

# CHAPTER ONE

MARCH 1945

*"Pull her up, Henry! Pull her up!"*

Henry gripped the plane's steering wheel as it crashed through sun-split clouds toward earth.

He gritted his teeth and waited. Henry had cheated death a dozen times like this during bombing missions over France and Germany. Hurling a plane into a dive to put out an engine fire was the first survival trick pilots learned. They'd earned their manhood during flight training by yanking a plane up just before it smashed into trees or barracks, bragging on how long they'd waited, how close they'd come, how boys who flinched and pulled up early were chicken. Whoever stayed cool longest won bets for three-day passes away from base through such dares. Stupid stuff.

Henry couldn't believe he was using the bullyboy tactic, and on Patsy, the person he loved most. But forcing a situation was the only battle strategy Henry knew since going to war. Never second-guess; force a shot-up plane to fly even though ditching was a better idea; charge in with guns blaring; do or die.

"Henry, please. Pull the plane up."

"Not until you say yes. Come on, Pats. Yes."

Henry glanced over at Patsy's heart-shaped face. It had that stubborn, I'll-never-admit-to-being-scared look he'd seen countless times on their school playground. He'd always loved what a spitfire she was. But it sure wasn't helping him now.

He calculated the distance to the horizon rushing toward him. He still had a good sixty seconds. He held to his bluff. "I'll pull up when you agree to marry me."

The plane started to buck.

Patsy braced herself. "No, Henry. I love you. But I can't."

"Why not, Pats?"

"I don't think you're ready, Henry."

"Not ready? I spent all my Air Force back pay for the ring. I had a heck of a fight with my dad about buying it. I'd say I'm ready." His voice rattled like the plane. "Please, Pats. Thinking about you, about coming home, is what kept me walking across France, what kept me alive when

the Gestapo near drowned me during interrogation. You're my copilot, my navigator. I can't fly straight without you."

For a moment, Patsy wavered. Then she screamed: "Henry—look out!"

Out of the lowering sun swarmed Nazi fighters—Junkers, Messerschmitts.

*Twelve-o'clock high—bogeys coming in, fast!* Henry heard the voices of his crew shouting, calling out the flight path of the Luftwaffe killers streaking toward them.

Someone radioed American fighters for help: *Little friends, little friends, we've got a hornet's nest here. They're everywhere!*

*Do something, Hank. I don't want to die!*

BANG-BANG-BANG.

A gray-green Messerschmitt roared past the cockpit, its bullets ripping into Henry's plane, the German pilot's mocking face close enough to see. *Did you really think I would allow you to escape?*

KA-BOOM!

Engines exploded. The plane erupted in a ripple of orange flames. Billowing smoke choked the cockpit. Henry couldn't see anything, couldn't find Patsy anywhere. All he could hear was: *We're cooked, Hank. We're cooked.*

\* \* \*

Henry lurched up, crab-backing into the bed's headboard and banging his skull against his high school diploma hanging above it. He counted the windows—one, two, three. He saw the whitewashed bureau by the door, looked up to see the airplane model he'd made when he was twelve hanging from the ceiling.

*Check. Check. Check.*

He was in his own bed, in Virginia. Just another nightmare. Another flight into the hell of his own mind.

Kicking back the tangle of covers, Henry fell out of bed and stumbled to his bureau. He picked up a small box and yanked open the starched cotton curtains. Moonlight fell onto his hands as he opened the case. There was the diamond ring Patsy hadn't wanted.

Henry rubbed his face against the ice-cold window-pane to wake himself up completely. He was so sick of his crazy, mixed-up thoughts; these nightmares; the flashbacks to air battles and his struggles on the escape lines of France; the bizarre overlap of his life in Virginia with the memories he was trying to dodge. He was ashamed of knee-jerk reactions like the time Henry's dad, Clayton, shot at a fox in one of the henhouses and the sound of the blast sent Henry bolting across half the county before he recognized he wasn't being hunted himself. It was so hard to know sometimes what was really happening and what was simply his mind playing with him, torturing him just

as the Gestapo had set up a fake escape to break his spirit.

He wanted the war in his soul to be over. He was home. Why couldn't he get back to normal? And why wouldn't Patsy marry him?

Henry had set up a perfect proposal, taking Patsy to a dance at Richmond's swank John Marshall Hotel. She'd piled her hair in soft curls and wore a dress she'd borrowed from a society friend she'd met through the Red Cross. It was deep blue velvet with swirls of small beads on its padded shoulders. Very fancy. Very Ginger Rogers. As she held his hand and guided Henry to the dance floor through the mob of returned servicemen and their dates, he knew marrying Patsy was the way back, back to the life he'd planned before the war, before the missions, before all the killing.

As the band played "Till Then," the heart-wrenching song asking the hometown girl to stay true until her soldier returned, Henry held Patsy close and whispered: "Marry me, Patsy." The moment felt like something out of the song, the line he'd hummed over and over to himself in France, "*Till then, let's dream of what there will be.*"

But Patsy had said no. Not yet. "You seem so angry," she said, "so haunted. I worry that you think getting married will stop all that somehow. But what if I'm not enough? I don't think I can fix all that. It scares me, Henry." She'd paused, then murmured, "You scare me."

Remembering, Henry butted his head against the glass. *Girl, you don't know scared.* He hadn't told Patsy half of what he'd seen. Boys shredded and blown out of bomb bays to splatter on the glass cockpits of planes following behind in formation. French children so hungry they fought over scraps dropped on the ground by picnicking Nazis. Women dragged out of their homes by neighbors to shave their heads as payback for teenage flirtations with the enemy.

Was he haunted? For sure. Every day in his mind, he walked the hills and streets of France, imagining the fate of those who'd saved him. He reflew his last bombing raid so that Captain Dan lived. He reclimbed the Pyrenees to save his friend, Billy. If only he had been stronger, smarter, done things differently, maybe they'd still be alive. Henry was not quite twenty and already he carried an old man's worth of regret and mourning.

He knew he was jumpy, that his temper had become quick-flint like that of his father, Clayton. He'd tried to explain to Patsy what it had been like—living as a hunted animal behind enemy lines. He had entrusted his life to strangers he couldn't understand, and lived off of adrenaline and suspicion, scrounging for food, scrounging for safety, rarely finding either, day after day, week after week, for months. He couldn't figure out how to shed that kind of battle-ready wariness, that kind of split-second instinct

to fight, to run. Half the time, he felt like a lunatic race-horse stuck in a start box. Nobody had said anything in debriefing about how to shrug that off.

Henry covered his face and realized with disgust that his hands were trembling. *You're flak-happy, boy. After all you survived? Now, you start sniveling?* Henry kicked at the heap of blankets, bashed his foot against the bed, and swore loudly.

"Henry, honey? You all right?"

Ma. Henry clapped his hand to his mouth. Poor Lilly had enough to deal with, married to Clayton. She didn't need a basket-case son. Did she know that he got up night after night and walked the lane of their farm to keep from waking her with nightmare screams?

Pulling on forced calm like a flight suit, Henry opened his bedroom door. There stood Lilly, small, sweet-tempered, worried, smelling of talcum powder and the biscuits she'd made for morning. "I'm okay, Ma. Stupid me. Got all tangled up in my covers and fell out of bed just like I used to when I was a kid." He'd gotten so good at faking. Henry tugged the long braid of her graying hair. "Go back to bed, Ma."

Lilly peeped past him to the mess of covers on the floor. "Want me to fix you some hot milk, honey?"

If only warm milk and Lilly's lullabies could settle

him the way they had when he was little. Henry took her gently by the shoulders and walked her back to her bedroom, where Clayton snored. "I'll see you in the morning, Ma."

Henry lingered in the hallway after she closed the door. He didn't want to go back to bed and another nightmare. Instead he dressed and tiptoed downstairs.

Whistling to his dog, Speed, Henry stepped out into the frigid night. He'd walk himself into a dead fatigue. That was the only way he slept sane and quiet.



## CHAPTER TWO

Outside the air felt like ice water in his chest. Henry sucked it in, little needles of pain jabbing him awake and clearing his storm-swept mind. He exhaled a thick mist of breath, haloing himself in the moonlight. Behind him his shadow stretched along the frost-slicked grass. Henry smiled. Over in France, on the run with the Resistance, he had hated such clear, starry nights. Back then, his shadow had been a traitorous enemy in bright moonlight, betraying his presence to German sentries. He'd darted from tree to tree to mask his telltale companion, each dash a heart-pounding risk.

But this night on his Tidewater farm, Henry beckoned his shadow as a friend to accompany him and Speed. Once past the chicken houses and into the back fields, he even dared to whistle. Speed trotted along beside him, making

all sorts of happy dog noises, snorting and sneezing as he sniffed along the shimmering, crackly ground.

Henry laughed. *See, fool. No Nazis here. Stop being such a birdbrain.*

His whistling turned to humming and then to singing, almost shouting: "*You've got to aaaac-cent-tchu-ate the positive, eeeeeee-liminate the negative, latch on to the affirmative, don't mess with Mister In-between . . .*"

Henry tried a few swing shuffles as he sang, imagining the jazzed-up big band sounds of Johnny Mercer's anthem of positive thinking. Speed barked and hopped up and down, nipping at Henry's pants. The two skipped and played, until they tripped over each other and fell into a heap of puppy and boy. Speed slobbered kisses on Henry's face. Henry halfheartedly pushed him away. "Aw, come on, pal, I'm not a kid anymore."

But it was the cold—not decorum—that made Henry jump to his feet. He popped up the fleecy collar of his new flight jacket, to cover his ears. "Darn, Speed. I didn't realize it was this cold again." It'd been wildly warm the week before, hitting ninety degrees one day. While Lilly and Henry happily stood in the sunshine in short sleeves, Clayton had flown into a streak of curses about the fruit trees blooming when it was sure to frost again, killing off their apples.

Clayton was even more cantankerous these days.

Despite the economic boom that had come to Richmond because of war ammunition production and new army facilities, times remained tough for farmers. With gas rationed to just three gallons a week, Clayton couldn't run his tractor and had hitched mules to his plow and wagons. A pair of the obstinate creatures cost him \$800—a fortune—and one of them had kicked him good in the leg. Henry figured the only reason Clayton hadn't shot the mule on the spot was the fact that shotgun shells were nearly impossible to buy, rationed along with shoes, tires, butter, and meat.

Using mules had slowed Clayton's work. So had Henry's absence. But Clayton had refused to use German POWs that Camp Peary hired out to local farms and pulp mills. Several Richmond farmers had had most of their peaches ruined when the prisoners picked them well enough but then scratched swastikas into the skin as they packed them for shipping.

Henry had laughed when Clayton had told him that story. He couldn't help it—the gesture of carving swastikas into peaches was so ridiculous. Was that what the war would come to—blind, numb loyalty? In Europe such unquestioning obedience to Hitler would mean a lot more than ruined peaches. It would cost thousands of lives—like the huge casualties in the Battle of the Bulge when the Nazis had stubbornly regrouped in the Ardennes Forest,

after being chased across France by Eisenhower's D-day army.

Now Allied leaders were responding to Hitler's unyielding stance with their own brutality, desperate to hasten the war's end. To cripple Hitler's railways and ability to transport supplies and troops, British and American planes bombed cities like Dresden, not just military targets near it. The newspapers weren't real forthcoming about it, but reading in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* that they'd dropped incendiary bombs filled with phosphorous, Henry knew what "Operation Thunderclap" meant for the civilians down below, the children playing under a war-torn sky.

The firestorm sparked by the phosphorous raged for days across miles of city blocks and created temperatures hot enough to suck people into the flames. The thought of it made Henry want to vomit. God help the crews who had dropped those bombs. Yes, their mission had saved countless American foot soldiers battling their way toward Berlin. But following orders only went so far against the morality of an airman's nightmares once he returned to base and had time to reflect on what he had done.

Henry pushed himself to walk on, marching on a reconnaissance for forgetfulness. Speed silently padded behind him, sensing Henry's tumult, cautious as when Clayton took him on a bird hunt.

But Henry's brooding thoughts kept pace with him.

What about that kind old German sergeant who was supposed to have shot him dead and instead let him go? Would he have shown such pity and generosity to an American boy only to be roasted in an Allied bombing? After her capture, would anyone have been merciful to Madame Gaulloise, the aristocratic woman who got him safely out of Switzerland? And what about Claudette, the beautiful angry Resistant from the Morvan, whose thirst for vengeance would have landed her right in front of retreating Nazi tanks, shaking her fist and harassing them in her rapid-fire French. Would they have just run over her?

The thoughts buzzed around him. He started to run, to flee their attack, but the faces followed, dive-bombing him like Messerschmitts. The image he feared most seeing, couldn't stand thinking about, not knowing, was of Pierre, the solemn little boy who had sheltered him, fed him, taught him, and lost everything—his mother, his grandfather, his farm—because of Henry's presence.

Henry sprinted, stumbling over stones and knee-high meadow grasses, flailing at images only he could see. Henry had left Pierre with a priest when his mother had been dragged away by the French Gestapo, the Milice. Left him with nothing but Henry's good-luck marble. What kind of protection would that be against an enraged, blood-soaked world?

*"It's my favorite marble. Mon favori. I want you to have it."*

*That way I'll always be with you. Henri avec Pierre."*

*"Pour toujours?" the small boy had whispered.*

*"Yes, always. Wherever I go, I remain with you."*

Henry fell to his knees, heaving from his run and his guilt about what his escape had cost Pierre, and about leaving him behind. He couldn't have taken Pierre with him, not on the almost suicidal run he'd had to make. He knew that. But was Pierre all right? Had the priest really taken him to a monastery for safety? Had he avoided the Nazi attack on Vassieux that came after Henry fled? Could his mother have survived the Ravensbruck prison the Milice sent her to?

France was in complete upheaval, trying to piece itself back together as Allied forces and retreating Nazis cut a path of destruction across it. Complete victory in Europe was still battles and months away. There was no way to know the answers to any of the questions that hounded him.

*Stop thinking!* Henry felt as though he was going mad. Patsy was right. He *was* frightening. He frightened himself. He had no idea what memories might grab him by the throat next, or what he might do in response.

*God help me.* Henry looked up to the stars. Slowly, his panic eased. There, he thought, look how far a soul can stretch. Look at all that black, quiet serenity. Where up

there, behind which star did God sit? Could God see the hell on his earth, the barbarity his creations were capable of? Did he weep to see it? How could he not do something to stop it?

No answers came. But out of the darkness of Henry's mind crept the words of "High Flight," a poem that had kept him both grounded and inspired during his combat months, a long-ago faith of his own:

*"Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings; . . .  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God."*

Henry leaped to his feet. That's right. He could fly. In the sky, he could touch God. Salvation was there.

Henry knew exactly where to find a plane that could take him.

## CHAPTER THREE

Old Man Newcomb's place.

Henry lit out across the fields. Newcomb had a Curtiss Jenny, a gorgeous, open-cockpit, WWI biplane—a real gem, since most had been junked long ago. He used it for barn-storming and wing walking. As a boy, Henry had watched Newcomb do daredevil loop-de-loops, whooping and hollering, for the local air circus. The wild-eyed pilot had even taken him up a few times, trying to convince Henry to do wing stunts. It was on those windswept jaunts, in that kite-like machine, that Henry first felt the rush of flight.

In Newcomb's Jenny, he'd leave his nightmares in the dust. It would be real flying, nothing between Henry and the clouds, just a big-ass engine and some fabric-covered wings. No bombs, no flak, no fighters, no worries.

When he saw its brass radiator gleam in the moonlight,



Henry didn't even consider knocking on Newcomb's door. War and living on the run had erased the habit of asking permission. He was going up. Now.

Henry stood on tiptoes to peer at the old-fashioned dial gauges on the control panel. Everything looked fine. He fished around for goggles, finding the long white scarf Newcomb always wore like a flying ace. Like a knight of the skies, thought Henry, as he wrapped it around his throat, his heart filling with the romance, the mystique flying had once had for him.

Then he noticed a tank and a spray boom crammed into the backseat. Newcomb was using the Jenny for crop dusting. Despite his reputation for brewing stump liquor, the old man was getting almost respectable. Last summer, during a polio outbreak, authorities had even trusted Newcomb to fly over the city of Richmond, dumping DDT, an insecticide that killed flies carrying the crippling disease.

But on this night, Henry wasn't interested in respectable. He couldn't stand the idea of anything being dropped out of a plane he was flying. This night was about freedom. This night was about baptism—washing himself clean of death and regrets and disappointment and fear, then beginning life reborn, redefined. This was about the “long, delirious, burning blue . . . the high, untrespassed sanctity of space.” Henry heaved the tank out of the plane,

laughing wildly when it hit the ground and cracked, releasing a stream of stench.

A jug of moonshine whiskey sat next to the Jenny's wheels. Newcomb was obviously using it to prime the engine. Henry poured the liquid into the engine's little brass cups on the intake manifolds and shut their levers. He rotated the Jenny's thick, wooden propeller five times to suck in the alcohol. Next he'd have to swing the heavy prop hard enough to spark a jump start and pop the engine into running.

Henry threw himself on it. One swing. A cough and sputter.

Another shove. A rattle and die-off.

A third. Nothing at all.

Henry still weighed next to nothing, starved as he'd been on the run in France. He chugged some of the jug's bitter, rancid booze. Feeling it knife through him, Henry hurled his whole being against the prop.

This time it caught and whipped around, nearly whacking Henry as it sped into a whirl. The engine spit smoke and the little plane shimmied all over. The delicate cables connecting its two wings hummed, beckoning.

Henry kissed the yellow-painted fuselage, pulled out the wheel chocks, and scrambled into the bucket seat as the Jenny rolled along the grass. He was vaguely aware of Speed barking along behind him, then the sound of

another dog howling. He paid no attention.

Henry opened the throttle. He braced his feet against the wooden bar that controlled the tail rudder, wrapped his hands around the long, thin wooden control stick, and pulled.

*Bounce, bounce, bounce.* The Jenny hopped happily along the ground like a child skipping, so light, so carefree, so different from his B-24, heavy with menace and five-hundred-pound bombs. Each hop lifted the Jenny a little higher for a little longer, until it finally vaulted up over the walnut grove at the field's edge, its wheels brushing the barren treetops with a musical *swish*. Air rushed through the plane's spiderweb of struts and wires, vibrating them like wind chimes.

Henry's soul rang with a long-forgotten joy. He shouted lyrics to a new hit: "I haven't felt like this, my dear, since I can't remember when. It's been a long, long time."

Between that and the steady seep of Newcomb's whiskey into his thinking, it didn't occur to Henry that he was stealing a plane. And he didn't hear the shotgun blasts below.

*C'mon, girl. Give me some speed.* Henry closed his eyes and held his face up to the winds. *C'mon, a little faster. That's it.*

The Jenny putt-puttered up to its maximum 75 mph, nothing like his B-24's 180 mph, but good enough to smack

Henry's face with a bracing current. He dipped his right wing and skimmed around in a full circle, then tilted left to arc the opposite way in a figure eight, as gracefully as an ice-skater, sliding his way across a vast lake of air.

Henry looked toward the stars that pinpricked the black sky. The Milky Way was so clear, so thick with shimmering lights, it looked like a runway laid out for him. *There, girl. He pointed. That'll take us. It's got to be a pathway to heaven. Let's go chase some angels.*

He pushed the throttle's control knob to open it more and pulled back gently on the control stick to tip the plane's nose up into a climb angle. The little Jenny began to tremble. But she dutifully inched higher, about 200 feet per minute.

"I've chased the shouting wind along . . . ," Henry recited. He chortled to himself, his laugh catching in a hiccup of overwrought, tangled emotions—relief, regret, hope.

*Come on, sweetheart. Old Man Newcomb said you could reach 6,500 feet.* He pulled the stick back a little harder.

The Jenny shook.

*Darn it, girl. I'm on a mission, here.* Henry's words were slurring. *Don't quit on me now. If I can just get a little higher.*

The Jenny quaked.

*C'mon!*

The engine belched, gagged, then suddenly silenced.

The Jenny's nose dropped and she began to drift earthward, gliding on air. Newcomb did this kind of stunt all the time for the air show. It was like she knew exactly what to do.

For a few long, glorious moments, Henry just grinned and listened to the quiet, waiting to hear a voice—God's voice, any voice of salvation. But when the hum of the struts turned to a shrieking whistle and the wind rushed so fast along his face that it felt like scraping along gravel, Henry realized that he was plummeting. The Jenny could go into a spin. Henry could die.

He didn't care.

It might be better to go this way—quick, in flight, not pulled down and picked apart by his own mind. He sat still a little longer.

*Look at that, girl. Dawn's coming.* There was the slightest glow of pink along the horizon. He watched it slip along the flat terrain below, tickling the edges of a farm. With the dispassion of a traveler passing through, Henry recognized the layout of his own home.

The Jenny kept falling.

Then a voice did come: *Pull out of this stall, lieutenant. Now, Hank!*

*Captain Dan?* Henry sat up straight, battle-ready. *Captain, where are you?*

The vision of Dan, wounded, drifting to safety in his

parachute only to be strafed by a Messerschmitt, slapped Henry to attention. NOOOOOO! His scream sliced through the silent sky.

Henry grabbed hold of the control stick and pushed forward to regain speed and control of the plane.

The little Jenny bucked, caught some wind, lifted, floated, dipped again, surfaced again. Henry struggled against the flood-water-strong pressure on the foot bar controlling the rudder. The Jenny fishtailed back and forth grotesquely, careening downward toward Clayton's chicken houses. Henry shoved the control stick to bank away, almost flipping the Jenny into a roll. But he righted her and lowered her, and for a few seconds, he had her on the ground, rolling along, soft and smooth.

"Yes, ma'am!" Henry cheered.

But the Jenny had no brakes, and the tailskid wasn't slowing her enough. Henry was fast coming face-to-face with the tree line separating his farm from Patsy's. There was no way to stop. Before he could react, he slammed into it. A wing caught a low-hanging branch; the struts twanged and snapped, and the Jenny tumbled about wildly.

Henry cracked his head against the instruments. The world went black.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Henry floated in darkness. His head throbbed with a percussive pounding, like bombs hitting. His ears rang like an air-raid siren. *This can't be heaven. Is it Hell? Just don't let it be another bomb run, please God.*

Henry could make out small, babbling voices. Angels? Devils? The airplane radio? He struggled to hear against the racket in his head.

"Pull off that scarf so I can see his face good. Wait a sec." There was the cold click of guns being cocked and readied.

"All right. Step back quick once you pull it off. There's no telling what this Nazi might do. Six POWs run off two days ago. One of 'em pulled a knife on poor Widow Moore. I about shot that one. Got 'em all rounded up but this one. Beats all. Suppose this stupid Kraut thought he

could fly back to Germany?"

Nazis? POWs? Germany? *No, no, no.* Henry couldn't survive another round with the Gestapo. He willed himself to lift his fists, just like Clayton had taught him. *Go down fighting, boy. Don't let them take you easy.*

"Look out! He's coming to."

Two gun barrels rammed up against Henry's chest.

"Hold still, you SOB." A hand jerked the cloth away from Henry's head and bright light hit him like a hammer. Blinking, Henry forced his eyes open.

He heard gasps. The guns pulled back.

"Good Lord!"

"It's Henry Forester!"

"I'll be . . ."

Shielding his eyes against the rising sun, Henry looked around him. He was surrounded by people—the sheriff, Old Man Newcomb, a couple of neighbors, and . . . *oh, no* . . . Clayton. Lilly. And here came Patsy running, trailed by her father carrying his shotgun.

Even with his head thundering, Henry knew. This was no nightmare. This was real.

No one said anything. They waited, dumbfounded. The looks on their faces mortified Henry. Only Lilly's carried pity. Patsy's had the same expression as when she'd turned him down and said he scared her. The moment dragged on and on and on.



Finally, Clayton strode to the cockpit. "Get your butt out of that plane, boy," he ordered.

Clayton offered no helping hand. Henry crawled out and stood shaking, knock-kneed on one of the wings. It was fine. But the other was torn and split, the tip-end of the top wing dangling down. He'd managed a pretty decent crash. Back at the base in England they'd crow over a salvage landing like that. But he'd still broken her. She might never fly completely straight again, no matter how good the repair.

*What an idiot.*

"Dad . . . Mr. Newcomb . . . Ma . . . I'm so sorry." He looked over at Patsy, so innocent looking in the coat she'd thrown over her nightgown, her hair cascading loose. All he could end with was a shrug. He hung his head, ashamed, confused. Blood trickled down his nose and splashed onto his hands.

"He's hurt!" Patsy and Lilly rushed to him as Henry's knees buckled. Gently, they brushed back his hair, wiped his face.

"How bad is it?"

"The blood's coming from his forehead."

"He's going to need a stitch or two."

"That's all right, I can do that."

"We've got to get him into the house."

"Can you stand?" Henry felt Patsy slip herself up under

his arm, wrapping it across her slight shoulder. "I'll help you walk."

Clayton stood stock still, glaring.

Lilly took Henry's other arm. She whispered into his ear, "Don't cry, honey lamb. Don't let your dad see you cry." Henry hadn't realized tears were mixing with his blood.

The three stumbled toward the house as Old Man Newcomb started whining, "Ain't you gonna arrest him, sheriff? He destroyed my Jenny."

Inside, the kitchen already smelled of morning coffee and bacon. Lilly had been cooking, preparing for a normal day, while he'd been gallivanting like a crazed fool and nearly killed himself. How could he explain himself to her?

But Lilly didn't ask—just pulled down her first-aid basket to clean and stitch up the gash in his scalp. He bit his tongue to keep from cursing when she dosed it with peroxide. She was quick, though. She'd have made a good doctor, Henry thought fleetingly, if such things were allowed.

When Patsy handed him water and aspirin, he grabbed her hand. No wonder she was afraid of him. He'd disintegrated into a crybaby, a freak. No words came, but his face pleaded forgiveness.

"It's all right," she answered softly.

"The hell it is." Clayton entered, slamming the door so hard all the plates and cups in the china cabinet rattled. He shot his most withering look toward Patsy. "Go home, girl."

Patsy straightened. "No, sir."

Henry almost smiled. But Patsy's refusal infuriated Clayton. "I said, go home. Now!"

"No, sir." Patsy held firm. "Henry's asked me to marry him. So I've a right and a duty to stay here with him."

Clayton's eyes narrowed. "Yeah, I know about that. Another one of his dang-fool ideas. And how'd you answer the boy?"

Patsy hesitated. Henry knew the lag would send Clayton in for the kill. He staggered to his feet. "That's enough, Dad. Patsy had nothing to do with last night."

Clayton stepped close, toe-to-toe with Henry, looking for the fight. Well, maybe this time Henry would give it to him. What did he have to lose?

"Just what was that stunt, boy?" Clayton's voice surprised Henry. There was something beneath the scowl, something new, something akin to concern.

Henry longed to trust that voice, to find the flicker of love he'd seen when he'd stepped out of that taxicab on Thanksgiving Day and his father had realized he was alive. But how could he describe the flashbacks, the mess of past and present, his confusion between waking reality

and nightmare? It was hard enough for Henry to understand how lost he felt while standing right there in his own home, with the three people he cared about most.

Clayton actually waited.

"Tell us, honey," Lilly coaxed. "What's troubling you so?"

"Oh, Ma. I just can't forget France. My friends who died. All those missions where I rained death on people, on civilians. All the people who helped me and may have been tortured and killed because of it . . . because of me. And that little boy, Ma. Pierre. I keep worrying about where he is. If anyone is helping him."

"But what were you doing in Newcomb's plane?" Clayton persisted.

"I . . . I . . . I don't know."

Had they been outside, Clayton would have spit on the ground. "'Don't know' don't cut it, boy."

Henry nodded. For once, Clayton was right. Henry knew if he told Clayton that he'd gotten drunk on whiskey, he and the sheriff might accept his stealing the plane as a high-spirited, flyboy prank. But Lilly would be scandalized. And besides, it wasn't true. He'd grown up enough in the past year to know lying was the coward's way out.

"It's nuts, Dad. But here it is. I think I thought I could escape it all, find salvation up in the clouds, get myself right again. The sky always brought me such peace, such

strength. When I fly, I'm free, just like the hawks over the fields. I wish you knew what it's like, Dad. I wish you could see past the farm and the chickens and the weeds and the manure and the banknote."

The last sentence was the mistake.

"Well, I can't see past the banknote, especially with a fool boy who destroys other people's property out joyriding," Clayton snarled. "Here's how I kept you from being arrested. Newcomb says you've ruined that plane. But the army's selling surplus Kaydet trainers for two hundred fifty bucks." He looked over at Lilly. "That old snake sure grabbed the opportunity." He looked back to Henry. "I haven't got two hundred fifty dollars. But you do. How much did that ring cost?"

Lilly gasped. "Oh, no, Clayton, don't make the boy give that up. He . . ."

Henry interrupted her. "Don't get into this, Ma." He knew how often she argued his case with Clayton and how she paid for it in his surliness. And this was justified. He'd screwed up, big-time. He needed to make it right. But Patsy . . . He turned to her.

She held up her hand and smiled, stopping his question. Lord, Henry could live for days on that reassuring smile. "Ask me again later, Henry. Mr. Forester's right." She kissed him on the cheek and left.

Clayton's expression remained grim. "I'll cinch the deal

with Newcomb. He's out there with the sheriff, claiming he'll report Henry to everyone, including the war office, if we don't settle this." He slammed the door again as he left.

Henry eased back into the chair, his head spinning. Lilly knelt beside him. "Henry, honey, I'd give anything to be able to fix things for you. When you were little and hurt or afraid, I could take your hands and say trust me, follow me, I can lead you out of this. But I can't now. You're all grown. My heart's been breaking watching you struggle so, hearing you cry out in your sleep and then getting up to walk off the nightmares."

Henry stared at her. She knew that?

"I can fatten you up, son, but you're the only one who can beat back the demons that have followed you home." She reached over to the table for a newspaper. "I wasn't sure I should show you this. But I see you need to know. I understand your regrets more, honey, reading this. It says that France is worse off now than it was under Hitler's rule in terms of hunger and sickness and lawlessness. It says that Allied bombings destroyed all their railroads and bridges so what food exists can't be shipped. People are starving.

"It's just so awful. And it's going to get worse. When the Soviets liberated a horrible place called Auschwitz, they found thousands . . ." She stopped and shook her head.

"Dear Lord, how is that possible? Hundreds of thousands of people were exterminated. And those who survived are near dead—skeletons, racked with disease. The Allies say there are more camps like it they haven't reached yet. They don't know what to do with the survivors. They have no homes, no families left to return to. Entire villages have been destroyed. Children wander gutted streets not knowing where their parents are."

Lilly's voice grew hoarse and she pushed the paper aside. "Oh, Henry, it is enough to make anyone sick. I understand why you are so worried. Let's pray President Roosevelt and General Eisenhower are wise enough to figure a way out of this horror for those poor people and quick. It's beyond my thinking."

She gently clasped Henry's face so he looked right into her green eyes, the same hue as his. "But I do know this much, honey. Sometimes you get back on your feet better when you're helping someone else stand in the process. The last thing in the world I want is for you to go away again. But I don't think you'll rest easy until you know about that little boy. Maybe . . . maybe you need to go back to France and find Pierre?"