



SUNRISE *at* NORMANDY
THREE

The
LAND BENEATH US

SARAH
SUNDIN



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CAMP FORREST, TULLAHOMA, TENNESSEE
FRIDAY, JUNE 11, 1943

Most men woke in a cold sweat when they dreamed of their own deaths, but not Private Clay Paxton.

Clay crawled through a foxhole, just like in his recurring dream. Bullets zinged overhead, but these were American bullets fired to teach the Army Ranger recruits to keep their heads down.

“Come on, G. M.,” he called to his buddy. Gene Mayer might be fast and wiry, but the Californian wilted in the Tennessee humidity.

“Right on your heels, Pax.”

Clay slithered out of the foxhole and under rows of barbed wire. His wrestling training kept his movements low, controlled, and speedy, even with full gear on his back.

The soldier to his right cussed. His rifle barrel had gotten caught in the wire.

“Back up, Holman.” Clay elbowed his way through the dirt. “Try again. Head low.”

Holman cussed again, but a friendly sort of cuss.

Clay cleared the wires and sprinted to the next station in the obstacle course, his respiratory rate fast but even.

He clambered up a cargo net and slapped his hand on the wooden platform that led to the rope bridge over the Elk River.

A boot slammed down.

"Watch out!" Clay yanked his hand away, and he lurched down, barely catching himself.

Bertie King sneered down at him. "No room in the Rangers for a half-breed."

If he wanted Clay to bite, he'd have to use fresher bait than that old worm.

"No room for a half-wit either, King," Gene said. "Let him up."

"What's the holdup, boys?" Sergeant Tommy Lombardi strode over. "King! Get your tail over that bridge. Paxton, Mayer, what are you waiting for?"

King stepped out onto the bridge, muttering obscenities about Lombardi's Italian blood.

Clay puffed out a breath. Nothing stupider than insulting your sergeant.

He hefted himself onto the platform, grasped the two side ropes, and set his boot on the center rope. Angling his feet, he worked his way across.

"Why do you let him talk to you that way?" Gene asked.

Clay shook his head. Not only had he never been the brawling kind, but any fight would be considered his fault, just because his mama was Mexican. "Let's save the fighting for the battlefield."

"You have to put up with this a lot?" Gene asked, his voice low and hard.

"Not as much as you might think." Growing up, he'd had Wyatt and Adler to protect him.

Until that night two years ago when they'd stripped him of his future and cast him into a pit. Showed what they really thought of their half-breed half brother.

Pain and humiliation threatened his balance, and he hardened his chest. None of that mattered anymore. The Lord had given

him the recurring dream to show him the way out of the pit, and Clay thanked him once again.

On the far side of the river, Clay ran through the forest, hurdling logs and darting around boulders. Gene's long legs gained on him.

As soon as Clay had seen the notice about the Rangers at basic training, he'd volunteered. Styled after the British Commandos, the US Army Rangers had already seen action in North Africa. In April, the 2nd Ranger Battalion had been activated at Camp Forrest, and now Clay hoped to replace one of the original volunteers who hadn't made the cut.

Clay jogged to a dangling rope and climbed ten feet to the single rope line across the Elk. Hand over hand, Clay swung like a monkey over the green water.

An explosion to his left, and a geyser shot up and soaked him. He didn't lose his grip or his nerve.

"Do that again, boys," Gene shouted. "Feels good."

It did, and Clay laughed.

On the other side, he sprinted toward a ten-foot-tall wooden fence.

"They don't call me king for nothing." Bertie King straddled the fence and beat his chest like Tarzan. "You girls might as well give up, 'cause they only take the best. Me."

Clay worked wet fingers between the planks and made his way up. Didn't King realize the Rangers wanted men who worked together?

"No stinking Jews." King kicked at Sid Rubenstein's hand.

Ruby dropped to the ground, yelling and swearing.

King threw back his head and laughed.

A mistake.

He lost his balance and toppled backward. With a scream, he cartwheeled to earth and landed hard on one leg.

A crack.

Two years ago, a scream, a fall, and a crack had changed the course of Clay's life. Once again, he scrambled down to help.

King's lower right leg bent at an unnatural angle. The man cussed and struggled to sit up.

"Lie down, Bertie. Stay calm." Clay pressed on the patient's shoulders. "Gene, go get the medic."

Bertie swore at him, insulting his heritage, his paternity, and his intelligence.

"Lie still, or you'll make it worse." Clay unsheathed his knife and sliced the trouser leg open from knee to ankle. "Y'all back up and give him some air. Ruby, Holman, open your first aid kits, get out the field dressings."

"How bad is it?" Bertie said between gritted teeth.

The blood and the angle of the leg made the diagnosis simple. "Complicated compound fracture of both the tibia and fibula—the bones in your shin." The man would need surgery, and he'd be out of the Rangers.

Clay took a field dressing from Ruby and opened it, careful to touch it as little as possible with his filthy hands. Right now stopping the bleeding was more important than sterility, so he pressed the dressing to the bloodiest part of the wound.

"Medics are here!" The circle of men opened.

Two fellows ran up with a litter and medical kits. "What happened?"

Lieutenant Bill Taylor stood behind the medics.

Clay's heart hammered harder than it had running the course. Time to play dumb again. "King here fell off the wall. Reckon he broke his leg."

"What? You should have heard Paxton a minute ago," Holman said. "Talking about fibulas and all. He ought to be a doctor."

He winced and let the medics take his place. "Nah, I ain't smart enough. I just paid attention in first aid class. Y'all should have done the same."

“A medic then.” Rubenstein pointed to the men splinting the remnants of Bertie King’s leg. “Say, Lieutenant, didn’t you say you need more medics in this unit?”

“Very much.” Keen eyes fixed on Clay, and Lieutenant Taylor beckoned to him.

No, no, no. Clay trudged over. Medics didn’t heave hand grenades into pillboxes like in his dream.

Taylor crossed muscular arms. “We need medics who can handle the physical training. You’re doing well here, Paxton. You’re the ideal candidate.”

If the brass dug into Clay’s records, they might learn he’d been top of his high school class, admitted to the University of Texas as a premedical student.

Clay sharpened his gaze. “Sir, I didn’t volunteer for the Rangers to patch people up. Doesn’t the Good Book say there’s a time to every purpose? A time to kill, and a time to heal?”

“It certainly does.”

“Well, sir, this ain’t my healing time.”

The lieutenant grinned. “I can’t say I’m not disappointed, but I like your fighting spirit. You’re dismissed.”

Clay released a long breath. He had to be more careful.

He couldn’t allow the shards of his old dream to shred his new dream.



TULLAHOMA, TENNESSEE
SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 1943

Leah Jones studied the poem in her composition book as the bus jostled down the road.

Between these lines
Begins a tale
Of hope, of chivalry beheld.

Beguiles my soul,
Becalms my heart,
And here I find where I belong.

“Is *begins* too mundane?” she asked her new roommate, Darlene Bishop. “*Beget* perhaps? *Bespoke*? No, neither is right.”

“Sugar, you need to get your head out of the clouds.” Darlene’s Southern accent rocked in unison with the bus.

Leah listed more “be” words in the margin. “Librarians are supposed to have their heads in the clouds.”

Darlene’s bright red lips twisted. “You’re working at an Army camp, sugar. These soldiers are wolves, every one of them. If you don’t keep your eyes open, they’ll eat you alive.”

Leah laughed and smoothed the threadbare gray charity-barrel dress that hung on her like a gunnysack. “They won’t give me a second glance.”

“Nonsense.” Darlene’s blue eyes narrowed in scrutiny. “When you get your first paycheck, I’ll take you to the beauty shop and the dress shop. You won’t need much makeup with your dark coloring. Why, we’ll smarten you right up.”

Leah fingered the curl at the end of her waist-length braid, and a thrill ran through her. Oh, to have things of her own. She couldn’t believe the boardinghouse placed only two girls in a room, and she had a bed all to herself.

“That’s Gate 1.” Darlene pointed out the window.

Cars and trucks and buses lined up at a booth with a sign that read “Camp Forrest.” Although the camp had been named for Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the pine trees framing the entrance still seemed appropriate.

Darlene fluffed her blonde curls. “Remember to stay away from the POW camp. I can’t believe they brought over a thousand Germans here last week. Gives me the willies.”

Leah shrugged. Since the Allies had captured hundreds of thou-

sands of Germans and Italians after the victory in North Africa, the prisoners had to go somewhere. "I'm sure the enclosure is secure."

Darlene wrinkled her pretty nose. "Oh, fiddle! I forgot to ask for you. I was meaning to find out where the library is."

Leah blinked at her roommate. Darlene had worked at Camp Forrest for a year. How could she not know where the library was? "Miss Mayhew's letter said it was between the service club and the sports arena."

"This is your stop then. That's the service club." She tapped Leah's arm. "If you need me, I'm at the PX at Avenue G and 26th."

"Thank you." Leah slid her book into her canvas schoolbag and squeezed past Darlene.

"Lamb to the wolves," Darlene muttered.

Leah smiled. A lamb could never have survived the orphanage.

She stepped off the bus, and pine-scented heat settled on her. A long two-story white frame building marked "Club 1" rose before her.

Leah passed groups of khaki-clad soldiers who cast sidelong glances that declared she didn't belong.

Oh, there it was. A smaller white frame building, too plain for the splendors it housed. All library buildings deserved to be as glorious as the one in her earliest memory.

A soldier stepped out of the library, as grand as an Indian chief with his strong features and high cheekbones and a complexion even darker than her own. He slipped on a cap over shiny black hair, and his gaze landed on her.

Leah held her breath. She'd been caught staring.

He gave her the same bewildered look the other soldiers had, but then he tipped his head in a thoughtful way and descended the steps. "Pardon me, miss. Are you lost?"

Men never talked to her, and her gaze swung to the library. "Oh no. I'm found."

"I reckon you like libraries." His accent sounded more cowboy than Indian, and he had a nice deep chuckle.

"They're my greatest joy. After the Lord, of course." She didn't think she'd ever seen such dark eyes, yet they shone with warm amusement.

"Glad your priorities are straight, young lady."

He obviously shared them, except . . . "You don't have a book."

He flashed a grin. "A muddy tent is no place for books. I do my reading here."

Leah wrapped her fingers around the fraying strap of her schoolbag. "Maybe I'll see you again. I work here. Today's my first day."

"Oh." With rounded eyes, his gaze swept her up and down, but in a swift way as if he thought it rude. "Then I won't keep you, Miss . . ."

Something about him made her want to tell the whole story of her name and why it wasn't hers at all, but she merely extended her hand. "Leah Jones."

"Private Clay Paxton." He shook her hand with a grip both strong and gentle.

She said good-bye and climbed the steps. Darlene was mistaken about the men being wolves. She obviously hadn't met Clay Paxton.

Once inside, the rich familiar scent enveloped her, of ink and ideas and imagination.

A brunette stood behind a desk to Leah's right, setting books in a stack. She looked up and startled, then gave Leah a curious look. "May I help you, miss?"

"I'm Leah Jones. Are you Miss Mayhew?"

"You're . . . Leah . . . Miss Jones?" Shock and pity and restraint battled for control of her pretty features.

Leah stretched to her full five feet. "Yes, ma'am. Miss Tilletson sent me. I have my papers here." She poked her hand into her schoolbag.

“No, no. That isn’t necessary. Oh my. Miss Tilletson said you came from the orphanage, but I had . . . no idea.”

Shame and grief wound around Leah’s heart in equal measure.

Miss Mayhew wore a trim powder blue suit. She inched closer as if afraid Leah might smell or have lice, but the orphanage had stressed cleanliness as a great virtue.

“Do you . . .” She gave Leah a sympathetic frown. “Do you have something more professional to wear? And your hair . . . could you put it up, perhaps?”

Leah’s stomach curled up. “This is my best dress, ma’am. But when I get my first paycheck, I’ll buy outfits and get a haircut. I promise.”

Miss Mayhew’s cheeks reddened, and she returned behind the desk and opened a drawer. “You won’t be paid until the end of the week. That won’t do.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.” Her eyes stung, but years of practice kept them dry. “Miss Tilletson and the ladies from church in Des Moines gave me money for my high school graduation last week. They were very generous. Very. They meant for me to buy clothes, but after I paid for bus and train tickets and my first month’s room and board, I had nothing left.”

“You’re working the closing shifts.” Miss Mayhew strode to her and held out a ten-dollar bill. “Tomorrow morning, go downtown and buy an outfit or two.”

Leah edged back. “No, ma’am. I refuse to take charity ever again.”

The librarian pursed her lips. “It isn’t charity. It—it’s a loan until your first paycheck.”

That much money would buy a suit and shoes and a haircut too. “I promise I’ll earn it. Every penny.”

“I’m sure you will. I’ve known Miss Tilletson since library school, and she said you were smart and diligent.” Miss Mayhew gazed around the room. “I would rather have hired a library school

graduate. You aren't qualified to help with cataloging or research or acquisitions, but you can serve as a circulation librarian."

Leah tucked the money into the deepest corner of her bag. "I know the Dewey decimal system, I read all Miss Tilletson's library science books, and I plan to go to library school after I earn the tuition."

Miss Mayhew's smile twitched between pity and disbelief. "Yes. Well. Why don't you set your . . . bag in this drawer, and I'll show you our operations."

"Excuse me, ma'am." A tall blond soldier nodded to Miss Mayhew. "My sergeant told me to read the field manual on service of the 75-millimeter howitzer. Do you have it?"

"Yes, sir." She turned to Leah. "Have a seat, Miss Jones. I'll be right back."

"Thank you." Leah sat behind the circulation desk and set her bag in the drawer—beside a heart-shaped cardboard box with a tag that read "To Myra. Love, John."

Her mouth watered. What would it be like to have an entire box of candy to herself?

She tipped open the lid. She just wanted a look. A smell. About half the chocolates were gone, but a dozen remained, round and glossy, with pretty swirls on top.

Leah's fingers strained for the chocolates, but she closed the box and the drawer. Tonight she'd pretend her father had brought her candy. He'd want her to have occasional treats.

But most of all, he'd want her to find her sisters.

The bookshelves called to her. If she could discover a picture or a snippet of information connected to one of her memories, then she'd know where she came from. And maybe she could find a Greek surname that sounded like her memory.

Ka-wa-los.

When her parents died, she'd only been four, too young to pronounce her name properly.

With a name and a city, she could locate the first orphanage she'd been sent to, the last place she'd seen her twin baby sisters. Every night she prayed that they were safe, that they had each other, and that one day she'd find them.

Only then would Leah belong.