

Chapter One – The Journey

All too often, he had feared he wouldn't live to make this trip. Yet here he was, pulling away from the station platform. He should've been overflowing with joy. Instead, all Robert McLellan could think about was how much he wished he'd chosen another train car... or at least a seat more than four rows from the battle.

"It's mine!" the toddler wailed in a soprano pitch. With the ferocity of Achilles, she wrestled and clawed for the coveted prize. But the other warrior held firm, as if her jagged green lollipop was the last ounce of sugar on earth.

"Mommy, Mommy!" the girls screeched in unison.

"That's enough!" Their mother shot to her feet, her face flushing a shade lighter than her burgundy felt hat and fitted suit. "I'm separating the two of you!" She gripped the hand of her older daughter, five years old if Robert had to guess, and began scanning the muted canvas of business suits and uniforms.

Robert glanced around, praying the seat beside him wasn't the only one available. He spotted a few others, but the passengers next to them seemed to be avoiding eye contact with the woman. They appeared engrossed in their newspapers or conversations. They puffed on pipes and cigarettes, and gazed out their windows. Apparently, not even victory in the Second World War had given

civilians or servicemen in the coach enough courage to volunteer.

"Excuse me, sir. Would you mind?" The mother stood before Robert, motioning to her youngster.

He had hoped for a nice, quiet train ride. His tension was mounting already, knowing he could soon be facing one of the most pivotal moments in his life. But utter exhaustion reflected in the mother's eyes, a weary look that had become the standard for all who had surrounded him over the past year, and he couldn't refuse.

"Not at all, ma'am." He smiled and retrieved his cherished box from the open seat.

"Thank you so much." She plopped her daughter into the cushioned chair. "Now, young lady," she said, wagging a lecturing finger, "you behave yourself, or we're going to turn this train around and head straight back to Grandma's."

Robert bit the inside of his cheek to prevent a chuckle. Certainly an impossible feat, yet he knew better than to underestimate the capabilities of a strong-headed and, more importantly, angry mother of two.

"Sir," she addressed Robert, the fire in her cheeks beginning to cool, "she shouldn't be any trouble for you. They're much better when they're split up. Inherited their father's competitive nature, I'm afraid."

"Nothing wrong with that, ma'am. If we'd had more soldiers like them, I'm guessing the war would've been over a long time ago."

She offered a tired smile before turning around and heading back into the trenches.

Out of the corner of his eye, Robert studied the little girl, curly pigtails uneven and ruffled dress slightly tattered. She licked her prized lollipop, releasing a scent of green apple into the tobacco-coated air. Then she swung her legs as rhythmically as wipers on a windshield. He tried to determine the name of the

familiar victory tune she was humming, but gave up when she fell silent, investigating a rip in her navy cloth seat.

So that's what it was like to be young...

The war had aged everyone. Robert was only twenty-two, but was sure he'd already survived as many tragedies in his life as any man he'd ever known.

A loud thud made him jump. He turned his head back toward the sound, his heart racing and palms sweating. A paratrooper had pulled his bag from the luggage rack and dropped it in the aisle to retrieve an item.

Robert took a deep breath. It was hard to relax with so much movement in a small area, specifically behind him. Not being able to see what everyone was doing added to his jitteriness.

He turned toward the window and tried to focus on the scenery. As the huff of the wheels and hiss of the steam engine intensified, New York's Penn Station faded in the distance. The overcast sky made the city appear like any other, no longer the glamorous mecca he'd remembered seeing before shipping off for duty. In fact, his view of the entire world was different now. He began to wonder how much he too had changed, but a small hand tug on his Army coat interrupted his thoughts.

"Is this your first train ride?" The girl's nurturing tone made Robert feel as though their ages were reversed. "Cause it's okay to be nervous." Not until that moment did he notice the brisk tapping of his hand on his leg.

Change of topic.

He leaned toward her. "Is someone meeting you in Chicago?"

"Yep, yep, yep," she replied with the speed of a hummingbird. "We've been staying with Grandma and Grandpa, but my daddy just got back from, um, the hospital. He was fighting all the bad guys... and, um, he was a hero, so they gave

him a pink heart... and they said he could go home 'cause Mommy said he took all his medicine."

"Well, that's great news. I'm sure he misses all of you very much."

"Yeah... but I think he misses me the most."

Yep, it would've been a shorter war.

"So do you know my daddy?" she asked.

Robert's olive-drab dress uniform must have been a sure sign that he knew her father. After all, how many soldiers could there be?

"Not sure. What's his name?"

She sat up straight, beaming with pride. "His name is Butt Sergeant John L. Morris."

He held in his laughter and considered teaching her the difference between "Butt" and "Buck," but decided her choice was better. He even entertained the idea of using the term himself someday, though not likely in the company of a senior-ranked officer.

"I'm afraid not," he said, "but I'm sure a lot of other guys know your daddy."

She sat back and smiled, noticeably comforted. "What's your name, mister?"

Feeling clever, he answered in a hushed tone, "Well, my real name is Superman, but everyone thinks my name is Robert."

The precocious youngster tilted her head and scanned his face slowly. "If you were Superman, you wouldn't need a train, now would you?"

Her keen wit surprised him. "No, I suppose I wouldn't –"

"Whatcha got in there?" She pointed her lollipop toward the red cigar box on his lap, the contents of which he considered just as responsible for saving his life as the Luger pistol he'd smuggled halfway across the world.

Robert tightened his grip on the container and smiled. She couldn't have

known, but this was exactly what he needed right now.

While he untied the thin string of rope wrapped around the box, the girl stared without blinking, gnawing on her bottom lip like a piece of chewy taffy.

He flipped open the top and stared in reverence. The mere sight of her handwriting calmed him. He placed his hand on the top envelope, wrinkled and smudged from nine months of battle. Suddenly he was home.

"Are they magic letters?" the girl whispered, her eyes like saucers.

"They sure are," he whispered back. "Someone special sent these to me. And whenever I read them, it's like that person's right here next to me."

She studied the postal stack for a moment then looked back into his eyes.

"They gonna meet you at the station too?"

Robert expelled a heavy sigh. "I sure hope so."

A wave of apprehension returned as he thought about the scheduled encounter that lay ahead... and the night of the USO dance when it all began.