

Chapter One

June 3, 1944

From my rear turret I got a glimpse of our attacker, a twin-engine Ju88, coming in for the kill.

“Corkscrew port! Go!” I shouted over the intercom to the skipper.

There was flak everywhere — little black cloud bursts all around.

Skipper relayed back, “Down port!”

We dove. I’d say 1,000 feet easy.

I started to fire and kept firing as we corkscrewed.

“Changing,” Skipper said. He pulled out of the dive.

Then “Up port,” came over my intercom as he climbed as steeply as he could manage with the lumbering Lanc.

I was almost out of ammo when suddenly the Ju broke away. I swung around, straining to see.

“Rolling.” Lew was converting the climb to starboard. “Up starboard.”

Before Lew could call “Changing” I felt the hit. A starboard engine flared. I couldn’t see a thing. I

was ready with my Browning but now had to wait for Stan to feather the engine. Sure enough he did and the fire went out. That's when I saw the two fighters, but too late. We took another hit. There was an explosion so loud my ears started to ring.

For a moment I held my breath, not knowing how bad it was, just that the entire plane had shaken as if we were one of those souvenir snow globes and someone had picked us up and dropped us. But then that unseen hand picked us up again and started to shake us and shake us.

The skipper said, "Starboard wing's all lighted up, fellows. Bail out, bail out." His voice was calm, as if he were telling us to have a cup of tea.

I decided to get out the rear door — turning my turret would take too much time — plus this way the others could follow me out. But the door wouldn't come loose, it was jammed. "*For fanden, fandens ogsaa!*" I muttered in Danish.

That's when Max appeared with an axe and broke the lock — he must have been there and come back with the axe, but I'd been trying too hard to open the door to even notice him.

I snapped my parachute pack onto my harness and then Max pushed me out, the bright white lights bursting through the darkness all around me.

The wind jerked me away from the plane with

such force that for a moment I couldn't even think what I had to do next. Then I heard my training sergeant's voice. "Dreamboy. Hey, Dreamboy. Don't forget to pull your cord when you jump. Dreamboy. Hear me?" Yup. I heard him. I reached for the rip cord. Panic washed over me. It wasn't there. It wasn't there! I was going to smash into the earth. Any second now. Did I even have time to deploy it? And then I heard another voice, my sister's. "Sam. Can't you tell right from left? Honestly! Lucky thing they aren't training you as a navigator!"

I reached for the rip cord on the other side. And there it was! I pulled.

The parachute deployed. It tugged me back up before I started to float slowly down. I tried to get my bearings. I was high enough up still — that was good.

The night was bright. A cloudless sky. The moon almost full.

My chute began to sway in a circular motion. I couldn't control it. Then I looked down and saw what looked like water. I knew that if I landed there I'd probably drown, pulled down by the weight of the harness and the canopy. The day they'd trained us in parachute control I'd been playing cards in the back of the room with Max, because

who wanted to think about the fact that maybe we'd need to bail out. We preferred to ignore what Max liked to call "negative thoughts." Facts, more like it, but too late now.

As I got closer to the water I realized it wasn't water but a large field of wheat. The noise of the aircraft faded. So did the bursts of anti-aircraft fire. The quiet of the night surrounded me. Time seemed to slow. It almost seemed peaceful. And then with a pretty hard bump, I was on the ground. I rolled and then managed to right myself. I seemed to be in one piece.

I hit the release button on my chute and wriggled out of it. One thing I had paid attention to — the orders about what to do if you survive a crash. I knew I only had minutes.

I had an escape kit with maps and a compass and a passport photo tucked into one of the large front pockets of my battledress jacket, but I had no time to use any of that now. First thing was to hide the parachute so the enemy wouldn't know there was an airman alive somewhere around here. But there was nowhere to hide it. I pulled off my leather gauntlets and heated gloves and finally the silk gloves, so I could reach into my pants pocket. I grabbed my knife and began to cut up the chute so I could hide it better. It seemed to

take forever and the silk was harder to slice than I would have thought, but it didn't help that my hands were shaking. I gave up when I had it in a few pieces. I dug a shallow pit with my hands and then stomped on the chute to flatten it down. I knew I had to get out of there fast. The Germans on the ground would have seen *H Hall* go down in flames and they'd be out after us even before our kite's position was radioed in by the Ju88 pilot.

I was starting to sweat. And that's when I realized I needed to get out of some of the gear I'd put on before the flight, just to keep from freezing to death in the minus-30 temps we'd get in the turret. I started by getting out of my lined leather flight suit, then stripped off layer after layer, which seemed to take forever, until I was down to my battledress jacket, my trousers, plus my thick cable-knit sweater that I tied around my waist. I had to dig a shallow pocket in the earth all over again and stuff the rest of my gear in as best I could.

It was still quiet. Too quiet. Where were my crew? Had any made it? There was a huge ball of flame not far off, which had to be our downed kite — it was bright enough that I could easily see where I was. Hunkering low, I decided to run away from that light. The farther away from the

evidence the better. I dashed through the wheat field and suddenly got this overwhelming feeling of strangeness. The air smelled sweet. The stars were shining. And the fact that a war was raging all around seemed almost impossible.

When I reached the edge of the field I saw a copse of trees just ahead. I lunged into it. And it was only a few seconds later that the quiet was pierced by the sound of cars travelling along a road somewhere close by. I had no doubt who they were looking for. I decided the best thing to do was to keep moving. That's when I heard the groan. The night was so quiet I couldn't have missed it. I inched cautiously over toward the sound — after all, it could as easily be a German as one of us. But when I peered around a tree, there was Bill, our navigator. He was trying to get up but couldn't.

“Need a hand?” I whispered.

He broke into a grin when he saw me. That was Bill. It would take more than getting shot down and — maybe a broken leg? — to dampen his spirits.

“I propose we get out of here,” he said.

Bill had been in law school before signing up; sometimes he still talked like a lawyer.

“Let me look at that,” I said.

I'd spent a lot of time going on call with Pops

over the years, watching him treat people. And picked up a thing or two. I examined Bill's leg as gently as I could.

"Sprained ankle," I said.

"Lucky for me that it's the football player who found me, then."

"Lucky for you," I agreed, as I put my arm under his and shouldered his weight. Still, he couldn't help but put his foot down as we walked — it must have been excruciating, but he never uttered a peep of protest or cried out or anything.

I could hear Coach's words in my head as I half-carried Bill. "Someday you'll thank me for this, Fred." Coach could never bother to say *Frederiksen*. I always wondered why he didn't just call me Sam. Surely that was short and sweet. But no, it was always, "Pick it up, Fred!" Or, "Are you pretending to push a pram, Fred?" as we ran round and round the track at the start of football season and then did more push-ups than seemed reasonable.

Bill and I staggered on until just before dawn and by then I *was* thanking Coach. We saw some farmhouses but didn't stop at any of them, since we wanted to get as far away as possible from the crash site. Finally we reached another copse of trees and I decided we needed to stop. I was

exhausted. I helped Bill settle on the ground and I sat beside him, each of us resting against a tree.

“We need to get you to a doctor,” I said.

But he was out cold.