Sir.”

Lunch would have to wait. “I’ll be right there.”

As soon as Cal saw the crowd gathered into the tent, he knew lunch would be delayed by

quite a while. "What's going on?"

Galloway wasn't the highest ranking man in the space. Every Captain, Major, and Lieutenant Colonel in the Regiment was there. Colonel Kane stood in the center. "We have orders," he replied, "And we're all going to get a chance to see how well our amphibious assault practice is going to pay off."

"Where are we invading, Sir?"

"The Gilbert Islands. Second Division is assigned to take the Tarawa Atoll. The Army will be handling the Makin Atoll. They're going to be bombing the island from the air before we get there, sending planes off the Ellice Islands and shooting from the fleet, so the Japs should be softened up some by the time we hit the beach."

Cal followed Kane's hand as he gestured to the relevant points on the map up on the board against one wall of the tent.

"When are we shipping out, Sir?" Galloway asked.

"Two days," said Kane. "Tell your men and be ready to ship out."

Cal could feel the air of confidence among the officers when the meeting finally split up. The island with the airfield was tiny. Compared to Guadalcanal it was nothing more than a pin prick. How hard could it be to take?

* * *

By the time Cal made it to the mess Higgins was finished eating. He didn't look surprised when Cal finished telling him the news. "About time we saw some more action, Sir."

“That’s what we’re here for.” Cal dug into his food. It didn’t matter that New Zealand was a more pleasant place to be, they had all signed up for a war, and the fighting hadn’t stopped the last few months just because they weren’t in the thick of it. “I hope the new boys can keep up.”

“They’re eager enough,” said Higgins. “And they train well.”

“They do.” It wasn’t their training that Cal worried about. “But they haven’t seen any real fighting yet.”

Higgins nodded. “True enough. But from what you said, they may not see much of any at Tarawa either.”

There was that. “Then maybe I’m worrying for nothing, but I’d rather worry needlessly than think it a sure thing and get a nasty surprise.” That had happened too many times in his life. If everything was looking good, it was almost always sure to be a trouble.

* * *

In the darkness, Betio Island in the Tarawa Atoll was truly invisible. Cal had known it was small, but the island was barely two acres in size, and almost entirely flat. It was more of an over-glorified sand bar protected by coral reef.

“How are we supposed to hit something we can’t see?” grumbled Higgins.

“Oh we’ll see it, when we fall out on top of it.” Cal squinted into the dark and spray as the landing boat crossed over the reef that protected the island. It was nearly dawn.

Out of the night a blur resolved into a pillar of smoke. Dawn light broke across the face of the sea, sending out a thousand shimmering specks and a rosy blush above them. The smoke became clear.

In the boat with him and in others, Cal felt the mood lift around. The navy had been bombarding the island by sea all night. It looked like they weren't going to have to fight this one after all. The island was a shambles.

“Looks like our training was a lot of preparation for nothing.” One soldier commented.

They moved closer, until they were crossing Tarawa Lagoon, and the sun continued to rise, gracing them at last with a full view of the island.

Bent and shattered palm trees covered most of the strip of sand. Boats with the scouts and snipers and assault engineers swept ahead of them towards the pier. The last thing they needed was Japanese shooting at the amtracs and boats as they hit the beach, which seemed likely depending on how many men were left alive to offer any resistance.

The battleships were still firing shells at the island. Cal watched them loft into the air, sailing up and over, and coming down again—

—in the water on the other side of the island.

“What the hell?” He pulled out a pair of binoculars and stared through them. No, the shell had missed completely. So did the next one. A third barely hit the far beach, blowing sand into the air in a useless plume. “They're not hitting the island.”

“What do you mean?” asked Higgins.

Cal was too angry to spit. Surely his superiors had already seen it by now as well. “The fleet's in too close. Bombardment my ass, those bastards aren't hitting a damned thing.” And if they weren't hitting the island, they hadn't slaughtered the Jap soldiers on the island either. “So much for the bravery and brilliance of the Navy. Get ready to fight boys. That island's not populated with ghosts!”

Machine gun fire from the shore started before they hit the beach.

Chapter Twenty

Cal's heart pounded in his chest as he dove into the nearest fox hole and covered his head as the top of the shallow sand-hill exploded, and sand rained down around him, stinging and sifting into places he really never wanted to consider having sand in them. He was getting really tired of close calls. As soon as the storm of grit stopped he turned around, bringing his rifle to bear on the hilltop. The Japanese machine gun nest was gone, along with the American soldiers who had gone up the hill with the charges.

"This is nothing but a royal snafu," Galloway's familiar grumble came from the sand as he crawled up behind him, radioman in tow, and they both started shooting. "Stuck on the damned reef. Half our officers dead, who knows how many men. This isn't a firefight it's a slaughter in raining lead."

Cal reloaded his M-1. He'd be out of ammo in another couple of hours, if it took that long. "Do we have any new orders?"

"Kill the Nips." Galloway set off a series of blasts as Japanese helmets poked up over the hill. Two fell backwards. The others ducked. "Have your men hold here, Fisher, however many you have left. Not everyone's landed yet. We should have reinforcements eventually."

"I admire your confidence, Sir."

"I wouldn't," Galloway replied stiffly. "I think of it as foolish optimism."

Cal took aim and blasted a Nip off to whatever heaven or hell he believed in. "As long as it wins battles."

* * *

“Well that’s genius,” Galloway griped as he put up the radio receiver.

“What?” Cal asked, rubbing grit out of his red and tired eyes. Twenty-four hours to go ten yards was already not his idea of great strategic planning.

“They never landed the 1/8!”

“They what?” There were still Marines waiting to land? “How did that happen?”

“Something that will probably involve a lot of yelling in officers later.” Galloway shook his head. “But they’re coming in now on the center beach.”

Thank god they still had reinforcements, however screwed up the commands had gotten to keep them back that long. Cal paused to sip from his canteen. The center beach meant they’d come right—

—Water spewed from his mouth as he almost choked on it. “Do they know about the reef?”

Galloway shook his wet hand. “Well of course they do. Why wouldn’t they?”

“They were left on the ocean for an entire day.” Cal could see more than one piece of information being forgotten. Bigger mistakes had already been made.

“Well we should be able to see them from here.” Galloway turned and squinted across the white sand back along the beach to the water.

Cal turned and did the same. He could just see boats –boats, not amtracs– moving up to the reef. Shit! There was no way the draft would be shallow enough for them to get over!

The boats slammed into the reef at full speed, and stopped dead. There was nothing Cal could do but watch as the boats lowered their ramps, and the Marines jumped into the water and, like many before them, waded across the waist-deep lagoon towards the shore.

Cal felt sickly prescient. The men waded closer, weapons raised above the water. As soon as they were within range, Japanese machine guns opened up with a barrage that filled the air with a wall of sound as much as bullets.

The Marines fell one row after the other, slashed to ribbons as they tried to make their way to shore. The water turned muddied red as they died.

* * *

Cal kept his head low and watched the engineers move up over the top of the large covered bunker sunk into the ground below his position. He did his best to ignore the dead body he was using as cover, his M-1 propped up above him.

The tang of blood in his mouth from an interior cut mingled with the salt of sweat. “You think this will work?” he asked softly.

“If flamethrowers don’t work, we have bigger problems.” Galloway kept his own rifle trained at the exit they were covering. If this worked, any Japanese who survived the blast would have to come out in the open.

The engineers paused, and the one holding the flamethrower aimed it straight down and opened it up. A gout of flame vanished into the ground into a shaft of some sort.

Muffled screams and shouting in rapid Japanese came out of the dirt.

Galloway adjusted his aim slightly. "Here we go."

Doors hidden in the sand came open as men came charging up out of the ground, many shouting, most of them still carrying weapons, though only a few brought them to bear before the tank twenty feet to Cal's left open fire, cutting them down like a scythe through underbrush.

Cal fired into the chaos along with the line of Marines waiting all around the mound to keep as many Japs from escaping as possible. Aim, fire, and repeat. He didn't think about the enemy, he didn't hate them, though he was mad as hell for every man he had lost on this strip of sand.

He fired until they stopped coming out of the ground, until every man who had come out the main entrance towards them lay dead and the tank had stopped firing. "Well that was successful." He turned to look at Galloway, who was no longer there. "Major?"

Cal turned around. Galloway lay on the sand a few feet back down the embankment. *Damn it!* "Corpsman!" Cal bellowed for assistance as he slid down on his heels and crouched beside Galloway's still form. Blood was soaking through his uniform already from just to the right of his stomach. "Stay with me, Sir." *You didn't survive this long just to leave your wife and kid did you?*

Galloway's eyes fluttered. His gasping breath gurgled. "I—"

"I'm here, Captain." A Corpsman dropped down beside them in the sand.

Cal sat back on his knees. "Too late for him though, I think."

The Corpsman nodded somberly, though he felt for a pulse anyway and looked at the wound. "Stomach and the lung punctured."

Cal swallowed the lump in his throat. "Where's the radioman?"

“Not sure, Sir.” The Corpsman shook his head.

It wasn't the man's problem. “Back to work then.” Cal crouched and hurried along the line towards the cluster of his men that remained. For the moment the area was clear of Japanese, if they wanted to regroup, now was the time to push their temporary advantage. Cal had no intention of losing now. No one who died here would die in vain. Not even him, as long as the attack ended in victory.

* * *

Cal heard no tears as he stepped among the dead, heading for the beach. In the early morning light, the shadows hid bits of the carnage, but he still knew it was there. Thousands of bodies littered the island, though they were mostly Japanese. Desperation had killed them. Worse than the Canal, they had thrown themselves at the American in the night despite inevitable defeat, dying rather than offering any kind of surrender. They didn't have to die, and for Cal, that just made it worse. He couldn't say he hated these men, but he doubted he would ever understand that part of their culture.

Something fluttered in one of the Japanese soldier's hands. Cal reached down and pried the slip of paper from stiff, dead fingers. Underneath the bloody thumb print he found a photo. It was grainy, but it showed a very pretty Japanese girl –Cal could barely call her a woman– holding a tiny, frowning baby.

Was there really a place where the women didn't want their men to come home if living might mean dishonor? Margie had to be relieved to have Reid home, even though he'd been shot

and couldn't finish out the war. Cal's mother would rather have him home than here at all. He could tell in her letters even though she never said it.

Galloway's wife would probably cry. Even though the Major hadn't spoken much more about his family, after going through so much to fix himself and his family, his death seemed like a real waste.

Wait, no, not a waste. Cal shook himself sharply. A shame, perhaps, but he had died a Marine doing his duty. There was little glory in it, but it was still a respectable end.

No. No matter how strange the Japs were, Cal couldn't imagine that deep down anyone would rather not have their loved ones home. He bent and slipped the photo into the pocket of the dead man's uniform. It belonged there.

Standing, Cal looked around. The wounded were being hauled to the water and dragged back out past the reef to boats on long, inflatable craft. There were a lot of wounded. The dead were being cleared away separately. He continued his path towards the ship towards which his remaining men were headed.

As he waded back across the lagoon, Cal wondered how much reshuffling –and how many shotgun promotions– would be needed to fill in all the holes that one 'little' battle had left in the Division command structure.

* * *

“I swear to never say a bad word about New Zealand again so long as I live.” Higgins crossed his heart just a bit too solemnly to be taken seriously. “It's nice to be back.”

Sitting on his cot, looking out at the utterly non-threatening landscape beyond the tent,

Cal spent his first uninterrupted moments of peace since they had arrived enjoying not having to move. He was of a mind to sit down and write letters to his mother and Margie, but that would require getting up. “Good for you, now sit down. Watching you stand there is making me tired.”

“Yes, Sir.” Higgins dropped down onto the little folding stool in the middle of the tent.

“You planning to go into town tonight?”

“I might.” Cal hadn’t given much thought to the liberty they had been offered for the evening. For once, he was tempted to spend it sleeping.

“Only if there’s time after tonight’s briefing.” A shadow fell across Cal’s lap.

Who? Cal looked up to see who was standing in the door of his tent. “What briefing is that, Sir?” he asked stiffly.

Major Richardson looked down at him. “The Battalion officer’s meeting I’m calling for this evening. With so many new officers, it was prudent.”

A feeling rose in Cal’s throat. It wasn’t quite dread. “Understood, Sir.”

Richardson looked around the tent. “There will also be camp inspections tomorrow afternoon.” He turned to go. “I expect everyone to meet the usual standards.”

Cal loosened his jaw. “They will, Sir.”

“We’ll see.” Richardson continued down the row.

Cal tried to sit still until the man was out of hearing, but ten steps down the road he gave up and stood. “Excuse me, Major, can we talk?”

Richardson turned around, looking like he expected an argument, and was already tired of it. “You may speak, Captain.”

“You’re our new commanding officer.”

“I thought that was obvious, Fisher.”

“Yes, Sir.” He was not going to lose his temper this time. Cal met Richardson’s cool gaze. “I just wanted to welcome you to the Battalion, Sir, and let you know that all of the men here will meet your standards.” He wasn’t much of a Marine if he couldn’t work under whoever was put in command over him. He liked Galloway. Even if he couldn’t learn to like Richardson he couldn’t let personal friction strain working relationships. He hoped the other man didn’t hold a grudge.

Richardson stood, unmoving, for several seconds. “Thank you, Captain. I don’t doubt it. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to speak with Colonel Kane.”

Cal watched him go, then turned back towards his tent. He hadn’t intended to do that, but it felt right. Now all he had to do was eat his temper for the rest of the war.

Chapter Twenty-One

1945

The whiskey in his glass was a far cry better than anything that had graced Cal’s lips in months. The little Wellington club was really jumping, he thought as he sat at a side table and looked around. For once he had managed to ditch Higgins, who seemed to have decided Cal needed his XO around even when a good chunk of the Company had liberty. Maybe he’d decided the raw recruits flown in from the States needed more watching. Whatever the reason, Cal was free to lurk in the corner and not be bothered by petty details.

The place was packed with locals as well as Americans, mostly crowding the dance floor until Cal couldn’t imagine getting out on it for anything more than a slow waltz. That was

probably why that was most of what the band seemed to like playing.

Several of Cal's men were there, and other soldiers out for a night while they could get it, but not many that Cal knew. He certainly didn't know any of the girls, though a couple smiled in his direction. None of them were perfect, but they were all beautiful and besides, how many perfect women were there in the world? Each of the ones he eyed back had her own qualities. One had lovely green eyes, another had soft brunette hair.

They all reminded him of Alice.

When did they stop reminding me of Valerie? Cal finished his glass. He had time for another.

"Captain!"

Cal looked up and spotted a man in uniform waving his direction through the crowd. He recognized the Lieutenant. "What is it, Dubbert?"

Lieutenant Dubbert pushed through to his table.

"Word from the Major," he replied, looking harried. "We're shipping out in the morning. They want everyone back from liberty tonight."

So much for time off. "All right then. Pass the word and have everyone round up their men."

"Yes, Sir. Already on it." Dubbert saluted and hurried off.

Cal headed outside. He needed to find Higgins and make sure things were in hand before heading for the train back to their Area of Operations. If they were shipping out, he had a lot of work to do.

* * *

The Area was orderly chaos as Cal strode down the dirt row between the tents in the pre-dawn light. Men were packed, camp was being broken down, and in three hours they would be on ship and heading for a destination Cal had been told would not be revealed to them until they were well at sea.

Almost everyone seemed to be ready, until Cal reached a fully pitched tent with little activity. The men standing beside it looked uneasy. "Where's Sergeant York?" Cal asked the nearest corporal.

"We haven't seen him, Sir," the corporal replied. "He had liberty last night."

"Did he make it on the train?"

"We don't know, Sir."

"Tell him he's to report to me as soon as he shows up." This was not news he needed this morning. York was one of his best Sergeants.

"Yes, Sir."

Cal made it down to the end of the row on his inspection when the man in question came up at a run, and snapped to attention when he looked like he ought to be doubled-over panting from the run. He was breathing deeply. "Sergeant York reporting, Sir."

"I see that, York. Care to tell me why you're so late?"

"I missed the last train, Sir," York replied. "A local fella was nice enough to give me a lift to the next town from here, and I ran the rest of the way."

"That's twenty miles, Sergeant."

"Yes, Sir."

No wonder the man was blowing. He couldn't be faulted for trying, and it was the only

time Cal had ever had any reason to fault York for anything. “Get packed, Sergeant. You have half an hour.”

York saluted, relief clear on his face. “Yes, Sir!”

Cal turned to head back down the row.

“What was that, Captain?” Richardson approached him, scowling.

“Nothing serious, Sir.” Cal faced the Major. “All men are now accounted for.”

“That man was late.”

So he’d witnessed the exchange. “I am aware of that, Sir.”

“So why didn’t you reprimand him?” Richardson asked.

“He’s a good man, Sir, and we have a deadline to meet.” Cal kept his tone carefully civil, though he couldn’t believe Richardson cared that much about protocol. There were better times to worry about an honest mistake.

“You *will* reprimand your subordinate, Captain.” There was no denying the *order* in the tone of his words.

“With all due respect, no, Sir.”

Richardson’s eyes turned to thunderheads. “That was an order, Fisher.”

“Sergeant York is one of my best men. I’m not going to waste time punishing a man for a minor mistake when we’re preparing for combat.” Cal had no intention of backing down now. It was too late to keep himself out of trouble, but he would stand by his decision.

Richardson took a single step forward. “Do it, or I’ll bring you up on charges for dereliction of duty.”

“That’s your right, Sir.” Cal didn’t budge. He’d had enough. “But you’ll have to defend

your reasoning to your superiors.” He spun on his heel and marched towards the make-shift command post at the edge of camp, where the ships were already being loaded. He was sick and tired of Richardson’s superior attitude. Richardson had no choice but to follow him or back down for the moment. He heard footsteps only a couple of seconds later.

“You’re in a lot of trouble, Captain.”

“Understood, Sir.”

Colonel Kane stood over what was little more than a stack of boxes with a map and papers weighted down on it with rocks, and occasionally looking up to bark orders. He looked up as the two of them approached. “What is it, Gentlemen?”

“Captain Fisher has refused direct orders, Colonel,” Richardson got out first, before Cal had his mouth half-open.

The Colonel turned his full gaze on Cal. “Is this true, Captain?”

“Yes, Sir,” Cal replied. “Major Richardson insisted I take the time to punish one of my best men because he spent the entire night finding a way back to camp after missing the last train.”

The Colonel looked between them. “Okay, explain from the beginning.”

It didn’t take long. Colonel Kane heard them out, and lit into them both. “I can’t believe I’m hearing this when we’re going to be on the boats in under two hours! You,” he pointed at Richardson. “Have overstepped the bounds of common sense. We’re going into combat and you want to delay preparations over something as petty as this?”

Richardson turned beet red.

Cal had to fight not to smile.

“And *you*, Captain,” Kane’s eye turned on him, and it was not friendly. “Have overstepped the bounds of your own authority. Good man or not, wasting time or not, you were given a direct order by your superior officer on a matter of discipline. You *will* assign this Sergeant a punishment befitting his infraction, to be fulfilled at a more appropriate time.”

Cal nodded. “Yes, Sir.” Well, it was a partial victory.

“And you will be receiving a formal reprimand for insubordination.”

“Understood.” Well that wasn’t going to look good on his next review board. Cal had a feeling he had just cost himself his next promotion.

“You’re dismissed, Captain.” The Colonel nodded sharply. “Richardson, I’d like a few words with you.”

Cal left quickly. Not that he wouldn’t have loved to hear what Kane had to say to Richardson, but he obviously wasn’t supposed to, and he didn’t want to anger the Colonel more than he already had.

When he returned, York had already managed to pack all of his things. Several of the other Marines paused in their work to look at Cal. A couple of them grinned, though the smiles faded when they looked at his face.

“How’d it go, Sir?” York asked. “I wanted to thank you. I heard you. We all did.”

Of course they’d heard the argument. Cal kept a cool, straight face. “Well enough, Sergeant. I’m assigning you to three weeks on mess duty, to be served when our next combat mission is completed.”

For a moment, York was blank-faced. “Understood, Sir,” he nodded and saluted.

“Good man. Now, back to work.”

No one spoke until Cal was several yards away, but he could still hear it when one of the men spoke up. “Mess duty? Is that supposed to be his idea of a punishment for York? He’d live in the mess if they’d let him.”

Another one shushed him. “I think that’s the idea. The Cap’s smarter than the Major.”

If it hadn’t cost him so much personally, Cal might have smiled. The admiration and trust of his men was worth a little personal discomfort, but he wasn’t looking forward to his next review board.

Chapter Twenty-Two

They were days out to sea before Cal’s curiosity about their final destination was satisfied. He was below with his men when the summons came for him to join the other officers on board for a briefing.

“This is the island we’re attacking,” Colonel Kane gestured with a pointer towards the map stuck to the ship’s bulkhead with the words Iwo Jima penned onto it. “It’s not large, but the Japs have three airfields and a large contingent of men on the island and have spent the last forty-years fortifying it.”

Cal looked at the place. From the image, he could see the airfields well enough. Though the island itself looked kind of like a pork chop with a lump on one end and not much growing.

“Now, we’ve had pilots bombarding the place for over seventy days,” Kane continued. “But we know how much good that’s done us in the past.”

A grim chuckle went up from not only Cal, but the other officers in the room. Tarawa had been shelled heavily too, in theory, so had Guadalcanal.

“As you can see, the fortifications seem to consist mainly of these three airfields. Now, because of the cliffs here,” the pointer moved along the northern side of the island mostly, “and this mountain to the South, called Suribachi, the only possible landing spots are the beach here, to the West, and this beach to the East.”

Cal didn't like the look of those beaches. For one thing, they were lined by cliffs. If the Nips had fortified the ridge, it was going to be another bloodbath just to get off the beach once they landed. He put up a hand and waited for permission to speak. “Sir, why do they want the island?” It was the first they had heard of it even being a primarily military target.

Kane nodded. “Because it's as close to the Japanese mainland as we are likely to get anytime soon, and Command wants it for us to base our operations off of for the attack on the main island of Japan.”

Cal nodded in understanding, but wasn't sure how he felt about that. Up until now, the islands had been populated pretty much entirely by military outposts. They were good for little else. Once they invaded Japan, they would have to deal with civilians. The very idea still brought to mind images of the French people, standing by as the Germans marched in. Yet Cal expected that the “great” Empire of Japan would not stand down so easily. First though, they had to take this island.

“Is the sand actually black?” a voice asked from somewhere a couple of rows behind Cal.

“It is,” Kane nodded. “Suribachi used to be an active volcano, and the entire island is mostly sulfuric rock.”

Cal's nose twitched in disgust. He knew the smell of sulfur. In other words, it was going to smell just like hell.

The briefing wrapped up soon after, and the lower ranking officers were released so they could go give the same talk to their men.

"This one doesn't look any more promising for an easy fight than any of the others," Higgins commented, falling in beside him.

"No it doesn't," Cal agreed. "And if we really had a good count of how many men they had tucked away in those rocks, I think we might be smart enough to get nervous."

"But not scared, like we probably ought."

Cal's mouth twisted into a wry grin. "No, not a bit. If we weren't Marines we might have that kind of sense. But then, we wouldn't be much good at doing the impossible, would we?"

Higgins' smile broadened. "No we wouldn't, Captain. We took all the others. My money's on us taking this one too. I just hope I live through it."

"Don't talk like that, Lieutenant." Cal stopped walking and turned to face him. "I thought you knew better by now."

"Don't you ever feel that way?" Higgins asked, a skeptical expression crossing his face. "Like one of these battles will be your last."

"That doesn't mean you should talk about it." Cal shifted uneasily. "Thinking like that just doesn't seem like a good idea to me."

"I didn't know you was superstitious, Captain," said Higgins.

"I'm not." Cal started walking again. They had men to brief. "You could say it's just the opposite. I just don't see the point in putting stock in feelings of dread and doom. After all, I've

felt that way through every battle so far, and I'm still here."

God willing, it would stay that way, because right now he felt death breathing on him from the skin all the way down to his bones.

* * *

Tension rose as the Higgins boat ploughed through the rolling waves towards the island in front of them. Even in the bright sunlight Iwo Jima lay low and dark in front of them, save for the hump to the left that was Mount Suribachi. Amidst the pitching boat and salty spray, Cal couldn't get much of a view of the beach before them just yet.

The bombardment from the naval ships continued, but it had moved off the beach. Pounding and booming from both planes and ships' cannon sent rolling thunder at odds with the clear sky.

Cal felt his instincts rising with his adrenaline, increasing his focus on the task at hand. Nothing existed now except the men around him, the ship, and the battlefield in front. His mind had no room for anything but tactics.

His company was spread out across multiple boats, all moving at the same pace towards the beach. They were right behind the first wave of boats to hit the beach, and as he watched, Marines poured out of the boats ahead onto the beach, and the flash and thunder of dumping ammunition increased, though the enemy didn't appear to be firing back.

Sitting beside him, Major Richardson scowled at the sand, eyes intent on the coming shore. For once the Battalion commander had no sardonic remarks.

The feeling of hell approaching continued to grow, an unpleasant encroaching feeling Cal just couldn't shake. Aside from the firing from the naval boats, everything fell into eerie quiet save for the creaking and motor of the boat and the sound of the waves. Only once did a whisper of two soldiers exchanging comments come to Cal's ears.

The beach grew until he could see the men ahead of them on the sand, getting into positions but not yet engaged in combat with the enemy.

Then the bang and thud of the ship hitting the beach rocked him, and Cal was on his feet, and the men in front of him were surging forward, Sergeants barking. They all knew their duties, Cal's orders would probably last only until after the first engagement with the enemy.

Which was now.

Charging through the cold surf, Cal's senses were bombarded with a thousand details at once, the salty spray, the crunch of sand, the overwhelming waft of sulfuric stench of the layers of volcanic ash mingled as thousands of feet stirred it all up.

They hit the beach-

- and nothing happened. Cal lurched back to a walk, and stopped amidst his men, who were immediately gathering into formations. The other Companies were doing the same around them. "What's going on?" Not that Cal objected to not being shot at, but it didn't fit with the location or the situation. After their arrival on Guadalcanal, it made him wary.

He wasn't the only one confused, though several faces looked pleasantly surprised and the milling soldiers were quickly in semblance of order, and moving onto the beach to make room for the Higgins boats bringing in the next wave of soldiers, and the Amtracs rolling up onto the beach out of the water, tank treads dripping. No one wanted to get run over.

“Form up.” Richardson barked and the order went down the line. “Move in and stay alert.”

Cal passed the order on as they moved away from Richardson to make sure everyone was in line. If they had the chance to move the troops inland without being shot at, they should take it.

“Maybe they’re not even guarding the beach,” Sergeant Phipps commented.

Cal shook his head. “I don’t buy it. Who would leave a perfect enemy landing zone unguarded?”

Yet the Japanese seemed to have done just that. Two divisions landed without a shot being fired by any soldier. They moved forward across the beach in orderly fashion, slipping a bit on the volcanic ash that coated everything. It even proved difficult for the soldiers assigned to try and dig entrenchments. Eventually, there had to be fighting.

In only a few minutes they began to advance in earnest, moving towards the fifteen-foot terrace rising up behind the beach, making a natural ramp to the rest of the island. Richardson’s Battalion was part of the group behind another regiment of the 5th Division.

As the men in front slid and clambered up the terrace, the slaughter began.

It seemed as if the earth itself shot the first men, who fell before their comrades had time to draw a breath. Then the shouting grew and guns were fired back.

The front lines hesitated only a moment, then charged forward, firing as they crested the hill and likely spotted the enemy positions. More men fell, and the bullets rained down on the beach.

The line picked up the pace, and soon they were running to avoid the hailstorm of death.

His ears near-deafened by the sudden chaos of fire and shouting, screaming, groaning men, Cal focused on one thing, moving straight ahead. Their orders were to take the beach and move past it as fast as possible. He put his heart into running.

Sand erupted two steps to his left, sending grit stinging into Cal's eyes as he swiveled and dodged, his pace slowed by the slide and suck of the sand beneath his boots.

Corpses, dozens of them, already littered the beach. Cal leapt them as if they were nothing but logs on an obstacle course. It was better than thinking about the reality as they bolted across the beach under the shadowing rain of enemy ammunition.

Orders shouted out here and there amongst the cacophony. "Clear the beach!" "Angle West!" "Corpsman!"

The last came most often, the call for aid to the wounded down.

Heat whizzed past Cal's ear and he slipped in the sand, pitching sideways into the sulfurous grit. Black sand coated his tongue as he sat up, spitting, and came up in seconds, scrambling over a fallen body as he regained his feet.

In that moment he took the split second needed to evaluate his position, half-way to the slope of the sand that rose to the land above the beach, machine gun nests, well-hidden until they began firing, perched along the top and back a bit like waiting vultures.

Another rain of gunfire sent him to his belly behind nothing more than a ridge in the sand. He was immediately jostled by men tumbling down beside him. A quick glance showed him Higgins and Bates to one side of him, and Richardson and a Radioman with Sergeant's insignia on his shoulder on the other.

"What's orders now, Major?" Higgins looked past Cal.

“They haven’t changed, Lieutenant,” said Richardson. His icy calm seemed to puddle and fill the shallow dip in which they were sprawled. “We stay out of the way of the artillery, and keep pushing.” Richardson looked straight at Cal as he spoke.

Cal gritted his teeth and tried not to snap in irritation at the obviousness of that statement. Of course their orders were the same. The delay hadn’t changed the battle plan. “When do you want us to move?” he asked. “This seems like about the only defensive position between here and the top of that hill.”

Richardson nodded once sharply. “It looks that way. Wait for the next wave, and we’ll go.” He turned to the Radioman to pass the news to the other Company commanders in the Battalion.

Cal didn’t expect there would be any break between volleys, not with machine guns. He hadn’t seen a Nip soldier yet on this rock. At this rate, he might not have to worry about it.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Charging up over that hill made Cal wonder if a giraffe on the Serengeti felt that exposed to the lions as he stooped and ran, trying to make himself as small a target as possible among a lot of them. Men picked off to his right and left fell gracelessly to the ground.

The flat ashen island spread out before him suddenly, with little more cover than the beach had offered. A few rocks poked the landscape, and Cal dove behind one as a bullet skimmed the very top of his helmet.

Sucking in air, Cal peered out at the battlefield, blown to lumps and craters by months of constant bombardment from above. Suribachi loomed above the black wasteland, streaked with

blood and the flashes of gunshot that gave away Japanese positions.

No wonder it had taken hours just to get off the beach, long-placed and well camouflaged machine gun nests could cover nearly every inch of the island the way they were spread. Fire rained down on the soldiers from the mountain itself. It made Cal feel ill. The entire mountain face looked riddled with entrenched Japs.

Marine movements were as stalled and scattered as they were down on the beach, though as many men as could were still pressing forward. More were systematically turning craters into fox holes as fast as they could and piling into them.

“Corpsman!”

Cal turned towards the shout, it was nearer than the others.

The Radioman was down in the dirt next to Richardson’s sprawled form. The Major was moving, but only to grasp his hand over the wound bleeding in his shoulder.

In the press, no Corpsmen were visible nearby. The first two Cal spotted were already occupied with treating other wounded. “Take Richardson back over the hill!” he shouted at the other man.

The man looked up at him, and only then did Cal see how pale he looked. “I can’t,” he shouted back.

Without hesitating, Cal bellied down in the sand and crawled his way to where they lay. “Where are you hurt, Sergeant?” he asked the other officer.

“Leg sir,” the man replied calmly. “Shot only winged me, but the ankle feels broken.” The foot looked bent enough, a sickeningly odd angle.

Cal shook his head and looked at Richardson. “Can you move, Major?”

Despite the grimace of pain, Richardson's eyes were clear. "We can't take this hunk of rock napping, Fisher." He grunted and strained as he sat half way up, then collapsed once more in a puff of black ash.

It wouldn't kill you to ask for help, would it? "Permission to be of assistance, Sir?" It took every ounce of will not to reply with a sarcastic comment.

The Major nodded once. "Permission granted."

Cal realized he needed more of a plan. Just helping the Major up wouldn't do any good if they all got killed, and he couldn't move them both at once. Cal took a good look at the wound, an ugly bleeding mess in the front meat of Richardson's shoulder, just down where it met the pectoral. "Corpsman!" he bellowed louder as he pulled the sulfa powder out of the pouch on the Major's belt and sprinkled it liberally over the wound. Then he pressed the bandage tightly against it. "Hold that," he told the Major as he crawled under Richardson's uninjured arm and propped him up just enough to get a grip on him, and pull the man partially onto his shoulders to support him. Despite Richardson's grumbling, he leaned heavily on Cal.

Still no medic arrived on the scene. There was only one good area of cover Cal could think of big enough for injured men, and that was back down the terrace. "I'm taking him back to cover," he informed the Sergeant. "Lay low and crawl after if you can. I'll come back for you."

The Sergeant nodded and rolled into an indentation in the ground, lying as flat as he could manage. "I'll try not to get run over," he promised as he pulled his gun out and aimed at the Japanese.

Going back over the terrace was agonizingly slow compared to the charge up over it. Cal had to stand to a crouch and scuttle for several feet at a time, then drop again. He stopped to rest

twice before he reached the edge, and then slipped and slid past the Marines running up it the other way until he nearly fell into the pit in the sand they had come out of less than half an hour before. Cal scrambled upright and looked around. "Corpsman!"

This time, the cry was answered almost at once by a man scrambling from the site of a bandaged man two holes down. "Let me have a look at him," he said, almost shoving Cal out of the way.

Panting, Cal turned and crouched, ready to head back up the hill, rifle at the ready. "Good. I've got another wounded man to bring you with a busted ankle."

Retrieving the Sergeant proved tougher than hauling Richardson. Cal had to go over the edge of the terrace on his belly, the machine gun fire had grown so thick, and the gunfire smoke and the kicked up ash made visibility less clear than he liked.

The Sergeant –communication equipment still on his back– was about ten feet closer to the edge, if that, and lying on his side, shooting at the Nips with everything he had. His exposed ankle was bandaged and power-coated.

"Come on," Cal shouted over the din. "Let's go."

With his ankle, the Sergeant was little use in helping move himself along the ground, save for crawling using his elbows. If they had to go over or around anything –mostly new fallen corpses– Cal had to help drag him up and over. If it wouldn't have gotten them both riddled with holes, he'd have just picked the man up and stood.

He was helping the Sergeant over yet another obstacle when Cal felt searing white agony blossom in his left thigh. "Holy shit!" He stumbled, falling to his hands and knees, left hand hand still barely on his rifle.

“You okay, Captain?” the Sergeant gasped as he was dropped.

“Sure,” Cal said through clenched teeth. He could feel wetness against his skin on the outside of his thigh. Now was not the time to lie down and take it. He forced his eyes open and looked over at the Sergeant. “Let’s go.”

The enlisted man’s expression called Cal a liar, even though he didn’t say so out loud.

“Yes, Sir.”

Another few feet brought them to the crowded precipice, where Cal felt arms grab him from the side as two other Marines stopped to help them back down to cover.

“You wasn’t supposed to make another patient, Captain,” the Corpsman commented, barely audible over the din, as he bent over Cal first.

“See to him,” Cal waved over at the Radioman, who lay with his back up against the wall of their shallow hide out next to Richardson, whose shoulder was bandaged.

“You’re the one bleeding like a bad-shot boar.” The Corpsman snorted, and cut through Cal’s pant leg at the site of the wound.

The moment hands touched the leg, Cal bit his lip and forced himself not to howl in pain. He only glanced down at the wound once, and immediately jerked his eyes away from the site of his own pierced and bleeding flesh. Bile rose up in his throat.

“Clean through,” the Corpsman declared after a minute. “In here, and out again right there, nothing but a bit of flesh. I’ll have you bandaged right up.”

“How’s the Major?” Cal asked. His commanding officer lay quiet, eyes heavy-lidded, but watching.

“He ought to live. Soon as it’s dark they’ll have him off this rock.”

“Good.” Bastard or not, no one deserved the ending most Marines got these days. Cal felt pressure on his leg that tightened and stabbed, then faded slowly as the wound throbbled. “Could you be any less gentle? I don’t think I felt that in my teeth.”

“I’ll try to make it hurt more next time,” the Corpsman promised, handing Cal a canteen and an aspirin. “If you can run on it you can fight on it.” He turned to the Sergeant at last. “Now let’s have a look at that ankle.”

The Radioman winced, and looked over at Cal. “What now, Sir?”

“We find the XO,” Cal sighed. Someone had to take command of the Battalion.

Richardson stirred. “He’s dead.”

Well that was inconvenient. “So we tell Command.” Wishing he had something to drink on him –he supposed water would do– Cal pointed at the radio on the man’s back. “Get me Regimental HQ, Sergeant.” Without the Major capable of continuing, there was no one to command the Battalion.

Despite his injury, the Radioman did as commanded. As soon as he had it dialed in, he handed over the radio.

“This is Mountain Lion. Put me through to Grandpa Joe.” That was Colonel Cummings’ designator for the mission.

“Your message?” the man at the other end said.

“Tell him Songbird is injured and Basilisk is dead.” That should be enough to get the message across.

It took a minute before he got any reply.

“Report Mountain Lion,” a deep voice rumbled over the static. “What’s the situation?”

“We’re stalled at the base of the mountain, Sir.”

“Viper is now in command,” Cummings named Major Marks. “Take your Company where you belong, Mountain Lion.”

Cal looked up at Suribachi, as riddled with Japs as a rabbit warren. He certainly didn’t feel like he belonged there, but his feelings were irrelevant now. “Yes, Sir. Mountain Lion out.”

That was it. Cal handed the radio back. “Viper’s in command,” he informed the others as he took proper hold of his rifle. “Got any last orders?” he asked Richardson.

Richardson nodded. “Don’t die.”

“I wasn’t planning on it, Sir.”

* * *

Cal only waited long enough for the aspirin to take the edge off the worst of the pain before he headed once more up the terrace and into the fray. “Any progress?” he gasped when he finally found Higgins kneeling behind a small ridge of jagged black rock where several men in the Company had set up and were shooting away at the well-protected Japanese soldiers.

“Not really, Captain,” Higgins replied. “It’s like the Canal. They’re all up there in the rocks.”

The mountain stood before him, an ever-darkening wall lit up red from the west by the sinking sun. In the deepening shadows, the spurts and sparks of firing weapons danced like deadly fireflies.

“We have to root them out to take the island.” Cal wished the Japs would just learn to surrender already. Island after island they had been swarmed and overtaken and claimed. How many more people had to die, and how many of them shouldn’t have had to?

“I’m not looking forward to that.” Higgins looked in the same direction. “It would be a heap easier if we could just blow the whole mountain up.”

“If months of shelling didn’t do it, I doubt we’ve got anything that will.” Cal shook his head. “If it was that easy to bring down a mountain, you couldn’t mine one without it falling in on your head for sure.” They did that often enough as it was.

“You’d know better than me.” Higgins dropped down behind the wall and rested against it. Around them, in the falling darkness, the sounds of gunfire slowed on both sides. There was little point in shooting in the dark. “I don’t suppose you do know a way to flush ‘em out?”

“Nothing reliable,” Cal shook his head. “Best way to kill someone in the mines was an ceiling collapse, gas, or a petrified tree stump falling out of the ceiling.” He doubted any real trees had ever stood on that mountain, let alone anything big enough to produce a widow-maker.

He gave up staring into the dark and dropped down next to Higgins and leaned against the wall. The throbbing in his leg eased very little now that his weight was off it. “That’s enough for tonight boys,” he told the men around them. “Save your ammo.”

Higgins was frowning at him. “You’re injured, Sir.”

“Not bad,” Cal waved it off. “A night off it’s all it’ll need.”

“A night out here.” Higgins sighed, but his worry seemed assuaged for the moment. “I guess we aren’t going to get much of a meal this evening.” Higgins reached into his pack and pulled out a slightly dented looking can of C rations.

Cal tugged a bent cigarette out of his chest pocket and lit it. One good long drag did more for his stress and discomfort than a handful of pills would have. He had similar unappetizing meals tucked away, but despite his growling stomach he had no real appetite, not surrounded by the stench of death. “Better hungry than dead.”

“And better coffee than old bread,” a Corporal grinned as he and a couple of the other fellows made a tiny fire out of scraps of busted palm tree. It only took a minute to rig a helmet on a tripod. Then they poured in about half the water from a canteen and the Corporal brought the coffee from his rations. Others did the same. “Would you like some, Sir?”

“Sure I would. Thanks, Corporal.” It would be weak and ashy and probably taste like rotten eggs. Cal knew he’d drink it anyway given how little sleep they were likely to get, bedded down in the dirt, exposed besides the rock that protected them. The night sounds settled down mostly to the rustle and clink of men setting up make-shift camps and the discontented shush of the salt-tanged air across the island.

It might have been peaceful if not for the moans of the dying.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Cal would have preferred a hangover to the constant throbbing in his leg and the headache he had anyway. The short night’s sleep had done little to refresh him. Cramped, cranky, and without time for morning coffee, he hoped the Japs understood that they were paying for making him stay out here longer than necessary.

Three hours of shooting from behind that same rock did nothing to improve his mood. It was hard to pretend they were making progress when they hadn’t gained even an inch of ground.

“Those damned machine gun nests,” he grumbled during a reload. “Why haven’t we taken them out yet?”

“We’ve tried, Captain,” Higgins replied. “Everyone’s tried. A few are gone.”

Cal peered through his scope at the particular nest keeping them pinned down. “How about another grenade instead?”

“No one can toss one that far, Sir,” Higgins pointed out. “And the one we tried yesterday almost rolled back to our position before it went.”

There were plenty of obvious problems with that. “So we need to get closer.” Cal knew that would be far more difficult than it sounded. If they could have, they would have done it already.

Once more Cal scanned the slanted hill between his position and the first of many machine gun nests between him and the rest of Suribachi. There was one spot, closer to the nest where a man might be able to avoid getting shot, but only if he made it there without getting mowed down in the process. From there a well-tossed grenade ought to be enough to take out the machine gun and anyone with it.

They could always play the waiting game, but Cal wasn’t willing to bet that the enemy would run out of ammunition first. Who knew how much was stockpiled in the caves that riddled the mountainside.

The decision was made for him as a ledge just off to the right exploded, sending Cal and several others diving for cover to avoid getting clocked. Chunks of rock showered down around him as he covered the back of his neck and waited for it to subside.

“We’re out of cover,” someone shouted.

Cal grabbed his M-1 and came up again with only a second to make another dive for the ground a burst of fire erupted from the machine gun's position. He scrambled to his left, looking for better cover, and nearly fell face-first into a foxhole.

"You okay there, Captain?" a Corporal asked, wide-eyed.

Cal spat out another mouthful of Iwo Jima. "Swell," he grunted, righting himself and looking back the way he had come to see how the other men had fared.

Two men lay obviously dead, one with a leg missing and the other with a chunk of rock lodged in his skull. Cal had to stretch to see past them, his ears straining for any sounds of life from the men who weren't shooting.

"Corpsman!" a voice called.

Cal would have scoffed if it had been funny. What were the chances of anyone getting to their position at that moment?

Worse was the realization that he knew the voice. "Corporal," he said without turning around. "Have you seen a Corpsman recently?"

"No, Sir."

Then like hell was Cal leaving his closest compatriot out there. "Keep my spot warm," he said as he dragged himself back over the edge of the hole. *I'm not an officer, I'm a danged golden retriever.*

At least his luck was with him. Cal made it to Higgins' side, still hurting but without any new holes in him. "What kind of an XO are you?" he asked, trying not to look as concerned as he felt. That was no way to keep up morale. Higgins' right leg was bleeding heavily from a hit just above the knee.

“Sorry, Captain,” said Higgins. “I never did claim to be much of a runner.”

Cal knew better. “After yesterday, I think we’ve had enough holes in the chain of command. Let’s get you in a fox hole.” He went for the pouch on Higgins’ belt... only to find it wasn’t there. “Where’s your medical kit?”

“Used it earlier,” Higgins replied with a wan grin. “Another soldier got shot twice and ran out of his.”

Cal didn’t have any left either after the day before. He maneuvered around to drag him back. “Let’s get out of here before you don’t need it.”

Getting Higgins back to the fox hole was harder than either of yesterday’s hauls had been, despite the shorter distance. Cal’s leg pained him, try as he did to ignore it, and Higgins’ wound had rendered him incapable of even helping to push himself along. The slighter-built man passed out before they got there. “Can anybody treat him?” he asked as he lay Higgins down at the bottom as gently as he could.

“I’ll do it,” the Corporal replied, leaving off firing to pull his own kit off his belt.

“Good work, Corporal.” Cal would have gone back for others if they had lived, but when he looked out of the foxhole the nearest men were dead. Beyond that, the rest seemed to have made it to another pile of rocks several yards to the right.

As Cal watched, a young kid –couldn’t have been more than eighteen if he was even legal– darted out from around one of the rocks, grenade in hand as he made a charge. He moved so quickly he looked like he might even make it –

–until he drew the full brunt of the machine gun’s fire. In less than a second he had gone from full force forward to pitching back from the force of the bullets. He fell back in the ash, and

a moment later, the grenade went off in his hand.

Cal had only a moment to feel sympathetic, he had to seize the opportunity that had just presented itself in his mind. The close explosion and obvious target had drawn enemy fire entirely away from his location.

Cal was crouched low, streaking for the furrow of cover halfway up the hill before the dust had settled from the grenade blast. He pulled a grenade from his belt, ready to pull the pin as soon as he landed behind cover.

The rock vaporized right in front of him as the onslaught renewed.

So much for that idea. Cal slipped and twisted, diving for the cover of a sharp rise in the earth. It was all he had. The spot wasn't great cover though and it wouldn't last. With no way to turn back, Cal realized he would have to keep going. He brought his rifle to bear and aimed. From the new position, he could actually see one of the Nips' eyes peeking out of the slit near the top of the camouflage set up over the nest. He started shooting, and the face vanished.

If he had been the only one shooting, Cal suspected the machine gun would have turned entirely on him, but fortunately there was a strong volley to the right. He braced himself, pushing the burning sensation in his thigh to the back of his consciousness. Taking the grenade, he pulled the pin, leapt up the hill, and threw it.

The grenade arched up, sailing through the air with all the grace of a flightless bird, and vanished into the machine gun nest. For a moment, it looked like nothing would happen.

Then the world in front of him erupted in fire and black smoke.

A triumphant surge welled up in Cal as he scrambled forward, rifle at the ready. It would be foolish to assume that the enemy was really dead without proof, and the Marines needed to

claim the position for themselves. Cal crept up to the nest and peeked inside as the smoke cleared. The machine gun was a twisted scattering of metal parts. The bodies of the Japs looked worse.

Cal was scrambling over the dirt ledge when a blur of movement to his left caught his eye. He stopped cold and brought up his rifle quickly. It had barely touched his shoulder when the man aiming back at him pulled the trigger.

This time the pain didn't start in his leg. Cal registered a radiating sear that encompassed his torso as the power of lead slamming into his body pushed him off his precarious perch and he fell, and then slid, into the blood and ash below.

When he came to rest, Cal opened his eyes, but the world was a blur, a fuzzy haze of noise of light and pain. His mind raced. *Move! Get going!* If he stayed in the open, he was dead.

But... if he moved, wasn't he dead already? Cal's hands were empty. He didn't know where his M-1 had fallen. His right hand lay draped across his stomach. There was something sticky and warm on his fingers.

The sky above was laced with bullets, but above those, something small way up seemed to hover, a bird maybe. It was white. *What kind of idiot bird would be here?*

Chapter Twenty-Five

The pain was the only constant besides the darkness, and even it became abstracted. It pulsed and beat like a big band rhythm, except when something made the world jerk up or down or sideways, and then a tympanic throb would erupt from somewhere within. Sound faded out, only to come crashing back with painful force. There was no touch, he was floating in a pool of

agony.

A deep thrumming came from below, and then the flapping above changed for a whine and a rough, stumbling rumble that evened out indeterminately until a sharp jerk jostled Cal roughly back into unwelcome wakefulness.

Cal immediately wished he could have remained unconscious. The gunshot wounds in his leg and side ate at him, burning so fiercely it felt like holding an ice cube against the skin far too long.

The scents of antiseptic and metal were almost overwhelming. The only light that met his grit-filled eyes was the harsh bulb in the roof of the plane. It was almost directly above his head. Cal clamped his eyes shut again. *Someone turn that damned light off!*

Apparently he had spoken aloud, because he heard a scrape-bump and footsteps. A few seconds later a shadow across his eyelids told Cal someone was standing over him. “Are you awake, Captain Fisher?” The unfamiliar female voice was probably a nurse.

It took a second to remember how his mouth worked. “Un...fortunately.”

“Are you in pain?” He felt the light brush of a sheet being moved. A second later a sharp stab ran through his midsection.

“Holy hell!” Cal yelled, biting his tongue in the process. “Damn it.”

The stocky, middle-aged woman bending over him did not seem the least upset.

“Looks like you’re due for your next morphine injection, Captain.”

“Next?” If he’d been given a pain injection, Cal couldn’t imagine that it had worked. Pain was all he remembered.

“Williams!” The woman stood again without answering Cal. “Bring me a dose of

morphine.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Alice’s familiar voice carried through the cabin.

If Alice was on the plane, he couldn’t be dead. There was no way this was heaven, and she would never be in hell.

Cal licked his cracked lips, tasting salt and the tang of blood. “Where are we?”

“We’ll be landing in San Diego in two hours.” The nurse turned back to him as she pulled out a thermometer and jabbed it under his tongue.

“Wha!” Cal tried to exclaim, and nearly gagged on the thermometer instead.

“Calm down, Captain,” The nurse continued with her examination. “You’re in no condition to be getting excited. You’re rather lucky, actually.”

“How’s that?” Cal managed to reply without choking himself.

“You’re not dead.”

The senseless jumble in his head began to piece back together as Cal concentrated on the scattered information his senses gave him. He had no idea how he had gotten on the plane, or how long it had been since he was fighting on the beach. The last thing Cal could remember was dragging “Higgins!”

“At the other end of the plane,” the nurse continued, leaning so close to examine his eyes that Cal could see the crow-feet around her tired brown eyes. “Didn’t I tell you to calm down?” She sat up again and removed the thermometer. Her lips pursed tightly together for a moment, then she tucked it into her pocket.

Momentary relief at Higgins’ survival was killed by a spike of fear. “What is it?”

“Nothing for you to worry about,” the nurse replied unhelpfully as Alice came up behind

her.

“Here you are, Major Evens,” Alice handed the older woman a small vial and needle.

Cal was too tired to do more than wince as he felt the needle slide under the skin of his left elbow. He just hoped it took effect fast.

“Sit with him, Lieutenant,” Nurse Evens stood. “I want to have a word with Doctor Lewis.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Alice replaced the woman on the little stool in the middle of the walkway. As soon as Evens was gone, Alice looked down at Cal and shook her head. “You idiot. You almost got killed.”

“About that... what happened?”

Alice shook her head slightly. “You mean your injuries. You got lucky. Neither shot hit a vital organ. You’ve been unconscious ever since you came on board, though your fever seems to be down. As long as your wounds don’t get infected you should be just fine in a few weeks.” Now *her* smile didn’t look entirely genuine.

“What aren’t you telling me?” Cal pressed.

Alice’s eyes riveted on a point just above his eyes. “Nothing! I mean, nothing about your injuries.”

His stomach sank. “Is it about one of my men?” Cal was fully aware that hundreds –at least– had died on that damned black beach.

“No,” Alice said. “The five you saved all look like they’re going to recover.”

Whether it was relief or the morphine working Cal’s pain and anxiety eased. “So what’s with the fake cheer?”

A smaller, but more real, smile touched Alice's lips. "I've just been worried about you, that's all," she admitted, her voice little more than a whisper. "We almost lost you."

Cal vision unfocused momentarily and his eyelids felt like they might close on their own. The idea that he had nearly died didn't faze him. He was too tired, and he was starting to feel... loopy. Even his usual panic at being in close quarters with Alice was missing. He smiled. "I guess I'm lucky you're a good nurse then."

He was rewarded with a squeeze of her hand. "I wasn't the only one," Alice replied. "But thank you."

He was sinking fast, but floating again at the same time. Cal closed his eyes. "You have softer hands."

A soft squeak of air was followed by a moment of silence. "Cal, I need to tell you something," her words floated towards him as if over a long distance, echoing.

"Mmm?"

"I like you."

Wow. They weren't kidding about the hallucinations.

* * *

Cal lost any sense of time the first few days of his stay in the Naval Hospital. When he wasn't being medicated, prodded, questioned, bathed, or fed, he slept long and deep. As soon as he had the energy to stay awake for more than half an hour or so, he began to feel antsy and

bored.

“Can’t I even read a damned newspaper?” he asked the nurse after his wounds had been cleaned and dressed one morning.

“You need to rest and keep calm.” The nurse shook her tight-curling head. “We’re winning the war. I think that’s all you need to know.”

That wasn’t nearly enough information, but Cal doubted he would get any more out of the nurse. This one was very tight-lipped. “Fine, then how about a smoke?”

“No.” She never let him have those either. She seemed to be one of those weirdoes who believed the idea a few scientists had that smoking caused cancer in the lungs.

“You know the Nazis believe that too.”

That earned him a red-faced glare. “That fact is irrelevant, Captain Fisher.” She stood up and turned with a sharp click of her heels on the floor. “I’m tempted not to let in your visitor.”

He had a visitor? “Who is it?”

The nurse did not provide him with an answer, but outside he heard her speak to someone in a quiet voice. “Not too long,” was about all Cal could make out.

After several seconds, a male orderly pushed a wooden wheelchair into the room. Higgins was smiling despite his slightly haggard appearance. “Hey there, Captain. They told me you wasn’t dead, but it was hard to believe.”

“I could say the same of you,” Cal retorted. Relief mingled with concern at the sight of the chair. “You owe me for the cleaning to get your blood out of my shirts.”

“Take it out of my pay.” Higgins waved the orderly away. “I’m good here a while.”

Cal waited until the orderly was gone before saying anything else. “How are you doing?”

Higgins chuckled. “Swell. I’m not as bad off as I look. They didn’t take my leg, but they won’t let me walk on it yet.”

“That’s good, cause you look like shit.”

“You’re one to talk.”

“That bad huh?” Cal couldn’t really see himself, sprawled on his back under the crisp linens. He hadn’t quite had the stomach to take a look at his own injuries. “I don’t suppose you’ve got more news than that old bird was willing to share?”

“Yes and no,” Higgins replied, not looking particularly apologetic. “What ocean you want first?”

“Do you have to ask?”

Higgins shifted in his chair, which didn’t look particularly comfortable. “From what I heard last night, they’re still fighting on the island. Though you’ll love this,” he grinned. “Japs all around and they managed to stick a flag on top of Suribachi... twice.”

Now that was something! “Why twice?”

“Apparently the first one wasn’t big enough.” Higgins laughed. “I can just imagine that radio call. *Get another flag up here, Charlie. They can’t see it from Japan.*”

Cal started to laugh, but cut off when it made his stomach muscles tighten. Fresh pain blossomed in his side. “That’s probably not far from the truth.”

“You know, that nurse has been in here twice to see you.”

“I’ve had my fill of nurses,” Cal said, willing himself to relax again.

“Oh I don’t think you’d turn that one away,” Higgins disagreed. “Not when she gets those big eyes looking at you.”

“Is she still here?”

“Whoa there, Captain,” Higgins held one hand out. “Easy there. No, she’s not here now. That was back before you were less delirious. She had to go again when the plane left.”

Of course she wasn’t here. Cal tried to ease himself back down, but it was too late to avoid the agony. “She talked to you?”

“I was awake.” Higgins shrugged. “I guess she figured we was friends enough, or ‘cause of our working together.”

“Well what did she say, man?” He had the gnawing feeling in his mind that it was important. Their last conversation was more than a little fuzzy.

Higgins’s grin returned. “Well she didn’t declare her undying love if that’s what you’re asking.” He stretched out one arm and stopped to scratch an itch. “She just said to let you know she’d make sure to come visit the next time she could and... oh that’s right... you’re not allowed to die.”

I like you, Cal. Those words had just been a hallucination, hadn’t they?

Cal shifted a little, trying to find a position that was more comfortable.

“Can I ask a personal question, Sir?”

“Sure, why not?”

“That nurse keeps showing up, and it’s sure you like each other, so why can’t you make up your mind?” Higgins asked. “You can’t just play her like that.”

That wasn’t quite the question he had been expecting. “I don’t,” Cal replied flat out.

“Well maybe you call it something different where you come from,” Higgins said, not smiling now. “So what’s the deal with that?”

So much for subtlety. Cal had no idea how to answer that question, mostly because he just didn't have an answer. At least, not an answer that didn't sound completely selfish or pathetic. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Skepticism was clear on Higgins' face, but he didn't look like he was willing to contradict him. "Whatever you say, Captain, but you better make up your mind and make it plain. There's already talk among the men, and if you're worried about what folks'll think about you and her, waiting only makes it worse."

Shit, he'd done it again. "I like her, Higgins, but even if she's been married before, she's still an Admiral's daughter. She's well-bred and moneyed. Dolls like her don't marry fellas like us. In the end it just doesn't work."

"So it's a family thing?" Higgins asked. "Like Romeo and Juliet."

"You know they both died right?"

"Everybody knows that," said Higgins. "I'm not dumb."

Somehow the discussion just made Cal even more tired. "No, you're not," he apologized as he closed his eyes. Fighting sleep would only prolong the conversation. "But Romeo sure the heck was. Just trust me on this one. Don't go sniffing around rose gardens. The wildflowers are just as pretty and they don't have thorns."

"Maybe so," Higgins agreed, "But I think the risk of getting stabbed would be worth it if you really wanted a rose. After all, it isn't near as bad as getting shot."

On that at least, Cal had to admit that maybe Higgins had a point.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The sore feeling of worked muscles was a far cry better than the agony his wounds had been at first. Even while he was still not allowed to walk for long periods, Cal was grateful to have been allowed a set of hand weights. Lying in bed lost its charms quickly when he knew many of his men were still fighting for control of a speck of island that probably most of the people Cal had met couldn't locate on a map. So he spent as much time as he could bear using those weights to get some exercise.

At least the burn of flexing muscles made Cal feel like he was doing something to work his way back to the war front. He didn't care if the doctors said it would be months before he was fit for duty. 'Months' was not an acceptable answer.

The door creaking open was Cal's only warning before Rachel White, the nurse on duty, entered with Alice smiling right behind her. Cal's stomach flipped.

"You have a visitor, Captain Fisher," Rachel smiled as she held up a slip of paper, "And a telegram too. Aren't you lucky today?"

Alice was obviously off-duty today. She wasn't in uniform, but instead a breezy blue dress that showed just enough leg and not enough chest.

Cal put down the weight on the bed. "Who's the telegram from?" Orders maybe, if Cal had to guess, though he would have expected someone from the base to bring those over in person.

"I didn't read it," the nurse replied, handing it over.

Cal took the sheet and flipped it open. The address surprised him. It came from Rocky Creek, but his mother had never paid the expense for a telegram. Maybe it was just because of

how long it had been since her last letter reached him.

The message was too short.

Your mother is dying. She wants to see you. If you come don't waste time.

Melvin Fisher

Cal could hear the air circulating in the room. He had no heart to beat, no lungs to gasp. His hands shook as they dropped slowly to his lap. How was this happening? His father was the sickly one, not her, the selfish one, not her.

“Calvin?”

Both women were staring at him with worry all over their faces.

“I need to make a trip to West Virginia. My mother is very ill.” Saying it made it painfully real, and yet somehow Cal felt he could stand it.

He might have said he was going to the moon from the look of disbelief Alice gave him.

Rachel looked skeptical. “I’m sorry to hear that, but you haven’t even been cleared for discharge from the hospital.”

“She’s dying. I’m not.”

“You’ll have to talk to the doctor.” Rachel frowned, then turned towards the door. “I’ll find him.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Cal looked at Alice. Her eyes were full of real sympathy. “This is probably going to sound awful to you, but I always assumed Dad would go first. He got gassed in the last war, and his lungs have been bad my whole life. I always felt like we had nothing at all in common, except maybe stubborn pride. It’s Mom who makes us a family.”

Alice's slim fingers slipped into his hand. "She must be a very strong woman."

"In a quiet way." Cal's hand tightened around hers. No one had ever called Violet Fisher strong to his knowledge. It made him think. "Coal towns are a hard life, and all my life she's seemed submissive, working away in that tiny little house. She almost never has a word to say against my old man. She doesn't raise her voice. But, you're right, she's stronger inside. She'd have to be to love us both." A thick knot rose up inside Cal, feeling like it might choke him.

"You don't seem like you're hard to love."

Cal hoped he wasn't blushing.

"Doctor Gallows will be here in a minute," Rachel said as she strode back through the door without knocking. She came up short and looked at them both. "Am I interrupting something?"

"Just a conversation," Cal replied, reluctantly letting go of Alice's hand as she stood up. Maybe the reprieve would give him time to figure out what the heck he was supposed to say next.

When he arrived, Doctor Gallows looked skeptical. "It's a long way to go so soon after injury."

"It's been weeks," Cal argued. "I'll take it easy. Believe me, I wouldn't go if it wasn't my mother." Anyone else in Rocky Creek he'd just as soon forget, or wouldn't feel any need to visit. Not that most of them would have wanted him at their bedside in their dying hours.

"You could send someone with him," Alice suggested.

"We don't have anyone to spare," Gallows shook his head. "Could you go?"

"I don't have the leave for it." From her expression, she wished she did.

Gallows' brow furrowed deep in thought. "Well I suppose you would be all right, Fisher, assuming you really do take it easy and don't try anything overly strenuous... like walking quickly. If your examination goes well this afternoon I'll give my consent to your commanding officer on base."

Cal had almost forgotten he still needed to get permission from his superiors for enough leave to go. He was fairly sure he had enough, but most of it would be wasted on travel. "Thank you, Doctor." Cal would just have to take what he could get. He really didn't intend to reinjure himself. Besides, what was he going to do on the train other than sit around, eat, sleep, and watch the uninformed American countryside whisk by?

When Gallows and the nurse left, Alice sat down beside him again. "I wish I could go with you."

"I'll be fine." Cal did his best to sound reassuring. "And you won't be missing out on anything, trust me. Rocky Creek can't even pass for charming."

"It wouldn't have been a site-seeing trip." Alice reminded him. "But I would like to meet your parents, and the friends in your letters you talk about. They seem like nice people. I wish there was something I could *do* for your mother."

Cal followed the impulse to take her hand again. Her words made him feel warmly grateful for her presence. "There is," he said after a moment. "Mom never misses a church service if she can help it. Pray for my mother, please."

Alice smiled. "Every day. You'd better write me though, and tell me what happens."

"Fair enough." Cal wished he could feel her optimism. Recovery or funeral, he would make sure to send her word. It was comforting to know she cared, and more than he had realized.

“Alice, on the flight here... I thought I heard you say something.”

“I wondered if you even heard me.”

“So I wasn’t hallucinating.”

“No more than you are right now.” She twitched her hand, which remained in his. “I do like you, Cal. I’d like to get to know you better, to find out what else we have in common. I feel a connection with you that I don’t with anyone else. I would love to explore that, but... I know now isn’t a good time.”

“Alice, I like you too,” Cal blurted out. “It’s just...” Where to begin?

When he hesitated, she went on. “It’s not. We have other duties and our situations are uncertain. There’s plenty of things some people might see as hurdles to us even trying to have a relationship. I’m glad to know you like me. I’d have hated to find out I was imagining it, or being fooled again.”

“I wouldn’t do that to you. I don’t want you to get hurt.” No one should have their heart broken twice.

“If I thought you did, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. But nothing needs to be decided right now. Your family needs you.”

Cal’s emotions were a mix of near-adoration, amazement at her maturity, and worry. In the midst of it all, he knew she was right. Cal couldn’t have given her a rational answer about their relationship right now if he tried. Not when only days ago he’d been too conflicted to even give Higgins a straight explanation of his thoughts, and now his strongest urge was to declare his love like some bad radio drama. “Thank you.” He pulled her into a hug.

Alice hugged him back. “*When* we see each other again we can figure this out.”

Somewhere down the hall, a radio played *Accentuate the Positive*, and Alice felt good in his arms.

* * *

Cal left his duffel at the front desk. It wouldn't do to drag it into the Colonel's office. He wasn't sure why Colonel Woods wanted to see him before he left. Cal already had approval for his leave time.

Upon his arrival, Cal was immediately let into the Colonel's office. "You wanted to see me, Sir?" he asked as he stood at attention and saluted.

"At ease, Captain," Woods nodded. "You do seem to be on your feet again."

Was that the only reason Woods had called him in, to see for himself? "Yes, Sir."

"Doctor Gallows said he gave you a cane to walk with."

"A Marine shows no weakness, Colonel." It was a pat response from training, but it got a smile out of Woods.

"That's exactly right. Well I'm sure you're wondering why I'm holding you up when you've got to be on a train." Woods slid an envelope across his desk. "I received information today that concerns you directly."

Woods' smile broadened as Cal stood silently, waiting for him to finish his explanation. "Congratulations, Captain Fisher. You're going to be receiving the Medal of Honor."

Cal had to bite his tongue to keep from scoffing. No officer would joke about a Medal of Honor. "Permission to ask a question, Sir?"

"Permission granted, Captain."

“What for?”

Woods picked up a sheet of paper from in front of him. “Well according to the official wording, it’s for ‘*single handedly taking out a machine gun nest in protection of your men and personally pulling five men –including a superior officer– out of the line of fire while wounded.*’ It seems clear enough to me.”

Cal remembered the battle, and doing those things, but at the time he hadn’t given them any thought. It sounded much more impressive worded that way. “I was just doing my job, Colonel.”

The Colonel chuckled. “You know, I’m told that’s what they all say, Fisher. Anyway, that’s yours,” he gestured to the envelope. “I thought that you ought to have the good news to take home to your family.”

Right, take it home to his father who wouldn’t give a damn. At least his mother would approve. If Uncle Danny were alive, Cal was sure he at least would have been proud. “Thank you, Sir.” Cal took the envelope and slipped it into his pocket. He was sure it would make interesting reading on the train when the reality hit him. “Does this change my travel plans at all?”

“Only in that at some point you’ll be making a trip to the Capitol. Word will be sent to you when your orders are determined.”

“What about the war, Sir?”

“What about it?” Woods asked.

“Will those orders include my combat instructions?” Cal had heard nothing yet to indicate whether or not he would be going back into combat quickly. Going all the way to

Washington seemed to say no.

Woods picked up a pen and bent back over his work. “If I knew that, Captain, I would tell you. However, as long as you heal up as fully as the medical reports say to expect, I’m sure they’ll have you back being shot at soon enough.”

Cal felt a sense of relief that seemed ironic to him given the situation. Most people ran away from death. Marines were programmed to seek it out and shoot it. “Thank you, Colonel.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The civilian world had become a foreign place. Little that Cal’s instincts told him could be trusted. Backfiring cars were not gun shots. Shouting children were not the enemy. It was loud noises that did it to him the worst, but that wasn’t the full extent of it. The war was crowded and noisy, but there was always an order to the chaos. The people milling about on the streets, and in the train station, and even on the train itself, were just going about their lives as if people weren’t dying.

Cal paid the extra for a private berth, and spent most of the trip from San Diego to Charleston in it, leaving only to relieve himself and to find food. Mostly he slept and tried not to think too much about what he was likely to face when he returned to Rocky Creek. Hopefully his mother would hold on at least long enough for him to grant her request. Otherwise the entire trip was a complete waste of time.

It had to be desperate if it was enough for his old man to write the only words he had sent to Cal in seven years. Naturally, it had to be bad news.

A conductor shook Cal out of a nap when they arrived in Charleston. Groggy, Cal

glanced out the window. Through his own reflection he could see the last hints of red and gold streaking a cloudy sky behind the mountains and the industrial works between him and the hills.

Cal refused to let someone else carry his duffle, though he ended up using the cane as he did his best not to look like he was hobbling off the train and onto the concrete platform below. Walking without it was still too painful. As he reached the platform, Cal felt the first stirrings of an eagerness to be back, if only for one reason. He didn't even have to look around much given how few people were disembarking at the stop.

Reid, alive and well in a respectable looking suit, stood under the nearest light. Grinning, he came forward. "Hey there, man! We've been waiting for you to visit."

A lump formed in Cal's throat as they exchanged a brief, thumping hug. "Sorry. I sort of got delayed."

"Well if the Japs hadn't slowed you down a bit we might never have caught you." Reid stood a moment, just looking at him. His eyes glinted in the yellow light above them. "I'm glad you made it, man."

"Yeah well, you got shot before I did." Cal shifted his stance and rebalanced his bag on his shoulder. "I bet you did it on purpose."

"Sure, just because I missed Margie's cooking." Reid chuckled and reached out. "Here, I'll take that."

"Well you've made up for it since coming home," Cal quipped, sidestepping Reid's attempt. His friend looked better fed than any of the soldiers. "It's all right, I've got it."

Reid shook his head. "Don't be a stubborn ass. Give it over."

Cal scowled. He wasn't a weakling. "Don't give me orders. I outrank you."

“Not anymore,” Reid snorted. “I’m a civilian again, remember? Now let me help you out.”

Reid didn’t think he was weak, Cal realized. There was a note of guilt there, like maybe Reid felt bad for not being with Cal from the start, or he felt bad for being out of the fighting before it was over. He wanted to be useful. “All right,” Cal slid the bag off his shoulder and handed it over. “But don’t strain something.”

Reid laughed and shouldered the bag with no trouble. It looked pretty funny over a suit. “Do I look that soft?” he asked as he turned and started walking towards the parking lot.

Cal fell into step beside him. “Sure you do.” He couldn’t help but feel that it was a good thing that Reid didn’t look like he’d spent a couple of years on the front in Europe, underfed and haunted. “You’d look pretty dumb if you didn’t fill out that swell outfit.”

“Margie picked it out,” Reid admitted. “Said a businessman ought to look the part.”

“So things are going well at the Brewery then.”

Reid stopped beside one of the few cars in the lot. “Ain’t that the truth. I’m lower management now. The war’s been great for the beer business, and more. Haven’t you looked at folks? They ain’t nearly as bad off as they was.” He moved around to the back and put the duffel in the seat.

A whiff of the breeze off the mountains sent a shudder through Cal. His side twinged.

“Are you okay?” Reid asked, brows knitting together.

“No. It’s nothing.” Cal got into the car. He suspected he would never again smell sulfur without thinking of black sand and gunfire.

* * *

“This is a nice place,” Cal complimented, still a bit startled as he sat in the over-stuffed chair in the living room of Reid and Margie’s little two-story Charleston townhome. It was far from the fanciest place he’d ever seen, but from what he recalled, it was nearly as nice as what passed for mansions in Rocky Creek.

“Well thank you,” Margie smiled as she set coffee for three on the table between the chair and the couch and sat down, smoothing her skirt over her knees. Of the three of them, Cal felt like she had changed least. She looked damned good for a mother of two.

“We had to really save up to afford it,” Reid admitted as he sat down next to his wife. “But we needed the space.”

Cal looked between them, suspicious. “Planning on expanding the family again?”

Margie blushed, but Reid chuckled. “Well we’ve talked about it. But no, this time it’s my father.” The smile faded. “He’s selling the shop and moving down here.”

“What for?” Cal hadn’t heard anything about this in any letters he had been sent. He supposed it had to be a recent decision.

Reid shifted in his seat. “Kline finally bought him out. Or well, he finally offered Dad a price good enough he was willing to sell, but he refuses to stay on. He ain’t going to buy in like so many folks. So we offered him a room with us. He’s not closing, just moving the business.”

Cal’s first feeling was anger at the idea of Kline getting something else he shouldn’t, but the feeling simmered lower when Reid’s expression changed to a small grin of triumph. His friend wanted this. “I take it he’ll make a better profit in Charleston.”

“And spend time with his grandkids.” Reid chuckled.

Giggles came from the hallway.

Margie sighed. “Harrison! Louisa! You’re supposed to be in bed.”

The tousled heads of Reid’s nearly-six-year-old son and four-year-old daughter peeked around the corner. Two pairs of bright eyes stared at Cal curiously, but nothing more than hair, eyes, and noses remained visible.

Cal smiled. “Apparently I’m the new variety act in town.” He tried to seem relaxed and friendly. He had heard plenty about the kids over the years, but meeting them finally, he couldn’t help but feel awkward. They were his best friend’s kids and to them he was a complete stranger. “Hey there.”

Faces vanished and feet thudded on wood.

“Forgive them.” Margie stood up. “We told them they could meet you in the morning, but apparently curiosity causes selective deafness.” She left the room, and a minute later Cal could hear her upstairs giving them a good scolding. Or he supposed it was from the complaints. Cal wasn’t used to what lectures from mothers sounded like.

“She’ll be a while.” Reid’s knowing smile implied this happened fairly regularly. “I can’t blame them for being curious. I’ve been telling them ‘Uncle Cal’ stories since they were in diapers.”

“I hope they’re good ones then.” Cal said, picking up his cup and sipping his coffee. Outside, he heard a low roll of thunder and the patter of rain beginning on the windows. Mountain storms had a lull to them, a sort of wild calm Cal didn’t hear in rain over Virginia, or rain in the cities.

“Only the cleanest, what few those are.” Reid replied with a nostalgic air. “When they hear what you told me in the car, you’ll be even more of a living legend.”

“No more than you then,” Cal objected.

Reid shook his head before getting stiffly to his feet. “I just got wounded. You’re a real war hero, just like your uncle.”

There was something discomfiting about the pride and possibly envy in his friend’s gaze. Cal hadn’t even considered it before, but other than what he had written back, what did people know about him? He had always assumed nothing, or that most everyone had forgotten about him save for Reid and Margie, and his folks. Not that he felt right asking about his own reputation, but there were other things he needed to know. “Reid, when we go up to Rocky Creek tomorrow, just what am I in for?”

Reid’s smile slipped again. “You want a drink?”

“If you think I’ll need it.”

Reid walked over to a little liquor cabinet –well above easy child reach- and opened it. Where Cal had been expecting a beer of some variety, Reid pulled out what Cal knew to be a reasonably pricy bottle of scotch. “What do you know?” he asked.

“Idle gossip from my mother.” Cal shrugged. “Her letters were usually full of depressing tales of sell outs and suffering. At least until she stopped writing.” Which meant, he realized upon counting, he hadn’t heard anything for at least six months.

“Then let me catch you up on the situation.” Reid vanished a moment into the kitchen before coming back with two glasses. He poured out scotch for each of them, and carefully put the bottle away before returning to his spot on the sofa.

“I appreciate it.” Cal traded his half-empty coffee cup for the other glass. “I like knowing the lay of the battlefield before I walk into a possible firefight.” It sounded like Bernard Kline had even more of a hold on the town than before. That couldn’t be sitting well with his old man. How was the store getting run with his mother sick? Who was taking care of her? Thousands of mundane issues suddenly sprang into his mind in a swarm of questions.

“Depressing is not too far off if you look at the economic situation,” Reid agreed. “Sure some folks are doing better with the economy improving, but they’re running out of folks to sell to if they ain’t selling for the Coal Company. More Miners have moved in and some of the towns folk, like us, have been moving out. Frankly, your father’s one of the few independent men still in business at all.”

Cal wondered if there was something wrong with the universe that his best friend sounded proud of the old man Cal had spent his adolescence wanting to punch in the face. “Who’s taking care of my mother?”

Reid looked up from his glass. “Your father of course. He wouldn’t let her stay at the clinic. Apparently he told them she’d be comfier and heal faster from the pneumonia at home. Really there ain’t much of a difference up there.” His uneasiness seemed to increase. “Even we didn’t know it was so bad until you called last week.”

“Did you find out anything new then?” Cal barked before he could check himself. “Sorry.”

“Hey, no need to apologize.” Reid waved it away. “My father went over and finally hounded answers out of yours. Old Doc Hollins says the pneumonia was supposed to be getting better but it suddenly got worse again.”

“My mother’s had pneumonia for six months?” Cal stared at Reid in disbelief. Was that even possible?

“They say she got it again right after getting over it,” Reid clarified. “Amounts to about the same thing doesn’t it?”

“I guess.” Cal tossed down a good bit of what was in his glass. “If she dies of it then it doesn’t really make a difference.” It didn’t matter what she died of if she didn’t make it. “This may sound terrible, but I always figured my old man would go first.”

“You and me both,” Reid admitted. “He ain’t doing too well either, Cal. Not that I think he’s close to dying or nothing,” he amended as Cal felt his blood pressure rising. “But I think you’ll find he’s pretty different than you remember.”

“You mean he’s not a stubborn bastard anymore?”

That got a wry smile out of Reid. “I didn’t say he’d changed completely.”

“No, you didn’t.” Cal didn’t want to ask any more questions about his family, or about the people in town. He would see for himself tomorrow how bad things were, and how well –or horribly– he was remembered. How many of them still thought of him as the kid who left in disgrace? It was hard to believe his mother’s letters that had insisted people didn’t feel that way. At best he hoped he was mostly forgotten. He just wanted to get in, see to family business, and leave as soon as he could.

Cal finished the last bit of scotch in his glass and held it out, hoping for a refill. “So you never did tell me how they got that bullet pulled back out of your ass in France.”

Reid stood up and fetched the Scotch. “Arm,” he corrected.

Cal smiled across his whisky. “Funny, that’s not what the casualty report said.” Oh sure,

there had been the arm wound, but there had been two bullet injuries listed when he'd had a moment on leave to find out.

Reid paused, a dark glint in his eyes. "Don't you dare tell Margie."

Cal almost choked on his whisky. "She doesn't know?"

"If she's figured it out she hasn't said anything," Reid admitted. "She thinks it was in the thigh."

"So why didn't you tell her?" Was it that big of a deal?

Reid stared at him and fell silent. In the quiet, above the rain, Margie's voice singing a lullaby could be softly heard. His voice dropped to a low whisper. "Cal, you really think I want to explain to my wife how I got shot in the rear and that it took three male medics to get the darned thing out again?"

If he spilled a drop of that whisky it was going to be a darned shame. Cal almost did anyway from shaking so hard as he laughed, but tried not to get Margie's attention. "You make a good point." He grinned. "But just to be fair, I won't tell her a thing, but only if you tell me the whole story."

"Fine," Reid agreed. "But after, you gotta tell me about what happened on that Japanese Island."

Cal thought he could do that... maybe. It was so clear in his mind, he had moments when he couldn't believe he was sitting safe and warm in West Virginia instead of dreaming on his cot. He half expected to wake up any moment to another air raid blast and the scent of salt and rotting jungle vegetation. "I'll try," he promised. "But I'm not sure I can do it justice."

"All right then, you've got a deal. But remember, Margie finds out, you owe me another

bottle.”

It was good whisky, but it wasn't the priciest Cal had seen. “Sure. It's a deal.” If nothing else, it would keep his mind off of what he still felt to be tomorrow's landmines.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The mountains were prettier than Cal remembered. They were ancient and soft, rolling instead of sharp, and covered in towering trees through which the sun dappled the earth underneath like stained glass in the windows of one of those European churches. In places the forest was broken by grassy clearings on the hillsides or short walls of slate rock.

The road going by Reid's tires was lined with delicate sprays of new spring flowers in gold and white and twilight sky, and huge yellow butterflies winged from blossom to blossom in the sun.

When did this place turn into some kind of Eden? Cal couldn't take his eyes off it. The breeze on his skin was like a brush of silk, or a woman's skin. While there was nothing to see from the winding road but nature, West Virginia seemed about as close to a natural paradise as Cal had ever seen.

The whiff of sulfur in the air was the only flaw. The scent grew stronger as they wove their way up towards Rocky Creek and the coal mines Cal knew to be hidden under the greenery.

They clunked over the metal bridge, painted green but rusting in places, turned a corner, and Cal was back in reality.

Where the mountains were more pristine than his memory allowed, Rocky Creek was dingier, smaller, and horribly cramped. Little houses with chipped-paint on wooden siding, coal

and mud tracked everywhere and not a paved road in sight. The midmorning bustle hadn't changed though. Women in dresses five years out of style went about their shopping and men were out working on a variety of projects, mending broken stairs, washing shop fronts, and anything else that could be done to keep the place from looking like it was falling apart.

Cal's temporary good mood died as they passed the stores that were now empty, or owned by Kline's Coal Company. It was clear that some places had given up trying to draw in customers. If everyone had to shop using Company scrip, what good was it to worry?

They passed through the flat area by the creek that counted as downtown, passed the town hall and little court house, and turned left, heading up the hill.

The grocery still sat along the edge of the road half way up between the other ramshackle buildings. The only difference as far as Cal could tell was the level of dilapidation. In the war against Kline's growing monopoly, Melvin had always kept the place looking sharper than a lot of the other places in town. Cal's ever-worked hands had been testament to it. Now it looked as old and worn as everyplace else.

Reid's car pulled to a stop. "You want me to come with you?" he asked.

Cal shook his head. "I'd rather face this alone first, thanks." He would rather face his old man alone. They hadn't talked in years, and he had no idea what he was walking into. Yet, somehow, that didn't faze him much as he had expected it would. "I'll meet you at the shop when I'm done."

Reid nodded. "You want your stuff?" he motioned to the bag lying in the back seat.

"If I do, I'll get it later." Cal wasn't sure where he would be staying, or even if he would be. That depended on what he found inside. He got out of the car and looked at the store. The

closed sign hung in the window.

“Good luck.” Reid drove off, the car rattling and popping up the tire-rutted road.

“Thanks,” Cal murmured. “I’ll need it.” He steeled himself for the worst, and went around the back of the house. The back door made him pause. He had been told to come, but that didn’t make him welcome. Feeling a bit foolish, he knocked on the door.

No one answered. After nearly a minute, Cal gave up knocking and turned the handle. It wasn’t locked.

The tiny kitchen was even more cramped than his memory allowed for, and there were no lights save that coming through the window over the sink as Cal closed the door and turned around. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness before he saw the figure slouched, unconscious, at the kitchen table.

His old man lay on top of what looked like the store accounts and a scattering of what Cal guessed were bills. In his tattered robe and his thinning hair, Melvin looked like the store, older, more broken down.

Cal reached out to shake his shoulder, and froze. A half-empty bottle of whisky held down a small pile of papers. The mental image of Galloway flinching as Cal got too close after a night drinking came to mind, and he shook his head. *Is that it, old man? Is that why you got onto me so hard?* Cal would have called him a hypocrite once, but that really wasn’t the problem.

His hand closed and he shook. His father came a wake with a startled snort, and looked blearily upward. “What do you want? We ain’t open.”

“You’re the one who told me to come.” Cal scowled.

Melvin squinted at him, confused. Then his eyes grew wider. “Calvin?”

His father didn't recognize him. Cal ran one hand absently over his short-cropped hair. He supposed he looked pretty different now. "Is Mom upstairs?"

"She's in bed," Melvin replied, coming more awake. One hand went to his forehead. "What time is it?"

"It's almost eleven." How had he ever been afraid of this man? Cal tried to summon a vindictive cheer at watching his old man suffer from an obvious hangover, but it just wasn't there. "You want some coffee?"

That earned him another hard look. "You sure you're my son?"

Okay, so the sarcasm hadn't changed much. "Yeah, Last I checked I spent seventeen years putting up with you. Do you want coffee or not?" Cal turned to find the little pot on the stove his mother had always used.

There was a long pause before Melvin responded with a tired, "Yes... thank you."

Cal put coffee on to steep in silence. When he turned around his old man was still looking at him oddly. "Do I look funny?"

Melvin frowned. "You look like Danny." The glare was spoiled by a dry cough.

Cal bit back the retort on his tongue. *Better him than you.* "Marines all kind of look the same," he retorted. "Coffee will be ready as soon as it gets hot. I'm going up to see Mom." He glanced at the ledger and the bottle. "You might want to clean things up." *Yourself included.* Then he turned and headed for the stairs.

They creaked under him all the way up the narrow stairway. His parents' bedroom door was open. As a child, Cal had entered that space only rarely. Now, he strode right in.

Frail and bundled in bed, his mother looked up at him. Her eyes lit up in immediate

recognition. A weak smile seemed to bring life to her pale face. "Calvin."

His throat hitched and Cal swallowed the forming lump. She looked like she didn't have much time. "I heard you weren't feeling well, so I came home." For lack of a chair he crouched beside the bed, taking her hand in his.

Violet's hand gave his a weak squeeze. "My sweet boy. I'm so glad... to see you're all right." She stopped, coughing violently.

Cal didn't let his worry show. "Oh yeah, I've been swell. I'm all healed up and I've got some good news. Guess what?"

That made her smile. "Tease."

He didn't make her guess. "I'm getting a medal, Mom. Medal of Honor, same one they gave Uncle Danny." His hands tightened. "I want you to be there when I get it."

Apparently delight and sorrow could exist together, because he saw them both on his mother's face. "I don't know about that," she sighed. "They keep telling me I'm dying."

"You don't believe them?" He hadn't expected that.

"I don't want to," Violet shook her head just slightly. "I don't have time to die... but they might be right. It explains... why your father's given up."

So she knew. Cal had hoped that she didn't know about the wreck he had talked to in the kitchen, but at least his mother's mind was still working. "He's drunk like this before."

She nodded. "After the war... the first one."

"What stopped him?" Talking about his father's shortcomings was only mildly preferable over discussing his mother's likely death.

Violet closed her heavy-lidded eyes. "Two things. Prohibition... and you."

“Me?” Cal bought the idea that his by-the-book old man would follow the law even through withdrawal, but not the second part.

“He became like he’s been lately,” she continued. “Only time he ever did for himself, fixing meals, taking care of me... like I was one of them fancy porcelain dolls.”

“Dad can cook?”

His mother’s lips twitched. “Passably. Can you?”

Cal couldn’t help a weak smile. “Passably.” It wasn’t like he had ever really had the time or need to learn much.

“Then you’d better make sure your future wife can.”

His stomach dropped. “My what?”

Violet’s eyes peeked open again. “When you find one.”

“Oh... right.” Cal let out a slow breath. He made a point of not mentioning women in his letters home. He doubted any mother wanted to know her son had slept with several.

Disappointment crept into his mother’s expression. “Isn’t there someone?” Before she could say more, she coughed wetly.

Cal turned and poured a glass of water from the pitcher on the bed stand. Even looking away, her eyes seemed to meet his. “Maybe.” His mother seemed to want him to have someone so badly. He could lie a little to make her feel better. “At least, possibly.”

“That’s a start. Tell me.”

Cal settled in close to his mother, offering her the glass in little sips to soothe her throat. “Well, her name’s Alice. She’s pretty and smart, and she’s a nurse in the army.”

Between sips, Violet smiled, studying him evenly. “She sounds lovely. I wish... I could

meet her.”

“Yeah, me too.” Wait, what was he saying? He wanted to introduce his mother and Alice? Cal had to bite his tongue to keep the cursing in his head.

The smile faded. “What’s wrong?” his mother asked. Apparently his expressions were transparent. “She ain’t interested?”

This was far more complicated a conversation than Cal was ready to have with his mother. “I... it’s not that simple.” He stood abruptly. “I should see if Dad needs help. Do you want me to bring you anything?”

“Tea would be nice.”

“Tea it is.” Cal left before he could say something else that would give his mother the wrong idea. He and Alice weren’t anything more than friends, if he could call it that. He didn’t normally want to see his friends unclothed.

He descended the steps slower than he had come up them. The exertion made his side throb, and he remembered the cane he had left in the back seat of Reid’s car. He would never have let his old man see him using it.

Melvin sat at the table but he now had coffee and his robe had been straightened and retied. The bottle hadn’t moved. He looked up from the pile of receipts. “Was she awake?”

Cal nodded. “She wants tea.” He put on the tea kettle then poured himself coffee. “You know, she doesn’t act like she’s dying.” If she was, she was taking plenty of time about it too. He’d had time to get here, and he found it surprisingly irksome that his father might have overstated the case.

“Well the doc says she is,” Melvin argued. “What is is. Ain’t no point in denying it.”

“Have you gotten a second opinion?” The more he stood there, in that house, the more the situation felt wrong. Rocky Creek’s doctor was not a stupid man, but he was old.

“From whom?” Melvin looked up sharply.

“A different doctor,” Cal pointed out. Shouldn’t it have been obvious? “There have been a lot of changes in medicine the last few years. Maybe someone who studied more recently would have a different diagnosis.”

“Pneumonia is pneumonia,” his old man said. “Besides, we can’t afford no fancy city doctors that don’t know no more than anyone else anyway.” He gestured at the paper spread out before him. “We ain’t exactly rolling in money.”

Cal moved closer. He was right. A lot of those slips were bills to pay out, and not nearly as much coming in. “Well it’s no wonder, if you’ve been drinking yourself stupid instead of opening the store like this morning.”

“Well it’s not like you’ve been here helping out.”

“No, I was just out getting shot at to keep your worthless hide and the rest of this place safe.” Cal snapped. He had no intention of putting up with his father making him feel guilty anymore. “Mom’s not dead yet. She might not die at all, but you’re already wallowing around like she’s gone and buried. How dare you give up on her.”

“And don’t you barge in here like you know something when you ain’t been here to care!” His father came to his feet. “There ain’t the money for paying some other doctor to come all the way out here to tell us the same thing. It’s a waste I can’t afford. It’s not like I haven’t tried.” The energy seemed to drain out of him as he broke off in a hacking cough of his own.

Cal did not stand down. “I’ll pay for it.”

“You’ll... how?” Melvin got control of his cough, staring up at Cal in disbelief.

“Unlike some, I haven’t blown all my pay on liberty.” Cal was more grateful than ever that he hadn’t. “Then it’s not your money being wasted if I’m wrong.”

For a moment, Melvin looked like he was debating whether to hug Cal or hit him. He did neither. “It’s a deal.”

Well, Cal supposed he shouldn’t have expected a thank you. The matter seemed settled for the moment so he let it be. Cal went to set down his coffee on the table, moving a piece of paper so it wouldn’t get wet. Cal paused, and read it more fully. It was an offer to buy the grocery store, though the price was ludicrous. “Don’t tell me Kline really thinks you’d sell to him for that amount?”

“He knows he’s got the market cornered on just about everything else in town,” Melvin replied, returning to his own cup. “The last offer was even more ridiculous.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“A few years.” Melvin shrugged as he dropped back into his chair like an over-used sandbag. “You didn’t know?”

“Mom didn’t tell me everything.” Despite the length of her letters, there was a lot Cal was finding out she had not told him either. Local gossip was hardly news. “As a matter of fact, I’m beginning to feel that she didn’t really tell me anything.” At least, she hadn’t included anything that really mattered.

“Sounds like her,” Melvin agreed. “She never did like to worry folks.”

“Stop talking like that.” Cal resisted the urge to slap him. “Using the past like that. She still doesn’t like worrying anyone. If we’re lucky, she’ll be able to keep on that way.” If he

couldn't fight the Japs anymore, he could still do what he could to help his mother live.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Cal knew he was going to owe Reid big time by the time this was all over. His friend called back into Charleston and then left to bring back their family doctor. While he was gone, Cal helped his father open up shop. It was the oddest sensation to be doing those things again, sweeping coal dust, stocking shelves with canned goods, restacking boxes in the store room. It didn't take long, and the silence in the room was almost companionable.

"At least you're more efficient." His father's gruff statement was about as close to approval as Cal figured he could expect. There was a distance between them now that had nothing to do with age.

Cal declined to make a sarcastic comment. "Do you need anything else done?"

"Not until closing." Melvin paused. "You don't have to stay."

Cal nodded. "I think I'll take a walk." His father could find him easily enough if he was needed.

"You do that," Melvin replied, as if he had any say in it.

Cal reluctantly fetched the cane from his luggage. Given the steepness of the hills, he had a feeling he might need it.

Outside, Cal headed downhill towards the main shopping district. Maybe he could find something his mother would like. Nothing big, but seeing what was left in town would kill time until Reid returned.

Cal had rarely gone in to the tiny antique shop at the bottom of the hill, on the corner

across from the tool shop. He remembered standing on that dingy street corner with his mother, window shopping. It was the kind of place the Klines and their associates usually shopped. Normally, they were the only ones who could afford it. Now he pushed the door open and stepped right on up inside.

“May I help you, sir?” An eager young man greeted him just inside the doorway.

It took Cal a moment to place the teenage face back in time to match one of the young boys playing in the school yard. He was pretty sure he was the son of the man who owned the store, Mr. Olsen. “Possibly, Teddy. I’m looking for a gift for my mother.”

That got him a startled look. “Do I know you?”

“In passing.” If a military haircut and out-of-town clothes was all it took to be unrecognizable in town, Cal was fine with that. It might mean fewer awkward moments. “I used to live here.”

The younger man looked skeptical, but did not argue. “Well what can I help you find?”

Cal looked around at the knickknacks and pieces of furniture and realized he really wasn’t entirely sure what his mother would like. It should just be something she did not have, but had always wanted. “Do you have anything in china?”

“We have a couple of really nice pieces,” Teddy nodded eagerly. “Right over here.”

Cal followed him over to a shelf holding a set of teacups and saucers with delicate blue flowers, an unrelated creamer set painted in a different floral, and a small teapot painted in African violets. His mother might like that one.

The jingle of the bell above the door sent the boy scampering while Cal examined his options.

“Good day, Mrs. Johnson! It’s so good to see you in again.” Someone definitely wanted to make a sale.

“I was here yesterday, Theodore.”

“Of course, Ma’am. What can I help you with today?”

“Silver, if you have any. We’re having a dinner party next week and there are a couple of pieces that just won’t do.”

Cal’s blood froze. His lungs stopped working. For just a moment, the world hesitated.

Then, in a rush, he came back to himself. He knew that voice, and that name. Taking a long breath, he turned around and looked at Valerie.

She hadn’t spotted him yet. Hair of yellow-blond brushed the shoulders of a dress that was the newest thing Cal had seen in town so far. It was also four years behind the styles he had seen elsewhere, if the people on the train were any indication, four years behind and at least a size too small. Though he suspected the toddler in her arms was likely to blame for that. Didn’t she have another one? Cal thought the one in his mother’s letter had been a boy. This one wore a dress

Her eyes were blue, just blue. Cal had always expected to feel the painful stirrings of lost love and betrayal the next time he saw Valerie, but she stirred little inside him. She was still pretty, but she wouldn’t stand out in Paris or even Virginia.

Her face turned in his direction, and Cal didn’t have time to look away. Curiosity and suspicion crept into Valerie’s expression. “Yes?”

I bet she thinks I’m checking her out. Doesn’t she recognize me? “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

His voice did it. Valerie's mouth dropped open in a perfect little oval. Her eyes traced him up and down twice. "Calvin. So you've come back."

Cal moved forward, weaving through the scattered antiques without knocking any over, though he kept his focus on her. "My mother isn't well."

Valerie's lips tightened. Maybe she had wondered if he had come back for her. "I'm sorry to hear it," she replied almost too politely. She seemed at a loss for anything substantive to say, falling back on formalities. The toddler in her arms squirmed, taking back her mother's attention.

"She's very pretty." Complimenting a baby was an acceptable thing in this situation, right? "What's her name?"

"Andrea."

"I suppose I should congratulate you, late as it is. My mother wrote me you had gotten married."

Valerie gave him a long, considering look.

"I mean it. I'm glad you're happy."

"Thank you, Calvin."

Teddy reappeared from the back, carrying a box that looked like it could hold silver.

"Sorry for the wait, Mrs. Johnson. I think these will be just what you're looking for."

As he set the case down on a table and opened it, Cal went back to the teapots. Yes, he thought his mother would definitely like the one with violets. He took it down then waited for Teddy to have a moment to attend the register. Cal wasn't at all surprised that he wasn't helped until Valerie had sent Teddy back twice, made a decision, paid, and left.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, Sir,” Teddy said as he took Cal’s money and wrote out the receipt, then carefully wrapped the teapot in brown paper to protect it. “Mrs. Johnson is very particular, but the family’s one of our best customers.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Cal took his package. “I know the type.”

Teddy gave him another long look before recognition came to his face. “You’re Fisher, ain’t you? Well danged!”

Cal had the feeling he was going to get a lot of that over the next few days. “Give your father my regards, Teddy.” He turned and headed out the door.

Cal had barely gone two steps when he heard a man’s voice shouting “Get back here, Richard!”

As Cal looked to his right, a small boy barreled into his legs, bounced off, and tried to keep going. “Slow up there, boy,” Cal dropped his cane and his hand shot out and took a firm hold of the boy’s arm. “Sounds like your father wants you.”

“No!” The boy tried to kick at him, but his legs were too short to do him any good held away from Cal’s body.

Cal turned around, still holding Richard’s arm firmly, and saw a man in a nice suit, sitting in a padded wooden wheelchair, wheeling down the sidewalk with a look of frustration. It took a moment to recognize Andy Johnson’s face. It was more lined than Cal remembered. “I believe this is yours,” he said as he walked Richard up to Andy.

Andy took a hold of his son as Cal let go. “How many times do I have to tell you to stay with me?” Andy looked down at the boy.

“But... Mom said we’d get candy!” Tears filled the boy’s face.

“After your mother finishes her shopping.”

“But...”

“That’s enough, Richard.”

Andy looked back up at Cal. “Thank you. He’s a rambunctious boy sometimes, but he ain’t bad.”

If he had talked to Valerie, she hadn’t mentioned running into Cal. It was clear that he didn’t recognize him. Cal wondered if Andy could even see past the fact that Cal’s clothes were of equal quality. “You’re welcome,” he replied. “That’s all right. Most boys are at that age aren’t they?”

“So I’m told. Are you here on business?”

“Of a sort. I know a bit about mining.” Cal’s eyes wandered briefly to Andy’s legs, and he saw at once why he needed the chair, his left leg was limp, the knee bent at an awkward angle. His own leg was starting to ache from the walk. “If you don’t mind my asking, was it a mining accident?”

“Yes, a widow-maker dropped while I was doing an inspection tour of the new tunnel, shattered the knee. Wait, how’d you know?” Andy looked up at him, startled.

“Because there’s nothing around here that can do that kind of damage that you would be anywhere near, Andy.”

It took him longer to recognize Cal, but the shock on Andy’s face was worth it. “What are you doing here?”

Cal held up the package. “Buying a present for my mother.”

“I mean back in town, Fisher.”

“Family business. Don’t worry, I’m not staying indefinitely.” Cal bent down slowly and retrieved his cane. “The last thing I want is any more excitement.”

Andy eyed the stick of wood thoughtfully. “What happened to you?”

“Gut and leg wounds on Iwo Jima. You’ve heard of it I assume.”

“I have. So, you’ve been discharged?”

“No. I’m waiting for my next orders.” Cal had no intention of getting out, not as long as he could still physically do the job. “I have to be in Washington before too long.”

“So you’re just passing through.”

He still thinks of me as a threat. It was an odd realization. Andy, even if he hadn’t been in a wheelchair, was no threat to Cal, physical or otherwise.

“Daddy!” Richard wailed, tugging hard at Andy’s grip on him. “I wanna go now.”

“Yes, I’m just passing through,” Cal nodded. “As soon as my business in town is taken care of, I’ll be on my way again. I see you’ve got your hands full,” he looked at the little boy.

“So I’ll let you go.” He turned and crossed the street.

Let the man worry himself to a frazzle over all the things Cal wasn’t doing. Cal had more important things to worry about than Andy’s curiosity and concerns about Cal’s presence in town and what it might mean for him. If he was expecting some kind of retribution, it would be more torturous if he didn’t know it wasn’t coming.

* * *

“It’s beautiful, Calvin,” his mother exclaimed with a weak but happy smile as he set the tea pot on her bedside table. “You didn’t have to do this for me.”

“Only the best for my mother,” Cal argued, smiling as he sat down in the chair by the

bed. "You've more than earned nice things and I can finally give them to you." Heaven forbid she died, he didn't want her to think he hadn't appreciated everything she had done raising him.

"I have some nice things," Violet objected gently. "Your father... ain't always stingy. He wasn't willing to risk... losing out to any other boys... as were interested in me."

Cal took her hand. "You had other suitors?" Somehow that hadn't ever occurred to him, though he had seen pictures. If he didn't think of the girl in the photos as his *mother*, she was quite the looker.

She smiled. "A couple. Not that I ever had no interest... for any but your father. He was... easily jealous in those days. I think he ain't... forgiven them even now." The last came out in a weak gasp.

"You shouldn't talk so much," Cal chided gently. "Do I know these men?" Men his father had never forgiven. Cal could only think of two, Bernard Kline and Uncle Danny.

"It's long past, Calvin. Better those old jealousies were forgotten. I...shouldn't have mentioned them."

"You're right." Cal didn't want his suspicions confirmed. It could be them, or some other man or men. Knowing wasn't necessary. He pat her hand, and smiled. "Why don't you rest now? The doctor should be here before too much longer."

"All right." She smiled, even as her eyes closed. "If you insist."

Chapter Thirty

The coffee in the pot had grown cold by the time Dr. McNeill creaked his way back down the stairs, pushing thick dark hair out of his glasses. The three men at the table looked up immediately.

Melvin's eyes darted sharply from the untouched work on the table.

Cal straightened up in his chair, dropping the newspaper he had been failing to focus on back on the table between him and Reid. His pulse quickened. "Well, Doc? What do you think?"

McNeill took off his glasses, cleaning them methodically with a cloth he pulled from his pocket. "I think she's a very sick woman."

"We know that," Cal's old man snapped.

"What are her chances?" Cal stood up from the table so he could look the doctor in the face.

McNeill squinted up at him. "If she stays here, not good. This house is far too drafty and dirty, and she needs constant care."

Melvin came to his feet. "I've been taking care of her."

"I mean medical care." McNeill never twitched. Cal wondered if he had ever been a battlefield medic. He wasn't the type to be flustered. "Your wife should be in a proper hospital, Mr. Fisher. If you'll allow me, I should like to have her brought to the hospital in Charleston where I can treat her properly. Despite her condition, I believe she would have a chance of recovery."

"That would be great!"

"Are you crazy?" Melvin snarled over Cal's response.

“Are you mad?” Cal rounded on him. “It’s a chance to save Mom.”

“A chance that’d cost more than I could ever hope to earn.” Melvin bristled like a cornered porcupine. “There’s the huge hospital bills, then a place to stay while she’s there, and paying someone to mind the store.”

“If I may,” McNeill cut in. “Returning her here would only invite another recurrence of illness. Mrs. Fisher is too delicate to remain in this climate. Mountain winters are hard on even the healthy.”

“He’s insane!” Melvin waved an arm at the doctor. “Where would we move to?”

“Someplace warm and mild.” Cal wasn’t about to lose this argument. “You can’t hide in the mountains forever.”

“You insolent—“

“Maybe we should wait outside.” Reid spoke up loudly.

Redfaced, Melvin’s mouth worked silently for several seconds before he calmed. “My apologies. I need to have a conversation with my son.”

McNeill nodded as if this kind of thing happened to him all the time. Well, Cal thought, perhaps it did. “I understand your concerns. We’ll give you a few minutes.”

The door hadn’t clicked shut behind Reid and the Doctor before Cal found himself nose to nose with Melvin. “Just what do you think you’re doing, barging in here and trying to make decisions like you own the place?”

“She’s my mother.” Cal shoved Melvin backwards with a finger in the sternum. “If you think I’m going to let her die without a fight then you’d better be ready to fight me over it. It’s not like I haven’t thought this through.” He stuffed his hand in his pocket and came up with his

wallet. "I'll pay for Mom's hospital bills as much as I can."

Gray eyes bulged. "You'll... how?"

Cal put the wallet back, point made. "There aren't a lot of places to blow that much money on half-deserted Islands." He took a long, deep breath, and tried to sound like he was making a suggestion to a superior officer instead of barking at one of his men. "You've got to do this for Mom. Or isn't she worth it?"

"Of course she is." Pain creased Melvin's brow. "How dare you suggest I feel any other way but it's just not feasible! The only offer I'll get on this place is Kline's joke of a price. No one else can afford even that much, and it ain't enough."

It was a crazy idea, but it just might work. "If Kline offered you what the place was worth, would you sell?"

"He'll never do it." Melvin snorted in disbelief.

"Would you?" Cal pressed. *You let me worry about how much.* "Selling and moving someplace better for Mom could be better for business you know. There are grocers in other towns too, where there aren't coal companies trying to buy up everything around them."

A war of principles and pride waged itself right in front of Cal. He didn't have to see it to know it was happening. This was his father, and Cal wouldn't have found it much easier to swallow, being told to retreat and give the enemy exactly what he wanted. "If your mother lived, and Kline made the offer, yes I'd sell."

"Done then." Cal held his hand out for a shake. "It's a deal."

"What do you mean?" Melvin's own hands didn't budge.

"When Mom gets better, you're moving," said Cal. "You might want to start packing."

He dropped his hand. "Reid's car is good enough to take Mom back with the doctor tonight."

Finally, his father seemed spurred to action. "You've gotten pushy. Just how do you expect to get that price out of Kline, Calvin?"

"You worry about Mom. I'll worry about Kline." Cal turned and headed for the door to get things moving. Now he just had to figure out how to put Kline's money where Cal's mouth was.

* * *

From the back of Reid's car, bundled in blankets, Cal's mother looked up at him in confusion. "Why are you wearing your uniform?"

"Don't you worry about it." Cal evaded the question as he gave her hand a squeeze and tucked it under the blanket. "I just need to make an official visit while I'm here."

The setting sun glowed yellow, giving his mother a soft halo as it caught the bits of frizz around her head. "When will you come see me again?"

"I'll be down tomorrow." Even if Cal hadn't had someone to talk to tonight, the car was full with Reid, the Doctor, both of his parents, and necessities packed into it. "Don't worry. I'll make sure everything's just fine here."

"You had better," said Melvin.

"He can handle it, dear," Cal's mother rested her head against her husband's shoulder.

Cal stepped away from the car as Reid started it up, trying to hide the sudden rush of love at his mother's defense. The best part was probably his father's bewildered expression. Cal grinned. "It's easier than an amphibious landing. I'll be fine."

Reid chuckled. "That's for sure. Just don't blow the place up, all right?"

"I'll try."

Cal watched the car until it turned right at the bottom of the hill and disappeared. It felt strange. He couldn't remember his mother ever leaving town in his memory. His father almost never. To be the only one of them here made him feel more out of place than he had anywhere else.

He turned and headed up the hill towards Bernard Kline's house, his hat tucked under his arm, but otherwise in full spit-and-polish. It was time to make a lasting impression.

The sun had vanished beyond the hills and twilight hid the grime in shadows as Cal moved up the small, twisting neighborhood streets toward the only mansion in town. Calling it that was like calling a dogwood a California redwood though.

It was just another building in town that looked like a child's toy, or a town on a model railroad, compared to the cities he had grown used to.

Too bad Bernard Kline wasn't likely to have shrunk into insignificance. At least now, Cal was certain he could take the man in a fight if it came to it.

His knock on the front door was answered almost immediately by a startled Kline, who took in the uniform before the face. "What do you want, Captain...?"

"Fisher."

Heavy eyebrows knit together. "What do you want?"

This is not a hostile situation... yet. He had to remember that. Cal gave a short, but respectful nod and looked Bernard straight in the eyes. "I have a business proposition to

discuss.”

“What kind of business?”

“Mutually beneficial, if you’re willing to hear me out.”

“If you think I’m letting you in my house boy—”

“Oh I wasn’t expecting it, sir,” Cal replied. “It’s a lovely evening if you’d prefer to join me out here.”

“I would not.” Kline’s eyes flickered across the uniform and then looked side to side, as if he had realized that any of his neighbors might have already seen Cal standing there and be curious enough to try and listen in. “Come in,” he said gruffly.

Cal had never seen the front rooms of the Kline house. Compared to the rest of town, the house might as well be a mansion, with lace-curtained windows, upholstered living room chairs, even an upright piano in one corner. A painting of a hunting scene hung over the fireplace. Cal found it all to be well-kept middle class, and the rooms felt cramped.

It only took a few steps to get past the living and dining room doors. Kline opened a door to the left, letting Cal into a small study, crammed with shelves, a roll-top desk, and a padded leather chair. A glass decanter of amber liquid sat on the desk. “How’s business?” Cal asked.

Kline poured himself a glass from the decanter. “Booming thanks to the war.” He sat down without offering Cal a drink or seat. “Coal’s the business to be in these days. Why? I ain’t supposing you want to buy in. So what’s your business?”

Cal held up the slip of paper he had picked up from the kitchen table. “I’d like to talk to you about your offer to buy the store.”

“I’ve heard an earful about how old Melvin ain’t gonna take it.”

“I’m aware of that. I’m here to negotiate.”

Kline’s eyebrows climbed almost to his receding hair line. “And just where do you think there’s room to negotiate?”

“You know as well as I do that the store’s worth three times what you’re offering.” Cal didn’t need to get closer to make it seem like he was pressing in on the man. He sharpened his gaze, holding Kline’s eyes to his. “And that even at that price that’s nothing compared to what you’ve paid to buy out half the other stores in town. It’s certainly nothing compared to how much coal is bringing in with the war on.”

Kline shifted his weight slightly. “So you want me to raise my price. What are you going to offer to make a deal worth my time?”

Cal glanced casually around the room. Let Kline know Cal wasn’t intimidated. “Make the offer good enough and I’ll personally guarantee that not only will you get the property, but my parents will move out of Rocky Creek and you’ll never have to deal with my father again.”

Kline stared at him for several seconds before he shook his head. “You had me going a moment there, boy. There ain’t no way you can make that promise.”

“I’ve already talked him into it.” Cal knew it was a risk revealing so much, but right now Kline didn’t know how much Cal was laying on the table.

At last the man seemed to get that Cal wasn’t bluffing. “You’re serious.”

“Bernard?” A woman’s voice called from inside. “Dinner’s ready. What’s keeping you?”

“Business! Just a moment, Martha,” he called back without taking his gaze away from Cal. “For the real value of that building that pain in my backside leaves forever? What’s the catch?”

The fish was biting. "My mother has to live."

Kline scowled. "I knew you were wasting my time. Rumor has it she's half dead already."

Cal's hand only clenched into a fist in his mind. "Rumors are misleading. She's been moved to the city hospital in Charleston, and the doctor thinks she has a fair chance of recovery. She lives, you get the building and your biggest political opponent out of the way. But if she can't get the care she needs and move someplace better for her, you have to put up with a further embittered, cantankerous thorn than before." *How do you like that? Save your enemy's wife and you win.*

"Think about it, Mr. Kline. For years you've had to fight for every square foot of mountainside you want to buy to expand your mining operation. None of your partners or sympathizers, or even anyone you can manipulate, has been elected Mayor in this town. Why? Because the townsfolk trust and rally to Melvin Fisher when he stands up and says what everyone's afraid to say otherwise. Even after I left, you couldn't drag his name in the mud enough to stop folks from accepting small loans from him to keep their businesses running and their mortgages paid in tough times. "

Kline said nothing. At least he was listening.

"If my mother dies, my father will have nothing better to do but put everything he's got left into interfering with your plans, just like he has for over twenty years. So you can keep dragging this fight out, or you can put an end to it expediently for the cost of one building. Would you rather continue being inconvenienced, or be known for a fair business deal and helping save the life of a good woman."

There, a flicker of something in Kline's eyes. Regret? It was gone too fast for Cal to be sure. "That's an awfully big loophole. I'm not putting my name to an agreement based on the survival of an ailing woman."

Cal's mind raced as he contemplated tactical options. Appealing to the man's sense of decency was a waste of time apparently. Outwardly, he smiled. "Then how about based on the continued respectability of a woman whose reputation means more to you?"

Kline scowled. "Just what are you saying?"

"Only a very small number of people in this town know that your charges against me were a complete fabrication, that Valerie and I were lovers, and that you found out because she was pregnant. The only reason you weren't exposed in court is because I still cared about what happened to Valerie."

"It's too late to change the judge's decision."

"No, but it would be very easy to add fuel to the fire against you in the opinion of the townsfolk, and your own miners." The last thing Kline would want would be further discontent among his workers. The Coal Mine Wars weren't much more than a decade gone. "So here's what I propose, a contract that lays down the following conditions: the rightful cost of the building and the land it's on and including my father's agreement to sell and move, but with the stipulation that the contract is void if my mother dies. Then you're not held to it, and you and my father can go on growling at each other until Armageddon if that's your preference."

The silence was broken only by an early cricket in the bushes. Kline said nothing, but Cal could see the man's brain working behind his eyes. It was far from a sure thing, but it was the easiest way for Kline to get exactly what he wanted, legally anyway.

“I’ll have my lawyer draw up the papers,” said Kline at last. “But Melvin has to sign it. I won’t accept just your signature.”

“He’ll sign it.” Even if Cal had to browbeat him into it. “Though you’ll understand if I run it by my own lawyer first.”

“You have a lawyer?”

Cal smiled. “I’m a Marine. I work for the government.” He would find a lawyer to look it over for loopholes if he had to send a copy to Quantico.

“Of course.” Now maybe Kline would take him a little more seriously.

Cal held out his hand. “I look forward to seeing the papers, sir. Please, don’t let me keep you from your dinner any longer.”

Kline’s fist closed on Cal’s in a firm shake. “Expect them within the week.”

“Eagerly.”

Cal didn’t breathe easily until he was halfway back down the hill. That had been, well, not simple, but far less difficult than he had feared. Of course, dangling temptation in front of someone usually yielded expected results.

Now he just had to get his father to actually sign the damned thing.

* * *

Cal made one more stop in town. It was getting late, but he knew at least one man who would be working half the night away who he wanted to have a word with. As he expected, the light in the front of the Rocky Creek Chronicle’s front window was lit. Sam O’Reilly was probably still at his typewriter. Cal knocked, and the door was answered by a middle-aged man with a day’s scruff and ruffled graying-red hair.

Cal smiled. "Good evening, Sam. It's Cal Fisher. How'd you like an exclusive interview before the National Press?"

Sam blinked at him for several seconds, then a smile broke across his face. "I'm always for a good story there, Cal boy! Well I guess I shouldn't be calling you boy now should I? I assume you mean yourself. What's the scoop?"

"How they're going to give me a Medal of Honor for getting shot up in the Pacific." Cal smiled back. "You think your readers would enjoy a local boy turned national hero story?"

"Would they ever. Come in," Sam stepped out of the way and motioned him inside. "Set on down and I'll pour us a couple of drinks and you can tell me all about it."

Chapter Thirty-One

The nearly overwhelming scent of sterilization was reassuring as Cal made his way upstairs to his mother's hospital room. Much as Cal disliked being a patient, the clean environment and constant care were things he appreciated. If he could survive a gut wound, he refused to believe his mother would die here. "I'm sorry to keep you jumping like this, man," he apologized to Reid who walked beside him. Driving the sixty miles back and forth between Charleston and Rocky Creek had to get tiresome.

"Don't worry about it," Reid smiled. "We moved up my vacation time and Dad's move after I got your request to make sure I could help you out."

"I owe you." Not many people Cal knew would do that for someone outside of family.

Reid slapped him on the shoulder. "Visit more often."

Melvin was standing in the waiting area as they entered the hallway. His wrinkled brown

coat lay across one of the uniformly colored chairs. His felt hat lay askew on top of it. "So you're still alive," he said as he turned towards them.

Cal nodded. "It was an unexpectedly civilized conversation."

"I don't believe it." Melvin moved stiffly over to a chair and dropped into it. "So, what did he say?"

Cal dropped into the chair across from him. "How's Mom?" That felt far more pressing than the prior conversation. The trip down had been rough on her.

"Asleep," said Melvin. "We're not allowed in until she wakes."

Cal could see how poorly that sat with him. Both being ordered to do anything and not allowed in with his wife. "How long is that likely to be?"

"Not sure."

"Hey, either of you want coffee?" Reid offered.

"Sure," Cal said as his father shook his head no.

Melvin watched Reid go. "Now, tell me what happened."

"He agreed to full price on the same condition you gave, if Mom lives through the pneumonia, you sell and move someplace better for her. If she doesn't, neither of you is held to it. You don't have to leave, and he doesn't have to offer the full price. You'll have to sign on it though."

"I don't like it."

"You're not backing out on your word now." Cal didn't like it either, but he was sure it was the right course, even though it stuck in his gut to give Kline what he had wanted under any condition.

His old man's tired eyes grew resigned. "Not as long as this contract doesn't try and pull one over on us."

"I've got a call in to a lawyer here in town to take a look at it.," Cal assured him, refusing to be riled by the look of skepticism on Melvin's face. "You remember Matthison." He had been the first man Cal had thought of he was fairly certain he could trust with it. Of course, he was also the only attorney Cal knew in Charleston.

"Hard to forget, considering."

"Let it go, Dad."

"Aren't you mad for what they did to you?" His father's caterpillar eyebrows crawled up his forehead.

"Not anymore." Cal pulled out a cigarette, but he stuck it in his mouth unlit at the last moment. No use getting dirty looks from any forward-thinking nurses.

For a moment he tried to decide if his father's shocked look was a response to the comment or the cigarette. At least until it turned to disapproval. *Don't look so Puritanical old man. I saw that bottle and you know it.*

"How charitable."

"It's just not worth it." As much as Cal would have liked to claim Christian charity or some noble virtue, he wasn't going to pretend it was anything more than simple forgiveness. "At least, not at Valerie. I figure she's got what she deserves."

"And Bernard?" Melvin asked.

"I walked out of that fight on my own terms despite him." Cal returned the cigarette pack to his pocket. "If you can't pick the battlefield, the least you can do is walk off it under your own

terms right?"

The military reference got a deep scowl, but a reluctant nod of agreement. "I ain't one for retreat or surrender."

"Oh really?" Cal smiled around his cigarette. "I thought you were a pacifist."

"I—" His old man blinked, and his face turned slowly red. "You're still a smart ass."

Feeling twitchy, Cal lit his smoke anyway. "What would you expect from the son of a mule?"

"Excuse me, gentlemen."

Turning his head, Cal found the doctor standing in the hallway.

"How's Violet?" His father lurched to his feet.

The doctor wasn't smiling. "Fever's back up and her breathing is labored."

An ill feeling crept over Cal.

His father's face lost what little color it had. "What are you doing about it?"

"Calm down," Doctor McNeill raised his hands in a placating gesture. "We're monitoring her condition very carefully. She's been given penicillin and we're keeping her hydrated and as comfortable as possible."

"Isn't there something else?" Desperation was not something Cal could remember ever seeing in his father before.

The doctor gave him a patient look. "Right now, I'd recommend praying."

* * *

Cal had never been fond of violets. Not that he minded the color, or flowers in general, but the way they wilted so easily hardly made them worth the effort. *You shouldn't be a violet,*

Mom. Why can't you be another flower, or something stronger, like a tree? It didn't even make him feel better.

The pale hand lying in his seemed almost transparent, defying the color in her flushed cheeks. Her eyes were closed, just as they had been every time Cal had been allowed in the room for the past three days. "At least I can pretend you're listening," he commented, mostly to break the lonely quiet. He felt sort of silly talking to her when she wasn't conscious, but who knew if she would wake up again? And besides, the buzz of the light bulb above him did not make for great company.

Her slow, wet breathing was all the response he received.

"Before Dad comes back, I... I wanted to confess something." He'd far rather confess to his mother than in a church any day. Though he was pretty sure death-bed confessions usually went the other way around. "Well, maybe a couple of things, but the first is... I sort of lied about Alice. I do like her, but it's complicated. I'm not sure if we're exactly a wrong match or maybe a near perfect one. She's from a well-off military family, she's very capable and independent, and she even weathered her... former husband's cheating and the scrutiny after with so much poise. She 's a musician, and understands politics. Everything right down to understanding heartbreak, she's almost perfect. I even like that she'll stand up and argue with me."

Longing ate at him just thinking about her. He'd thought about love before, but he'd never felt this dizzy over a woman. "But I thought I knew what I was doing before, when I was a boy, and I thought too short-term. I could have made a real difference here if I'd stood up in that courtroom instead of taking an out. I hurt you, our family, and I'm not sure what I did was the best thing for anyone, even though it's long over. I'd like to think I'm better than that now. My

record's still not perfect, but I'm trying. I just wish it was as clear what I should do with Alice as it is in combat."

Cal's free hand landed with a soft thump on the bed. "I'm falling in love again, and I don't want to mess things up again... for either of us."

Something creaked softly behind him. Cal sat up sharply, glancing back over his shoulder. The door to the room was slightly ajar. He couldn't remember if he had closed it. Had someone been listening?

"Someone there?"

It was several seconds before the door moved again, and Melvin entered with two small steaming cups "Any change?"

"Not in the last ten minutes." Cal reluctantly stood, letting go of his mother's hand. It was his old man's turn. "Did you hear anything?"

"Hear anything?" Melvin cocked one eyebrow.

"Before you came in." *You know, my confessions of utterly non-masculine insecurity?*

Melvin looked him straight in the eye as he handed over one of the cups. "Not a word. I was drinking my coffee."

Cal held his gaze for several seconds, unblinking, then took his drink. "Don't tell, Mom. She'd be upset to know you slurped that loud in a public hallway."

"I'd be grateful for the fight, if it meant she had the energy for it," his father replied.

"Any idea how much longer you'll be able to stay?"

"Not yet. When I reported in on the phone they said it could be as little as a week, or more than a month. All I can hope is that however long I've got here will be enough."

* * *

Cal paced the hallway until his feet wanted to give out, then he sat until his backside went numb. The night stretched out before him like a winter road march, long and uninviting, but he dared not go back to Reid's to sleep. He picked up a magazine in the waiting room and flipped through it, but nothing stuck. It wasn't interesting enough, he supposed, just a gossip rag.

There was a feeling in the air tonight, not unlike the one he felt sometimes before battle. Only then, it was the feeling that he wasn't going to make it. It felt more like if he left, his mother would die while he slept.

"Can I get you anything?"

Cal looked up from the page he had been staring through. A nurse stood there with a concerned expression on her delicate face. "Oh, no thanks." He was sure she had more important things to do.

"You should get some sleep."

"I appreciate the concern, but I've got something more important to worry about." Cal hoped she wouldn't be stubborn about it.

Her eyes flicked towards the door to his mother's room. "I understand, but you were limping earlier. You're injured."

Damn, she had a good eye. "I'll rest here." Cal waved one hand at the chairs in the waiting area. A couple of them along the wall were close enough to form a bench of sorts.

The woman did not look convinced, but left it at "you should," before going back to her work.

Cal shifted into a lying position across the chairs instead. The thin layer of cushioning did

nothing to make them comfortable. He doubted any kind of rest would be possible, but he didn't want to prove himself a liar. He could rest for a bit.

* * *

What was that? Something had latched onto his shoulder. Cal's arm snapped up as his eyes popped open. "Don't move," he hissed.

His father's startled face came into focus above him.

Well shit. Cal loosened his grip.

Melvin pulled his wrist free, rubbing it with his other hand. "You break me you're paying for that bill too."

"You should know better than to wake a soldier like that." Cal sat up, stretching an uncomfortable kink out of his back. It was a good way to get shot if a man slept with his gun. "Don't do that again."

"I ain't planning on it." Melvin dropped down on the chair two down at the end of the row. "I just... wanted to tell you something."

Cal finally took a good look at him. His eyes were red-lined. Was it from lack of sleep or tears? "What is it?" He straightened up, tugging the muscles in his side. He hadn't meant to fall asleep. Was it over?

Melvin rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. "It's about your mother."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Cal could not remember the last time he had seen his father cry. Yet now fresh tears ran down Melvin Fisher's face. Cal's throat constricted, but he refused to weep. He had seen and dealt with enough death in the past couple of years. "When did she pass?"

His father's head came up so sharply Cal expected to hear a cracking noise. "Pass? You idiot." He wiped his face, and an ill-practiced smile drew back his thin lips. "The fever broke."

Cal's mouth closed on the epithet he had prepared in response to the idiot comment. "She's alive."

Melvin nodded. "Yes, thank God. Took me five minutes to wake you, you know. You're lucky I bothered."

Cal let it go. What did it matter? "Can I see her?"

"McNeill says we can go back in tomorrow morning." Melvin leaned back, resting his shoulders against the wall. "She's sleeping right now."

"But she's stabilized again." Cal resisted the urge to pry the information out of his father physically.

"That's what he said. She beat it. Now she just needs to get better."

Now they needed to move someplace where that would be possible. "So when are you going to sign the contract?"

The smile vanished like a rainbow behind darkening clouds. "Matthison looked it over?"

"He's got it now."

"Then I'll do it tomorrow." He looked like he'd just swallowed a rotten lime. "The Hudsons have offered us their spare room until we find a place."

“Any idea where you want to go?”

Irrked eyes flicked in Cal’s direction. “You sound like you’ve given it some thought.”

Backing off a bit looked like a good idea. “Some.”

Melvin nodded. “I... may ask you about them later.”

Gee old man, that almost sounded like you were admitting I was right. That, or it was a really odd way of saying thank you.

* * *

While Cal had come along to witness the event, he was beginning to wonder if he should have brought his gun. Despite the fact that the agreement had been made, his father and Bernard Kline glowered across the table like two men signing an unpalatable truce against their wills. *That’s probably not far off from the truth.*

The Real Estate broker was there at Cal’s insistence, to make sure neither man tried to back out of or change the deal at the last minute. He also looked like he expected violence at any moment as first Kline, then Melvin, signed their names to the official sales contract, a copy for each of them and one for the town record.

When the deed touched both sets of hands an electric current seemed to fill the air between the two men. Their eyes locked, and for a second Cal was sure his father was considering backing out.

But it was too late for that now. Melvin let go.

Kline looked the paper over before folding it back up and sticking it in his pocket. He did

not look particularly pleased, despite his apparent victory. He handed over the money in cash.

“You’ll get off my property within a week.”

Melvin’s flinty stare lasted several seconds. Then he turned and headed for the door.

“Don’t worry. The last time I see your mug will be the happiest day of my life.”

* * *

“What are you going to do with all that junk?” Melvin asked Cal as they wrapped the last of the tea cups in brown paper and packed it in the box with the rest.

“Give most of it away, or sell it,” Cal admitted as he folded his mother’s kitchen towels. They were worn, but she had asked him to make sure to pack them, so they got packed. “I took the things that really mattered when I left.” Most of what was left in his room now didn’t seem to mean very much. It was remnants of a boyhood he had long since grown out of.

“Not worth much,” his father shrugged.

“I’ll take care of getting rid of it all.” Cal was fairly sure some of the boys in town would be quite happy to be given his hand-me-down toys. “Are you really taking all the furniture?” Reid was borrowing a company delivery truck to help move the things Cal’s parents were keeping. It didn’t amount to too much, but the furniture still took up space.

“Bernard didn’t pay for my furniture.”

“It’s not worth much,” Cal pointed out. The couch springs were dead. Their bed was old and the mattress in almost as bad a shape. The kitchen table wobbled like a drunken soldier.

“It’s still home.”

Cal tucked the towels in their box, which was only half full. Carefully he took the lace curtain out of the little window over the sink. It had been there for longer than he could remember, a wedding present from his grandmother. It wasn't just home, it was his parents' entire life together that fit into these few boxes. "I guess that makes sense."

Melvin moved from cups to plates, leaving the cabinet empty. "Why are you doing all this?"

Cal kept folding the curtain. He had asked that question of himself lately, and come to only one conclusion. "Because no man should ever abandon his people, no matter how he feels about them."

His father looked at him blankly for several seconds. "So you still hate me."

"Surprisingly, I don't actually hate you. Just because we don't see eye to eye doesn't mean I can't respect your efforts here." Holding off Kline for all those years as the mouthpiece for townfolk too afraid to speak up, loaning out money when he could to help other families, rallying folks to vote down Kline's agendas to keep the Mining outfit from taking over the town it had moved in on. Cal only just recently understood what that meant.

"So why are you pushing so hard for me to give up and move on?"

"Because some things are more important than holding useless ground in a slowly losing battle. Mom is definitely worth finding better ground, isn't she?" Cal put the curtain in the box and turned to face Melvin full on.

Melvin wasn't working anymore either, just looking at Cal, considering. Silence stretched between them like a rubber band. "This is what the Marine Corps taught you."

No argument? No accusation either. "You don't like it?"

"I'm just surprised."

Was that approval? It certainly sounded like there might be a bit of it, begrudging at least.

"Does that mean you've changed your mind about the military?"

In a flash like gunpowder the smile was gone. "Of course not."

The indignation on his face was too funny. Cal chuckled, a laugh that released tension he had gotten so used to that its relief reminded him it had ever been there. "So you won't mind if I keep Uncle Danny's medals then."

Either the laugh or the comment had caught him off guard because Melvin turned back to the plates and picked up the brown paper used to pack them. "Might as well go with you, I suppose. Ain't never had a use for them."

Well, that was easy. "Thanks."

"Not that you do either," Melvin continued. "Getting one of your own, ain't you?"

As unimpressed as you are with those things, I figured you'd forgotten already. "That doesn't mean I don't want to honor my uncle." Cal pulled the already slightly tattered calendar off the wall.

"For what?"

You're a broken record, aren't you? Cal put it in the box. "For dying so others wouldn't have to."

"Oh for Christ's sake, make sense."

Cal wasn't expecting the anguish and confusion he found behind his father's eyes when he turned to find his father staring at him. Maybe he had misunderstood. Fine, then maybe they

could actually have this conversation. At least he could try. “You always said he died for nothing, but he didn’t, and I think you know that. He died because he wanted to protect his fiancée, and you and Mom and this rat-hole town, so folks could continue to live in it. He felt like it was something he ought to do, but that made it something he wanted to do.” He leaned on the top of the kitchen chair between them.

Eyes locked, Melvin said nothing, but stood there holding half-crumpled paper.

Maybe something was getting through. “Someone’s got to take care of the folks that can’t, or shouldn’t be forced to. That doesn’t mean Uncle Danny liked killing. It doesn’t mean he hated anyone, either. I bet he did it because there were people he didn’t want to see get hurt or killed, and I bet the only thing he regretted in any of it was actually dying, and the things he wouldn’t get to do with the rest of you.”

Dry-mouthed, Cal reached for the bottle of sarsaparilla on the table and took a swig.

The explosion never came. If anything, his father’s face had gone pale as he looked at Cal.

“Well?” Cal wasn’t sure what to make of the silence.

“How do you know what he felt?” Melvin dropped the paper. “How can you claim to know any of it?”

Cal lowered the bottle. “Because you always said we were just alike.”

His father’s mouth worked silently for several seconds before anything articulate came out of it. “Damn it, I was right too.” He bent to pick up the scrap he had dropped, and one sleeve swept surreptitiously over his eyes before he stood. “Do you even know how Danny died?”

“Only what’s in the Corps records.” *Since you never wanted to talk about it.* “I know he

was one of the casualties at Belleau Wood, and it was his actions there that earned him his Medal of Honor.”

“That’s what the men who brought the news told us,” Melvin nodded. He had gone very still. “Said Danny took out three machine gun nests himself, saved eight wounded marines before the Germans got him. Called him a hero for charging across that bloody field over and over, six times! You know how many men got shot on that field? I heard it was near ten thousand, and they ran into slaughter.”

“Most of them lived,” Cal said. “The Corps lost less than two-thousand men in the end. When they talk of it, they tell it as a hard won victory. The French even renamed the place after the Marines.”

“Two-thousand men sounds like reasonable losses to you?”

“It’s not up to me,” Cal pointed out. “But I know what it is to have to fight your enemy to the last man because they would rather die than surrender. I know what slaughter looks like.” They’d had to kill all but a hundred-forty-six of the five thousand Japanese on Tarawa.

“I don’t understand them.” Melvin finally moved, continuing to pack. “What’s worth that kind of fight?”

“Aren’t you doing that here, Dad?” Cal asked quietly. “You’ve been fighting for your own beliefs and reasons here for as long as I can remember. To the last house, the last man, the last dime, you’ve done everything you could to keep this town out of Kline’s hands, even though it’s been a losing battle.”

“A lost battle.”

“Only one.” Cal reached for another plate to wrap in paper. “We still have Mom. Who do

you think the men out there are really fighting for?"

Melvin pondered that quietly for over a minute. "You're not planning to get out of the Marines when this war's done are you?"

"No, I'm not."

His father shook his head. "Yes, you should definitely take the medals. I think Danny'd have wanted you to have them anyway. Now, let's get this finished. I hate packing."

Chapter Thirty-Three

"Do you want another helping, Cal?"

Cal looked up at Margie's face and shook his head. "If I do I'll explode." He had just barely put down his fork on seconds. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were trying to stuff me."

"And I'd be jealous." Reid chuckled as he took the plate of peas to serve some up for himself. There was plenty of roast beef left dripping in its own juices.

"You don't look like a skeleton," Margie replied with a small sniff.

Reid shrugged. "Who could on your cooking?"

Full and tired from the last of the moving, he didn't want to move. His side and leg ached despite how much less Cal had hauled and lifted than the others. Still, Cal was content to rest and listen to the flirtatious banter. The children ignored it, and next to Cal, Melvin seemed lost in thought. Cal tried not to think of it as sulking. His father hadn't insulted him in two days.

Margie's next comment was cut off by a knock at the door.

"That'll probably be the evening postman." Reid stood up and headed into the front hall.

Margie was smiling, face flushed and pretty as she turned to Cal again. She always looked that way when she and Reid got into it like that.

Would Alice look like that?

“You’re sure about being done?” asked Margie.

“What? Oh, yes,” Cal nodded and slid his chair back, picking up his plate.

“I can get it,” Margie objected.

“But you shouldn’t have to.” Cal smiled at her as he stepped around the table so he could get into the kitchen. “You’ve been more than generous. The least I can do is help out a bit.”

Margie shook her head. “Who am I to argue with a guest?”

“Oh argue with him all you like,” said Reid as he returned with a handful of envelopes. “He’s family.” He paused in flipping through them. “At least, he has to be now. He’s getting mail here.”

Cal set his plate down and turned around. “Let me see.” The Marine Corps Seal on the envelope verified its contents even before he opened it. *Well it didn’t take them long.* He opened it and read the contents.

“What is it?” his father asked.

“New orders.” Cal finished reading and folded them up again. “They want me to report to Quantico within the week.”

“Why so soon?” Reid put the rest of the mail on the table.

Margie paused in the middle of clearing away the other plates.

“Why else?” Cal put the envelope in his pocket. “They want me back in training. I’m not much good to them lying around here indulging in Margie’s fantastic cooking.” He still had

some leave time left, but that wasn't the issue. The war wasn't over even though Iwo Jima was finally under control. If he got back to training now, Cal expected he would be back in the Pacific by June if not sooner.

The mood of the room had dropped noticeably.

"Why don't you two go upstairs?" Margie excused the kids and shooed them out of the room. As soon as they were gone she took the rest of the dishes into the kitchen. A minute later Cal heard water running.

"We were hoping you'd have more time to stay," said Reid.

"Me too." Reid and Margie's was the most home-like place in which Cal had ever felt comfortable. He didn't even mind that the kids insisted on calling him uncle. "At least the moving's done for now." Cal glanced at his father, who hadn't said a word yet.

Melvin nodded. "We'll do all right without you, like usual."

Reid scowled, but Cal waved him down. "I'll make sure Mom's bills are paid off so far before I go, like I promised."

His father looked up from the table. "Don't forget to visit your mother." He stood. "She'll never forgive me if you don't."

Cal watched him go to the door and pull his coat off the rack. "Don't get lost on the way to the hospital."

"I haven't yet," Melvin replied with a short start. Then he put on his hat and disappeared out the door.

"Well aren't you the concerned son all of a sudden," Reid commented, looking both curious and concerned.

Cal turned away from the door and went into the little sitting room. “There are four bars between here and the hospital.” He should know, he’d counted them.

* * *

The train ticket was in Cal’s pocket, and his luggage in Reid’s car downstairs, but Cal didn’t feel like he was ready to go. Ironic, he felt, given how fast he’d wanted to get out of West Virginia the first time.

It was his mother’s weak grip on his hand that held him there better than shackles. She still looked delicate, but there was color in her cheeks again, and her hair no longer hung limply. “You’ll be back to visit,” she said for the fifth time in an hour.

“Yes, Mom.” Cal patted her hand. “When the war’s over and you have a place. I even gave Dad a list of places Reid and I came up with. Some of them are pretty far from here, but I think you’d like them.”

“As long as they’re closer to you,” said Violet.

“Some are.” Not that Cal expected his father to agree to moving anywhere near a big city. Nor did Cal know where he would end up later. He could get stationed just about anywhere.

His mother smiled. “Then I’ll be happy anywhere. I just hope your father will be too.”

“Anywhere he’s with you ought to be like heaven.” Cal stood, reluctantly, and gave her a gentle hug. “I have to catch my train, but I promise I’ll write as soon as I get back to Virginia. You talk Dad into bringing you to see me when I meet the President, okay? Love you.”

“Oh, I love you too,” she reached out one arm and gave him a hug in return. “I’ll talk him

into it.”

Cal made it out of the room without crying. That was one thing he missed about being on duty. Almost no one cried in combat. He had one other thing he wanted to say though, and that was to his father, who was standing outside the room as Cal closed the door. “We need to talk.”

“We’ve done a fair bit of that lately,” Melvin pointed out, but followed as Cal motioned to a corner. “What is it?”

Cal stepped up close and dropped his voice. Family matters were still family matters, and a man had his pride. “You touch a drop of drink again and I’ll make sure you regret it. You hurt Mom and I’ll break your nose.”

“I ain’t-”

“You try and tell me you never did before and I’ll call you a liar too.” The only proof he needed was the quickly suppressed flash of guilt in his father’s eyes. “My whole life you stayed on the wagon. Now Mom needs you more than ever before. So don’t you dare ruin things for her.”

Melvin’s face turned red for the few seconds it took before an orderly walked by, and glanced in their direction. The color faded from his face, and the orderly moved on. “Do me one thing in return.”

Cal didn’t recall offering to bargain. “What’s that?”

“Don’t waste a chance on that nurse of yours.”

So you were listening. “Isn’t it a little late for you to start giving fatherly advice?”

Melvin gave him a wry twist of the lips that was not quite a smile. “Not if it ain’t too late for you to learn some sense.”

* * *

It was distinctly odd to be back at Quantico without General Edwards there. Cal had affixed the two together in his mind closely ever since he joined, but now there were thousands of miles between the place and man. Alice had said once that Edwards was in Hawaii. The last Cal had heard, the man was still out there with the Pacific fleet giving the Nips hell.

So Cal stood at attention in front of Brigadier General Lukas' desk, the late March sunlight sending weak stripes across the wood floor between them. "So I'm being reassigned back to Quantico, Sir?"

The bald, middle-aged Marine nodded. "That's correct, Captain. Headquarters has decided with your recent experience you'll be valuable in training our current crop of officer candidates and more advanced training of the new offers."

"Understood. Permission to ask a question, Sir?"

"Permission granted." Lukas eyed him curiously.

"Why me? At least, me in particular."

"Because you're conveniently here, and you're not fit to return to combat at the present time," Lukas explained briskly. "Besides which, you have new training orders yourself."

The letter hadn't mentioned those. "What would those be, Sir?"

The Brigadier General's face split into a broad smile. "Well, in order to be a Major around here, you'll have to get a college degree."

A degree? "But, I—" Cal clapped his mouth shut. He was being promoted. "Yes, Sir.

Thank you.” Well he supposed they weren’t planning to ship him back to the front at all, not unless the war lasted long enough for him to finish college. “Is there anything else, Sir?”

“Report to Simmons to get your teaching schedule,” Lukas replied. “That’s all for now.”

Cal’s head was swimming by the time he got out of Lukas’ office, on top of the Medal, he was going to be a Major, teaching at Quantico once he had his degree... he might feel elated later, but at the moment it was more than a little overwhelming.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Cal’s heart pumped in his chest, his breath coming deep and even as he jogged down the familiar roads of the Quantico base. The light sweat made the breeze feel cool against his skin. The best part about the run, however, was the lack of complaint from his injuries.

Aside from the occasional twinge, his leg felt surprisingly good. The muscles in his side cramped more easily, but he didn’t think that would last too much longer. Now that he was cleared to work out as heavily as he wanted again, he felt better for it.

He rounded the corner and his building came into view. With a final push, Cal made it the last couple dozen yards and pulled up, slowing to a walk and checking his wrist watch. The time was decent, but he had done better. *At least I won’t look like I spent the last couple of months loafing when I receive that medal.* He couldn’t go to the Capitol and meet the President looking like a slob.

Cal went inside and was halfway to his quarters when he heard someone called out “Excuse me, Captain!” Turning around, he spotted a private trotting his direction down the hall.

“What is it, Private?” Cal asked.

“You received a call,” the man came up and stopped, panting as he held out a slip of paper. “Here is your message.”

Cal wondered if there would ever be an easier way to get personal calls than through the HQ office. He took the note. “Thank you, Private. You’re dismissed.” He turned and continued to his room, looking down at the note as he went. It was minimal, but he almost tripped over his own feet when he read it.

Call from Lieutenant Alice Williams. Please return at 768-4744.

Cal started walking again, a flipping sensation in his chest. He would change clothes before he went outside to use the phone. Not that she would be able to tell if he was sweaty or not just by talking, but he needed the time to calm the nerves in his stomach.

As soon as he was showered and changed, Cal went to the nearest pay phone, just grateful there was one right outside the building, put in his money, and dialed the number.

The phone only rang twice.

“Edwards residence,” a female voice spoke into the phone. It wasn’t Alice’s though, it was a bit mellower. Her mother, Cal guessed.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” Cal said politely, trying not to swallow his tongue. “This is Captain Calvin Fisher, ma’am, returning Alice’s phone call.” He really hoped Alice didn’t mind him saying as much.

“Good afternoon, Captain,” she replied. Was it his imagination or did she sound amused? “Alice is expecting your call. Please hold on just a moment.”

Cal’s heart began to beat like he was still out running. What should he say to her, something suave and flirtatious, or more formal and businesslike? Maybe it would be better if he

let her take the tone of the conversation, or—

“Hello, Cal,” Alice picked up the phone.

“Hi,” said Cal. “Sorry it took so long to call you back.” *Oh, brilliant opening line there pal.*

“It’s all right. I only got back into town this morning. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Cal replied. Naturally the nurse wanted to ask after his health. “They’re finally letting me do full PT again.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Even though he couldn’t see her, Cal was fairly certain Alice was smiling. “Are you available this evening?”

“Sure.” Cal was as available as he was ever going to be. He wasn’t off medical leave yet.

“Oh good. Can you pick me up at my parents’ house? I’ll give you directions.”

He would need to borrow someone’s car. “I’ll be there,” Cal promised. What else could he do? He had promised that he would give her an answer at some point. It might as well be tonight. “What time?”

“Six o’clock.” Alice did not phrase it as a suggestion, though it was just short of sounding like an order. “Okay, here’s how you get here from the highway.” She quickly rattled off directions while Cal did his best to commit them to memory. “You have all that?”

“Yes, I can find it.”

“Wonderful, I’ll see you tonight.”

“See you.” Cal put the receiver back on the hook. He had six hours to find a car, get directions, and figure out what the hell he was going to tell the girl. *Sure, right, no problem.*

* * *

Cal peered out the window of the black Ford he'd borrowed from Lieutenant Riley who roomed down the hall from him in the barracks. He had managed to follow Alice's directions to the house in Alexandria. At least, the address out front said it was definitely the right place. He felt like he ought to be in a good suit instead of khaki pants and a green collared button-down shirt, even if they were good quality.

Above him rose a white-painted two story colonial house with a high columned front porch. The large yard was landscaped in flower beds and ornamental trees that lined the walks and driveway under the taller oaks, towering at least fifty feet or more, white and red dogwoods, weeping cherry trees, and a small red tree he was fairly sure was a Japanese maple. In the late afternoon sunlight, everything was kissed with gold.

He was still working up the nerve to go to the door and probably have to meet Alice's family when one of the front double-doors opened and Alice stepped out onto the porch. As she came down the walk in a soft green dress and the very French-style matching chiffon neck scarf, Cal realized it was only the third time he had seen her out of uniform.

He stepped out of the car so he could get her door. "You look lovely."

"Thank you." Alice came around the car and accepted his holding the door graciously. As she sat down, Cal noticed an ACE bandage on her left ankle.

"What happened to your ankle?"

"Oh, I sprained it when we were evacuating men off Okinawa. It's almost healed already." Alice set her purse in her lap as Cal closed her door and got back in the car.

“That’s a relief. So, where are we going?” Alice hadn’t really been forthcoming with details on the phone.

“Have you had the chance to eat in Alexandria before?” Alice asked. When Cal shook his head, she smiled. “I think you’d love Gadsby’s Tavern.”

“I’m not underdressed am I?” Cal asked. “I have a jacket that matches the pants.”

“You’re fine,” Alice assured him. “It’s one of the oldest restaurants in the city, and they have the best food.”

“I leave my taste buds to your good taste.” Cal started the car again, and followed Alice’s directions to Royal Street.

If there was a place in America that Cal had been that reminded him most of Europe, downtown Alexandria might just be it. The relatively narrow streets lined with row houses reminded him a lot of parts of the towns he had seen in England in particular. Not surprising given the folks that had settled it. Deep, narrow buildings, often with stores on the bottom floors and apartments on top, or stores on top of stores, lined the streets and the only way to park was parallel. It was a pretty town, with a feel to it he had come to think of as having a weight of history.

Gadsby’s had the same feel. The interior was fully colonial in style, with dark-stained hardwood crown moldings and floors, white walls and dark-curtained windows. There was even a stained wooden fireplace. It was an old world elegance that spoke of its English influence.

The menu spoke of affluence, though Cal was relieved that most of the dishes were within a very reasonable range. There was anything from meatloaf to veal or duck, and an extensive wine list with a large number of local wineries as well as imported names that Cal

recognized. "Tonight's on me," Cal said.

Alice looked up from her menu. "Thank you."

Cal smiled. "You don't have to look surprised."

"Not even pleasantly surprised?"

"I suppose pleasantly is all right, though I had to have you think of me as a free-loader."

"No, I know better." Alice sipped from her water glass. "It's just that I asked you to come, so you're not obligated."

"I appreciate that, but I want to." Cal was just grateful that he hadn't eaten off base recently.

Alice finally settled on a grilled vegetable dish with brie served over risotto, and Cal ordered the lamb chops in a cabernet sauce and a glass of the Pinot Noir for each of them.

"So how's your family?" Cal asked. That seemed like a safe conversation topic.

"Doing well, though my brother is still deployed in the Atlantic," Alice said. "My father is Stateside, but he's up in Baltimore right now, so the only ones actually home are my mother and grandmother."

Cal tried not to show his relief. His feelings about Alice aside, he wasn't really sure he was ready for a formal introduction to the Admiral. "They didn't mind you going out on your first night back?"

"They've been helping plan a fundraising banquet for months, and it's tonight. They couldn't miss it of course, and I didn't feel like spending my evening trying to look attentive instead of horrendously bored."

Cal smiled and picked up his glass of wine. "I guess I should be grateful you find me more interesting than fundraisers."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"You must have lots of other friends you could have called besides me," Cal nodded. "I'm glad you called."

"I do, but they weren't who I wanted to talk to tonight."

Cal sipped his wine, trying to force moisture back into a mouth suddenly gone dry. Coming to a decision on what he wanted with Alice was one thing, following through on it might be quite another. "Good thing I was available then."

"Are you usually?" Alice asked as the waiter arrived with their food. "I didn't think you'd be back on duty already. Or do you have a crowded social calendar now that you're a hero?"

"What? No. I just meant in general. The most exciting evening I've had since I got back involved a lucky streak at poker... in the barracks." The last thing he wanted to do was give the impression now that he had gone out with other women recently. Wait... "How did you know about the Medal?"

Alice chuckled softly as she picked up her fork. "I had the opportunity to visit the hospital again, but it was after you left. Lieutenant Higgins told me all about it, very enthusiastically."

Cal smiled and cut his lamb. "Yeah. He likes to talk."

"Well he was practically holding court with the other soldiers who wanted to hear the story of the landing." Alice took a bite of her vegetables, chewing neatly.

“Well if the story gets expanded in the telling, I hope my part in it is good. I’d rather hear what you know about things other than the Pacific.” That was news he could get anytime.

“What’s your opinion on the Soviets in Berlin?”

Cal relaxed as the conversation moved from thoughts on how the Allies seemed to be wrapping things up in Europe, to opinions on Harry Truman’s abilities as president. By dessert Cal had given her a brief summary of events in Rocky Creek, and sworn, at Alice’s insistence, to introduce her to his parents. “If they come to the ceremony,” he specified. “I really don’t see my father wanting to come. Though I think my mother will drag him if she’s well enough.”

“Well I hope they can make it. They still have a week.” Alice set down her spoon next to the empty cheesecake plate. “Would you like to take a walk?”

“Sure.” Cal paid and they soon stepped back out onto the street. Alice put her arm lightly through his, as if they strolled arm-in-arm all the time. “Where did you want to go?”

Alice smiled up at him in the gathering dusk. “Market Square is just down the block, though if we walk down to the river there’s a beautiful view of Washington on the other side. It’s peaceful down there, if you ignore the torpedo factory.”

“I’ll try.”

Market Square turned out to have a large, lovely square fountain in the middle. “I used to make wishes in this fountain,” Alice smiled. “And watch the rainbows. When I was young enough, I even tried to catch them in the summer.”

Cal chuckled, trying to picture a little girl running around the fountain. “It’s too bad you never did.”

“Oh sure I did.”

“How?”

“Just because you can’t touch something doesn’t mean you can’t capture it. Like how photographers talk about capturing images on film. I can still remember them perfectly, and after all, aren’t rainbows the most perfect thing in all of nature?”

Cal hadn’t ever really paused to consider it until that moment. “I think I get you. After all, they’re a perfect circle, even though you can’t see all of it at once. You never can find purer colors than those either.”

Her arm tightened on his. “Exactly.”

They weren’t the only pair standing in Market Square that evening. Cal saw several couples standing close, or sitting on benches, whispering like lovers. “So, where’s this view?”

“Just down the street.” Alice turned and led him down the hill between the two rows of narrow buildings that lined King Street, towards the torpedo factory that loomed over the buildings to their left.

It was only a few short blocks to the last street, but Alice did not turn aside, turning right and crossing into a small grassy area, maybe thirty yards long, that ran down to the river.

“What’s this?” Cal asked.

“A park,” Alice replied as she walked towards the river. “They use it for small fairs and events.”

“And what are we doing here?” Cal asked as Alice led him almost down to the river’s edge.

Alice stopped and turned to face him. The last vestiges of the sun kissed her hair in a soft halo. “I was hoping we could finally have a serious talk about where, if at all, we’re going. I

mean, I've given it a lot of thought."

"I have too. You can go first, if you want."

"Do you believe in fate?"

"No, not really," Cal admitted. "I mean, I suppose sometimes God might decide to stick a hand in and help a person out."

Alice looked relieved. "Good. I mean, I've never really believed in fate either, but I have to admit, I used to wonder about you after I left Paris. That night was the first time I'd felt like myself in a while. You believed me when I told you what happened with my ex-husband when a lot of people outside the case didn't. I... well after everything I know about you, I trust you, and I want more than being fortunate enough to catch you by chance. My heart almost stopped on that plane, Cal..." She reached for his hands, and he obliged and took them.

"Lucky for me it didn't." Cal pulled up all his courage. "I find myself thinking about you when I really ought to be thinking about other things. You're different from most of the women I know, and that's a good thing. I want it too but... it won't be easy."

"I know, but we can make it work."

"The war isn't over."

"But we're winning it."

"We'll never be stationed together and, if I've figured out anything, I can't ask you give up what you're doing."

"Well, if this works out, I'm not necessarily opposed to working in a civilian hospital."

Alice smiled at him.

"We're both going to take lot of flak," Cal pointed out. "My record's not exactly

spotless.”

“I’m used to it, and somehow I think the Medal of Honor and a promotion will clean your reputation up nicely.”

“If I don’t mess it up again.”

“I won’t let you.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

Alice stepped in close enough that he could smell her shampoo. She smelled like lilacs.

“Not quite everything.”

“Do you think this is love?”

She kissed him. Words were unnecessary.

Chapter Thirty-Five

The crowd swarming in front of the Capitol building gave off an exuberant cacophony of chatter. The Marine Corps Band –as many as were available– played jubilantly in the stands. And why not? Germany had surrendered and they were winning in the Pacific. The war wasn’t over yet, but it looked like it soon would be. Standing on the Mall however, off to the side waiting for the ceremony to begin, it felt as if the war was in another time as much as another place.

“Relax, Cal.” Beside him, Alice turned and reached up, straightening the collar on his uniform ever so slightly. She flattened it with her hands, smiling all the while. “You’re here because you’re a hero.”

“I’m not much for public displays,” Cal replied softly. He reached up and took one of her

hands in his. "All I did was what anyone in my position would have done."

"But it wasn't someone else, it was you."

"Well yes, but—"

"No *buts*." Alice squeezed his hand. "It may mean more to the people here today to see you and others who've earned this honor receive it than it means to you. They feel good and safe knowing men like you fight to protect them. They appreciate what you've done. It's all right to let them thank you."

How could he argue with that? Cal tried to relax, brushing a stray lock of her hair behind her ear with his free hand. "If you insist."

"I do." She looked lovely this morning, in a pale green dress instead of her uniform.

Cal suspected her calm presence was all that was going to get him through today. "Alice, does it feel strange to you, to be here today? I feel like I should still be in the Pacific." Of course, she would be going back when her leave was over. So maybe it wasn't the same.

"It's surreal, isn't it, the way the world is?" She turned and slipped her arm through his. "It does feel strange to come home. I'm always grateful my family understands, but it's hard to explain what I've seen and done to my friends who don't know, and don't really want to."

Cal's arm tightened instinctively around hers. "You'll take care of yourself."

"Worried about me now?" Alice chuckled, but made no attempt to pull out of his hold. "I wasn't the one who got shot. I'll be fine."

Cal looked out past the side of the grandstand. Reid had said he and Margie were coming, but he hadn't seen them yet, or his parents. Reid hadn't said if his mother was coming or not. Cal wouldn't hold his breath on his father coming.

“They’ll be here.” Alice patted his arm like she might that of a nervous child. “I wish I knew what they looked like.”

Cal caught sight of a small commotion at the edge of the crowd, then security letting a small crowd of people through and leading them in their direction. Cal counted a surprising seven people. “Like that actually.” He hadn’t expected Reid’s father to come too. Or his own father, in a stiffly-ironed suit and looking extremely uncomfortable in the large public setting.

Reid’s grin was infectious. “There you are! It’s been years since I’ve seen a crowd like this, man! How’s it feel?”

Cal released Alice in time to receive and return a back-thumping hug. “A little ridiculous,” he admitted, grinning until his cheeks hurt. “You didn’t say you were bringing *everybody*.”

“Surprise.” Reid shrugged. “How often am I going to have a friend recognized by the President?”

Cal turned from Reid, his gaze falling on the face that smiled most, and immediately enfolded his mother in a hug that was gentle, but no less enthusiastic. Holding her close helped hide an emotional tremble. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

She had a cane, but she hugged him back with renewed strength. Clear eyes beamed with pride through unshed tears. “You made me promise. I couldn’t fail my son could I?”

“Of course not.” Cal straightened up, and looked at his father. He didn’t try to hug him. “And you?”

Melvin scowled under his hat. “Your mother made me do it.”

Good for you, Mom. Cal would have liked to have heard that argument. His father looked

tired, but sober. Cal offered him a hand. “Well, thanks for coming anyway.”

His father looked at his hand for a moment, then shook it, probably just to save face.

There were other people standing around watching after all. Then Melvin looked past him. “And who’s this?”

As if you haven’t figured that out. Cal took a step back, and smiled at Alice, bringing her forward. “Alice, I’d like you to meet my parents –Violet and Melvin Fisher– and my best friend, Reid, his wife, Margie, and their kids and Mr. Hudson. Everyone, this is Alice Williams, my girlfriend.”