

# THE WEALTH OF HOME

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*"Nor need we power or splendor, wide hall or lordly dome; the good, the true, the tender -- these form the wealth of home."*  
--- Sarah Josepha Hale

## Chapter One: *The Things That Matter*

Peoria, Illinois

September, 18, 1945

It was Marjorie Saunders' favorite time of year. Late summer had given way to autumn. Evenings were cool and crisp, and left a shimmer of frost with the dawn. The days, of course, were still sunny and pleasantly warm. It was a time of change, when leaves shed their cloaks of rich emerald and turned to burning red, blazing orange and brilliant ochre. It was the time of year for bonfires and football games, for taking quilts out of cedar chests and lying in firewood for the coming months ahead. Tucking a strand of loose blonde hair behind one ear, Marjorie hummed a favorite tune as she worked in her garden, preparing it for the winter. She wondered if next year she ought to add to the assortment of vegetables she normally planted. Of course, the garden would need expanding, but resetting the fence posts and getting a bit more chicken wire would be well worth it. Her mother had some seeds for several things Marjorie wanted and –

Suddenly, her attention was diverted to the sound of the family dog barking uproariously in the front yard.

"Jack!" Marjorie called. But the old Border collie, always so obedient, did not come. Instead, he continued to woof and yap, and Marjorie called to him again. *Darn that dog! What is he on about?*

The noise drew closer, making it obvious that Jack was making his way along the driveway. There must be a stranger coming to call, Marjorie thought, because Jack didn't cause such a commotion over people he knew. But neither did strangers come to the back – not unless there was an emergency of some sort and no one had been inside to answer the front door.

The bed linens on the clothes line obstructed her view, so she ducked her head, and peered under the sheets. Whoever was coming across the yard wore uniform trousers. A terrible thought caused her stomach to knot with fear. *The War's over. Surely, no bad news could come now?*

"Who's there?" she tried to ask, but Jack's constant barking, and the sound of her own hammering heartbeat, made any answer she might otherwise have heard, seem miles away.

Against her fears, Marjorie gathered every ounce of her strength and resolve and tried once more to ask who was there, but this time, her voice utterly failed. She took a halting step forward, and then another, and another. At last, she drew aside the corner of a hanging sheet. Her gaze traveled upward...And she froze.

The rush of emotion that flooded through her was nearly unbearable. As tears instantly blurred her vision, her hands seemed to go almost numb and the gardening tool slipped from her fingers. A little, 'Oh!' caught on her breath and her knees buckled. But strong hands gently steadied her. With unbridled elation, she laid her shaking hands upon the face that gazed at her with eyes the color of a clear summer sky.

"Hi, Mom. I'm home." Chip Saunders gathered his mother into his arms.

With that comforting movement, he felt as if a cleansing rain was washing away all of the derailing fear, immeasurable loss, and intolerable suffering that was war. Like wisps of fog caught in the sun's warmth, all the horrors that had lain beside him in foxholes, had dogged his steps as he'd slogged in sucking mud or trudged through freezing, knee-deep snow, or had crept behind him as he'd crawled over corpses that barely resembled a human, faded. In this perfect moment, such phantoms seemed never to have haunted his dreams, or ever stripped bare the walls he'd tried to keep so fastidiously erected around his emotions. Absorbed in this sweet reunion, all the weight of responsibility he'd carried for other men's lives -- and for those he'd taken -- receded.

While his mother still wept with unspeakable happiness, telling him she loved him and how she'd missed him, he swiped the back of one hand against his own moistened eyes, and managed to gather his composure. "Don't cry, Mom. I'm home now. I'm home."

Half sobbing, half laughing, Marjorie held him even tighter, crushing her face against him and gently pounding his back with curled fists. "Oh, shut up! I'll cry if I damn well want to!" Then she stepped back a little and met her eldest son's radiant smile with her own. Snagging the calico kerchief holding her hair back, she dabbed at her eyes. "I was so worried," she sniffed against her tears. "We got your telegram...you were supposed to be here two or three days ago."

"I'm sorry. I got bumped back a couple of days leaving France and --"

"When did your ship arrive?"

"A few days ago. Then I had to --"

"I was so scared there for a minute, thinking --"

"--report at Camp Dix --"

"-- that something horrible had happened to you."

"Mom, please don't start crying again, huh?" While she dried her eyes, he took advantage of her momentary silence to add, "I tried to get a train straight out of Newark to Chicago but you wouldn't believe how crowded everything is. I didn't think I'd be this late getting here."

"You're here now, that's all that matters."

"I tried to call from a couple of places along the way, but I never got a turn at a phone. All the stations are lousy with G.I.'s going home."

She nodded. "I've seen the cars pulling in at the station downtown a few times. I don't know how you boys manage to travel, packed in like sardines."

"It's really not as bad as all that."

He'd been in worse places, but she didn't need to hear about it. He didn't want her to know about living in dugouts that leaked rain through a roof (when he was lucky enough to even have one) fabricated from tree branches and a scrap of tarp, or from the shards of what had once been someone's front door. She didn't need to know about not having regular meals, clean clothes, a bath and a shave, or catching only a few minutes of uninterrupted sleep here and there for weeks on end. For now, he would let her believe all the things people at home had been told for the sake of morale. Someday, maybe the truth of how the G.I.'s had slogged it out from day to day would be told. But that day would be a long time coming. For now, all that mattered was that he'd made it home.

His mother ran her fingers over a faint scar just along the hairline of his left temple, and he had to wonder, when she looked in his eyes, did she see how the War had aged him more than his twenty-five years? He was so tired.

"When did you eat last?" she asked. "What I can I fix for you?"

The question gave rise to a particular memory: in the spring, at a farm near some village in Germany he did not remember the name of, he and Kirby had discovered a bin of potatoes in the kitchen. Near the barn, Littlejohn had found a bunch of hens that had somehow survived the recent barrages and battles; they were nesting in a coup, and he'd collected a total of twenty five fresh eggs. Minutes later, Nelson had scrambled from the cellar of the house, howling in absolute delight with the news that he'd come across some canned cherries – they were even cold! Their rations had been depleted a couple of days ago, and as for hot chow, well, they hadn't seen that in weeks. But on this simple fare, they had dined like kings. The experience was one they had relished over the next weeks, reminiscing about it often. It had gotten them through many a cold and miserable rainy night.

*What can I fix for you?* His mother's words, and the care in her voice, were pure bliss. He blinked against the surge of emotion that welled in his eyes, and breathed steadily against the tightness in his chest, but nevertheless, his words were a little ragged. "I'm okay, Mom. You don't have to --"

"Nonsense," she gently chided. "I'll fix you something." She stepped away long enough to shut the gate to the garden. "I couldn't believe it, when I told them at work that you were coming home, Mr. Merrell gave me the week off, with pay! This is all so perfect. You'll be here for Louise's birthday. Oh, my goodness," she exclaimed, "your sister is going to be so surprised when she gets home from school today!"

Chip put one arm around her as they walked toward the house. "It's hard to believe the Brat'll be sixteen in a couple of days! She was barely twelve when I left." Saying that seemed to make the four years he'd been away suddenly feel like twenty.

"She started to get a little worried," he mother told him, "thinking that you wouldn't be here for her birthday. You won't believe how she's growing up, Chip."

He cleared his throat a little and then remembered he'd seen the car parked in the drive, but the truck was gone. "Where's Pops?"

"Oh, he's gone down to the barber shop to meet his friends. I'll call and tell him the news. And your Grandma Cecie, too, and --"

"Mom --"

Marjorie halted. "Joey and Chris will want to know that you made it home. Maybe we should send them a telegram."

Chip could only smile at her unrestrained excitement. "Yeah, I think they'd like that."

"You heard about Joey, didn't you? I couldn't believe it, only a day before the War against Japan was over and he was wounded."

"Yeah, I heard that he took some shrapnel in the leg."

"They told me he's in a hospital in Australia."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," Chip replied, and bent down to pet Jack, who had been constantly whining and nudging him with his nose.

Marjorie wrung her hands together. "He said the wound wasn't that bad, but I know how you boys didn't want any of us to worry if you got hurt --"

Chip placed his hands on her shoulders. "Mom, just take it easy, huh? Joey's gonna be fine, and before you know it, he'll be home, and so will Chris."

"Yes, I know you're right." Her tears rose again. "Goodness! Just look at me, I'm a mess."

"You look just fine."

"Here I am, getting all carried away about things, and you haven't even had a chance to tell me anything."

He couldn't help but laugh a little. "I haven't heard you get 'carried away' in a long time. It sounds pretty good."

She hugged him close again. "Oh, Chip, I just can't believe you're really here!"

"Well, I *am* here. So get used to me being around all over again, huh?"

They continued toward the house and he told her how he could sure use a decent cup of coffee.

"I'll put a fresh pot on. I wanted to cook something special for you when you got here, one of your favorites --"

"Don't go to any trouble, Mom. It can wait until tomorrow or the weekend."

"I've got some leftovers from dinner last night. I can heat that up."

"Anything's fine."

Climbing the porch steps to the kitchen door, Marjorie remarked, "There'll be so many people wanting to come see you tonight. It's past two o'clock now. I have no idea what to have ready."

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure someone'll think of something since it's short notice and all." He would have preferred a quiet homecoming, with no fuss, but he couldn't deny his family and friends the chance to celebrate.

Grabbing the large duffle bag that he'd set on the porch, he let his gaze drift slowly over the back yard. The breeze billowed against the clean sheets and pillow cases on the clothes line; he'd forgotten the scent of fresh laundered linens, and it made him almost lightheaded. Behind the garage, high up in the huge sycamore, the remnants of the tree house he and his brothers built years ago, still remained. Over by the apple tree was the gliding double rocker Pops and Grandma Evelyn used to sit in for hours at a time, just holding hands and talking. It had been eleven years since his grandmother had died, and Chip had never known Pops to sit in that rocker again. Still, it needed a new coat of paint and Chip decided that he'd get that done in the next couple of days.

He looked upward to the gabled window of the attic bedroom. How often he'd thought of that room, letting it take his mind off the cold and all too often soggy confines of a foxhole, or the drafty, plaster-dusted floors of a ruined house or cellar. A small chuckle rose in him and he recalled a particularly grey afternoon in November of 1929. He and Joey, having read one too many tales by Edgar Rice Burroughs, had gotten overly adventurous and attempted to climb from their bedroom and onto the roof. But the shingles had been slick with a fine coating of ice and they'd slid on their bellies to the gutter. Hanging on tightly with gloved fingers, their legs dangled in mid air as they'd hollered for help – even against the knowledge that, as Chris loudly exclaimed from the window, 'You guys are gonna get it!' Saved by Dad and Pops, they had indeed gotten a mighty good tanning on their backsides for that stunt. Such memories...

They seemed to take solid form right in front of his eyes. There, in the driveway, was his father, calling to him and Joey and Chris to help unload a Christmas tree from the Ford Woody. In

the kitchen, while Louise learned to bake cookies, Grandma Cecie chided Grandpa Ed as he told another of his infamous tales, stories laced with words she did not condone. That image blended into another: it was summer, and Chip sat with his brothers and the Brat on the porch steps. They were all giggling while they ate cold watermelon and spit the seeds as far as they could. Then there was the evening when Jack had chased Mrs. Trapp's cat out of Mom's vegetable garden, taking down a whole section of chicken wire in the process. And then there was his mom, standing at the kitchen door, calling everyone in to dinner. The mouthwatering smell of fresh baked bread and shepherd's pie wafted on the air.

More than once, recollections such as these had kept fear at bay, and even, he swore, kept him alive when he'd been badly wounded in Italy. They had been his lifeline then against blood loss and shock. And they had been his anchor against pain in the weeks it had taken him to recover. He treasured these memories beyond all measure. Though not poor, his family had not been rich with money, but they were wealthy in the things that matter. It was, after all, what he'd fought for.

His mother's voice brought him back to the present. "Chip?" She stood in the kitchen doorway, the corners of her eyes crinkling in concern. "Is anything wrong?"

"Huh? Oh, no, Mom, nothing's wrong." He stepped inside, smiling faintly at the familiar, reassuring sound of the screen door tapping against its frame behind him. "It's just good to be home."



The last bell rang at three thirty and in moments students were pouring from Peoria High School. In the crowd, accompanied by three of her closest friends, Louise Saunders descended the front steps. The girls all chatted excitedly about whom they were going to the Homecoming dance with, about what they were going to wear, and who they thought would win the vote for Homecoming King and Queen. Halfway to the sidewalk that ran along N. North Street, Janie Kincaid, Louise's best friend since first grade, started to say something about calling her later, but instead formed the silent words, 'Holy Cow!'

"What's up?" Louise asked. "What are you looking at?"

Slack-jawed, Janie stared past her. "Didn't you say Pops was picking you up?"

"Yeah. So?"

The other girls were now looking in the same direction. While Dottie Tommaselli gasped and covered her mouth with one hand, Marybeth Rawlings and Rosalind Friese shared an inquisitive look.

Rosalind giggled. "Who's the handsome soldier, Louise?"

Louise turned around -- and instantly dropped her books.

Leaning against her grandfather's old pick up truck, was her eldest brother.

"CHIP? CHIP!!!" Shoving and shouldering her way through a throng of students, she ran to her brother and all but flew into his arms. "Oh, Goon!" she cried, "You're home! I missed you so much!"

He hugged her tightly and spun her around. "Hiya, Brat! I missed you too."

Despite the photographs he'd received from time to time, he hadn't quite realized just how much his little sister had changed. The sprinkling of freckles that had once dotted her nose and cheeks had nearly faded, but Louise's eyes and smile were still as bright and full of mischief as he remembered. Her hair was no longer worn in braids or pigtails, but covered her shoulders in soft waves. Four years ago, she had still been a gawky tomboy, wearing hand-me-down dungarees and sneakers when she went out to play. It was a far cry from the skirt and sweater that showed off a petite figure, one that Chip was sure turned the eyes of countless boys. He wasn't quite certain how he felt about that, but, after all, she wasn't twelve anymore. A sense of sorrow filled him. He'd missed out on so much. But that feeling was quickly replaced by a mixture of pride and protectiveness.

"Look at you!" he exclaimed. "You're nearly all grown up."

Although his voice didn't reveal it, Louise detected an unexpected sadness in his eyes. She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. "I'll always be your little sister, no matter what."

"Promise?"

Drawing an imaginary 'X' over her chest, she proclaimed, "Cross my heart and hope to die." She was ecstatic with joy. "We thought you'd be here on the weekend! Mom didn't say anything, but she was starting to wonder if something terrible might have happened to you. Oh! I'm so glad you'll be here for my birthday!"

"Well," he said, with an exaggerated sense of importance, "I couldn't miss that, now could I? I explained to the Army that your sixteenth birthday was coming up and I needed to be here for it."

Her eyes widened, and then she looked at him curiously. "You're pulling my leg."

He gave her his best poker face. "Do I look like I'm kidding?" Letting his expression remain solidly in place for a moment, he finally broke out in a huge grin.

Louise cuffed his shoulder playfully. "Oh! You had me going there for a minute. I'll get you back for it." Hugging him close again, she smiled through a new rise of tears. "I sometimes thought that I'd never see you again. Gosh, this is going to be the *best* birthday ever!"

Louise's friends suddenly descended on them. Janie was carrying her books and having a hard time managing them with her own. Chip quickly helped her before the whole pile fell from her arms. He remembered Janie, and Dottie, too, but the other girls he couldn't quite place.

"Marybeth, Rosalind," Louise began, "this is my oldest brother, Chip."

"I guess you're in the same class as Louise?" He felt more than a little awkward when they gazed up at him dreamily, replying in perfect unison, "Uh, huh."

"Well, it's...it's very nice to meet you ladies."

"*Ladies*," Marybeth repeated breathlessly. "Did you hear thaaat, Roz?"

"Yeahhh."

Dottie curled her upper lip and rolled her eyes. She elbowed Rosalind. "Roz! Manners!"

But Rosalind continued to stare. "Gee, you have the bluest eyes I've ever seen."

"Golly..." still, was all that Marybeth managed to say.

Louise blushed in an attempt to hide a wide smile, but failed. "Nobody has bluer eyes than my big brother," she bragged lightheartedly.

"Not *even* Frank Sinatra!" Janie added emphatically. Her loud voice instantly drew the attention of what seemed like the whole student body of Peoria High.

Something between a grin and a grimace crossed Chip's expression; he'd forgotten what a fog-horn of a voice Janie had. Much as he'd enjoyed meeting his sister's friends, he was ready to get back to the house. "I'd offer you all a ride, but..." He motioned to the truck which, obviously, did not have enough room for everyone.

Marybeth waved it off. "Oh that's alright. We don't have that far to walk home anyway. It was awfully nice meeting you."

Janie's happiness for her best friend was evident in her broad smile. "I'll see ya later," she said. "And Chip...welcome home."

"Thanks. Tell your mom and Beth that I said hello, will ya?"

"I sure will!"

As the girls all said goodbye, Chip opened the passenger door for his sister, and handed the school books to her. "I know Pops was going to run you downtown to your favorite record store, but if you can wait until after school tomorrow, I'll take you."

"Oh, that'd be swell! But," and she cut her eyes sidelong at him, "you'll have to buy me a soda."

Apparently, some things hadn't changed; the Brat could still wind him around her little finger. "A soda, huh?"

"Yes. A very *large* soda."

"A very *large* soda, and before dinner, too. Hmm..." He closed the door and leaned in through the open window. "You realize I'll be in trouble with mom."

She kissed him on the cheek. "Goon, you're the *best!*"

"Yeah, the best sucker," he laughed, then swiped one knuckle over the end of her nose, making her giggle. It was a sound he'd missed, and on more than one occasion, feared he would never hear again. He slapped a hand against the roof of the truck. "Let's go home, Brat."



There'd been more people crowding the house to welcome him back than Chip had ever expected. Their gratitude for his service, their joy at seeing him again, was all very heartfelt and he'd appreciated it. Although he was overjoyed to see relatives, neighbors and friends he'd not seen in so long, he was relieved when everyone had gone and the house was quiet. He was more tired than he was willing to admit.

The long haul home – from the 'cigarette camps' in Le Havre, to the tightly packed ship across the Atlantic, the trip to Ft. Dix to get discharged from the Army, the crammed train cars he'd ridden in to Peoria – had been one arduous journey of days and nights that ran together in mile upon tiresome mile. In an absurd way, he felt as if the Army had a last laugh and sent him on one more patrol.

He insisted on helping to clean up, but laughed a little at his mother as she told him he looked too beat to trust handling the dishes. She was right of course, he could barely keep his eyes open. Marjorie kissed him goodnight on the cheek. "It's so good to have you back," she told him. He returned her smile, told her loved her, and traded a slap on the back with Pops.

Despite being exhausted, he looked in on Louise. She'd been allowed to stay up later than usual, but it was a school night and she'd gone to bed two hours ago -- albeit reluctantly. A book was half opened between her hands and Chip carefully laid it aside. He pulled the covers up to Louise's shoulders, rested one hand against her head and then shut the little lamp off on the bedside table. The soft rustling of sheets made him look over his shoulder.

His sister smiled sweetly through half-opened eyes and muttered sleepily, "G'night, Goon."

"Night, Brat," he said, relishing the simple words. "See you in the morning."

With Jack cradled in his arms, he climbed the attic staircase, not bothering to turn on a light as he stripped down to his skivvies and crawled into bed.

Barely two hours later, he awoke. Opening one bleary eye, he risked a glance at the clock on the nightstand and was just able, in the darkness, to see the time. *Two in the morning. Shit!* During the War, he'd had to put up with the sound of planes flying overhead, the thunder of artillery, the noises of other men trying to sleep, or those making soft-voiced exchanges while on watch, the rattling of jeeps and trucks passing by, or the grinding engines and tracks of tanks -- any number of things that, even if he couldn't sleep through, had become absurdly familiar. Now, the simple tranquility of subtle sounds he had not been around in a very long time dragged him from sleep. He lay there, listening. Tree limbs creaked as they swayed in the breeze. Leaves rustled against each other. A night bird intermittently sang its song, and from somewhere in the neighborhood, a dog barked. On the outskirts of town, a train whistle blew.

He closed his eyes, trying to fall asleep again by thinking back to the old days, when he and his brothers, and sometimes Louise, had played and fought in this room, made promises and apologies, plotted adventures, celebrated victories and suffered punishments. They had laughed together, grieved together, collaborated and worried together. Supported and surrounded by the hard wood floor and the tongue-and-grooved paneled walls, sheltered by the beamed ceiling, they had reminded themselves not only of the traditional, parent-comprised version of the 'Saunders House Rules', but had come up with some ingenious additions of their own. Depending upon the seriousness of a rule that was broken, the wrong-doer was obligated to pay a penny, nickel, or even, on a rare occasion, a dime. But the worst offences demanded much more -- a favorite marble or lucky charm! All were added, with a certain degree of ceremony of course, to a mason jar aptly referred to as, 'The Jar of Sins'. At one point in time, Joey had more of these in the jar than anyone.

Chip missed Joey and Chris terribly. He looked forward to their homecomings. Granted, because of the War, their lives would never be the same, but they were all alive. Sometimes, when there was a lull in the fighting, and he and his squad would wait in silence, hoping that a

counterattack would not come, Chip would imagine himself at home again, and Chris and Joey were there too. He reminded himself how Chris liked to believe that Grandma Cecie was right: if you pictured something in your head hard enough, it would happen. Maybe that was what praying was all about, he wasn't sure. He was not a man given to praying very much. But then again, there were no atheists in foxholes either.

The minutes dragged on and still sleep escaped him. Soon, he found himself thinking about his friends that were already home, and about those still waiting to get back to the States, and about those that would never return. Guys like Doc Walton and Kelly, Temple and Delaney, Baker, Murray, Gates and of course there was, as always there was, Grady Long. Before the War, he probably would never have met Grady, even though he, too, was from Peoria. As fate would have it, they'd been in the same line at their local induction center. They were the same age but Grady had gone to Peoria's Catholic school, Notre Dame High, while Chip had (until dropping out halfway through his junior year) attended Peoria High. They'd hit it off as friends from the start and went through basic training together, served in the same outfit in North Africa, Sicily and all the way to the Liri Valley in Italy. Later, as chance would have it, they'd been assigned to the 361<sup>st</sup> in England, but they'd been in different companies. After Omaha Beach, when men were being shuffled to reform squads that had been wiped out, or taken heavy casualties, Grady had been reassigned to King Company's 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon as BAR man for First Squad. Chip was elated. The squad was quick to respect Grady for his combat experience. They also liked his wry humor and sense of fair play. A few weeks later, Grady was dead. The platoon felt his absence, but for Chip that loss was almost insufferable. At times he'd thought he'd gotten over his friend's death, but in truth he'd merely tried to bury it. After all, he had a job to do, men he was responsible for and the War didn't allow a guy time to grieve. He'd go see Grady's folks tomorrow. It wouldn't be easy, but it's what Grady would have done for him.

Exhaling wearily, he ran his hands over his face and rolled onto his side. Inadvertently, he caught a glimpse of the mail his mother had placed on the dresser. Knowing that sleep was simply going to continue to evade him, he climbed out of bed and glanced through the envelopes. To his surprise, Dana Marshal's name was on one of them. He'd written to her several times and received only one response -- a fact that bothered him a great deal. The post mark on the envelope was September 8. With a sense of expectancy running through him, Chip gathered that Dana must have received the telegram he'd sent to her on the third, before he'd left Le Havre, and sent a response. Overjoyed with the prospect of seeing her again, he couldn't wait to read her letter. Without another thought, he shrugged into a robe, tucked his mail into a pocket, lifted the patiently waiting Jack in his arms and quietly descended the stairs, remembering to very carefully avoid the creaky Judas Step on his way down.



In the soft light cast by the lamp on the hutch, he sipped the strong, black coffee he'd made and read Dana's letter for the second time.

*Dear Chip,*

*If you're reading this, then you're finally home and I hope your reunion with family and friends has been as warm and exciting as ever you'd imagined.*

*I think of you often, and the time we spent together in Paris, but your silence since then is evident that your feelings toward me have changed. Perhaps my unexpected and sudden departure for the States is to blame for that. If so, I can only ask that you accept my apology again for the disappointment and hurt that surely must have caused you. Or, perhaps your change of heart is simply a matter of time and distance having come between us. Whatever the case may be, Chip, please know that my only desire in writing to you one last time, is to express that I have no regrets for the time we spent together, and that I wish you only happiness and wellbeing for the future.*

*Yours,  
Dana*

The finely penned words left him totally dismayed and thoroughly confused. Apparently, she'd written to him more than once. Granted, the mail going back and forth overseas was still slow, but surely, he thought, she should have received at least a couple of his letters. There hadn't even been any mention of the telegram he'd sent to her. If anything, she would have gotten that. Something wasn't right.

"Chip?"

Pops' voice startled him. He flinched, causing some of the coffee to slosh onto the table and the letter as well. Quickly placing it with the rest of his mail, he rose to get a dish towel.

In the meantime, his grandfather eyed the half folded letter.

"It's okay, Pops," Chip said, "It only got on the edge of the page." As he dabbed up the spill, he asked his grandfather why he was up so late.

"I was going to ask *you* that question," Pops replied. He poured himself a cup of coffee, adding, "I heard you coming down the stairs. You okay?"

"Oh, sure," Chip answered offhandedly. With a half-smile, he added, if a little too lightly, "You know, I've never had that attic room all to myself before. It seems kind of strange. I woke up a while ago but...I just couldn't get back to sleep"

Pops gave him a discerning look and then replied, almost too agreeably, "Well, that's understandable. I guess it *is* too quiet up there without Joey and Chris." He didn't need to tell his grandson that his excuse for a restless night was missing a few details. "You know, son," he said compassionately, "when your dad came home from his war, it took some time for him to get used to things again. He didn't sleep an entire night through for quite a long while." A crooked, derisive grin creased his features. "Same thing happened with me, too, after Cuba and Puerto Rico."

Pops seemed to retreat into his own war memories for a moment, and Chip needed no imagination to understand the kinds of things he remembered.

"I woke up," he admitted, "thinking about Joey and Chris, the things we did as kids...how nothing will be the same because of what we've all been through in combat." He stared at the remainder of the coffee in his cup and swirled it around. "I keep thinking about the guys in my outfit, too. Some of them are still waiting to get orders to come home. A lot of them...I wish I could've..." He set the coffee down and rubbed at his tired eyes.

"You couldn't have kept them all alive, son, no matter how hard you tried to. It just doesn't work that way." Pops lowered his gaze and whispered absently, "The things war does to people..." He shook his head despondently and looked up. "There's things you and your brothers won't forget, Chip, and even some you shouldn't."

Chip let out a slow breath. "I know, Pops."

"I wish you didn't have to." The old man cleared his throat a little and motioned to the mail on the table. "I see you've been going through these."

The deliberate re-direction of the conversation was welcome, as Jack, who lay beside Chip's chair, attested to with a contented groan, followed by a heavy sigh. Chip reached down and ran his hand along the silky head and ears of his faithful friend, while Pops inspected the damp stain on the open letter. Chip assured him again that it wasn't ruined.

"Oh, I can see that." A knowing smile lit the old man's expression. "This is from the lieutenant who wrote the letters for Chris last November, isn't it? The same lieutenant you met in Paris?"

"How'd you know this was from her?"

Pops raised an eyebrow and tapped one finger against his head. "I'm a grandparent," he replied. "Wise in all things. If you're lucky, one day you'll be like this, too."

Chip grinned and waved him off. "Cut it out, Pops. If I know you, you read the return address on the envelope when this was delivered."

The older man winked. "Looks like your girl's in Chicago."

"Now wait a minute, Pops, I never said she was --"

"You don't need to." His grandfather leaned his forearms on the edge of the table. "Let me tell you something, your grandmother doesn't need to be on this earth anymore for me to still love her as much as I ever did. It's not something I have to put into words, it's just there, because we were so much a part of each other. You're a part of me too. Now, I might be an old man, but my eyes still see better'n most, and I can tell that you if didn't feel something for Miss Marshall, you wouldn't have been down here reading her letter with such a worried look on your face."

Chip regarded him for a solemn moment. "I do like her, Pops. I like her a lot." Just exactly how deep his relationship with Dana had grown during that week in Paris, wasn't something he was willing to divulge. He did, however, impart some of what her letter said. "I just don't get it, I wrote to her several times, but she didn't get any of my letters. Not one in all that time."

Pops spread his hands and offered, "You know the overseas mail is still moving pretty slow --"

Chip sighed and ran one hand through his hair. "I know it is, but, she'd have at least gotten the telegram I sent before I left for the States. I told her I was coming home, that I'd like to see her again." He indicated the post mark on the envelope. "Pops, she sent this *after* she would've gotten my telegram."

"But she doesn't mention it?"

Chip shook his head.

Pops' brow drew down in a serious expression. He sat back, arms folded across his broad chest. "I don't like to say it, Chip, but, if she hasn't heard from you in all this time, for whatever reason, there might be --"

"Someone else now?" Chip finished. "I've thought of that, and I guess I couldn't blame her if that's so, but..." He rested his elbows on the table and leaned into his folded hands. "Pops, did Dana call at any time before I got home?"

"You know we'd have told you if she had." Pops suggested that Miss Marshall might have telephoned and there simply hadn't been anyone home. He took the letter into his own hands. "I don't know everything, but I do know this, if a lady signs a letter, 'Yours', then she wants to hear from you. Maybe you should call her."

"I tried that before I left New Jersey. A house servant answered, told me Dana wasn't available. I got the feeling that I was getting the brush-off."

His grandfather leveled a steady gaze at him. "Do you love her?"

The look on his grandson's face revealed that he hadn't expected that question at all. "Well," Pops repeated bluntly, "do you? He could see the uncertain answer forming on Chip's face and he wasn't about to let him off easy. "I don't know'," Pops remarked frankly, "isn't acceptable. And neither is 'maybe'. Either you love this woman, or you don't."

The expression on Chip's face was one that brooked no uncertainty. "Yeah, Pops, I do love her."

Pops rose, and placed the letter in his grandson's hands. His words were straightforward, the voice sympathetic and quietly encouraging. "Then go to Chicago."



To be continued...

