

**THOSE WHO DARE TO DREAM**  
Edited By Richard Van Camp and Kelly S. Thompson

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## Prologue

It was a beautiful sunny, summer day in 1995. Behind the reviewing stand, the Canadian Maple Leaf flag was flying in all its glory. Along with it were the brilliant colors of the Union Jack and a flag from the Canadian Army, which designated that this was an event to honour a Canadian soldier. It was an outdoor ceremony for the World War Two and Korean War veterans who had made the biggest stamp on post-war society, and among them was Matthew Morgan, who was to be given the Order of Canada. Many had heard of his tireless efforts to manufacture aluminum, which was used around the world and employed masses of people, but few knew how he got to that point in life.

“And now, I want to present to you Matthew, my dear friend,” Prime Minister Jean Chrétien said to the gathered crowd of soldiers and civilians, “Who has done so much with so little that it is no surprise he is here today to receive our country’s second highest decoration. He earned it in his military service and he earned it again in his years of work spent learning metallurgical engineering from the ground up, without the benefit of a university education. Mr. Morgan embodies all the things that make this country great, from his charity work with orphans of war to his contributions to the Canadian Red Cross, which have been substantial, though no one but he himself knows the total he has given. I asked him to say a few words and here he is!”

An ageing but still youthful looking, seventy-year old man stood up on the stage with his wife, gave her a kiss and waved at the crowd. Cries of “speech, speech!” were heard, but Matthew simply received his commendation and returned to his seat. After the presentation, a number of reporters came to him for comment but he turned down all of them, until he came across a young teen who had stuck a sign saying, “press” in his hat. The boy had a simple camera around his neck that didn’t have a flash. He was obviously nervous but he boldly came up to Matthew.

“What can I do for you young man?” Matthew Morgan asked him.

“Sir, my name is Scott Henderson. I would like to write your story. I would like to be your biographer.”

“Where are you from?”

“I live in Drumheller, Alberta with my mom.” The frail and hungry looking teen said. “Four years ago, my dad passed away in a mining accident. I was told your favourite charity helped us through some tough times and I thought you might let me interview you.”

“Do you have a tape recorder at your hotel to do this with?” Matthew asked.

“Actually, sir, I don’t have a hotel room. I was staying at the shelter. It took just about all my money for the bus ticket out here from Alberta.”

“I see, I see.” Matthew put his hand to his chin for a moment and then said, “Son, I would like to help you. I have a tape recorder sitting at my house that I can let you have, and if you can write a good story, I will give you all the time and all the help you need.”

“Really?” Scott’s eyes lit up. “That’s so kind of you, sir, but why?”

“Don’t worry too much about that Mr. Henderson. Just come home with me and you can stay with my wife and I. Come now, there is a lot to talk about and we need to get it all done before you have to go back to Alberta for school.”

“Thank you, sir, thank you so very much!”

That night, after Scott had the finest meal of his life, Matthew showed him how to operate the tape recorder and the pair sat by a warm fire and time seemed to slip away from them. Matthew began to talk, to let his whole life out. He felt that this was something he had to do, something he owed not just to this boy, but to all the people who suffered and died around him. As his words came loose from his tongue, young Scott was transported back in time to the “dirty 30s” in a small coalmine town, not unlike the one he had grown up in.

## Chapter One

Matthew and his older brother Jake lived in the small coal-mining town of Fish Creek, Alberta, just forty miles southeast of Edmonton. Their father worked in a mine and came home black with coal dust, coughing repeatedly for hours after he got home. They loved their dad, but most of their time with adults was spent with their mother, who was a stern and proud model of the hardworking and dedicated housewife. In this way, Jake had become like a Dad to Matthew, he was his hero and his advisor in all things that a young boy needed to understand. Times were hard but the family had each other, and as long as the world needed coal, they had food on their table.

One day, as the two young boys were playing catch in the front yard of their small but pretty house, close to shift change where their Dad was working, they heard a long, shrill whistle blast from the mine, different from the usual two short blasts that signaled the end of the day shift. If it had been the end of the day whistle, it would have meant that eight-year-old Matthew's father would be coming home to hug his boys and share a meal before having a hot bath and collapsing into bed. This particular sound was reserved for when a miner was in trouble, and everyone in the small town knew what it meant. Cave in. Someone's brother or father or husband, or perhaps even a number of men were in great danger. It also meant that every able-bodied person was quickly needed to respond to the call for help.

Matthew and Jake knew the whistle blast meant that they wouldn't be seeing their father home any time soon. What they didn't know was how long it might be.

Two hours later, as the summer sun was dipping low in the sky, the two boys were still playing outside and listening for the sound of their father whistling and coughing as he walked down the road, making his way towards their house. They heard a car but it wasn't their neighbour's car. The brothers saw a dark, four-door Chevrolet sedan pull up to their house. Jake was old enough to know what that meant. He tossed Matthew the India rubber ball the two had been throwing, and told him to play by himself as he went inside the house.

"Matthew!" his mother yelled through the kitchen window of the small, two-bedroom house the family of four shared. His mother's voice sounded worried and tense and he automatically thought he was in trouble. Maybe someone had seen him make Suzie Walker cry by pushing her off the front steps of the schoolhouse last week. Maybe those men were police who had come to take him away to reform school. His teacher had warned him there would be repercussions if he didn't get his math marks up. One thing Matthew always had was an active imagination, most likely from the books he devoured from the supply in the school library. He hesitated, not knowing what to do, before the voice became louder and sterner.

"Matthew! Get inside!"

He reluctantly complied like a condemned man off to his execution. When Matthew got inside, his brother and mom were waiting for him along with two men in suits, the owners of the fancy Chevrolet. They looked serious and upset and Matthew braced himself for a tongue-lashing followed by a strap or two from his father when he came home. Instead, the men tried to smile at the boys and the two of them stayed silent until the men told Matthew's mom she might want to sit down. Mrs. Morgan led them into the sitting room as they held their hats in their hands.

“I think you know what has brought us here Mrs. Morgan,” said one of the men. “There was a terrible accident at the mine. We’re not exactly sure what happened, but we do know that your husband helped three men get out before he was crushed by a second cave in. He didn’t make it out alive. We’re very sorry.”

Their mother stood still and silent for what seemed like a very long time, then steadied herself, put her hand over her eyes and began to sob. *Fifteen years in the mines and this is all he gets for giving his life to these rich jerks*, she thought. Matthew went up to her, held her leg and started to cry himself, not fully understanding but knowing something bad had happened to his father.

“We had a look at your husband’s file to contact you and our records indicate you didn’t have insurance. We wanted to offer to drive you into town to apply for benefits when you’re ready, arrange his last pay and handle any difficulties you may come across.”

“Oh, isn’t that noble of you,” Matthew’s mom said, wiping her tears and showing anger towards the company men. “If fifteen years of your coal dust didn’t do a number on his lungs, he could have had life insurance. I won’t need any benefits, thank you very much. Francis and I bought this house and have some savings from when my own father died. I’ll thank you gentlemen to leave and not attend the funeral.”

“We’re very sorry, Mrs. Morgan. Our offer stands if you need it.”

“Get... out!” she said through more tears. The men said no more left immediately.

That night, Matthew lay awake and wondered what insurance and benefits and cave ins and even death were all about. Deep inside he longed to understand the world of grown-ups but perhaps as he was the youngest, everyone wanted to handle those things for him. When times of confusion came over Matthew, he would dream, dream of the day when he could stand on his own, and to him this was to dream of flying. As he started to drift off to sleep, he felt himself floating away, far off outside of himself. At first he could see himself beneath his spirit, then he floated through the walls of their small home, out into the darkness and flying high among the stars and the moon. He was alone in this dream but he could feel the presence of his father. He could feel love and completeness as if his dad would be with him forever. He wished he never had to stop dreaming.

Matthew heard soft weeping that grew louder and finally woke him from his dream state. At once, he was back in his bed and his older brother, his hero capable of anything, was crying. He could offer no words of encouragement, no solace. He simply wrapped himself tighter in his blanket and tried to fall back asleep to feel the warmth of his father’s spirit around him again.

As he lay there, trying to get back to his wonderful dream, Matthew thought of how Sunday school had told him people go to a better place when they die. *Any place has to be better than a dark, scary mine*, he thought. His dad would always come home so exhausted, though he would still find time to play ball with his boys. His father had been a wonderful man. He had read grownup books to him and his brother, even when he was still young enough to like children’s books. All his young life, Matthew hadn’t known their family wasn’t upper class because he thought all that determined class was taste in books and music, and Matthew’s dad had excellent taste. They had stacks of old 78 rpm records of symphony and classical music and so many great books; titles he could hardly wait to read himself one day. Hours later, he finally fell asleep and again dreamt of his father, the kindness and discipline he had shown to Matthew and Jake. The dream swirled through Matthew’s head and played tricks on him until he shook himself awake. As he opened his eyes, he heard his father’s voice tell him he was no longer a boy. From then on, just as though the words were real to him, Matthew considered himself as much a man as Jake.

The funeral for Matthew's dad came and went, but Matthew couldn't shake the feeling that he had betrayed the memory of his father because he hadn't cried at the service. A few of his dad's friends offered a bit of money, while one man made advances on their mother, dropping hints to her that he was single and although he had snow on the roof, referring to his grey hair, there was still a fire in the hearth. Matthew barely understood these actions but enough to hate this man for thinking he could replace his father.

With the funeral over, Matthew began to realize nothing was going to bring his father back. For a time, he would sit and listen to the radio, expecting his father to come in the door until he remembered his dad was buried and gone. The family went through a grieving period and his mother refused all of the offers of masculine company that came her way. Weeks turned to months, and eventually the years ticked away and Mrs. Morgan did everything she could to keep her small family together and properly fed, but it was never enough. She took in extra washing for a few dollars a week, which helped, but soon that didn't suffice. She took out a mortgage on the house and in no time, she was behind on payments. When she was almost completely out of choices, sending her children to school with no lunches and skimping on anything that cost money, Jake couldn't stand his mom suffering and watching his brother bring mashed potato sandwiches to school. Jake quit school to go underground and work in the mines, something his father had never wanted for his sons. Jake went into that scary darkness day after day, twelve hours at a time, breathing in the same coal dust that half killed his father and ruined his ability to acquire insurance. Jake spent each day facing the same mishaps and dangers that killed his father, but in a strange way it felt good. He felt pride and a sense of ongoing love for the man who had done so much for him.

Jake was lucky to find any work considering it was the 30s in Alberta and there was only low-paying mine work. There had been oil discoveries, but he had no intention of going to some far off place in Alberta to work with a bunch of strangers away from his family.

A lot of trouble seemed to be stirring in Europe and each night, the Morgans were glued to their radio set, fearing a new Germany in power all across Europe, maybe even all across the world. Finally, in 1939, Canada declared war on Germany and all kinds of industry geared up to supply the allied war machine. Jake desperately wanted to go, but money was needed, coal had to be dug for the war effort and the Armed Forces were only taking volunteers, so he stayed behind as he watched his friends go off and come back for a short time, looking spiffed up in brand new uniforms with a little money in their pockets, getting all the girls.

Finally, in the summer of 1941, he'd had enough. Jake wrote to the recruiting office in Edmonton and made plans to join the Royal Canadian Air Force Bomber Command as a tail gunner on a Lancaster Bomber. They were desperate for pilots, but since he couldn't even drive a car and he hadn't finished school, he was low on the list for that job, so he decided not to try. He wanted to be a hero, to save lives, to get in the fight before it was over and so his idea, which he worked out with a friend who had done the same, was to sign on to be trained as an aircrew member. He would have to become a Sergeant first, which meant his pay wouldn't be bad and he could at least send most of it home in hopes that Matthew would have the chances he didn't.

Matthew was growing up too, taller and leaner like his father and the girls at his school were taking notice. Fifteen now, he would walk past them in the halls and hear giggles and snippets of compliments. He was never able to shake off the feeling that he was a young man with a large part missing from his soul, something that caused him to live his life without the heart to care that his mother suffered and his father had been killed. He often dreamed about the war and it

disturbed him that while he was dreaming he could commit acts of violence without upset. He did think he would make a good soldier if he ever needed to be one.

There was a girl named Gloria in his class. She was wealthy and always had the nicest clothing and sweetest smelling perfume. It surprised the heck out of him one day when she approached him in the hallway and asked if he could help her with her math homework. He hadn't even thought she would ever talk to him, but she seemed really nice. Before long, Gloria would say hello each time she went by and they would have lunch in math class together and get the teacher to coach both of them. By some miracle, suddenly math was his best subject and Matthew started to feel very fond of Gloria, though in the back of his mind she didn't seem to really be the one for him, he wanted something more in a girlfriend, something it seemed none of the girls in Fish Creek could offer him.

When Jake finally told his mom the news about his plans to go off to war, she seemed as struck dumb as the day her husband was killed. She knew she had no real way of stopping him, but she tried talking him out of it.

"You don't need to be a hero, you're my baby. I don't want you to go off on some crazy adventure and get yourself killed."

Secretly though, she desperately wanted to see him go further than he would ever get digging coal. She already heard him coughing at night and it scared her. She also thought about how proud she would be when he went and became a special and heroic young man, and finally be able to feel good about who he was and what he was doing.

"Mom, you don't understand." Jake pleaded. "I have to do this. This is my war, my one chance to make something of myself. There's a huge change in how the world is evolving into a new era and I want to be a part of it. So much is going on and they need people like me in Europe desperately. Besides, money is running thin around here and you know how little they pay miners. The recruiting station for the Air Force told me I could get on a plane as part of a crew of a bomber and be a tail gunner. I'll be protecting the lives of seven other men with my own hands. Bobby Watson did it and he said I would make Sergeant in no time and that I could send most of my pay home, since there isn't much overseas to spend it on."

"Jacob, I lost your father, and I needed you badly back then," his mom said, tears welling up in her eyes, though her heart really wasn't in what she had to tell him. "If you go, and if anything happens, I'll lose another piece of this family and you two boys are all I have. Think of what that would do to me. They won't draft you and they can't draft you. You're our sole support."

"Don't you see mom? Dad would have wanted me to do this. He loved England after he came back from World War I. He loved his freedom and felt it was worth fighting for."

"If it's what you want Jake, I can't stop you. All I want is to see you happy. I would be so proud of you, more than you could know. Your father would want you to go too, I know it. I wish I could make you think it over, convince you that you don't need to do this, but I can't. I just want to tell you that your father was one type of person when he left for that war and another when he came back."

"Of course, the army makes a man out of you," Jake said.

"No honey, he had a lot of horrid dreams for years afterwards, dreams he wouldn't talk about. Sometimes he would be asleep and tossing around and I would try and wake him and he would lash out like I was trying to kill him. He would wake up and drown his misery in alcohol until he could sleep again. One time, I tried to wake him from a bad dream and he threw me halfway across the room. Before you and your brother were born, we had some tough times, your father and me, and it almost ended our marriage before we had you two miracles. It was very

hard, but your father quit drinking and started to read books that helped him sort out all of his feelings. You have to understand though that war is a horrible thing and you are too young to know what it can do to you. Stay here where you're needed, where you're loved."

"I can't stay here anymore, Mom. I've made my decision. You know the mines are starting to get to me. I'll be careful, and I promise I won't do anything stupid like stick my neck out or drink my money away. I'll send you all I can every month."

"Jake..."

The two looked up to see Matthew, now nearly six feet tall at sixteen years old, standing and listening. His mother got an embarrassed, ashamed look on her face. She knew Matthew had his own ideas about going to war and since she became their only parent, she was never able to express caring or love to Matthew for some reason. He had such brilliant blue eyes, though they betrayed a great intelligence seething deep down inside him, just like his Dad. Jake broke the silence first.

"Hi little brother. What can I do for you?"

"You want to walk with me to town?"

"Sure, Matthew. We'll talk more tomorrow, Mom. I'm going to have a couple hours with you before I catch my train in the afternoon."

"Okay my boy. Don't stay out too late. You need your rest." Jake felt bad just leaving his Mom alone that night. He wondered what it would be like to say goodbye possibly forever.

Jake and Matthew left the house and heard the radio turn up in the house. They knew this was something their Mom did when she wanted to let loose with a good cry and didn't want the boys to know about it. The two walked towards town and every few feet, Matthew kicked at a rock and then kicked again, trying to see how far he could send it skittering across the ground. It was a childish game he often played and didn't think anyone paid much attention to it. He kicked the rock and it skipped up and went to his left, near Jake. Matthew looked for a different rock to kick but then Jake kicked the rock back towards his brother. Matthew let out a small laugh and thought about how good it was to have someone who understands you and looks out for you, but he couldn't say it. The pair walked along and kicked the same rock back and forth all the way into town.

"You know, I'm going to be going away for a while, eh?"

"I heard a lot of what you were saying to Mom. I think it's kind of cool, but I'm going to miss having you around to watch out for me. I guess I might have to quit school and work in the mines myself pretty soon."

"No you aren't, Matthew!" Jake said firmly. "You're going to finish high school and try and get into university. I won't let you work until you finish school."

"How are you going to do anything about me when you're off in Europe?"

"I have a few friends back here I can arrange to make sure things go the way I want them to. Listen, the mines are awful. You go underground and work until you sweat to death and all the time, you're breathing in that coal dust. When you're done school, get out of this town and find a job in a union and save some money for school."

"I guess I could do that. I would sure like to be a soldier though. I've been reading a lot about the war and what's going on over there. I heard you tell Mom you're going to be a tail gunner? Did you know that's one of the most dangerous jobs in the Air Force? The German fighters get right on the bomber's tail and if you don't get them right away, you're dead. And lots of planes go down every day. I read the news reports they put up on the bulletin board at school."

“Yeah, I know. But don’t tell Mom all that. I figure it’s the only way I’ll be flying and I will go up in rank fast. More money that way, more glory. More money and more glory means more girls when I get back. Plus maybe I can save the pilot’s life one day and he’ll teach me to fly.”

“Why don’t you join the Navy? I heard they have the best food and a better survival rate.”

“Can’t swim. I don’t have fins and gills.”

“You don’t have wings or a beak either.”

Matthew snickered, and Jake smiled and punched Matthew’s arm.

“Jake, do you remember that girl Gloria from school?” Matthew asked.

“The one around your age?”

“She’s seventeen, a year older, but yeah.”

“What about her? Got a little crush going?”

“Well, I like her, as any guy would, but I never thought I had a chance. Then a while ago she asked me to help with her homework. We’ve been spending lots of time together and then just the other day, she looked at me in French class, smiled at me, winked and passed me a note.”

“Are you serious? What did it say?”

“It said she wanted me to walk her home from school and that we could have a soda at her house after.”

“So how was it?”

“How was what?”

“The soda, jerk.”

“Oh, I never walked her home. I don’t know what to do really. She kind of makes me nervous and her dad owns one of the mines and all. They’re rich.”

“Don’t let rich bother you. Anyone can be rich if they work hard enough. Wait until you see how rich I’m going to be, what I’ll be able to do for you and Mom one day. I have friends who are rich and all it comes down to is working hard, whether it be in a mine, in the military, or running a business. Hey, you want a beer?”

“Sure, I love beer.”

Matthew had never had a beer in his life.

“I’ll get us some at the store. You wait outside though.”

Jake went into the store, asked for a six-pack of pilsner and went for his wallet to pay for it.

“Jake, does your mother know you drink beer?” the shop owner asked, eyeing the young man carefully.

“Hey, give me a break. I leave for basic aircrew training tomorrow, plus I’m sharing this. What harm can it do?” Jake put two one-dollar bills on the counter and an extra fifty cents for the beer, and slid the cash over. The man winked at Jake, scooped up the bills and put them in his pocket, rang the sale up on the till for fifty cents, then wrapped up the beer for him.

Jake got outside to where he left Matthew and soon had opened the box and took a bottle out.

“Here, don’t drink it too fast, and you’re only having two,” Jake said.

“I think I can handle my booze okay, Jake? Hand it over.”

Matthew took the bottle and tried to guzzle the whole thing. Bubbles of pleasure rose to his head almost immediately, but along with it came a strong urge to throw up. Jake could see him turning green.

“Man, is this your first beer?”

“Nah, I’ve had lots of beer in my day.” Matthew’s words came out funny and his head felt strange. He shook his head and tossed the bottle away, even though it was a third full.

“Well, lets get walking anyway. We’ll head up to the lake and on the way you can sip at your other beer a little slower maybe.”

“Sounds good to me,” Matthew replied and deliberately closed and opened his eyes hard and pinched his tongue with his right hand, curious why it felt numb.

“Matthew, what do you know about the war in Japan?”

“Pretty complicated thing. The Japanese have this code, they call it Bushido I think, the Samurai code. They don’t believe in surrender and they treat people they capture pretty bad. Do you think they might send you there?”

“Well, the priority to send Canadians to the Pacific is low, but I guess there’s a chance. Someone told me that the government took everyone who was from Japanese descent and put them in camps. Doesn’t seem right if they were really Canadians.”

“Yeah, I don’t know about that too much either. I guess they treat the people in camps here a lot better than what the Japanese treat their prisoners. How did you find out about this whole tail gunner thing? They call those guys Tail End Charlie and they get killed like flies.”

“All depends how good a shot you are. Remember the time I hit that can off a log at one hundred yards with Dad’s old twenty-two? I can shoot as good as anyone.”

“I sure hope so. Geez Jake, this beer is pretty good once you get a bit of it in you.”

Matthew was starting to feel his head buzzing and his stomachache had gone away.

“Why do you think people drink beer so often?”

“I don’t know. I guess I thought they got used to the awful taste, but this stuff makes you feel pretty good. I sure wish Gloria was around now. I would just love to talk to her. She fills out those cashmere sweaters like nobody’s business.”

“Did I ever tell you about Two Finger Ernie at the mine?” Jake asked, changing the subject.

“No, but I heard some funny stories about him. Were his fingers really crushed in the same cave in when Dad was killed?”

“Yeah, him and Dad were good friends. He was crushed and Dad mostly dug him out but then Dad was crushed by another cave in. Ernie went and got an x-ray and they said he was fine, so he went back to the mine to finish his shift. That guy would work on God’s birthday. Another time, he was resting from moving a rock and someone accidentally clipped off three of his fingers with the business end of a pickaxe. It was mostly a clean break, so they could have grafted them back on and it would have worked okay but he just put the fingers in his shirt pocket and kept working.”

Matthew burst out laughing, feeling a sense of closeness to his brother and a happiness that he had never felt before. As they walked and sipped their beer, they talked about what they remembered of their Dad and some of his old war stories. Jake told a few stories of the mine and some of the crazy people he worked with.

After a long walk among the stars and the moonlight, they got to the lake outside of town and thought of having a swim. They sat in the dark tossing in stones and watching for fish coming up to feed, leaving circular ripples expanding like tiny waves after an explosion. After a while, they laid on their backs gazing up at the stars and Matthew was feeling the effects of the beer. He drifted away from the conversation and looked up at the universe around them and wondered about the millions of miles the starlight had travelled. His teacher told him about light years and how all the visible stars could be dark and dead, but they wouldn’t know for a very long time about it on Earth because of how far the light had to travel.

All this made him wonder about the war, which was something he didn’t fully understand. All he had really been told was that England and many other countries were in grave danger and

that Hitler was an evil and awful man. He wondered how long it would take for people in Canada to learn if Churchill was dead, that England had been lost to a massive Nazi invasion. Already London had been bombed so often that it was a mass of burning rubble, which the firemen would work themselves half to death to put out. But before the job was done, the bombers would return and the Spitfire and Hurricane fighters were barely keeping them at bay.

“Jake?” Matthew asked.

“Yeah, what’s up?”

“Did you ever, you know, do it with a girl, like go all the way?”

“Oh yeah, lots of times.”

“Really? With who?”

“I will never kiss and tell. Even for you,” Jake said.

“Some girl once told me guys always say they’ve done it, even when they haven’t.”

“No, really. I’ve done it. It’s great.”

“So what did you do then?”

“Well, it happened with Sandra, you know that brunette with the curly hair who lives over in Greenborough. One night, her Dad let her take us out in his car and I took her to a movie. We left early and came up here to the lake and well...”

“Are you serious? Did you use anything?”

“You mean like those fancy toys? Nah, can’t get those around here.”

“No, I mean like a prophylactic or something. A rubber.”

“No, those things take the fun out of it.”

“So can a baby.”

“Yeah, I guess. I heard you can’t get a girl pregnant if you drink three milkshakes beforehand though. Her stomach gets bigger and her baby makers don’t come out like normal.”

“Man, who told you that?”

“Teddy Rockford told me.”

“Man, he gave you a bum steer. Didn’t you take health class? Oh yeah, I keep forgetting you had to quit school. Hey, if you ever meet another girl like that, you should use a rubber.”

“Oh, I knew that. I was just pulling your leg.”

“Then why are you blushing?”

“Ah, let’s drop it alright!”

“Sure, okay.”

Matthew snickered but also felt bad that his brother had missed out on all the fun times he and his friends had in school. Most of health class was a laugh riot but also, it was kind of neat to learn about what was happening to their bodies as they grew up.

Matthew and Jake heard a sound on the road a short ways off and soon a car pulled up. Matthew was half drunk at this point, having finished his second beer and now sipping at a third that he wasn’t supposed to have. The two brothers needed few words, as they had done this sort of skullduggery before. They ducked down on their bellies and crawled up with stealth and silence, like soldiers, to the parking area near the lakefront to see who was in the car. Everything was so mysterious and secretive about sex and their hearts pounded with excitement and anticipation. They wondered if they would see it happen live, or perhaps, heaven forbid, get to see a young woman with her clothes off.

At first it looked like there was just one person in the car after it parked, but as they moved closer, they could see there were two, and they were getting fairly passionate with each other. Matthew let out a laugh but Jake shushed him. He thought it was amusing to watch until he saw

that it was Gloria. Anyone in their right mind would have felt bad and walked off, but Matthew wasn't in his right mind. At sixteen, Matthew's hormones were raging and there was jealousy fueling the fire. He took this act as a threat to his entire manhood, even though he was just a slightly drunk teenager, which of course, didn't help either.

He walked up and banged on the window of the car and the two just about jumped through the roof. The male in the driver's seat opened his door and started to step out of the car but Gloria pulled him back in and said it was all a misunderstanding.

"It's Matthew, a boy from school. Just let me talk to him," Gloria said.

"Boy? I'm not a boy! What the hell are you doing Gloria? I thought you liked me. I'll show you I'm not a boy!" Matthew said.

"I do like you Matthew, but we're not going steady or anything," Gloria said.

"I didn't think you were that kind of girl." Tears began to run down his face.

"What kind of girl is that?" Gloria asked, sounding angry.

"The kind of girl that... well..."

Gloria's face took on a look of disgust when she heard this.

"Johnny, I want you to deal with this guy," Gloria said, opening the driver's side door. The guy got out and he looked big, grown-up and mean.

"You just stay in the car there mister, unless you want trouble," Matthew said.

"No. I'm getting out and I'm going to give you more trouble than you can handle," Johnny said.

"Don't hurt him, Johnny, just teach him some respect," Gloria said.

"I'll take care of this little pipsqueak," Johnny said.

"Respect! I need to learn respect?" Matthew shouted, now in a rage. "You need to learn to keep your paws off another guy's girl!"

Matthew lunged forward and caught Johnny off guard, knocking him into the car where he lost his balance and fell. It could have been the booze or the embarrassment, or his bad memories of being pushed around as a kid, or a combination of all of them, but Matthew let loose a hailstorm of punches and kicks. Finally, amid Gloria's screams, Jake pulled Matthew away and they took off for home as fast as they could.

## Chapter Two

When morning came around, Jake paid a visit to Gloria's house to apologize for his brother and learned that her friend Johnny was actually an off duty RCMP Constable. He was going to press charges, Gloria told Jake, and he was also going to make life very difficult for Matthew whenever he got the chance. The way small town politics worked, Jake knew there was little he could do but get his younger brother out of town as soon as he could.

Without telling their mom, Jake and Matthew boarded the same train for Edmonton and Matthew signed up for the infantry with a forged birth certificate from Jake's friend. He could have joined the army at sixteen with no problem, but the Canadian Army wouldn't send him into combat at that age. Matthew saw no point in joining up if he wasn't going to fight and so he got the fake birth certificate, lied his way into the army and it was done. A few of the recruiters probably knew he was younger, but this was a common occurrence and the need for men was so great, they turned a blind eye.

Soon, Matthew was stuffed onto a crowded train headed for his basic training camp in far off Wetaskiwin. The train chugged past fields, marshes and trees as Matthew let his mind wander. As the passing scenery hypnotized him, he left his body like he had done so many times before, his imagination morphing him into a bird, circling in the up and down drafts, looking out over the moving train and the farms and valleys, all the incredible scenery of big sky country. He could see the train he was on with all the young and confused men, not knowing what they were heading to, not understanding the beauty that was Alberta, the place Matthew had once hoped he would never have to leave. He wondered how Jake was going to fare at the camp for aircrew and felt a small tinge of happiness that they weren't going together and he could finally find out what it was like to just rely on his own wits.

Hundreds of other young men were with him but he had never felt quite so lonely. All while growing up, Matthew was either with Jake or people he had known forever. Writing the farewell letter to his mom was the hardest thing he ever had to do, even worse than saying goodbye to Jake. He had never felt so homesick before and not only was he badly hung over from his escapade, he was more than a little scared.

Some of the men on the train played poker for cigarettes, some went on about women they had conquered and things they had done in far off exotic places like Calgary, Vancouver, Toronto, and even Yellowknife. Volunteering for a combat outfit was just one more adventure to these men. It was easy for Matthew to feel some jealousy that most of these men were worldlier than he, but even more so, he looked up to a lot of them. They had the courage and the will to go out into the world. And he felt no small sense of pride that he would soon be an adventurer like them.

Some of the guys talked about things they truly had no idea about, which he was pretty much sure was a bunch of horse hockey. He thought back to what his brother had said about milkshakes and sex and this time, instead of laughing, Matthew felt a deep sense of sadness for the innocence he was now leaving behind. He could never again start crying when he felt life kicked him in the teeth, and he would never be able to go to his mom for kind words and sympathy. He thought about his dad and wondered what it was like for him when he left for England to fight in the Great War.

One guy kept going on about what it was going to be like in Paris. This made Matthew curious, and when he got the chance, he engaged the guy in conversation over the noise of the crowded train car they shared. He was an intelligent and handsome guy, and seemed very friendly. Normally, Matthew wouldn't do such a thing as challenge someone about things they had said. He thought back to times when he went to get Jake from the local tavern, and men reeking of booze would get downright nasty. Matthew would be scared out of his tree that they would take out the problems of their miserable lives on him. He felt that he had nothing to lose, and if this guy wasn't lying, it would make for some good conversation.

"You've been to Paris?" Matthew asked.

"Yeah, I went there on a school trip when I was in college."

"You went to college and now you're in training for the regular infantry? Why wouldn't you try and be an officer? It's better pay and you don't stick your neck out so much. You tell your men to do it for you."

"I never said I finished college. Let's just say life got in the way." The young man smiled.

"What was Paris like?" Matthew said with a nervous tone to his voice.

"Beautiful beyond description. So much artistic expression in their architecture and the streets are filled with jugglers, painters, and sidewalk chalk artists. The whole place was like the best festival in Edmonton times twenty. They really like to booze it up too. *Joie de vivre* they call it."

"What's that?"

"Joy of living. They usually use that phrase when they talk about drinking."

"I think I had a little too much of that already. That's why I'm here." Matthew looked down at his shoes.

"When we get to Paris, I'll show you around. The women are unbelievable, make you forget anything you got going back here."

Matthew gave him a thoughtful glance and smiled. He was already thinking this guy would quickly become his new best friend, and he hoped he would really help him forget about Gloria.

"I'm Matthew Morgan. What's your name?" Matthew asked.

"Gary. I'm Gary Blanchette."

And with that, a new friendship was forged.

As the miles rolled on, Matthew noticed that a lot of the young men sat and stared out the window with sad looks on their faces, holding back their emotions. Like Matthew, some of them were now further away from home than they had been their whole lives and the train hadn't even left the province yet. He wondered if any of the other guys were getting a pain in their stomach when thinking about all the things that lay ahead for them. Weeks of training, a whole new kind of life, and a dangerous and completely different experience when they finished their training and sailed for England, followed by the inevitable combat with the people Churchill called "The Huns." All Matthew could think of was getting through the next few days without being found out as a wanted criminal. He was so nervous and edgy he couldn't sleep, and if he drifted off, the slightest bump or sound would jolt him awake. It was possible he could get his wish of escaping responsibility for his crime, but ancient wisdom noted that people should be careful what they wish for, as they just might get it.

The train pulled to a stop at the camp and the men were approached by a tough looking Corporal in a spotless and well-kept uniform with boots polished to a high shine. The Corporal directed them to their groupings and Matthew was put in a platoon of about fifty men. Firstly, they were taken for a barely passable meal of sausage and macaroni with watered down coffee,

then they were herded from place to place to get their uniforms and equipment and all the things they would need for the coming weeks of training. As they were lining up, any talking or complaining was met with abusive and derogatory remarks screamed in their faces by the military staff. After getting their uniforms, which were old and worn khaki pants and shirts that were probably worn by a hundred other troops in their day, the men finally had time to kill and went to practice drill.

They were formed up into three rows, one in front of another, and organized according to height. All the activities of the surrounding base were going on in frenzy. Matthew's mind wandered and he drifted upwards to the blue sky again, looking down at all these earth-bound creatures who worried about every detail, marching in their small groups from place to place, all of them afraid of what their leaders might do to them with the smallest mistake. There they were, learning all these things they would need to master in order to kill or be killed. He wanted so much to be a bird, to looking down and to rise above. He closed his eyes and it all seemed so real for a moment, but then he heard something. It was faint at first, but as his dream bubble popped, he realized it was coming right at him.

"What are you doing?" someone said in a harsh whisper. "What do you think you are doing?" The voice grew louder.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing mister!?" The voice became a scream and Matthew opened his eyes to see that he had daydreamed his way through an order to march, and the rest of his squad was forty feet away, marching as the Corporal shouted at him. He was too embarrassed to say anything and ran to catch up with the other men.

"You'll never bloody make it, Mr. Morgan!" the Corporal yelled after him.

The fact that the Corporal already knew his name worried Matthew. Did the Corporal know he was underage for the army, that he had beaten up a police constable? What if he knew Matthew was wanted and didn't care because once they were overseas, Matthew would be sent out to die before any of the others? A thousand paranoid thoughts filled his head as he tried to listen to his orders and learn to perform marching drill.

The days passed and slowly the men in Matthew's group turned into something more than what they were as individuals, into a whole that was greater than the sum of its parts. They were soon learning the skills of being paid professional killers. Their Sergeant, looking even meaner and neatly dressed than the Corporal, with a big scar running down his face and a thick British accent, had once been a police officer in Hong Kong and was skilled at knife use and hand-to-hand combat. More than once in a demonstration, he flipped a soldier onto his back and put a sheathed knife to his throat before the man realized what had happened to him. Then there was the running. At first, Matthew thought he was going to die from overexertion on a one mile jaunt, but as the days and weeks passed, he grew stronger, leaner and fitter, and he felt the physical, animal side of him emerge. As they ran, he often imagined himself as a panther, hunting a zebra or an eland through the jungle. It gave him a rush to run as fast as he could for long stretches, followed by a feeling of liveliness. After he grew accustomed to the physical work of soldiering, he felt like he could spend the rest of his life doing this sort of thing. Soon, all thoughts of giving up or going home left him.

It was four weeks into his training when Matthew felt safe enough to send his first letters.

*Dear Mom,*

*I am terribly sorry I had to leave you at such a time in your life. I hope you won't be too lonely while I'm gone. I promise to write every chance I can. I am doing well in my training, and*

*I will soon be able to send you some money. I had no intention of leaving for the army, but circumstances allowed me no choice. I made some stupid mistakes and I hope in some way that by volunteering to fight, I could make up for some of them. I miss you Mom, and I love you very much.*

*Yours,  
Matthew*

*Dear Gloria:*

*I can't tell you how much regret I have for getting angry and beating up your boyfriend. I know this is no excuse, but I did it because I cared so much for you and I'd just had the first and last three beers of my life. I don't fully understand what came over me. I know you may never want to talk to me again, but I honestly hope you can find it in you to forgive me. I have held you deep inside my heart with a true feeling of love for such a long time that it hurts to think I may have screwed up any chance I had with you. You have my promise I will never touch booze again and if I ever come back from the war, I will repay my debt to society and Johnny, and if you will have me, I will do anything to get you back to feeling right about what you and I have together.*

*Matthew*

A few days later, Matthew received a letter from Gloria.

*Dear Matthew,*

*I want you to know that you have also been in my thoughts for a long time. You were always the cutest boy in school and every girl wished they could marry you or even just dance with you or talk to you. For a short while, I thought I liked Johnny, but lately he has been trying to force me to do things I don't want to do with him, and he makes me sick at how he hides behind his badge and expects people to respect him for it. I have always seen you as a good person and I not only admire your courage for joining up, but I also pray every day you will come home safe. I think I love you Matthew, and I want you to keep writing me.*

*Gloria*

Inside the letter was a small black and white photo of Gloria looking like a beauty queen, with her long blonde hair in curls and her delicate face shining with a smile. He took the picture and kissed it and then put it in his breast pocket next to his heart. All at once, his strength and resolve to go on with his plan to fake his way into combat grew by a factor of ten. He dreamed of what it would be like when he came home, medals on his chest, money in his pocket to rent a home in which Gloria and him could live after they married. The whole idea of having a beautiful girl all to himself ran through his body like electricity. He had never felt so free and happy in his life.

At the end of their training, a short graduation ceremony was given on the parade square in the camp, though Matthew's mother didn't come. She wanted to, but he had kept his location a secret in case his mom used it as an opportunity to have his real age revealed, which would mean he would be kept away from combat until he was eighteen. He might have even been kicked out of the army for lying, if word got to the wrong commanders. Somewhere deep down, Matthew wanted to prove to himself that he could do what his Dad had done, what his brave and strong hero of a brother was doing. At the end of the graduation parade, his platoon was dismissed and

out of the corner of his eye, Matthew noticed a beautiful young woman climbing over the fence in front of the reviewing stand and running towards the men. Some lucky guy has a girlfriend he thought. But then when he took a closer look, he saw it was Gloria.

“What are you doing here?” Matthew yelled.

“I wrote to your brother and he told me where I could find you,” Gloria said with a killer smile on her face. “I wanted to let you know I’m proud of you and give you this.” She put a rosary around his neck and gave him a kiss on the lips. Matthew looked at the fancy chain of beads.

“Wow, thanks. But I’m not even Catholic.”

“Well, you’re going to have to convert if you want to marry me.”

“Marry you? I don’t even know where we’re going in the next few weeks. And plus I’m only...” Matthew looked over and noticed his Sergeant was in earshot, “I’m only eighteen.”

“Well then, I’m eighteen too, and that’s older than when my parents married.” Gloria smiled as her sweet eyes gazed into his while she had her arms around his neck. She moved in for a kiss and pressed her beautiful body into his and he couldn’t think of anything in his life that had ever felt better.

“Let’s go get a root beer and we’ll talk about it,” Matthew said.

The pair began to walk off, but as they were leaving, his Sergeant stopped him. He expected to get chewed out again but instead the Sergeant gave him a two-day pass to go to town and a pay envelope with a few bills in it. The Sergeant winked at him and smiled.

“You did very well Private Morgan. I’m glad to be in the same army as you,” the Sergeant said. “Now quit daydreaming and take your lovely girl to town!”

It was the first time he had seen even the hint of a smile on the man’s face and he had to admit, he did feel pretty good about the whole situation. He and Gloria walked from the camp into the town of Wetaskiwin where they sat down over root beer and milkshakes and talked for hours. She went on about her friends and the things she and her mom were going to do on winter vacation from school, what she thought of studying biology and chemistry through all those long, boring classes when all she wanted to do was be a hairdresser until she had kids. While she was talking, Matthew couldn’t stop looking at her. She was so beautiful he almost wondered how such a girl as this could want to marry him. Somehow though, it still didn’t seem right to him, it still didn’t feel like the kind of love he had really waited for all this time.

Soon it was his turn to talk and Matthew went on about some of the books he had been reading from the local library and was surprised to learn Gloria had read some of them both in and out of school. She hadn’t liked all of them nearly as much as he had, but it felt good to know that she at least had a brain in her head. He figured talking about books would give them something to do when they weren’t in the process of making the ten kids he wanted to have with her.

At the end of the night, he saw Gloria off to the last train, and after giving her enough money for emergencies and meals on the trip home, he put the rest of his pay in an envelope, addressed it to his mom, and mailed it at the box outside the train station before walking back to the base on a cloud. As he lay in his bunk that night, he thought about his short life for a long time. It could end soon or it could go on for a hundred years. So much had occurred in the past weeks. He felt the glow of the love he once felt from his Dad and as he drifted off to sleep, his mind conjured up an image of his brother as a skeleton in a Royal Air Force blue uniform. The skeleton reached out for him and when it touched Matthew, his entire body went ice cold and felt completely lifeless. He sat up straight in bed, his heart pounding and his body in a cold sweat. In

the dark he got some paper and decided the best thing he could do was write to his brother to calm his nerves. It took him a while, but he calmed down after writing and then looked out the barracks window at the stars and wondered what was going to happen next.

*Dear Jake,*

*Training is finally over and I want to thank you for letting Gloria know about my graduation. She came to see me and man do I ever feel good about it. She is already talking about marriage and I think I have fallen in love completely. I had a bad dream about you just now and wanted to write to you just to let you know someone wants to see you make it through this war in one piece, someone who doesn't rely on you for money or your fighting ability, someone who loves you as any brother would, but even more as the best and closest friend I ever had.*

*Private Matthew Morgan, Royal Canadian Army*

Matthew rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, folded and sealed up the letter and got into his uniform, walked to the mailbox and slipped in the letter. In the cool, summer night air Matthew hungered to climb on a roof, take off his clothes to feel the warmth of the air and be surrounded by the beautiful night sky with the crescent moon and the million stars shining down on him. He had to be respectable though, as he was a real soldier and he couldn't take a chance doing something so crazy. He did let his mind wander and thought about the Northern Lights and how he wouldn't see them in England. He called to them by rubbing his knuckles together like a Native friend had shown him, and a small sheet of the lights seemed to slowly grow out of nowhere. In his head, he became that shimmering sheet, a part of space and rays of light that came down from the stars. He was part of the universe and the universe was him. Somewhere far away, history was being made and he drank in the power and energy of the northern Alberta night and somehow, he knew that with all of this spirit in him, he would never die in some lonely, far off place. He would live long enough to come back home where there was real love and power in him. He would go off and fight, earn honours and commendations and Canada would be a new world for him when he returned. Hearing footsteps, he came back to present time and raised his thumbnail to the inside of his front tooth to make a clicking sound that released the Northern Lights. They obediently slipped into the darkness.

## Chapter Three

Basic training ended, as did the eighteen hours a day of lectures, classes, field exercises, drill and rifle range time. The men Matthew had gone through training with all felt like brothers to him, even the ones he never liked. There were some guys who would avoid work at any cost and there were some who would kiss up to the leaders but act like total slack-offs when they weren't around. But there were also a few who really believed in what they were doing. Perhaps all of them did, but each man approached the difficulties and privations of basic training in their own way, and somehow they became so tightly knit that no one looked forward to being separated from each other and possibly never seeing each other again. After basic, they went through some more trade-specific training in everything from anti-tank rifles to leadership and radio operation. By the time they were done, it was February of 1942. The Americans were now in the fight and were gearing up en masse to take on the Pacific, African, and European conflicts as war raged all over the globe. The men all knew that one day soon, Fortress Europe would have to be cracked wide open at the cost of many lives. If their own way of life was going to survive back home, the men had to ensure the freedom of France, Russia, and Poland.

Matthew was given leave to visit his mom before he would be permanently assigned overseas. When he got off the train in the driving snow of their home, she was at the station with Gloria. The two most important women in his life had brought all of his school friends, and aside from wanting to gloat that he was now a real soldier and that he had so many stories and new things to tell his hometown friends, when it came down to it, he just wanted to spend time with his mom and Gloria.

The three had dinner together, and Matthew told them about his best friend Gary and about the times Matthew had been caught daydreaming in lectures or even falling asleep, thanks to their murderous schedule, but somehow managed to get one of the top marks of the battalion. They were proud that he had made it through and even his mom felt he had made a good decision when she saw how fit, healthy and happy he looked.

Matthew walked Gloria home and met her dad formally. Her dad kept smiling at him but had a touch of sadness in his eyes when they spoke. Matthew wondered if it had to do with Gloria's dad's experiences in the Great War twenty-five years earlier. Matthew got to know Gloria's dad in a new way and respected him as they talked about what was going on in Europe. This was a strange feeling for Matthew because he had known the man from around town for quite a while and it seemed so incredible that now he was an equal of this great man.

Matthew left and walked up the street, then sat down on a stump used to cut wood, sitting outside someone's home. He looked up at the stars like he had done so many times before but this time, he thought about how there were people over in Europe looking up at the same stars, not in expectation of a great adventure, but in desperate hope for some miracle to save them from certain destruction. He had heard radio reports from Edward R. Murrow about the German bombing and it made him angry. As he gazed up at the sky, he said a silent prayer for the occupied people and also prayed he could be a part of the effort to save them, no matter how small a part it might be. Not long after he heard footsteps.

"Was it hard to get out?" Matthew asked Gloria when she came up to him.

"Nah, I've done it a million times," she said.

"For other boys?" Matthew asked, sounding a little disappointed.

“There are no other boys, sweetie. You’re the only one for me.”

She walked up to Matthew and gave him a long, passionate kiss. He stood and held her tight, feeling her warm and curvy body underneath her cashmere sweater, wondering what new and wonderful experiences their wedding night would bring. They necked and explored with their hands for a short while and then Gloria stopped him.

“Have you ever gone all the way?”

Matthew didn’t answer. He just looked down and blushed.

“Don’t worry, there’s nothing evil or difficult about it.”

“No, it’s just that I want it to be special. I want my wedding night to be my first time.”

“That’s so beautiful...” Gloria trailed off and a tear ran down her cheek. “I’m so glad I chose you Matthew. My dad had heard about you, about your family. He said Jake was a good and dependable man in the mine and that he would be proud to have his brother for a son-in-law. He even remembers your dad and used to really like him too. He said he was one of his best...”

Matthew, interrupted, stood, embraced Gloria tightly and kissed her again. They probed with their tongues and Matthew was on cloud nine. He wanted to be there in that moment forever, there with his innocence and all his love. All the good feelings about where he was going to go, and what he had to do. Then in a moment he thought of his dream about Jake and the cold feeling it gave him and it made his whole body shiver. He pulled away, put a finger to Gloria’s lips and then held her hand and walked her back to her house. It all seemed so easy, so effortless for them to walk and not say anything, just smile at one another and know that one day they would be one. They would have a house and children and no one to give them a curfew and no need to get permission for anything. On his way home, he half floated in the air, half walked on the ground.

The next day he returned to base and after some processing and administrative work, he was directed to board another train. It went on for hundreds then thousands of miles, through places Matthew thought he would never see. First the vast and open forest of northern Alberta went past, then the wide-open prairies that were as beautiful to Matthew as the Taj Mahal.

Time passed, and night fell as the train kept moving. When the sun rose again, they were in the Laurentian Mountains and passing the lakes and forests of Manitoba and Ontario. All of Canada rolled past him and he was in awe. Still, he longed for the small mining town where he had spent all of his sixteen tender years. They stopped for a short rest and a change of trains in Toronto and there were more people than he had ever seen in the huge and teeming rail station. The whole population of Wetaskiwin would go by every minute, and there were so many hotels, office buildings, restaurants and pubs. Matthew thought it was incredible, but still not quite as good as being able to call up the Northern Lights.

They weren’t told where they were going, but when they were finally at the east coast, they were loaded onto troopships with a military band playing. They knew that for many, this was going to be a one-way ticket overseas, but spirits were high. The men all gathered on deck after boarding their assigned steamer and crowds came to cheer them off, giving them the best send-off possible. Someone disobeyed ordinance and set off firecrackers when dusk came. Little did they know that even this far away, there was a danger of submarines sneaking into the harbour in Quebec.

After a few days and what seemed like a million faces went past him, Matthew ran into Gary on the ship and like they had never parted, they clicked as the best of friends as the ocean moved beneath them. Gary was even more friendly and enjoyable to be around than Matthew remembered. He had a few books with him and as they passed the time together, Matthew read

all of them. Aristotle, Dickens, Herman Melville. There was also a small ship's library, and as the days passed with nothing to see or do, he read through more philosophy books and a copy of *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. As they sailed on, Gary and Matthew spent a lot of time discussing the very basic ideas of democracy and freedom, and learned from their books all the ways a soldier could get into trouble on leave.

One night, with all the ships blacked out, Matthew and Gary were topside looking out at the stars and the moonlight as it reflected off the waves, talking about life back in Alberta and all the entrepreneurial and industrious things they planned to do when the war ended. Suddenly, they heard a huge explosion and saw another ship begin to sink.

"Submarines!" someone exclaimed.

All cigarettes, lamps and voices that hadn't already been put out were extinguished. The troop ships usually had a few smaller guns and they let them rip, to little avail, round after round in whichever direction the radio directed them to shoot. Gary and Matthew figured it must have been a number of submarines gathering, because it seemed that ships were being hit all over the convoy. One by one, they would hear an explosion and then the panic ensuing on the ships as they went down. There were life rafts of course, but never enough for all the troops on board some of the larger ships.

As this was happening, the navy destroyer and corvettes that were escorting the convoy were patrolling and dropping depth charges among the otherwise totally defenseless troop ships. Out of nowhere, the two young soldiers heard the arrival of a squadron of RAF Mosquito light bombers from the seemingly far off shores of England. After dropping a few bombs to the sound of great cheering from the men on the ships, the word passed that the submarines had dived to avoid certain death and the explosions stopped and safe passage was granted. From that point onwards, Matthew never felt alone again. Each man that had survived that fracas was as much his brother as anyone he had known, even Jake.

After the bombers left, in the teeming, freezing waters of the North Atlantic below, there were men drowning, yelling and screaming for help. Gary and Matthew got the idea of lowering a lifeboat to them, and some others joined in. When the two young men got the rescue craft down to sea level, the swimming men were in a mad panic, trying to claw at the sides of the boat and each other to get aboard. They saved a few, but many of the soldiers died due to the freezing temperatures of the North Atlantic waters and the difficulty of swimming in their soaked wool uniforms and boots. The smarter ones had taken their knives and cut their laces, but that even posed a danger for faster freezing if they weren't taken up into a life raft immediately. Many who survived lost fingers and toes.

When the lifeboats were retrieved, the men who lowered them were both commended for their bravery and reprimanded for risking the King's property. Sometimes it was hard to understand how their superiors thought, but for a long while after, Matthew and Gary both wished they had let someone else watch the tragedies that had unfolded after they had gone down to the water to save those men. They indeed had to leave behind those they were unable to help, and in a few short minutes of doing so, the screams faded off. Keeping true to what was to be his new religion, Matthew crossed himself and said a short prayer for them and kissed the cross on the rosary. Later, it was hard to decide if the screams or the silence made more of a dark impression on Matthew's nightmares.

"Believe in God, Matthew?" Gary asked him, in the darkness later that night, a grim look on his face from what he had seen.

"I like something I read in a book once. 'There are no atheists at sea in a storm.'"

“I kind of like that too. Say a prayer for me, would you?”

“I already did.”

As Matthew was praying, the men on the ship and the dead men below in the frigid waters became part of him. It was like something he had heard about mountain forests in school, where a large forest consisted of connections and interconnections between one massive tree system that shared roots. All the other men were a part of him and as he watched so many die, a part of him died too. He now understood what his mom said to Jake about war changing people. He now had no more doubt about what he was to do, namely anything he could do to end the slaughter the Germans had perpetrated on the Allied Forces and the civilians him and the other Canadians hoped to protect.

A day and a half later, the ship docked at a port in the south of England and another military band piped them ashore and another huge crowd gathered to cheer them off the ship. The English people welcoming the Canadians at the port were grateful to see more soldiers coming. They knew their country was taking a beating all over the world and that they needed these men to protect their home. The people had some solace in knowing the Americans were now in the fight, but the Yanks had yet to prove themselves as soldiers in this war. The Canadians were respected all throughout the British Empire as some of the best trained troops in the world, perhaps with the exception of the legendary Ghurkas.

There was little time for celebration as the men were immediately filed off onto trains and trucks and taken to bases where they would be kept in reserve until needed. Here, the Royal Regiment of Canada, as the men with Gary and Matthew were now known, were given further exercise and training. No one had to tell them what the training was for. They were lectured on safe boarding of landing craft off ships, on demolitions and use of the infantry weapons from the PIAT, or the projectile, infantry, anti-tank—the British “bazooka,” all the way down to skilled death-dealing with a bayonet, and even their bare hands.

Gary and Matthew spent their off time playing cards and reading and when they had leave, they would take it on a Sunday rather than a Saturday and take a train into London where they took photos with Gary’s camera of all the sights that hadn’t been bombed out and some that had. If they could make it in time, they also attended a church service. At first Gary didn’t want to attend with him, but Matthew talked him into it, saying that he would feel strange going to one alone, and that he needed protection from all the little old ladies who would ambush him after the service. As they got to know these women, they learned to like them. It seemed they all had sons or grandsons who were in North Africa or Burma or some hot spot, and they loved to spoil Matthew and Gary with sausages and fried potatoes and cake for dessert at the after church gatherings they were always putting together.

After the two were spoiled like this, wanting to earn the food they had been given, they took it upon themselves to fix plumbing, replace broken doorknobs or tinker with the women’s clocks, even repair bomb or fire damage as best they could with the carpentry skills almost every young boy learned in Alberta. The women appreciated it so much they almost wanted to adopt them and always invited them back. Some of these women saved their ration cards all week to get the sugar and meat they lavished on the two young men Sunday evenings.

Late one Wednesday evening, Gary was looking at a used copy of “*All Quiet On The Western Front*” and an extremely beautiful, young, and well-dressed young woman came up to him to ask about it.

“Oh, you’re not going to buy that book are you? I was just looking for a copy.”

“Oh,” Gary said. “Have you read it?”

“I’ve read it a few times. It’s such a beautiful little work of literature.”

Gary had no intentions of buying it and he had hoped no one would see him looking at it. He understood it was a book about a German during the first world war.

“To be honest love, I had my heart set on buying it, but if you give me your address I can lend it to you after I’m finished.”

“Oh dear, I think you’re trying to figure out a way to date me young man!” The young woman couldn’t help but smile at Gary’s tactics.

“Well, we would have something in common.”

“What could we have in common?”

“Great books, this one for a start,” he said.

“Well, you do have a point there. Tell you what, I think my father would prefer if I didn’t give you my address at first meeting, but if you want to meet next Monday at Kingston Pub on Fell Street, you can have the time it takes to drink a pot of tea to convince me I should see you again.” And then she gave him a smile that melted his heart. “And bring the book.”

“It’s a deal ma’am,” Gary said jokingly and gave a deep bow. “By the way, I’m Gary Blanchette. Your name is?”

“Carol. Short for Carolyn. Carolyn Windermere.”

Gary nearly fainted when he realized this woman was just about royalty, the daughter of the richest man in the county, who was also a famous writer.

“Pleased to meet you Carol. We shall see you again soon.”

Carol left and Gary found himself thanking God in no small way. For a long time, he had fantasies of a girl who was beautiful and loved good books and would give him a chance to shine in all his youthful glory. He raced back to the camp to tell Matthew.

“Matthew, Matthew my friend!” Gary said. “You won’t believe what just happened to me!”

Matthew did not seem to react. He looked very dejected in fact.

“What’s wrong mate? What could be so awful you can’t be up for some great news?”

Matthew handed over a telegram he had received from the Royal Canadian Air Force. Gary read it solemnly, then read it again out loud.

“It is our regret to inform you that Sergeant Jacob Morgan, tail gunner on a Lancaster Bomber, has been reported missing in action over Germany. We will notify you further should any developments occur.” Gary felt so moved that he forgot about his own news. “Well, it says missing right? That doesn’t mean dead does it?”

“I asked the Commanding Officer about it, and he was telling me he got the same telegram when his brother, a pilot in a bomber squadron went down. He found out later that missing in action for an air crew only means there wasn’t enough left in the explosion or crash to send home their id tags.” Matthew wiped a tear. “I don’t know what I’m going to do, Gary.”

“Matthew, you have a girl back home and a mother right? They don’t want you giving up on things. What you have to do is keep going, keep being a brave soldier. And don’t give up hope just yet.”

“What was your news Gary? You seemed pretty happy when you walked in.”

“I did it my friend, I finally did it! I met the woman I’m going to marry. Her name is Carol and she is beautiful. I think she’s rich and we have a date next week. All I have to do is read this book.” He held up the book.

“*All Quiet On The Western Front*. I read that back when I was in school. It’s pretty good.”

“I heard it was about a German. I was just curious, but she seemed to be in love with it. Is it really that good?”

“Good enough that I want to read it again when you’re done. And congratulations.” Matthew sniffed and wiped another tear. “I hope you can find happiness. I need to write a couple of letters right now though.”

“Okay brother. Remember you may not have Jake right here with you anymore, but you’ll always have me. And in a way, Jake will never leave you. His love will always be in your heart and mind.”

“Thanks Gary. That means a lot.”

Matthew sat down and started to write first to Gloria and then his mom.

*Dearest Gloria,*

*I just got a telegram from the war department. I have been notified that Jake is most likely dead, lost on a mission. He was so full of life and happy last time I saw him. He told me he loved flying and that he had been getting pilots to show him what he needed to know to become a pilot one day. Since he arrived in England, he wrote me all these stories about shooting down enemy planes and how sometimes planes would come in with a piece of their wing shot off or leaking oil or fuel or both. He seemed to love being right on the edge of things, and now for some reason he has fallen off.*

*Did you ever read All Quiet On The Western Front? Gary just found a copy and thinking about it makes me start to think that this war is such a useless endeavour when you look at it through neutral eyes. If I ever get through it, I’m going to come home and marry you and never leave Alberta again. I have also decided I want to become a Catholic. Gary and I have been attending services and there is something so special about it, something so holy that I can’t describe. Last Sunday, the priest was giving mass and I was staring at a statue of our Lord Jesus and I actually started to feel pain on my back where Jesus was whipped. It felt like they were really whipping me with a cat o’ nine tails, and that for a moment I was experiencing what happens to Jesus when someone dies in the war. I have been growing and changing so much, learning so much from books and the people I’ve met here. I don’t want to talk down about anyone who worships God, but it seems so strange that I once went to a church where people seemed to be just trying to look more religious than the next person and everyone seemed to be so ready to judge everyone. I miss you a lot Gloria. Take care.*

*Love,*

*Matthew*

Matthew sealed the letter and kissed it, and tucked it away in his inside pocket to keep it close to his heart. While he was there, he took out the picture of Gloria and his eyes welled up with tears. He missed home so much. He took out another sheet of stationery and started to write.

*Dear Mom,*

*I don’t know if you would have gotten the news by now, so I don’t really know how to say this. Jake has been listed as missing in action and it has me pretty upset. I heard our Commanding Officer had a family member in the Air Force who had gone missing and I went to see him and he told me that missing in action almost always means dead. I can’t stop thinking about all the times Jake taught me things that Dad couldn’t, how he became my Dad in a way after our father died. I never felt like I was my own man until I joined up, but I think he was proud of me that I made it into the infantry. I was definitely proud of him for the brave task he took.*

*Enclosed is most of my pay. If you get a chance, I would really like it if you could invite Gloria over some time. I would love to hear stories of you getting to know her. I'm sure you will love her, as she is one of my few inspirations now, other than you Mom. Gary has found himself a new girl and even though they haven't had their first date, he is already engaged to her in his head. It is good to know I at least have him. He is a great friend, just like a true brother to me. Take care, Mom. Write soon.*

*Love,  
Matthew*

## Chapter Four

Matthew was given no time to mourn, no time to attend services. The very next day was business as usual for a Canadian soldier in the tumultuous time. He preferred it that way because the more he could focus and keep busy, the less he would feel the pain of losing Jake and the less he would think about home and how much he missed his home and Gloria. He threw himself into the training, yelling louder, pushing harder, running faster than all the others. Deep inside he wanted out of this whole war, wanted to admit he was really just a child, but the memory of Jake wouldn't let him give an inch.

One day, Matthew and Gary were on board a Navy ship being trained to board landing craft in rough weather and someone slipped on the rope netting they had to climb down to board the craft. The man's leg twisted into an unnatural angle and he screamed. Matthew took the initiative and though he was already safely on the landing craft, he climbed back up to help the man and skillfully carried him over his shoulder to safety.

The next day he was asked to see the Commanding Officer again.

"Private Morgan?"

"Yes, sir, how can I be of assistance?"

"I saw you some weeks ago. You lost a brother to the Germans didn't you?"

"I did, sir. I think I've accepted the loss mostly. It's a terrible thing to lose someone so close to you but at least he fought the good fight." Matthew said showing little emotion.

"Good, good for you, son. I hope you can manage to move ahead. I wanted to call you in to give you these as a thank you."

The Major tossed something to Matthew who fumbled with it, dropped it then picked it up. It was a set of Corporal's stripes.

"Sir, am I being promoted?"

"Yes, you are. That was a brave thing you did yesterday and you have been doing well in the eyes of all of your instructors, aside from the odd bout of daydreaming, so I hear. I need men like you, Morgan. I need them for a special task force I've been asked to form out of our regiment."

"Count me in, sir."

"I haven't told you yet what you'll be doing. It will be extremely dangerous and it won't be held against you if you decline."

"Sir, I can't take any more of these lectures and training sessions. I already know how to shoot a rifle. I've learned how to jump over an obstacle course. If you have something that will get me in the war sooner and challenge me, I'll take it with pleasure."

"Very well then. I want to make something clear though; don't discuss this with anyone. Just say you're being reassigned and that's it. And don't offer much information, even to your superiors if you can at all avoid it. If you need anything, come directly to me, and I'll let you know when it will be time to head for your new assignment."

"Yes, thank you, sir!" Matthew came to attention, saluted crisply and turned and went out the door.

"God, bloody help us. That boy must be sixteen at most," the Major said.

Matthew said his goodbyes, mostly to Gary, by giving him letters to send in case of his death and the same was reciprocated. He then exchanged home addresses with a few friends and they all promised to write and meet up after the war at a famous pub in London on the third

Wednesday after peace was declared. Then, in three days' time, he lined up with one hundred others and they boarded a train for the southern coast of England. On the train, he went to an open seat and a strange voice barked out an order, telling him he wasn't permitted to sit. He was about to get angry and exercise the power he had recently been given in the form of Corporal's stripes, but then he looked at where the voice came from and it was Gary.

"Gary! Why didn't you tell me you were coming along?"

"Because I wasn't sure. I was thinking of Carol and how I might not see her again and thought about declining the offer. Either way, I wasn't supposed to tell you anything."

Matthew felt so full of joy he nearly shook Gary's arm off and couldn't stop grinning. He somehow knew they were going to have some adventures they would be able to tell their grandkids and that somehow, one of them would get through to keep the other's memory alive.

When they arrived at the port south of the camp they were previously stationed in, they boarded a ferry that had been converted for military use, which took them to an island off the English coast. The mood on ship was good, though the men looked like a tough bunch. They were all fit and most of them fairly large and rough in appearance. As soon as they disembarked their transport, they were drilled and pushed continuously, put through beatings in martial arts instruction, run off their feet in physical training, forced to swim in freezing water and run naked in the morning cold. Though most of them were experienced riflemen, they were taught to shoot better, plus shoot with a pistol. They were also given commando knives, which seemed even more deadly than the bayonets they had been instructed on in basic training. Constantly they were training for special duties, be it how to sneak up to guard houses at night or practicing how to crawl on their bellies under other people's noses. The men from the Royal Regiment of Canada were given the new name, No. 3 Commando, and were made as tough and as ready for war as anyone could make them.

With any free time he had, Gary wrote letters to Carol. It made Matthew snicker to think of what the censor might be reading before his mail was sent. The important thing was that his best friend was happy. And Carol was nice enough to mail a book for them to read every now and then. She even wrote the odd letter to Matthew, at first imploring him to watch Gary's back and be careful himself, but later they started to develop a deep friendship of their own. It felt strange at first, but Matthew felt that he could open up to Carol more than he could to Gloria.

Carol was only twenty years old, but very intelligent. She didn't go on about girls she hated or makeup or hairdressing. Gloria did like books, but Carol understood them and had plans for after the war to be one of the few female literature professors at Cambridge. For fun, Matthew wrote a poem in one of Carol's letters and she wrote back to say she thought it was lovely and asked who wrote it. He beamed with pride but didn't reveal the source to her. Finally when she demanded the author's name so she could get a book by the same writer, he told her he had written it in the next letter she jokingly swore at him. As time passed, Matthew wrote fewer letters to Gloria and more to Carol. He told Gary about them but hid how he felt about this young woman he found to be so amazing, and Gary didn't seem at all threatened.

Matthew would never try and double-cross Gary and he was pretty sure it was the last thing on Carol's mind as well. He had just never clicked with anyone quite like he did with Carol, his relationship with Gloria was not even close. Matthew went on writing and hiding the upset that Gary met Carol first and felt very lucky to have two such wonderful friends.

The books Carol sent were a luxury few men got. Soon, the other men learned about it and a crowd would line up to put their name on a list to read the latest delivery. The men so desperately needed the escape of new minds, new places, and new worlds where half the

inhabitants of the planet weren't trying to kill the other. All of the soldiers in Gary and Matthew's unit soon had a place in their heart for Carol.

In late July, 1942, the men of No. 3 Commando felt indestructible. They had prepared for every type of conflict, had been put through the wringer, mentally and physically, and they were as ready as anyone could ever make them for whatever job they would be ordered to carry out.

By special consideration, Gary and Matthew somehow got leave, and the pair went to England to see Carol in a small, single engine aircraft piloted by one of their reconnaissance officers. There was no way to warn her or let her know they were coming, so they simply showed up at the door of her house. To call it a house would be an understatement, as it was an estate that could cover a number of city blocks, with gardens and a long driveway decorated with Rolls-Royce and Bentley cars. The pair, dressed in their army uniforms, walked from where the train left them in the town and rang the doorbell.

"Yes, may I help you gentlemen?" said the butler who answered the door.

"Yes, we are here to see Carol," Gary said.

"Please wait here. Do you have a card?" Gary handed him his Canadian Army ID disc and the butler looked amused and went inside for a moment. From inside they heard a voice.

"Gary! You're here!" Carol rushed to the door and flung it open. "Come in, come in! You must be Matthew. You're as handsome as Gary said."

Matthew blushed crimson red as she led them inside and sat them down in the library. It had couches, chairs, coffee tables and walls lined with thick, leather-bound volumes.

Carol went to the stairs and yelled up, "Daddy. Come down, I have someone I want you to meet."

Soon, an older, distinguished man came down the stairs with a silk smoking jacket on, hair neatly trimmed, oiled and combed, and a pipe clenched between his teeth.

"Yes darling, who have you brought to my home now?"

"Daddy, this is Gary, the man I told you about. The one who liked your book."

"This is the author who wrote that novel you loaned me?" Matthew asked.

"In the flesh," Carol said.

"You inspire me, sir. I wish I had the education and intelligence you have. I would love to be a writer," Gary said.

"Never too early to start young man. I understand you are a bit of a voracious reader. Carol has pilfered some of my best books to send to you."

"Oh, I'll be sure and bring them back. This trip was unexpected, but next time we come we will return them for sure. I came now because I wanted to ask you something," Gary said.

"Yes, son, what can I do for you?" he said, imperceptibly tilting his head back and looking down his nose at Gary.

Gary smiled at Carol and she nodded at him.

"I want to ask if I can marry your daughter, sir."

The man's face dropped and the pipe nearly fell out of his mouth.

"Can you excuse us for a moment Gary and uhh..."

"Matthew."

"Yes, Matthew. Henry, will you show these young men to the kitchen? They must be starved."

"Yes, sir. I will do that immediately."

The butler bowed and put his hand out to signal to Gary and Matthew with his index finger, indicating rudely that they were to leave the room.

Gary and Matthew were hungry and the cook on duty fixed them a snack of cheese and crackers with slices of pork sausage, along with some with liver paste that Matthew and Gary devoured. Quietly at first, but growing louder, they heard shouts coming from the library. They weren't sure what to do, but Carol solved the problem for them by storming into the kitchen and telling Gary she wanted to leave, now, with him. She went up to her room and threw together a small bag of possessions and then the three walked out, with a warning coming from behind her as she opened the front door.

“If you marry that man, you can never come back here, Carolyn!”

“If that's how you feel, then I never want to come back here, Daddy!” she said and slammed the door shut. As soon as they walked away from the house, Carol burst into tears.

The three of them walked to the rail station and got onboard a train to a small town named Foresthaven, which was close to where Gary and Matthew would have to catch their ferry back to the base. With their pooled cash, Gary and Matthew rented two rooms and paid the local Anglican Priest to marry the young couple. It was a short honeymoon, but a loving one, as the pair went for long walks during the day, and then tired themselves with lovemaking when they returned to their bed and breakfast. When they were full of enjoyment and exhaustion, they talked about all the things their future would bring them. Everything was on hold for the war, everything they talked about was what they would do when they went home. It was too painful to talk about what fate the war might have for them before that time came about.

All the while, Matthew lounged in their extra room and read book after book, trying not to think of how badly he wished it were he in the next room with that beautiful and intelligent woman, leaving his room only to eat. All too soon, the two men had to return to their base and when they did, both Gary and Carol were teary-eyed and sad to see each other go.

After the newlyweds kissed, Carol grabbed Matthew and held him tightly and he hugged her back, smelling her perfume and feeling her perfection pressed into him. She kissed him on the cheek and told him they had both better come home in one piece. Matthew blushed once more and looked down at his shoes, fearing his eyes would betray how he really felt.

After their return, on August 12, 1942, Gary received a telegram that simply stated, “Your loving wife is with child.” The first person he told was Matthew and they were both elated at the chance of new life among the ending of so many other lives around them. Matthew was amazed at how much Gary had changed in the short while since they had met in Alberta a few months earlier.

## Chapter Five

Later in the same day Gary got his news, the men were assembled and given an hour to write any final letters they wanted to send before a secrecy restriction would be in place. They were instructed to inform the unit of any last wishes, and then brought to the bomb shelter where a table sat full of maps and envelopes with a chalkboard behind it.

Soon, a Canadian Colonel came to address the men.

“Gentlemen, as you know the war is raging all over Europe and the Americans have now joined us. I don’t think I have to tell you that the war is not going well. The Germans have us on the run in North Africa, and the Japanese all but destroyed us in the Pacific. With the help of the Americans, the tide is slowly turning, but we are still in a dire situation. Although we are not yet ready for it, our Russian allies are pressuring us to open a second front in Europe. The reason you men have been training is we need to make a trial run of things to find out what mistakes can be avoided, what methods can be used, and how men will react in a big invasion. There are so many unknowns and we can’t risk jumping into a full invasion because we will only get one chance. On August 19th, just one week from now, we are going to invade Hitler’s Fortress Europe. We are going to try and give the Germans a bloody nose and the importance of our mission is so great that all of our lives are considered expendable. For this reason, no one will be looked on poorly if they choose to back out. For most of you, that is all I can say. You will be given more info as you need to know, but for now I want to excuse you all and ask all Sergeants and above to remain for more detailed briefings.”

The men filed out, silent and somber. Some of them looked scared while others were so thrilled to be headed for a real fight that they were smiling and joking, despite indications in their voices and gestures that they were nervous. Matthew took it in stride. He knew he had signed up for something like this. He hoped he would get a chance to do some fighting, but he had no delusions about how dangerous the mission would be.

Over the next week, duties were light and the men were allowed extra rations. Hour after hour each day, the Sergeant in Gary and Matthew’s platoon discussed where they would be landing, what they were to do, how to navigate with a map and compass prepared for the mission, how to find rally points and what to say and what not to say if captured. In a way, it bothered Matthew because the only difference between him and the Sergeant was one stripe on their sleeves and that the man hadn’t had any combat experience. Still, he respected him and listened intently when he was giving instructions.

In a whisper of time, the day of action came and No. 3 Commando was onboard a transport ship, headed for the French coast to Dieppe. The whole experience was surreal to Matthew. The salty spray of the ocean came up and hit his face, he could feel the rise and fall of the craft in the waves, and yet in his head he was back in Alberta and his brother was alive and they were playing catch with their dad.

His thoughts were jolted back to the present when a deafening explosion caught his attention. He looked over to see cannon fire from another ship hitting Matthew’s boat. It seemed like a mistake, an accidental explosion of a Composition C demolition plastic stash, but off on the horizon he could see enemy ships. The small flotilla carrying No. 3 Commando scattered and tried to return fire, but they weren’t working in concert and were succumbing to the confusion.

As they neared the coast, the pilots of the landing crafts had all but forgotten their objectives, and as the men disembarked, they were all over the beach in places they shouldn't be.

Matthew's unit landed at a place called Puys, which had a narrow beach surrounded by high cliffs. Soon after they landed, the men were picked off by murderous enemy fire from machine guns above. They made it ashore but were subjected to every type of danger and mishap, from mines to mortars to incredibly accurate sniper fire. It was almost as if the enemy had seen them coming. Matthew moved across the beach as close to the cliffs as possible and dug in. He was relatively safe but that wouldn't last for long.

As the day wore on, reinforcements from the Black Watch of Canada came in to try and get No. 3 Commando out of their dire situation, but it was a fiasco. There was nothing they could do. Soon, the other members of the unit surrendered and were captured or outright murdered, and Matthew took out his handkerchief to use as a white flag to signal his own surrender.

The Germans took no end of precautions with the surrendering troops. They were stripped of any weapons, searched from the tips of their toes to the last follicle of hair on their heads. They were immediately loaded onto trains that were blacked out from the inside to prevent anyone from knowing how to return, and then they were sent to prison camps. In the darkness, Matthew tried to find out if Gary had made it but the men in his darkened railcar were only a small part of the men who had been captured. Kneeling, Matthew crossed himself and thanked God for saving him and prayed that God could do the same for his friend and father-to-be, Gary. He prayed a few more words about Gloria and his mom and even took the time to pray for Jake, whether he be in earth, heaven or hell. Then he said the prayer he hoped would not be needed; he prayed for the wellbeing and safety of Carol and the baby that was growing inside of her.

## Chapter Six

The weather was turning towards fall and even Germany seemed beautiful. The side of the boxcar had a tiny crack and Matthew and the other soldiers took turns looking out. They went past snow-capped mountains, ornate cities and stunning forests. Finally, Matthew arrived at the prisoner of war camp on August 23, 1942. When they got to the camp, Matthew managed to borrow some paper and envelopes and wrote to his mother and Carol first.

*Dear Mom,*

*I can't tell you much about what brought me here, but I am safe in a prisoner of war camp. There isn't much food to be had and someone told me to expect no more than one meal a day, but I feel comfortable and in some strange way content compared to the rigours of military life and the dangers of getting to know small town girls too well. I don't see any reason to escape. I like to think I have done my bit and that the war is over for me. Before I left, I arranged to have my pay sent directly to you in case of any mishaps, and this seems like a huge one. All I ask is that you send me a book every now and then. It looks like I am going to have a lot of time to read here.*

*Love,  
Matthew*

*Dear Carol,*

*I am writing to you now from a prisoner of war camp. I was captured on August 19, and I am far from any conflict now. I wanted to write to ask you if you had heard from Gary. We were separated before our mission and I have no idea what became of him. Let him know that I am safe and always have both of you in my thoughts and prayers.*

*Matthew*

Matthew gave his two letters to the Postmaster, who told him that he would save the letters for the next time the Swedish Red Cross arranged a pick up and delivery, which could be months. He spent the rest of the day staring out his window in the building for Non-Commissioned Officers, which he had been assigned to. This was the first time he had a moment to himself in many months and he thought a lot about his brother and the things they would do together as kids, the dreams they had. He thought about *All Quiet On The Western Front* and started to wonder if this war would involve massive defeats and millions of deaths, only ending when both sides were run down and sick of war like the Great War had. It scared him to think about the fact that so many people were dying. He wondered what people would think of him if he did indeed give up hope of escape, which was actually his duty.

Matthew heard reports of inhuman things that were being done to prisoners and he wondered if the Red Cross would make assurances those things not be done in this camp. He wondered for a while what made the Germans so evil and why was it so important to stop them in Europe. Not long ago, it seemed so clear, but after he saw how beautiful Germany was, he wanted to think that it was just Hitler and Fascism that were bad and that the Germans were simply people like him, fighting for a place that ran deep in their blood, mistakenly spurred on by a madman. Going to England had caused him to grow and change in his ideas a lot. He realized now that he was

not from an upper class family at all, the upper class were people like Carol's father who seemingly only wanted to maintain their position in the world. All in all, he hadn't had much time to make a decision on how he really felt. After basic training, everything seemed so cut and dry, and all of the men were ready and raring to leave for Europe to destroy the enemy. Matthew wondered if that attitude was killing everyone, regardless of whether or not they died in the war.

This was how Matthew spent most of his time, staring out his window and thinking about his brother, his home in Alberta, his mom, and the total futility of the war in general. Months went by without him hearing anything from home or Carol, but he had been warned about that. It scared him that far away, his mom was wondering if he was dead like his brother. He had a faint hope that maybe Jake hadn't been killed. Maybe he was like Matthew, missing but not reported captured yet.

One night in a dream, Matthew's mind conjured up the strange idea that Jake was not only alive, but in the same camp and since he outranked Matthew, he was yelling orders at him, making him march around the compound and generally being a cruel brother. Finally, after putting Matthew through the wringer, Jake walked up to him and said, "I'm proud of you brother, keep on going, keep fighting the good fight." And then put his hand on Matthew's shoulder just as he turned back into the skeleton from his previous dream. A deep, dark sense of coldness again rushed through Matthew. He awoke with a start and let out a loud, sharp sound that woke up some of his bunkmates. They all understood though, as most of them had dreams like his and had done the very same thing. They were all in the same boat and it seemed sometimes like it was sinking.

One day, Mathew sat looking out his window and noticed the view of the outside compound. Over time, he saw that each hour, the guard who walked the line took an extra five minutes to return for his patrol sweep. Five minutes was like a lifetime for a motivated man with a pair of wire cutters and a brave spirit. He thought he should let someone know about it, but as he was getting up to leave he heard his name called.

"Morgan. Corporal Morgan?" an officer in his midtwenties shouted.

"Yes, sir, that's me."

"I have a package for you. If it's chocolate I want a piece."

Morgan looked at the name. It was a package from Carol.

"Sorry, sir, I think it's a book."

"Alright, you owe me." The officer smiled and winked at him.

"Sure thing."

Matthew tore open the package. It was a collection of stories by Jack London, *Tales of the North*. Lovely, he thought to himself. He then returned to his bunk to read the letter.

*Dearest Matthew,*

*I was so glad to hear that you were alive. My feelings are shadowed by the news that Gary did not in fact survive the battle you were in. He was awarded a medal for bravery, which was sent to me. I thought now that Gary is gone, you and I could remain friends. I am enclosing a book that once made me fall in love with Canada, or at least, the literature about it. One day when this war is over, perhaps I will go to Canada to meet Gary's parents and tell them what a wonderful man he had become. I hope you will be able to come with me. Gary loved you like a brother.*

*Yours,*

*Carol*

*Sweet Carol, that poor girl*, Matthew thought to himself. He had in his pocket a letter he had been saving, one that Gary had given for him to open in case of his death. Now that he knew, he took it out and opened it.

*Dear Matthew,*

*If you are reading this it means that I am gone. I want to tell you a couple of things. First of all, you are like a brother to me and I don't want you to in any way feel guilty about what I am going to tell you. I loved Carol and she loved me back, but it wasn't the real kind of love that people marry for. It was more the love of friendship. Carol is a sweet girl and she used to talk about you a lot when we met, in her letters, and even on our honeymoon. I told her you were a bit young for her, but she was so impressed by your intelligence and strength to volunteer to help her country through a tough spot. She loved you Matthew, she loved you like someone you should marry. Her and I could have had a wonderful life together and been very happy, but now that I am gone, I want you not only to watch out for her, but to remember that she has deep feelings for you and that she will likely need your help to raise our child after the war. That is my last wish, brother. Be good to her, marry her if you feel right about it, and know that you do so with my full blessing.*

*Gary*

Matthew was deeply saddened, but not overcome by the news. His friendship with Gary had been strong enough that he knew this was the way he would want things to end up. It was sad that Gary's child would never meet his father, but there were worse tragedies in life. After digesting what Gary said about Carol, he was a bit confused and worried. Could it really be true that Carol felt the same feelings he did? It was too much to contemplate. His mind almost went blank at the thought. But most importantly, Matthew needed to find the escape committee and tell them about what he saw on the fence line that day. Every escape that could succeed was something that helped the war effort, and now Matthew was starting to think it was truly a just cause. He walked across the camp to the officer's quarters and went to their dining room door, which was closed. He knocked three times then waited and knocked twice. He heard a mass shuffle go on in the room and then a minute later a voice told him to enter.

"Smythe, who is this man?" one of the senior officers declared without greeting him.

"This is Corporal Morgan, sir, a Canadian commando just brought in three months ago."

"Why is he using the old knock?"

"Well, sir, we thought it best that anyone new coming in should have to prove themselves before we tell them any secrets."

"Yes, yes. Good idea and good work, Smythe. Now, Morgan, what can we help you with?" the British Colonel said as he opened a drawer and pulled out a tobacco pipe and a mug, potentially filled with real alcohol.

"Sir, I was watching at my bunk and I noticed a strange pattern with a guard. I've watched him maybe a few hundred times and each time it's the same. An hour goes past and he disappears for an extra five minutes. I think someone quick could get through the wire while he's having his cigarette or whatever it is that keeps him busy."

"Yes, yes. Sounds very good. But what do you know about escaping?"

"Me, sir? I have no clue about escaping. I just thought you could find someone who would..."

“Corporal, we can’t go around suggesting ideas to people from those who have no stake in the escape’s success. Either you make the escape or no one will. Are you a commando or a bloody desk clerk from the rear?”

“Yes, sir.”

Matthew turned and left without another word. When he returned to his building, he took out some paper and sat down to write back to Carol in hopes of getting his letter off right away, with the recent news that mail was soon to be gathered and sent.

*Dear Carol,*

*It was very thoughtful of you to send me that book. Things can get pretty boring in a prisoner of war camp. I don’t mind you writing at all, but I think you need to save all the money you can now that Gary is gone. Don’t worry about my reading problems. I am going to get my mom to send me books.*

*I am very sad to hear the news about Gary, he was such a true friend. I could always talk to him about my girlfriend back home, my brother, my family. He would have made a great father. If you would like to one day go to Canada, I would be more than happy to show you around. Please contact me if you need financial help. I want to support you and Gary’s child in any way I can.*

*I just wanted to mention that I love Jack London as well. He wrote a book once called Call of the Wild, about a sled dog, and it reminded me of the things I went through in basic training, how I turned all lean and fit and learned a whole new way of looking at the world. Sometimes, I would imagine myself a wild and vicious dog being tamed like the wolf in the story. When I think back though, it almost seems crazy. I don’t know why I was so anxious to come here and kill people. Killing is an awful thing. Ending a life that could one day grow and flourish, may have children at home and have a parent who once had hopes and dreams for them, is painful. I saw a lot of men die near me before. I was captured and their faces and torn bodies will never leave me at peace again, I fear. Sorry, I don’t mean to drop all these bad images on you. I can only imagine what you are going through. Just keep it in your head that the war will end one day and we will all go home.*

*Sincerely,*

*Matthew*

A week passed, and the officer named Smythe came to see him.

“Corporal Morgan, may I have a word?” he asked

“You can have as many words as you like, sir,” Matthew said.

“No one likes a smart ass, Morgan. I want to know how old you are.”

“I’m nineteen, sir,” he lied.

“No, come on. You can’t get in trouble for it here and it may help.”

“I’m seventeen, sir.”

“Yes, I thought around there. You see, we have some clothes and a German ID someone smuggled in, and we think you would fit the clothes and the ID card.”

“Sorry, sir. I don’t want to escape. I want to sit the war out.”

“What kind of soldier are you, Corporal?”

“A live one.”

“Listen, this is the army, and if you disobey an order, inside a camp or out, you will be court martialed.”

“What are you going to do? Send me home?”

“No, but we can put you in a much worse prison than this when we’re liberated. And who knows what manner of accidents could befall you before that happens.” Matthew got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. “Understand that it is your duty to escape, and if you refuse to do your duty, you will be considered a coward and a liability.”

“Sorry, sir, I just thought I could sit things out. I lost a brother and a best friend. Plus I’m the sole support for my mom. I don’t know what she would do if I died.”

“Well I can understand that. We’re not without some compassion. Haven’t you heard of life insurance? If you’re worried about your mom, we can have someone arrange a policy.”

“Can they give half to my mom, half to my departed friend’s widow if anything happens?”

“We have an officer in camp who used to work for Lloyds of London. He can fix things for you in any way you like. It’s a special thing we worked out with our government boys in London for high risk prisoners who need it, just like yourself.”

“Well, I guess I don’t have any good reason not to. I’ll admit I was getting bored in here. I also was starting to feel like I should be doing more for the people I lost.”

“Excellent, let’s go over the plan.”

Smythe taught Matthew how to speak a few key phrases in German, got him some wire cutters and ran down the layout and the placement of guards and what to do if found out by the Germans. It surprised him to learn that the enemy often planted spies in the camp to learn placements of tunnels, where forgeries were kept and so on. They were very hard to find, as often they had been educated in England or North America and seemed like regular soldiers. After a few days of instruction and planning, Matthew was given an ID card, a forged travel pass and a makeshift map indicating where to catch the train in the nearby town. As he was about to leave the room that day, he couldn’t help but wonder what the other seventeen-year-olds were doing back in Alberta. Most likely staring out a window or maybe even staring at Gloria. Gloria! Damn! He realized. I almost forgot to write her and I may not get another chance.

*Dear Gloria,*

*Things are going as usual here. I want you to know that I love you but I may not be back for a very long time. I can understand if you want to find someone else. I have been faithful to you but so many things can happen in war. I want only the best for you and think of you often.*

*Matthew*

It was a short letter, but he couldn’t help but hold a secret wish that Gloria would take him up on his offer of finding someone else. When he thought about her, all he could think of was that she was gorgeous, and Matthew had lived long enough to learn that looks may be nice for a while, but not only do they fade, they often hide things in people that most would find ugly. The only exception he had found to this rule was Carol. He made an image in his head of her and the baby growing inside of her and couldn’t help but think she was wonderful. He shook his head and realized he was thinking about Gary’s wife and felt awful about it. Still, he looked forward to seeing her again, if and when he ever returned to England. With any luck that might be sometime soon.

## Chapter Seven

The escape was to be done during the day. It was the only time the cigarette smoking guard could be assured to be on duty and timetabling everything was extremely important. A precise timeframe was required for the train ticket and phase of the moon, since much of his escape would occur after he went through the wire in the dark. The team had arranged for a diversion as well. Two men would go up to the guard towers and start throwing rocks at them. They were assured to be given cooler time, the term they used for solitary confinement, for the prank and their part in an escape, but if an escape was successful, it would be more than worth it. Escapes tied up enemy resources and raised the spirits of everyone in camp.

Watching each second tick by on the pocket watch he had been given by Smythe, Matthew lay in wait to calmly walk to the wire in the dark suit that another prisoner had custom tailored out of scraps of uniforms. The insignia had been taken off and the fabric had been dyed to look like a regular suit.

There was nothing particularly fancy about the escape plan. Clothing, wire cutters, passes, and a train ticket. Run to the wire at the right time, cut, roll through the wire and run. There was just a small problem. The guards in the tower didn't like rocks being thrown at them.

Five minutes before it was time for Matthew to go, the rock throwing started, but instead of sounding an alarm, the guards in the tower fired a number of warning shots. This set off alarms all over the camp, but Matthew felt this would help the distraction, not hurt it. He also knew all his documents were dated for that particular day, so he went ahead and cautiously approached the wire. He briskly walked up to the fence, took a quick look around, lay down and cut the wire, then as he was rolling through, he heard someone yell.

"Achtung! Halt! Verbotten!" Matthew could taste his freedom. The woods were only thirty feet away. He rose to his feet and bolted. Before he made it, the distinctive rat-atat-tat sound of a Schmeisser submachine gun going off behind him sounded and he felt the hot sting of pain as a bullet penetrated his lower right leg.

*Damn!* he thought, but kept running, with an extremely painful limp in his gait. He ran as far and as fast as he could, but soon started losing blood and feeling weak. He stopped and using his belt, he put a tourniquet on his leg and limped away. In the distance, he could hear dogs barking. He looked at the direction he was headed in, thought about the dogs and his pain and decided he wasn't going to make it. He sat down, nearly passed out from loss of blood and waited. Soon the dogs came and he tried to calm them to no avail. Any time he moved a muscle they barked and snapped their menacing jaws at him. Enemy soldiers came and half walked, half carried him back to camp.

The soldiers brought him before the camp commandant.

"Take him to the doctor and then the cooler. Give him sixty days. Next time it will be a hundred."

The doctor removed the bullet, cleaned his wound and stitched Matthew up as best he could. Luckily, the bullet hadn't hit any bone or caused too much damage to his tendons or ligaments. Matthew couldn't really call being shot a lucky situation, but at least he had done his duty in the eyes of his commanders and was alive.

A week went past and the doctor came by the cooler to check on Matthew's wound and saw that it was healing as well as could be expected. A German guard was there and he asked a few

questions, one of them being if Matthew was strong enough. The doctor said yes with a disgusted look on his face and then left.

In came four guards, two that had been in the tower when he escaped, with the cigarette smoking guard and the Sergeant of the guard. They punched, kicked and beat Matthew half to death and left him bruised and battered, lying on the floor of his cell with broken ribs, a broken collarbone, three teeth knocked out and an incredible amount of pain on top of the wound he had been given no painkillers for. The rest of his time in solitary would be needed to heal to the point of feeling human again.

## Chapter Eight

When Matthew got out of the cooler, it was hard for him to stop talking to himself since he had grown so used to it. The escape committee wanted to see him and was glad to hear he hadn't revealed the sources of his documents. In fact, he hadn't revealed anything because the Germans didn't ask him any questions. They just set their boots to him as roughly as they felt they could, short of killing him. The papers that he was caught with had been stolen from the Sergeant of the guard's son when he came to the camp for a visit. Matthew told the committee that he was now ready to do anything it took to get out of the camp and back to fighting the Germans. He had come very close to losing his mind in solitary and he thought if he had to keep dealing with camp life and his inability to do anything about the deaths of his brother or Gary or the mistreatments he had undergone, he would soon go the rest of the way.

Some mail had come for him, which the committee gave to him in a small bundle. He excused himself, dashed off and opened the first one from Gloria, just as he got out the door of the officer's quarters.

*Dear Matthew,*

*I am truly happy to hear that you are safe and sound and that you understand my situation. I have started seeing Johnny again and he has asked that I stop writing to you. I hope you understand.*

*Gloria*

*Three sentences,* Matthew thought. Three sentences to end everything with a guy who is off serving his country and his King. He supposed he was right about Gloria being ugly on the inside. He turned to the one from Carol and hoped it held better news.

*Dear Matthew,*

*You haven't written in some time. I have to admit I am more than a little worried. I was just thinking about the time the three of us went to the pub in town and you showed us what a talented piano player you were while we sung along, half gone on pints of beer. This is hard for me to say so soon but I hope you come home and I hope we can really go to Canada after the war because right now, you are the closest person to me in the world. Please write.*

*Love,  
Carol*

Matthew rushed back to his bunk for paper and a pencil and wrote.

*Dearest Carol,*

*I am sorry I was unable to write but I was in solitary for quite some time. I will refrain from telling you why, as no form of communication goes out without being checked by the Germans here. All I can say is that thoughts of you have filled my heart and kept me going when I was in solitary confinement in great pain from a wound and a beating. I don't know how you will take this offer, but I want to be able to help you in any way I can and I want to take Gary's place as your baby's father. You don't have to marry me. I just want to be like an uncle or older brother*

*to your child, and to make sure the baby grows up with everything he or she needs. I miss Gary a lot and in many ways, I also miss the times I spent with you. Thank you for writing. I too look forward to seeing you again one day.*

*Yours,  
Matthew*

After giving him a chance to regain his sanity and stamina with a few weeks of rest and daily walks and games of English football, the escape committee sent Smythe to summon Matthew again. With determination in him, and a persistent limp, he walked to the officer's quarters and this time, knocked the required two-three-two soft taps on the door. He was told through the door to enter, and was offered a drink of prison potato vodka. He took a cup of coffee instead, a luxury not often afforded to the noncommissioned ranks.

"Corporal Morgan, we understand you have been through the wringer. Please understand that you had to be the one to attempt that escape. You did your duty and there is no more we can reasonably ask of you."

"It seems to me that war is an unreasonable time, sir. You can ask of me anything you like," Matthew said, his intelligent blue eyes shining.

"First, we need to make sure of some things. Can you show us your bullet wound?" Matthew lifted his pant leg and showed the scar in the fleshy part of his calf. The officer winced at the sight of the poorly stitched wound.

"Any others, Corporal?" Matthew loosened his shirt and pulled it back to reveal that part of his collarbone was sticking out under his skin. "Damn, that looks painful Morgan," the officer said.

"You get used to it, sir. Nothing we weren't prepared for in training. More than a few times they ran us naked through snow just to toughen us up. Gave me a whole new way of looking at pain. We were told that pain is only pain if you acknowledge it."

"Yes, understood. First off, we want you to have these. Your pay will be adjusted accordingly as soon as the Ministry of Defence gets our letter." The Colonel placed a pair of Sergeant's stripes on the table and pushed them towards Matthew.

"Thank you, sir. The extra pay will go a long way back home. And I will serve under your command with great respect and admiration."

"Yes, indeed. The stripes come with a job. You see, we're building a tunnel and we need another man to dig in it. Since you are young and well, um, skinny, and you need more time for your leg to heal, we thought it would be opportune for you."

"Anything to help the war effort, sir."

"Excellent, excellent. And by taking this job, you are putting yourself higher up the list of priority we keep for upcoming escapes."

"Yes, thank you, sir."

"That's all, Sergeant. You are dismissed."

Morgan soon learned that there were some very brilliant men that worked on the escape tunnel and other hidden projects in the camp. There were engineers, surveyors, architects and even ventilation experts who had ended up in the camp. As he met and spoke with each of these men, he kept thinking how easy life may have been if he had stayed in school and gone on to university under a scholarship, like he had wanted, like he would have if that fateful night from when he last saw his brother alive hadn't happened. It seemed so much easier to push a pen on a paper using an educated mind than to dig a makeshift shovel into a dark and dirty tunnel wall.

No way to change that reality though, at least until after the war-that far off place of hope he half lived in in his dreams.

The tunnel Matthew worked in was situated below a toilet stall. It was ingenious, as there were pipes redirecting the water in the toilet so a person could enter the tunnel while a lookout sat on the toilet. By a special signal, the lookout would be alerted to the presence of guards and he would use feces they had saved in a jar to smell up the stall. It wasn't pleasant for the people who worked in the tunnel, but it was also not pleasant for the guards and they would never take more than a cursory look at what was in fact the tunnel entrance before leaving.

Matthew was given the job of helping dig the tunnel. It was an important job, but it could not go on without the assistance of nearly every man in camp. There were the professionals who laid out the plans and made sure everything worked right, but every man in the camp had a hand in the effort, such as getting rid of excess dirt, and collecting wood for the walls and ceiling of the tunnel to lessen the chances of a cave in. Even more men were needed to set up a network that kept track of every guard and German officer in the camp. The tunnel had a special place in the heart of every man in the camp who longed to be free to fight the Nazis regime. There was hardly a man in camp who hadn't lost a close friend or family member to the dangers imposed by fighting the enemy. A lot of them had known people who became battle casualties in North Africa or were civilian victims of the blitz on London, or had been killed the treacherous groups of German submarines in the North Atlantic known as U-boat wolf packs.

Digging through the dirt and clay under the camp wasn't easy for Matthew. He had recurring dreams of the walls falling in, to go with his nightmares of battle and home. A couple of times, the walls did cave in, but he was soon dug out. That was something he actually liked about being in the camp, and in the military in general. No soldier did their job alone; there were always people watching your back.

Digging the tunnel, Matthew couldn't help but think that this role was much like his father's, the same thing that killed him years earlier. Being in the dirt and the darkness and the dusty, stale air, he gained huge respect for his dad, respect he never had before, for the way he was able to do this sort of thing every day for twelve hours with no end. His father saw no great reward, other than a paycheck not one quarter of what the educated company men got for bullying the workers. His dad did it all just to love, shelter and feed Matthew and the rest of his family. Matthew only hoped that his dad was watching him from somewhere, proud that he had done so much for his country and the cause so many millions were fighting for.

After four long weeks of daily back-breaking work, the tunnel was complete, and soon they would take people out through the tunnel, one at a time according to the all important list the escape committee kept. There was a lot of secrecy surrounding the project and every man who was to go in the tunnel knew they may well soon have to give up life or limb to attempt to get out of the camp. As a constant reminder of his hatred for the enemy, Matthew kept touching his pain wracked, extended collarbone bone that may never return to a normal position.

As promised, Matthew was one of the first to be scheduled to escape by the tunnel. He wrote a final letter to Carol before he left, being totally unable to write anything about his escape or how happy he was to soon be back in action, but there were other things he wanted to say even more.

*Dearest Carol,*

*I hope all is going well for you. Life in camp is boring, as I don't have much to do. Escape seems to be impossible and many of us have stopped trying to get out. I am not sure, I have lost*

*count of the days, but I am assuming you will be having your baby soon. I wish I could be there. It warms my heart that a part of Gary will live on. I want to teach that child what a wonderful person his or her father was and the things he sacrificed so his child could live free. I have to admit that aside from the fact that the child could one day be called to fight in some other senseless war, I am hoping for a boy. Regardless though, I know I will love this child, as I have grown to love the child's mother. Yes, I said it, I am in love with you and for the first time, I don't feel guilty about it. Gary had good taste in companions, and, after spending a lot of time thinking, I decided that he would have wanted us to be together. I don't know if you feel the same way about me but at least if you don't, I won't have to think myself a coward and miss out on a chance of being loved by the one person who could make me happy. I have gotten an increase in rank and pay and I have instructed my paymaster to send half of my earnings to you. Even if you decide you don't feel for me the way I do about you, I want you to have the money because you are going to need it to raise the baby. I am also putting you down as part beneficiary of my new insurance policy, should anything happen to me.*

*Love,  
Matthew*

Matthew dropped off the letter with the postmaster and felt a range of emotions course through him. What if she thinks I'm a jerk for moving in on a dead friend's girl? *What if she doesn't love me and I never see her again anyway? Well, at least if I die I can do it knowing I tried for my one shot at true bliss*, he thought. Part of him felt stupid and part of him felt happy that he had at last let things out. None of that would matter because he was going through the tunnel that night and would need a clear head to do the tasks that were set before him. He had to push away all his hate for the enemy, his fear of the unknown, and worry for his first true love and feelings of hope for Gary's child. There was a war being fought and he would soon be back in the thick of things and for now that was all that mattered.

## Chapter Nine

Matthew laid in his bunk until it was almost lights out, then walked to building ten and into the bathroom. The jar of ripe human excrement sitting on the floor beside the toilet nearly made him sick just to look at, but part of him thought it was funny to use such a method to avoid discovery. He moved the toilet, readjusted the pipes leading to it, then lifted the trap door underneath and climbed in. The process reminded him of a comedy film he had seen as a small boy, in which a guy got sucked into a toilet. It had scared the life out of him back then and for a while, he thought it could really happen. It was a good thing his home had no indoor plumbing, just an outhouse, because he likely would have been too scared to use a toilet like this one back then.

Matthew went down the tunnel, lit a lamp and inched his way across the two hundred feet that would bring him underneath the edge of the camp, hopefully in the forest beyond the wire fence that kept them penned in. He was five minutes early for his time to exit the tunnel, but his sixth sense told him it was better that way, just incase anything was held up. He made it to the end of the tunnel, which was in the woods, climbed the makeshift ladder up to ground level, lifted the covering board, and carefully let himself out and covered the board with leaves and sticks. Five minutes later he nearly leapt out of his skin when he heard a deafening sound that reminded him of the time he had been shelled onboard the troop ship that had taken him and Gary to England. He looked back to see flames leaping from where the tunnel would have been.

“What in the hell?” he said.

Then he thought about two men, Griffith and Langsham, who prodded him with questions until he explained the best time to exit the tunnel. By the watch he had, the tunnel had blown at just that time. Spies! They had to be spies! Damn it! All around, sirens were going off and search lights were moving around the woods he was in.

With any luck, the Germans would think he was torched in the tunnel, and he ran off towards the town. He found a ditch to hide in and spent the rest of the night waiting, wide awake and paranoid as a frightened cat, reacting to the sound of every vehicle going by, every whisper of the wind, every movement of a creature from the forest.

Morning came and Matthew made his way into town and bought himself a cup of coffee at a restaurant across from the train station. There wasn't much for him to use, but he had been given a few marks and a train ticket to Paris. He didn't want to think of Gary and all Gary had told Matthew about the City of Lights. He decided to use his time before the train came to write to Carol.

*Dearest Carol,*

*I am sorry about being so vague in my last letter. I was in the prison camp and I wanted to throw off the Germans because last night, I escaped. Part of me wanted to stay there and wait out the war, but part of me felt bad that men like Gary and my brother would have to die while I was sleeping my life away. With any luck, I will be back in England soon, and we can sort out anything we need to then.*

*Love,  
Matthew*

Matthew folded the letter and sealed it in an envelope and wrote down an address of a person in neutral Switzerland who worked for the British and would forward his letter unopened. This was the way just about all correspondence had to be sent. Much of the mail in the camp had to be smuggled out by sympathetic or bribed German guards, though there were no guarantees they weren't doing it just to catch someone with loose lips. Other than this method, it was difficult to correspond with anyone back in the allied parts of the world.

By the time he mailed his letter, it was time for him to catch his train bound for Paris. Before boarding the train, he took a quick detour and bought himself a bottle of cheap wine. He got on the train, went into the bathroom and poured wine on his coat and gargled and spat some of it into the sink. He even poured some of it in his hair. Then he walked with a bit of a weave in his step, though his limp had by now gotten much better, and plopped himself down in his seat where two other passengers and pretended to pass out. With any luck, they would smell the wine and let him sleep things off.

A half hour after the train pulled away from the station, Matthew was still pretending to sleep and trying hard not to fall asleep for real. These hours were critical, as they were the hours the Germans would be most intently looking for him. There was a great deal of danger because they would be looking close to the camp, especially on a train headed for Paris. The edge of danger helped keep him conscious, though all he wanted to do was collapse. A conductor came up to him and shook his arm to wake him.

"Aughhhh!" Matthew yelled as though he were awoken from a bad dream. The conductor jumped and the two other passengers stifled a laugh.

"Fahrkarte," the conductor said, asking for Matthew's ticket.

Matthew handed over his stub and the conductor punched it and then asked the other two passengers for theirs. A look of disgust crossed the conductor's face when he left and Matthew almost wanted to apologize before realizing this man would be more than happy to turn him in to the Gestapo, who would put him before a firing squad as a spy, which was how they dealt with a lot of their prisoners.

There were German checkpoints along the way and Matthew had no problem fooling them with his high school French, his air of drunkenness and feigned ignorance of the German language. For the past few months, Matthew had been given lessons in German from fellow prisoners and could tell a lot about what was being said about him. He caught words like "drunk, bum, dirty Frenchman" and worse. He wondered if any of those men who taught him German were the spies that nearly succeeded in getting him torched in the tunnel. Griffith and Lansham. *Dirty bastards, it had to be them*, he thought to himself. To think of how close he came to being barbecued and forever taken from Carol and his mom made him boil with rage.

After a while, he was actually able to sleep. His nerves were just as bad but he was exhausted from all the walking, travel and staying up all night. Before he knew it, a few hours had passed in slumber and the train arrived in Paris.

## Chapter Ten

For a moment Matthew could hardly believe where he was. The whole city was breathtaking, even though it seemed every ten feet there was a Nazi flag and Germans in uniform. He saw the Eiffel Tower and the Arc De Triomphe while he wandered around and saw so many amazing, old buildings. Gary had once told Matthew that Paris was a bible of architecture, and now he finally understood why he said that. Everything from the ornate buildings to the cobbled streets were hundreds of years old and made of the most incredible stone, which all neatly fit together as though there was an intricate higher intelligence that put it all there. Somehow, the genius and strong will of mankind had made this ancient city into a larger whole. Matthew thought about home and how after the war, he wanted to return to school and be one of these people who left their marks on the world in the form of engineering or architectural skill. He didn't have all that much time to waste looking around, as he had to contact the resistance or he would soon be sleeping in another ditch or alleyway, fearing every moment for his life.

It took hours to find the right road, mostly because he was too worried about asking anyone for directions, but he finally found the Rue de l'Eglise. All he had been given was an address and a password. Two sharp, short knocks followed by two scratches at the door, followed by several phrases. He knocked and then a small window opened in the door.

"Oui, monsieur. Qu'est-ce que c'est?"

"Je suis un grande poisson," Matthew responded with the password, which translated roughly into, "I am a large fish."

"Who sent you?" the sharp answer came.

"Monsieur Jaques."

"Canadian?"

"Oui."

"You like the Montreal or the Boston?"

"I like the Maple Leafs." The code was complete.

"Come in then."

A short man opened the door, much older than Matthew, likely in his forties. He had neatly trimmed brown hair, wore a white shirt and an apron that seemed to have blood stains on it. He led Matthew down two flights of stairs to a dark basement, and pointed to a chair and told Matthew to sit. It was dark, but he felt the presence of someone else, though all he could hear was strained, heavy breathing.

"My name is Henri. I will help you if you help me. I don't take chances with my life when I can avoid it, and I'm hoping since you got this far, you take things seriously."

A match was struck and it illuminated Henri and an oil lamp he was holding, which he used the match to light. As the light grew, Matthew could see that the breathing he heard was coming from a German officer who had been tied up and was gagged, soaked with sweat and badly bruised, cut and bleeding from his face. The man struggled against his restraints.

"Mmmmm..." The German tried to say something, but was too tightly gagged.

"Silence!" Henri yelled at him and struck him with the back of his hand.

"You must be hungry. I will get my wife to make you something to eat," Henri said, as kindly as if it were a lovely day in the park and they had just met for a picnic. He walked to the

wall and pulled on a string that must have rung a bell upstairs. Soon, Henri's wife came down with a plate full of cheese, meat, butter and bread.

Matthew was reluctant to eat alone considering the other men. Both him and the soldier looked like they hadn't had a real meal in weeks, gaunt and serious. The soldier stared with a hungry gaze as Matthew contemplated the food before him. His hunger got the better of him soon enough and he ended up ungraciously stuffing the food in his mouth. With all he had seen, it didn't bother him much that the German was still in the room with them. At first he tried to talk to Henri, but then he realized that anything they said around the German could be repeated if things went wrong. When he finished his meal, Henri sent him back up the stairs where his wife met him.

"I will give you some soap and heat some water for a bath. You need to shave and we'll cut and dye your hair. You also need some different clothes," she said.

"Yes, that would be great. I have been wearing these rags non-stop for days," Matthew replied.

He took his bath, shaved and then Henri's wife came and dyed his dark blond hair to a coal black to make him look more French. Finally, he could rest.

Matthew had no idea how long he slept. He got a few hours on the long train ride but it was nowhere near enough. He had been running on pure adrenaline and being in a real bed with clean white sheets and a blanket was so relaxing he couldn't force himself to get up after he drifted off to sleep. When he awoke, he noticed that a tray had been placed with some fried eggs and potatoes, which were cold but delicious.

Matthew went downstairs and saw from an old grandfather clock that it was five, and too light to be five in the morning. His mother would have killed him for sleeping that much, even if he had just gotten back from the gates of hell. Who knows what his old drill Sergeant would have done to him. Matthew, being a small town kid, always woke up at dawn to gather eggs and milk the cows their family raised. He was one of the few guys in basic who didn't have to get used to the military tradition of up at 0600 hours, to bed at 2200 hours. Seeing he had awoken, Henri looked up from a book at him and smiled.

"Ah, yes, you must have had quite a trip. It is good that you have slept, as we might be up all night."

"The food and the bed were wonderful. Haven't felt so comfortable and well fed in a long time," Matthew said.

"I hope you don't mind. We have a little job to do. I will introduce you to my niece who will be helping us."

"What job is that?"

"You will learn soon enough. Sit. My wife will bring you coffee."

"How do you get all of this food with the war going on?"

"My father runs a restaurant on rue de St. Jean. The Germans eat there, so he can get just about anything," Henri said. "Now sit, and enjoy some coffee. Marie! Coffee for our Canadian!"

Matthew sat down and looked at the bookshelf. Just about all of the books were in French and he was able to recognize some titles he would love to read, though his French wasn't good enough. He thought back to his school days and how he hated taking French, thinking he would never go to Quebec. It seemed that every inconvenience he ran into had something to do with his education or lack thereof. There was one title that wasn't in French, or at least seemed not to be. He picked it up and looked at it and it turned out the title was simply a word that was the same in French and English. He put it back and leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Nearly the

moment he did, he opened his eyes to see the bruised and bloody German officer burst into the room and shoot him in the chest. Matthew yelled and jumped up, grabbed his chest but there was no blood or pain. He realized that he was so exhausted that he had fallen asleep the moment he closed his eyes and had gone right into a nightmare.

Henri was very kind to him, calming him down and telling him it was okay. He had seen many cases of such dreams, he told Matthew, nothing to be ashamed of. Soon the coffee came and Henri's wife poured him a cup. She seemed to look at him with suspicion and prattled on for about a minute in French, too quickly for Matthew to understand. Henri waved a hand and laughed at her. Henri didn't seem to take too much seriously except his work. As she left the room, Marie again gave him what seemed like an angry look. He wondered how his mother would react if some foreigner came into their tiny home back in Alberta during a war, needing help and risking everyone's lives to get it. These resistance fighters really were good people. Matthew hoped he could live up to their expectations of what a soldier must do.

Soon their coffee was done and Henri led Matthew down to the basement again. There was no sound of breathing, but something felt strange. Henri lit another match and in the initial glow, Matthew saw the grim sight of a German officer who had his throat cut and had bled to death while tied up. The image shocked Matthew but Henri just smiled.

"Do you have something I can be sick in?" Matthew asked.

"You are going to be sick, mon ami? And waste the good food I gave you?" Henri smiled and laughed. It was too late, Matthew threw up on the floor, twice. "Your first time with a body, non?"

"I saw some pretty gruesome stuff at Dieppe when we came ashore, I guess," Matthew said, wiping his mouth, but didn't want to mention that it was more Henri's attitude towards the corpse in the room that had made him vomit. "It... It wasn't quite like this."

"You will see more before the war is over, I promise. You will one day feel as I do if you keep in the fight."

"So, our job is to get rid of this... this... body?"

He almost didn't want to consider the dead German as a person. That would just make him feel sick again.

"Yes, we are going to take him to the canal and throw him in, weighted down. Then we are going to visit some friends."

"Always nice to go out for the evening after disposing of a body."

Henri cast a quizzical look at the young man and forced a smile.

Later, in the evening, as the sun was starting to wane, a hand-pulled cart rattled up to Henri's home, loaded with all kinds of rags and clothing and a stone wheel for sharpening knives. With few words exchanged, Henri and Matthew loaded the dead German into a hollowed-out partition in the cart and then the two of them pushed the cart towards the canal. As they went, Henri proudly gave him history lessons about his most loved parts of the city, the same places Matthew heard Gary talk so much about. They took turns pushing the cart through the narrow cobblestone streets and Henri made promises of a grand meal they would have when they went to visit his niece afterwards.

As they went down one of the larger streets towards the canal, they passed a German Army Sergeant. Matthew didn't want to make eye contact and so he looked down at the ground when they passed each other. To his horror, even though it was getting dark, Matthew saw a trail of blood coming from the corpse they were hiding. He prayed under his breath that the German wouldn't see it, and they seemed to be past him.

“Halt! Halt!” the Sergeant yelled at them.

Matthew had to think fast and so he stealthily took a knife off the cart and cut the edge of his hand deeply with it. The Sergeant ran up to them and pointed to the blood trail and started prattling away in German. Matthew pointed at the fresh wound on his hand and then at the blood drips and the Sergeant seemed to relax a little. Then he spoke a few words in French to Matthew and Henri answered for him. The Sergeant looked at Matthew and spoke again and Henri answered for him once more. He could hear Henri say something about the boy being slow mentally.

Just as the Sergeant seemed satisfied, he took a quick look down and saw there was more blood coming from the cart.

“Did you drop something boy?” the German said in English.

“No, not that I’m aware of,” Matthew replied. He realized then he had been caught by the oldest trick in the occupying soldier’s book. The Sergeant pushed the two men aside and flipped the cart over, exposing the body of the German officer. He took out a whistle with his left hand and his pistol with the right, but he was too slow. Henri buried a knife deep into the German’s ribs and in a split second, he had no more breath left inside him to let out a whisper. Henri and Matthew ran off and soon they could hear the sounds of whistles and sirens and in a few short minutes there seemed to be a Nazi in uniform around every corner and in every street and alley. They ducked into a side street and covered themselves with garbage and waited in the rotten stink for hours.

Finally, late into the night, the pair emerged and Henri told him that there was no point in returning to his home since it would only put his wife at great risk. He wasn’t sure if the blood trail led the Nazis back to his house already. Avoiding checkpoints and staying in the shadows, even using rooftops, the pair slowly and stealthily made their way to the home they had originally meant to get to. There was another mission to be accomplished, and they hoped it wouldn’t go as badly as the first.

## Chapter Eleven

Close to three in the morning, Matthew and Henri arrived at the second resistance house. Like before, a secret knock was used and when someone came to the door, Henri simply said, “Open the door idiot,” or at least what sounded like the French equivalent.

The door opened and they were led inside. The man who greeted them, who Matthew learned was named JeanPaul, yelled and argued with Henri for a solid fifteen minutes. He went on and on about alerting the Germans, risking their lives, saying again and again that they shouldn’t have come there. He led Henri and Matthew to a dark sitting room and made no effort to light a lamp or get any drinks or food.

After leaving them for a while, Jean-Paul came down the stairs with another man who he introduced as Alex. They gave Matthew a quick rundown on him. He was a Polish pilot who had been flying with the Royal Air Force and had been shot down a few weeks ago on a reconnaissance mission over a suburb of Paris. The two were to stick together and try to make it back to England. The resistance would help the two men make their way back to freedom in any way they could, but most of the escape would rely on their own wisdom and luck. Alex didn’t speak French and his English wasn’t the best. He seemed like a kind person though and he smiled often and the few words he said were well chosen. For no real reason, he offered Matthew a cigarette. Back home, he wouldn’t have taken one in a thousand years, but with all that had happened, he felt he could use a cigarette. He had been led to understand that cigarette smoke could be relaxing, so he took one. He wasn’t sure how to light it and Alex opened a lighter, flicked the flint and Matthew leaned in and sucked in a lungful of smoke, which sent him into a coughing spasm. All the other men laughed, but Matthew nearly got sick for the second time that day.

Henri patted him on the back.

“This is a game for men, mon ami. You are just a boy!”

Matthew would have punched another man for saying that, especially since his commando training had made him not only a man, but a very dangerous one, but he was too busy coughing. He wondered what it was going to take for him to be considered a man. He felt he had aged a thousand years in the past two. Would he have to kill someone? Get a girl pregnant? Ever since he had lied to the recruiter to get sent to Europe, he had struggled with those questions.

Henri and Jean-Paul laid out the plan for Matthew and Alex’s escape to England. They would travel by night, going from safe house to safe house, mostly through the country, for which they would have to memorize passwords and locations for security reasons. Later, when they reached the coast, they would be taken to a secret location where a disguised British fishing boat would take them across the channel, supported by a Royal Navy Corvette that would be waiting for them in open waters to protect them once they left sight of shore. Jean-Paul had taken people out of France this way before, so he would accompany them. The first leg of their journey was to be completed by train, and not in the luxury coach.

Jean-Paul, Matthew and Alex walked out in the shadows of the Paris night and in the cool air, walked five miles to a train yard. Jean-Paul found a hole made in the wire fence surrounding the yard and led them inside. A freight train had been scheduled to leave at 0600 hours, and there would be empty cars that were being loaded elsewhere. The night air was cold but there was no way to warm up other than huddling together inside the car.

Despite Matthew's belief that they would freeze to death first, the sun eventually came up and with a blast of a whistle, the train began to move. As they pulled away, Matthew felt in high spirits again and this time, when Alex handed him a cigarette, he actually liked smoking it. The train left Paris and gathered speed and Matthew thought back to his hometown and how nothing exciting ever happened there. So many times he would sit in his boring classroom and dream he was an eagle, seeing the whole town and surrounding country from high up in the air, swooping and soaring, diving and beating his massive wings. That was all he liked about home sometimes, that he had the freedom to let his mind wander. When he thought back to how much he had wanted to leave Fish Creek, he felt happy to be where he was, in this horrible situation of having to kill or die, run or be caught again and most likely be shot. He wondered what kind of world he would be able to make for himself if he ever got home, if it would be like he planned, a good life where people respected him and he could work and perhaps marry Carol, and if he would have these nightmares and drifting thoughts forever.

Matthew didn't know for sure what the Germans would do to him if they caught him, but he knew if they had any knowledge of his dealings with Henri and the now departed officer, they would shoot him without hesitation. He poked his head out the side door of the rail car and looked out at the countryside before him. France was beautiful but he couldn't stop thinking about Napoleon, about World War I, and how they hadn't learned that war, destruction and killing could only take things away from mankind, not benefit them in any way. Matthew thought about Hitler and all the death and tragedy this whole continent had seen. Sometimes he wondered about the history of his own country and all the Inuit people that had died of Tuberculosis because they had no immunity to European diseases. Both lands were ancient, but in Canada, the Native people had lived in harmony with the land for thousands of years. Here in France, it was almost as though every despot and every warmonger from the Romans to modern day armies had raped the land. Blood had been spilled so many times, but still Matthew felt it was worth fighting for. The Germans had no right enslaving this country and he almost wished the world were rid of them. It was hard for him to think of the difference between a Nazi and a German, though even in countries they occupied the Germans had formed volunteer forces of troops. Even Denmark, which had always seemed to be such a modern and civilized nation had raised Nazi troops that served alongside the 'pure' Aryans. Maybe those volunteers didn't know Hitler's cause wasn't just. Maybe they were all people like him, wanting a little money or escape from legal trouble, or some excitement.

It was sometimes disastrous that there was little communication between resistance fighting units in France. As the train was speeding along taking the three men far off to the country, another group of resistance fighters was packing charges, running wire, hiding their handiwork and preparing to blow up the tracks that that very same train was speeding forth on. They too knew the schedule of this train and that some of the cars were delivering munitions to strengthen the defenses of the northern coast against invasion from the allies. They also knew the train carried a good deal of diesel fuel. The three travellers didn't know what hit them when the explosions went off while the train was speeding along. With no warning at all, the tracks beneath them exploded with great ferocity and the entire train derailed in a massive scattering of exploding and burning rail cars and spilled fuel.

Jean-Paul was killed instantly when he was thrown head first into the wall of the car as it flipped, breaking his neck. Alex was also thrown, wedging his leg under some cargo inside their boxcar that was now resting on its side. Only Matthew was unhurt, though he was knocked unconscious. An hour went by and Alex kept trying to free his leg, each time having to yell and

curse from the pain. Matthew slowly regained his consciousness, at first lost in the dreams of the damned, his mind convincing him he was an eagle again, not trapped in this overturned car but far above any danger, soaring safely above the shattered mess. Soon he was rudely awakened by Alex and his shouting. At first he thought he was sleeping comfortably in the prisoner of war camp, perhaps even back home in the soft feather bed his dad bought for him when he was a boy, but as he awakened, he realized that he was in a desperate and horrible situation. He stood up, nearly crippled with the pain of a massive headache and the knowledge that his guide was now dead and that Alex was trapped.

There was very little Matthew could do to help his Polish friend get out from under the cargo. It was too heavy and there was precious little time. Finally, Matthew decided there was only one choice. He tore off cloth from his pants, once again made a makeshift tourniquet like he had in his first escape attempt, and wrapped it tight around Alex's leg to lower the flow of blood, then used a knife to slowly, painfully amputate the trapped limb. The knife would not go through bone, so Matthew had to use the heel of his boot to kick at the bone until it broke. More than a few times, Alex passed out from the pain, and Matthew was practically traumatized just watching what his own hands were doing. But if both men were to get out alive, there was no other choice. Soon, men would come to scour the area and others would arrive to clean up the mess and repair the tracks. Danger was close at hand.

It took nearly half an hour until Alex was freed, minus his crushed limb. Using a rope he had found, Matthew made a loop that he put around Alex and then climbed to the now topside door of the tipped boxcar and pulled Alex up so they could exit the train. He dragged his new friend off to some woods, built a fire and used a chunk of burning wood to burn the stump of Alex's leg to cauterize it, preventing infection and slowing the bleeding. Matthew gave him a stick wrapped in a leather belt to bite down on, which was all they had to help ease the pain. As their campfire burned, he made a makeshift crutch for Alex and waited for him to get his strength back while Matthew tried to keep him from going into shock.

During the night, Alex managed to fall asleep for a short time, but when he woke up Matthew was gone and the pain in his leg was intense. He tried to keep himself from making sounds but he was overcome, nearly delirious and started to yell for help. This went on for hours. Either people around the area were used to hearing screams of agony or no one heard him. If the yelling had alerted any enemy soldiers, it would have been game over.

Just before nightfall, Matthew returned and apologized for taking so long. He had brought some food and a bottle of vodka he had begged from some French farmers, who likely had very little more than what they gave him to use for themselves. Matthew washed Alex's wound as best he could with some of the vodka and then gave him a drink for the sedative and anesthetic effect. It took close to two-thirds of the bottle, but Alex's pain eased. After some uncomfortable silence, Alex took a sip of the alcohol and turned to his friend.

"Matthew, my friend, you have truly saved my life. I want to tell you something about me so you understand what you have done. Maybe what I tell you can help you if you make it and I don't. Do you know what I did back home?"

"I figured you were a pilot," Matthew said.

"No money in being a pilot. In Poland, if you want to fly, you had to accept years of waiting, stiff competition and then little pay. I could fly a plane, yes, but I had other plans in mind."

"Really, what kind of plans?"

"I grew up wanting to be a metallurgist. I wanted to learn to engineer metals. They fascinated me. My dad was a blacksmith and he taught me many things but most of all, he told me to never

stop learning. He told me that education was the greatest gift I could give myself, one that no one can take from you.”

“So what happened? The war?”

“No, I’m not that young my friend. I went to a top institute in Russia, earned a Master’s Degree in metallurgy and managed to please my superiors at the military research facility in the university. They were pleased with me and they let me learn how to fly. I was developing a new metal for aircraft, I told them, which was a lie. I was doing this, but I didn’t need to fly to do it. I just liked flying.”

Despite the pain he must be experiencing, Alex had a happy look on his face and an air of being a man who was not hard to please.

“Well, why weren’t you working on that for the British?”

“I wanted to fight the Germans. They killed many of my friends and invaded my country like they owned it. When I made it to England, I realized that I couldn’t stand the idea of working away in a lab for years on something that would do nothing until long after the war was over. Since my notes and samples were still in Poland, I never told the British about my schooling or research. I did tell them I could fly a plane though.”

“Amazing. You’re completely serious aren’t you? What was this new metal like?”

“It was a type of aluminum that would one day be cheap to make and stronger and lighter than anything on the market. I felt I was so close to having it but when the Nazis invaded, they shut down the lab and took it over. I managed to convince them I knew nothing of the project and that I was just a janitor, and after they tortured me they let me go.”

“They tortured you? What did they do?”

“Let’s say you removing my leg was not so much of a big deal after what I went through. Have you ever been to a dentist or had a bad cavity that needed an extraction?”

“Yes, of course. It was the worst.”

“Let’s just say dentists know a lot about how to make you hurt, and when they work for the Gestapo, they can make you do anything.”

“So how did you manage to keep your secret?” Matthew asked.

“I don’t know. I broke down, cried for my mother, begged them to stop. I hate to say this but I am kind of a baby sometimes. They were disgusted at my weakness and I think that helped. They released me and I fled to England and now here I am.”

“So what about the lab? What happened to your work?”

“It’s still there, but I will never see it again. My logs, my formulas, everything, all wasted. I even had a few million in gold in the safe. The town government needed it for emergencies and kept it in our safe, which was thought to be unbreakable. They trusted me with their lives and I was powerless to return their gold or continue my precious and important work.”

“I can see why you want to get back at the Nazis. But why are you telling me this now?”

“Because you saved my life. I owe you, my friend. I just wanted you to know I can help you one day, if we can survive this.”

“Help me in what way?”

“I’ll let you know when we return to England.”

Times were difficult for the two men over the next few weeks. They had a rough idea from Jean-Paul where to catch the boat, but many times they ended up lost and it was slow going. The men had to live on what they could beg or steal and were only able to contact the resistance in a few of the towns they stopped in. Each time they encountered Germans, they made up a new story. Alex was Matthew’s father, they would say, and he was taking him home after losing a leg

fighting for Germany in Russia. The checkpoint guards weren't hard to convince, especially since Alex spoke better German than he spoke English. And they were dismissed as just another peasant boy and his crippled father. As they walked along and spent time together, Alex was constantly giving Matthew lessons, phrases in different languages, and details the Royal Air Force had taught him about escape. He even had time to explain his work in metals and he told Matthew where his logs were stored, if they even still existed, and even told him the safe combination. Finally, after weeks of being on the run and Alex in constant pain and heightened danger making them both near the end of their wits, they arrived at the pick-up point on the northern coast of France. When the pick-up day came, they waited for nightfall and discreetly signaled the code with a stolen oil lamp.

The small, disguised fishing boat came to shore and as soon as they boarded, they were warmly welcomed with hot coffee and food and a British officer who debriefed them.

They were kept sequestered in England for a few weeks after their return, their stories checked, their information gone over. Matthew told them about how close he had come to being killed by the spies Griffith and Lansgham, and he was assured they would try to deal with them. He hoped the two would be hung by their fellow prisoners, though that would stir up even more reprisals. What was more likely was that a special code would be sent in a letter and they would feed these two bastards false information until they became useless and even the Germans didn't want them. If Matthew had his way, after being so close to being cooked in the tunnel he himself dug, they would have swastikas tattooed on their foreheads to make them useless as spies and branded for life.

Alex was released sooner than Matthew because they didn't see him as much of an asset anymore now that he could no longer fight or fly a plane. Matthew was allowed to write letters, and for the first time, he got a letter back from Carol.

*Dear Matthew,*

*I have to admit that I was a bit stunned by your letter from Germany, the one that was posted after your escape. I didn't know how to react at first, but then I thought of how much I loved Gary and how much of a friend you were to him. I thought for a long time and I think way back when I first met you I started to fall in love with you too. I greatly appreciate you giving me financial assistance and it has meant so much to me now that I have Gary's daughter to look after. I found some work though in a factory, making utility belts for the army, and they advanced me to foreman because of my schooling, so I won't need any more money from you, but I still desperately want you in my life. I pray every chance I get that you will make it and that you will help me raise Gary's child like you said. I need you so much now that he is gone.*

*I have thought a lot about what it is going to be like living like a normal person without heaps of money and it doesn't scare me. I like going to work, interacting with people, feeling important and valued. The people I used to circulate with were very vain and shallow. This may seem odd, but you and Gary were the first 'real' people I ever met. I want to keep writing to you, and I can't wait to see you. I care so very deeply for you Matthew,*

*Love,  
Carol*

When Matthew was being processed, they told him that they had learned he had lied about his age but they didn't want to court martial him for it because he had distinguished himself in training, in battle, and in his daring escape. He was told that it would be best if he were released

from the military and allowed to return home. He didn't want to go but they insisted. It was a matter of public relations and it was also a rule that they didn't send a family's sole support into combat. They also didn't send people back to battle when the possibility of capture meant risking the secrecy of the resistance fighters they had knowledge of. So despite anything he could say or do, Matthew was decorated and retired from the Canadian Army with a small pension at the ripe old age of seventeen.

Matthew decided not to return to Canada immediately and found work a short train ride from where Carol was living. He had written to her but didn't know when he would have the chance to visit her. One day, he showed up at her work and his heart missed a beat when she looked at him. Her intelligent, piercing brown eyes lit up at the sight of him.

"Matthew, thank God! You're here. You're whole. And you look like such a grown man now! Sorry, you were always a man, but you are even more handsome than when I last saw you."

Matthew thought of Gary and Gloria and didn't know who he was or what to do or say. He blushed and said nothing and then Carol grabbed him and hugged him tightly. His spirit soared and for the first time in his life, he didn't have to dream. Carol was real and would follow him to the ends of the earth. It seemed almost magical.

From then on, if it were at all possible, Matthew spent time with Carol and her child. It was such a joy to see new life, a little human being with tiny fingers and toes that would one day grow up to discover friends, what it felt like to read a good book, and all of the good things the world had to offer. Each day, Matthew and Carol fell more deeply in love, going for walks, playing games of chess and talking late into the night about books, adventures and Matthew's dreams of being a writer and a leader of men. When they had a lot of time to pass and they were apart, Matthew would sing symphonies of his love on paper in the form of poems for Carol. They got by, but it wasn't the easiest thing to live in England in that day on a soldier's pension and the work they did. Matthew longed to give Carol all the best in life but it was more important just that they were together and in love.

D-Day, also known as Operation Overload came, and Russia began to advance towards Germany as a new front had finally opened up, putting pressure on the Nazi Forces. When the Russians liberated Poland, Matthew took all of his savings, borrowed what he could and got himself passage to the Soviet Union, using his connections to get proper documentation. He got to Moscow where he then hitched rides on trucks and military trains to the ruins that were Poland. He made it to Warsaw, found the university and hoped that the safe would be there. His heart dropped when he found it, blown open with the door hanging from a hinge. When he looked inside, the gold was gone but what he wanted was still there. He took the notes and samples and everything he could carry, which some ignorant, destructive fool had left behind. Matthew then fled Warsaw, making his way back to Russia where he chartered a small plane back to England.

A few months passed and Matthew continued to work and spent every extra moment he could with Carol. The war ended, they had a simple wedding ceremony, and Matthew officially adopted Gary's daughter, who they named after Gary's mother. They returned to Canada along with hundreds of other soldiers and their war brides, and intended to return to Alberta. But first they decided to rent a cheap hotel room in Toronto to make one last try at achieving their dreams. Matthew made an appointment to see an investment banker about a loan to start a factory and when the time came for it, he went into the bank in a suit and had a suitcase full of documents with him.

“Yes, Mr...” the banker looked at his appointment book and then back at Matthew, “Mr. Morgan, you are how old...?”

“I’ll be twenty in a few months, sir.”

“I understand you are a decorated veteran and you have some kind of idea to build a factory. And you’re coming to ask me for a sizeable loan, is that correct?”

“Yes, sir. I need one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“Son, if this is some kind of a joke, I assure you no one is laughing. That kind of money may change hands here, but I generally deal with people who are established and have something to offer. I have to say that I don’t see myself approving any kind of loan of that size, based on your age and lack of experience.” Just then a knock came at the door. “Are you expecting someone?”

“Yes, sir, I wanted to introduce you to a friend of mine from the war. His name is Alex.”

An older Polish man came in, one of his legs false, walking with a cane. He spent two hours going over his notes and the plans he had drawn up to complete his formula and begin to produce his new aluminum. At the end, the banker agreed to loan Matthew money, enough for the rent, some office supplies and a few months of expenses. Alex agreed to bring Matthew into the business as a full partner, not only because of what he felt he owed him, but because Alex himself was not a leader or a courageous man and he knew Matthew was. The deal was that he would pledge most of the proceeds of his aluminum production and other projects he had in progress in exchange for being able to work in a laboratory where he could continue his research. Alex also had ideas for other projects in the back of his head all through those desperate war years, and he wanted full use of a small plane to clear his thoughts for more metallurgical work, which was the one thing in the world he truly loved other than flying.

After leaving the bank, Matthew let Carol know that she no longer had to wonder about what life would be like without heaps of money. She just had to worry about what it would be like to have her own heaps to do with as she pleased. Fifteen hundred was not much for men with big ambitions, but the post-war boom hit Ontario like a wildfire and the metals Alex and Matthew developed were a massive success, even more so when the Cold War with Russia began. Matthew and Carol went on to have two more children, both boys, one named they named Jake and the other they named Gary. And over time, Matthew and Alex became wealthy enough to dream, wealthy enough to see the world and the last years of his mother’s life were spent in happiness among her grandchildren.

Years later, Matthew was sitting next to Alex looking out the window of a small plane high in the air above Toronto. In his mind, he could see inside the factory that was pumping out the aluminum that made new airplanes fly faster, safer, further, better. Metal that was changing the world. A little further out in his sky-high view was the suburban neighborhood of Toronto where his huge home held his wife and children, happily waiting for him to come home. Further out were the massive Great Lakes, where his metals were loaded onto vessels to be shipped off to every corner of the globe. Far off were the oceans, now made safe in part thanks to his efforts during the war, the great and beautiful oceans that he could now cross any time he wanted. He could go to the tropics or to France or any part of the world because a good deal of it was now free, and because thanks to Alex, he had the financial freedom to go anywhere and do anything that pleased him. It all seemed so perfect, so idyllic.

“Matthew my good friend, what is on your mind? Are you daydreaming again?” Alex said through their radio headsets.

“Yes, Alex, I am daydreaming again,” Matthew said, not re-focusing his gaze from the outside of the small aircraft window. “As I sit here in this small plane made of metals you and I

forged together, for the very first time in my life I see that I don't have to stop daydreaming. I can go on like this forever, for the rest of my life if I want. But when are we going to land so I know to be ready?"

"Matthew, with this new lightweight metal and the fuel tanks we have fitted, one day we may never have to land. But for now it is safe to say that I will bring you back to earth in an hour or so, just so you can be home with your family for supper. Dream my friend, dream all you can. You are the king of the world, a powerful eagle floating on a rising air current carrying you upwards to heaven and you don't ever have to come back. We're home, here in the sky. We're home."

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With that, Matthew took a poker from the fire, pushed around the logs so the rest of the wood would burn itself off, and pressed the stop button on the tape recorder. He looked over at Scott, who had now gone fast asleep. Matthew went to the hallway closet of his large Victorian home, the same home he had raised his three children in, who had all gone to top universities, though they still called or visited. He thought of all this as he found a soft and comfortable blanket and draped it over Scott. He couldn't resist and he gave the boy a kiss on the forehead and then closed his eyes said a prayer for him. Maybe this story would be worth something he thought. Maybe Scott could put it together into a decent book and publish it and people would want to know what made a captain of industry out of a miner's son, and a reporter out of a young orphan. All he knew was that he hoped the words got out, that someone somewhere would read the words he had recounted from all those hard times and adventures and somehow they would understand that life is grand for all those who dare to dream.

THE END