



CHAPTER 1

Wright Field Fence Line, Dayton, Ohio 15 January
1944 TIME: 2145 hours

JAMIE'S FINGERS WERE USELESS. Cold, heavy sticks inside his wool gloves that refused to listen to his brain.

He had been crouched behind the fence post for twenty minutes, and now his legs were screaming. A dull heat burned in his thighs, but his toes had turned into wooden blocks ten minutes ago. Doubt needled him harder than the wind. If the rumor was just schoolyard talk, he was risking everything for nothing. Getting caught did not mean detention or a lecture. It meant arrest. Questioning. A charge that would follow him for the rest of the war. He was one mistake away from disappearing into a system that did not care why he had been there.

The cold bit through his coat and settled into his joints like a deep ache. His breath came out in thick white puffs, hanging in the air like smoke. He tried to swallow the air, breathing into his collar to hide the signs of his position. The Rolleiflex was a freezing brick against his chest.

Jack's camera. Jack's trust.

Jamie checked his watch again, wiping fog from the glass to see the dial. 2145. Fifteen minutes until the ghost engine arrived. The darkness was so thick he could not tell where the field ended and the sky began. He felt blind, pinned against the chain-link fence. But he was too cold and too far in to leave empty-handed.

The airfield went silent for a heartbeat.

Jamie's stomach hardened into a cold knot. Then he heard it. A thin, high whistle that did not sound like any engine he knew. Not the chug-chug of a propeller. Something sharper. Mechanical.

The sound grew fast, tearing at the air. A hollow roar, like a hurricane trapped inside a steel tunnel. Jamie felt it in his teeth before the full force hit him. The noise had weight, squeezing his chest until his ribs vibrated.

His heart stopped, then kicked into a frantic sprint. The rumor was true. The ghost engine existed.

Runway lights flickered to life, a string of bright pearls cutting across the asphalt. Suddenly, the plane was there, dropping out of the clouds like a dark miracle. No spinning blades. Just a smooth, shark-like shape slicing through the night, screaming with power.

Jamie's hands shook. Not from the cold. From the secret unfolding right in front of him.

He fumbled open the viewfinder, vision swimming in the sudden light. He stared into the glass until the world narrowed

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to a square. He turned the dial, watching the image snap into sharp black-and-white focus. Intake vents. Stubby wings. No propellers.

His finger found the button.

Click.

The shutter whispered.

Then, in the rush, Jamie broke the most basic rule of shooting in the dark.

The flash bulb fired.

The night tore open in a burst of white. For a split second, the world was as bright as noon. The light slammed into the fence, the frozen weeds, and Jamie's wide eyes.

He was not a shadow anymore.

He was a target.

“Hey! You! Over there!”

The shout hit him like a punch to the gut. Headlights swung toward the fence, beams slicing across the wire until they locked onto him. A Jeep roared to life, a low growl compared to the jet, but it was coming fast.

Jamie did not stop to think.

He ran.

Boots crunched behind him. A voice called out, not shouting, clear and certain. The sound of someone who expected to be obeyed.

Jamie did not look back.

The camera knocked against his ribs as he ran, heavier than it had been moments before. The plane was still there in his mind, its shape burned bright and wrong against the sky. He had seen it. Worse, he had taken its picture.

Another voice, closer now. The snap of a radio. The hard sweep of a flashlight cutting through the dark.

Jamie cut across the field and did not stop until the ground rose and the buildings broke his line of sight. Only then did he slow, hands shaking as he pressed the camera flat against his chest, as if that could make it disappear.

He understood something then, though he did not yet have words for it.

The danger was not what he had seen.

It was that someone had seen him seeing it.



CHAPTER 2

Billy's Kitchen, Dayton, Ohio 16 January 1944

TIME: 1900 hours

THE GLOVE OIL SMELLED like summer.

Billy worked it into the leather with his fingers. Small circles, the way Mike had taught him. The mitt was stiff from sitting in the closet all winter. The pocket needed work. Billy pressed his fist into it, twisting, working the leather until it started to give.

Mike's name was written on the thumb strap in faded black ink. MIKE HOFFMAN. The letters were worn thin from sweat and sun. Billy rubbed more oil into the leather. It darkened to a rich golden-brown under the kitchen light. His hands smelled like the oil, like Mike's hands used to smell after practice.

The glove laces were frayed. Chewed. Mike used to bite them when he got nervous.

Billy closed his eyes and saw the championship game from the summer before Mike left. Bases loaded. Two outs. The heat of the July sun shimmered off the dirt. Mike is on the mound,

working the ball deep in his glove. Billy could see it even from the bleachers. Mike's teeth clamped on the leather laces. His tell.

Billy had known Mike was terrified. The pressure of the whole town sat on his shoulders. Then came the pitch. A fastball on the inside corner. Strike three. Game over.

In the chaos of teammates, Mike had looked straight at Billy and given him a thumbs-up.

I got this, kid.

That was what being brave looked like. Being scared and pitching anyway. Those laces held Mike's fear and his courage. Billy's inheritance. Billy's glove. Billy's turn to pitch.

Billy bit his thumbnail. A habit. Same as Mike.

From the living room, the radio crackled. "Reports from the Pacific theater indicate heavy fighting continues—"

Billy's hand froze.

Leyte. That's where Mike was.

The V-mail had come that afternoon. A small, glossy photograph inside a paper envelope. His mom had held it carefully, as if the surface might smudge if she touched it wrong. She'd read it first, lips moving without sound, then handed the photograph to Billy. She hadn't said a word.

Most of it was blacked out by the censor.

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Billy read between the black bars. Tried to imagine what had been taken out.

Lost some good men. The Japs. We saw action.

Mike was scared. Billy knew it. Not from what the letter said, but from what it didn't. No jokes. No, save me some pot roast. Just facts. Just distance. Just fear.

Billy worked more oil into the glove. His hands were shaking now.

He glanced through the doorway. His dad sat in the armchair, a glass in his hand that he wasn't drinking from. He stared at the wall. His mom stood at the window. The Blue Star flag hung there. One star. One son in the service. She touched the fabric with two fingers, as if making sure it was still real.

The house smelled like pot roast, but nobody had eaten. The food sat on the stove, cooling. Billy bit down harder on his thumbnail. He tasted blood. Metallic and sharp. He'd gone too far.

Soldiers didn't cry.

Mike hadn't cried when he got his orders. He'd just punched Billy on the shoulder.

"You're the man of the house now, kid," Mike had said. "Keep the perimeter secure."

Billy had promised.

He'd watched Mike step onto the train platform with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder. The whistle had blown. The crowd had surged. When the train finally pulled away, Mike was already gone into a sea of uniforms.

That was six months ago.

Billy pressed his fist into the glove pocket. Fastball or curve?

He set the glove down and picked up the V-mail again.

Lost some good men.

His throat tightened. His eyes burned.

Don't cry. Don't cry.

Mike was brave. Mike was strong. Mike was everything Billy wasn't.

A knock at the door.

Billy's dad didn't move. His mom turned from the window but didn't walk toward it. They stood frozen, like the knock was a telegram. Like a man in uniform stood outside to say Mike was gone.

Billy set the letter down. "I'll get it."

He walked through the living room. His parents watched him without speaking. The radio kept talking. More fighting. More dead.

Billy opened the door.

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Mr. Clark stood on the porch, smiling sadly. He wore a thick wool coat and held a casserole dish wrapped in a towel.

“Evening, Billy,” Mr. Clark said. His breath puffed white. “Your folks home?”

“Yeah.”

“Mind if I come in? Martha made a casserole. Thought your mom might not feel much like cooking tonight.”

Billy stepped back and let him in.

Mr. Clark entered the living room. Billy’s dad looked up slowly.

“Tom. Helen,” Mr. Clark said gently. “We saw the light on and figured it had been a long day. Thought we’d bring something hot.”

Billy’s mom’s face crumpled for just a second, then pulled itself together. “That’s kind of you, Arthur.”

“Martha made chicken and rice. Nothing fancy. But it’s hot.”

Billy’s mom took the dish, holding it like she didn’t quite know what it was. “Thank you.”

Mr. Clark followed her into the kitchen. Billy followed him.

The kitchen was warm. The pot roast still sat on the stove, cold and greasy. Mr. Clark glanced at the table. He saw the glove. The oil. The V-mail.

“Mike’s?” he asked.

Billy nodded.

Mr. Clark picked up the glove. He noticed the chewed laces. His mouth twitched. "He always did that. Nervous habit. I remember watching him pitch."

Billy couldn't speak.

Mr. Clark set the glove down carefully. "The letter was hard?"

Billy's mom made a sound. Not a sob. But close.

"Most of it was censored," Billy said. His voice sounded like gravel. "But he's okay. He said he's okay."

"That's good. Real good." Mr. Clark glanced at the stove. "Helen, why don't you sit down? Let me make some coffee."

"I can—"

"Sit."

Billy's mom sat. It was like her strings had been cut.

Mr. Clark moved through the kitchen like he belonged there. Found the coffee. Filled the percolator. His hands were steady.

Billy stood by the table, unsure what to do with his own.

"Billy's been keeping Mike's glove ready," Mr. Clark said. "That's good. Mike'll appreciate that when he gets home."

When. Not if.

Billy's mom nodded.

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Mr. Clark lit the burner, then turned back to Billy. “You’re doing a good job, son. Being the man of the house. I can tell. It’s hard, though. Being here while Mike’s over there. Waiting. Not being able to do anything.”

Billy nodded. That was it. He felt useless.

“I know how that feels,” Mr. Clark said. “My brother was in the First World War. I was too young to go, but old enough to wait. Wanted to help, but didn’t know how. That’s actually why I came by. Thought maybe Billy could help me with something.”

Billy’s mom looked up.

“Nothing dangerous,” Mr. Clark said. “Just keeping an eye on things. You know the railyard past Wright Field? We’ve been having trouble. Kids sneaking in. Taking scrap metal. Things the war effort needs. I work double shifts. Can’t be everywhere.”

He looked at Billy’s mom, then Billy. “I could use someone to walk the perimeter. Just watch. Keep an eye out. It’d be helping. Really helping. For the war effort. For Mike.”

Billy’s heart slammed against his ribs. This was real.

“I don’t know,” Billy’s mom said. “It’s dark. It’s cold—”

“Just an hour. After school. Before dinner.” Mr. Clark’s voice stayed calm. “Billy’s responsible. He wouldn’t go inside the fence. Just watch from outside.”

Billy stood straighter. “Yes, sir.”

“It’s important work. Not a game.”

“I can do it.”

Mr. Clark smiled. He turned to Billy’s mom. “What do you think, Helen? Give the boy something useful?”

She looked at Billy. Her eyes were red. “I suppose,” she said. “If it’s just watching.”

“Just watching,” Mr. Clark said. “I’ll check on him regularly.” He held out his hand. Billy shook it. The grip was iron. “Tomorrow. After school. Sixteen hundred hours. Fence by the signal box.”

“Yes, sir.”

The coffee finished. Mr. Clark poured three cups and set one in front of Billy’s mom.

“To Mike,” he said. “May he come home safe.”

Billy’s mom lifted her cup. Her hand shook. “To Mike.”

They drank. The coffee was bitter and hot. Billy didn’t like it, but he drank it anyway.

Like a man.

Mr. Clark said his goodbyes, told Billy’s mom to keep the dish, and let himself out.

The door closed.

Billy stood in the kitchen. The radio kept talking about the war.

He looked at Mike’s glove. The leather was dark and ready.

He had a job now. A real one.

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He pressed his fist into the pocket one more time. He would be ready.

For when Mike came home.

When.

Billy glanced at the door. Mr. Clark's hat was still on the peg.

He turned back to the table.

Something was wrong.

Beside Mike's V-mail sat a small, heavy envelope. It hadn't been there before. It was tucked just under the edge of the letter, hidden, but meant to be found.

Billy picked it up. It felt heavier than it should have. On the front was his name, written in handwriting that looked eerily like his own, but wasn't.

His heart skipped.

Why would Mr. Clark leave a secret envelope? And how did he know how to copy Billy's writing?

Billy's fingers hovered over the flap, trembling. He wanted to tear it open.

He glanced toward the living room. His parents sat close together now, the radio still talking, the house holding its breath.

Billy folded the envelope and slipped it into his pocket.

Not tonight, he decided.