



Catalina
Blues

∞
Marlo York

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

CATALINA BLUES

By Marlo York

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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CATALINA BLUES

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Photo Description

A black and white photograph of a dripping-wet, naked gunner standing in a flying boat's cupola, manning his machine gun. His long crew cut hangs in his face, his headphones protect his ears, and he stares out against his enemy with concentration. Behind him on a small bit of wall is a poster showing silhouettes of Japanese warships. Photographed by Horace Bristol, 1944.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“This young crewman of a US Navy “Dumbo” PBY rescue mission has just jumped into the water of Rabaul Harbor to rescue a badly burned Marine pilot who was shot down while bombing the Japanese-held fortress of Rabaul. Since Japanese coastal defense guns were firing at the plane while it was in the water during take-off, this brave young man, after rescuing the pilot, manned his position as machine gunner without taking time to put on his clothes. A hero photographed right after he'd completed his heroic act. Naked.”

That is the caption and the story behind the picture taken in 1944 and I figured that alone could make for a really good prompt for Love is an Open Road. I'm being cliché but wouldn't it be nice to imagine that the naked gunner and the marine pilot; you fill in the blank.

Thanks.

Sincerely,

Bookjunkie12

Story Info

Genre: historical

Tags: closeted, military men, Pacific Islands, smoking, storytelling, World War II, pilot, gunner, oral sex (only)

Word Count: 28,776

Dedication

For Keah

Acknowledgements

Thanks are owed to the wonderful readers and authors of the MMRG for reading this rough piece of work: Eric, Gwynn, Kaje, and Samantha. A heartfelt thank you to the editors, proofreaders, and Raevyn who kept everything together. A tip of the hat to Alex for transforming a few sentences into a spectacular cover. I've blown a kiss across the ocean to Kinga for answering last minute questions about Polish grammar. All mistakes found herein are my own. And finally, much gratitude to Keah for inspiring this story; I'm sending this along with my fervent hope that she enjoys it. Thank you for reading.

CATALINA BLUES

By Marlo York

Chapter 1

Saved by Catalina

Leon ducked under each oncoming swell of water with precision, forcefully tamping down each burst of panic inside himself as gunfire rang out and planes exploded in the air above. He sliced through the next wave and reached out to the man struggling to stay above water. This man was one of the escort fighter pilots who'd been shot down, and it was Leon's job as a gunner on a Consolidated PBV Catalina—their Catalina—to rescue him.

The contingent of Mitsubishi's was war-torn but vicious enough. They had surprised the allied bomb mission, emerging from within the cloudbank that the Catalina, the B-29 Superfortress and the motley fighters had been heading toward. As the dogfight moved farther away, the Catalina had landed and showed her true strength as a flying boat, gliding to pick up those who had already been shot down and could be saved.

Leon had stripped and jumped into the water to swim and pick up this pilot.

"Swim toward me!" Leon commanded, swallowing a mouthful of salt water as the ocean bucked him, and the downed pilot remained blank faced.

Damn, doesn't he understand English? Leon thought. *Were there any foreign soldiers on the manifest?* He spat out the taste of brine.

The pilot was treading water, his hair plastered to his forehead, and he watched Leon close that last distance between them. Finally, Leon could grasp the pilot with one hand and reeled him in. The sea was choppy and Leon's load heavy, but the man was safe—for now.

"We're in the Dumbo." Leon didn't bother pointing to the flying boat, his Catalina, as all the other planes in the water were sinking. "What's your name?"

Do you have any brain damage? was the real question.

"Nikifor Jelen," the pilot said, except he was gulping water, and the stuttering mess sounded more like "Kippur Jelly."

"Leonard Dobson," Leon said, trying to sound conversational, like they had met on a city street and not in the middle of the Pacific. "Kippur. Is that Jewish? Whoa, whoa, whoa, stay with me."

Even with the pilot's inflated life vest, Leon was struggling to drag him through the water toward their plane without drowning him. He spun them in the water to orient himself and saw they were not so far away from the hulking Dumbo. She sat waiting for them, bobbing a little, but reassuring him.

"Stay with me, Kip," Leon said and readjusted his grip, the buckles and straps of the pilot's uniform scraping against Leon's bare gooseflesh. "Tell me what you see."

"Everyone is dying," Kip said. High above them a plane had been shot and was burning as it fell, vomiting a streak of black smoke across a periwinkle sky. Too far away and too far gone for either of them to tell whose it was and whether the pilot had been ejected in time. Leon watched Kip's eyes, the color of the stormy sea, close against the sights.

Leon kept quiet the rest of the way, recalling the scramble on the Chinese base that morning as he slowly pulled Kip back to the flying boat.

"Damn, damn, damn!" Lieutenant Commander Dickens kicked an ammunition box on his way out of HQ, and Leon jogged to catch up to his commanding officer.

"Sir." He stopped and saluted as soon as Dickens stood still.

"Dobson, good. They're cobbling an escort together, but I need you to find us a sober navigator, or they're going without us."

"Sir?"

"I'll take anyone qualified, anything but a fucking fascist. Go!"

From a few feet away, Leon could already see the other gunner who'd jumped in already back on board. Joe Altoviti was dripping water from his dark-brown hair onto his collar as he buttoned up his uniform again.

"Would you come on? I'm already dressed!" Joe said as others pulled Kip and Leon onboard. "We've gotta go!"

Leon shook water from his short brown hair and was back on his feet. Despite the hurry, it was eerily quiet until the engines were revved to life again. Leon barely had time to climb into his cupola, the glass blister where his machine gun sat, and check his ammunition before they were skirting water; the

floaters on the wings were retracted, and they were back in the air again. There were no allied ships in sight and only three Japs left in the air: they were trying to catch up to the bomber.

“Oh no you don’t,” Leon said as the Catalina came up between the three Japs, all three guns blasting as soon as the planes were in range. One fell to the gun at the fore-end, and Vaughn Calhoun whooped like a cowboy over the headset. Once past, the Japs returned fire, riddling holes in the Catalina. Behind him Leon could hear Joe cursing from across the walkway in his own blister on the starboard side.

At least he’s wearing clothes, Leon thought as cold wind rushed through the hole in the blister.

Another pass and there was only one Jap plane left, clipped but not flight impaired. It picked up speed, slowly slipping away from them.

“We’re losing him!” Calhoun said.

Leon stood shivering and waiting for his chance to shoot, which dwindled the longer they tailed the rapidly fleeing monoplane. Until suddenly it veered back toward them again, dead-on, guns blazing, and Joe cursed.

“Lady, Mother of God, that fucker is—”

Leon cut the words off with the roar of gunfire, returning each enemy shot blast for blast. Calhoun hit it as it came head-on again, then Leon swung his gun to hit one wing as the Jap came down the portside, which wobbled the Mitsubishi, and Joe hit it once more when the plane came back around starboard for more. Probably hoping to take them down with him, the Mitsubishi had given a lot but could take very little itself, fighting one-on-one. It began to spiral, smoking, to the sea.

There was shouting elsewhere, but Leon had relaxed his grip on the gun and was just noticing Joe squeezing into the blister close beside him, and he heard him whispering in his ear over the din of the generator being switched on. “Don’t lose him, watch if he ejects...” Their eyes followed the falling enemy plane.

“We’re hit! We’re hit!” The voice coming over the headset registered clearly now. Carl Perez, their engineer, was in full-blown panic. “Generator is all we’ve got, get us down, Commander!”

“We’re going down either way, Carl!”

“Dickens!”

“Hold fast, boys.” This calmer, sonorous command came from Al Vang, Dickens’s co-pilot.

“Floaters down,” the navigator said.

Leon wanted to continue the watch for the Mitsubishi’s own crash, but Joe grabbed his arm as the plane shook and jolted on its hasty descent.

“Hold tight,” Joe said, looking directly at Leon’s free-swinging dick.

Well, shit.

He cupped himself in one hand and braced himself on the curved wall for their impact with the water. Joe pushed against him from behind, an arm around his waist, his other arm braced against the opposite wall of the blister. Leon’s breath caught and his nerves began to jigger about in his stomach at the warmth.

Oh, God.

“Shit, Joe, ain’t this the most romantic—” Another jolt, and there was the water; it roared as the boat crashed into it. Sea and salt and debris came in the gun hole and soaked them both.

“Did you see the Mitsubishi go down?” Joe spat, dark curls spilling water into his eyes as he blinked continuously. He was still close, and Leon was sure that a blush was imminent.

“Uh, portside,” Leon said. He tried to focus but was having trouble collecting his thoughts. He wiped his face and pointed to the sinking monoplane, easily found, white in a sea of gray. “There.”

The boat continued to move at a decent clip in the direction of the downed Jap, but the generator was straining, not doing well on its own just then. There was the sound of water lapping and also the nasty telltale splash of water within the boat itself. There was a lot of work awaiting them outside the blister, but all Leon could think about was that Joe was still holding onto him.

Downed Jap. Save him.

“I should go. Get the guy.” Leon’s voice was hoarse, and he knew Joe wasn’t as aware of his hands on Leon as Leon was.

“Yeah, go.” And Joe let him out with a nod.

Leon, still stark naked, met Carl at the middle of the ship.

“Perez, did you see—”

“Jumped, to our port.” Carl helped Leon open the door. “Fifty feet away, but his plane came down almost on top of him.”

“How fast is it sinking?” Leon asked.

“Slow enough, probably.”

Leon had found a company clerk willing to rifle through files at lightning speed and find him the navigators currently on base. Only one name stuck out.

“Wait, that one. Ensign Cyrus MacDougal. When is he on duty?”

“At the top of the hour.”

“Where’s his bunk?”

“With the other colored airmen,” he said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Leon took about two seconds to gauge the dark water and steel himself for another swim. He was about to dive off when Mac peered from the radio room. “Where do you think you’re going?” He squeezed into the space next to Carl and crossed his arms. A swarthy scowl from Mac might have usually made Leon think twice, but he already had, and this was his job.

“Capturing us a prisoner,” Leon answered and sprang into the ocean.

“Leon! Dammit.” Mac clambered into the doorway and shouted after him. “He’s got a gun, Leon!”

Leon cut through the waves more quickly this time, warming up as he moved, soon coming within sight of the Japanese pilot. All that was visible of the plane was the tail fin. The man saw Leon at about the same time and began shouting gibberish and waving his gun at him.

“Marine pig!” the pilot spat, and Leon suspected his English was memorized epithets. “G.I. will die!”

Instead of leading up to a pointless argument where neither would understand each other, Leon took his chances with a waterlogged gun and quickly fading enemy. He spoke mostly for his own sake. “Hey, I’m not going to hurt you.”

In more or less of a smooth move, Leon slammed his hand against the Jap’s arm that held the gun and circled his other arm around the pilot’s waist. The

man passed out in Leon's arms as soon as he had him. He towed the prisoner away from the sinking plane as quickly as possible, worried that there could be an undertow. His muscles began to burn, the deep cold of the ocean bit him, and the adrenaline faded away.

"Mac?" Leon stood on the threshold of the segregated room while a young, bleary-eyed airman sat up in his bed in confusion.

"Yes, sir?"

"At ease. Is Ensign MacDougal still here?"

"Showers," the black kid grunted and barely hit the pillow before he started snoring again.

Leon met him on the way, and felt relief flood him as he recognized his friend.

"Mac, can your captain spare you?"

Leon and the captured Jap were pulled inside, and Mac immediately wrenched the handgun from the enemy's limp hand. Joe rolled Leon onto his side and thumped him on his back hard, just to get a mouthful of water out of him.

"Leon." Joe patted his face. "Leon, look at me."

And he tried, he really did, but for a couple seconds, time was not his. The slowness of everything weighed him down, made his mouth clumsy and empty. He saw Joe above him, lit by an ugly yellow light and tried to reconcile the concern he saw there with an undulating ocean.

"Leon, what happened? Tell me what happened."

Joe was always so nice to Leon, serious though he was. He was patient with him, suffering through the jokes and well-intended gaffs despite wanting to *just get on with it*. And now Joe was very, very close. *Why was that?*

"Joe," Leon said weakly and looked at Joe through heavy eyes. "Did you kiss me?" He hadn't meant to say that out loud and in his mind began backpedaling, looking for an escape. A joke. Anything. Surprisingly, Joe gave him one.

Joe smacked him a little harder. “Leon, don’t kid.” He smiled mischievously, shaking his head, a hint of annoyance in his tone. “Doc, he’s delirious.”

Dr. Reynolds didn’t take his stethoscope out of his ears, but did look up from his unconscious Japanese patient for a second. His interest in Leon did not go far beyond the bare minimum necessary for a ship’s doctor at the best of times. Tapping into the joke that Joe had assumed Leon’s outburst was, he had little time to spare for Leon. “Seems normal to me.” He then dismissed them from mind.

Leon didn’t miss an opportunity to sell this. “No, really.” He tried to sit up, but his head was still swimming in the ocean. “*Oof*. I need to know if I was unconscious for true love’s kiss, because—ow.” He was forced back down by Mac.

“Lie down. Nobody’s kissing nobody right now, you goof,” Mac said.

Ah, there’s my protector to seal the deal.

“But Joe saved my life, didn’t he?” Leon tried to sit up again, against the resistance of Mac’s hand on his chest. “Joe at least let me kiss *you*, as thanks!” He threw in a dramatic hand gesture to his retreating savior; it was sloppy, but he wasn’t feeling very strong just then, sprawled naked on the grate of the walkway.

Then the doctor gave him an annoyed look, and Leon knew he was done. *Safe for now*, Leon thought, and was able to lie down with a little help from Mac. *It’s good to have a friend around.*

“At least let me have a blanket or something,” Leon said, quieter, sobering. He felt the hot flush ebb from his body, the cold steel sapping the last of his heat.

Nikifor awoke with the dull thrumming of a generator in his ear, lying in a sea-soaked uniform, his arm in a sling, and his hair damp but drying.

“*Gdzie...*” Nikifor struggled to remember where he was.

“*Jesteśmy bezpieczni,*” Jan Maslanka whispered from the bunk above Nikifor.

We’re safe.

Nikifor's thoughts rearranged themselves, and he understood the context now. He had crashed and been rescued. He was on the flying boat that had accompanied their mission, a PBY Catalina, and the engines weren't running. The plane was still moving but slowly, as well as rising and falling steadily like a ship in a calm sea. At the fore-end of the boat he could hear the clear, even tones of a radio operator. Nikifor sat up, and his eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light.

"Maslanka," Nikifor whispered, but Jan didn't answer. Had he imagined hearing his lieutenant?

"He's sleeping." The doctor entered from aft and kneeled beside Nikifor, shining a light into his eyes. "Been drifting in and out of consciousness. I'm Dr. Reynolds. Name, rank, and the last mission?"

"Flying Officer Nikifor Jelen," he said then paused. "Our mission was escorting a B-29 Superfortress to... I can't remember the name." He rubbed his face roughly with his left hand. "There were fifteen planes in the escort. Flight Lieute—"

"That'll do." The doctor put the light away and patted his hand. "The boys are calling you 'Kip' though. That fool Dobson thought your name was 'Kippur Jelly.'"

Nikifor couldn't do much with this information and ignored it, asking instead: "Maslanka?"

"He suffered some burns, but if he holds out a couple more hours he should pull through."

"That's why he's sleeping."

The doctor nodded. "The druggist gave him some strong sedatives to help. Those burns hurt like the devil."

"Anyone else?"

Dr. Reynolds shook his head with a rueful smile. "I'm sorry." He patted Nikifor's hand again and stood. "You should try standing."

Nikifor used the rocking motion of the boat as an excuse to support himself on Jan's bunk. But in that moment of twisting to support himself, he tangled his right arm in the sling and stared at it instead.

"What happened to my arm?"

"Oh, it's just a sprain. You can remove the sling if it feels all right."

Nikifor nodded and slipped it off, dropping it on the bunk. He couldn't see the extent of Jan's wounds but could smell the slight acrid sweetness of burnt skin. Screwing up his face against unwanted emotion, he reached out with his left hand to stroke hair back from Jan's face, feeling soot and salt between his fingers. Jan inhaled, a small, shallow gasp, and with eyes glazed over, recognised Nikifor only among great confusion.

"Nikki," Jan breathed. "Nikki?" His pain became clear on his face and then was quickly chased by fear.

"*Jesteśmy bezpieczni, Jan.*" Nikifor repeated Jan's words back to him, and his dirty brow relaxed even as a lump blocked more words from leaving Nikifor's own mouth. Jan murmured something and fell back asleep, worry draining from his face. Nikifor swiped at his eyes with his hand and stumbled out of the rest compartment.

He brushed fingers through his frizzing hair, pulling a blond curl down to see how much soot he carried. He'd stepped into the middle compartment of the ship, where the whine of a generator was loudest. It smelled like petrol and coffee from a hot plate shoved in front of lockers in the fore starboard corner. The way he'd come in, the door on the portside, had been closed and a bunk replaced in front of it. Through a small window he could see an ocean of night.

From beyond the bulkhead, a black man made eye contact and turned back to the navigator's table. "Kip's up." He spoke loudly to the plane at large.

Above Nikifor's head, a man with bright grey eyes and an oil-smudged face peered down from the entrance to the engineer's seat. "Thanks, Mac!" He gave Nikifor a toothy smile. "Hey there! Feeling better?" He lingered only a second, waiting for Nikifor's answer, but before Nikifor could, someone else called "Leon!" and he disappeared.

Was that the man who saved me?

Continuing forward, Nikifor recognised the man behind the black man, the navigator, as a lieutenant commander he'd seen on base in China and remembered to salute the ranking officer. "Sir! Flying Officer Nikifor Jelen, Royal Air Force, squadron—"

"At ease, Lieutenant. We'll need your help as soon as we're ashore." He glanced over his shoulder to the radio operator, smushed against the starboard wall. "Identify yourself and your compatriot to Lieutenant Altoviti and then get yourself out from underfoot posthaste. In fact, you can make yourself useful.

The more eyes on our prisoner in the rest compartment, the better.” The commander climbed up and forward from their compartment into the next one without a backward glance.

“Kip?” The man at the radio had looked up and straight at Nikifor, who forgot everything at that precise moment.

Nikifor moved closer but didn’t block Mac, the navigator, from getting up if he needed to. He gulped as the wireless operator, Alto... something, continued to stare at him. He tried smiling, but Altoviti’s serious gaze was intense and there was a flicker of impatience as well. Nikifor thought that Altoviti might be prettier if he didn’t scowl so severely. His black curls, aquiline nose and dark, hazel eyes weren’t exactly badly matched to his thick eyebrows and square jaw, but it was as if he could look straight through and penetrate the deepe—

“Kip.” Altoviti huffed with impatience. “You can call me Joe.” He flipped a switch and put the headset back on, only covering one of his ears. “Please tell me the names of yourself and the other pilot. I need to report the survivors to HQ, and neither of you had identification.”

The night wore on. Nikifor was wearing the drabs of an American pilot, someone’s spare from a locker, and trying not to think of his hat, with his name painted above the bill, swirling in the depths of the ocean with the other victims of the dogfight.

Nikifor dozed in the rest compartment with Jan, the Japanese prisoner and the crewmen who had no immediate tasks. He sat on the bunk beneath Jan, bundled between the soft-handed Dr. Reynolds and the skinny druggist, Goldfarb. The Japanese prisoner lay across from them. Crawling underneath, stuffing oil-soaked bits of cloth in bullet holes, was Rocco, a junior pilot who looked about the same age as Nikifor.

The two engineers, Chief Hobbs and Perez, were on the roof to examine the damage, tied to the plane while it continued sailing to “some unnamed island.” This was what the well-moustached fore-end gunner, Vaughn Calhoun, told him on his way to the head, anyway. Their banging and shouting kept Nikifor from getting any real sleep.

In total, there were fourteen people onboard. While nowhere near capacity, it was crowded, and Nikifor was glad for what little space he had.

To his confusion, Nikifor was always referred to as Kip, despite the introductions between himself and the majority of the crew—but there wasn’t

much idle chatter as they made slow progress. Hazy and more or less comfortable, he began to doze again.

With the bang of a hammer on metal, Nikifor shot forward, sitting up from the bunk he'd laid down on. Snoring came from elsewhere, and the smell of old coffee still lingered. His heart was racing, but he couldn't remember his dream. He clutched at his chest pocket, but it was empty.

Of course, I'm wearing someone else's suit.

It was still loud, but Nikifor stepped lightly on the walkway, aware that Goldfarb was asleep on the bunk beneath him, and Jan on the one above. He inadvertently caught the angry stare of the Japanese prisoner and quickly left to look for his flight suit.

Someone was asleep with his back to him as Kip entered the middle compartment beneath the wings. The generator whined more loudly here even as one of the Wasp engines coughed, an engineer attempting to revive it. The hot plate was cold now, and he reached into one of the open lockers. His suit was still wet, and fully expecting the paper to fall apart in his hands, he carefully fiddled the letter out of his chest pocket. He tried peeling the sopping envelope open, the postmark ink smearing on his fingers, but he had nowhere to lay out the pages to dry; the tiny stove was cut off by the decoy flame floats stacked beneath the generator. He looked around, remembering his claustrophobia test ruefully now. It was roomier than a bomber in here, he was probably panicking more about losing the last link to home than being in such close quarters.

He went to try the aft of the plane again, since the fore-end was in heavier use, and was careful to avoid looking at the prisoner as he passed through the rest compartment. In the gun compartment, Altoviti was asleep in the starboard side blister, though it looked incredibly uncomfortable. He considered the portside but settled on wiping dirt off the ground with his sleeve and laying the wet paper there. Clicking his tongue derisively when the fold tore, angry with himself on top of everything, he managed to still his hands enough and carefully pulled the letter flat with his fingertips. He'd been so absorbed in the task that he hadn't heard the lavatory evacuate or the tread of boots on the walkway behind him.

"Oh, that's too bad." Leon startled Nikifor, and he jerked upright. Had Leon been standing any closer, he might have headbutted him. "Hi," Leon said.

Nikifor managed a bob of his head, still crouching beneath the machine gun, which was awkward but sufficient. He twisted to get himself a seat on the

bottom of the blister without knocking his head against the gun or brushing against the other crewman. It was impossible.

Leon was cleaner now than he had been earlier in the night, and Nikifor saw Leon's eyes were more a mix of greys and blues with even a little green. Leon's hair glistened tawny gold where the light hit it, short on the sides, longer on the top. He wore only a grease-stained undershirt, his flight suit tied at the waist; the gob shirt's tight fit was very flattering.

"I'm Leon, by the way," he said. "Nice to meet you—awake that is. We first met while I was saving you." Leon explained this in mock seriousness and flexed his arms as he braced them on the edge between the two cupolas. Every single movement of his body was visible through that tight shirt, and Nikifor felt the creep of a blush on his face as he found it hard to look away.

"You don't speak English, do you?" Leon asked, leaning into the blister and smiling smugly.

"No, I speak!" Nikifor blurted out. "I mean, I do speak." His face began to turn red in earnest. "Not well."

He'd been in the military long enough—been at the Chinese base with the American Navy long enough—to know that Americans wore tighter shirts than the European soldiers, and that the Navy wore them tighter than the rest. He could force himself to look at this man's face, if he couldn't control his blush. Why was he reacting like this?

"You speak just fine," Leon said, smiling more earnestly. A corner of his mouth quirked higher, and in the moonlight, it was less toothy and more charming.

Nikifor's chest seemed to expand. "Thank you," he said, his voice a much smoother version of his racing thoughts. "I know it is just your job—to know there is a PBY just behind you, to rescue you, just in case anything should happen—you can't imagine what a lightness it gives you." He thought he could hear his heart slow down its pace. "And then to actually be rescued..." For a moment he and Leon were just looking at each other.

"I do actually," Leon said more softly. He didn't move or shift his gaze. "They rotate us through air sea rescue, bomber patrol. I usually fly solo like you."

Leon may have washed the oil and engine fluid off of his hands, but the smell of it still clung to his sweaty clothes. He reached out abruptly, and at first

Nikifor thought he'd been jolted by the movement of the boat, but then Leon's hand landed on his shoulder lightly, deliberately. "Get yourself ready, we'll be there soon. And then it'll be all hands on deck, sweetheart."

Chapter 2

Redacted Island

In the early pre-dawn light, Leon was the first one out the port door, climbing down into warm, hip-deep waters, blue as the approaching sky. Lieutenant Bailey Hobbs, chief engineer, and Aviation Machinist's Mate Carl Perez, airframe engineer, were watching him from on top of the wings, waiting for the generator to shut off and the flying boat to stop skimming the sandy waters. Leon had helped them patch problematic holes and attempt a repair of the engines, but the fight had mangled one Wasp too horribly to even be a donor for the second. They were down to the respectable, if not flight-able, generator. And Dickens would probably have some choice words for HQ about that.

Leon tied the first tow cable before Carl had a chance to climb down. Carl then untied the rope at his waist and threw it back to Hobbs, who then attached the ropes and threw them down the starboard side. He quickly followed them down. More rope was brought out, and all three were lashing the plane long before the rest of the crew was able to join them. With a few knots here and there, they began to tow the Catalina to shore, sand swirling between their legs.

The doctor and Kip came out last. Feeling something buoyant rise in him, a smile quick on his face, Leon waved Kip over, and the younger man stomped through the water toward him. But then Leon caught Mac's worried look.

"Be careful now," Mac said. Eying his friend, he dropped his rope and worked at a knot on Leon's instead. It was a pretense to speak less loudly about something so sensitive. Mac was the only one who knew what Leon was. "I like seeing you happy, but I worry. You know he may not..." Mac said, letting his voice trail off.

"I know!" Leon snapped and turned his back on Kip as he came to help.

They worked steadily, tying the flying boat to palm trees, covering it with camouflage netting and laying fronds on the wing tip and tail that were exposed to the sky. All they needed was for one errant Japanese flyboy to spot them and they could kiss the PBY good-bye.

Lieutenant Commander Dickens and Leon had a mutual distaste for one another. There was a respect between them, since it was bad form to hate each

other outright, but on the few missions they'd run together so far, Leon could tell that Dickens didn't like his camp theatrics. And for that, Leon didn't like Dickens either. Unlike the doctor who just hated Leon outright, possibly because he suspected he knew what Leon was. But as long as he played along with the other straight men, didn't get caught doing anything too queer, he would continue to ride his free pass. Airmen had a low life expectancy, no need to waste one unnecessarily.

They had been told the island was uninhabited, but the lieutenant commander set up a scouting party once the plane was secured. Begrudging respect or not, it didn't stop Dickens from putting Leon as far away from himself as possible. They walked side by side, about ten meters between each man, Dickens on one end, Leon on the other; between them were Al, Vaughn, Mac, Joe and Rocco. The trees were sparse, but the island wasn't so small, so once in its depths, dozens of trees between one man and the next, their advance began to spread apart. Leon could hear Rocco, stumbling over the sand soil and whatever else, but he couldn't see him all the time now. He couldn't see the beach either, but he could still hear the distant surf breaking.

Leon's progress was slow and fraught with the expectation of mines or booby-trapped defenses left from an unfought battle. The island had no name as far as he knew, no discernible features, barren and flat and without a source of fresh water, *but who knows what some clever troop of Japanese soldiers can do if they ever stopped here?* He wouldn't put it past them to sabotage something perfectly harmless.

Rocco gave a friendly shout, and Leon made his way farther inland, toward more voices, and saw that they'd found the makings of an outpost—an unfinished way station that had been abandoned.

“Altoviti, take a look at the radio, would you?” Dickens then gestured to Al and took him on a quick survey around the small clearing.

“You don't think we'll find water, do you?” Rocco asked and Leon shrugged.

“Jackpot!” Vaughn came out with his arms lifted over his head.

“Radio works?” Leon asked.

“Not sure—not without power. But there's a very promising-looking basement. Help us pry the trapdoor open, wouldja?”

Joe was frowning at the cables coming out of the fuse box inside and didn't pay attention to them as they traipsed by into the second room. It was as small

as the first, yet somehow had two cots crammed into it. The strip of patio to the back had a trapdoor made of driftwood, which had shifted though with the passing of time and wet heat. Only with all three digging into it did they manage to lift it.

“Please, God, don’t let it be pickled eggs and spam,” Rocco said as Vaughn went down.

“Yahoo!”

“What is it? Water tablets?”

“Better!” Vaughn sent up two cans, almost identical. “Beans and peaches!”

You could just see on Rocco’s face that he didn’t think this was better.

Leon found nothing on the rest of his march. When he met the other men on the far side of the island, he learned that they had found a small freshwater pond. But the wide swath of beach around the island was too open, the smaller stretch they’d towed the boat onto was safer, and the command for return was given. But the march back was just as long, and they passed the hottest hours of the day walking beneath the trees.

Things became a little less G.I. after that. A radio played an allied radio station of tragic French tunes and big swing bands over a crackling connection. The crew took turns on watch, patrol and fixing the things the engineers gave them. But there were fewer things to do as the day passed and the light faded. Dickens took the radio and spoke in a hushed voice that Leon didn’t listen to but still sent chills down his spine. After rattling around with something Hobbs had given him to do, Leon was dismissed and took a walk down the beach. He lay down with his bare feet in the lagoon, enjoying the solitude while he could.

“Hello,” Kip said and startled Leon from his reverie.

“Howdy.” Leon threw his cigarette away. “Pretty, huh.” It was easy to avoid eye contact, avoid building camaraderie, but he could feel parts of himself already wishing for more. So he stared out into the bright sky, his eyes prickling. The sunset was a shameless spread of glorious color, as it always seemed to be in these parts. Though he’d seen only a couple this nice before.

“It amazes me, time and again, to be here,” Kip said. “Alive, yes, but here, I mean, in such beautiful places.”

“Not quite paradise.” If Leon was rueful, it was because he could never forget that they were at war.

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” Leon looked at Kip directly for the first time, and it was a bit of a shock. There was an unmasked intensity when the kid spoke. Leon liked the looks of him, as he suspected he might.

“Praise it and then dismiss it, so soon after the first.” Kip looked away—*Was he uncomfortable?* He ran a hand through his hair, and it fluffed the waves to a new level. It was endearing in a way.

Leon didn't want to be cynical; he'd only been in the army a little over two years, and fifty-two weeks had just been the process of shifting from a small town hick with a good eye to a fighter pilot. He'd seen so much change in no time at all, the small pleasure of good weather, of a warm body to lie beside, never mind *sex* when there was a chance... What could he say that wasn't going to burst this boy's bubble?

“Things don't ever last here.”

Screw it.

He lit another cigarette.

Although he knew it was all temporary, Leon never lingered on the thought, never could—not if he wanted to stay alive. He didn't think about unachievable happiness with a man he'd never meet, or how the odds were against him every time he climbed back into the sky.

Never think about the life expectancy. How far away am I from the average? Two missions. Shit.

Don't think about it. Don't think. Dontthinkdontthinkdontthink...

Kip fell back in the sand and stretched his bare feet into the trickling waves. Leon'd never seen a lagoon so calm, an island so perfect yet unimportant. He looked at his companion, wanting a distraction, yet fearful of not being in control of his emotions. Things could get away from him so fast.

But Kip's eyes were closed, his hair longer than a GI's, letting the sun and wind play with hair that he imagined was soft. The damn stupid olive-drab color was unflattering. Leon imagined what Kip looked like in the blue of a RAF officer.

Leon had to look away; he'd only dared a brief glance anyway, enough to build lazy afternoon dreams and sustain the lonely dark ones. He pretended to take a great interest in the vivid colors across the water, tracing them with the half-burnt cigarette. He held it without smoking it.

“So you’re a pilot.”

Kip grumbled an affirmative. His eyes were still closed.

“Did you join up after the Warsaw blitz and just...”

“Do you really want to know?” Kip asked.

“Yeah! I came to this late. Were you at the Battle of Britain? I flew with a guy who told me some tall tales.”

“No, I was too young. I trained up as soon as it was legal and flew alone for the first time in the summer of 1943.”

“Forty-three.” Leon appraised him, not as he had before, but taking in the details of weathering on Kip’s face, the tone of his stomach and arms and the stubble on his cheeks. “How old are you?”

Kip smirked. “According to the RAF, I’ll be twenty-two come April.” He reached out for the cigarette Leon had just lit, brushing his fingers as he took it. Leon forced the breath back into his lungs and quickly picked up the train of conversation he’d lost.

“And really?”

Leon watched Kip as he puffed on the cigarette, lips delicately clamping onto it. He glanced at Leon but didn’t seem to question the look, whatever expression it was on Leon’s face. Kip had lovely hands, Leon noted.

“Twenty in April.”

When Leon took the stub back, he returned the caress and found it to be a mistake. If he had warmed to the first contact, he now burst into flames. The second, intentional touch, with only his barest desire exposed—a suspicion buried beneath one unlikely thing after another—lit him from within and sent electrical charges to his heart. It also had the side effect of putting a manic smile on his face, which Kip laughed at.

“I know,” he said. “I do not look it, but let us keep it our secret.” He lay his head back down and closed his eyes.

God, the boy is beautiful.

Mac was right, and if life had taught him one lesson after another, he knew *that* by now. But here before him lay a puzzle, and how could he not look at a man who was still gorgeous despite the ugly uniform?

The last cigarette went out and the sky grew to lavender. Leon lay back and just listened to the man breathing beside him and the distant surf. Then he heard the discordant sound that kept him up at night, slowly growing louder.

“Planes, Kip.”

“What?” Kip seemed to awake as from a daze.

“Can you hear the planes, too?”

They scrambled up and were back by their plane in time to see the first scout come into sight to the northwest. Leon’s entire body vibrated with fear, his legs pumped up and down as his heart caught in his throat. Images, nightmares, flashed in his mind but he didn’t hold onto any of them. The rest of the crew was already on their way to cover under the trees, the plane abandoned. Leon grabbed Kip’s hand and pulled him deeper as Dickens had ordered them. Their pace was uneven, one of them had longer legs and steps quickly became jumbled. He didn’t want to let go of Kip’s hand, but his fingers slipped and he stopped.

“Kip.” Leon bent over, panting, his hands on his knees.

“Leon. Why do you keep calling me that? Kip, I mean.” He stepped back, hardly out of breath.

Leon took Kip’s wrist and led him to the sandy grove where the two-room shack stood. They were the first ones there. “I misheard your name.”

“Kippur Jelly? Yes, I heard.”

“It was a split-second decision, Kip. I didn’t think. I might have also called you ‘skipper.’ And now it’s stuck.” Leon sounded a little exasperated, but was it because the nickname was catching or because he wanted to be the only one to use it? *Be reasonable.*

“I like it,” Kip said. “Do you know how many people I know are called Nikki?”

How many of those are dead?

“Okay, it’s official.” Leon threw an arm over Kip’s shoulders and grinned at him. “Your own moniker with a funny backstory. Come on.”

Kip grinned back at him. “I think my fiancée will love it even more than I do.”

See? One mistake after another.

After Dickens gave the temporary all clear, an official kibosh was put on campfires. It was cold beans for dinner. Banning fire also meant the only light was moonglow, starlight and a cold lantern that Dickens kept close while he read. From the inside the Catalina, Mac could be heard playing a harmonica.

Leon was happy, in spite of his wiser self, that Kip would sleep outside with the crew. As the only stranger to join their loosely knitted group, it was easy to goad him into answering long strings of questions. Leon's own particular curiosity blended in among the others, whose own homesickness was forgotten when they heard of someone else's.

Kip spoke in a deliberate measure, in that Slavic way. By focusing entirely on Kip's soft voice beneath a sea wind, Leon fell under a hypnotic spell.

"So you didn't train in Poland?" Rocco asked.

"Trained with a couple other Polish in England, yes."

"How is that? I mean, did you already speak English then?"

"Very little. One of the reasons I was in the 313 squadron."

Rocco nodded with satisfaction and lit his cigarette. "Want one?" He proffered the pack toward Kip who declined.

Hadn't he smoked with me earlier?

"Kip." Vaughn drawled a bit when he spoke. "If you don't mind my asking, how'd you get out of there? Was it in '39?"

The tension amongst the group was palpable. Even Joe, feigning disinterest in everything, turned to look at Kip.

"You survived Warsaw, right?" Joe asked. The ember of his cigarette lit his face as he drew in the smoke. It was absolutely silent but for natural and incidental noises. A birdcall, trees shifting in the breeze, the generator, cigarettes burning and smoke exhalation. Mac had stopped playing for some reason, *as though he knew, too.*

This was clearly what everyone had been hoping to hear about.

"Yes," Kip rasped. "I did."

He paused for a long time and a thin string was strung between him and his waiting audience.

"I lived not far from a pretty big town called Deblin. I'd been to Warsaw only once in my life, but we went to the market in Deblin all the time. Selling

vegetables...” For a moment, Kip’s eyes clouded over. “And flowers. It’s where our Air Force was moved when I was very young. I grew up with the planes buzzing overhead all my life.

“Jan, my comrade, actually remembers the town much as I do. It was one of the last to be captured before the Russians came from the east. Heavily fortified, we civilians actually had the choice of staying. We didn’t leave our village right away, actually. We: that was my father, my brother, my little sister, my fiancée: Łucja, and her parents. Only when the ground began to rumbling did we leave.

“The first night in Deblin, I remember the commotion at the Academy. The fortress swarmed with more soldiers than I had ever seen in the city. And the planes just kept going out. Jan told me that he was still a student and worked on the airfield in that time. He didn’t have flight experience yet. If there hadn’t been a rumour that Russians might come from the other side he might’ve seen his part of action with the Germans.

“When we left, it was already too late. There was a train depot that was to be destroyed—the lines broken, so they could not be used—and the army was moving to stand on the Vistula, the river in Warsaw. So we couldn’t take the train anymore and we were forced to run—those who could run. My father and Łucja’s parents stayed behind, my brother carried my sister, and I never let go of Łucja’s hand.

“It was dark and cold and how we didn’t get turned around back toward the burning fields of light, I don’t know. We fell asleep after so many hours, waking up with cows licking our faces. It was still Poland, but we must have gone over seventy kilometres in the previous day. It seemed impossible, but everything was unreal in those days. We went through such parts of Poland I’d never seen, and the fields of dead, some discarded and others buried... We gave a wide berth to Krakow, where we heard was a huge battle, possibly to be the last.

“Then we should have died in the mountains but we met others. Jews and others who were going south. We walked without shoes, without food, and felt we disintegrated in the Slovak lands. We kept going south. At some point our options were simple. We could not go anywhere but Palestine or Paris, and my fear then was dying of the cold. We could fish in the south and began to walk with the Jews toward Palestine, but then we heard that we would be welcome in England if we joined the war effort. I’d never wanted to be a soldier my entire

life, but I could give Łucja more in the west than in Palestine. Others from our country had already joined. So we went.

“I proposed to Łucja officially, and we went to England as bride and groom.” He sat silently for a minute, just breathing heavily through his nose. As though if he just kept breathing, he could make it through these memories—keep him from crying. “I haven’t seen my village or anyone from it since then.”

Some sympathetic feeling roiled inside Leon, but he had trouble pinpointing what it was. Anger mixed with a deep longing to take Kip’s hand. But of course, if he were heterosexual he would have done so by now without a second thought.

“That’s got to be tough,” Vaughn said, and Joe gave a grunt, turning away again.

Al, big, tall, blond Midwesterner that he was, found it easy to lean a few inches toward Kip and throw his arms around him. Kip patted the arm thankfully, still huffing with emotion.

“And when’s the last time you saw your girl?” Rocco asked, eyes wide. *He might hug Kip and start weeping besides*, Leon thought.

“Rocco’s never seen a girl, see,” Leon said, and everyone laughed, the tension snapping with it.

“She writes to me,” Kip said and slipped away from Vaughn to get the crinkled letter out of his pocket. For a minute he just held it. “I just got this last week. She writes in English unless she can not get a word. Good practise for us both, I guess. She works as a secretary in an office since she can’t stand the smell of blood.” Kip laughed. “Not that I’m much better. She turned out to be quite the patriot.”

Leon felt the lump in his throat fall to his stomach, and they all probably thought of their own bloodiest memories.

“Kip.” Rocco had the most despicable puppy-eyed look on his face. “Would you mind reading it? It’s been a while since most of us have had a word. I think we’d all love a glimpse of life back home.”

Leon wasn’t sure he would, but he wasn’t going to say anything. He watched Kip blush and clear his throat. He decided to lay back and stargaze instead.

“Nikki,” Kip began reading. “I pray for you every night and look forward to your next letter with the breath held. Sandra is the only other one with a soldier,

so we usually stay in at lunch. I went once with other girls, they usually eat lunch at a park down the street. It used to be nicer, I hear. Actually they go because there is some sort of American officers club across the street and they talk to the soldiers. But I'll only laugh until one of them is engaged and eating on the steps of the office with Sandra and myself.

"I haven't written sooner because there's a candle shortage. I'm not allowed to turn the lights on at night as you know, but candles are the only light allowed. I'm a little happy for this because I'm so klutzy that I burned your last letter in the flame a little in an accident. I didn't lose much, but you write so little that it feels like a great loss.

"I miss you very much, Nikki, more so than when you were on the continent, more than when you were in Africa, it's like you are not visible to me now and I hardly remember what it is to see you and hold you now. It's like the last little part of home has left me.

"There's a little bookshop across the Victoria and Albert Museum, that I pass on the way sometimes. Now that weather is nicer they have a box out front, books for only a pence or two, sometimes three. I try to read more, but I hate it, it is so hard, and I look at English all day, but I know I have to. Sometimes I am glad I can not find Polish books, otherwise I would have no reason to practise outside work.

"So I bought a short book of short little poems in English translated from Japan or China, I can not remember. It says in the front but it is too small to read. I read poetry now, like you used to read to me, while you were still here, and it reminds me of you. They don't always make sense right away, like the ones you love, but can be a bit like a rough jewel, the longer you look the more beauty you find. A bit like my love. I hope you will return soon. Waiting faithfully, your Lucy."

"That's beautiful," Vaughn said, a little choked up. Leon could hear that Vaughn wasn't the only one. Joe gave a grunt, and after a heavy moment they could hear Mac playing his harmonica again. The beating of Leon's heart was loud in his ears, competing with the warbling tune. The conversation drifted, men began to talk in murmuring voices about girls they knew, and Leon's mind began to wander.

At first he tried to imagine Łucja in a moonlit room, pining out the open window. Blonder than Kip, more delicate in feature, pale eyes and brows, fair like milk, pretty in a sweet way. She appeared opaque, illuminated in the pure

light. The picture of innocence. A victim of war. The room was bare and very rural, nothing was without purpose, yet her rustic farm dress made her seem even more beautiful.

He also put her in a club like the ones he'd been to in London. Loud, bright, thronging with life to be lost and forgotten. Some bombed-out dance hall, badly in need of repair, but hung with Chinese paper lanterns regardless. Was she dancing with Kip? No, some dark-haired American Marine who would sweep her off her feet. Her lipstick was a fabulous shade of red, her dress far too short, and she laughed as she returned home and burned Kip's letters.

He woke with a snort and saw Mac leaning over him. "Get your ass on the boat before Dickens finds you, brother."

Leon nodded and tried grumbling something, but it was unintelligible, and Mac said nothing as he helped him up. Leon stumbled to the water's edge, still barefoot and groggy. The cold water splashing his feet and ankles, soaking up his pants, woke him a little more, and he became aware that he had no idea where his shoes were only when he had his hands on the rungs of the ladder. It would have mattered more if he were on a carrier, or back in China. But here, between sea and sand, it wouldn't matter.

The generator whirred low inside, providing a dim view of the glowering Japanese man and the slow moving form on the other bunk—Jan. The compartment smelled of sweat and a lingering charcoal odor, which was from Jan's burned skin. After checking the prisoner's handcuffs for chafing, Leon opened all the little windows and vents that might let in the fresh sea breeze. Sitting at the radio was tedious, and the cupolas were just as bad as sitting in the rest compartment. So he sat in the port doorway and lit a cigarette. With one hand on the strat, he leaned over the water, watching the late moon rising, its reflection a glimmer on the softly undulating sea.

He heard Kip coming long before he saw the ripples in the water, or even knew it was him. He was sloshing in water up to his knees and gave only a heavily accented "Howdy" as greeting. Leon clenched his cigarette in his teeth and held out both hands to help Kip up. The kid was grinning, probably would have made it up without him, but it gave Leon a chance to realize that he was heavier than he'd thought. Apparently he packed a lot more muscle than it seemed.

"Nineteen, huh?"

"Yes." Kip smiled sheepishly.

“You’re strong for a nineteen-year-old,” Leon noted.

“You mean I am heavy.” Leon grunted affirmation but shrugged. “I work hard, and I grew up on a farm.”

“So did I—” Leon began to say, but Kip was already moving past him to the rest compartment. Leon came in after him and was immediately struck by how tightly Kip was gripping the edge of Jan’s bunk. The clash of electric light from the generator and moonlight made it hard to see anything, but it seemed to Leon that Kip was frozen in place.

Leon made his next decision without thinking about it too long: he flicked his cigarette into the water and came up close behind Kip to watch Jan as well.

“Is he?” Leon’s question hung there, unfinished.

After one more tortured second, Jan’s chest rose noticeably higher and fell again, his breathing filling the compartment once more. Kip slumped forward in relief, and Leon touched his shoulder gently, as he had done earlier in the day. Rough fabric under his fingers, so noticeable to tender longing, completed a casual illusion of comrades comforting one another, even if Leon wished it were more. This time however Kip grasped Leon’s hand in his own and leaned his cheek into it. Leon’s heart began to speed wildly and he dared not move, dared not exhale, feeling like a trapped rabbit. As Kip’s lips carelessly brushed the back of Leon’s hand, he wondered if, like a rabbit, he could die in this moment of excitement.

“I’m so sorry,” Kip said and slipped away. “I care too much.”

Leon gave him space. He moved back to the compartment doorway, trying to keep the urge to comfort Kip at an objective distance. The Japanese pilot was another reminder of how tenuous any privacy was. Kip sat down on the walkway, but kept fidgeting.

The boat was completely still with the lagoon peaceful that night. Kip was clearly lost in his thoughts. The Japanese prisoner had turned his back to them and might have already fallen back asleep; in any case, he wasn’t staring at them anymore.

Leon cooled his affection or whatever hot ideas his mind was wandering toward and decided he could resume his watch elsewhere. He didn’t think Kip would notice him leave.

“Will you not stay?” Kip asked. Leon deliberately took a long time to answer, thinking and rethinking.

“Did you need something?”

“Does it bother you to sit inside?” Kip was looking at him curiously, as if he really didn’t know what drove Leon away.

No, he wouldn’t.

“No,” Leon said and sat down on the walkway where he stood, there by the doorway. Now, again, there was silence but for the meek lapping of waves on the hull, muted birdcalls and breathing.

Kip took a deeper breath; Leon heard it before Kip began to speak. “My mother is dead, but I only know that because it happened when I was young. It’s less sad somehow, though I was naïve until—” He changed tracks, abruptly, pushing away from the words no one wanted to say. He glanced at Leon. “My mother took me into the garden as soon as she was strong enough. I crawled around in dirt, weeding all the wrong plants when I was too young. My mother taught me which to pull, and I continued for all my childhood to do so. My brother and sister did their best, but after her death, I was the only one old enough and who knew enough to carry on.

“Then, when I was strong enough, I began to plough and till and harvest with my father and the farmhands. My brother joined soon and my sister, who never knew my mother, learned women’s work where she could. She didn’t remember much about her time in the garden, but she took to women’s life well enough.” He paused again and seemed to see something far away just in front of him. Leon could not look away. He spoke more softly now, as if in wonder.

“It’s so strange to think that they might never live the lives they imagined. My brother would have fought were he old enough, and then supported the farm. We might have shared the house with two families. Though my sister would definitely have married well and moved out. She was sweet and pretty girl. Last time I saw her.”

Leon wanted Kip to see them again, though he felt sad that Kip spoke in a hesitant way, as though he still hoped to hear from them one day—but perhaps knew better. His tongue was heavy and he stood to get the canteen that lay beside Jan. He took a sip and offered it to Kip, who drank a whole gulp. Leon half hoped that they wouldn’t talk anymore, and he could take his watch in silence. But he had more wishes than there were stars in the sky. He couldn’t chase them all. So Kip continued to speak unhindered.

“I used to think my brother would have made an honourable life as a soldier. While I certainly liked the planes and the parades, I never imagined that

life for myself. Or this one.” He scowled down at his boots. “There is nothing that I imagined left in my life. Even Łucja. She hasn’t changed really. Modern fashion hasn’t changed her, the way she does her hair, the fact that we speak English... It’s all fine, but without the life of farming waiting for me, my father’s livelihood to be passed down to me, to my son—” He chuckled derisively at himself, shaking his head. “It was a burden and a relief to know what lay ahead of you. Now every day is like dying.”

How do you respond to that?

“Well, think of it this way,” Leon said after a slow moment. “Right now we are in the safest place we can be in the entire Pacific. Far from Japanese controlled water, on a nonstrategic island, far from the usual shipping lanes, in water too shallow for submarines, well covered from view from above... without a care in the world.”

Kip exhaled once, a tiny laugh to accompany a ghost of a smile. “Not exactly.”

“Alright, so we’ve got a prisoner and your injured crewman. But Doc’s got a handle on it.” Leon did his best impression of James Cagney. It was actually pretty good, but Kip didn’t really react.

“I hope so.” Kip looked to the bunk but didn’t get up. He made a noise of disgust and buried his face. “I care too much.”

“Hey now,” Leon said. He felt flustered by the need to comfort Kip. Normally he wouldn’t hesitate; normally he would’ve scooted over and not thought twice about comforting another man, even a man he was attracted to. Maybe another joke would work this time, bolster him out of the dark thoughts. But Kip didn’t fit nicely into any boxes; Leon was unsure if his camp theatrics would entertain him or scare him off. He was even wary to put himself in a box at that moment, especially in relation to this one Polish soldier.

Who was he tonight? Was he a kind friend, a stoic comrade or something else entirely?

Lust wasn’t indicative of love. Sparks weren’t an indication of fire. So he moved only slightly and put a hand on Kip’s elbow. “Take it easy on yourself. We’re all we’ve got, the closest thing to family for thousands of miles. It’s good to care. It’s *important*.” As before, Kip placed his own hand on Leon’s. It was electric.

“I think I was falling in love with him,” Kip croaked, hiccupped and began to cry openly. “I don’t even know what being in love is like, but I think—” He sobbed and turned away.

Leon's mind had gone blank while Kip just kept on talking. There was a series of questions he automatically began to answer, his subconscious was already halfway through those. *Should I move my hand?* His stomach clenched and he looked to the Japanese man but he hadn't moved. *Was he asleep? Did he speak English?*

He couldn't seem to stop the deep breaths he was taking, but unless Kip was listening to his breathing, exhausted as that poor kid was, he wouldn't have noticed Leon's shock. *What was he thinking?* He calmed and thought, *Perhaps a kindred spirit then after all.*

Leon shifted himself around so he was close enough to put his arm around Kip and hug him as he continued to cry. *The kid wasn't far from sleep, would he remember this?*

Was that important now?

When Vaughn came to relieve Leon's watch not long before sunrise, Kip was fast asleep, alone, and Leon was smoking a cigarette at the radio.

Chapter 3

Walk the Beach

Nikifor awoke when Joe came to relieve Vaughn, clanging about with bedpans, which he was dumping and rinsing out in the seawater.

“Hey, watch it!” Vaughn said from outside.

“Shoulda done it yourself,” Joe replied.

Nikifor sat up in a daze. The ship was quiet, the generator wasn’t running, and it was very dark inside the compartment. He could only see Joe by his silhouette in the doorway.

“Sleep well, sweet prince?”

“I bet you are real heartbreaker,” Nikifor said. Speaking English was tiresome. He wasn’t sure why he was so grumpy, but he was exhausted. Last night he’d lain down in the bunk, but he remembered falling asleep on the floor, Leon’s arms around him. Flickers of nervous energy forced him to sit. Joe offered him a hand up, and he accepted it.

“Want your sling?” Joe asked. Nikifor shook his head, and when he turned, he saw the upper bunk was empty.

“Jan.” A rush of emotion jolted him awake, but his legs went weak; Joe had to catch him to keep him from crashing to the floor.

“Geez, kid, calm down.” Joe supported him for another moment. “Leon and I took them onto the island, and we’re working on a rig for the prisoner. We could be here another twenty-four hours before they can send somebody to rescue us.” Joe let him go just as Nikifor realised how much he enjoyed being held, remembering the comforting body contact that had helped him sleep last night. Leon had been there. He worried that he had said and done things he shouldn’t have. Comforting a sad comrade was one thing, cuddling was quite another.

Oh God, had there been cuddling?

“Do you know where Leon is?”

“I ain’t his keeper.” Joe scowled. “Somewhere on the island—ask Mac.”

Nikifor climbed into the water, feeling weak again, and tried to separate his thoughts. He couldn’t understand some of the emotion he’d felt when he’d

thought Jan was gone. His squadmate, his fellow countryman, someone he'd told Leon he loved... angry fear and relief had crippled him for a moment. And now Leon knew. Not all, but Leon would have an idea now of what Nikifor was, and that scared him most of all.

Dripping wet, stomach growling, he headed directly for Leon who stood under the shade of the camouflage net. He was talking to the airframe engineer, a dark-skinned man with shiny brown hair, but didn't drop Nikifor's gaze when he saw him. The thoughts of dishonourable discharge were at the forefront of his mind, and an unfamiliar shame roiled under his skin. He was eager to speak to Leon alone.

"Do you need help with that?" Nikifor blurted out. He had overheard something about the shack.

If Leon regarded Nikifor differently than he had the night before, he couldn't tell. They moved slowly across the sand to the shade of wide-standing palm trees, and Nikifor's mind slowed. His fears consisted mainly of no longer being able to provide for Łucja, and he thought, if only he could say this to Leon, he might be able to survive this war. He only needed Leon to keep quiet after all. How long had they been on the Chinese base together? A month? So far they had not bumped into each other. He didn't need Leon to like or accept him. He was resigned to this, but it made him a little sad.

Nikifor had been lagging behind, and Leon had turned to glance at him. He sighed when Nikifor came close and stopped. Nikifor's heart began to beat faster, and his head began to hurt. They stood breathing heavily, and for a moment Nikifor was watching Leon's back because he wasn't looking at Nikifor now, gazing out between the trees instead.

"A break?" Nikifor asked, but he wasn't hopeful.

"About last night..." Leon said.

Nikifor's insides twisted viciously; he hadn't actually expected Leon to bring it up. He'd been more careless than he'd thought. "Yes." He clenched his fists, trying to steel himself, to keep up strength for just one more moment. "I am very ashamed that you have witnessed such an outburst, you have been nothing but kind—"

Leon waved him off with a look that seemed to say Nikifor was crazy. He swallowed hard. "No, that's not—" He wiped the sweat from his brow, still panting. "I wanted to let you know that it's alright. I thought I was in love with a man, too. It happens."

Struck dumb by Leon's comment, Nikifor's jaw dropped open.

"Yeah, Joe, actually." Leon laughed. "He's a real bastard when he wants to be, but at first all I saw was the brooding good looks." He shrugged. "Jan is different, though, I guess."

"I don't know." Nikifor tried not thinking about it, but the feelings came unbidden. The revulsion he feared he'd learned from Jan. "It is not love anymore—for him it never was. I just worry now."

"I'm sorry for you." Leon's face fell. "But it's better this way, isn't it?"

Nikifor shrugged. "It does not matter," he said, but an old familiar ache began his chest. He started forward again. "Let us go."

Leon put his hand on Nikifor's shoulder. "You're okay. I won't say anything."

The lightheadedness Nikifor had felt while wading to shore returned and fought against Leon's steady hand. By the time they got to the shack, Nikifor was unsure he could stand up if he sat down.

"Lieutenant Jelen." Dickens came out of the shack, smoking a cigar. "You look like a ghost, son."

When the smoke hit him, Nikifor's stomach turned over. "No, sir, I just have no food since last night." God, his English was really suffering.

"Lieutenant Dobson, get this man some food before he falls down," Dickens said and left, heading back in the direction of the plane.

"Yes, sir." Leon's hand fell away, and he went inside the shack. Nikifor steadied himself on the bamboo railing before sitting down. It didn't take Leon long to come back, but Nikifor needed both hands to keep his head up by the time he did.

"Here," Leon said and handed him a cool canteen first. "You're probably dehydrated, too."

Nikifor smiled in appreciation. Leon had placed a hand on Nikifor's back, just below his neck, and calm seemed to radiate from that connection.

"How did I get so lucky?" He felt water dripping from his lips and held the bottle suspended in front of his open mouth. "Of all the people to tell. You."

"Uh," Leon was turning more red from the heat and scratched his scalp as he considered. "Maybe it's a kind of sense. You just knew..."

Nikifor had no idea. His headache wasn't subsiding very quickly, but his immediate worries were no longer pressing down on him. Leon continued to stand beside him, and at some point began to massage a circle at the base of Nikifor's neck while he drank.

"You feeling better?" Leon asked.

Nikifor nodded. "I would really appreciate some food—"

Leon produced a tin can from his pocket with a flourish and got out his knife to cut it open. He then held out both to Nikifor, displaying the pale peaches soaking in juice.

"I'm afraid I would stab myself," Nikifor said and got out his own knife. It was like the Swiss knives, having a few other things on it besides a knife, notably a spoon. "This was a gift from Łucja."

Leon pulled away. Inside the shack there came a cough, and the doctor was heard speaking softly to Jan. He continued to eat as though he could not hear the halting grumbles between doctor and patient. When Nikifor looked up however, he saw Leon regarding him thoughtfully.

"What is it?"

"I'm just about due to take another round of the island. If you're up for it, you're welcome to come with me." He stood with his hands in his pockets, nodding his chin at the shack. "Better than staying here..."

Nikifor's heart swelled at the small consideration.

"Sure" was all he said.

"Been a long time since basic training, huh?" Leon asked.

"Yes, something like that." Nikifor frowned at the rifle. Having spent his entire military career sitting behind machine guns, with nothing more than a pistol at his side, Nikifor held it a little unsure.

"Want a review?" Leon asked, and Nikifor knew from his smile that he was in trouble. Leon grabbed Nikifor's gun and slid his hand up it. "Now this is called the shaft, and oil—"

"I know." Nikifor jerked the gun away from Leon, knowing the joke was on him but not understanding it. Thankfully Mac had spotted them and was making a beeline for them.

“Where’re you going?” Mac asked Leon, barely acknowledging Nikifor with a nod.

“Walkabout.” Leon grinned in a way that made Nikifor nervous.

“Leon,” Mac said, and though he wasn’t an intimidating person really, it sounded like a clear warning.

“Mac, baby, don’t worry,” Leon said and winked at Mac. “Birds of a feather, and so on...” Mac’s posture tensed for a moment, but he shook his head and turned his back on them.

“Fine, just don’t get caught. By the Japanese especially.”

“Aye-aye.” Leon gave a jaunty salute, and they parted ways a bit abruptly. Nikifor had to jump into a short run to catch Leon.

“Did you really just wink at him?”

“Sure.” Leon shrugged and swung his rifle over his shoulder. “Mac and I have been friends for over... almost two years now.”

“It is not common to see a black man with white men.”

“No, it’s unheard of.” He glanced at Nikifor who was listening closely. “We make an odd pair, don’t we. The fairy and the Negro. Nobody is very nice to either of us, but I get along much better than he does. This time, nobody knows about me. But he can’t hide very well, can he?”

Leon walked in silence a moment, eyes on the horizon, before Nikifor spoke.

“So how did he come to be here?”

“You know what the skies were like; we needed a navigator. Ours fell into a jug of *baijiu* and got himself locked up. We couldn’t head into night, under cloud cover, without somebody trained. If we couldn’t get anybody, we’d have to stay home.” He sighed. “When we got shot, I thought, why did we even go through all that trouble. Mac’s done us really well, but not everybody has been good to him. I said a strong word when Al said something, pale bastard, and they’ve been good since then, but I’m sure they talk when I’m not around.”

Nikifor was more than a little perplexed at the standoffish navigator and the goofy pilot being friends. He’d never seen a black man before until he’d seen American soldiers in London. Friendships sprang up in the strangest places. The personalities between these two were just more different than most.

“Here.” Leon was close again and reached to adjust Nikifor’s gun off his bad shoulder and onto his good one. It was funny that he remembered which was which.

“Thanks,” Nikifor said with a slight smile, actually feeling relief. He hadn’t even realised it was straining him until Leon had shifted it, and his surprise showed.

“Didn’t anyone ever take care of you before?” Leon gave him a look of pity mixed with bemusement, and Nikifor couldn’t guess what he was thinking.

“Jan did,” Nikifor said. “He saw me as a little brother, I think.”

“Ah,” Leon said, facing the trail ahead, but the note of distaste was not lost on Nikifor.

He followed Leon until they just passed the little sandbar that they had watched last night’s sunset from, and when Nikifor looked back, their plane had disappeared from view behind them.

They walked just at the edge of the languid lagoon in the most informal patrol Nikifor had ever been a part of, but they didn’t speak. Every once in a while, they’d stop, Leon would sweep the horizon with his binoculars, focusing on every single blip, while Nikifor would turn back to land. They both shaded their eyes against the sun every time a gull threw a shadow. Scanning the tree line from just fifty yards made it seem denser than it was.

“Looks cool,” Nikifor said, wishfully imagining the pool of water that existed somewhere in there. Turning back to the sea. He saw that Leon had put his binoculars down and was once more looking at him, smiling just the slightest bit. “What?” Nikifor asked and for no discernible reason began smiling as well.

“Nothing. Just thinking.” And Leon looked away.

Leon was wearing an undershirt as a shirt again that day; there were different stains on this one. It was a different cut as well; his shoulders were bare. He had a strong back, the kind of physique a man got if he’d been pushing guns around and lifting things his entire tour. His arms were fairly hairless, another sign of his youth, and Nikifor could see where the sun was beginning to freckle Leon’s skin. His own skin was hot to the touch, turning brown, and then he thought of touching Leon’s hot skin, Nikifor’s hands gliding across smooth muscle. Watching the stretch and cling of sweaty fabric to Leon’s lower back and waist was a shock like baptismal water.

Leon gave him a glance in profile and asked, “You keeping a lookout, Kip?”

Nikifor tried coming up for air, but had to look away, resting his gaze on the tree line again. After a few minutes of diligent walk and watch, Nikifor formed new thoughts. Jan’s disgusted outburst stayed with Nikifor and he blurted out: “What must you think of me...”

“What?” Leon asked, faltering in his pace to fall beside Nikifor.

“What do you think of me? I can only imagine what you must think, telling you I’ve been so selfish, to fall in love with a comrade.”

“Don’t be stupid.” Leon picked up his former pace. Nikifor began to trail behind, while Leon thought. He slowed and turned back. “Why did things change? How did he find out?”

Nikifor blanched at the dread, familiar now when he thought of Jan. He stared out to the brighter sea and the blinding light, and then spoke. “We got drunk again one night, except something was different from the first moment we drank that night. We talked about girls and loneliness, and he said he was horny,” Nikifor said and laughed, but it felt forced. “I have never said that word aloud before.

“He told me how it felt to have a girl give you a ‘blow off’ and—and how it must be amazing to do it because they seemed to enjoy doing it... to him. He cursed that there wasn’t a girl with us because he felt the need to release some steam just then, and he pitied me, still a virgin, and one until marriage.”

Nikifor could feel the tense stillness of Leon, standing near him, not daring to move. When Nikifor looked up, into Leon’s eyes, there was such an overwhelming amount of emotion: pity, anger, confusion, and an open kind of sympathy. But then, Nikifor had to cringe at himself and closed his eyes: “So I offered. I reached out and touched a man for the first time and took him in my mouth.” He frowned angrily, *at himself or the memory, or...?*

“He enjoyed it immensely.

“But everything was different immediately. I thought it would be the same,”—he gulped—“the same easy affection, but when he looked at me, I did not feel anything but a hungry contempt anymore.” He felt so sad to remember and tried to ignore whatever sort of hot anger Leon was radiating. “Any time we got drunk and he had a chance, he would ask. And I did, once or twice more, but then I said no, and then he said he wanted to do something else and got so—*mean.*”

“What, he wanted to fuck you in the ass?” Leon asked. The blunt words stung Nikifor.

“I don’t know,” Nikifor said and dropped his gaze. “I wasn’t a person to him anymore, I was a perversion.”

He stood, slouching a little, and focused on Leon’s bare feet. His pants were rolled up to his shins and the brown hairs on his legs and feet were still pretty sparse. *He’s just as young as I am*, Nikifor thought and looked up. Leon wore such a scowl as to turn the bright blue day to night.

“‘Nobody gives better head than a queer,’ they say.” And he seemed lost for a second, mulling on this. “And I did for a while, but nobody I loved. I’ve never loved anybody. Joe’s gorgeous but there’s no room for love in war.” He nodded. “That’s the best thing about being a pilot. I get to fly alone, control the field, and not get distracted by the idiots.”

“It is nice to be above it all.”

Leon squinted, the negativity falling away like a mask. “Did you... did you just make a joke?”

“I did, yes.” Nikifor was more flustered than pleased.

Leon swung an arm around Nikifor’s shoulder and got them back on track. “Listen, someday you’ll find that special someone who revs your engine just the right way, who thinks you’re just as swell.” Leon smiled at Nikifor sideways and bumped him with his hip. “Or else you need to get yourself a Jiminy cricket so you don’t screw it up again.”

“Yiminy... a cricket?” Nikifor didn’t understand.

“There was a movie... it’s your conscience basically, tells you to not do something stupid.”

“Was Mac trying to do that?”

“Yeah.” Leon smiled. “Thought I was going to try and seduce you and get my heart broken.”

Nikifor actually burst out laughing at that and halted their progress once more.

Leon frowned at that and tried to light a cigarette. He was a bit too aggressive with the match, however, and nearly tore the book. Nikifor calmly took it from him, cupping Leon’s hand around the cigarette he lit in Leon’s

mouth. After Leon had pulled on it a few times, Nikifor took it out of his mouth and took a slow drag on it.

Leon shook his head in wonder and spoke softly. “Like you don’t know you’re sexy.”

Nikifor looked up at Leon through eyelashes and didn’t say anything, sucking on the cigarette for another long pull. He then placed it back between Leon’s lips.

“Jesus,” Leon rasped.

“Let us go.”

“We better.”

Nikifor walked at Leon’s side now. His right arm was hooked in the gun strap across his body while his left arm dangled casually between the two of them. They didn’t touch, just the brush of air as they walked. Then it was the scrape of cloth on cloth, and Nikifor felt as though his left side was taut enough to string a fiddle.

Chapter 4

False Starts

Their watch ended without incident. Back under the tied up plane, things were settling down similarly to yesterday, except a hotter afternoon beckoned them to the little pond of water under the trees. Lieutenant Commander Dickens didn't join them despite being near to sweating his dark-brown moustache off his face. Instead he took guard at the shack while the doctor watched Jan. Dickens did seem sincere when telling the men to have a good time, however. Even Joe seemed happy.

They raced under the trees to the pool, and Nikifor was amazed at how quickly the crew could strip down. They jumped in, splashing the latecomers with surprisingly cool water. There must have been a stream—Nikifor didn't really care enough to figure it out. He swam and chatted with the American crew, not so different from British soldiers, and once they began to tire, he settled down with the others to wait out the heat.

"Does anyone have any new stories to tell?" Leon asked. He glanced at Nikifor who dipped his head back under the water.

"Why don't you tell a story, Leon," Rocco said gamely, and protests broke out immediately.

"Why do you encourage him?"

"Haven't we heard enough from that nincompoop?"

Rocco spoke quietly, demanding everyone listen. "I ain't lived as long as any of y'all, so I like to hear from a man who has some breadth of experience."

"There's nothing 'broad' about it," Joe quipped.

"Rocco," Leon said, "in deference to your esteemed colleagues, and for Mac's mental health, I won't tell the one about the officers club in Pearl City."

"Or any of the others we've heard a dozen times," Mac said.

"Hey, if none of you don't ever have anything happen to you"—he shrugged carelessly—"A guy will have to recycle a story or two."

"Or all of 'em," Joe said.

“Luckily, I thought of a new one,” Leon said, ignoring Joe. “When you said that thing about uniforms in the ocean, Rocco. Something the neighbor kid and I did back home.”

“Oh Jesus,” Vaughn said, laughing anyway, “What filth is this?”

“Nah,” Leon said, brushing him off. “This was my cousin, of a sort. He was the son of my mother’s best friend who had married the Lutheran preacher. We only ever got into the good *clean* kind of fun.”

Everyone laughed at that.

“That being said... He had some of the craziest ideas, not all of them strictly legal, but they certainly kept us all busy. Some busier than others—the sheriff didn’t like us much.

“One spring, some shop—I don’t remember which one—got a new shed out back, and the owner was thinking of painting it green, but my friend, he says to me one day, ‘What good is the shed gonna be green? No one’s going to see it anyway—we could do so much more with that paint than he could.’ And he drew me such a picture of words, I swear to you the kid was *Michelangelo*.” He said this with a great deal of reverence.

Nikifor was sitting at the edge of the pool, and climbed out of the water to lie on the sand with the others as Leon continued to speak.

“So what he convinced me to do, which went against *my* better judgment, was to steal the paint, for the betterment of society.” The men gave a groan.

“We took it out to this farm on the edge of town, where, he said, an eyesore had been grating on the members of our fine community for at least two hundred years.” He smirked. “He was a bit dramatic, but it was true! There were these white flecks *all* across the field that you could see for *miles* away. This was a large farm, the barn and house were on the edge of town, and these fields were practically in the next *county*. Well not really, but you could see them from the far side of town.”

Nikifor glanced around and saw that Carl was listening rapt, his head held up by his hands, lying on his stomach. So he felt safe taking a similar pose.

“The lower fields were used for the fair in summer, but it was too early for that yet. So it was really empty out there when we put our plan into action. We would paint every white spot in that field green, in time for the fair.

“We didn’t use much, just enough to cover it up from afar. After all, we didn’t have that much to begin with, and we still need a little bit to bring back. Just enough for the pretense of ‘borrowing.’ But that wasn’t really our priority.

“So we started around ten o’clock in the morning, and we finished in time to pick up my kid sister from nursery school. We all went for a sundae, and we saw the fruits of our labor when we licked the bowls.

“The farmer had not been the first to notice, but it was only the beginnings of a rumbling. The grapevine hadn’t really begun to rustle.

“We heard the farmer shout all the way from the center of town. Now I know I said he lived at the edge of town, but it wasn’t a big one to begin with. Henrik, bless him, despite his age, despite farming with arthritis for many, many years, had quite an impressive set of pipes on him. And when he hollered, everyone heard and came running.

“Apparently some hooligans had snuck into his field and left the gate open and all his sheep had escaped.

“Or so he thought.”

“You have got to be kidding me.” Vaughn was grinning ear to ear.

Rocco’s jaw had dropped, and Leon was looking very pleased with himself.

“That’s no easy feat,” Al said. “My aunt has a sheep farm—they aren’t easy to hang onto. Why do you think so many people are needed for shearing?”

Leon shrugged, apparently shameless. “This kid and I had helped out once or twice.”

“How did you have enough paint for the shed?” Nikifor asked, frowning a little.

Rocco nearly fell over cackling. “What a pragmatist! Have you no heart?”

“Take it easy on Kip,” Carl said. “English isn’t his first language.”

“No, I understand the story.” Nikifor frowned. “I am just concerned about original objective.”

“Wait, did you—” Rocco asked.

“Yeah,” Leon said. “He got it.” Leon turned to Nikifor and smiled a little differently, more sweetly perhaps. Nikifor couldn’t put his finger on it, but it was like he had told a joke and only Leon got the punch line.

“You were such a numbskull, Dobson!” Vaughn said and pulled a hat over his eyes. He was lying at the edge of the pool, along with Joe and Mac, while Leon was closer to Nikifor.

“What do you mean, ‘were’?” Rocco asked. He was still sitting in the water, grinning at the rest of them. “Can you tell the one about you and Mac again? Kip hasn’t heard it.”

Leon held a hand to his heart in mock hurt. “That’s your tactic? Insult a guy then ask him a favor?”

“You’d be doing us all a favor,” Joe mumbled from between his arms. Lying on his belly, arms crossed to pillow his head, he was probably nearest to falling asleep.

Nikifor could see this was all the encouragement Leon needed. He leaned forward and began to weave another tale: “So there was this club—and before I got to Oahu last year, all the guys told me I needed to check this joint out.”

By the end of the story, most men had fallen asleep. Rocco sprawled out in perhaps the only sunny spot and began to doze off with a pleasant smile on his face. He was almost pretty, like a child again. Nikifor, however, hadn’t really listened. He’d heard words about some prank they’d played on a trumped up bouncer with some army nurses, and how they’d got Mac into an all-white club—only to get drunk, get rowdy, and get thrown out again. Instead, all throughout the story, he’d watched the shifting shadows play across Leon’s skin, the little movements as he’d spoken and laughed. He stopped speaking and sighed.

Now, somewhat alone, with sleeping dogs lying around them, Leon stopped avoiding Nikifor and looked at him again. The smile on his face didn’t falter but became intimate. Nikifor answered the silent summons and moved to sit beside him. Leon lay back while Nikifor leaned over him. For a moment he just gazed at him before he reached out one hand, moving so slowly, as though he was afraid of spooking Leon.

Leon’s lips parted and he breathed more deeply, his eyes half lidded against the flickering sunlight that broke upon them. Nikifor couldn’t tell if he was about to fall asleep, touching his neck lightly, tracing the ridge of his collarbone, running his fingers down the grooves to his belly button. Leon’s breath hitched, Nikifor felt it, and a pang raced through his heart. He looked

around them to the slumbering crewmen, and his thoughts sobered, his face a stoic mask. He crouched and held a hand out to Leon.

Like a flash, Leon grabbed Nikifor's wrist as he had the day before, but more tightly. Leon pulled him along, past a couple trees, further away from the other men, further away from the shack, until he could barely see them. Nikifor stilled, stopping them, holding onto Leon's gaze even as hazel eyes searched for something, Nikifor didn't know what. But still above all he felt fear.

He leaned forward to whisper, *we're safe*. But the words came out Polish, and Leon interrupted him anyway.

“*Jesteśmy—*”

Leon kissed him and didn't let go. Where Nikifor's movements were delicate, aware of something fragile, Leon touched him firm but slow. Sticky lips slipped apart and Nikifor lifted his left hand to push sweat-slicked hair from Leon's face. Leon still held Nikifor by the wrist.

“What do you worry about?” Nikifor whispered. “Let go.” Leon said nothing, just closed his eyes and relaxed against Nikifor.

Nikifor kissed Leon again and then slipped to his cheek, scraping against the stubble there and tracing his jaw with his lips. Perhaps it was because they were wearing nothing much at all, but even this simple touching felt like more, so much more, than any kiss he'd ever had before. Nikifor wondered if he ever would have been able to kiss Łucja so desperately, if he'd ever be so passionate with her, even with Jan—he bit his lip, grimacing and stopped the thought too late.

“Don't,” Leon said, combing through Nikifor's damp curls. “Wherever you're going—don't. Stay here.” He gripped Nikifor with both hands and pulled him closer. “Stay with me,” he whispered into the crook of his neck and, *oh God*, they were kissing again.

Wondering about hot skin and feeling its press were very different things. Nikifor relished the wandering hands holding him, sweat trickling between them, chest against chest, legs uselessly tangled. Leon pushed Nikifor against a tree and tilted his head back. A deeper kiss meant that Nikifor had a harder time breathing but didn't want to breathe, had no use for something so simple. He wanted all the complication of the universe to descend upon him in that moment and was daring himself to reach into Leon's pants.

Suddenly Leon froze as there came the sound of a tremendous yawn, followed by the serious kind of noise a man makes when he stretches.

Separating, they peered around the tree trunk to see Joe attempting to get up, bleary-eyed. Leon pushed away so quickly, that Nikifor's arm tangled for a moment, and his shoulder twisted. He had a hard time keeping himself from cursing loudly.

"I guess that explains the sling," Nikifor said after a moment. He tried to smile but it was more like a grimace. As he stood, Joe gave Nikifor a look that was barely sympathetic.

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," Leon said and covered his mouth.

"It's okay." Nikifor waved him off. "I just need to go find doctor." And after all that, he just turned and walked away.

"He's not gonna—" Mac was following Leon out of the radio compartment.

"I don't know anything about him!" Leon trotted to the back of the ship to check on his gun once again, and Mac followed him.

"Would you stop that already? You've checked it three times; we don't even know that we're going tomorrow."

"For all I know this could be some really good acting on his part," Leon said. Mac gave him a look. "Yeah I don't believe me either, but..."

"But nothing. You don't know. And you won't unless you find out."

"Gee, thanks. You're the worst help!" Leon headed for the exit. With his feet on the top step, back to the ocean, Mac caught up with him and had one final word.

"Just... remember that he has a fiancée."

"The worst!" And Leon went over the edge.

Back on land, Joe was poking at the fire in nothing but shorts.

"Hey, Joe, what ya cookin'?"

Joe made a sour expression. "Beans."

"Sounds scrumptious."

"You know it ain't."

"Speaking of scrumptious, I was wondering—"

“The Polish delight? Down on the point, watching the sunset, I reckon.”

“Thanks, Joe! You’re a real sweetheart.” And because he felt like it, Leon grabbed Joe around the waist and gave him a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

“Yeuch! You’re a real putz.” He pushed Leon off and wiped his cheek. “I know you don’t slobber on the other guys, why does it always have to be me?”

Leon went for the gold: “Cause it’s so easy to rile you up, honey.” He winked and laughed even as Joe turned away with a disgusted look.

Leon soon saw Kip sitting where they had been the night before, and tried his best to walk steadily toward him, pushing away deviant thoughts and doubts, stumbling on the wet sand. The tide had gone out, leaving this sandbar, which stretched further into the blue waters than the rest of the beach. He glanced back and saw that Joe was just a speck beside a bright-red dot, the plane no more than a blip to watch for beside a wide forest of palm trees. If Nikifor hadn’t noticed him coming, he certainly heard Leon trip.

“Oof!” Leon landed only a couple feet away from the water’s edge, but instead of helping him up, Nikifor laughed at him.

“Thanks very much, good to know one good turn deserves another.” Leon brushed himself off, pointedly looked to the Catalina and pretended to think about something. “Didn’t I save your life... Or was that some other attractive Polish pilot?”

Kip got up and walked toward Leon who stilled, vaguely aware that anyone could come around the trees and see them and his heart was beginning to pick up a quick tempo. But Kip unabashedly reached up to tuck some of Leon’s hair away and while Leon was distracted swiped his legs out from under him. They toppled down, Kip on top, still wearing those stupid OD clothes. His shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbows, hair was horribly unkempt. Leon couldn’t help but brush his fingers through Kip’s wavy hair and run his nails gently along Kip’s scalp.

Too long for the army. He thought about saying something. *No, that’s stupid. Why waste the time... there’s so little...*

So Leon just looked at him, took him in like he was a piece of art. His chest rose and fell more quickly now, the rapid pace of his heart pulling shallow breaths from the open air.

“Isn’t this perfect?” Kip asked.

Yes.

“You know,” Leon stroked Kip’s cheek with tenderness, “you’re pretty ugly in those drabs.”

Kip smacked him lightly on the chest and Leon laughed. Kip pushed off against the sand, stood, and offered Leon a hand to get up.

Leon sighed. “I suppose we must.”

They stood together a moment, side by side, arms around each other’s waists, the sun spreading red fingers in between pink clouds. Leon tensed a little and pulled away, turning to look back over their shoulders. It was darker, but he saw Joe still at the fire, but also another man standing a little closer, but he wasn’t sure which way he was facing. He thought it might be the doctor, but he couldn’t tell.

“What? Is somebody coming?” Kip asked. He looked as well, and then looked to Leon again.

“The sky is already getting black, behind us,” Leon said. He turned to face the setting sun and smiled a little sadly. “We can’t stay here forever. Let’s go.” And he took Kip’s hand in his own to pull him along.

“Hang on,” Kip said and grabbed Leon by the hips to hold him, kissing him softly. Kip then leaned his head back when Leon obliged to kiss him more deeply. It was too short, however, *always too short*, and Kip sighed when it ended. “You don’t need to worry so much. I don’t care what anyone thinks.”

Something squeezed his heart, and Leon, despite his grumbling fears, kissed him soundly. He pulled Kip a little closer, and with his back to any potential audience, felt safe grabbing Kip’s butt and lifting him a little off the ground. Kip giggled and broke the kiss as a wolf whistle echoed from down the beach.

“Now we really have to go,” Leon whispered, thrilled and relieved at the same time. This time he stuck his hands in his pockets though, bumping elbows with Kip.

As they got closer to the Catalina, Leon could hear a conga beat on the radio and saw Joe dancing in the firelight. Twilight colored him purple where the red and orange flames didn’t touch him. Leon would have contentedly stood beside Hobbs and Goldfarb, chuckling as Joe did some approximation of a tribal dance, if only Joe hadn’t seen him.

“You!” Joe pointed a wooden spoon at Leon.

“Yes,” Leon said and snorted laughter. “This is some strange tribal scene we’ve stumbled on. Kip, perhaps we should leave this native and find supper elsewhere.” Leon began to back away and tried to escape the thrall.

“Stop!” Joe stalked toward him. “You will honor the dinner I have slaved over.”

“Beans?” Kip asked, clearly unimpressed.

“Yes, beans. Of course, beans,” Joe said, silhouetted by fire, hands on his hips and so angry it was almost terrifying.

“Hey—oh.” Al came out of the trees carrying some box, and stopped short, a cigar dangling precariously from his lips. Vaughn nearly ran him over with a box of his own. “What the devil have we here?” He set down the box and looked them over, smiling a little. “Joe... where’d your clothes get to?”

Joe lowered his arms a little, his attention wandering. “Do you not remember how hot it was today? I didn’t put them back on after we swam.” Leon began to back away again and pulled Kip along with him. “Oh no, you don’t! You are going to eat what I have made. After all the jokes and pranks you’ve pulled—”

Al, though clearly amused, was thinking of something else.

“Say, Joe, do you remember that routine you and I did back in Hawaii?”

“The one with the coconuts?”

“Do I look like Josephine Baker?” He grabbed his chest provocatively. “Yeah, the coconuts.” Al fished for something in his chest pocket. “I’ll give you one of the cigars Dickens gave me if you do your half.”

Joe thought about this for a moment, hesitating. “You’re not gonna?”

“Do you think I can do ballet in these conditions?” He sniffed like his ballet was somethin’ real special and began to button up his shirt pocket again. “If you don’t wanna...”

Joe plucked the cigar from his pocket. “You better bring me something to wear before Dickens gets here.”

Al rubbed his hands together gleefully and went back into the trees.

“Leon?” Kip whispered.

“Here’s our chance to scam.”

There was no further discussion. Leon headed around to the portside of the plane, and Kip followed him. They waded into the hip-deep water, soaking themselves entirely. Leon's pants had barely dried from the first dip, but it was warm and the unspoken prospect of stolen privacy enticed him. Kip caught Leon's shirtfront in his hands and pushed him against the hull, sand shifting beneath their feet. The warm sheet metal behind Leon numbed him, like some slight inebriation from the first mouthful of *baijiu*, China's answer to vodka.

Speaking of mouths...

Kip seemed unsure: he was biting his lower lip, his hands no longer touching Leon, but placed to either side of him on the hull of the boat.

"Whatcha doing?" Leon asked but didn't reach for him. Didn't want to seem overeager. There was still that thought that nagged at the back of his mind that this wasn't more than a way to get off. And he seemed to be asking himself, *was that a problem?*

"This... is new."

"What?" Leon asked and gave a winning smile. Kip didn't answer. Before he could think about it anymore, Leon began to undo the buttons on Kip's shirt. "Aren't you hot?"

Kip scoffed.

"No I meant..." This time he took Kip by the lapels and pulled him in for a kiss, biting his lips gently and then slowly peeling that dumb shirt off.

What did it matter if this was a one-shot?

Leon found it to be some greater satisfaction being with a partner as willing as you were. Kip needed no encouragement, and it took all of Leon's self-preservation to remember to hold onto Kip's shirt. Although it would've been something to see it float away across a placid sea. At that point, Kip began to experiment with nibbling on Leon's throat and collarbone, and a faint alarm reminded Leon that *hickies were not GI, he should make him stop*. But there was soft, hot skin under Leon's hands, and he couldn't think clearly of the last time he'd done with this with someone he actually liked.

Was there a time?

The boat began to move up and down slightly, and water splashed up between them. The bang of expanding metal made them both jump. With one hand, Leon pushed Kip back.

“Hello?” Mac came to the door and swung a quick look around the lagoon, landing on them last. “Oh,” Mac said, blank faced, trying to think of something more to say. Kip tensed but Leon didn’t move. The awkwardness passed soon enough. “Y’all shouldn’t do that here. My watch is almost over.” He waited a moment until Leon gave Mac a nod and that was that. He withdrew back into the boat.

“We should—”

“You go on ahead, detract attention,” Leon said, trying to look nonchalant.

“From what?” Kip grinned and reached for the crotch of Leon’s trousers. “Hiding something?”

Leon swatted at him. “Don’t start something you can’t finish!”

Kip came back with full force, leaning heavily against him, one firm length against another. “You think I cannot deliver?” Kip purred, rubbing himself against Leon’s swelling penis.

“Seriously, boy. Not now.” Leon growled a little even as Kip came back for one last kiss. Leon bit him a little harder this time, but Kip only winked as he splashed away.

Alone for now, Leon cursed and pulled the wet fabric of his pants away from his groin, moaning as stiff cotton scraped against tender flesh. Angrily he hit the bottom of his fists back against the hull of the boat, and it resounded loudly. There was no time now, no privacy, to jerk himself off. They’d risked enough being so intimate so close to the rest of the crew, even if it had only been Mac inside the boat...

Mac stuck his head out the side of the boat. “You rang?” He grinned and said in mock concern, “I’m sorry, buddy. Did I interrupt something?”

“I’m—” Leon struggled to find an appropriate threat. “I’m gonna tell your girl that you’re not really a captain in the Tuskegee Airmen.”

“Yeah, you do that! Like you should’ve when we met. One day I won’t be able to save your ass, then what are you gonna do?” Leon began to wade away. “Hey! Where do you think you’re going? You can’t just walk away from this. Hey!”

“I’m going for a swim!” And Leon dove under the water.

Chapter 5

Moonglow

Leon swam across the lagoon and back and, while not as effective as a cold shower, it helped relieve most of the throbbing ache. The sun was almost completely hidden when he stomped ashore, sopping wet. He strode over to Kip, sitting in the sand by the fire, and sprinkled considerable water on him as he pulled the crumpled up shirt from his pocket.

“I think you forgot this.” Leon held the thing up so it dripped on Kip.

“Er, thank you...” Kip said, clearly not grateful and spread it on the sand beside him. “Won’t you sit?”

Leon did and begrudgingly enjoyed the savory beans when passed to him. They sat for a while like that, fingers discreetly interlaced in the sand, watching the flames jig back and forth. As the night cooled down, Leon warmed up and dried out. Then Joe emerged from the jungle in full regalia, and Leon immediately began to laugh.

“What in the hell are you wearing?” he asked.

Kip leaned toward him and whispered, “We missed his earlier performance.”

“You know, Lenny, he’s really quite good!” Rocco said, noticing Leon, his mouth full of beans. “I haven’t seen anything like it since Radio City Music Hall!”

“That’s coz you ain’t ever been!” Joe sneered.

“Encore!” Leon called.

“You weren’t here the first time!” Joe put his hands on his hips, and his coconut breasts swung back and forth. He was over enunciating around the cigar Al had given him, and on top of his shorts he wore a skirt made of palm leaves. “You can’t call for encore!”

“Encore!” Rocco said, laughing.

“Bastard.” Joe took the unlit cigar from his mouth and smiled sinisterly at Rocco. “I can’t dance to this kind of music.” And he gave a mocking, apologetic half bow, and stuck the cigar back in.

Static came on the radio as Al—an unlit cigar clenched between his teeth—fiddled with it. It cleared into a rumba, and he pretended to look surprised. “Oh? What’s this?” His smile was all teeth.

“Why I oughta—” Joe advanced on Al with a fist, but Rocco, sensible for once, jumped up to head him off.

“Oh, come on, Joe, you’re really good!”

Joe struck a match and lit his cigar, puffing on it with such intensity that Leon was sure smoke would pour out of his ears and there would be a real fight. But then Joe shrugged and gave in. He turned in a circle and began bobbing his head to the beat, and Leon thought Joe didn’t mind it so much.

There were whoops and hollers as he did a shimmy, coconuts jiggling. He jumped around flatfooted, and Leon was pretty sure he’d seen this routine before, perhaps while drunk at a party. It seemed so easy for other men to play at being this way; anytime he did his fair share it felt like he was only a few seconds away from discovery. When he looked at Kip, however, the kid was watching with skeptical amusement, like he was expecting someone to tell him this was all a joke. *But that was the joke.* This was good for morale or something, so it was allowed and sometimes encouraged.

Leon forgot the Josephine Baker impression that Joe was affecting and watched Kip instead.

Kip’s deep eyes were dark, shadows flickering across his face, but when he turned, there glowed a spark of the fire in his eyes. His smile waned and grew a little sad. He crept his hand toward Leon’s in the sand again. Leon really wished he could ask Kip what he was thinking just then, but at the same time, he really didn’t want to tell Kip what he was thinking. *Fear, hope...* Hot colors flickered as shadows danced and twilight fled them at last.

Dickens emerged from the jungle and observed this raucous debacle for only a moment before he called attention to himself.

“At ease,” he said, once everyone was standing in various stages of undress. “What is this?” He gestured to the fire. “Did I not have a standing order? No fires.”

“But the gas, sir.” Rocco somehow had another can of beans in his hand.

“What was that, Lieutenant?” The bored derision with which Dickens was regarding him could not have been more evident even if he’d said ‘Junior Grade’ out loud.

“The more you cook beans,” Joe said, saving Rocco. “The less gas they produce, sir.”

Kip started to giggle, and Leon shushed him.

“Hmmm.” Dickens gave Joe an appraising look up and down. “And what’s this? A banana dance?” He turned back to the jungle. “Find some *chansons* or something. Smother the fire. Oh, and give Joe a break. Find someone else to dance, would you? I’m sure he needs a break.” And he left again.

Still the rumba played on.

“Sometimes I just don’t get that guy,” Al said, once Dickens was out of earshot.

“I’m getting cold anyway,” Joe said. “Who’s on watch?” He didn’t wait for the answer, shedding his accoutrements on the beach, heading for the pile of clothes he’d left on a box.

Al was already back on the dial, spinning through static and Japanese propaganda, “*Homesick yet, GI Joe?*” He’d just switched to the end and gone back when he finally found some big band swing. No one spoke. Leon was just arranging to settle back in the sand when Kip held out a hand to him.

“You’re joking.” He shook his head more subtly, trying to signal that it was a bad idea. The song ended, canned applause filled the air, and some tinny announcer declared the next song. It had a nice pace, but Leon was not dancing, not here, not now. Kip just waited.

“Don’t you know how to foxtrot?” Rocco asked with some interest. “Just dance with the kid.”

Leon got up and took Kip’s hand, deftly stroking his thumb across Kip’s salty, dry palm. There was a moment of staring dumbly at each other while they held hands in the waning light. Leon was aware that they were being watched. “Wait, who leads?”

Rocco snorted and wheezed a little. “Why not the better dancer?”

“That’s you,” Kip said. And when Leon moved, Kip followed like he’d always done this. The music was sultry, Kip’s hands warm and secure, the steps coming to them as though they were in tune with the music and the dancers in a ballroom far, far away.

Shuffling came from the direction of the boat, and Joe came into view, caught in the outer edge of the firelight. “Hey, Joe,” Rocco said, getting up. “You want to dance?”

Joe scoffed. “You wish, you’re on watch.”

“Wait, where?”

“Where Vaughn is, bozo?”

Rocco scuffed off, and Joe searched his pockets for a cigarette pack. “Leon, you got smokes?”

Leon hauled a wet packet out of his pocket and tossed it to Joe. “Won’t have luck.”

“Trade ya,” Al said, holding up his last cigar. “Smoke for a dance.”

“Sure.” Joe shrugged, and when Al led, that silence only lasted a couple seconds. “Wait, why do I—”

“Where do you go?” Kip asked.

“Huh?” Leon turned back to him, shutting out Al and Joe’s bickering.

“Your mind, it wanders easily.” Kip stepped in a more closely, and spoke more softly. “Put your hand on my back, only think of me.”

And you’ll promise to do the same?

But Leon held his tongue. The music was languid, meant for a late-night rendezvous, for lovers. Here he was. Maybe Kip was thinking about him, maybe another man, maybe his fiancée. Lucy. The other men certainly weren’t thinking about each other. When he took another glance at them, they were starry eyed, lost in thoughts elsewhere. Of girls they only met or danced with once.

Then Leon heeded the beckoning of his partner, moving as one in the darkness. They danced cheek to cheek, and when Leon bent his head to touch his lips below Kip’s ear, he smelled him, the warm body odor, like musk, salt overwhelming everything, faint leather grease, smoke of a driftwood fire shading all the rest. He held Kip and rocked him, letting the moment bleed. It couldn’t last forever, but maybe he could hold onto this until he was home.

They retired at some point after Mac demanded that someone relieve Carl and Dickens, and made their beds along the beach. But while the others fell asleep, Nikifor enticed Leon to wander in the moonlight. Nikifor couldn’t keep away from him; he was like a magnet. Both were far from tired, and Leon agreed easily. They walked under trees until they couldn’t hear anyone else, couldn’t smell wood fire. Nikifor pulled a flask out of his pocket and drank.

“Would you like some?” Nikifor held it out and was suddenly, irrationally, worried that Leon didn’t drink. Some Americans were like that.

“God, yeah.” He took a long drink and shook his head. “Woo! What is that? Paint thinner?”

“Russian vodka.” Nikifor took a swig. “No Polish *wódka* left at the base.”

They finished the little left between them, passing it back and forth. And between one breath and the next, Nikifor began to recite a poem about the harvest of grains for bread and *wódka*, and Leon listened with total concentration. Nikifor couldn’t help but blush under such attention. When he finished, Leon’s voice rumbled over the song of some tropical nightjar, distant waves crashing on coral, to ask what it was about, and Nikifor told him. He remembered fields of wheat and ploughs and strong horses like he had seen them only a few days ago, and tried to share them as vividly as he saw them with Leon.

Leon licked the rim of the flask last, watching Nikifor as he spoke and handed the empty thing back. “You sound so dignified and steady when you speak Polish,” Leon said. “It’s really... admirable.”

Nikifor held the flask, wanting to touch his lips where Leon’s had been, resisting the urge to raise the flask to his mouth.

“I’ll never have the voice of my brother, though; he was to sing at the next festival.”

He was stuck there a moment, in thought. Remembering his brother’s costume, only a few weeks until harvest. He leaned in confidentially to say something under the sounds of whirring bugs and then couldn’t voice it.

Leon didn’t notice or made up for the lack by leaning in and breathing at his throat, curling a hand around in the hair at the nape of his neck. After an uninterrupted moment, he whispered in his ear, “When you speak Polish, it drives me crazy.”

Crazy? What crazy? Good crazy?

Nikifor didn’t push Leon away although he thought there might be a reason he should, which he couldn’t remember. *We’re far away...* He leaned closer, pulled Leon closer with hands that were on his bare waist, skirting his fingers up to Leon’s back, where muscles were vibrating with tension. Leon nuzzled Nikifor’s neck and stroked his hair, and it seemed to Nikifor that the moon was

shining from somewhere between his eyes, blinding him to thought and drawing an ache from within him like he'd never felt before. Leon withdrew and it worsened, far worse than the one time with Łucja in the hayloft.

She'd stuck her hand down his pants, and he'd cupped her breasts under her summer frock. It had been pleasure and simplicity. But that hadn't been nearly as pleasurable as the time he'd caught his cousin and her betrothed in a deeply intimate act in the barn. She had been on her knees, worshiping her husband-to-be, doing divine things with her tongue. And while watching them, he had enviously tried to replicate Łucja's hand movements on himself. His hand seemed incapable, clumsy and cold in comparison to his imagination.

Oh, how it must feel to have hot breath and a wet tongue, where he could only provide a callused hand, but he'd spit and rubbed his penis, pulling the foreskin over and over as he watched, and many times since, while his cousin had been laid facedown on a bale of hay and her strong and godly lover had done what men should do and ploughed into her. None of them lasted long, even as a painful envy grew inside Nikifor that it was not he who lay on that hay, wetter than a spring day for want. Pleasure overwhelmed him for a little while, and afterward he hid away, inexplicably ashamed.

Now, in this humid night, drunker than the moon, Nikifor reached down and found he was hard. His penis ached when he touched it, and he let out a whimper. He was in so much pain and unable to be fulfilled.

Except Leon was there. When Nikifor made the slightest noise, there was a corresponding movement, first a small touch, as though Leon weren't sure what Nikifor wanted. They easily resumed the kiss from a few hours before.

In the shade of the palm trees, fat moon above, millions of stars casting a dusty light between fronds of the trees, Leon's eyes seemed to glitter, and as close as they were, they seemed to be lost with intensity. There was no pupil, no iris, only lust. *And maybe*, Nikifor thought, *he knows what it is to want something else that you cannot easily grasp with words.*

Then Leon grabbed Nikifor's cock through ill-fitting pants, and Nikifor stopped thinking and felt. He squeezed Leon's bare shoulder and panted hot breaths against his collarbone and neck. He kissed him there, where no hickeys should be left behind, and grimaced as the sensation of rough cotton against dry foreskin became painful. It was a step up from self-satisfaction, that was certain.

“Can't—”

Can't what? Come on, Nikki, use your words. Don't forget English now!

But Leon understood and snapped the trousers open quickly, understanding urgency like he was a code breaker. The pants were around his ankles next, and his cock was free to stand in the humid air. Leon touched him again, directly, and Nikifor had to rely on his comrade entirely for support. With the moon shining brightly, he could only close his eyes and wrap his arms around Leon. They rubbed slowly against one another, hands unbuttoning their shirts, as they never stopped kissing.

Nikifor buzzed, there was a pressure within him he couldn't describe, even in Polish, and he barely noticed as the flask dropped to the sand, and Leon began to back him up. It was like the dance. Leon led and Nikifor followed. He didn't even think of where they were going until he was pushed against the prickly ridges of a palm tree.

"Mind if I give you a blow?" Leon asked, and Nikifor smoothed back the sweaty hair, tilting his head back in starlight. Eyes dark, face flushed from some kind of heat, Leon was as entranced as Nikifor was.

"Okay," Nikifor said, gulping.

Leon kissed him on his jaw, his neck, tongue slow to leave, hands pulling at Nikifor's hair and then trailing down his chest. Skimming over, then slipping under the undershirt he wore. Leon crouched and began to kiss him where the hair began above his groin. He reached up and Nikifor took Leon's hand and kissed the fingertips while Leon's mouth got closer to actually doing something. Leon licked the length of Nikifor's cock first, and then began to gently suck on the head, where the foreskin was barely covering him, and Nikifor winced.

Why does it hurt? Nikifor wanted to ask. But English had fled him. He met Leon's eyes and the other man slowed, licking more broadly on the base and using his free hand to pull back the skin. Nikifor groaned and sucked Leon's fingers into his mouth. Leon grunted and put his entire mouth on Nikifor's cock. This is where the tree came in handy. Nikifor reached behind him for purchase, and just let himself feel the sizzle of heat on wet skin every time his cock left Leon's mouth. His moans were louder, and the fingers still in Nikifor's mouth pulled it open just enough for the sound to carry. *To where?* Nikifor abandoned the thought, unfinished.

Leon tugged on Nikifor's low-hanging nuts, heavy with the heat, though there was a strain as the urge within him grew even more. Leon slipped his fingers out of Nikifor's mouth to better keep the momentum, sucking more and

more each time he pulled off Nikifor's cock. His other hand now more earnestly massaged the space behind his nutsack, slick with sweat and saliva, rubbing the smooth and taut muscle there.

Nikifor gasped, barely noticing he was going to shoot before he did. He whined and whimpered as Leon sucked and swallowed every drop that came out of him. While Nikifor felt the moon grow pale for him, stars glowing above him, reflecting on drops of sweat and dew, he felt smaller than he had only moments before. Beneath him, Leon was nuzzling Nikifor's most tender skin carefully, his own cock out and about ready to burst. With what seemed like only two strokes and a badly contained groan, Leon came at Nikifor's feet. He stayed there a moment, and Nikifor ran his fingers through Leon's hair while Leon recovered, not that Nikifor was ready to move just yet either. Then Leon stood and they were eye to eye once more.

Unabashed for one last second, Nikifor reached down and felt for Leon's drips and licked them off his fingers. He wiped a bit of seed off Leon's face as he kissed him, tasting salt and a slight tang, overpowering any remnant of tobacco on Leon's lips. He idly thought that he preferred this and immediately corrected himself.

Preferred this? No, he relished it, wanted to encapsulate this moment, die if necessary to prolong this. This...

Leon broke the kiss and leaned his forehead against Nikifor's, breathing heavily.

"You okay?" Nikifor asked, the glow reaching its end too soon.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Leon asked.

"Did you want me to blow you off?" Nikifor asked, attempting to touch Leon's cock again, but he twisted out of reach.

"No, that's—" he interrupted himself. "I wanted to give, to just—" He sighed. "Can we talk later?"

"Yes," Nikifor said and just held Leon close for another moment while both their hearts slowed back down again.

Chapter 6

Going Back

Early birds of the morning woke them just before dawn. Nikifor had managed to pull his trousers and pants up, but they were still open, and after buttoning his up, he carefully did the same for Leon while he slept. He ran a hand over the smooth muscles of Leon's stomach and through the sparse hairs coming up from his groin, darker than the hair on his head. He circled in the swirls of hair on Leon's chest and smoothed it down again as Leon's breaths deepened and his eyes fluttered.

"Morning," Nikifor said, and Leon grabbed him with a startled expression, looking around them with such wide-eyed fear that Nikifor's own chest clenched and his lungs seemed to stiffen.

"We're safe," Nikifor said.

Jesteśmy bezpieczni. Nikifor sighed. His mind was still dull with alcohol from the night before, but he remembered a dream after the pleasure. Something like this, but there was no one to catch them; there was no repercussion for love.

Leon's grip relaxed, but he got up soon after that. Wiping the remaining crust of last night off with his dampened shirt, Nikifor got up after him and trailed along, a little dampened himself.

Leon led them into camp with what he hoped was an unconcerned expression and a loudly hungry belly.

"*Peaches or beans?*" That was the unappetizing question. He turned to ask Kip and saw that he'd stayed behind and was now talking to Vaughn a little further down the beach. He frowned and put off the question entirely.

"I'm going to go see if there are any other rations left," he told Rocco, who shrugged.

"Okay."

He tried to linger with the crates, hoping to inconspicuously wait for Kip, but he seemed determined to stay where he was, away from Leon, so he had to

move on. He waded through the lagoon and climbed onto the plane where Joe was sitting next to the radio, smoking.

“Got any cigs?”

“Depends. You have a good night, lover boy?”

“What, you want a story?” He was already sweating inside the tin can of a plane, so he tried to focus. “Apparently Kip had a little vodka left, which he obliged to share with me. We got buzzed and fell asleep in a bush. Perfectly pleasant. Now, the cig.” The partial truths came easily.

Joe must have thought so, too, because he regarded Leon with that cool detachment and indifference and blew a smoke ring to entertain himself.

“It’s probably best that you don’t kiss and tell,” Joe mused.

That bastard. What is he thinking?

But Leon didn’t ask, and they were happy to sit in silence. Joe had hauled out a carton of cigs behind the radio and gave Leon a smoke from his pack.

“Who’s got next watch?” Leon asked after lighting it.

“Vaughn.”

Leon got up. “I’m gonna go,” he said.

“You do that,” Joe said and regarded him with veiled interest.

Leon snagged a pack of cigarettes and held them up in a salute. He climbed out the portside and dropped down into the water, cigarette bobbing in his mouth.

That bastard.

The sky was gray that day, the air cooler without the sun beating down on them, and Leon was reminded that it was autumn here, in this hemisphere. They had received no word yet, but in anticipation of their departure, they got ready. They reassembled the broken motor parts, stowed their unnecessaries in the shack, and smoked cigarettes by the pack.

There was actually very little to keep them busy, but Leon did his best to avoid Kip, since Kip seemed to want to be avoided. He climbed into the monkey hole with Carl, only to peer out and see Kip on the beach, hands in pockets, and felt his heart freeze. He looked away, but it was never fast enough.

Since there wasn't enough to do, he volunteered to walk the island again and marched through the jungle with a rifle, jittery and afraid. When he heard someone calling him, he broke for the beach and came out on the far end of the island. Sticking close to the shade of the trees, he unrolled his shirtsleeves and slowly made his way around back to the plane. There was no fire, but some crewmen sat around eating from cans. When he didn't see Kip, Leon made a direct cut through the water around the back of the plane to take over his watch.

Vaughn was inside, dozing at the radio, and jumped when Leon kicked his boot.

"'S time already?" Vaughn asked.

"Want me to take over already?" Leon asked.

"Can I sleep on a bunk?" Vaughn shot back.

"Sure," Leon said.

"Then yeah." He handed the headphones to Leon and stumbled into the back of the plane.

Leon fell into the seat at the radio with a groan.

"No jacking off in there!" Vaughn shouted.

"Go to sleep, idiot!"

The dull buzz of a live connection irritated like him like a fly in his ear. *Half an hour early for his watch...* He wasn't tired, he was too high-strung for sleep. *No one is going to relieve me any time soon.* Sometimes it felt like relief would never come.

The warm, close air of the compartment was comfortable, and he neared a sort of almost sleep; the objects around him loomed and transfigured themselves into people. Standing in the middle compartment, just beyond the opening in the bulkhead, was Kip, hands in his pockets, watching Leon.

Relief at last. He roused himself from the hallucination.

He wanted to imagine a place where there was some kind of normal for a man like him or Kip. But he might fall asleep if he began to dream, and that would be bad. Still that droning insect-like sound faded in and out; so, so irritating. Suddenly he realized that Kip really *was* there, and he bolted upright.

His mouth was thick with saliva and his head swam.

Kip's hair was silhouetted in sunlight.

“Can we talk?”

No. The cobwebs were hard to shake. Leon lifted the headphones from where they lay on his neck and hung them on their hook—*Were they always so heavy?* His thoughts were still sluggish, and he got a good look at every maddening one. He was torn in two directions: *get away* and *stay forever*.

“Sure,” Leon said pretending nonchalance. “But Vaughn’s here.”

“He is fast asleep.” Kip leaned in the doorway and hesitated. “Mind if I sit?” He pointed to the navigator’s chair, wedged in close to Leon.

Leon shook his head and shrugged at the same time.

Kip sat and was no longer looking at Leon, letting the static build up like he’d forgotten he’d asked to speak to Leon.

“What’s up?” Leon asked, but his voice cracked, already anticipating the sting of rejection.

“You want something to drink?” Kip was out of his chair before Leon could answer, going to grab a canteen from beside the stove. There was still some stale coffee as well...

“Coffee!” Leon blurted out. *He needed to be awake for this shit.*

Kip brought it and sat down again. He rubbed his face with his hands and didn’t look at Leon when he spoke. “I don’t understand you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you run?”

“When?”

“This morning.” Kip shifted, struggling to be comfortable, folding and unfolding his arms, finally resting his hands on the table. “We are practically alone and you run. I understand, but I don’t.”

“You don’t?” Leon swallowed, sat up straighter, and felt the vibration of anger tensing his stomach and making his voice even more unsteady. *Quietly.* “We could have been caught in each other’s arms.”

Kip shrugged, whispering, “We have done other things...”

“A blow is not just another ‘thing.’ That’s full ‘queer’ behavior.” He took a shaky breath, trying to find the source of his anger, but it was too hot, too near the root. He began running his hand over his greasy hair in an anxious motion.

He felt Kip's eyes on him and couldn't look at him, even if he wanted to. "I get that this is new to you, but if Dickens knew what happened last night—"

"He will not."

"Gee—" *Too loud.* His words were like acid in his mouth, but he swallowed them back. He was just a kid. *Just a kid. Lay it out for him.* "You may have had fun last night, but there are real consequences for things like that."

"I know, and I am sorry that the world is this way." Kip reached out and touched Leon's face, *so close*, tilting his chin up so they were looking at one another. He spoke so softly, it was almost inaudible. "I can't help the way I feel."

Too close.

Leon sighed and slipped into the same tone of voice Humphrey Bogart took with a girl who was meddling. "Look, kid—"

Kip slapped him. Not hard. It certainly didn't hurt, but the surprise stung and knocked any remnant cobwebs out of Leon's brain. He grabbed Kip's wrist to prevent him from doing it again.

"I am not. I am not some deer-eyed kid. I want you look at me."

Leon tried, but the dark intensity of Kip's gaze made his nervous stomach even more uneasy. "I can't. I'm so angry and I can't look at you."

"I know. I am angry also." Kip's resolve palpably softened. "Can you hold me?" he whispered.

"I'm afraid to," Leon said. He gasped as the tension broke, and all the anger ebbed out to be replaced by frustration and such *utter* loneliness. His voice rasped, "I'm afraid of it ending."

Kip came to him. "We could all die, right now. We could be dead by this evening."

"That's no excuse." Leon fought a sob and held Kip so tightly he was afraid he could hurt him. "God, I'm so—"

Kip brushed his wet cheeks and kissed his dry lips. He ran his thumb over the place where he'd slapped Leon, pushing against stubble, and whispered "Sorry. I'm sorry."

Leon resumed the kiss, and pulled Kip on top of him. The chair groaned a little beneath them, and Leon remembered to ask "What about Vaughn?"

“He’s asleep, he won’t hear us.” Kip dipped his head to suck on the skin of Leon’s throat, and vaguely Leon thought of this just being bad, all bad.

‘There’s no chance for you and me. Better to stop before we both get hurt.’

But Kip bore down on him, ground his pelvis against Leon’s burgeoning hardness, and Leon thought, *not all bad*.

‘You think this will not hurt?’

If he were wise, he’d cut Kip off, send him away, and lie to his face about the way he felt. But he didn’t know if he could do that. *Ugh, he felt so good against him. When did he learn to take charge like this?*

‘Let’s not kid ourselves. We’re not meant to be happy.’

Leon jumped as the buzz in his ear intensified: there was a call coming in. *Shit. Shit. Shit.* He’d fallen asleep after all.

Blearily he swiped at his eyes and cracked his mouth open, nearly glued shut. He rambled off the call code, memorized to recite in his sleep and probably sounded like a drunk person. The operator on the other line told him to hold for orders.

“Affirmative, standing by,” he said. He jumped up and tried to find the canteen to wash the crust out of his mouth, but it wasn’t on the stove. It was lying on the chart table.

How much had been a dream and how much reality?

He took the orders in stride, adrenaline making him jittery as the pubescent on the other end of the line gave him coordinates for a meet up with a tanker not far from their location. He hung up and caught his breath. *Why was he so shook up?* He was afraid they had kissed here, that they’d been caught.

He stumbled out of the compartment, crossed the belly of the boat and saw that Vaughn lay on a bunk snoring.

‘You’re too young to understand.’

Was it an echo of another conversation?

He was more afraid that he’d done what he didn’t think he could do and sent Kip away.

He wanted to wade to shore himself after he woke Vaughn, but he couldn’t leave his post yet. The men were quick to come back; Jan and the Jap were brought onboard, and within a short time, they were all ready to go. Kip was

among the crew. Leon looked to him, but Kip didn't meet his eyes. There was no hopeful question there. He had given Kip the wrong answer. Their rescue lay in another direction.

When they arrived at their destination, the crew was spit out onto the tanker, their cargo carefully stowed away, and it was determined by an engineering conference that the flying boat was seaworthy. Only one crewmember was needed on board while the fleet tug escorted them back to the base. Leon volunteered himself for this. He didn't notice Nikifor had remained behind until he left the cockpit, checking the stopped up holes all along the boat and found the lieutenant in the tail.

"I wanted to be alone," Nikifor said in explanation. It had been more than a desire to be alone: it had been an anxious need...

Leon shifted his weight, supporting himself on the pylon above as the tug buffeted them back and forth on the waves, driving them along at a ferocious clip. Leon sat beside Nikifor and didn't speak. Nikifor was glad in one way because he was afraid of words. On the other hand, he thought holding hands, chaste, infrequent kisses, and the memories of three days were not enough. What would he have of all this, in the end? An ache in his right shoulder, but even that would fade...

Nikifor closed his eyes against the backwash of memory as motion sickness pushed him further into discomfort. He didn't want to remember the conversation he'd tried to have with Leon, half asleep, wholly an asshole, but he wanted something familiar and real as well.

Even if there is no hope.

Leon was staring into space, his face a mask. Leon barely even reacted when Nikifor took his hand and brought the back of it to his face, rubbing his cheek on it. Leon jokingly said, "So you can grow a beard." But humour deserted them as well.

"Would you like to see me again?" Nikifor asked.

"I don't think I can," Leon said and shrugged: it was a hurtful thing.

"I asked if you'd like to."

Leon stood and patted his pockets nervously. "Do you have any smokes?"

Nikifor shook his head and watched Leon walk up front to the radio and pull a pack out from somewhere. It took him several attempts to light, but once

he did, he breathed deeply again, exhaling smoke like a sigh. When he returned, Nikifor reached for it, as was his habit. Leon dutifully allowed the intrusion, and Nikifor gave it back after a long drag. He passed it without touching Leon this time.

“Do you not want to see me again?”

“That’s not the question you should ask,” Leon said.

“What?”

“We don’t get a choice. And they wouldn’t like it.”

Nikifor’s anger flared and subsided. He wanted something Leon didn’t think he could give, and he wasn’t keen on being treated like a child again. He stood, inches away from Leon. “We still have now…” He kissed Leon, pulling him close, but Leon never relaxed into it. “I know it’s not much…”

“It’s nothing.” Leon got up and walked away, toward the aft. “Better off never having met.”

“I would not agree—”

“Be better off forgetting one another.” Leon stopped between the two blisters and lost his thoughts in the gun-grey waves.

“Better for you, maybe.” Nikifor ground the words out, his anger returning, hands balled at his sides. This is why he should have kept his mouth shut and now why he couldn’t move a muscle. They were polar opposites, their repulsion electrical. While Nikifor would give anything to bridge the space between them, Leon was determined to wedge them further apart. “I do not want to forget you.”

“You should forget me, move on, marry that girl without thinking of a man. Your poor Lucy…” He didn’t look at Nikifor and that injured him even more. “Make it easier for yourself, put your mistakes behind you.”

“I cannot be so selfish. What about *you*?”

“I’ll forget soon enough. I have to.”

Leon stood with one hand on his gun, the other holding a burning cigarette. The wind coming in the gun hole buffeted his short hair, his eyes were cast down to watch the ember glow. Nikifor could barely see, his eyes filling with tears, betraying him, while his breaking heart cursed him and his soul cried out in frustration: “What did you expect… letters? A reunion in London? Love?” Leon asked these questions which Nikifor could not voice.

“Do you have to be so cruel?” Nikifor asked, aware and ashamed of crying now in front of this unfeeling comrade.

“It’s kinder to be truthful, even if it’s cruel.” Leon finally looked up and didn’t shy away from the sight. He seemed to relish it, taking it all in and almost basking in Nikifor’s distress. Nikifor fled, but this time Leon followed. Reaching to touch tears on Nikifor’s face.

“Is this what you were afraid of?” Nikifor asked between sobs. “Is this mess, what you hope to avoid?”

Leon looked so sad just then, and Nikifor almost faltered long enough to share his misery with someone else. *I don’t want to be alone anymore.*

“I feel as though I could have fallen in love with you.”

“Don’t,” Leon said sharply. “Save your heart for someone else. If not your girl, then another. Not for me—I don’t deserve it.”

The words were harsh, but they felt too late. After all that Leon had said—*hadn’t they been happy?*

“No.” Kip retreated again and worked to steady himself. “Where is your compassion? Where are your *tears*, don’t you feel the same?” He gasped and tried to catch his breath. “I thought you did.”

Leon took Nikifor firmly in his hands. Nikifor struggled but would weep either way, so he surrendered, in the end, to Leon’s embrace. The touch burned like dry sand, blown in the winds from Africa, but the stinging warmth was welcome.

Leon petted Nikifor’s unkempt hair and spoke softly in his ear. “I’m sorry.”

Nikifor closed his eyes and waited for the torment to end.

Chapter 7

In Paris

Six Months Later

He came out of the municipal building in the same way people emerged from the *métro*, dazzled by the sunlight, confused by their destination. His hair was brown, like Leon's, but he wore a suit that had been altered to fit him, not made for him. He was definitely American, but he was not Leon. Something in the shoulders...

Nikifor felt the prickle of fear and a touch of icy anger gripping his heart. Visions could be cruel. Here in the late summer of Paris was a hint of Polynesia: heat that radiated from the cobblestones, sun that bore down on you between townhouses, lack of resources unless you had a pack or a favour to trade.

The man who could not be Leon stuck his hands in his pockets and began to amble up *Montmartre* towards *Sacré Cœur*, and soon would pass by the café where Nikifor sat. He could not help but call out to the American pedestrian: “*Bonsoir!*”

“*Bonsoir,*” the soldier replied automatically, lifting his head as he did so, and stopped short. “Nikifor?”

Nikifor's blood ran cold. He immediately glanced around himself. There was no one else at the tiny café. He had a full cup of tea in front of him. He had no excuse to leave, no appointment, no escape. Nikifor sat frozen in his seat as Leon tentatively came forward.

“Nikifor.” Leon grinned and stood behind the chair opposite, gripping its back with both hands. “As I live and breathe.”

Nikifor suddenly remembered himself and stood up, reaching out his hand to shake Leon's, but the motion felt like it was someone else's.

“How are you, Nikifor?” Leon asked.

Nikifor couldn't remember. The months suddenly stretched into an inconceivable distance—*halfway around the world*—it felt like ages since they had last spoken. Perhaps it was. They had just been men then. What was time to the miles they had crossed; the many dogs and princes that had lain between

them since that time? Was this fate's cruel trick, or were they to master their own destiny?

"I'm fine," he said and gestured to the chair.

Leon sat, and it was like something emerged from within Nikifor to bask in the sun; a butterfly was the obvious metaphor, but he couldn't pin down the feeling more exactly. *A butterfly is too obvious.* The familiarity that he wanted flooded him with warmth even as a bitterness in his throat refused to be swallowed. He drank some tea.

"Of all the people to bump into. Nikifor. I thought I was seeing things—"

"Please," Nikifor said. "My friends call me Kip."

Leon raised his eyebrows at that. His hair was almost too long for an American soldier and fell onto his forehead. He seemed to grin more widely than before, and Nikifor could practically feel the impatience that wanted to lash out at banal small talk, reclaiming the presumption of complete understanding Nikifor had once thought they had shared. But Leon had not felt the same, that much he had made clear. Still, he was a good man.

"So, you're here now? Stationed in Paris?" Kip asked and took another sip of tea.

"I was." He shook his head. "Not really." Beneath the table, his leg jiggered up and down.

"They moved you again?"

"Nah." Leon scoffed. "I've been discharged."

Nikifor sat a moment in shock. "What?"

"I'm a freeman. No longer property of the US government. I can do as I please."

Nikifor rumped his brow at this, but Leon seemed more or less happy about the outcome, so...

"So...?"

"So, the world is my oyster." Leon leaned back in his chair. Nikifor rolled his eyes.

"Can you please be serious? How will you find work? How will you live? They don't just—Why are you still smiling?"

"Because it was an honorable discharge." He cocked a half smile.

“You requested it?” Nikifor couldn’t quite believe it, and Leon seemed a little incredulous himself.

“Yeah, I managed to get out in time.” He laughed. “And even though they had some report on me—that woulda lined me up for a Blue Discharge—someone other than Mac was watching my back for once.

“I caught up with Dickens after my *meeting*, which had clearly been a court martial until someone had stepped in. He didn’t really want to talk at first, but after I insisted, we had a chat in the courtyard—” His breath caught as he remembered.

Nikifor had a hard time remaining calm, *too close*, and couldn’t imagine the stern officer bending to Leon, but he listened anyway.

“That courtyard. Kip, you wouldn’t believe it.” He leaned forward, and Nikifor adjusted as well. “Either they had repaired it so well, or... it had been missed by shells entirely. So we sat on this little bench, with green all around us, a gravel walkway all around. It was like an oasis of Paris before the war, like the rubble outside, in the city, didn’t exist. The war had never happened here.

“Anyway, Dickens still liked me about as much as ever.” Leon made a face before continuing his story. “I had to do what’s right,’ he told me.

“‘Why?’ I asked, ‘Did someone else do this?’

“His eyes kinda bugged out at that, and he came back, all shocked: ‘You think I reported you for Blue Discharge?’ I shrugged. ‘It was the doctor,’ he said, very matter of fact, and hunted for cigarettes. I was still smoking at the time, so I gave him one and lit it for him.

“He then said, ‘I put in the word for your Honorable. No sense in starting anything now. You’re leaving, it’s over, good riddance.’ And he spat on the ground—” Leon spat. “—like that.

“He thanked me for the smoke, and we sat in silence for a moment. The first lights were lit, simple candles in the windows; it was so provincial, and a little surreal. I thought of home and... I thought of your little town somewhere.”

“Nowhere,” Nikifor said.

“Right,” Leon said.

Nikifor recalled the captivation that had lured him in. It was starting to catch him again. “Where will you go, now?” he asked.

Leon shrugged carelessly, and looked down the street, away from Kip. “Anywhere I want.” He looked back, directly at Nikifor. “What about you?”

Nikifor blushed.

“Oh, hello,” Łucja said.

Leon looked up just as a pale beauty came to stand beside Kip, placing an easy hand on his shoulder.

“I believe you’ve taken my spot, *monsieur*.” She smiled at him in a way that teased him and was open to being liked. Her dress was blue, to match her eyes, and in a modest fashion, but it suited her perfectly, so elegantly.

“I’m very sorry, ma’am.” Leon had almost forgotten about this girl, whom he imagined so differently.

Leon got up without another moment to lose. His instinct was to run, and she seemed to sense the need to still him.

“Won’t you join us?” she asked and glanced at Kip.

“If you don’t mind.” Leon looked to Kip, half expecting to be dismissed.

Kip shrugged in a casual way, so Leon pulled up one of the heavy cast-iron chairs for her to sit between them. She spoke a few words in Polish with Kip, as though to confirm something before turning her pure sunshine smile on him. He instinctively returned it, but it only dulled his fears a little.

“Leon,” she said. “It’s so wonderful to meet you at last. I’ve heard so much about the man who has saved Nikki’s life.” She sat so carefully on the chair, and Leon felt the bottom fall out of his stomach.

Was this what it was to have a broken heart? he wondered.

“Leon, this is Łucja.”

“Leon, you *must* call me Lucy.”

Aside from her slight Polish accent, she wasn’t unlike any of the other English girls he’d met. In her manner she was milder, but she was very pretty, as he’d expected her to be.

The pang inside ached. *You told him to move on yourself, chump.*

“Will you drink a tea with us?” Lucy asked.

Leon thought about making an excuse, but there was no immediate destination, no automatic place for him to go. He had no “where.” And it was nice to be here.

So he smiled back at her and nodded.

“*Monsieur!*” She turned to the café, and a moment later a waiter in a patterned shirt came to take his order. Leon gulped at the price of coffee but ordered it anyway. Lucy’s French being better than his own, she helped him order.

“Thank you,” Leon said, but she waved him off.

“We are as good as friends already.”

“How is it you know French?”

“It turns out I have a—how you say?” She glanced at Kip. “—*knack* for languages. English was just one, and *then* I learned French, a *true* language of romance.” She was grinning at Kip now, and it unnerved Leon a little.

“I was hopeless at pronunciation. I sound like a Polack no matter what I say. It’s abysmal—must be why she left me.” Kip meant it as a joke, his face said as much.

“Stop!” She gasped. “You know that’s not why. Just think how that sounds!”

She laughed and joked something in Polish. Leon was stuck there, however, and the two of them waited for him to speak. “Wait, you aren’t *together?*”

“Yes,” Lucy said, making a silent confirmation with Kip—*Is this okay?*—before turning her brightness back to Leon. “I was just married this morning—”

“To?” He couldn’t help feeling a pale sort of uneasiness, a queasy look on his face still.

“Roger,” Kip said, smirking into his teacup. He said it in a very brusque, English way.

“*Mon Commandant Roger Deschamps. Je m’appelle Lucy Deschamps. Enchanté.*” And she held out her hand out to Leon, as though he should kiss it. He wasn’t quite sure why he did, but it seemed to be the right thing to do when she broke into another beautiful smile.

Lucy then reached for Kip’s hand. “He released me from a contractual engagement.” She scoffed. “I mean, we were honest with one another—

weren't in love. And we hear that's all the rage these days." Her eyes flashed at him.

"It makes for a good story, sure." Leon was a bit breathless, nervously playing with an almost empty bowl of sugar. "Oh, here's my coffee."

"Leon..." Kip reached for his hand, the one resting on the table beside his cooling coffee, but Leon snatched it away, glancing in alarm at Lucy, who just laughed charmingly.

"Nikki, why don't you tell Leon about Jan," Lucy said.

"Was Jan the" —he couldn't very well say "bastard" in the company of a lady— "other Polish pilot?"

"He was a dolt," Lucy said.

"Ma'am." Leon managed a wide-eyed nod.

"He healed all right, I think," Kip said with a shrug. He didn't meet Leon's eye for some reason.

"Did something happen?"

"He was a—a dolt. He asked me something inappropriate, and so I never saw him again after we got back to base." Kip smiled glumly. "I have no idea, but I hear he went away with a commendation. He fought well; he deserved it."

"Oh, Nikki." Lucy reached for Kip's hand and stroked it. She smiled at him, and Leon felt a bubble of jealousy rise up and burst. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and cleared his throat.

"Łucja knows this already, I'm not sure why she wants you to know." Kip's eyes were downcast again. Leon could help but feel snubbed. "But I think you'll find it much more of interest what became of the other lieutenant with us."

Leon furrowed his brow at this. "Who?"

"Tanaka Saburo, a second lieutenant in the Japanese Army." Kip half smiled. "He requested asylum in the States. I believe they even gave him a plot of land out west."

"You're joking."

"His family died in the firebombing of Tokyo. He had nothing, and—I don't think he would have been well received back home."

"Oh..."

“Tell him what you found out,” Lucy said.

It was funny to Leon the way she encouraged Kip to speak.

“Yes, yes.” Kip took a moment. “They kept him on base a little while; he had some internal injury that needed treating. Better to keep him on base at that point... That is when I got a chance to sit down with him and a translator. Getting rank out of the way, I introduced myself, and he said he remembered me.

“Then the translator leans into me and says, a little lower, ‘Maybe I don’t understand, but he says you were embracing—’ and I cut him off.

“‘Yeah, I know what he means,’ I said. ‘I was afraid my fellow pilot, one of the last people of my country I knew well, was going to die.’

“Saburo said he understood, said, ‘I am probably the only one who survived.’ I told him he was right.” Kip huffed a sigh and looked down. He sat with his hands resting on his knees for a few seconds before resuming. “That we had shot the other pilots down.”

“‘They were suicidal,’ Saburo told me.”

Leon frowned at that, but Kip coughed a short laugh before continuing.

“He was surprised we hadn’t cut him open and served him his own liver yet. They told them such stories—”

“Just like the Russians,” Lucy said. She sat with lost eyes between them, perking up when Leon looked at her. “I worked with the consulate. The letters were... quite vivid.”

“Wait, do you also speak Russian?”

She shrugged. *Yes, basically.*

“We didn’t talk long, maybe a half of an hour. But after that I stopped by almost every day until he was well enough to travel.”

“I didn’t know you were still around—I left a couple days after we got in, was to go to Germany up ’til a couple weeks ago.”

“I thought we were clear on that?” Kip’s eyes were shaded, his voice lightly challenging. It rankled Leon.

“Well, maybe it’s not a good time...” Leon checked what Lucy knew with a glance, but she was watching Kip, smiling a quick flash of teeth when she caught him.

Kip made a sound of annoyance and crossed his arms.

“Leon, how’s the coffee?” Lucy asked.

Leon shrugged. “Good, I really just missed it. The fresh stuff you didn’t get often. Now you can get it all the time in exchange for an arm and a leg.”

Kip nodded and almost too quickly asked, “Are you happy, Łucja?”

It sounded like a continued conversation from earlier, and perhaps Kip had meant to say it in Polish. Leon tried to make himself inconspicuous, bowing his head a little, seeming not too interested but immovable since he couldn’t very well leave the table just then. When he glanced up, he saw Lucy considering the white gloves that lay on the table while Kip watched her.

“I am,” she said. “He’s different than you, Nikki, but that isn’t really comparable, is it? He’s good to me, and I try to be good for him.” She sighed. “He’s taking me to *Nice*, Nikki. Just because I asked. He’s been there a dozen times, all over this country, but because I asked—” She covered her face. “It’s like my face could go numb from all the smiling I do.”

“It’s making up for the past.”

“Ah, we didn’t do so bad.”

Leon felt so out of place here. He’d been impatient to fight banality, sit down and resume *something*, but the presumption of understanding each other’s souls may have never even have existed. How else could Kip have gone along with Leon’s damn fool suggestion and just... *moved on*?

Kip made a sound like a pot releasing steam. It turned into a chuckle. “What time were you meeting the train?”

“Ah! Leon—” Lucy stood abruptly and the two men rose with her. “Take care of my Nikki. I have to go. Roger will have been waiting *five* minutes by the time I get there.” She laughed, pinned her hat into her hair and picked up her gloves. “He’s notoriously early for everything.” She took Leon’s hand and kissed him in the French fashion, once on each cheek, with a grin to eat a tiger’s heart out. It felt like a loving gesture, *as though she already really cared*. When he responded to her smile, it felt real.

Leon felt his heart swell, and it was easy for a moment.

“A pleasure meeting you, Lucy.”

Leon was being generous, Kip suspected. She was probably just a sore reminder of things he could not have to him. This had been unfortunate, them

meeting like this. Leon seemed the same. Recognizing a familiar face where he'd expected a stranger, it was like the past six months were erased. Same sun, different place. *Beneath the uniform lay the same terrain.*

He'd fallen in love in the meanwhile.

He watched Łucja, who had done her best to charm Leon from the ledge of assumptions and knew that the appreciation he had of her, the prettiness he saw in her delicate chin, sweet eyes and smooth peach skin was not love. He wondered what Leon saw when he looked at her.

He knew it was impossible to forget a person entirely, and he knew Leon kept turning a questioning look to Kip that he could not return. Kip found he could not look at Leon for very long, so he had focused on Łucja instead.

It hurt much more to know you'd been forgotten.

"No, the pleasure's mine. I've been dying to meet the strong American who pulled him out of the sea." She turned and embraced him. "Nikki, it's been a dream. Don't take this the wrong way, but I hope we don't see each other for a while." She began to move to the street. "Write once you're settled!" She gave a little wave.

They watched her as she went off down the street. Leon smiled and shook his head when he caught Kip's eye. "She's more gorgeous than you mentioned."

"She's blossomed after Berlin fell." Kip smiled and failed to find the words. "But she's—More than—" English wasn't the real problem. "Roger and she will be very happy. I wish them nothing but the best."

"What about you?" Leon asked.

"Me?" Kip frowned.

"I mean—" Leon dropped his eyes again. "—are you still in the military?"

"No, I'm out." He knew how it sounded but let the misunderstanding linger. As Leon had.

"What?" Leon hissed. "What about your career dreams? Won't they deport you?"

"Not to Soviet Poland, or whatever country that place is now... They gave me an ultimatum, Leon," Kip looked up from under his drawn brows, heavy with the memory of it. "I could resign or marry Łucja. I told them I'd make an honest woman of her once I resigned, so they let me go, and we moved across

the channel.” He shrugged and returned his focus to the empty cup. “She met Roger, and I told her... about myself... and about you.”

Leon went pale, but said nothing. Kip had said enough already and was content to wait.

The time passed as the waiter continued to leave them in peace, used to slow talkers in the lull before lunch. But the street began to pick up in noise, and aside from them, nothing was sacred, nothing nailed down. A shop woman moved the flowerpots in front of her store when it was empty, the others in the café moved tables and chairs, even taking Łucja’s chair. The flap of wet laundry being hung in an alley came from four directions. It all moved on without them.

“So,” Leon said at last. “You didn’t move on.”

“You forgot, at least.”

“I didn’t.”

Kip’s heart stilled for a second, and he looked straight at Leon as he said, “I fell in love with you.” The sun burned in his entire body, even as an awning was hung above them. Brightly coloured, newly made, incongruous to bullet holes in the façade.

He knew that the words were meaningless now. Trivial. Only the eye contact mattered.

“You thought you loved Jan once, too.”

“I know now I didn’t.”

From the shop across the street came the static of a radio being adjusted, and then music flowed across to them, the chorus asked, “*Ou dormez-vous?*”

The dance that they’d started months ago seemed to resume spiritually. Kip was drawn toward and felt Leon’s presence even from three feet away. Kip held out his hand for Leon’s, and he gave it without hesitation this time. No one in the café looked at them twice.

They paid and began to amble up towards *Sacré Coeur*, dodging vendors, arm in elbow, careful not to look each other in the eye as the crowds around them spoke of unimportant things. So he held Leon’s elbow tightly, and they walked closely together.

The road they were on took them to the room Kip had been staying in—their room. The landlady was out, so Kip helped himself to the key without a

drop of shame. He didn't look at Leon as they climbed to the attic, and he introduced the empty room with an embarrassed bow.

Leon didn't wait any longer. He grabbed Kip by the throat, and they kissed roughly, angrily, hungrily. The key was turned in the lock, and they shed clothes like wilting petals. The urgency faded once they touched naked skin to naked skin. There was no thought of fiancées, landladies or anything but each other.

Kip, as brief as it had been before, remembered this. He had gone back and memorised the details, burning the sensations into the palms of his hands. He'd fallen in love once deprived, and had thought he'd never have this again. His heart could heal itself. *Now*, he thought, *now I know what it is to be in love*.

The end was content with the silence, his fear destroyed. There was no word necessary to continue. Kip knew this as though they spoke differently now than they had before. Leon touched him, and he touched Leon. It was pleasure without end, necessary by the risk of pleasure before. Eyes didn't need to look to see, ears didn't need to listen to hear, and hearts beat even as they stopped. It was like Kip harboured a storm inside himself, but he himself was the calm that came after. This was where he knew he would be forever. Where they would be forever.

The End

Author Bio

Marlo York studied her friends at a young age and earned a reputation as an oblivious liar. With her skills, Ms. York tried lulling children to sleep, performing skits on the street and ultimately found success conning people. Since beginning to write, she hardly ever lies in person anymore.

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