

**The Story of Jimmy Lee  
Preview Edition  
Chapters 1–6**

**Michael Wickham**

## **Synopsis**

A WWII veteran suffering from dementia struggles to hold onto the memory of the friend who saved his life on Omaha Beach. As memories fade and the past becomes present, one final journey reveals the true meaning of friendship, sacrifice, family, and remembrance.

# CHAPTER ONE

Golden Ages

Dad sat by the window in the same brown chair he'd been sitting in for the last three years.

At least that's what he believed.

Truth was, the chair had only been there a month. The old one finally gave way beneath him one afternoon during bingo and nearly dumped him onto the floor. But somewhere in his mind, time no longer stacked itself in straight lines. It drifted around loose and disconnected like old photographs sliding across a table.

Still, he loved that chair.

Said it fit his back better.

Said whoever picked it out finally had some sense.

The late afternoon sun stretched across his hands resting in his lap. Thin hands now. Spotted with age. Hard to believe those same hands once loaded rifles and carried wounded men through waist-high surf on Omaha Beach.

Outside his window, summer heat settled over the parking lot in slow waves. A few trees stood near the edge of the property, their leaves barely moving in the heavy Tennessee air. Beyond them sat Highway 72 where cars passed steady enough to remind you the rest of the world was still moving.

Inside Golden Ages, time moved differently.

Meals arrived on beige plastic trays. Medicine cups rattled down hallways. Wheelchairs drifted slowly across the tile floors. Televisions played louder than necessary because half the residents couldn't hear them anymore and the other half had forgotten they were even on.

Down the hallway, somebody was hollering for Louise again.

Every day somebody hollered for Louise.

Nobody knew who Louise was.

Maybe she was dead.

Maybe she never existed.

But somewhere inside those fading minds, Louise was always just around the corner.

Dad kept staring out the window with a crease in his forehead like he was trying to remember something important before it got away from him again.

The jazz station beside his bed crackled softly through static.

He loved jazz.

Always had.

Even after the dementia started taking names and faces from him, the music somehow stayed behind like an old friend refusing to leave.

"You hear that trumpet?" he asked one evening a few months earlier. "That boy's forcing the note. You don't force music. You let it come to you."

Then ten minutes later he forgot what year it was.

Funny thing about dementia. Sometimes music survives longer than memory.

"Tony?"

I looked up.

Dad was staring at me now.

"You just get here?"

"Been here for hours dad."

He nodded slowly like he believed me, though I wasn't sure he did.

"How's your wife doing?"

"She's good."

"How are the boys?"

"They're doing good too."

I answered the same way every time.

There was no wife.

No boys either.

But correcting him only confused him. Sometimes it embarrassed him. Other times it made him angry because somewhere in his mind he knew things weren't lining up right anymore.

So I let him have the version of life that brought him peace.

Sometimes mercy and lying looked an awful lot alike.

A nurse rolled a medicine cart past the doorway humming quietly to herself. Right behind her came Sandy carrying a paper cup and a small bottle of pills.

Sandy had worked at Golden Ages nearly twelve years. Mid-fifties maybe. Gray beginning to show around his temples. Calm voice. Slow walker. The kind of man who never seemed rattled by anything.

"Afternoon, Mr. Bennett," Sandy said. "You ready to take these vitamins?"

Dad squinted up at him.

"Well Andy, long as they ain't horse pills."

Sandy smiled.

"No horses harmed in the making of these."

Dad chuckled softly at his own joke before swallowing the pills one at a time.

When his mind drifted, he called Sandy "Andy."

Sandy quit correcting him years ago.

"Your blood pressure's looking good today," Sandy said.

"Course it is," Dad muttered. "I ain't paid taxes in years."

Sandy laughed.

"Wish it worked that way."

After Sandy left, Dad looked back toward the window again.

"You know what I like about this chair?"

"What's that?"

"It remembers me."

I smiled a little.

"How do you figure?"

"Been sitting here three years and it still knows the shape of my backside."

I laughed softly.

The sad thing was, part of him probably believed that.

He rubbed his wedding ring absentmindedly with his thumb.

Mama had been gone ten years now.

At first, after she died, Dad held together pretty well. At least outwardly. He still mowed his own grass. Still drove to the grocery store. Still sat on his porch in the evenings listening to jazz records while the sun went down.

Then little things started slipping.

He forgot appointments.

Forgot conversations.

Forgot where he parked his truck.

One afternoon he drove halfway to Nashville before realizing he wasn't sure where he was going.

The worst was the wandering.

Five years after Mama died, the police found him two neighborhoods over knocking on strangers' doors in bedroom slippers.

"Have y'all seen my wife?" he kept asking.

That was the night I finally understood he wasn't coming back from whatever this was.

A lot of people think dementia happens all at once.

It doesn't.

It happens in pieces.

A missed name here.

A forgotten street there.

Then one day the person you knew is standing right in front of you and somehow also already halfway gone.

Mrs. Cantley appeared in the doorway carrying a clipboard against her chest.

She ran the front office at Golden Ages and treated the place like it was a church fellowship hall that happened to contain ninety old people and occasional chaos.

"Tony," she said softly. "You got a minute?"

I stepped into the hallway and pulled the door halfway closed behind me.

"What's going on?"

"Nothing bad," she said quickly. "I just wanted to ask you something before you left today."

She lowered her voice.

"Your daddy's been calmer lately when you're here."

I nodded.

"Some days."

"Well... we've noticed he gets agitated on the evenings you don't come by."

"That doesn't surprise me."

She studied me for a second.

"You know he talks about Jimmy Lee almost constantly now."

"I know."

"He talks about Omaha Beach like it happened last week."

For Dad, sometimes it probably had.

Mrs. Cantley sighed quietly.

"I just worry about you carrying all this by yourself."

"I'm alright."

She gave me a look that suggested she didn't believe that for one second.

"You ever think about taking a few days for yourself?"

I almost laughed.

"Wouldn't know what to do with them."

"That ain't healthy, Tony."

Maybe not.

But some promises follow you whether you want them to or not.

I glanced back through the doorway at Dad sitting by the window.

"When he forgets who I am," I said quietly, "the story's usually the only thing left he recognizes."

Mrs. Cantley nodded slowly.

"Well... just don't disappear yourself trying to keep him together."

I gave her a tired smile.

"I'll do my best."

When I stepped back inside the room, Dad looked up immediately.

"There you are," he said. "Thought maybe you'd run off with one of them nurses."

"At my age?"

"At any age."

I pulled my chair closer beside him.

The sun outside had started dipping lower now, turning the parking lot gold.

Dad kept staring at the fading light.

"You know," he said softly, "there's something about evenings."

"What's that?"

"Feels like the world gets quieter right before dark. Like everybody's waiting on something."

His voice had changed.

Softer now.

Far away.

I'd learned to recognize that look in his eyes. It usually meant he was drifting backward again.

Toward the war.

Toward Jimmy.

Toward the memories that dementia refused to let die.

The jazz station crackled softly between songs.

Then Dad finally turned toward me.

Fear sat behind his eyes now.

Not panic.

Not confusion.

Just fear.

The kind that comes when somebody knows they're losing pieces of themselves and can't stop it.

"Son?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you remember Jimmy Lee?"

There it was.

The question that lived inside these walls like a ghost.

Some days he asked it casually.

Other days like he was searching for proof the past had really happened.

Today sounded different.

Today sounded desperate.

I leaned back slowly in my chair.

Outside, the last sunlight slipped behind the trees.

And once again—

I began.

## CHAPTER TWO

Do You Remember the Story of Jimmy Lee?

“Do you remember the story of Jimmy Lee?”

Dad was staring out the window when he asked it.

Rain from earlier that morning still clung to the glass in thin crooked streaks, bending the late afternoon sunlight into pale lines across the floor. Somewhere down the hall, an old woman was calling for her sister again. The television in the commons room played louder than anyone needed, mostly because nobody remembered where the remote was.

Dad didn't seem to notice any of it.

His eyes stayed fixed outside.

Waiting.

I had heard that question thousands of times.

Some days he asked it with excitement, like an old man waiting to hear his favorite song. Other days he asked it carefully, almost afraid of the answer. Like maybe this time the story would end differently.

And sometimes—like today—it sounded like he truly couldn't remember if Jimmy Lee had ever existed at all.

I looked over at him sitting there in the fading light.

Hands spotted with age.

Shoulders smaller than the ones that once carried a rifle across Europe.

The war had never really left him. Time had simply buried it beneath decades of life until dementia started digging it back up again.

“Yeah,” I said softly. “I remember.”

He nodded once.

Slow.

Distant.

For a few seconds neither of us spoke.

The jazz station beside his bed crackled softly through static. A trumpet drifted somewhere beneath the hiss.

Dad loved jazz.

Still did.

Funny thing about dementia. Sometimes music survives longer than names.

Then his eyes drifted toward me.

“You tell it better than I do now.”

That nearly broke me.

Because once upon a time, nobody told stories better than my father.

Now he struggled to remember what year it was.

I stood and walked to the activities closet near the end of the hallway. The volunteers kept old military memorabilia there for Veterans Day events. Most of it was junk. Cheap reproductions and faded decorations.

But buried beneath an Army blanket sat an old steel helmet and a pair of worn combat boots somebody had donated years ago.

Real ones.

Heavy.

Scarred.

Used.

I carried them back to the room.

Dad watched carefully.

I sat the helmet down.

Then I slipped on the boots.

The old leather creaked as I tightened the laces.

“Thought these might help jog your memory.”

His eyes drifted downward.

For a moment something moved across his face.

Not recognition.

Not exactly.

But something.

Like a door somewhere deep inside him had opened an inch.

“Fort Benning,” he murmured.

I stopped.

“What was that?”

“Red dirt,” he said quietly. “Hot as hell down there.”

The room grew still.

He wasn't looking at me anymore.

He was somewhere else.

Somewhere eighty years away.

The fluorescent lights hummed softly overhead.

Then the room disappeared.

The tile floor softened into Georgia clay.

The smell of coffee and disinfectant faded into dust, pine trees, sweat, and gun oil.

And in my mind—

I stepped into my father's life.

The heat hit first.

Not ordinary heat.

Georgia heat.

The kind that crawled inside your clothes and stayed there.

Dust floated through the air with every bootstep. Men shouted somewhere nearby. Rifles clattered.

A train whistle echoed in the distance.

And suddenly—

I was him.

My hand was being crushed by Staff Sergeant Bill Cox.

"Welcome to boot camp, son."

"Thank you, sir."

The men called him Big Bill.

I understood why immediately.

I wasn't a small man. Twenty-three years old. Six-foot-two. Around two hundred and twenty pounds. Played football in school and thought I was pretty tough.

Then I met Big Bill.

He made me feel like I'd shrunk.

His shoulders stretched his uniform. His hands looked like they could bend horseshoes.

I remember thinking if there hadn't been a war, he probably could've made a living wrestling grizzly bears.

"Get yourself settled in," he said. "Get a good night's sleep. You're gonna need it."

After the long train ride to camp, it sounded like the best advice I'd ever heard.

Later I learned sleep was mostly a rumor in the Army.

I turned toward the door just as it swung open.

A young man nearly ran into me.

He stopped short and looked me up and down.

Then he grinned.

"Well," he said, "I know who I want standing next to me when we head off to Europe."

I laughed.

"Me too."

I jerked my thumb toward Big Bill.

The sergeant shook his head.

The young man stuck out his hand.

"Jimmy Lee."

I shook it.

"Tony Bennett."

"Bennett," he repeated.

Just like that.

I had a friend.

Jimmy had a way of talking that made everything sound interesting. He spoke with a slow East Tennessee drawl that rolled out easy and natural.

Nineteen years old.

Fresh out of high school.

Dirty blond hair.

A grin that seemed permanently attached to his face.

You could tell immediately he enjoyed life.

I imagined he'd spent most of high school talking himself into and out of trouble.

Not me.

I had a wife waiting back home.

A young son.

That's all I cared about.

Getting back to them.

"All right, Bennett," Big Bill barked. "Get out of here. I've got some chewing out to do with your new friend. Seems he can't leave the females alone on this base."

Jimmy didn't look remotely concerned.

"Occupational hazard, Sarge."

Big Bill fought a smile.

"We'll see you boys at chow."

As I walked away, Jimmy called after me.

"We'll have supper together. You can tell me all about that wife of yours."

I smiled.

For some reason, I was already looking forward to it.

The mess hall food looked like somebody had declared war on flavor.

I was halfway through eating when Jimmy dropped onto the bench across from me.

"Good news," he announced.

"What's that?"

"I survived my first official Army chewing-out."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

An older corporal sitting nearby pointed a fork at him.

"When are they sending you to punishment detail?"

Jimmy shoveled a bite of mystery meat into his mouth.

"Hopefully after dessert."

The corporal rolled his eyes.

"Smart-ass."

"That's what my mama always said."

I laughed despite myself.

The corporal looked at me.

"You'll learn."

"Learn what?"

"He never shuts up."

Jimmy grinned.

"Not true."

"Name one time."

Jimmy thought about it.

Then nodded.

“Fair point.”

For the first time since arriving at Fort Benning, I found myself relaxing.

Just a little.

Maybe it was because Jimmy treated everything like an adventure.

Maybe it was because laughing felt better than thinking.

Either way, supper lasted longer than it should have because none of us were in any hurry to return to reality.

Reality was waiting outside.

And reality wore Army boots.

The Barracks

That first night in the barracks was a shock all its own.

Rows of metal bunks stretched from one end of the building to the other. Footlockers sat at attention beneath them like obedient soldiers waiting for orders. Ceiling fans turned lazily overhead, pushing warm air around without doing much good.

The Army had a way of putting a hundred strangers together and expecting them to become one thing.

It didn't happen overnight.

That first evening, men talked quietly about home.

Where they were from.

What kind of work they'd done before the Army found them.

Whether they thought the war might be over before Christmas.

Nobody talked about dying.

Not directly.

That thought lived in the room anyway.

It sat between the bunks and drifted through conversations without ever introducing itself.

I climbed into my bunk and stared at the underside of the mattress above me.

The springs creaked every time Jimmy moved.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

“Not especially.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Means we're all miserable together.”

I laughed.

A few minutes later the lights snapped off.

Darkness settled across the barracks.

Half the room started snoring almost immediately.

One man talked in his sleep.

Another coughed for what felt like an hour.  
Somewhere down the row somebody whispered a prayer.  
The box fanz clicked steadily from the open windows.  
I thought about my wife.  
My son.  
I wondered what they were doing.  
Whether she was sleeping.  
Whether he cried when I wasn't there.  
Mostly I wondered if they were as scared as I was.  
Not of boot camp.  
Of what came after.  
The war felt distant during the day.  
At night it sat at the foot of your bed.  
Waiting.  
The next morning began with violence.  
Not bullets.  
Not explosions.  
A bugle.  
Reveille ripped through the barracks before daylight had fully arrived.  
One second I was asleep.  
The next I was upright, heart racing, trying to remember where I was.  
Men stumbled out of bunks.  
Boots hit the floor.  
Footlockers slammed.  
Somebody cursed.  
Somebody else tripped over a blanket.  
"Move!" a voice roared.  
"Benning ain't waiting on you ladies!"  
Jimmy swung down from the bunk above mine and landed beside me.  
"Morning, sunshine."  
"You look entirely too happy."  
"I'm not happy."  
"You sure?"  
"No. I'm just naturally irritating."  
That much was already obvious.  
The sergeant stormed through the barracks.  
"Lee!"  
Jimmy froze.

"Yes, sir?"

"If I have to come back over here again, you'll be making friends with every push-up in the state of Georgia."

"Yes, sir."

The sergeant leaned closer.

"And don't smile at me."

Jimmy immediately stopped smiling.

The second the sergeant walked away, he grinned again.

I shook my head.

"One of these days he's gonna kill you."

"Probably."

Outside, dawn was just beginning to lighten the sky.

The air already felt heavy.

By breakfast, sweat was running down our backs.

By lunch, most of us looked like we'd fallen into a river.

Fort Benning wasted no time breaking us down.

Physical training came first.

Push-ups.

Sit-ups.

Running.

More push-ups.

Then some additional push-ups for good measure.

If a man looked comfortable, the Army considered that a problem requiring immediate correction.

Big Bill paced in front of us while we exercised.

"If your arms ain't burnin', you ain't low enough."

Nobody argued.

Arguing only created more exercise.

The days settled into a rhythm.

Wake up.

Run.

March.

Drill.

Eat.

Train.

Collapse.

Repeat.

The Army wasn't just training bodies.

It was training habits.

Training reactions.

Training obedience.

Training men to move together.

To think together.

To survive together.

At least that was the idea.

Some men adapted quickly.

Others struggled.

Most of us fell somewhere in between.

The obstacle course became the center of our misery.

Tall wooden walls.

Rope climbs.

Balance beams.

Mud pits.

Enough ways to embarrass yourself to fill an entire afternoon.

Jimmy loved it.

Naturally.

"Come on, Bennett," he called one morning. "I thought football players were supposed to be athletic."

"I am athletic."

"Then why do you look like a bear climbing a fence?"

I wiped sweat from my face.

"Because I am a bear climbing a fence."

"Fair enough."

We reached one of the taller walls.

Men were scrambling over it from both directions.

Boots scratched against rough wood.

A few fell back down.

Big Bill watched the chaos with amusement.

"Use your legs!"

Nobody listened.

We were too busy suffering.

Jimmy jumped, grabbed the top edge, and pulled himself over smoothly.

Before dropping down the other side he looked back.

"See?"

I hated him a little.

"Show off."

He grinned.

“Just naturally gifted.”

Big Bill barked from behind us.

“Lee!”

“Yes, sir?”

“You planning on flirting your way through this war too?”

Jimmy considered it.

“If possible, sir.”

Even Big Bill almost smiled.

By the end of the first week, everybody hurt.

Not injured.

Just worn down.

Shoulders ached.

Legs ached.

Feet ached.

Parts of your body you didn't know existed suddenly demanded attention.

The amazing thing wasn't how much training we did.

The amazing thing was how quickly it became normal.

Human beings can get used to almost anything.

Including misery.

The mess hall became one of the few places where men relaxed.

Food wasn't particularly good.

But it was food.

That mattered.

One afternoon a young woman working behind the serving counter caught Jimmy's attention.

I noticed the moment it happened.

His posture changed.

His grin appeared.

His confidence doubled.

All warning signs.

“Well, howdy, ma'am,” he said.

She looked up.

“You want your food or not?”

“I was hoping to get both.”

The girl rolled her eyes.

The soldier behind me muttered, “Lord help us.”

Jimmy wasn't discouraged.

He never seemed discouraged.

“You got a name?” he asked.

"I got stew."

"That's a beautiful name."

The soldier behind me laughed.

The girl fought a smile.

Jimmy accepted his tray like he'd just completed an important military mission.

At the table, Haskins shook his head.

"This boy chases anything wearing a skirt."

Jimmy pointed a spoon at him.

"That ain't true."

"It absolutely is."

"It might be partially true."

The older corporal sat down beside us.

"You know what your problem is, Lee?"

"I got several. Which one are we discussing?"

"You're always chasing something."

He took a bite of bread.

Then pointed again.

"That's it."

"What?"

"Chase."

Jimmy blinked.

"Chase?"

"Yeah. You chase girls. You chase trouble. You'll probably end up chasing bullets before this thing's over."

Haskins laughed.

"He's right."

A few others at the table picked it up immediately.

"Pass the salt, Chase."

"Hey Chase, you eating that roll?"

"Chase, quit staring at the kitchen girls."

Within five minutes the name had taken hold.

Jimmy shook his head.

"Could've been worse."

The corporal nodded.

"There's still time."

Everybody laughed.

Even Jimmy.

From that day forward, he was Chase.

And somehow the name fit him perfectly.

The funny thing about friendships is that sometimes they take years.

Sometimes they take ten minutes.

By the end of that first week, I couldn't imagine boot camp without him.

Neither of us knew it then.

But the friendship forming between those barracks walls was going to survive a lot more than Georgia heat.

The Promise

The first week ended the same way every night.

Hot.

Tired.

Sore.

By lights out, most of us were too exhausted to do much more than climb into our bunks and stare into the dark.

The barracks settled into its nighttime sounds.

The slow turning of ceiling fans.

The occasional cough.

A distant train whistle somewhere beyond the base.

Men shifting beneath thin blankets.

Thinking.

Remembering.

Worrying.

Nobody said much once the lights went out.

The dark had a way of making honest thoughts louder.

One evening, after a particularly miserable day on the obstacle course, Jimmy's voice drifted down from the bunk above mine.

"You awake, Bennett?"

"Yeah."

"Thought so."

"You can tell from my breathing?"

"No."

"Then how?"

"Because you're too old to sleep comfortably."

I laughed quietly.

"I'm twenty-three."

"Exactly."

"I hate you."

"No you don't."

A few bunks away, somebody snored loud enough to rattle windows.

Jimmy chuckled.

"Haskins sounds like a freight train."

"Poor fellow probably works harder asleep than he does awake."

That earned another laugh.

For a few minutes neither of us spoke.

Then Jimmy's voice changed.

Just a little.

Less joking.

More serious.

"You got a picture of them?"

"My wife and boy?"

"Yeah."

I reached beneath my pillow and pulled out my wallet.

Even in the dark I knew exactly where the photograph was.

I had looked at it every night since arriving.

"Right here."

"You carry it all the time?"

"Every day."

"Good."

I slid the picture back into my wallet.

"You got one?"

"My folks."

His voice softened.

"Momma insisted I take it."

"Glad she did?"

"Yeah."

A pause.

Then:

"She's probably worried herself sick."

I understood that feeling.

My wife was probably doing the same thing.

Trying not to imagine what might happen once we left America.

Trying not to think about the newspapers.

The casualty reports.

The photographs coming back from overseas.

Trying not to think about war.

Which meant she was probably thinking about nothing else.

"You ever think about it?" Jimmy asked.

I knew exactly what he meant.

Getting killed.

Not coming home.

The question had been living in all our heads from the first day.

Nobody just said it out loud very often.

"Every minute," I admitted.

The ceiling fan clicked overhead.

Jimmy let out a slow breath.

"Me too."

There was no joking in his voice now.

No grin.

No charm.

Just honesty.

For the first time since meeting him, he sounded nineteen.

A kid.

Scared like the rest of us.

"Tell you what, Bennett."

"What?"

"If I get shot first, you lay down behind me."

I laughed once.

It sounded ridiculous.

He didn't laugh.

"You use me for cover," he continued. "Get your big self back home to that wife and kid."

I stared up into the darkness.

"You serious?"

"Dead serious."

His answer came too quickly.

Like he'd already thought about it.

Like he'd already made peace with the possibility.

"Why would you say something like that?"

"Because somebody ought to make it home."

The barracks fell silent around us.

The fan continued its lazy clicking in the window.

"Besides," Jimmy said, trying to lighten the mood, "somebody's gotta tell my daddy I wasn't completely worthless."

I smiled.

"Your daddy probably already knows that."

"I hope so."

Then he grew quiet again.

“Deal?”

I don't know why I said yes.

Maybe because neither of us wanted to feel helpless.

Maybe because promises are easier than fear.

Maybe because two young men lying in the dark wanted to believe they had some control over what was coming.

“Deal.”

“Good.”

Another pause.

Then Jimmy's voice returned to normal.

“Now get some sleep.”

“You first.”

“I am asleep.”

“You're talking.”

“Sleep talking.”

I shook my head.

A few minutes later I heard him snoring softly above me.

I lay awake much longer.

Thinking about home.

Thinking about war.

Thinking about promises.

At the time, it felt like one more conversation between two tired soldiers.

I didn't know then how much that promise would eventually cost.

A few days later, Haskins died.

The thing I remember most isn't the death itself.

It's how ordinary the day started.

Nobody wakes up expecting tragedy.

The sun came up.

The whistles blew.

The sergeants yelled.

The coffee tasted terrible.

Everything felt exactly the same.

Until it wasn't.

We were on a conditioning march.

Ten miles.

Maybe a little more.

Georgia heat had settled over the countryside before noon.

The kind of heat that pressed against your chest every time you tried to breathe.

Our uniforms were soaked through.

Dust clung to our boots and trouser legs.

Most of us kept our eyes on the man in front of us and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

Haskins had been struggling all morning.

Not complaining.

Just fading.

Falling farther behind.

Breathing harder.

One of the sergeants noticed.

"Pick it up, Haskins!"

No response.

"Haskins!"

Still nothing.

A few moments later he stumbled.

Then dropped to one knee.

Then both.

The column slowed.

At first nobody thought much of it.

Men passed out during training.

It happened.

Especially in that heat.

Then Haskins pitched forward face first into the dirt.

A small cloud of dust rose around him.

The sergeant turned around.

"Haskins!"

Nothing.

"Get up!"

Still nothing.

Something changed then.

You could feel it.

The moment when annoyance turns into concern.

The moment when concern turns into fear.

Several men rushed toward him.

The rest of us stood there watching.

Waiting.

Hoping.

Nobody said it out loud.  
But we all knew something was wrong.  
Very wrong.  
The medics arrived quickly.  
Not quickly enough.  
Haskins never got back up.  
We learned later it was heat stroke.  
His canteen was still nearly full.  
One of the boys who knew him best said Haskins hated water.  
Wouldn't drink it unless he absolutely had to.  
Preferred coffee.  
Sweet tea.  
Anything but water.  
A simple thing.  
A foolish thing.  
The kind of thing nobody thinks about until it's too late.  
He died less than two miles from the barracks.  
Less than two miles.  
That fact stayed with me.  
War hadn't killed him.  
Germany hadn't killed him.  
A beach in France hadn't killed him.  
Georgia heat had.  
The barracks were different that night.  
Nobody had to say anything.  
The difference was everywhere.  
Men spoke softer.  
Moved slower.  
Thought harder.  
The joking disappeared.  
Even Jimmy was quiet.  
The building creaked occasionally.  
Somewhere in the darkness a man whispered a prayer.  
Then another.  
Nobody laughed.  
Nobody complained.  
Nobody talked about going home.  
For the first time since arriving at Fort Benning, the war felt real.

Not because we had seen combat.  
Because we finally understood something.  
People died.  
Young men.  
Ordinary men.  
Men who laughed at breakfast.  
Men who sat across from you at supper.  
Men who expected tomorrow.  
Then suddenly there wasn't a tomorrow.  
The realization settled over the barracks like a blanket.  
Heavy.  
Uncomfortable.  
Impossible to ignore.  
After a long silence, Jimmy finally spoke.  
His voice was barely above a whisper.  
"I wonder if Haskins died better than the way we're gonna die over there."  
Nobody answered.  
There wasn't an answer.  
Not one any of us wanted to hear.  
The darkness swallowed the question.  
The fan continued turning.  
And eventually sleep came.  
Or something close to it.  
After Haskins died, Fort Benning changed.  
Not officially.  
The schedules stayed the same.  
The marches continued.  
Big Bill kept yelling.  
The obstacle course didn't get any shorter.  
But something inside us shifted.  
Before Haskins, training felt temporary.  
After Haskins, it felt like preparation for something real.  
Something waiting beyond the horizon.  
The illusion disappeared.  
We were no longer learning how to be soldiers.  
We were learning how to survive.  
Training was no longer preparation.  
It was a warning.

A noise in the hallway pulled me back.  
The Georgia heat faded.  
The barracks disappeared.  
The dust settled.  
I blinked and found myself standing once again inside Golden Ages.  
Dad was asleep.  
His hands rested peacefully in his lap.  
The jazz station played softly beside him.  
At some point while I was telling the story, he'd drifted off.  
I stood there for a moment watching him.  
The old man in the chair.  
The young soldier in Georgia.  
Both somehow the same person.  
I wondered how many times he had told me these stories over the years.  
A hundred?  
A thousand?  
Enough that parts of them felt like my own memories now.  
I adjusted the blanket across his lap.  
"Get some rest, old man."  
He didn't stir.  
Outside the window, evening shadows stretched across the parking lot.  
The world kept moving.  
Cars passed.  
Birds settled into the trees.  
People hurried home to families waiting for them.  
Inside the room, time seemed content to stand still.  
I looked at him one last time.  
Tomorrow we'd continue.  
Tomorrow we'd board a ship.  
Tomorrow we'd sail toward history.  
Toward France.  
Toward Omaha Beach.  
Toward Jimmy Lee's promise.  
And toward the day that would haunt my father for the rest of his life.  
I turned down the radio.  
Then quietly stepped into the hallway.  
Behind me, Dad slept peacefully.  
Ahead of me waited the rest of the story.

# CHAPTER THREE

Orders for Europe

I always made it a point to stop by a few of the nurses' stations before heading to Dad's room.

Partly to be polite.

Partly because I needed the conversation.

When your only regular companion at home is a house cat you never intended to own, you start appreciating human voices.

Funny thing is, I was always a dog person.

Cats were supposed to be moody. Aloof. Barely interested in your existence.

Then one rainy morning a scraggly little calico showed up on my porch looking like she'd been through three counties and lost an argument with all of them.

She meowed once.

Walked inside.

And never left.

Somewhere along the way she became my best friend.

Life has a funny way of changing your mind about things.

Sandy was stepping out of Dad's room as I came down the hallway.

The look on his face told me everything.

Raised eyebrows.

Pinched lips.

That slight shake of the head.

The universal expression of a man who'd just survived a difficult afternoon.

"Your daddy's in rare form today," he said.

"That bad?"

"He spent twenty minutes asking for Mrs. Bennett."

That caught my attention.

Mrs. Bennett.

I hadn't heard that name in years.

She had been a neighbor when Dad was growing up. A widow who always left bread crumbs out for birds and never minded neighborhood kids sitting on her porch.

Whenever Dad's dementia got particularly bad, certain people from his childhood would suddenly return.

Not because he remembered them clearly.

Because they represented safety.

I nodded toward the room.

"How's he doing now?"

Sandy sighed.

"Depends on which decade he's living in."

That wasn't much of an answer.

But it usually wasn't.

I opened the door slowly.

Dad was sitting upright in bed clutching his blanket.

His eyes were wide.

Suspicious.

Scared.

The look told me immediately that he wasn't in the present.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

I stayed where I was.

"Just me, Dad."

"This is my house."

"No, sir."

"It is too."

His voice was growing louder.

I've learned not to argue.

Logic doesn't work against dementia.

Facts don't work.

Correction doesn't work.

You have to find an anchor.

Something strong enough to pull them back.

For Dad, that anchor had always been Jimmy Lee.

"Hey Dad," I said casually. "Do you remember where Jimmy Lee left his dog tags?"

The change was immediate.

Not complete.

But immediate.

His shoulders relaxed.

The anger drained from his face.

"Top drawer," he muttered.

"What?"

"Top drawer."

He pointed toward the dresser.

"That's where he left them."

"Thank you."

His eyes softened.

Then he smiled.

A real smile.

"You always were forgetful, son."

Son.

I hadn't heard him call me that in months.  
Maybe today was going to be a good day.  
I pulled a chair beside his bed and sat down.  
For a few minutes we talked.  
Not about anything important.  
The weather.  
Baseball.  
The birds outside.  
Normal conversation.  
The kind most people take for granted.  
Then a food tray crashed somewhere down the hall.  
A nurse apologized.  
Somebody started yelling.  
The spell broke.  
Dad's expression emptied.  
His shoulders sagged.  
The fog rolled back in.  
He looked at me.  
Confused.  
Lost.  
Almost frightened.  
Then quietly he asked:  
"Son... could you remind me about Jimmy Lee?"  
There it was.  
The question.  
The one that always found its way back.  
I reached over and squeezed his hand.  
"Do you remember the day you got your orders for Europe?"  
His fingers tightened around mine.  
For a moment his eyes sharpened.  
"Yes," he whispered.  
Then after a pause:  
"Tell me what happened."  
And so I began.  
The barracks were unusually quiet.  
That should have been the first sign.  
Army barracks were never quiet.  
Not really.

There was always somebody talking.  
Somebody laughing.  
Somebody complaining.  
But that afternoon a strange stillness had settled over the room.  
Men sat on bunks writing letters.  
Reading old ones.  
Thinking.  
Waiting.  
Nobody knew exactly what was coming.  
But everybody knew something was.  
Jimmy sat across from me on his bunk.  
Boots off.  
Letter from home folded in his hands.  
For once he wasn't talking.  
That alone was enough to make me nervous.  
Then the office door opened.  
Sarge stepped out carrying a clipboard.  
Conversations died immediately.  
The room went still.  
"Gather around."  
Nobody wasted time.  
Boots hit the floor.  
Letters disappeared into pockets.  
Men formed a loose circle around him.  
Sarge looked older than usual.  
Not tired.  
Just serious.  
The kind of serious that tells you life is about to change.  
"You boys trained hard."  
Nobody spoke.  
"You've marched. Drilled. Sweated. Complained."  
A few smiles appeared.  
Even Sarge almost smiled.  
"Most of you are twice the soldiers you were when you got here."  
He paused.  
The room seemed to tighten.  
Then he delivered the words we'd all been expecting.  
"You received your movement orders this morning."

Silence.

Nobody reacted.

Not outwardly.

Inside was a different story.

"We ship out soon."

There it was.

No more wondering.

No more speculation.

No more pretending the war existed somewhere far away.

Europe had arrived.

Right there inside that barracks.

"You'll remember your training."

Sarge paced slowly in front of us.

"You'll trust your officers."

Another step.

"You'll trust each other."

Another.

"And you'll keep your heads when things get rough."

Nobody moved.

Nobody coughed.

Nobody looked away.

"A squad that fights together comes home together."

The words hung there.

Every man hearing something slightly different.

Hope.

Fear.

Determination.

Prayer.

When he finally dismissed us, nobody rushed back to what they were doing.

The war had entered the room.

And it wasn't leaving.

Jimmy sat back down heavily.

For once he didn't have a joke ready.

"Well, TB."

I looked over.

"Looks like we're taking that boat ride after all."

"Looks that way."

He stared at the floor.

"We're really doing this."

Neither of us smiled.

Neither of us needed to.

The reality was finally sitting between us.

And it was heavier than either of us expected.

That night was the last night before shipping out.

Most of the barracks spent the evening writing letters.

Jimmy wasn't one of them.

Jimmy had other priorities.

Or more accurately—

One particular priority.

A certain young woman from the mess hall.

Rumors moved through Army camps faster than official orders.

By supper everyone knew Jimmy had somehow managed to sneak away and see her.

By midnight everyone knew he'd been caught.

The next morning everyone knew he'd spent half the night on punishment detail cleaning latrines.

When he finally returned, he looked exhausted.

And completely pleased with himself.

"You look terrible," I told him.

"Worth it."

"You spent six hours scrubbing toilets."

"Worth it."

"You got caught."

"Worth it."

I shook my head.

"I don't understand you."

"Most people don't."

He sat beside me and pointed toward the letter in my hand.

"What're you writing?"

"My wife."

"That's it?"

"What do you mean, that's it?"

"You're shipping to Europe."

He grabbed at the air dramatically.

"You gotta say something romantic."

"I'm not taking relationship advice from a man who just got punished for sneaking around."

Jimmy ignored that.

"Tell her she's beautiful."

"I already did."

"Tell her you miss her."

"I already did."

"Tell her—"

"No."

Jimmy laughed.

"You're no fun."

Maybe not.

But before I sealed the letter, I added one more sentence.

Just one.

And for a moment I could almost see her smiling when she read it.

For a moment the war felt very far away.

Then lights out came.

And reality returned.

Nobody slept much that night.

Not because of noise.

Because of anticipation.

The future was waiting just outside the barracks.

And everybody knew it.

Men tossed.

Turned.

Stared into darkness.

Thought about home.

Thought about Europe.

Thought about things they couldn't say out loud.

The next morning arrived far too quickly.

Reveille sounded.

But most of us were already awake.

Duffel bags lined the walls.

Boots were laced.

Gear was packed.

Nobody needed motivation.

Today we were moving.

Today we were leaving Fort Benning behind.

The buses arrived shortly after sunrise.

And the journey began.

Train Journey

The train pulled out just after sunrise.

Fort Benning slowly disappeared behind us.  
The parade grounds.  
The barracks.  
The obstacle courses.  
The red Georgia dirt that had managed to find its way into every piece of clothing we owned.  
All of it drifted away through the windows as the train gathered speed.  
For a while nobody talked.  
Most of us simply watched.  
Watching seemed important.  
Like maybe we'd never see any of it again.  
The steady clack of steel wheels filled the railcars.  
The sound would become so familiar over the next few days that it felt almost alive.  
Clack-clack.  
Clack-clack.  
Clack-clack.  
A rhythm carrying thousands of young men toward a future none of them could see.  
Jimmy sat across from me near the window.  
He watched the countryside rolling past.  
Farmhouses.  
Fields.  
Country roads.  
Church steeples.  
The America we'd grown up in.  
The America we were leaving behind.  
Finally he leaned back.  
"Funny."  
"What is?"  
"I spent eighteen years trying to get away from home."  
"And now?"  
"Now I wish we'd slow this thing down."  
I smiled.  
That was probably the most honest thing he'd said since I'd met him.  
The farther north we traveled, the more people seemed to appear at the tracks.  
Families gathered near crossings.  
Children waved.  
Farmers stopped working long enough to remove their hats.  
Women stood in front yards holding handkerchiefs.  
Some saluted.

Some prayed.

Some simply watched.

Nobody knew who we were.

Yet somehow they did.

A train full of young men in Army uniforms didn't require much explaining.

One afternoon we passed through a small town where half the population appeared to be standing near the station.

The train slowed briefly.

People waved flags.

Children ran alongside the tracks.

One elderly man stood at attention and saluted until we disappeared from sight.

Nobody laughed.

Nobody waved it off.

Those moments mattered.

Because every man on that train understood something.

The people watching us weren't seeing soldiers.

They were seeing sons.

Brothers.

Husbands.

Neighbors.

And maybe, for some of them, they were seeing boys who wouldn't be coming back.

A little girl appeared near one station carrying a homemade sign.

The letters were crooked.

The paint had run.

But the message was clear.

GOOD LUCK BOYS

Jimmy stared at it through the window.

Then quietly said:

"Lord."

Nobody spoke for a moment.

Sometimes a few simple words carry more weight than a speech.

That sign stayed with me long after the station disappeared.

The farther north we traveled, the quieter the train became.

The excitement of leaving camp slowly gave way to reality.

We weren't headed to another training center.

We weren't headed to another exercise.

We were headed toward war.

Men started talking less about home and more about what might be waiting overseas.

Rumors spread through the railcars.  
The Army runs on rumors almost as much as it runs on orders.  
Somebody heard we were going to England.  
Somebody else swore we were headed for North Africa.  
One man claimed we'd be invading Norway.  
Nobody knew anything.  
Everybody pretended they did.  
Jimmy listened to all of it.  
Then finally shook his head.  
"You know what?"  
"What?"  
"If half these boys are right, we're fixing to invade six different countries."  
That got a laugh.  
Even during moments like this, Jimmy could still find humor.  
Maybe that's why people liked him.  
Maybe that's why I did.  
That evening we crossed into Tennessee.  
Jimmy immediately noticed.  
His face lit up.  
"Home."  
"Close to it."  
"Close enough."  
He moved to the window.  
For the next hour he became an unpaid tour guide.  
Every hill reminded him of something.  
Every valley had a story attached to it.  
Every town seemed connected to somebody he knew.  
"There's a creek over that ridge."  
"You can see a creek from here?"  
"No."  
"Then how do you know?"  
"Because I know it's there."  
I laughed.  
"You making this up?"  
"Maybe."  
The truth was, hearing him talk about home helped.  
The war felt farther away when Jimmy was telling stories.  
For a little while we weren't soldiers heading toward Europe.

We were just two Southern boys riding a train.  
Talking about places we loved.  
That night the train stopped long enough for everybody to stretch their legs.  
The station wasn't much.  
A small building.  
A few benches.  
A water tower.  
But word had gotten around.  
The platform was crowded.  
Women from a church had brought sandwiches.  
Coffee.  
Pies.  
One elderly lady handed Jimmy two slices of apple pie.  
"You look skinny."  
Jimmy accepted both immediately.  
"Thank you, ma'am."  
"You need feeding."  
"I've been saying that for years."  
The old woman laughed.  
A few minutes later Jimmy handed me one of the slices.  
I took a bite.  
Best pie I'd tasted since leaving home.  
For ten minutes the war disappeared.  
It was just coffee.  
Pie.  
Conversation.  
Kindness.  
The sort of things people remember when everything else gets hard.  
As we climbed back aboard, one of the church ladies called out:  
"Y'all come home safe!"  
The train pulled away before anybody could answer.  
But every man heard it.  
The next morning brought cooler air.  
We were moving farther north now.  
The landscape was changing.  
The accents were changing too.  
Somewhere during the journey we crossed the Mason-Dixon Line.  
Nobody announced it.

No band played.  
No signs appeared.  
But the older men seemed to know.  
One soldier from Alabama leaned back in his seat.  
“Well boys.”  
“What?”  
“We ain’t in the South anymore.”  
That earned a few chuckles.  
Jimmy looked out the window.  
“You reckon they know how to make sweet tea up here?”  
“No.”  
“Then we’re in enemy territory already.”  
That got a bigger laugh.  
By the third day, New York was all anybody talked about.  
Most of us had never seen it.  
I’d seen photographs.  
Newspapers.  
Postcards.  
That was about it.  
To a farm boy.  
A factory worker.  
A clerk.  
A mechanic.  
New York might as well have been another world.  
The closer we got, the more excited everybody became.  
Even the men trying not to show it.  
Jimmy sat beside the window watching carefully.  
“Think it’ll really be that big?”  
“That’s what they say.”  
“How big?”  
“I don’t know.”  
He nodded.  
Then looked outside again.  
For once he didn’t have a joke.  
For once neither of us did.  
Because underneath all the excitement sat a simple truth.  
New York wasn’t our destination.  
It was the last stop before war.

Late that afternoon the skyline finally appeared.  
At first it looked unreal.  
Shapes in the distance.  
Gray outlines rising above the horizon.  
Then the train rounded a curve.  
And there it was.  
Buildings taller than anything most of us had ever imagined.  
Smoke.  
Ships.  
Factories.  
Bridges.  
Life moving in every direction at once.  
The entire railcar went quiet.  
Men pressed against windows.  
Nobody wanted to miss it.  
Jimmy stared for several seconds.  
Then slowly shook his head.  
“TB.”  
“What?”  
“That’s too much city.”  
I laughed.  
“You ain’t wrong.”  
The train rolled forward.  
Closer.  
Closer.  
Closer.  
Toward New York.  
Toward Camp Shanks.  
Toward the Atlantic.  
Toward history.  
And for the first time since leaving Fort Benning, every man aboard understood something.  
There wasn’t much America left between us and the war.  
As evening settled over the city, the train finally slowed.  
Orders were shouted.  
Gear was collected.  
Men stood.  
Shouldered duffel bags.  
The journey north was over.

The next part was about to begin.

Camp Shanks waited ahead.

And beyond Camp Shanks waited the ocean.

Camp Shanks

Camp Shanks felt different from Fort Benning.

Nobody yelled much.

Nobody needed to.

The Army wasn't trying to make soldiers anymore.

That part was finished.

Now it was simply moving them toward the war.

Days became a blur of paperwork, inspections, equipment checks, medical examinations, and endless waiting.

Waiting seemed to be the Army's favorite activity.

Men waited in lines.

Waited for orders.

Waited for meals.

Waited for mail.

Waited for ships.

Mostly, they waited for the future.

Jimmy hated waiting.

Naturally.

"You know what's wrong with this place?" he asked one afternoon.

"Everything?"

"Besides that."

I looked up from cleaning my rifle.

"What?"

"We're too close."

"To what?"

"The ocean."

I laughed.

"That's what bothers you?"

"That's exactly what bothers me."

He pointed toward the east.

"That water keeps going all the way to Germany."

"England first."

"Still too much water."

The final night arrived quietly.

Nobody announced it.

Nobody needed to.

Every man knew.

Letters were written.

Photographs studied.

Conversations grew shorter.

The joking never completely disappeared, but it wasn't as loud anymore.

Even Jimmy seemed quieter.

Not sad.

Just thoughtful.

That evening they attended a USO show.

Music.

Dancing.

Pretty girls.

Laughter.

For a few hours somebody tried to remind them they were still young men instead of future casualties.

It worked.

For a little while.

Then the show ended.

And reality returned.

Back in the barracks, Jimmy sat on his bunk turning a photograph over in his hands.

"What's that?" Tony asked.

"My folks."

"You've looked at it twenty times tonight."

"Twenty-one."

Tony smiled.

Jimmy stared at the picture a moment longer.

Then tucked it away.

"You reckon we'll be alright?"

There it was.

The question.

No jokes.

No grin.

Just honesty.

Tony thought for a moment.

Then answered the only way he knew how.

"We'll do our best."

Jimmy nodded.

"Fair enough."

Neither man slept much that night.

Before dawn, buses rolled into camp.

Engines idling.

Headlights cutting through the darkness.

Duffel bags were lifted.

Names were checked.

Orders were shouted.

Men climbed aboard.

The buses pulled away.

At first nobody talked.

The closer they got to the harbor, the quieter things became.

Outside the windows, fog drifted through the streets.

New York was still asleep.

Then somebody near the front whispered:

"Sweet Lord."

Heads turned.

Men leaned toward the glass.

At first Tony couldn't understand what he was looking at.

It didn't seem possible.

The shape emerging through the fog was too large.

Too tall.

Too massive.

Jimmy pressed against the window.

"TB..."

Tony didn't answer.

Neither did anyone else.

The Queen Mary towered above the harbor like a floating city.

Deck after deck.

Porthole after porthole.

A steel mountain anchored beside the docks.

For a moment every man on that bus forgot to breathe.

Training was over.

America was behind them.

The Atlantic waited ahead.

And somewhere beyond the horizon was war.

# CHAPTER FOUR

The Crossing

Jimmy always said the ocean had a way of reminding a man how small he really was.

But nothing prepared them for the first sight of the Queen Mary.

The buses rolled through the fog-covered streets of New York before dawn, their headlights cutting pale tunnels through the darkness. Most of the men sat quietly, duffel bags clutched between their knees. The joking that usually followed Jimmy everywhere had faded somewhere during the ride from Camp Shanks.

Nobody had much left to say.

Then the harbor appeared.

And with it came the ship.

At first, Tony thought he was looking at a building.

The shape emerging from the fog seemed too large to be anything else.

Then the bus rounded a corner.

And there she was.

The Queen Mary.

Jimmy pressed against the window.

"Jesus."

Nobody laughed at him.

Half the bus was thinking the same thing.

The ship rose above the docks like a steel mountain trying to pass itself off as a vessel. Troop transports crowded the harbor. Trucks rumbled across loading areas. MPs shouted directions over the noise of engines and machinery. Thousands of soldiers moved through the fog in long columns.

But the Queen Mary stole all the attention.

Even stripped of her civilian elegance, she possessed a presence that was impossible to ignore.

The deck chairs were gone.

The bright paint had been dulled.

Windows were blacked out.

Military equipment crowded spaces once reserved for wealthy travelers.

The war had transformed one of the world's most luxurious ocean liners into something entirely different.

A weapon.

A floating machine built to move an army.

Jimmy continued staring.

"Look at the size of her."

Tony nodded.

Words felt inadequate.

The closer they got, the larger she became.

And somehow the size made everything feel more real.

Training camps had still felt connected to home.

Even Camp Shanks.

This was different.

Nobody boarded a ship like that for a training exercise.

Nobody crossed an ocean because things were safe.

The buses stopped.

Orders echoed through the morning fog.

Men stood.

Duffel bags were lifted.

Shoulders squared.

The long line toward the gangway began moving.

"Wonder if they're gonna let us use the pool?" Jimmy asked.

Tony snorted.

"Sure. Right after your manicure."

Jimmy nodded seriously.

"Good. I was worried they might overlook how delicate I am."

A few men laughed.

The sound helped.

Not much.

But enough.

They shuffled forward, boots clattering against steel ramps and wooden dock planking. The closer they got, the more Tony could feel a faint vibration beneath his feet.

At first he thought it was machinery from the harbor.

Then he realized it was the ship itself.

The engines were already alive.

The Queen Mary was waiting.

And she wasn't waiting long.

The MPs at the gangway barely glanced at paperwork.

They didn't need to.

Nobody was trying to sneak away.

Not now.

Not with the Atlantic stretching between them and Europe.

Tony stepped onto the gangway.

The steel vibrated beneath his boots.

A few moments later he crossed the threshold and entered the ship.

The Queen Mary swallowed them whole.

The first thing he noticed was the heat.

Not warmth.

Heat.

The ship's interior felt alive with it.

Steam pipes ran through the walls. Engines pulsed somewhere deep below. Thousands of bodies crowded every available space.

The air felt heavy.

Close.

Used.

They followed an MP through a maze of passageways and stairwells.

Left.

Right.

Down another corridor.

Then another.

Until finally they entered a compartment packed with bunks stacked five high from one end of the room to the other.

Rows.

Rows.

And more rows.

The war had found a way to pack fifteen thousand men into a luxury liner.

The result looked less like a ship and more like a warehouse filled with soldiers.

"This is you," the MP barked.

Jimmy climbed into the second bunk from the top and tossed his duffel onto the mattress.

Tony took the bunk below him.

He looked around.

There wasn't enough room to sit comfortably.

Barely enough room to turn over.

The air carried traces of machine oil, damp wool, and thousands of nervous young men trying not to think too far ahead.

Jimmy hung his head over the edge of the bunk.

"Cozy."

Tony looked up.

"You ever think the Army oversold the perks?"

"Never."

Jimmy settled in dramatically.

"I specifically enlisted for cramped bunks, questionable food, and the opportunity to die in a country I can't pronounce."

Tony laughed.

"Dream big."

"I do my best."

For the first time that morning, some of the tension eased.

Just a little.

Jimmy had that effect.

He could find humor almost anywhere.

Even in a floating steel box headed toward war.

The Queen Mary

The Queen Mary eased away from the pier with a deep groan of steel and a blast from her horn that seemed powerful enough to shake the city itself.

Men crowded every available railing.

Some waved.

Some saluted.

Some simply stood and stared.

New York drifted slowly away behind them.

The skyline rose through the morning haze, taller than anything most of them had ever seen. Tugboats churned white water around the massive liner as she moved toward open sea.

Nobody talked much.

Not at first.

Tony leaned against the rail and watched the harbor shrink.

Somewhere beyond those buildings was home.

Not Memphis exactly.

But America.

The last solid piece of it they would see for a long time.

Beside him, Jimmy stood quietly.

That alone felt strange.

"You alright?" Tony asked.

Jimmy nodded.

"Yeah."

"You don't sound like it."

Jimmy kept watching the shoreline.

"My mama's probably standing on her porch right now."

Tony smiled.

"Thinking about you?"

"Probably worrying herself into a nervous breakdown."

"Sounds about right."

Jimmy laughed softly.

"She'll be alright."

Neither of them knew if that was true.

Sometimes hope was just another way of saying I don't know.

The city slowly disappeared into the haze.

The ocean waited beyond it.

Gray.

Cold.

Endless.

And before long, that was all they could see.

Water.

Sky.

Water.

Nothing else.

The seasickness started before supper.

At first it was only a few men.

One soldier stumbled down a corridor looking pale enough to qualify as a ghost.

Another sat with his head buried between his knees.

A third suddenly abandoned his meal halfway through and sprinted toward the nearest head.

By evening the ship felt like a floating hospital ward.

The Queen Mary had left the shelter of the harbor and entered the open Atlantic.

Now she rose and fell with the swells.

Nothing violent.

Nothing dangerous.

Just enough movement to remind everybody that they were no longer standing on land.

For men who had spent their lives on farms, in factories, and on city streets, that was more than enough.

Tony managed to make it through supper.

Barely.

Jimmy made it three bites.

The fourth bite came right back.

"Lord have mercy," Jimmy groaned.

"You alright?"

"No."

"You don't look good."

"I don't feel good either."

Jimmy leaned against the bulkhead and closed his eyes.

"The floor keeps moving."

"That's because we're on a ship."

"Ships are stupid."

Tony laughed.

"Yesterday you thought this was an adventure."

"Yesterday I wasn't dying."

"You ain't dying."

Jimmy opened one eye.

"You don't know that."

The man in the bunk across from them suddenly bolted upright and grabbed a bucket.

A second later everyone understood why.

Jimmy pointed.

"See?"

Tony shook his head.

The misery spread quickly.

By midnight, buckets seemed almost as valuable as ammunition.

The only people unaffected were the sailors.

They moved through the corridors carrying trays, coffee, and supplies as though the ship were sitting perfectly still.

One gray-haired crewman walked past Jimmy carrying two cups of coffee.

Jimmy watched him carefully.

The sailor smiled.

"First crossing?"

Jimmy nodded.

The sailor handed him one of the cups.

"Gets better."

"When?"

The sailor shrugged.

"Eventually."

Then he walked away.

Jimmy stared after him.

"That wasn't encouraging."

The next few days settled into a routine.

Not a comfortable routine.

But a routine nonetheless.

Every morning loudspeakers crackled with announcements.

Men lined up for chow.

Officers conducted inspections.

Training exercises filled the hours.

The Army had no intention of allowing fifteen thousand soldiers to sit around thinking.

Thinking led to worrying.

Worrying led to problems.

So they stayed busy.

On the upper decks, officers rehearsed loading procedures over and over again.

Men practiced forming lines.

Moving quickly.

Following commands.

Dropping into positions.

Rising again.

The Atlantic wind cut through uniforms and coated everything with a thin layer of salt.

Jimmy hated every minute of it.

"We're standing on a floating city."

Tony adjusted his rifle sling.

"So?"

"So why are we running in circles?"

"Because somebody outranks us."

Jimmy considered that.

"That's a terrible system."

One afternoon they found a place near the railing where they could watch the ocean.

Nothing existed out there except water.

No ships.

No land.

No signs of life.

Just endless Atlantic stretching toward Europe.

Tony understood why sailors respected the ocean.

It didn't care about anybody.

Not soldiers.

Not generals.

Not presidents.

The Atlantic had been there long before all of them.

And it would remain long after they were gone.

Jimmy stared at the horizon.

"You ever wonder what's under there?"

"Fish."

"Besides fish."

Tony shrugged.

"More fish."

Jimmy nodded.

"Fair point."

For several minutes they stood quietly.

Watching.

Listening.

Thinking.

The ocean had a way of making men feel very small.  
That night, shortly after midnight, every light aboard the ship suddenly went dark.  
The change happened so quickly it startled half the compartment awake.  
Voices rose immediately.  
Questions followed.  
Nobody had answers.  
Then the loudspeaker crackled.  
“Maintain blackout conditions.”  
The announcement ended there.  
Nothing more.  
No explanation.  
No reassurance.  
Just silence.  
The darkness felt absolute.  
Men sat up in their bunks.  
Listening.  
Waiting.  
Somewhere deep within the ship, engines continued their steady rumble.  
Jimmy’s voice drifted down from above.  
“You awake?”  
“Now I am.”  
“What do you think’s happening?”  
Tony listened for a moment.  
The ship seemed quieter somehow.  
More cautious.  
“I don’t know.”  
Neither of them spoke again.  
Not for several minutes.  
The darkness stretched on.  
Eventually rumors began moving through the compartment.  
U-boats.  
German submarines.  
Somebody claimed another ship had been spotted.  
Someone else swore they’d heard officers talking.  
Nobody knew anything.  
But everybody listened.  
For nearly an hour the Queen Mary moved through the darkness without a single visible light.  
Fifteen thousand men holding their breath.

Waiting for something that never came.

Eventually the tension eased.

Conversations returned.

Men settled back into their bunks.

The engines continued their steady rhythm.

Jimmy finally spoke.

“Well.”

“Well what?”

“If the Germans were looking for us, they missed.”

Tony smiled.

“Go to sleep.”

“Good idea.”

A pause.

Then:

“You know what I’d really like?”

“What?”

“A cheeseburger.”

Tony laughed.

Trust Jimmy.

An entire ocean full of danger.

And somehow he was thinking about supper.

By the fifth day, most of the men had finally found their sea legs.

The ship still rolled.

The ocean still shifted beneath them.

But the worst of the seasickness had passed.

For the first time since leaving New York, men started laughing again.

Playing cards.

Telling stories.

Arguing about baseball.

Trying to pretend they weren’t crossing an ocean toward war.

And for a little while—

it almost worked.

All the Stars

On the fourth night, Tony woke to somebody whispering his name.

At first he thought he was dreaming.

The compartment was dark except for the faint glow of emergency lighting filtering through distant passageways. Around him came the sounds that never seemed to stop aboard the Queen Mary—engines humming deep beneath the decks, steel creaking occasionally, men snoring in every direction.

Then the whisper came again.

"TB."

Tony opened his eyes.

Jimmy's face appeared over the side of the bunk.

His hair stuck out in every direction.

"You awake?"

"I am now."

"Good."

Tony groaned.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then why'd you wake me up?"

Jimmy grinned.

"Because you gotta see something."

A few minutes later they were climbing narrow stairwells toward one of the upper observation decks.

The higher they went, the colder the air became.

By the time they stepped outside, the Atlantic wind hit them like a slap.

Tony immediately regretted leaving his blanket behind.

"What in the world..."

Then he looked up.

And forgot what he was about to say.

The storm clouds that had followed them for days were gone.

The sky stretched from horizon to horizon.

Clear.

Cold.

Endless.

Stars filled every inch of it.

Not city stars.

Not the handful visible from Memphis on a good night.

Thousands of them.

Maybe millions.

The ocean reflected them faintly below, creating the illusion that the Queen Mary was floating between two skies.

For a long moment neither man spoke.

The sight demanded silence.

Finally Jimmy folded his arms against the cold.

"Worth waking you up for?"

Tony nodded.

“Yeah.”

“Thought so.”

The massive ship pushed forward through the darkness, leaving a long trail of white foam behind it. The wake glowed faintly in the moonlight before disappearing into the black Atlantic.

Somewhere ahead lay England.

Somewhere beyond England lay Germany.

And somewhere in between waited their future.

They leaned against the railing.

The cold steel bit through their sleeves.

Neither seemed to care.

For the first time since boarding the ship, there was no noise from officers.

No drills.

No lines.

No instructions.

Just ocean.

Wind.

And stars.

Jimmy stared upward.

“You ever notice how small this makes a fellow feel?”

Tony laughed softly.

“Everything makes you feel small.”

“That’s because I’m surrounded by giants.”

Tony rolled his eyes.

“You ain’t that little.”

“I’m delicate.”

“You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true.”

For a few seconds the old Jimmy returned.

The joking one.

The version that kept everybody laughing.

Then his smile faded.

Not completely.

Just enough.

Tony recognized the change immediately.

Jimmy was thinking.

And thinking was usually dangerous.

“You ever think about what we’re heading into?”

There it was.

Tony had been waiting for the question.

"All the time."

Jimmy nodded.

"Me too."

The Atlantic rolled beneath them.

A wave crashed against the hull somewhere below.

Spray drifted upward and vanished into the darkness.

"I keep trying not to think about it," Jimmy admitted.

"How's that working?"

"Terrible."

Tony smiled.

"Same here."

Jimmy looked back toward the wake.

"My brain keeps making up stories."

"What kind of stories?"

"The kind where I'm a hero."

Tony laughed.

"Only those?"

"No."

Jimmy shook his head.

"Sometimes it's the kind where I trip over my own feet and drown before we ever reach Europe."

"That sounds more realistic."

"Exactly."

For a few moments they stood quietly.

The ship surged forward.

The ocean never seemed to notice.

"You scared?"

Tony considered lying.

Men lied about fear all the time.

Especially soldiers.

But there wasn't much point with Jimmy.

"Yeah."

Jimmy nodded.

"Good."

Tony frowned.

"Good?"

"Means you're paying attention."

He leaned against the railing.

"The fellows who ain't scared are the ones worry me."

That was probably true.

Tony watched the stars reflected across the water.

"I miss home."

The words surprised him.

Maybe because he hadn't said them out loud before.

Jimmy understood immediately.

"I miss the feeling of it."

Tony looked over.

"The feeling?"

Jimmy nodded.

"Knowing what tomorrow looks like."

He smiled sadly.

"Waking up and already understanding the day."

Tony thought about Memphis.

His wife.

His little boy.

His house.

The familiar sounds of evening.

The certainty of ordinary life.

Those things seemed impossibly far away now.

"I miss my son."

Jimmy's expression softened.

"You gonna tell him all about this when it's over?"

Tony stared across the dark water.

"If I make it home."

Jimmy elbowed him.

Hard.

"No if."

Tony rubbed his side.

"That hurt."

"Good."

Jimmy pointed at him.

"Mama says talking bad luck invites it inside."

Tony raised an eyebrow.

"Pretty sure your mama told you not to chase girls, too."

Jimmy grinned.

"She told me lots of things."

The wind picked up.  
Cold enough now that both men wished they'd brought heavier jackets.  
Neither moved.  
Neither wanted to leave.  
Because deep down they both knew something.  
Moments like this were becoming rare.  
Soon there would be training.  
Then England.  
Then whatever came after England.  
And eventually—  
war.  
Real war.  
Not drills.  
Not practice.  
Not stories.  
The real thing.  
Jimmy suddenly turned toward him.  
His expression had changed again.  
No grin.  
No joke.  
Just honesty.  
“Whatever happens...”  
Tony waited.  
Jimmy looked out at the ocean one more time before continuing.  
“You're my brother, Memphis.”  
The words hung there between them.  
Simple.  
Direct.  
Real.  
Tony felt something tighten in his chest.  
Not sadness.  
Not exactly.  
Something deeper.  
The realization that friendships like this didn't come along often.  
Maybe once in a lifetime.  
Maybe never.  
“Yeah,” Tony said quietly.  
“I know.”

Jimmy nodded.

Satisfied.

Then slapped him on the shoulder.

“Good.”

A grin returned.

“That means I get to haunt you if you screw up.”

Tony laughed.

A real laugh.

The hardest one he'd managed since leaving America.

And somehow the ship felt steadier beneath his feet afterward.

The crossing dragged on.

Days blurred together.

Gray ocean.

Gray sky.

Cold wind.

Card games.

Training drills.

Endless waiting.

Men adapted.

They always do.

The Atlantic stopped feeling impossible.

The ship became a floating town.

Familiar faces appeared every day.

Conversations repeated themselves.

Routine returned.

Not comfort.

But routine.

And routine helps men survive.

Then the storm arrived.

It hit without warning.

One afternoon the sky darkened.

By evening the Atlantic looked angry.

By midnight it looked murderous.

Waves slammed against the Queen Mary with enough force to rattle dishes and bunks alike.

The ship rolled violently.

Men grabbed whatever they could hold onto.

Loose items slid across compartments.

Somebody cursed.

Somebody prayed.

Somebody did both.

Jimmy clung to the edge of his bunk.

"If we die in here," he announced, "I'm haunting the captain first."

Tony held onto his own bunk.

"You think the ocean's trying to kill us?"

Jimmy shrugged.

"Wouldn't blame it."

Another wave struck.

The ship tilted.

Then recovered.

Steel groaned.

Pipes rattled.

The Queen Mary pushed forward.

Refusing to surrender.

She had carried movie stars.

Millionaires.

Kings.

Now she carried soldiers.

And she seemed equally determined to deliver all of them.

By morning the worst had passed.

The ocean remained rough.

But the storm was losing.

The Queen Mary was not.

Late on the ninth day, a shout went up from somewhere on deck.

Then another.

Then another.

Men rushed toward railings and observation areas.

Jimmy nearly ran somebody over getting there.

"Move!"

Tony followed close behind.

At first he couldn't see anything.

Just gray water.

Gray clouds.

Gray horizon.

Then—

land.

A dark line stretched across the distance.

Small.

Faint.

But unmistakable.

England.

For several seconds nobody spoke.

Then somebody whispered:

“Holy hell.”

Another man laughed.

A third started crying.

Nobody made fun of him.

Not after nine days on the Atlantic.

Not after wondering if England was ever actually going to appear.

Jimmy leaned against the rail.

“I was beginning to think this place was a myth.”

Tony smiled.

“We made it.”

Jimmy nodded.

But his expression had grown serious again.

“Yeah.”

His eyes stayed fixed on the shoreline.

“Now the hard part starts.”

The laughter faded.

Nobody disagreed.

Because for the first time since boarding the Queen Mary, Europe no longer felt distant.

It was right there.

Waiting.

And the war was waiting with it.

England

The closer the Queen Mary moved toward shore, the more restless the men became.

Nine days earlier they had stood on a dock in New York staring up at a ship.

Now they stood along her rails staring at England.

Nobody cared about the ocean anymore.

All eyes were fixed on the land ahead.

Low green hills emerged beneath a ceiling of gray clouds. Small villages appeared in the distance. Church steeples rose above clusters of buildings that looked centuries older than anything most of the men had ever seen.

England.

The place they had read about in newspapers.

The place German bombers had tried to destroy.

The place standing between Hitler and the rest of the world.

Now it was real.

Jimmy leaned against the railing.

"Looks smaller than I expected."

Tony laughed.

"It's a country, not a horse."

"I know."

Jimmy squinted toward shore.

"Still looks smaller."

As the Queen Mary entered Liverpool Harbor, tugboats appeared alongside her.

Compared to the liner, they looked like toys.

The harbor itself seemed alive.

Ships.

Cranes.

Trucks.

Dockworkers.

Military police.

Everything moving at once.

The war was everywhere.

Not visible in explosions or gunfire.

Visible in purpose.

Every man seemed to be headed somewhere important.

Every vehicle carried something necessary.

Nobody appeared to be wasting time.

The closer they came to the docks, the quieter the soldiers became.

Reality had returned.

The Atlantic crossing was over.

The next chapter had begun.

When the gangways finally dropped, orders echoed across the ship.

Duffel bags were lifted.

Helmets adjusted.

Lines formed.

Thousands of American soldiers began pouring into England.

Cold air slapped Tony in the face the moment he stepped off the ship.

Not the sharp cold of winter back home.

A damp cold.

The kind that seemed to seep through clothing.

A fine mist drifted through the harbor.

Not quite rain.

Not quite fog.

Just enough to make everything feel wet.

Jimmy took one deep breath.

Then immediately made a face.

“Good Lord.”

“What?”

“This place smells like wet socks.”

Tony laughed.

“That’s England.”

Jimmy nodded.

“Then England smells like wet socks.”

The soldier behind them nearly choked trying not to laugh.

The docks stretched for what felt like miles.

Columns of soldiers moved in every direction.

British officers shouted instructions.

American officers shouted different instructions.

Truck engines growled.

Train whistles echoed somewhere in the distance.

Coal smoke drifted through the air.

The entire harbor felt busy.

Purposeful.

Like a machine operating around the clock.

Tony watched British civilians standing behind barriers observing the endless stream of American troops.

Some waved.

Some smiled.

Children pointed excitedly.

A few old men simply nodded.

The expressions looked familiar.

He’d seen the same thing at train stations back home.

People watching young men march toward war.

Hoping for the best.

Fearing the worst.

The ride out of Liverpool introduced them to another surprise.

Everything looked backward.

Roads.

Traffic.

Street signs.

The entire country seemed determined to do things opposite from America.

Jimmy stared through the truck window.

"I don't trust it."

Tony smiled.

"What now?"

"They drive on the wrong side."

"They've probably been saying the same thing about us."

Jimmy considered that.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because we're right."

The truck erupted in laughter.

Some things never changed.

A few hours later the city disappeared behind them.

England opened up into countryside.

Rolling fields.

Stone fences.

Small farms.

Villages that looked like they belonged in history books.

The scenery might have been beautiful if not for the signs of war scattered throughout it.

Sandbags.

Military vehicles.

Camouflaged positions.

Anti-aircraft emplacements.

Everywhere they looked, England seemed to be preparing for something.

Or recovering from something.

Sometimes both.

The training camp sat among muddy fields and hedgerows in the countryside.

Nothing about it felt permanent.

Rows of tents stretched across the landscape.

Vehicles sat parked in neat formations.

Soldiers moved constantly.

The camp felt less like a military base and more like an army waiting room.

Thousands of men preparing for something nobody would discuss openly.

Yet everybody understood.

The training began immediately.

The Army had not brought them across an ocean to relax.

Days started before sunrise.

Ended after dark.

And left little energy for anything in between.

The terrain was different from Georgia.

Different from Tennessee.

Different from home.

Fields were divided by thick hedgerows taller than a man.

Ditches crisscrossed the countryside.

Mud seemed determined to attach itself to everything.

The officers loved it.

According to them, this was exactly what they needed.

Nobody bothered explaining why.

Not yet.

One afternoon the men spent six hours practicing assaults against mock German positions.

Wooden machine-gun nests.

Fake bunkers.

Barbed wire obstacles.

Everything designed to imitate what they might eventually face.

Jimmy dropped beside Tony during a short break.

Covered in mud.

Out of breath.

Unhappy.

"You know what?"

Tony took a drink from his canteen.

"What?"

"I miss the ocean."

Tony nearly laughed the water out of his mouth.

"You hated the ocean."

"I know."

Jimmy pointed toward the training field.

"But at least the ocean wasn't shooting blanks at me all day."

The weeks passed.

Training intensified.

The officers became more demanding.

Rumors multiplied.

Every camp in England seemed full of rumors.

Some said the invasion would happen in weeks.

Others claimed months.

One soldier swore they were headed to Norway.

Another insisted France.

Nobody knew.

Everybody guessed.

And every day brought more troops.

More vehicles.

More equipment.

More aircraft overhead.

The scale of it all was impossible to ignore.

Something enormous was coming.

The men could feel it.

Even if nobody would say it outright.

One cold evening after a particularly brutal day of training, Tony and Jimmy sat beside a small potbelly stove inside their tent.

Rain tapped steadily against the canvas overhead.

The stove glowed orange.

Outside, darkness covered the camp.

Inside, exhaustion sat heavily on both men.

For several minutes neither spoke.

The crackle of burning wood filled the silence.

Finally Jimmy broke it.

"You think this is all leading to something big?"

Tony looked up.

The answer seemed obvious.

"Yeah."

Jimmy nodded slowly.

"Me too."

The rain continued falling.

Steady.

Relentless.

Almost comforting.

For a few moments both men listened to it.

Then Jimmy asked the question Tony suspected every man in England was asking himself.

"You scared?"

Tony stared into the stove.

The fire reflected in his eyes.

"Yeah."

Jimmy looked down at his hands.

“Me too.”

Neither laughed.

Neither pretended otherwise.

The honesty felt easier now.

Maybe because they had crossed an ocean together.

Maybe because friendship had a way of removing certain masks.

After a while Jimmy leaned back against the tent pole.

“Whatever comes next...”

Tony looked over.

Jimmy smiled faintly.

“You stick near me, Memphis.”

Tony returned the smile.

“I was gonna tell you the same thing.”

Jimmy chuckled.

“Good.”

He stretched his legs toward the stove.

“Means we’re both idiots.”

Tony laughed.

Outside, rain continued falling across the English countryside.

Beyond the camp lay villages sleeping beneath blackout curtains.

Beyond those villages lay the English Channel.

And somewhere across that narrow stretch of water waited a coastline neither man had ever heard of.

A place called Omaha Beach.

Neither knew its name yet.

Neither understood how completely it would change their lives.

The rain drummed softly against the canvas.

The stove glowed.

The night grew deeper.

And the war waited.

# CHAPTER FIVE

Headed To War

Portland Harbor

June 5, 1944

Something poked me in the leg.

I opened my eyes and found Jimmy standing over me holding a stick.

“What in the world are you doing?”

He poked me again.

“Making sure you’re still alive.”

I swatted the stick away.

“Why are you poking me with that thing?”

Jimmy shrugged.

“I got bored watching you sleep.”

“Ain’t there any women around here you can go aggravate?”

That familiar grin appeared immediately.

“Oh, so we’re grouchy this morning.”

I sat up slowly and rubbed my eyes.

The uneasy feeling from the night before hadn’t gone anywhere.

If anything, it had gotten worse.

Jimmy noticed.

Of course he noticed.

For all his joking and carrying on, he paid attention to people better than most.

His smile softened.

“No worries, my older brother.”

I looked up at him.

“You really consider me your brother?”

Jimmy looked almost offended.

“Well hell yes.”

He sat down beside me on a stack of crates.

“We’ve been together nearly three years.”

He pointed toward the thousands of soldiers spread across the harbor.

“We’ve trained together.”

Another point.

“Marched together.”

Another.

“Slept in the same barracks.”

Another.

“Crossed the Atlantic together.”

Then he nudged me.

“If that don’t make somebody a brother, I don’t know what does.”

I smiled.

The title felt natural now.

Not forced.

Not sentimental.

Just true.

“Alright then, brother. Help me up.”

Jimmy grabbed my arm and hauled me to my feet.

Together we looked out across Portland Harbor.

The sight was overwhelming.

Ships filled the water in every direction.

Destroyers.

Transports.

Landing craft.

Cargo vessels.

The largest gathering of military power either of us had ever seen.

Fog hung low over the harbor, drifting between ships and docks like smoke.

Thousands upon thousands of men moved through the gray morning.

Some laughed.

Some smoked.

Some wrote final letters.

Some stood alone staring at the water.

Every one of them knew something important was about to happen.

Few knew exactly what.

Jimmy folded his arms.

“Looks like the whole world’s headed somewhere.”

“Sure does.”

A line of tanks rolled slowly toward a dock.

Their engines growled through the mist.

Nearby, soldiers checked weapons and adjusted gear.

Officers moved through the crowds reviewing lists and shouting instructions.

Everywhere Tony looked, preparations were underway.

The scale of it all felt impossible.

Months of training.

Months of planning.

Thousands of ships.

Hundreds of thousands of men.

All gathering for something.

Jimmy glanced sideways.

"You shaking?"

I looked down at my hands.

They were trembling.

Just slightly.

"I'm cold."

Jimmy snorted.

"Cold, my ass."

I laughed despite myself.

He pointed toward the harbor.

"We're all scared."

I didn't answer.

Because he was right.

All around us men were pretending to be calm.

Pretending this was another exercise.

Pretending tomorrow wasn't waiting.

The truth sat behind every conversation.

Behind every smile.

Behind every cigarette.

Nobody knew what the next twenty-four hours would bring.

And that uncertainty weighed more than any pack we'd ever carried.

Later that afternoon we sat on wooden crates near the loading area eating rations that tasted like punishment.

Jimmy stared suspiciously at a chunk of meat.

"I think this thing fought harder than the Germans."

I laughed.

"You gonna eat it?"

"Absolutely not."

He pushed it toward me.

"You want it?"

"No."

"Smart man."

For a while we simply watched the harbor.

Ships loading.

Men moving.

Engines running.

The entire invasion gathering strength around us.

Then Jimmy suddenly said:

“When we get home, I’m buying the biggest hamburger in America.”

I smiled.

“That right?”

“Biggest one I can find.”

“You sharing?”

“I’ll let you smell it.”

“That’s generous.”

“I know.”

We laughed.

Not because it was particularly funny.

Because laughing felt better than thinking.

For a few minutes we talked about home.

About food.

About music.

About anything except war.

Then Jimmy asked:

“What’s today?”

I glanced toward the gray sky.

“June fifth. Nineteen forty-four.”

He nodded slowly.

Then asked:

“You reckon there’s any chance this war ends today and we all just go home?”

I thought about my wife.

My son.

Memphis.

The life waiting on the other side of all this.

“That’d be the best news I’ve ever heard.”

Jimmy smiled.

Then his expression changed.

Became more serious.

“If it did…”

He hesitated.

“If we got on another boat and headed home tomorrow…”

I looked at him.

“What?”

“You reckon you’d let me come over for supper?”

I smiled immediately.

"My friend, I'd be honored."

His eyes watered slightly.

"So would I, brother."

For a moment neither of us spoke.

The harbor disappeared.

The ships disappeared.

The war disappeared.

And we were just two friends sitting together imagining a future neither one of us knew we'd never share.

When Jimmy Was young

"Did you have a good life back home?" I asked.

Jimmy thought about it for a while before answering.

"Depends on which part."

The harbor stretched out before us. Ships moved through the fog while thousands of soldiers waited for orders that hadn't come yet.

"We lived up in the Tennessee hills," he said. "Dad had land that'd been in the family a long time. Worked in a mill when he felt like it."

"When he felt like it?"

Jimmy smiled.

"Dad wasn't what you'd call ambitious."

I laughed.

"He drank?"

"Like a fish."

Jimmy picked at his ration.

"Ran a still too. Sold shine. Drank shine. Sometimes made enough money to get by. Sometimes didn't."

"What about your mama?"

The smile softened.

"Best person I ever knew."

He stared out toward the harbor.

"She mended clothes for people down in the valley. Worked harder than anybody in our house."

"Are they still together?"

Jimmy shook his head.

"No."

A long silence followed.

"Momma got tired of mending."

He shrugged.

"Daddy got hooked on the shine."

The words sounded practiced.

Like he'd told himself the story enough times to stop feeling it.

"She left when I was fourteen."

I didn't know what to say.

"Where'd she go?"

"Town, I guess."

"You ever see her again?"

"Not much."

"What about your daddy?"

Jimmy laughed softly.

"Daddy took a fork in the road."

Then he grew quiet.

"I reckon he never came back."

The harbor noise seemed farther away now.

"What'd you do?"

He grinned.

"What choice did I have?"

I waited.

"Momma went one way. Daddy went another."

He shrugged.

"I was left standing in the middle trying to figure out which way to go."

That line stayed with me.

Maybe because of how simply he said it.

Maybe because I could hear the fourteen-year-old boy still living inside the man.

"So what'd you do?"

"I left."

"For Nashville?"

"Yep."

His grin returned.

"Thought I was gonna make it on Music Row."

"Did you?"

"No, sir."

He laughed.

"Turns out they already had singers."

"That's a shame."

"It sure is. Because I was good."

"Still are."

Jimmy pointed at me.

"That's why you're my brother."

The two of us laughed.

Then for a moment neither of us spoke.

The harbor disappeared.

The war disappeared.

And all I could see was a young Tennessee boy who'd spent most of his life looking for somewhere he belonged.

The Harbor

For a little while after that, neither of us said much.

There wasn't much left to say.

The harbor stretched out before us beneath a blanket of gray clouds. Ships sat anchored in every direction. The water was crowded with more vessels than I'd ever seen in one place.

Destroyers.

Transports.

Landing craft.

Cargo ships.

The entire horizon looked like it had been built out of steel.

Around us, thousands of soldiers waited.

Some cleaned rifles.

Some smoked.

Some wrote letters.

Some simply sat alone with their thoughts.

Every man was trying to pass the time.

Nobody was having much success.

Then the loudspeaker crackled to life.

The conversation around us stopped immediately.

A voice echoed across the harbor.

Unit numbers.

Assembly areas.

Movement instructions.

Nobody spoke while it was happening.

When the announcement ended, the harbor felt different.

The waiting was over.

Jimmy stood first.

"Well."

I looked up.

"Well what?"

"I reckon this is where we stop pretending."

The grin was still there.

But it wasn't quite as big as before.

I stood and brushed the dirt from my trousers.

Around us, men were gathering gear and falling into formation.

Truck engines rumbled somewhere beyond the loading areas.

Officers moved through the crowds with clipboards tucked beneath their arms.

The entire harbor had suddenly come alive.

Months of preparation were beginning to move.

Like some giant machine finally being switched on.

Jimmy adjusted his helmet.

"You nervous?"

I looked at him.

"You?"

"Terrified."

That made me laugh.

"At least you're honest."

"No sense lying now."

He glanced toward the ships.

"We're headed somewhere important."

I nodded.

Neither of us knew exactly where.

But every man in that harbor understood one thing.

Nobody assembled this many ships for a training exercise.

The line began moving.

Thousands of soldiers flowing toward assigned embarkation points.

Duffel bags bounced against legs.

Weapons clinked softly against equipment.

Boots shuffled across gravel and wooden piers.

The sound seemed endless.

Jimmy fell into step beside me.

For once he wasn't chasing girls.

Wasn't telling stories.

Wasn't trying to get himself in trouble.

He simply walked.

And that alone told me how serious the moment had become.

As we moved closer to the water, the scale of the operation became impossible to ignore.

Landing craft bobbed against docks.

Crews loaded supplies.

Vehicles rolled aboard larger transports.

Officers checked manifests.  
Military police directed traffic.  
Everywhere I looked, men were moving.  
Thousands of them.  
The biggest thing I'd ever seen.  
The biggest thing any of us had ever seen.  
A soldier behind us whistled softly.  
"Good Lord."  
Nobody disagreed.  
Jimmy suddenly pointed toward a group of Navy sailors.  
"Look at them."  
"What about them?"  
"They look entirely too calm."  
I glanced over.  
The sailors moved about their work as though this were any other day.  
No fear.  
No nervousness.  
No hesitation.  
Just routine.  
Jimmy shook his head.  
"I don't trust people that calm."  
I laughed.  
"They probably don't trust Army boys."  
"Fair point."  
The grin returned briefly.  
Then disappeared again.  
The farther we walked, the fewer conversations there were.  
The joking slowly faded.  
The closer men got to the ships, the quieter they became.  
Somewhere ahead, officers were shouting names.  
Units were being separated and assigned.  
Lines split.  
Merged.  
Split again.  
The harbor had become a maze of movement.  
Then someone near the front of our column called out:  
"Keep moving!"  
The line surged forward.

And for the first time, I saw it.

Our landing craft.

It wasn't impressive.

Not like the Queen Mary.

Not like the destroyers.

Not like the battleships sitting farther out in the bay.

It looked small.

Cramped.

Functional.

A machine built for one purpose.

Delivering men somewhere dangerous.

Jimmy stared at it.

Then looked at me.

"That's it?"

I laughed.

"What were you expecting?"

"I don't know."

He pointed toward the craft.

"Something bigger."

"Me too."

Neither of us said what we were really thinking.

The smaller the boat looked, the larger the future suddenly felt.

We climbed aboard with the rest of our unit.

Steel echoed beneath our boots.

The interior smelled of fuel, machinery, wet canvas, and too many men packed into too little space.

Soldiers settled wherever they could.

Some sat quietly.

Some checked weapons again.

A few stared at photographs.

One young private removed a picture from his wallet and studied it like he was trying to memorize every detail.

Jimmy noticed too.

Neither of us said anything.

We understood.

Everybody carried something onto that boat.

A photograph.

A letter.

A memory.

A promise.

Something worth coming home for.

The harbor slowly began slipping away behind us.

The engines rumbled.

The craft turned toward open water.

The shoreline grew smaller.

The ships grew larger.

And somewhere beyond the darkness lay France.

Neither of us had ever seen France.

Most of us couldn't have found it on a map a few years earlier.

Now an entire army was heading toward it.

Toward whatever waited there.

Jimmy leaned closer.

"You know something?"

"What?"

"If we survive this thing..."

I smiled.

"Here we go."

"I'm serious."

"That's what worries me."

Jimmy ignored that.

"If we survive this thing, we're getting that hamburger."

"The biggest one in America?"

"The biggest."

I held out my hand.

He shook it.

"Deal."

"Deal."

For a moment we both smiled.

Then the engines grew louder.

The shoreline faded farther into the distance.

And little by little, conversation aboard the landing craft died away.

The sea stretched before us.

The night grew darker.

And every mile carried us closer to history.

Ahead, hidden beyond the darkness, thousands of ships were already moving toward Normandy.

Neither of us knew the name of the beach.

Neither of us knew what waited there.

But before the sun came up, we would.

The Invasion

Darkness settled over the English Channel long before any of us were ready for it.

The farther we moved from shore, the less anyone talked.

At first there had been conversation.

A few jokes.

A few nervous laughs.

The usual attempts to convince ourselves everything was normal.

But normal had disappeared somewhere behind us.

Along with England.

Along with safety.

Now there was only darkness.

And water.

The sea wasn't rough.

Not like the Atlantic crossing aboard the Queen Mary.

The Channel seemed calmer.

Smaller.

Yet somehow far more threatening.

Maybe because we knew what waited on the other side.

I sat with my back against the steel hull and pulled my jacket tighter around my shoulders.

The air felt damp.

Cold.

The kind of cold that slipped through clothing and settled into your bones.

Jimmy sat beside me.

His helmet tilted slightly forward.

Neither of us had much to say.

Around us, dozens of soldiers sat quietly in the dim light.

Some stared at the floor.

Some stared into the darkness beyond the gunwale.

Others simply closed their eyes.

Trying to rest.

Trying not to think.

Trying and failing.

Hours passed.

Nobody knew exactly how many.

Time felt strange out there.

The sea and darkness seemed to swallow it.

The only constant was the steady vibration beneath our boots and the low growl of engines pushing us toward France.

Eventually Jimmy nudged me.

“Look.”

I followed his finger.

At first I didn't see anything.

Then I realized what I was looking at.

Ships.

Hundreds of them.

Maybe thousands.

Every direction I turned, shadows moved across the water.

Destroyers.

Transports.

Landing craft.

Battleships.

An armada stretching across the horizon.

The largest fleet either of us had ever imagined.

And every vessel was headed the same direction.

Toward war.

Jimmy stared for a long moment.

Then quietly said:

“Ain't nobody stopping this.”

I nodded.

No nation on earth had ever assembled something this large.

Something this determined.

The sight was almost unbelievable.

Like watching an entire continent move.

Around midnight a Navy coxswain moved down the center of the landing craft.

“Keep your gear secured.”

Nobody answered.

The sailor continued.

“Stay seated.”

Still nobody answered.

The seriousness in his voice made every man listen.

Whatever was coming was close enough now that the Navy had stopped joking too.

That got our attention.

One young private across from us finally broke the silence.

“You reckon they'll tell us where we're landing?”

Nobody answered.

A minute later he asked again.

"Anybody know?"

A corporal farther down the craft shook his head.

"Nope."

The private looked disappointed.

Then embarrassed.

Then quiet.

The truth was, everybody wanted the same answer.

Nobody had it.

A few hours later the first flashes appeared on the horizon.

At first I thought it was lightning.

So did everyone else.

Then another flash followed.

Then another.

Then another.

The horizon flickered.

White.

Orange.

White again.

No thunder followed.

Only distance.

Jimmy leaned forward.

"What is that?"

A sergeant nearby answered before anyone else could.

"Battleships."

Nobody spoke.

We watched the flashes continue.

Great bursts of light erupting against the darkness.

Somewhere ahead, enormous naval guns were firing.

Shells weighing more than men.

Traveling miles through the night.

Toward targets we couldn't see.

Toward France.

Toward the beaches.

Toward the beginning of the invasion.

The realization settled over the landing craft slowly.

Then all at once.

This wasn't preparation anymore.  
This wasn't training.  
This wasn't practice.  
The invasion had started.  
We simply hadn't arrived yet.  
The closer we moved toward shore, the more serious the officers became.  
Orders were checked.  
Equipment inspected again.  
Men adjusted straps that didn't need adjusting.  
Checked rifles that had already been checked ten times.  
Everybody needed something to do with their hands.  
Fear demands activity.  
Even pointless activity.  
Jimmy looked down at his rifle.  
Then looked at me.  
"You remember that obstacle course at Benning?"  
I laughed softly.  
"Which one?"  
"The one where I fell off the wall."  
"You mean the six times you fell off the wall?"  
Jimmy ignored that.  
"I'd trade places with that fellow right now."  
A few nearby soldiers laughed.  
Not because it was particularly funny.  
Because everybody needed the release.  
Because tension had become almost unbearable.  
As the hours crawled toward dawn, seasickness returned.  
Not from rough water.  
From nerves.  
Men who had crossed the Atlantic without trouble suddenly looked pale.  
Others sat quietly with their heads down.  
One soldier prayed continuously beneath his breath.  
Another read the same letter over and over again.  
A third simply stared into the darkness.  
I don't think he blinked for nearly twenty minutes.  
Everybody fought fear differently.  
Nobody escaped it.  
Then the horizon began to change.

Very slowly.  
A faint gray line appeared ahead.  
Night was ending.  
Dawn was coming.  
And with it came the first glimpse of France.  
The naval bombardment intensified.  
Flashes lit the shoreline.  
Smoke drifted into the morning sky.  
The sound finally reached us.  
Distant at first.  
Then louder.  
A deep rolling thunder that seemed to shake the sea itself.  
Battleships.  
Cruisers.  
Destroyers.  
All pouring fire onto the coast.  
The invasion fleet stretched across the water in every direction.  
As far as I could see.  
Ships.  
Men.  
Machines.  
History moving toward a single point.  
Jimmy stood and looked toward the shore.  
Nobody told him to sit down.  
Nobody cared anymore.  
Most of us were standing now.  
Trying to see.  
Trying to understand.  
Trying to convince ourselves that this was real.  
The coastline slowly emerged through the smoke.  
Dark bluffs.  
Sand.  
Fire.  
Movement.  
The first pieces of France.  
The first pieces of the battlefield.  
Jimmy swallowed hard.  
Then looked over at me.

For the first time since I'd met him, I didn't see a joke waiting behind his eyes.

Only honesty.

"Brother..."

I nodded.

"I know."

Neither of us said anything else.

There wasn't anything left to say.

Ahead of us, the coast of Normandy grew larger.

The bombardment continued.

The sky brightened.

And every yard of water that disappeared beneath our bow carried us closer to the moment that would change both our lives forever.

In the distance, machine guns were already firing.

The war had been waiting for us.

Now we had arrived.

The Landing Craft

The closer we got to shore, the slower time seemed to move.

Nobody spoke much anymore.

The jokes were gone.

The laughter was gone.

Even Jimmy had fallen silent.

The only sounds came from the engines, the water slapping against the steel hull, and the distant thunder of naval guns hammering the French coastline.

I stood shoulder to shoulder with him near the front of the landing craft.

The two of us gripping our rifles.

Waiting.

Watching.

The shoreline continued growing larger.

Every minute revealing more detail.

The dark bluffs.

The sand.

The smoke.

The flashes of gunfire.

And then—

the obstacles.

Rows of steel hedgehogs protruded from the surf.

Wooden stakes angled toward the sea.

Mines attached to many of them.

The beach looked less like a beach and more like a trap.

Jimmy stared at them.  
“What in the hell is all that?”  
Nobody answered.  
Because nobody knew.  
Not really.  
We had practiced landings.  
We had studied maps.  
We had trained for months.  
But none of it looked like this.  
None of it felt like this.  
The coxswain shouted something from behind us.  
The engines changed pitch.  
The landing craft slowed.  
Then turned slightly.  
Several men nearly lost their balance.  
The water around us churned white.  
A lieutenant moved down the center of the craft.  
Young.  
Determined.  
Trying hard not to let anybody see how nervous he was.  
“Listen up!”  
Every head turned.  
“Stay together!”  
His voice was almost drowned out by the bombardment.  
“Get off the beach!”  
Another explosion flashed somewhere ahead.  
“Move inland as fast as possible!”  
The lieutenant looked at every man he could.  
Trying to leave them with something.  
Trying to leave them with confidence.  
“Keep moving!”  
Nobody cheered.  
Nobody answered.  
They simply listened.  
Because there was nothing else to do.  
A shell exploded somewhere along the shoreline.  
Then another.  
Then another.

Columns of dirt and smoke rose into the morning air.

The battleships continued firing.

Yet the machine guns never stopped.

The flashes kept appearing from the bluffs.

Tiny.

Almost insignificant.

Until you remembered what they were.

Men.

Waiting.

Watching.

Aiming.

Jimmy shifted beside me.

I looked over.

His face had gone pale.

Not cowardly.

Not panicked.

Just honest.

The face of a man seeing reality.

The face every soldier wore.

"You alright?"

He nodded.

"Yeah."

Then after a pause:

"You?"

"No."

That earned the faintest smile.

"Good."

I laughed despite myself.

Even now.

Even here.

Jimmy was still Jimmy.

The shoreline seemed impossibly close now.

The machine-gun fire grew louder.

Individual bursts becoming distinguishable.

The sound carried across the water.

Sharp.

Fast.

Relentless.

A soldier behind me crossed himself.  
Another whispered a prayer.  
A third reached into his pocket and touched something hidden there.  
Maybe a photograph.  
Maybe a lucky coin.  
Maybe a letter.  
Whatever it was, he held onto it like it could stop bullets.  
The coxswain yelled again.  
The engines roared.  
The landing craft surged forward.  
Water sprayed over the bow.  
The entire vessel rattled.  
Men tightened their grips on rifles.  
Nobody blinked.  
Nobody looked away.  
The beach was directly in front of us now.  
Close enough to see individual obstacles.  
Close enough to see explosions throwing sand into the air.  
Close enough to see men already moving along the shoreline.  
Some advancing.  
Some crawling.  
Some not moving at all.  
Then something struck the ramp.  
CLANG!  
The sound echoed through the craft.  
Every man flinched.  
Another impact followed immediately.  
CLANG!  
Then another.  
CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!  
For a second nobody understood.  
Then we did.  
Machine-gun rounds.  
German bullets hammering the steel ramp.  
The sound was unlike anything I'd ever heard.  
Like somebody swinging a sledgehammer against sheet metal.  
Again.  
And again.

And again.  
The impacts multiplied.  
The entire front of the landing craft rang with them.  
Men exchanged looks.  
Nobody needed an explanation.  
The Germans knew exactly where we were.  
Jimmy slowly turned toward me.  
The noise around us seemed to fade.  
The machine guns.  
The explosions.  
The engines.  
Everything.  
For a moment it was just the two of us.  
Standing at the front of the craft.  
Like we had stood at Fort Benning.  
Like we had stood aboard the Queen Mary.  
Like we had stood in Portland Harbor.  
Brothers.  
Friends.  
Waiting.  
Jimmy held out his hand.  
I looked at it.  
Then looked at him.  
Neither of us smiled.  
Neither of us had to.  
I grabbed his hand.  
The grip was firm.  
Steady.  
Real.  
“See you on the sand.”  
His voice barely rose above the noise.  
I nodded.  
“See you on the sand.”  
He squeezed once.  
Then let go.  
The coxswain screamed something.  
The engines reversed.  
The landing craft lurched.

Steel scraped against sand.  
The entire vessel shuddered.  
We had arrived.  
The machine-gun fire intensified immediately.  
The ramp rattled under repeated impacts.  
Men adjusted their footing.  
Gripped rifles.  
Prepared themselves.  
Some prayed.  
Some cursed.  
Some simply stared.  
Waiting.  
The lieutenant drew a breath.  
Looked toward the ramp.  
Then back at us.  
His face pale.  
His jaw set.  
Knowing exactly what came next.  
The coxswain reached for the release.  
And the ramp began to move.  
Omaha Beach  
Tony crouched behind the steel obstacle, fighting for breath.  
The beach had become a nightmare.  
Men were everywhere.  
Running.  
Falling.  
Crawling.  
Screaming.  
The machine guns on the bluffs raked the sand without mercy.  
Rounds snapped overhead.  
Others struck the water with sharp slapping sounds.  
Everywhere he looked, somebody was trying to stay alive.  
Everywhere he looked, somebody wasn't.  
For several seconds Tony couldn't move.  
Jimmy's fall replayed over and over in his mind.  
The smile.  
The promise.  
The splash.

The red water.  
His friend was only yards away.  
Yet he might as well have been a hundred miles away.  
The beach between them had become impossible.  
A shell exploded nearby.  
Sand blasted across Tony's face.  
The concussion rattled his teeth.  
Instinct finally took over.  
He moved.  
Not forward.  
Not yet.  
Toward another obstacle.  
Then another.  
Then a shell crater.  
Anything that offered cover.  
Anything that kept him alive another minute.  
The invasion had shattered.  
The neat formations from training were gone.  
The organized plans were gone.  
The units were gone.  
The beach had broken everything apart.  
Men fought beside whoever happened to be nearest.  
A private from Ohio.  
A corporal from Texas.  
A sergeant from Boston.  
Names didn't matter.  
Ranks barely mattered.  
Survival mattered.  
Tony slid into a crater already occupied by three soldiers.  
None belonged to his company.  
One was bleeding from the shoulder.  
Another clutched a radio that no longer worked.  
The third looked barely old enough to shave.  
Nobody introduced themselves.  
Nobody needed to.  
The machine guns above them did all the talking.  
The young soldier peeked over the rim.  
Immediately bullets snapped overhead.

He dropped back down.

“Jesus Christ.”

Nobody corrected him.

Everybody was thinking the same thing.

A staff sergeant suddenly landed in the crater beside them.

Covered in sand.

Covered in sweat.

Covered in somebody else’s blood.

“Anybody got Bangalore torpedoes?”

The men stared at him.

The sergeant swore.

“Anybody?”

One soldier finally nodded.

“Two sections.”

“Good.”

The sergeant pointed toward the wire ahead.

Only then did Tony notice it.

Barbed wire stretched across portions of the beach.

Not everywhere.

Enough.

Enough to slow men down.

Enough to kill them.

The sergeant looked around the crater.

“You boys planning on staying here all day?”

Nobody answered.

The question sounded ridiculous.

Yet everybody understood what he meant.

If they stayed on the beach, they died.

If they moved, they might die.

Those were the choices.

The sergeant pointed inland.

“Those guns are killing us.”

Another explosion shook the ground.

“We gotta get off this damn beach.”

He looked at Tony.

“You with me?”

Tony didn’t hesitate.

“Yes, Sergeant.”

The answer surprised him.  
Not because it was brave.  
Because for the first time since Jimmy fell, he'd stopped thinking about himself.  
Stopped thinking about grief.  
Stopped thinking about fear.  
The beach demanded action.  
And action was all he had left.  
The assault group formed without ceremony.  
No speeches.  
No introductions.  
Just necessity.  
Seven men.  
Then ten.  
Then twelve.  
A handful of survivors gathered around one determined sergeant.  
Exactly the way it happened all across Omaha Beach that morning.  
The Bangalore torpedoes were awkward steel tubes packed with explosives.  
Training had made them seem simple.  
Nothing felt simple now.  
Two men crawled forward dragging sections of pipe through the sand.  
Machine-gun fire immediately found them.  
One man went down.  
The other kept crawling.  
Kept pushing.  
Kept moving.  
Because stopping wasn't an option.  
Tony found himself firing toward the bluffs.  
Not because he could hit anything.  
The Germans were mostly hidden.  
The distance was too great.  
The smoke too thick.  
But firing felt better than doing nothing.  
Everybody needed something to fight back with.  
Even if it was hope.  
The remaining engineer finally shoved the Bangalore beneath the wire.  
Men flattened themselves into the sand.  
The explosion thundered across the beach.  
Wire flew into the air.

A gap appeared.  
Not large.  
Large enough.  
The sergeant rose first.  
“MOVE!”  
The group surged forward.  
Not charging.  
Not heroically.  
Running.  
Falling.  
Crawling.  
Advancing a few yards at a time.  
The way survival actually works.  
Tony dropped into another crater.  
Then another.  
Each one bringing him slightly closer to the bluff.  
Slightly farther from the surf.  
Slightly farther from where Jimmy had fallen.  
Yet somehow the memory stayed beside him.  
Every step.  
Every breath.  
Every yard.  
The beach behind them continued filling with men.  
The beach ahead continued firing back.  
The invasion wasn't one battle.  
It was a thousand small battles happening at once.  
Every shell crater held a different story.  
Every obstacle held a different struggle.  
Every survivor carried a different reason for moving forward.  
The sergeant pointed toward a shallow draw cutting through the bluff.  
“There!”  
Tony followed his finger.  
A narrow break in the terrain.  
Steep.  
Ugly.  
Exposed.  
But possible.  
And on Omaha Beach, possible was good enough.

Another burst of machine-gun fire tore across the sand.  
The young soldier from the crater spun backward and fell.  
Nobody stopped.  
Nobody could.  
The war was teaching its lessons now.  
Fast.  
Brutally.  
Without mercy.  
The sergeant looked back one final time.  
“Get ready, boys.”  
Tony gripped his rifle tighter.  
Above them, hidden among the smoke and earth, German positions waited.  
The beach was behind them.  
The bluff stood ahead.  
And the hardest part of the fight was just beginning.  
The draw looked impossible.  
That was Tony's first thought.  
The second was that it was still better than staying on the beach.  
The narrow break in the bluff twisted upward through dirt, rock, weeds, and shattered earth.  
German machine guns covered much of the open ground around it, but the terrain offered enough folds and depressions to give determined men a chance.  
A chance.  
On Omaha Beach, that was about all anybody could ask for.  
The sergeant pointed upward.  
"Move one at a time!"  
Nobody argued.  
Nobody questioned.  
The chain of command that morning was built on competence.  
The men followed whoever seemed to know what they were doing.  
At that moment, the sergeant knew what he was doing.  
That was enough.  
The first soldier sprinted forward.  
Made it.  
The second followed.  
Made it.  
The third nearly did.  
A burst of machine-gun fire caught him halfway across the open ground.  
He disappeared in a cloud of dirt.  
The others flattened themselves instinctively.

Nobody moved.  
Nobody breathed.  
The machine gun continued firing.  
The rounds snapped overhead like giant whips.  
The sergeant studied the bluff.  
Watching.  
Waiting.  
Counting.  
Then he pointed.  
"NOW!"  
Tony ran.  
The world narrowed immediately.  
No beach.  
No ocean.  
No invasion.  
Only the next piece of ground.  
Ten yards.  
Eight.  
Five.  
A shallow depression appeared.  
Tony dove into it.  
Bullets struck the dirt behind him.  
One passed so close he felt the air move beside his face.  
For several seconds he simply lay there breathing.  
Alive.  
Still alive.  
The climb continued.  
A few yards at a time.  
A crater.  
A ditch.  
A fold in the terrain.  
Another crater.  
The men moved like water finding cracks in stone.  
Slowly.  
Relentlessly.  
Every foot gained felt expensive.  
Every yard cost something.  
The farther they climbed, the more evidence of the bombardment appeared.

Broken trees.  
Shattered concrete.  
Burned earth.  
Huge shell holes gouged into the hillside.  
The Navy had pounded the German defenses all morning.  
Some positions were destroyed.  
Others weren't.  
The ones that survived continued firing.  
Tony crawled behind a mound of dirt and nearly collided with an Army lieutenant.  
The officer looked exhausted.  
His face covered with grime and sweat.  
Several men huddled around him.  
Different unit patches.  
Different divisions.  
It no longer mattered.  
The lieutenant pointed toward a machine-gun position farther up the bluff.  
"There."  
Tony followed his finger.  
For the first time he could actually see it.  
A bunker partially hidden among the earth and brush.  
Small.  
Difficult to spot.  
Deadly.  
Every few seconds muzzle flashes erupted from the opening.  
Each burst reaching down toward the beach.  
Toward the men still trapped below.  
The lieutenant looked around.  
"Who's got grenades?"  
Several hands immediately appeared.  
Tony's among them.  
The lieutenant nodded.  
"Good."  
His voice remained calm.  
Steady.  
Exactly the kind of voice men wanted to hear.  
"We take that position, we open a path for everybody behind us."  
Nobody needed convincing.  
They could hear the machine gun.

Could see what it was doing.

The group moved again.

This time even slower.

The bunker was close enough now that mistakes became deadly.

Every movement mattered.

Every sound mattered.

Every second mattered.

Tony crawled behind a fallen tree.

The lieutenant moved beside him.

Then stood slightly to signal the next group forward.

The shot came instantly.

One crack.

Sharp.

Final.

The lieutenant's whistle slipped from his mouth as he fell backward.

Dead before he hit the ground.

Nobody spoke.

Nobody had time.

The machine gun continued firing.

The beach continued suffering.

The war continued moving.

Even when men didn't.

The sergeant from the beach appeared again.

As if he'd materialized from the earth itself.

"Keep moving!"

The order cut through the shock.

The lieutenant was gone.

The mission wasn't.

That was another lesson Omaha taught quickly.

Somebody always had to keep going.

The assault group split naturally.

Several men worked left.

Others moved right.

Tony found himself advancing with four strangers through a shallow depression leading toward the bunker.

The distance closed.

Fifty yards.

Forty.

Thirty.

The machine gun sounded impossibly loud now.

A soldier beside Tony pulled the pin on a grenade.

Held it.

Counted.

Then threw.

The grenade disappeared into the brush near the position.

The explosion rocked the hillside.

A second grenade followed.

Then a third.

Smoke poured into the air.

The machine gun stopped.

For one glorious second—

silence.

Then rifle fire erupted from somewhere nearby.

The Germans weren't finished.

Not even close.

The sergeant rose.

"GO!"

The group surged forward.

Running now.

No more crawling.

No more waiting.

No more careful movement.

The final yards disappeared in seconds.

Tony scrambled over sandbags and shattered earth.

The smell of explosives filled the air.

Smoke burned his eyes.

His heart hammered against his ribs.

The first German soldier he saw looked as frightened as everyone else.

Young.

Dirty.

Human.

For a brief moment the reality felt strange.

The enemy wasn't a monster.

Wasn't a machine.

Just another young man trapped inside history.

The moment lasted less than a second.

The German reached for his rifle.  
Tony fired.  
The war moved on.  
The fighting inside the position was short.  
Violent.  
Confused.  
Nothing like the movies.  
Men shouting.  
Rifles firing.  
Smoke everywhere.  
Then suddenly—  
it was over.  
The machine gun that had been firing on the beach sat silent.  
The bunker belonged to the Americans now.  
Below them Omaha Beach stretched across the shoreline.  
Smoke drifted over the water.  
Landing craft continued arriving.  
Men continued moving inland.  
The invasion was still unfolding.  
But for the first time all morning, Tony could see progress.  
The beach wasn't winning.  
The Germans weren't winning.  
The Americans were simply refusing to stop.  
The sergeant stood near the edge of the bluff.  
Looking down.  
Breathing hard.  
"Well boys."  
Nobody answered.  
Most were too exhausted.  
The sergeant nodded toward the beach.  
"We're off it."  
Those three words carried more meaning than any speech.  
We're off it.  
They had survived the impossible part.  
At least for now.  
Tony looked back toward the shoreline.  
Toward the surf.  
Toward the place where Jimmy had fallen.

The distance seemed enormous.  
Yet the memory remained crystal clear.  
The smile.  
The handshake.  
The promise.  
The sacrifice.  
For a moment the battle faded.  
And all Tony could think about was finding his friend.  
he fighting moved inland.  
The surviving men followed it.  
Tony didn't.  
Not immediately.  
For the first time since the ramp dropped, he wasn't thinking about machine guns.  
Or bunkers.  
Or German positions.  
He was thinking about Jimmy.  
The sergeant shouted for everyone to keep moving.  
Other officers were doing the same.  
The battle wasn't over.  
Not even close.  
But Tony couldn't make his legs follow them.  
Not yet.  
The image of Jimmy falling into the surf refused to leave him.  
Every time he blinked, he saw it again.  
The smile.  
The handshake.  
The promise.  
Then the bullets.  
A captain grabbed his shoulder.  
"You moving, soldier?"  
Tony looked at him.  
For a second he wasn't sure where he was.  
"My friend."  
"What?"  
"My friend is down there."  
The captain followed Tony's gaze toward the beach.  
The officer's face changed immediately.  
He understood.

Everybody understood.

There were thousands of friendships scattered across Omaha Beach that morning.

Thousands of men wondering where somebody had gone.

Thousands of men hoping.

Thousands already knowing.

The captain squeezed Tony's shoulder once.

Then pointed inland.

"Find him later."

Tony looked back toward the beach.

The captain's voice softened.

"If you stay here, somebody else is gonna be looking for you."

The words landed.

Hard.

Because they were true.

Somewhere back in Memphis a wife was waiting.

A son was waiting.

And Jimmy had already given everything to make sure Tony got the chance to return to them.

Tony nodded slowly.

Then moved inland with the others.

But his mind never left the beach.

The remainder of the day passed in fragments.

Pieces.

Moments.

Memories stitched together by exhaustion.

German positions.

Hedgerows.

Prisoners.

Gunfire.

Orders.

Confusion.

Victory.

Loss.

At times it felt like a week.

At others it felt like minutes.

The battle continued long after the beach had been secured.

Yet through it all, one thought remained.

Find Jimmy.

By late afternoon the gunfire had finally begun to fade.

Not disappear.  
Just fade.  
The beach behind them remained crowded with activity.  
Medics.  
Engineers.  
Burial details.  
Fresh troops moving inland.  
The invasion was still growing.  
Still unfolding.  
Still changing the world.  
But Tony had a different mission now.  
He started back toward the shoreline.  
Alone.  
Nobody stopped him.  
Nobody questioned him.  
Several men were doing the same thing.  
Searching.  
Looking.  
Hoping.  
The beach looked different now.  
Worse.  
The tide had shifted.  
Smoke drifted across the sand.  
Destroyed landing craft sat at strange angles.  
Equipment littered the shoreline.  
Helmets.  
Packs.  
Rifles.  
Pieces of lives interrupted.  
The obstacles remained standing.  
Silent now.  
No longer terrifying.  
Just steel.  
Just wood.  
The killing had moved elsewhere.  
The evidence remained.  
Tony walked slowly.  
Every few steps he recognized something.

A helmet.  
A patch.  
A face.  
Some men had already been covered with ponchos.  
Others waited where they had fallen.  
Medics still moved among them.  
Still searching.  
Still hoping.  
The farther he walked, the heavier his legs became.  
Part of him wanted to keep looking.  
Part of him wanted to stop.  
Because as long as he hadn't found Jimmy, there was still a chance.  
A foolish chance.  
But a chance.  
Then he saw him.  
The surf moved gently around the body.  
Almost peacefully.  
As though the sea had finally grown tired.  
Jimmy lay where the tide had carried him.  
One arm partially submerged.  
His uniform darkened by seawater.  
His helmet gone.  
His rifle nowhere in sight.  
The violence of the morning had disappeared from his face.  
What remained looked strangely familiar.  
The Tennessee boy.  
The singer.  
The joker.  
The brother.  
Tony stopped walking.  
The world seemed to grow quiet.  
Not silent.  
Just distant.  
Like everything had moved farther away.  
The waves.  
The voices.  
The war.  
All of it.

He knelt beside him.

Slowly.

Carefully.

Almost afraid to touch him.

For a moment he simply sat there.

Looking.

Remembering.

Trying to understand how somebody could be alive in one moment and gone in the next.

"Hey, Jimmy."

The words came out softly.

Almost a whisper.

The way you speak to an old friend.

The way you speak when part of you still expects an answer.

None came.

Only the sound of water rolling across the sand.

Tony stared out toward the horizon.

Toward England.

Toward America.

Toward all the places they had talked about.

The hamburger.

The supper table.

Tellico Plains.

The mountains.

The future.

Gone.

Every one of them.

Gone.

His eyes filled with tears.

He didn't fight them.

There wasn't any point.

"You idiot."

A small laugh escaped him.

The kind that comes when grief doesn't know what else to do.

"You actually did it."

The promise from Fort Benning.

The promise in the barracks.

The promise neither of them had taken seriously.

Until Jimmy did.

Tony reached down and opened Jimmy's tunic.  
His hands trembled.  
Not from fear.  
From loss.  
The chain appeared beneath the fabric.  
Army dog tags.  
Still there.  
For a moment Tony hesitated.  
Taking them felt final.  
Permanent.  
Like admitting the truth.  
Like closing a door that could never be opened again.  
Then he remembered the conversation on the crate.  
The Tennessee hills.  
The broken family.  
The boy trying to figure out which way to go.  
The man who wanted one supper with a family that wasn't his.  
The friend who had finally found a brother.  
Tony removed the tags carefully.  
The chain slid free.  
The metal felt cold against his hand.  
He wrapped his fingers around it.  
Held it tightly.  
As though letting go might somehow mean losing Jimmy twice.  
"Don't worry."  
His voice cracked.  
He swallowed hard.  
Then tried again.  
"Don't worry, brother."  
The tears came harder now.  
"I'll get you home."  
The tide rolled in.  
Then rolled out again.  
The beach stretched endlessly around him.  
Filled with thousands of stories.  
Thousands of sacrifices.  
Thousands of names.  
Yet at that moment there was only one.

Jimmy Lee.

Tony sat beside him for a long time.

Long enough for the sun to begin sinking toward the horizon.

Long enough for the shadows to grow longer across Omaha Beach.

Long enough for a promise to take root inside his heart.

A promise that would survive decades.

A promise that would survive marriage.

Children.

Old age.

Even dementia.

As long as Tony Bennett drew breath—

Jimmy Lee would never be forgotten.

The tide continued rolling in.

Then rolling back out.

The same way it had before the invasion.

The same way it would long after the war was over.

The sea didn't care who won.

It didn't care who died.

It simply kept moving.

Tony remained beside Jimmy for a long time.

Long enough for the sounds of battle to move farther inland.

Long enough for medics and engineers to begin working across the beach.

Long enough for the shock to settle into something heavier.

Something permanent.

The dog tags rested in his hand.

Cold.

Wet.

Real.

Every few moments he would tighten his grip around them.

As though he needed to remind himself they were actually there.

As though letting go might somehow erase everything that had happened.

He looked around.

For the first time all day, he truly saw the beach.

Not as a battlefield.

As a graveyard.

The shoreline stretched in both directions.

American soldiers.

German soldiers.

Men from farms.

Men from cities.

Men who had families waiting.

Men who didn't.

All lying beneath the same gray sky.

All equal now.

A chaplain moved through the sand in the distance.

Stopping.

Praying.

Moving again.

A medic covered another body with a poncho.

Engineers worked among the obstacles.

Landing craft continued arriving.

The invasion pushed forward.

History pushed forward.

It always did.

Tony looked down at Jimmy.

The Tennessee boy.

The singer.

The dreamer.

The joker.

The friend.

The brother.

A strange thought entered his mind.

One that would never leave.

The world would never know this man.

The newspapers would write about generals.

About divisions.

About armies.

About victories.

The history books would talk about Omaha Beach.

About D-Day.

About strategy.

About nations.

But nobody would write about Jimmy Lee.

Nobody would write about a boy from the Tennessee hills whose mother left and whose father disappeared into moonshine and debt.

Nobody would write about a kid who chased girls, told jokes, dreamed about Music Row, and wanted nothing more than one good supper with a family that loved him.

Nobody would write about the young man who had kept a promise made in a dark barracks years earlier.

The world would move on.

The war would continue.

Tomorrow new headlines would appear.

New battles.

New casualties.

New stories.

And Jimmy Lee would become one more name among thousands.

Unless somebody remembered.

Tony stared at the dog tags.

The metal glinted faintly in the afternoon light.

He closed his hand around them.

Tightly.

"I'll remember."

The words came quietly.

Barely above a whisper.

Yet they felt larger than anything he'd ever said.

He looked toward the hills beyond the beach.

Toward the fighting still taking place inland.

Toward the future waiting for him.

Toward the years he could not yet imagine.

Marriage.

Children.

Grandchildren.

Old age.

Loss.

Memory.

All of it still hidden beyond the horizon.

But one thing suddenly felt certain.

As long as he lived, Jimmy Lee would not disappear.

Not into the sand.

Not into the sea.

Not into history.

Tony reached down and picked up Jimmy's helmet.

He placed it gently beside him.

Then rose to his feet.

Slowly.

Reluctantly.

Like a man leaving part of himself behind.

For one final moment he stood looking at his friend.

The tide washing quietly around the shoreline.

The smoke drifting across the beach.

The invasion continuing beyond them.

Then he turned inland.

The dog tags hung from his fist.

Heavy.

Cold.

Permanent.

He took a step.

Then another.

And began walking toward the war.

Carrying the only thing he could still save.

The story of Jimmy Lee.

# CHAPTER SIX

Back at the Home

It had been a few weeks since Dad last asked me to tell him the story.

The nurses were beginning to complain about it.

Not because they were tired of hearing it. Quite the opposite.

They had gotten used to their front-row seats for Jimmy Lee, like it was some old-time radio serial and they were tuning in between medication rounds and blood pressure checks.

One afternoon I passed two of them leaning against the medication cart outside the dining room.

“You gonna leave us hanging like that?” one of them asked.

“We’re going through withdrawals.”

The other nodded.

“Poor Jimmy’s been standing on Omaha Beach for three weeks waiting on you.”

I laughed.

“I’ll let him know y’all are concerned.”

But Dad never asked.

He had gone quiet.

And quiet at Golden Ages was different than ordinary silence.

It wasn’t peaceful.

It wasn’t comforting.

It was the kind of quiet that presses against your ears.

The kind that makes you notice every squeak of a medication cart wheel, every distant cough from down the hall, every soft shuffle of rubber-soled shoes moving across tile.

A padded sort of silence.

Artificial.

Like the moments before a funeral starts.

Like a church sanctuary after everyone has gone home.

The kind of silence that makes you wonder what comes next.

Sometimes when I visited, Dad looked at me like he wasn’t quite sure why I was there.

His eyes would narrow slightly.

Not angry.

Not suspicious.

Just confused.

Like he was trying to fit my face into a puzzle missing several pieces.

Sometimes he’d glance toward the doorway and wait.

As though somebody else was supposed to walk in.

As though the real visitor hadn’t arrived yet.

Maybe in those moments I really was just another stranger refusing to leave him alone.

I kept showing up anyway.

Most evenings after visiting hours, I'd sit in my truck for a while before heading home.

Engine off.

Windows cracked.

The smell of rain or cut grass drifting through the cab depending on the season.

The parking lot lights cast everything in that dull yellow glow that somehow makes the world look older than it really is.

I'd sit there thinking about Dad.

Thinking about Jimmy.

Thinking about how memory works.

Or doesn't.

Sometimes I'd replay pieces of Dad's life the way you sort through an old box of photographs.

Some pictures sharp.

Others faded.

Corners bent.

Names forgotten.

A lifetime reduced to fragments.

Dad had come home from Europe in 1945.

The war ended.

The Army sent him home.

And somehow he carried part of Omaha Beach with him for the next fifty-seven years.

The older I got, the more that amazed me.

He was born October 22, 1919.

I was born July 27, 1941.

Today was May 15, 2001.

I was almost sixty years old.

Dad was eighty-one.

Numbers gave me something solid to hold onto.

Dates didn't change.

Arithmetic didn't wake up one morning and forget who it was.

Arithmetic never looked at its own son and saw a stranger.

Mom used to say the war put iron in his spine.

Maybe she was right.

Dad believed in discipline.

Beds made tight.

Tools put back where they belonged.

Shirts folded properly.

Words chosen carefully.

Nothing wasted.

He wasn't an affectionate man.

Not because he didn't love people.

Because he came from a generation that often showed love through responsibility rather than conversation.

When Dad hugged you, it felt less like affection and more like being braced by a fence post.

Solid.

Reliable.

Permanent.

Mom balanced all that out.

She filled the house with warmth.

With laughter.

With biscuits and Sunday dinners and the smell of Ivory soap.

She softened the edges life had sharpened on him.

Together they somehow made it work.

Now she was gone.

And I was the only one left who remembered both versions of him.

The soldier.

And the man who came home.

Dad's Memory

One afternoon I was sitting beside Dad's bed flipping through an old hunting magazine I'd already read twice when he stirred from a nap and said:

"December."

I looked up.

"What about December?"

"That's when I came home."

The words were clear.

Strong.

Not the uncertain, wandering speech I'd grown accustomed to hearing.

For a moment he sounded like my father again.

Outside the window, a maple tree swayed in the breeze. Its leaves flashed silver and green against the gray Memphis afternoon.

"You remember that?" I asked.

"Of course I remember it."

He sounded irritated by the question.

"I wanted to be home before Christmas."

I nodded.

His voice carried a certainty that had been missing lately.

Not borrowed certainty.

Not the kind that came from hearing a story repeated enough times to make it feel like a memory.

This felt real.

Anchored.

For a moment, I could almost see the young soldier standing where the old man sat.

The twenty-five-year-old stepping off a train.

The war behind him.

Home waiting ahead.

“So what made you think about that?” I asked.

He looked at me.

“Think about what?”

“Coming home.”

“I didn’t.”

“You just said December.”

“Because you asked.”

His answer was immediate.

Certain.

Completely wrong.

I smiled.

Arguing with dementia is like arguing with rain.

It doesn’t matter how right you are.

The weather always wins.

“Okay,” I said. “Maybe I did.”

He nodded, satisfied.

The matter settled.

At least for him.

For a while neither of us spoke.

The television sat silent in the corner.

A nurse pushed a medication cart past the doorway.

Somewhere down the hall somebody laughed.

Then Dad broke the silence.

“Do you want something?”

I smiled.

“Not unless you’ve got a hamburger hidden somewhere.”

That earned the faintest hint of a grin.

Then it disappeared.

His eyes drifted toward the wall.

Toward some distant place only he could see.

The room grew quiet again.

I watched him for a moment.

The man who taught me how to fish.  
The man who taught me how to drive.  
The man who could fix almost anything with a wrench and enough patience.  
Some days he remembered all of it.  
Other days he couldn't remember what he'd had for breakfast.  
The hardest part wasn't the forgetting.  
It was never knowing which version of him would be waiting when I walked through the door.  
Finally I asked:  
"Do you feel like talking today, Dad?"  
His eyes remained fixed on the wall.  
A long silence followed.  
Then:  
"Yes."  
Relief flickered through me.  
"Good."  
Another pause.  
Then he turned and looked directly at me.  
"But not with you."  
The words hit harder than they should have.  
I laughed softly.  
Trying to make it sound like a joke.  
"Not with me?"  
"No."  
"Why not?"  
He studied my face.  
Not angrily.  
Not cruelly.  
Just confused.  
Like a man trying to place a stranger he'd seen somewhere before.  
Because I don't know who you are.  
The room suddenly felt smaller.  
I looked away toward the window.  
Toward the parking lot.  
Toward anything except his eyes.  
"You know who I am."  
"No."  
His answer came immediately.  
Firm.

Certain.

"No, I don't."

I swallowed.

"I'm your son."

His expression never changed.

"I don't have a son."

The words landed like a door slamming shut.

For a few seconds neither of us spoke.

I stood slowly.

Stretched my back.

Pretended I needed to move around.

Anything to give myself a second.

"Well," I said, forcing a smile, "I'm gonna get a soda."

"No."

"You don't want one?"

"Not from you."

I nodded.

"Okay then, Pops."

His eyes snapped toward me.

Sharp.

Alert.

"What did you call me?"

I stopped.

"Pops."

The expression on his face changed.

Not confusion.

Recognition.

Something older.

Darker.

"That's what I called my father."

For the first time all afternoon, his voice carried something close to anger.

I slowly sat back down.

And for the first time in my life, Dad began talking about a man I'd never heard him mention before.

Dad's Story

Dad frowned, his gaze drifting somewhere beyond the room.

Beyond me.

Beyond Golden Ages.

For a moment he looked younger.

Not physically.

Emotionally.

Like a boy staring down a road he hadn't traveled in sixty years.

"That man was a tyrant," he said quietly.

I waited.

Dad rarely talked about his childhood.

In truth, I knew almost nothing about it.

I'd heard stories about farming.

About hard times.

About the Depression.

But never much about the man who raised him.

"He stayed drunk most of the time," Dad continued.

"Whiskey before breakfast. Whiskey before supper. Whiskey before bed."

His jaw tightened.

"When he wasn't drinking, he was thinking about drinking."

The room had gone still.

Even the television seemed quieter.

I leaned forward.

"You never told me any of this."

"No."

"Why not?"

Dad shrugged.

"Nobody asked."

The answer sounded simple.

But I knew better.

Nobody spends eighty years hiding something because nobody asked.

Some doors stay closed because opening them hurts.

"Did he hit you?"

The question slipped out before I could stop it.

Dad didn't answer right away.

His fingers tightened around the armrest.

The knuckles turned pale.

Then he nodded.

"Quite often."

The words landed softly.

Almost casually.

Which somehow made them worse.

"He hit Grammy too?"

“Sometimes.”

His eyes remained fixed on the floor.

“But mostly me.”

A long silence settled between us.

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead.

Somewhere down the hall a nurse laughed.

Life continued moving while two generations sat staring at old ghosts.

“I didn’t know.”

Dad let out a dry laugh.

“You weren’t supposed to.”

His voice carried no anger.

Just exhaustion.

The exhaustion of a man who had spent a lifetime carrying something heavy.

“You know what the funny thing is?”

I shook my head.

“No.”

“I thought everybody’s father was like that.”

He smiled sadly.

“When you’re little, you don’t know any different.”

The words hit harder than anything else he’d said.

Because they sounded true.

For several moments neither of us spoke.

Then Dad surprised me.

“I had a brother.”

The room seemed to stop.

I blinked.

“What?”

“A brother.”

I stared at him.

Certain I’d heard him wrong.

“You had a brother?”

Dad nodded.

The movement was small.

Barely noticeable.

Yet it changed everything.

I was nearly sixty years old.

Dad was eighty-one.

And in all those years, I had never once heard the words:

I had a brother.

Not from Dad.

Not from Mom.

Not from an aunt.

Not from a cousin.

Nobody.

"Wait a minute."

I sat forward.

"You had a brother and I'm just now finding this out?"

Dad's eyes drifted toward the window.

"He was dead before you were born."

The answer came quietly.

Matter-of-fact.

As though that explained everything.

Maybe to him it did.

"What happened?"

The question hung in the room.

Dad didn't answer.

His jaw worked slowly from side to side.

The way it always did when he was deciding whether to tell the truth.

Or keep carrying it.

Finally he spoke.

"Pops came home drunk."

His eyes never left the window.

"Meaner than usual."

The Memphis afternoon drifted beyond the glass.

Cars moved through the parking lot.

Clouds gathered in the distance.

Normal life.

Completely unaware of what was happening inside Room 214.

"He started after me."

Dad swallowed.

"He always started after me."

The words sounded rehearsed.

Not because they weren't true.

Because he'd lived with them for so long.

"My brother stepped in between us."

For the first time his voice began to tremble.

Just slightly.  
Enough for me to notice.  
“He told Pops to leave me alone.”  
Dad looked down at his hands.  
Old hands now.  
Spotted with age.  
Yet somehow I could see the frightened boy hidden beneath them.  
“Pops took a swing.”  
The room seemed to shrink.  
Dad’s eyes closed.  
“He missed me.”  
A long silence followed.  
The kind of silence that tells you something terrible is coming.  
“He hit my brother instead.”  
Dad’s voice had become almost a whisper.  
The memory wasn’t in 2001 anymore.  
It wasn’t in Golden Ages.  
It wasn’t even in Memphis.  
It was somewhere far away.  
Somewhere dark.  
Somewhere he had spent decades trying not to visit.  
“He fell backward.”  
Dad swallowed.  
“Hit the stove.”  
His eyes remained closed.  
“He never woke up.”  
The words left the room completely silent.  
No dramatic pause.  
No tears.  
No speech.  
Just truth.  
Heavy as stone.  
I sat there staring at him.  
Trying to absorb what I’d just heard.  
A brother.  
Dead.  
Gone before I was born.  
Erased so completely from the family story that I never even knew he existed.

For sixty years I thought I knew everything important about my father's life.

The war.

My mother.

Jimmy.

The years that came after.

Now, sitting in a room at Golden Ages, I was discovering entire chapters that had never been told.

And for the first time, I began to wonder how many more were still missing.

Room 214

I stood and walked toward the window.

The Memphis afternoon had darkened.

Rain clouds were gathering over the parking lot.

Cars came and went.

Families visited.

Lives continued.

Meanwhile, inside Room 214, the past kept opening doors neither of us knew existed.

A brother.

Dead before I was born.

Hidden for more than sixty years.

I wasn't sure what surprised me more.

That he'd never told me.

Or that he'd finally decided to.

My mouth felt dry.

A cold soda sat on the small table beside his chair.

Probably left there by Sandy.

I picked it up, popped the tab, and took a long drink.

The carbonation burned going down.

I welcomed it.

It gave me something to focus on.

Something besides the fact that I apparently knew less about my father's life than I thought.

I turned back toward him.

"If we're sharing secrets, Dad, is there anything else I should know?"

No answer.

He sat staring at his hands.

I tried again.

"What next?"

Still nothing.

The silence stretched.

Then I smiled.

“You got another brother hidden somewhere?”

Nothing.

“A cousin?”

Silence.

I took another sip.

“Maybe an uncle?”

Still nothing.

Then I noticed his shoulders moving.

At first I thought he was laughing.

The timing seemed right.

A bad joke.

An old man finally enjoying himself.

Then I saw the tears.

“Dad?”

He covered his face with both hands.

The room suddenly felt very small.

Very quiet.

The rain began tapping softly against the window.

A slow Tennessee rain.

Steady.

Patient.

“Dad?”

His shoulders trembled again.

“No.”

The word barely escaped him.

“No.”

He struck the armrest lightly with his fist.

Not angry.

Frustrated.

Like a man trying to force something painful back into a box.

I moved closer.

Kneeling beside his chair.

“What is it?”

He lowered his hands.

His eyes were red.

Wet.

The look on his face reminded me of a child who'd been carrying a secret too heavy to hold.

“You don't have a brother.”

I blinked.

“What?”

“You asked if you had a brother.”

His voice cracked.

“You don’t.”

For a second I thought we had somehow drifted back into the conversation about his brother.

Then he looked directly at me.

And everything changed.

“You have a sister.”

The words hung between us.

Fragile.

Impossible.

Enormous.

“A what?”

My voice barely worked.

“A sister.”

The tears returned immediately.

He wasn’t confused.

He wasn’t drifting.

He wasn’t mixing up stories.

This was memory.

Pure memory.

I sat down hard in the chair across from him.

The room seemed to tilt slightly.

A sister.

A whole human being.

An entire life.

And I had never heard a single word about her.

“Why am I just now hearing this?”

The question came out sharper than I intended.

Dad didn’t flinch.

Maybe because he’d asked himself the same question for decades.

He stared toward the rain-streaked window.

“Your mother and I were young.”

His voice had become distant.

Like he was reading from a page only he could see.

“I was seventeen.”

He swallowed.

"She was fifteen."

The pieces began fitting together.

Slowly.

Painfully.

"We thought we were in love."

A faint smile crossed his face.

"We probably were."

The smile disappeared.

"Then she got pregnant."

Neither of us spoke.

The rain continued tapping softly against the glass.

The sound seemed louder now.

As though the entire world had stopped to listen.

"Both our parents said we couldn't keep her."

His eyes never left the window.

"They said we were children."

He laughed once.

Without humor.

"They were right."

His hands tightened around the blanket.

"But that didn't make it hurt any less."

I had never seen my father like this.

Not after Mom died.

Not after his stroke.

Not even when he talked about Jimmy.

Because this wasn't war.

This wasn't history.

This wasn't memory.

This was regret.

And regret ages a man in ways years never can.

"We held her for maybe ten minutes."

His voice had become almost a whisper.

"Maybe less."

I could picture it.

A hospital room.

Two frightened teenagers.

A newborn child.

Ten borrowed minutes.

Then goodbye.

Forever.

“Did you name her?”

Dad closed his eyes.

For a long moment I didn't think he was going to answer.

Then:

“Rose.”

The name filled the room.

Soft.

Simple.

Beautiful.

“We called her Rose.”

His eyes remained closed.

“It wasn't official.”

A tear slipped down his cheek.

“It was just ours.”

Outside, thunder rolled somewhere beyond the city.

Inside Room 214, neither of us moved.

Because for the second time that afternoon, another ghost had walked into the room.

Home is a Ghost

For several moments neither of us spoke.

The rain continued falling against the window.

Steady.

Gentle.

The kind of rain that settles over Memphis and makes the whole city seem quieter than it really is.

Dad sat staring at the far wall.

Not looking at me.

Not looking at the room.

Looking somewhere else.

Somewhere decades away.

“What happened after that?”

The question felt small.

Insufficient.

But it was all I had.

Dad rubbed his thumb across his wedding ring.

A habit I'd seen a thousand times.

Usually without noticing.

Now it seemed important.

Like he was reaching for Mom.

Even after all these years.

“Losing her almost broke your mother.”

His voice was soft.

Careful.

The way people speak when they’re handling something fragile.

“We never talked about it much.”

He swallowed.

“But it stayed with her.”

The rain tapped gently against the glass.

Neither of us looked away.

“For a while she managed.”

His eyes drifted toward the doorway.

“Then she’d see a little girl in a grocery store.”

A pause.

“Or hear somebody call out a name.”

Another pause.

“Or see a birthday party.”

His voice cracked.

Just slightly.

Enough.

“And she’d wonder.”

I didn’t say anything.

There wasn’t anything to say.

“Wonder what?”

Dad laughed softly.

The saddest laugh I’d ever heard.

“What she looked like.”

A long pause.

“If she was happy.”

Another.

“If she knew.”

The room felt heavy now.

Filled with people who weren’t there.

A dead brother.

A lost daughter.

A wife gone years before her husband.

The ghosts were beginning to outnumber the living.

"When you were born, it helped."

He looked toward me.

Really looked at me.

For the first time all afternoon.

"You gave her something to hold on to."

His eyes softened.

"Something to love."

The words hit me harder than I expected.

Because for all the confusion.

For all the dementia.

For all the uncertainty.

That felt true.

"But it never completely went away."

His gaze returned to the window.

"Not for either of us."

A movement at the doorway caught my attention.

Mrs. Cantley stood just outside the room.

One hand pressed lightly against her chest.

Listening.

Not eavesdropping.

Listening.

The way people do when they realize something important is happening.

She stepped inside quietly.

No interruption.

No speech.

No questions.

She placed a tissue in Dad's hand.

Gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze.

Then left as quietly as she'd entered.

Dad looked down at the tissue.

Turned it over once.

Then twice.

Like he wasn't entirely sure where it had come from.

"Good woman."

I smiled.

"She is."

The room grew quiet again.

Only the rain remained.

And memory.

After a while Dad leaned back in his chair.

The effort of remembering seemed to have exhausted him.

Like he'd spent the afternoon carrying furniture up a flight of stairs.

"Did you ever find her?"

The question came suddenly.

So suddenly I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly.

"Find who?"

"Our girl."

The words settled into the room.

Heavy.

Permanent.

"You mean Rose?"

He nodded.

Once.

"I tried."

His eyes remained fixed on the window.

"Years ago."

"What happened?"

"The records were sealed."

A faint smile appeared.

The kind people wear when they lose a fight they never expected to win.

"Maybe that was for the best."

I frowned.

"For the best for who?"

He didn't answer.

Because I don't think he had one.

The rain had nearly stopped now.

The clouds were beginning to break apart.

Thin shafts of evening sunlight filtered through the glass.

Turning the room gold.

Dad watched the light for a long time.

Then finally spoke.

"You know what the nurses tell me every morning when they wheel me in here?"

I shook my head.

"They tell me I'm home."

A dry laugh escaped him.

"This ain't home."

The words hung there.

Simple.

Certain.

The way only old truths can be.

“Home’s a ghost, son.”

He looked directly at me.

Not through me.

Not around me.

At me.

“You don’t ever get back to it.”

For a moment I thought he was talking about Memphis.

Or the house he shared with Mom.

Or the farm where he grew up.

Then I realized he wasn’t talking about a place at all.

He was talking about time.

The people you lose.

The mistakes you carry.

The roads you wish you’d taken.

The ones you wish you hadn’t.

All of it.

Gone.

And no matter how badly you wanted it back.

You never truly returned.

Dad looked toward the rain-streaked window one last time.

Then quietly said:

“That’s why I keep talking about Jimmy.”

His Words

Dad’s words lingered in the room.

That’s why I keep talking about Jimmy.

For several seconds neither of us spoke.

The late afternoon sunlight continued filtering through the window.

The rain had moved east.

The parking lot glistened beneath the fading Memphis sky.

I finally asked:

“What do you mean?”

Dad smiled faintly.

Not a happy smile.

A tired one.

“Because that’s the last place I knew exactly who I was.”

The answer settled into me slowly.

Like a stone sinking through water.

“I was a soldier.”

His voice remained calm.

Steady.

“Before that, I was a scared kid trying not to get hit by his father.”

A pause.

“Afterward, I was a husband.”

Another pause.

“A father.”

Another.

“A worker.”

He shrugged.

“Then I got old.”

I laughed softly.

“So did everybody else.”

“Not like this.”

His fingers tapped lightly against the armrest.

“I wake up some mornings and spend five minutes trying to figure out where I am.”

He looked around the room.

“The walls change.”

A pause.

“The furniture changes.”

Another.

“The faces change.”

Then he looked at me.

“But Jimmy doesn’t.”

The words hit harder than anything else he’d said all day.

“Jimmy stays nineteen.”

His eyes drifted toward the window.

“He’s always standing on that beach.”

A long silence followed.

The kind that doesn’t need filling.

Then a familiar voice appeared from the doorway.

“Well, if we’re handing out depression today, save me a serving.”

Sandy walked into the room carrying a medication tray.

Dad immediately rolled his eyes.

"There he is."

Sandy looked at me.

"Everything alright?"

I laughed.

"Depends on your definition."

"That's usually a bad sign."

Sandy handed Dad a small paper cup.

Dad stared at it suspiciously.

"What is it?"

"Medicine."

"It wasn't medicine yesterday."

"Yes, it was."

Dad pointed toward him.

"See?"

He looked at me.

"That's the problem with this place."

"What?"

"They keep changing everything."

Sandy laughed.

"They've been the same pills for three years."

Dad frowned.

Then nodded.

"That's even worse."

The three of us laughed.

For the first time all afternoon the room felt lighter.

Sandy adjusted Dad's blanket.

"You been behaving?"

"No."

"Good."

Sandy pointed toward me.

"He talks too much anyway."

Dad immediately nodded.

"That's what I've been telling everybody."

"Nobody asked you."

"Nobody asked him either."

I sat there watching the two of them argue.

The old soldier.

The nurse.

Neither willing to surrender.

Both secretly enjoying the fight.

For a brief moment Golden Ages felt less like a nursing home.

And more like a family kitchen.

Then Dad suddenly grew serious again.

“Sandy.”

“What?”

“If I die before he finds her...”

The room immediately fell silent.

Sandy looked at him.

Then at me.

Neither of us spoke.

Dad pointed toward me.

“Make him keep looking.”

My stomach tightened.

“Dad.”

“No.”

His voice carried unexpected firmness.

“Promise me.”

I stared at him.

“We don’t even know where to start.”

“You’ll figure it out.”

“Dad—”

“You always do.”

The certainty in his voice stopped me.

For a moment he sounded exactly like the father who taught me how to bait a fishing hook.

The father who fixed broken lawnmowers.

The father who always assumed problems had solutions.

Finally I nodded.

“Okay.”

Dad leaned back.

Satisfied.

“Good.”

Within minutes he was drifting toward sleep.

The effort of the afternoon had exhausted him.

His eyes closed.

His breathing slowed.

And little by little he disappeared into the quiet again.

Sandy gathered the medication cups.

Neither of us spoke until we reached the hallway.

“Think he’s serious?”

Sandy asked.

I looked back through the doorway.

Dad was asleep.

The sunlight had faded.

The room had grown darker.

Older somehow.

“About Rose?”

Sandy nodded.

“Yeah.”

I thought about the brother.

About Jimmy.

About the tears.

About the way Dad’s voice sounded when he said her name.

Rose.

A daughter he’d held for ten minutes.

And remembered for more than sixty years.

“Yeah.”

I finally said.

“I think he is.”

Sandy nodded.

Neither of us said anything else.

A few minutes later I found myself sitting in my truck.

Engine off.

Hands resting on the steering wheel.

The parking lot lights flickered on one by one.

Cars pulled onto the street.

Headed home.

I stared through the windshield.

Listening to the ticking sound of the cooling engine.

Find Rose.

The idea felt ridiculous.

Impossible.

The records would be sealed.

The trail would be cold.

She could be anywhere.

Or nowhere.

I leaned back in the seat.

Closed my eyes.

And thought about all the reasons I shouldn't do it.

Then I started the truck.

Pulled out of the parking lot.

And spent the entire drive home thinking about where to begin.

I wasn't going to look.

But for the first time in my life, I wasn't entirely sure I was telling myself the truth.

## **End of Preview**

Thank you for reading the first six chapters of *The Story of Jimmy Lee*. Visit [Wickham-Productions.com](http://Wickham-Productions.com) for updates and release information. Listen to *The Blue Rose*, the companion song inspired by the novel.

## **About the Author**

The vision for *The Story of Jimmy Lee* began with a song. Long before there was a novel, there was Jimmy Lee. What started as a song about friendship, sacrifice, and remembrance eventually grew into a story that demanded to be told. Michael Wickham is a singer-songwriter and novelist who has written more than one hundred songs, many registered with the Library of Congress. His music can be heard on Spotify, SoundCloud, and other major streaming platforms. Current releases include *Only You Do*, *Old Gravel Road*, *Which Way To Go*, *Moving Riding Laden*, and *I Ain't Got No Tobacco*. Upcoming releases include *Back In Tennessee* and *I Can't Stay*.