

## Chapter One

March 1944.

"Pull her up, Hank! Pull her up!"

Henry's arms were locked through the steering wheel of his B-24. He was yanking with all he had, but the wheel was stuck solid. "I can't! She won't budge!"

The bomber was in a death dive. Henry's pilot had hurled them into the dive to put out a fire in the plane's engines. The fire had erupted after a Nazi fighter shot up their wing. The force of the winds against the bomber as it hurtled toward the ground was the only thing strong enough to snuff out the flames. Still, Henry knew the pilot's strategy was a real gamble. There was no guarantee that once the plane was rocketing to earth her two pilots would be able to wrestle her level again. Right now the plane was bucking and rattling enough to shake a guy's teeth loose.

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Over the intercom Henry listened to the panic of the crew: "We're going down!"

"Do something, Hank! Please! I don't wanna die!"

In his mind, Henry heard the distant growl of his father: *Do something, you idiot.* The surly voice slapped him into action.

Henry had learned to cheat death at the very last second during flight training. Hadn't he repeatedly yanked his plane up just before smashing into something, forcing out a big-man guffaw to hide the fact he'd almost wet his pants, he'd been so afraid? He could do this. Just yank the wheel, Henry, yank it hard, to level the plane off.

*BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG.*

A German Messerschmitt zoomed past to strafe the bomber's cockpit one last time. Henry couldn't believe the pilot would take the trouble to target a plane already in flames. Ha, you missed me, he thought.

"Do something, Hank! Pull her up."

Henry looked down at the wheel. He stared at the metal half-circle. *Put your hands on it, fool.*

But he couldn't. The Messerschmitt's bullets must have ripped his arms clear off. He stared. He couldn't find them anywhere in the cockpit.

Henry looked up through the shattered window and saw the green, leafy domes of treetops racing toward him. Closer, closer. There wasn't anything left to do but die. He tried to scream.

With a choking gasp, Henry lurched up. He clenched his hands. They were there. He felt every finger. Henry rec-

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ognized the stink of burning coal, wet woolen socks hung up to dry, lingering cigarette smoke. He was in his Nissen hut on base in England. It had just been another nightmare. He was awake. He was alive.

Quietly, Henry eased himself back down on his cot. He was grateful not to have woken up the other fliers who slept in the cold hut. They could be tough on a fellow if they smelled his fear. It was hard enough being the youngest copilot there. Henry was just barely nineteen.

He rolled over, still trembling. He wanted to get up and walk off the nightmare, but he couldn't without waking everyone. So he flipped onto his back, whacking his ankles against the cot's iron rails. It creaked loudly. With embarrassed irritation, he wiped leftover dream sweat from his face and stared up at the bottom of the shelf over his head. On it, where no one else would see it, he'd taped a poem called "High Flight." A nineteen-year-old American pilot, flying with the Royal Air Force, had written it just before he'd been killed. Henry knew every word.

He closed his eyes and tried reciting it silently to ease himself back to sleep:

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth  
Of sun-split clouds—and done a hundred things  
You have not dreamed of—wheeled and soared and swung  
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,  
I've chased the shouting wind along and flung

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My eager craft through footless halls of air.  
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark, or even eagle, flew;  
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod  
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

That's how Henry had thought flying would be—dancing the skies, skating the winds, playing tag with angels. But flying bombing missions hadn't been anything like that. The missions had been teeth-gritting beelines to targets, dogged all the way by men shooting at them. He didn't know how many planes he'd seen explode, scattering debris and bodies through the clouds, how many screams of pain he'd tried to ignore during the past few months.

With a groan of frustration, Henry put his hands over his eyes and rubbed his forehead to clear his mind. That's no way to go back to sleep, he told himself. He listened to the deep, steady snores of his bunkmates. See, they're not afraid.

*Suck it up, boy. A whiner won't last long in this world.*

Henry pushed his father's voice out of his head. He was sick of that voice and its harsh assessments. It had been a real struggle for Henry not to see himself the way his father seemed to. He'd thought he'd be free of his father here, overseas, in a war, a chaotic world away from their isolated farm. But the voice haunted him still.

Henry made himself think about blueberry pie. To

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smell his Ma's blueberry pie—that would calm him down. It always did. He drifted home to Virginia and dreamed of his mother, Lilly, standing by the kitchen sink. She was awash in Tidewater sunshine:

"Get your fingers out of my pie, you sneak," Lilly chided. "It'll be cool soon enough. Then you can have a proper slice and sit down to the table like civilized folk." Her dimples showed as she said it, though, so Henry knew he could push it. He pulled out another small wedge even though it scalded his fingers. He popped it into his mouth.

Grinning, Lilly picked up a wooden spoon and shook it at him. "You're a hambone," she said and caught him for a hug.

"Lieutenant Forester?" A voice cut through the bleary warmth of Lilly's kitchen. "Get up, Lieutenant. You're flying today."

Henry forced his eyes open. Sergeant Bromsky stood by his bunk, shining a flashlight. The blueberry pie evaporated.

"I'm up, I'm up," Henry said and stretched himself awake. He was used to arising at 4 A.M. on his family's chicken farm. But most of the other fliers weren't. Sleepy groans filled the Nissen hut as the sergeant and his flashlight beam moved from bed to bed to rouse fifteen other pilots, navigators, and bombardiers—the officers of four bomber crews.

"Where we heading, Sarge?" Henry asked. "Any idea?"  
Sergeant Bromsky came back to Henry's cot. It was

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next to the small black stove that heated the thirty-foot-long hut. Built like a tin can cut in half and turned onto the ground, the hut had only one door and two windows at each end. It was dark and damp. Winds from the nearby North Sea found every crack. Even right beside the stove, the airmen shivered.

Sergeant Bromsky faced his backside to the stove. "The word is Germany, pretty far in. But keep it to yourself. You know the rules, Hank."

Henry ground his teeth. That meant about a thousand miles round-trip under attack by enemy fighter planes and antiaircraft guns on the ground. They'd just hit Berlin and lost almost half the base's crews.

"What number is this, Hank?" the sergeant asked.

The sergeant always asked Henry what number the day's mission was, as if he were rooting for him to get home. His support helped Henry. In return, he gave Sergeant Bromsky his cigarette rations, even though the other guys in the hut made fun of him for not smoking them himself. Henry had been born and raised in tobacco country, and he just hated the stuff.

Today, though, superstition slowed Henry's answer. To finish his tour of duty and go home, Henry had to survive twenty-five missions. But every airman had figured out that the average life span of an Eighth Air Force bomber crew was only fifteen. Everyone was afraid of the fifteenth mission. It was a make-or-break flight.

"It's my fifteenth," Henry said quietly. He watched the sergeant's face tighten.

"Yeah?" Bromsky looked away. His eyes fell on a pho-

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tograph pinned to the wall beside Henry's cot. A pretty teenage girl smiled back at him.

"I hadn't noticed her before," Bromsky changed the subject. "Who's the dame?"

"Oh, she isn't a dame, Sarge. That's Patsy. We grew up together. Her family has the farm next to ours. She's almost like my kid sister."

Sergeant Bromsky leaned forward to get a better look at Patsy's thick, wavy hair, heart-shaped face, and serene smile. "Wow. She's a real looker, Hank."

Henry was mortified to feel himself blush. He tried to seem nonchalant. "To tell the truth, Sarge, that picture kills me, because she looks so ladylike. What I love about Patsy is that she's no sissy. She's a real spitfire. We could use her fighting the Germans."

Henry could tell from the Sarge's smile that his attempts to seem indifferent to Patsy's beauty were failing. He was just so confused about Patsy these days. Until right before he'd joined the Air Corps, they'd been buddies, best friends. But somehow their relationship had changed when he'd received his orders. And her letters, well, her letters brought out a longing in him he'd never felt before. Henry couldn't sort out if the longing was for her or home or just peacetime. But it was a strong feeling. She wrote him and he answered every week. He started to ask Sarge what he thought about the wisdom of romancing a girl through letters, but changed his mind.

"When I was about ten I was in a fight in the school yard," Henry continued. "This dopey boy, Jackson, was giving me trouble because my family raises chickens and

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the farm smells of them. He thought he was better than all us farmers. His dad hauled cargo at the Norfolk docks and didn't have to work the dirt the way we did. He was yelling: 'Henny Penny, what a chicken.' Well, I'd given him a sharp punch like my dad showed me. But he'd knocked me down and was kicking me good. Patsy came tearing up out of nowhere. Her face was red as a tomato. She kicked Jackson's shins so hard he cried!"

Henry paused to look at Patsy's face and felt his own flush again. "Anyway, she's . . . special, you know, Sarge?"

Before Bromsky could reply, Henry rushed to wrap her up with a safe comment. "I mostly appreciate how Patsy checks up on Ma for me. Dad doesn't talk much except when he's mad. Living on a hundred and fifty acres all alone with him and two thousand chickens could drive anyone crazy."

"Two thousand chickens! I'm not sure I've ever even seen one live chicken," said Bromsky, who was a native of New York City. He gave Henry a quick clap on the back. "Good luck today, Hank. I gotta roust the rest of the crews."

Henry dressed hurriedly to prevent the concrete floor's icy cold from seeping up through his entire body. He kept his blond head low as he pulled on his mission gear. The ceiling was eight feet high in the center of the Nissen hut but it curved downward to the ground from there. Henry was a lanky six feet tall and still stretching, as his ma always said.

Over his long johns, he pulled blue flannel underwear



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that was wired to connect to the airplane's electrical system and protect him from severe frostbite. If thick clouds and enemy flak forced them to fly at 24,000 feet—four and a half miles up—the temperature inside the bomber's open bays could be thirty below zero.

Next came wool pants and shirt, plus a black wool tie. Over that, Henry pulled flying overhauls and fleeced-lined boots. Finally, he picked up his fleeced-lined bomber jacket and strapped on a .45 pistol. He'd need the gun if he had to bail out somewhere over Nazi-controlled Europe.

Across the aisle, Billy White, another copilot, was inspecting his beard. Dark haired Billy was just six months older than Henry, but his beard grew thick. Henry had to look close to find anything to shave. Still, he did it. During a flight even the slightest stubble caught condensation that could freeze and leave a string of icy beads right where the oxygen mask gripped his face.

Billy rubbed his smooth face and grinned. "Gotta be close, boys," he said to a bunkmate who cat-whistled at him.

Billy was peering into a tiny mirror hung next to a sultry photograph of movie star Rita Hayworth. He caught Henry's dimpled, babyfaced reflection in the mirror. He tapped Hayworth's photo and said, "Hey, Hanky, this is a real woman, no prudish kid sister. But would you know what to do with a real woman if you ever caught one?"

Henry straightened up. He'd gotten used to the raunchy humor around the barracks. He'd also flown a lot more missions than Lieutenant White. "You know what,

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Billy," he said. "I've learned a thing or two flying *all* my missions. When guys are scared, they talk big."

"Whooooaa," laughed a few of the men as they scrambled to get ready.

Billy White shrugged. "We'll see who flies the most missions, farm boy."

"All right. Save the spit for the Germans," interrupted Henry's pilot, Dan MacNamara. Dan was twenty-five years old, married, and the father of a baby girl named Colleen. He'd been the oldest brother in a rowdy clan of seven Irish siblings in Chicago. He could control the barracks and crew with just a few words.

"Billy," Dan said. "We'll let it stand that you've danced with every girl this side of London. Of course, whether you've gotten anywhere with them, we don't know."

He turned to Henry. "Hank, you're one hotshot pilot. Nobody flies a tighter formation than you do. Let's just get over there, drop our bombs, get home, and I'll buy you both a beer. That's root beer for you, right, Hank?" Dan winked at Henry as he said it.

"Yeah, yeah," Henry said and smiled.

Today would be Dan's twenty-first mission. He had even survived the legendary raid on the Ploesti Oil fields in Romania the previous August. Dan had told Henry how the bombers had gone in at treetop level to avoid detection as long as possible. They didn't know about the antiaircraft guns hidden behind haystacks. A third of the planes went down in flames, too low in altitude for any of their crews to bail out.

After hearing that, Henry was certain Dan could

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survive anything. Henry's first four raids had been under a different pilot, last name Cobb, a real wildcat flier. He'd bled to death on their fourth mission, as Henry fought on alone to get their plane up and over the Dover cliffs and crash-land on English soil. Only then had he realized he was covered with Cobb's splattered blood. Henry had crawled out of the cockpit and vomited for fifteen minutes solid.

With Dan in command, no matter how bad the flak or fighters were, Henry knew he at least had a chance.

Dan threw open the door to a wet wind and a sea of slippery, icy English mud. "Let's get to Group Ops," he said. "Briefing's in ten minutes."

"Jeez," said Billy, pushing his way out past Henry. "It musta poured last night."

"Isn't it always raining in England?" muttered Dan. "Let's hope the weather officer knows what he's doing."

They all looked up at the black sky, trying to assess the clouds. No stars visible and no sunrise yet. The only lights were on the distant airfield. Out there, the ground crews were loading bombs and fueling the aircraft. If it wasn't mechanically perfect, a B-24 loaded with 2,000 pounds of bombs and glutted with gasoline was a flying deathtrap. "God bless the ground crew," murmured Henry aloud, without thinking.

Then he wanted to kick himself for opening the door to a put-down. He'd been dismissed as "a Boy Scout" before and knew some of the older fliers were merciless with a devout Baptist gunner who got down on his knees

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to pray before getting into his plane. Henry could see a jeer forming on Billy's face and braced himself.

But instead Billy agreed: "Amen to that." The ground crew and their work were sacrosanct for everyone.

"Hey, didya hear Lord Ha Ha last night?" asked Henry's navigator, Fred Bennett, as they slogged across the mud-washed base.

"Naw, I never listen to that guy," said Henry, even though he did. "He's full of baloney." Broadcasting in English almost every night, Lord Ha Ha was a Nazi trying to unnerve the British and American fliers.

"I don't know, Hank," said Fred. "He seemed to know we'd be flying today. He said the Luftwaffe would be waiting for us."

Fred was a small guy, a washout from flight school, a real worrier. He'd finished two years of an English literature major at Harvard before volunteering. He was always quoting some writer named Thomas Hardy—very depressing stuff. But he was a great navigator. He seemed to have a sixth sense for direction, even in heavy cloud cover. And Henry just liked him. "You know what we can do tonight when we get back, Fred?" said Henry.

The navigator shook his head.

"I'd love it if you'd read aloud some more of that Dickens, that *Tale of Two Cities*. I've got to keep up my studies, you know. Virginia said they'd keep my scholarship active for me for two years as long as I don't go stupid on them."

"I didn't know you were going to be a college boy, Hank," said Dan.

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"When I get home. I promised Ma. It about killed her when I joined up two weeks after graduating high school. Schooling is real important to her. She's the one who taught me there's more to the world than chicken coops. She used to read to me even when I shelled peas and beans, so my mind was working too. The Bible, Sherlock Holmes, a poet named Emily Dickinson she loved. My personal favorite is Jules Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*."

"Good for you, Hank," said Dan. "I dropped out of high school when the Depression hit. I needed to work to help Da. Seven kids need lots of shoes. Read to us, Fred. Gotta get me some book education to impress my baby girl when I get home. Rose wrote that she said her first word."

"What was it, Dad? *Goo-goo blah-blah?*" It was Henry's turn to tease.

"No," said Dan goodnaturedly. "It was wa-wa."

"Wa-wa?" Henry laughed. "I don't seem to have wa-wa in my vocabulary, Captain. What's it mean?"

"She was asking for water," Dan said, laughing at himself. "A budding genius, she is." Then he grew quiet. "I tell you what, though. The first word I'm going to work on her saying when I get home is *Daddy*."

"You guys are making me sick," Billy interrupted. "You know what I did last night? Some important scientific research. I figured out that these flight getups have thirty-six feet of zippers. I'm getting mighty good at unzipping fast. That'll come in real handy with the girls someday soon, boys, if you know what I mean. Do you have any idea what I mean, Hank?"

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Patsy's pretty face came to Henry. He knew how much Billy's off-color jokes would insult her. And he was startled and mad with himself that for a few fleeting seconds Billy's crude comment had sent Henry imagining Patsy in a vivid, not particularly respectful way.

"Stow it, White," Henry snapped. "I feel sorry for any girl who gets stuck with you."

The group had reached the operations building. Billy turned to ridicule Henry in a forced Southern twang: "And whom do you all date, farm boy? Some bucktoothed swamp queen?"

Henry's nightmare had left him feeling thin-skinned and homesick. He stepped in front of Billy to block his path. Leaning toward him, Henry whispered in a menacing manner, "Y'all want to see some swamp-boy boxing?"

"Hey! Cut it out," yelled Dan. He pushed them apart with a big, practiced shove. "Remember what you're here for. Shake hands."

"No way," muttered Billy. "The guy's a lunatic."

"Shake hands. That's an order."

Reluctantly, Henry extended his.

Reluctantly, Billy took it.

As their hands touched, Henry regretted his outburst. That was the kind of threat his Dad would have made. Henry had always promised himself that he'd never be like his volatile father. He took a deep breath and tried looking at things from Billy's side, the way his ma forever told him to. Heck, Billy was probably just as nervous as he was. And what could you expect from such a jerk on a morning like this, anyway?

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"Tell you what," Henry said as he let go of Billy's hand. "When the war's over, I'll come to Philadelphia to meet those country-club lady friends of yours. Then you come to Richmond. My ma will fix a meal that'll melt in your mouth and teach you some manners without your ever realizing she's doing it."

Billy seemed to relax. "Done." He opened the door and whistled as he walked through. "Off we go, into the wild blue yonder. . . ."

Dan followed behind Henry. "What's the matter with you, Hank?"

"Sorry, Captain." Henry's green eyes hit the ground. "I don't know what's wrong with me this morning. Got the jitters, I guess."

"Don't get flak-happy on me, boy," Dan said, putting his hand on Henry's shoulder. "I mean it. You're the steadiest copilot I've ever seen."

Henry nodded, bolstered.

"I want to get home, too, Hank. I've only got four more to go. Let's make sure we both get back today."

The pilots' eyes held each other's for a moment. Dan's belief in him made Henry feel years older, stronger. He wasn't just a scared farm boy away from home for the first time. He was someone Dan could trust. "I'm with you, Captain," Henry answered.

Dan smiled. Then he resumed his flyboy swagger. He called after the group, "Okay, boys, let's see what part of hell we're visiting today."