

CHAPTER ONE

Just Missing

There have been a lot of long roads already since I left home. This one, however, is for sure the longest.

Even though it is the very same road I started out on.

The plane took me to Baltimore. The bus took me to Accokeek, the finest small town in the world. Dropped me at the end of the long cracked road that is now taking me, whether I like it or not, to my house, my parents, and my sister.

I'm here on what they call compassionate leave. As I approach the steps to the front door — the door that opened and closed on every meaningful moment of my life before the Army Air Corps took command of all my moments — I feel like it would be more compassionate to spare me what all I'm about to experience.

Never in my life did I have to walk through that door in fear, whether I was walking inside to face a tough situation, or out. Because I never before had to

walk through it without the rock of certainty that was my big brother, Hank, right by my side.

And the first time is the worst time. Hank went down with his ship, the aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown*, when it was sunk in the Pacific at the Battle of Midway.

I'm not here to tell them anything they don't know, since I don't know anything they don't. I am here to be here. To let them see a son. To let them know they still have one, can touch him and squeeze him and feed him and pretend they are keeping him safe and out of harm's way, because we all know that harm's way is way, way over that way. And it is surely not in sweet, sleepy, slow Accokeek, Maryland. Not in this house, where Pop said once that no man should be expected to lose two sons to war. He should be prepared to lose *one* if it came to that, Pop said, and I joked to Hank that that meant him.

It was a joke, because it would never be him. My brother was always that guy, the guy who rose to every challenge. The guy who calmly and quietly worked it all out and then stood up to the invincible school yard bully and showed everybody how invincible the bully wasn't. The guy who flailed as helplessly and repeatedly as the rest of us at the nastiest rising curveball the

Eastern Shore League had ever seen, until he calmly and quietly worked that out, too. I do believe the resulting home run ball still hasn't landed yet, three years after Hank crushed it.

Just like he crushed everything that crossed his path and needed crushing. And everything that crossed my path as well. He was always there for me, a protective two steps ahead of me, and he always saw to it.

Except he's not here now. As I stand in front of this door, the door that always represented the final barrier of safety between us, our family, our home, our peace, and whatever all out there in the world would threaten any of that, I am as fearful as I have ever been at the mere thought of knocking.

He's not here now. Hank. I failed to ever appreciate how profoundly that would hit me. How much he did, even when he didn't seem to be doing anything. I never considered him not being there at my side, so I never got prepared for the first time he wasn't.

And then the first time I have to soldier on without him turns out to be the time I have to talk to the family about soldiering on without him. Indefinitely.

I'm certain they were aware of my approach down

the road. We'd always watched for every movement out those parlor windows since forever. And I'm certain they are aware of my presence here, up the stairs, on the porch, square in front of the door.

And I am certain, once again, of how good and kind these anxious people are, as they wait for me to get my helpless, crying, sad self under control before they make any acknowledgment of my presence.

Good people. They deserve better than what they're getting. They deserve, if nothing else, an explanation. *Why?* for instance. Why their boy? How? How in all of God's creation did we get to this *abomination* of a result? How do righteous, God-fearing folk send not one son but two off into a bloody crusade to preserve decency over evil? To do all the hard-but-right things required to promote a civilization based on God's own love and respect for all our neighbors regardless of their strangeness? How does a stout, unblemished soul like Hank McCallum get knocked off the top deck of one of the world's most resilient, indestructible ships? Especially after he and that ship had already just barely survived another of the deadliest sea battles in history at the Coral Sea only one month before?

Everybody, *everybody* who ever cared about Hank is deserving of an explanation. And all the people who cared about him craziest are inside this house in front of me.

I have some explaining to do.

Even though I have no explanation for them.

As I have no explanation for myself.

And my certainty grows that if Hank were here he would have something to say. Something like an explanation. Hank was always the guy who said those somethings that folks needed to hear.

“The explanation is, there is no explanation,” he would have said. And I should say that I don’t know this for sure, because no one person knows another enough to speak his thoughts for him. I *should* say that. And I want to say that. I don’t know why but something won’t let me say it. “Because if you allow it an explanation,” he would have said, “that’s just a step closer to an excuse. And there is no excuse. Not for all we’re doing to each other. No excuse.”

I don’t know if I ever once seriously disagreed with my big brother, and this right here would be an awkward place to start, but it’s probably important to say

that I, myself, believe there are sometimes troubles in the world that are so serious and unfair that strong countries are right to come in and do possibly unpleasant violent stuff to defend the weaker countries. Our country just happens to be one of those stronger countries, and I don't think we should have to go around apologizing for that. This war we are fighting is the right war, and we're fighting the right people, without a doubt. This war here — here, there, and everywhere, so it seems — frankly coughs up one scene after another, right in front of your eyes, that makes it blindingly obvious that any sane and moral country has no choice but to intervene.

So then really, ultimately, everything explains itself. It should be easy and straightforward enough to knock on the door and fall into the embrace of my beloved loved ones who've no doubt been storing up hug muscle for two years just for this first contact. And it should be simple, wheezing through love-squashed lungs, to dole out all the plain, heartfelt words, telling them what a hero our hero had been, what magnificent parents they are, how grateful the whole country and the freedom-loving world is for the sacrifice Hank has made and

that they have made in giving their oldest son to the Cause, to the United States Navy, and ultimately, to the sea.

It was straightforward, if not easy. And I said it, all of it, to Mam, and to Pop, and to Susan. I practiced it over and over in my head, said it as my duty and for my family, and for peace. We should at least be able to achieve peace here in this one modest house, even if it's the only place on earth we can.

But we can't even manage that, because I cannot say those words about the hero's courage and the family's sacrifice and the country's gratitude and the ocean's satisfaction. I can't say it because it's not so.

Because my brother is not dead. Nobody has shown me otherwise, and in that case I know he has to be alive. Hank McCallum. Ask anybody, they'll back me up on this. Hank McCallum was always gonna be the last man standing at the end of this thing, and if not one person has produced not one item of evidence that my brother was hurt bad at Midway, then you can take it to the bank that he is in one piece somewhere. And even if they did come up with something, well, just don't even bother with it 'cause something's usually

nothing in these situations. Show me a whole entire Hank McCallum with maybe a torpedo sticking out of his gut and you will then have my attention, but upon closer inspection, we will all see for ourselves that the toughest, greatest guy who ever lived is still doing exactly that: living. Torpedo or no.

Missing in action is what he is, actually and officially. Lost at sea. He's been lost before, and he'll be lost again.

Because what is missing can be found.