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France 1944

The flowers were gray and the world ashen as the sun struggled to make itself shown. The desolate strip of land had long since been abandoned by the troops on both sides, and now an eerie silence settled over the barren area.

Yet, through the layers of smoke and the littered bodies of boys whose lives had been snuffed out before their prime, life still pulsed through the veins of one, solitary figure.

A man named Danny.

He lay on the ground, alone in a sea of gray. A trickle of blood that started at his temple had made a pool on the sand, and both his legs lay twisted at an unnatural angle.

As a bird swooped overhead, he opened his eyes ran a dry tongue over his lips. As his consciousness returned, so did the excruciating pain.

Every time his heart beat he could feel it in his legs, and the wound in his head continued to keep a small but steady stream of blood emptying into the thirty sand below.

“God, help me.” The words, spoken through swollen, cracked lips, could hardly be heard above the gentle sound of the waves crashing upon the shore.

He had been left for dead. That told him a thing or two about how he must look.

Doing his best to keep the lower half of his body still, he brought his right hand out from under his body and pressed it to his head. Alarmed at the moist, sticky substance that slipped between his fingers, he pressed to try and stop the bleeding. He knew it was useless. Without help, he was destined to die here. Die. Alone, and on unfamiliar soil, dying for the freedom of so many he would never see.

A sigh escaped his lips. He had dreamed of peace, but it appeared God had seen fit that he not see it until he passed through the pearly gates.

He forced his brain to focus; to form words out of the blinding pain. God was sovereign. He had a reason for everything. So why was it so hard to believe it now?

He looked heavenward and spoke. "Please watch over Jim for me."

Those words off his chest, he could rest easy now. He wondered if Jim had made it up the treacherous slopes, or if he had died trying to make it ashore.

He had never been separated from his younger brother until today. He had always watched over him; always sheltered him.

But not anymore. He couldn't. It was in God's hands.

Ever so slowly he managed to turn himself over so that what little sun had made its way through the clouds would warm his face.

Funny thing, he could no longer feel his legs. That couldn't mean anything good.

It did help him focus, though. The pain he had been feeling no longer consumed his thoughts. His head, on the other hand, had not stopped throbbing. However, the pain radiating from it paled in comparison to the agony he had felt in his legs.

The mournful cry of a lone seagull drifted to him over the waves. He wondered if perhaps it was flying home, back to a warm nest somewhere where it would be sheltered and kept safe.

Home.

Thoughts of home came flooding into his head. The warm, spicy scent of cinnamon raisin cookies wafting through the house. Laughter around the dinner table over stories that were told. His dad's strong hand on his shoulder, making him feel able to conquer the world.

He was startled from his reverie when he realized it wasn't just his imagination. A hand was on his shoulder, pressing hard.

Eyes flying open, he immediately met the blue-eyed gaze of a soldier not much older than him. He glanced down at his uniform, and a shudder raced down his spine.

This man was not an American. He was German.

He braced himself for whatever may come next. He'd heard the stories. The Germans took no pity on those who were weak or broken.

And right now, he fit both those categories.

But, to his surprise, a damp cloth was pressed to his head, and the man took his canteen and held it to his mouth.

The cool water trickled down his lips, and he coughed in his eagerness to swallow. “Careful. Take it slow.”

The voice, speaking perfect English with only a hint of an accent, startled him. Having gotten his fill of the water, he pulled away from the canteen. “You speak English?”

The man nodded. “My name is Marcus.” He didn’t meet Danny’s eyes, but set the canteen aside and took a roll of cloth from the belt around his waist.

“You . . . are helping me?”

“I’m a medic.”

It seemed that Marcus thought that those three words could explain everything.

“Yes.” Danny was still confused. “But you’re a . . . a . . .”

“A kraut?” This time Marcus looked up at met his gaze.

Danny didn’t know what to think. There was no hostility in his gaze. None of the hate he had expected to see from someone wearing this uniform.

Instead, his eyes were glazed over with weariness. He looked . . . human.

As though reading his thoughts, Marcus spoke. “We’re not all heartless animals, you know. Some of us do have a soul . . . and a conscience.”

He said no more; simply used the water to cleanse the wounded area on Danny’s head before taking the length of cloth and wrapping it tightly around.

Danny winced as the slight pressure caused his head to throb again, but Marcus didn’t even glance at his face. “If you think this hurts, wait till I get to your legs.”

“They don’t hurt anymore.” He watched as Marcus shifted and moved down to his legs.

After surveying them for a moment, Marcus turned. “This . . . this is more than I can do.” He shook his head. “I can clean them, wrap them, try and straighten them, but there’s something else wrong. You’ll need a doctor to look at them.”

Danny nodded. “Whatever you can do, I thank you.”

“What’s your name?” Marcus asked as he tore the uniform covering Danny's legs.

“Danny. Danny Spencer, Infantry division”

As Marcus went to work, Danny studied him. He was tall and slim, but strongly built. His hair was blondish-red and wavy, and a few stray strands brushed against his forehead, which was furrowed in concentration as he worked on Danny's legs.

Just then, Marcus turned and caught him staring. He simply gave a small grin, and turned back to his work. "So, you have a girl waiting for you back home?"

"A girl?" A slight smile touched Danny's lips. "I have a wife."

It was Marcus's turn to look startled. "A wife? How long have you been married?"

"We married a month before I left."

"Describe her for me."

Danny pondered the odd request, then shrugged. What difference would it make? "Her name's Betty. She's small. Comes up a little past my shoulder. But she's spirited. We grew up together; seemed we always knew we'd get married. She's got blond hair, and the darkest blue eyes you ever saw. She—ugh!"

He recoiled and writhed in pain as Marcus pulled to straighten the leg.

"Don't think about the pain," Marcus grunted. "Keep talking about your wife. Keep thinking about her. "

Danny tried to focus as the waves of pain threatened to overwhelm him. A welcome blackness hovered over him, and Danny wanted nothing more than to stop fighting and let go.

A sudden slap on his face startled him, bringing the pain back as the blessed darkness vanished.

"You stay with me, Danny." Marcus was breathing hard. "You're going to get home if it kills me."

Danny's eyes focused on Marcus, who hovered above him.

"Now listen to me, Danny. I got to straighten that other leg, and I need you to stay with me. You let go now, you'll die."

Danny struggled to wrap his mind around Marcus's words.

Marcus grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Danny!"

"Yeah." Danny did his best to nod. "I . . . understand."

Marcus seemed satisfied as he lowered Danny back down onto the sand and he turned back to his legs.

Danny braced himself, gritting his teeth and waiting for the pain he knew would come. For a brief moment he wondered if perhaps he had been better off before. He may have died, but at least it would have been painless.

Then it came. The pain shot through his leg and once again he could see the painless darkness beckoning to him.

“Think about Betty. She wants you to come home. Don’t let go, Danny,” Marcus yelled as he worked on splinting and binding the mangled legs.

Danny fought to stay above the waves of pain that seemed intent on carrying him out to some distant sea that he would never return from.

After what seemed like an eternity, he felt a small capsule pushed into his mouth, and the canteen held to his lips.

“Here.” Marcus’s voice seemed far away. “I found I had one morphine tablet left. Take it.”

Morphine. That would dull the pain. Danny swallowed it as fast as he possibly could, hardly feeling the cool water that slid down his throat.

Though he knew it wasn’t possible, it seemed as though the morphine started working the moment he swallowed it. He settled back onto the sand and took a deep breath.

Marcus sat next to him, head in his hands. He looked exhausted. Danny could only wonder what he’d been through the day before. As a medic, he would have seen things no man should ever have to see. And it showed.

There was one thing Danny was certain of. No matter what side of a war you fought on, every man went through the same horrific struggle, and it changed him. He forced himself to concentrate. “You got a girl waiting for you?”

Maybe talking would help Marcus’s mind get off the horrors of war, if just for a moment. He owed him something.

At his words, Marcus looked up. A small ghost of a smile lifted the corner of his eyes. As he gaze out at the sea. “I have a sister. Her name is Ellie. A young, beautiful little girl who is waiting for me to come home, take her in my arms, and twirl her around.”

His gaze cut to Danny. “That’s what she made me promise.” The smile left his face. “When our father died, she made me promise I would come home and hold her.”

He paused. “It’s been four, long years since I’ve seen her. She’ll be about eleven now. I can’t wait to see her again. To keep my promise.”

Silence settled between the two men.

The tide was coming in, and the sound of the waves was closer, creating a calm, peaceful setting. How could place be so peaceful, when just a few short hours ago it had been echoing with the shouts of men and the thunder of heavy artillery?

Calm came after the storm. Apparently that was true in war, too.

Yet, as they sat there together, another question wouldn’t leave Danny alone. Finally, he asked it.

“Why did you help me?”

At his words, Marcus turned. “I answered the call to heal before I answered the call of duty to my country. My job is to help and heal, not to destroy.”

The answer was so simple, but it left Danny baffled. How could someone whom he had been taught was the enemy hold such a view on the war?

But before he could ask anything else, shouts of men could be heard coming over the dunes just above them. As Danny watched, the small group of soldier quickly crossed the sand, heading towards where they were sitting.

“Hey, that there’s a kraut down there with one of our boys!” A voice, unmistakably American, drifted toward them.

Danny started. He knew that voice. “Jim. Jim!” He craned his neck around just in time to see his brother raise his rifle and aim it at Marcus.

“No, no!” Danny’s voice was hoarse, and he couldn’t seem to get it any louder. How could he make them understand Marcus had not been trying to hurt him?

Marcus shot up, his hands in the air, but the moment he stood taller than Danny, a shot rang out.

Time seemed to move in slow motion as Marcus crumpled to the ground.

Danny turned to see him as best he could. “Are you all right?”

“They— they sure teach you—how—to —shoot, don’t—they?” Marcus said as he gasped for breath.

Danny could see a bright red stain spreading across the front of his uniform. No one had to tell him; Marcus was dying.

Danny couldn't understand how he could feel such a loss from a man—an enemy—he had just met.

He reached over and clutched his hand, and Marcus gripped it. “Danny—live your life. Win—win the war. You'll see—the—peace—I longed for.”

His breathing became more labored as he struggled for each lungful of air.

“I'll see peace because of you,” Danny breathed. “I thank you.”

Once more the shadow of a smile made its way across Marcus's face. Danny wondered what he would look like if he ever fully smiled; if the shadow left his eyes.

“Ellie—”

Danny leaned closer to hear what he was saying, and then realized Marcus wasn't talking to him.

“Ellie—I tried. I'm sorry—sorry I won't be there to—see—you grow up.” With the last word, Marcus's breathing came in short gasps, and then . . . he was gone.

The Americans had reached them now. Danny looked helplessly as one of the men rolled Marcus's body to the side.

“Danny!” His brother's face was suddenly in front of him. “Oh, you made it through.”

Relief was evident in his gaze, and Danny nodded. “I wouldn't have made it . . . except for him.” He nodded toward Marcus.

Jim followed his gaze. “Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know . . .” his voice trailed off. He rubbed a hand over his face and then spoke again. “He patched ya up good, but you need to see a doctor. Harry and I, we'll go and grab a stretcher and Robbie'll go find a doctor we can take ya to.” He held his brother's gaze. “I'll be right back, Danny. I promise.”

Danny nodded, and the three hurried off, leaving him once again alone.

Marcus's body lay off to the side; his lifeless form making the silence around Danny seem to close in all the more.

He was alive; Marcus was dead. War was no respecter of persons.

And it made absolutely no sense.

~ 4 years later ~

As the small boat neared the beach, the girl standing at the bow turned to the man at her side. “Is this the place?”

The man twisted to look where she was pointing. “Yes. We’ll get off here and I’ll show you.”

The girl looked back to the white, sandy strip of land. Her auburn curls were loose in the breeze, and her hazel eyes unusually serious.

The boat docked, and he led her up onto the sand. The breeze was warm and the sun bright as they walked together across the sand.

It took time. The man used a cane to help him walk with his good leg, while trying to keep his prosthetic leg from dragging. The sand made it all the harder, but the girl was patient and willing to give a helping hand whenever it was needed.

At last they made it to their desired spot. The rocks were still there, though much of the driftwood had been washed away during storms at sea. The man leaned heavily on his cane, reliving the last time he had been here. Alone and almost dead.

At last he spoke. “This is it, Ellie. This is where your brother died.”

Ellie wrapped her hand around his arm as they stood there together.

There really wasn’t much to see. White sand stretched out for miles in stark contrast against the dark rock of the cliffs above.

But to the two solitary figures, this beach was far more. For one, it represented life. For another, death. But for both of them, it was a promise.

A promise that even when all seems to be lost, God steps in, and makes a mess into His beautiful masterpiece.

At last Ellie turned. “Thank you for bringing me here, Danny.”

Danny nodded. “He wanted to come home, Ellie. He wanted nothing more than to make it back home for you.”

There was silence for a moment. When she spoke, Ellie’s voice was quite. “He made it home. Jesus took him from this war-torn, blood-stained earth and ushered him into paradise.” Her eyes glistened with tears. “Marcus has the peace he longed for.”

Danny didn’t reply, only reached down and squeezed her hand. “Is there anything else you want to do or see while we’re here?”

Ellie thought for a moment, and then a whimsical smile drifted over her face, reminding Danny so much of her brother. “There is one thing I always dreamed of when I thought about Marcus, so far away.” She ducked her head. “It’s rather silly, actually. But every time he would come home from anywhere, he would pick me up and twirl me in his arms. And then, just before he left, he sat me down and made me promise that I wouldn’t cry for him. Not at all, until he held me again.

Her eyes drifted out to the ocean, and Danny had a feeling that though she was by his side, she was miles away. “I’ve kept my promise. I haven’t cried for him.”

Lifting a hand, Danny brushed his flyaway hair out of his eyes. “I know I’m not your brother, but I can hold you. And you can cry, Ellie. It’s okay to cry.”

Ellie’s chin wobbled, and she blinked as she turned back to look at the cliffs in front of them.

And then, with a strangled cry, she threw herself in Danny’s arm while her body shook with sobs.

Danny held her and let her cry. They stood there, not moving, for a long while.

As the sun finally slipped beyond the waters, Danny turned and together they walked back to the small boat.

When they got there, Ellie stopped and surveyed the scene once more. And then, as the boat began to move away from shore, she spoke, her voice hardly a whisper.

“Goodbye, Marcus, my brother. I’ll see you again soon.”

Danny only put an arm on her shoulder. No words would help something like this; only time.

The war may have been over, battles may have been won. But for many, life was never the same.

Because some battles are not fought with others. They do not have battlefields that can be visited, or memories erected in their honor. These battles are fought every day, as people struggle to go on living after the war.

These are lonely battles that are fought within a person. Fought in a place called lonesome.