

TELEGRAM FOR MRS. MOONEY

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Foxford Press

PROLOGUE

Somewhere in Belgium

WHEN THE CALL COMES to Gestapo headquarters, Otto Ulbricht sits at a roll-top desk eating a lunch of cold chicken with a side of over cooked red-cabbage slaw.

On the first ring, he's thinking about his wife back in Dresden—the meals she makes: pork chops braised with brown sugar, dumplings as light as clouds. He sighs. The phone rings again as he wipes grease from his hands. On the third ring he lifts the receiver, while he throws the remains of his lunch into a trash can.

“*Ja*,” he says, nodding his head as he folds back a pad of paper, ready to take notes. “*Das Flugzeug Spitfeuer*.” The airplane is a Spitfire. He continues to make notations. The repeat of “*Ja*,” and the forceful pressure of his mechanical pencil, punctuate each period mark. He says in German, “I understand—yes—somewhere north of the tracks.”

Returning the receiver to its cradle, he looks at the clock that hangs above a portrait of the Führer. It will be at least an hour before the others return—longer if the beer is good. If the Royal Air Force pilot survived the crash, an hour will give him a good start at an escape. “*Verdammt*,” he

says, cursing under his breath.

It's like a race: the Belgian Resistance will try to get to the crash site first. He looks again at the clock and then lowers his eyes, looking into those of Adolf Hitler. Rising from his seat, he approaches the portrait, which always gives him strength.

He scribbles a note and leaves it on his officer's desk.

Walking to a coat rack, he grabs a long black leather trench coat, even though it's a sweltering day. He'll be on a motorcycle; and, besides, when approaching an enemy officer it's always best to be properly attired. Before buttoning the coat he pats the Luger that fits into a leather harness strapped to his torso. He takes a fedora from the shelf above the rack, pushing it snugly onto his head.

Before he turns the ignition key on his BMW motorcycle, he scans the road that leads to the timber and lath city center—the opposite direction of the crash site. For a moment he hesitates, thinking he should pull one of the others away from his lunch. They might be in any number of cafés or pubs. . .there's the problem. A waste of time.

Then he thinks about the glory that will be all his. When finding the RAF pilot, he puts the Luger to his head and pulls the trigger. He's never gotten a shot at a British officer—only at a few Jews, and Belgians who won't get in line.

He kick starts the motorcycle. It backfires as he pulls the bike onto the road—tar sticky in the merciless sun.

I will bring honor to the Fatherland.

Thinking this, he gives the bike full throttle, feeling the power of the engine pulsating between his legs.

CHAPTER ONE

Long Island, New York

WHEN THE BOY ROLLED UP TO OUR GATE, I was up in the O'Leary's oak tree, playing hooky and hiding out from my ma. I seen him lean the bike against our picket fence, reach into his saddlebag, and open the gate latch—which always gives trouble. Next, he swooped up the brick path to our front stoop and knocked three times. I seen it all from above, like a bird sees it, or like an airplane.

The boy called out, "Telegram!" My ma called back that she was coming.

From my brother Jack, I figured.

He's famous—bold letters in *The New York Times*: same exact paper President Roosevelt, a New Yorker too, gets delivered to the White House every morning. The president is proud of my brother, I betcha Edward R. Murrow interviewed Jack on the radio. His voice came through the air and hit the antenna on our roof. Everybody on the block heard it. He was in a movie with Jimmy Cagney, *Captains of the Clouds*. On top of all that: he shaked hands with the King of England.

His letters came all the way across the Atlantic

Ocean—in the belly of ocean liners—the stamps engraved with a portrait of the king, which my ma let me keep if I was careful steaming them off the envelopes. He sent us a black and white of the house he was living in—a hoity-toity place near the sea, once an earl's.

I'd get the news from Jack at 4 o'clock, when everybody expected me home from school. I was supposed to be in sixth grade grammar class reading *Fun With John and Jean*, the Catholic school version of *Dick and Jane*—like the original wasn't mind-numbing enough. Sister Bridget at Saint Brendan's I'd handle with an absentee note typed up on my sister's Underwood, Da's signature traced using his fountain pen. That wouldn't work with Ma and I needed to stay out of her path, and how.

Hanging from a branch was my lunch pail—baloney and liverwurst sandwich, an apple, and a nickel for milk. I wouldn't go hungry and could wait it out. The nickel was better spent on an ice-cold bottle of soda anyways.

"Jack's faster than a speeding bullet," I said out loud. Opening my arms wide I became an airplane, buzzing low over the house and the corn fields beyond—flying over to Manhattan, circling the Empire State Building and the Statue of Liberty, then buzzing Ellis Island before cruising all the way to Southend-on-Sea, England, and Jack. Then I put my head back in my book: *Treasure Island*.

By the time I climbed out of the tree, hours later, my head was filled with pirates and treasure and I'd plum forgot about the telegram.

When I entered the house, the first thing I noticed was that the radio was turned off, and the place was as quiet as a church on Monday. A yellow jacket buzzed against a

screen window in the parlor. My ma wasn't in the kitchen, where she should've been fixing my after school snack and winding up to quiz me about the day's learning. And another thing was that somebody left the icebox door open and water was spilt all over the linoleum floor.

I called out for my ma but got no answer. Then I seen that her bedroom door was shut closed, which was just plain abnormal. Wondering if my ma was down with something, I tapped.

"Ma? Are you in there?" I asked in a whisper, so as not to wake her if she was taking a lay down, which she hardly ever did in broad daylight.

Had to put my ear flat to the door to catch her words: "Not now Tommy," she said, fast and sharp.

Sitting on the parlor sofa, I tried to think what could be the matter. I didn't make the connection to the telegram, not even then.

I looked around the bare room for a clue. We didn't have fancy things, because my da was laid-off and we was stone-broke. That's when I seen the telegram put next to the photograph of Jack in his Royal Air Force pilot's uniform. It took a brave man to fly a Spitfire. The Nazis were always chasing after Jack and trying to shoot him down.

I'd read it in the paper. My brother chased a Messerschmitt AG and got within 10 yards of it before letting loose his guns. He looked the Luftwaffe pilot in the eyes right before the German plane went into a tailspin and then hit the ground in a blaze of fire. He had another German plane on his tail—a Focke-Wulf 190. Jack did an aerial flip, coming up behind it. Two kills in less than five minutes.

The memory gived me a jolt. I stepped to the side table

where the telegram was. Very slowly, like it was a booby trap. I read it over a few times before my heart started beating regular again.

Turned out my brother was missing, was all. It didn't make sense to me that somebody went to all this trouble to tell us. I went missing all the time—like today, missing from Saint Brendan's. One time I went missing for two days to practice survival skills for a Boy Scout badge. Nobody sent a telegram.

Only once or twice do I remember getting lost for real. There was the day I got a new Schwinn Camelback and was testing it out on long distances. One wrong turn and I ended up in Oyster Bay at Sagamore Hill—that place of President Teddy Roosevelt's where he kept that taxidermy collection. All I done was ask one of those gardeners to help me make a phone call to my ma. In no time Jack came in his pickup. While I waited, I examined a few moose heads. The bear and tiger rugs was terrifying to step on. I didn't get in trouble with Ma, because it was an honest mistake.

My brother was always the one to find me—when I was lost by accident, or hiding out on purpose. He knew all the hiding places, because he'd used them before me. When I was holed up with a good book in the hayloft and late for dinner, Jack came to get me.

Once I got lost in the woods. In the middle of escaping wild Indians, I ducked behind an oak tree. Changing parts, I became an Apache scout and climbed up a dogwood. Somewheres in the switch, I lost north. Starving to death, now just a plain ol' Irish-American, I was miles from home near a muddy creek when Jack found me. It was astonishing

how he'd drive up alongside me in that old Ford pickup of his whenever I got more than ten blocks from home. The reason I was able to play hooky now was because my brother was off fighting Hitler.

Every once in a while, Jack showed me a new place to hide. There was an abandoned house he took me to, a creepy place where an old widow once lived. Her husband was killed by a Confederate cannonball in the Battle of Gettysburg, which made it so the house was never painted again. The front porch was rotten and fallen in and there was snake nests up around the dowel trim. We entered through a back window and found ourselves in what used to be the kitchen pantry. Cans of food from before the Great War were still stacked on them shelves. Jack said you could get botulism if you ate from them. Once a bunch of folks died eating olives out of old rusty cans. I didn't like olives myself but got the point and didn't touch them cans except to check and see if there was money socked in one of them.

People don't trust banks anymore. That's good news for people like Jack and me who like to hunt for treasure. The obvious hiding place is a cookie jar or under a mattress. Problem is, thieves know this, so people have to be cleverer these days. Cans and jars left on shelves and in iceboxes are good options. And cornflake boxes.

Some fools will ruin a perfectly good book by cutting a hole out of the center of the pages. They'll find a thick one, like the "S" volume of an encyclopedia. They put treasures inside—small things like diamonds, rare coins, and postage stamps. Or Babe Ruth baseball cards which will be going up in value now he's retired. Then they put the book back on the bookshelf, thinking no one will notice. It's one of the

first places any halfway decent thief or treasure hunter will look. And what happens later when that same fool needs to learn about the Spanish Inquisition?

One good hiding place is inside of walls. A person good at carpentry can make a hole, put treasures inside where the insulation goes and then patch it up with plaster. People forget to attach a treasure map to their Last Will and Testament, and in that case, it's fair game. Jack and me tapped around the walls in that abandoned house listening for a change in tone. A couple times we used Da's hammer to bust a hole.

In this way we stumbled on hidden newspapers dating from March 15, 1889. We looked them over cover-to-cover, hoping for clues to a real treasure but never could find nothing. The funny thing was that on that day in '89, the German Navy tried to take over an island called Samoa. That was the first time I learned that we Americans owned an island in the Pacific Ocean. Most people didn't find out until last year when the Japanese tried to steal Oahu, Hawaii. Back in 1889, it took three American warships to scare the Germans off. Made you wonder—all these years later and my brother fighting the Germans off again.

People are always asking me how it is my brother became a fighter pilot. Well, he learned to fly while working for the A&P. He started out with the supermarket chain when he was not much older than me—mopping floors at night when the store was closed. We live around the corner from Mitchell Field and he worked his way up to a position as a driver—ferrying goods from the airfield to a warehouse.

Jack got in tight with the pilots who worked for the

A&P. Before long, he'd learned how to fly and was hired on as a pilot. You could say Jack was a self-made man.

His job was to bring fresh fish to markets around Long Island—fish stinking to high heaven if delivered in the back of a truck. Once he came home with fish eggs, which he said rich people called *caviar* and ate on crackers. I left some of them eggs on my sister Mary's pillow that night. Another time he brought home a live lobster, which he flew with all the way from Maine. My ma refused to let it in the house. She said she'd be satisfied with a fresh flounder on Fridays.

At the cinema one Saturday night, Jack seen a news-reel featuring the First American Eagle Squadron—a squadron of American pilots flying for Great Britain. The squadron was sort of like the famous Lafayette Escadrilles of the Great War. The Eagles were American pilots who enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force and later joined forces with the Royal Air Force—the RAF. Already they'd seen action against the Germans and were heroes in the Battle of Britain. All Jack planned on that night was seeing a good Western but he left a changed man. For my brother Jack, being a fighter pilot was just the sort of life he wanted.

In the summer of 1940, he hitched up to Montreal. America wasn't in the war yet. Funny thing is, he'd enlisted the same day France fell to the Jerries. At the time I don't think my brother had anything against the Germans. Jack had a kind word for everybody, even for my sister Mary, the thorn in my side. He wanted to dogfight and who could blame him?

My ma wasn't happy about him joining the RAF and fighting on the side of Britain. She and my da were born

and raised in Ireland—before independence, when the Irish sent all the good potatoes to England and were left with the crummy ones. My da, in his heart, wanted Jack fighting against the British and not for them. Not for the Nazis, mind you, but for the Irish Republican Army. Problem was, the IRA didn't have Spitfires.

Then Pearl Harbor was attacked, America jumped into the war, and my ma was looking forward to Jack's transfer to the U.S. Army Air Force. He'd fight for America—that was the main thing. Ma was hoping he'd be sent somewhere like Texas to train new pilots. Jack mentioned that as one possibility. I knew better. My brother would volunteer to go to the Pacific and fight against Japan. That was more his style.

Ma still hadn't come out of her room. I was back sitting on the parlor sofa, with the telegram in my hand, still baffled why we got it. Jack was a grown-up and was allowed to go missing if he wanted. So why'd somebody rat on him to Ma? He was old enough to drive a car, a motorcycle, and an airplane even. Ma teared her hair out when he joined up with England but there was nothing she could do to stop him. He was getting married in two weeks, for Pete's sake, even though my ma wanted him to marry a girl from the old country, not an English girl. It didn't make sense, none of it. If Jack was lost for real, the RAF needed to go find him, was all. Maybe they was too busy fighting off the Nazis and couldn't spare anybody for search and rescue. Maybe they'd telegraphed us hoping my ma and da would find him, so he'd keep fighting.

That's when an idea began formulating in my mind. I

was the best qualified to find Jack, what with all my treasure hunting experience. If he was hiding out from the Gestapo, I'd know the sort of hideouts he'd pick.

Jack was always the one to find me. It seemed only right I should help him out when he was in a tough spot. Besides, my da needed to find a job and be the breadwinner. That left me the only man in the family to take on the responsibility of finding Jack. I wasn't even able to find ten-cent lawn mowing jobs. What with the depression and all, people was either mowing their own grass or just letting it grow tall. And I was afraid of dogs, so being a paperboy was out of the question. I was no use to the family staying here in East Hempstead.

I put the telegram back on the side table and went to find myself a snack. Maybe I'd go out to the abandoned house, come to think of it. It was a good place to begin planning my trip to Europe. My sister Mary would get home from school at any minute and she'd start pestering me. I needed somewheres quiet to let the wheels in my head spin smooth. An abandoned attic was the perfect place to do it.

CHAPTER TWO

TREASURE HUNTERS GOT TO have a knack for observation—20/20 vision and big ears. King Tutankhamen's tomb was discovered by Howard Carter's trusted Arabian worker, who spotted a small step covered in sand—a step that for years other archeologists strolled over on the way back and forth to their tents. Down that staircase was the Egyptian Fort Knox.

By applying powers of observation, I avoid ever coming face-to-face with my sister Mary. All five senses can be used, even though two will do the trick.

Smell: She uses Ivory soap, which she thinks will clear up her pimples, and setting lotion to tame her frizz. Smoky house and you know she's in the kitchen cooking.

Hearing: She wears a charm bracelet. The Washington Memorial clinks against Sacagawea, the Indian lady who helped the Lewis and Clark Expedition. If that fails, I listen for the Chrysler Building clanging against a heart locket. Who gave her a heart locket is anyone's guess.

One night a month or more after the telegram arrived, I sat at the dinner table eating mashed potatoes with ketchup, a combination my ma said was a sin. She believed the only proper way to eat mashed potatoes, or baked potatoes

for that matter, was with a dab of butter and a sprinkle of salt. Tonight I observed she wasn't eating much at all and skipped the butter all together. The spuds sat in a big lump on Ma's plate, and she picked at them with the prongs of her fork. She got skinny this last month—I'd say from size 16 to 12. This normally would have her boasting as she put darts in the waistbands of her skirts. Now she let the clothes hang baggy on her. Her wedding ring was loose, too. While she was washing up one night, it slipped down the drain. Da had to take apart all the plumbing to retrieve it and meanwhile flooded the whole kitchen.

On top of that, she wasn't applying Woolworth's "Lustre-Cream" to her hair and she'd stopped plucking the white ones out. She stopped putting on the cameo brooch Da got her when they was courting. These were all bad signs. But the worst thing was she stopped baking cakes. I wanted more than the world to make her happy again, happy like before the telegram arrived.

My da sat quiet at the head of the table eating his fair share of boiled cabbage, shamefaced because he'd drunk our meat money down at the Cold Stream Pub and there was no ham to go with it. He was drinking more than usual since Jack went missing. Da kept to himself, but we knew he was worried about Jack by the way he stared at the ketchup bottle. My da was what you'd call the silent type, so I wasn't too troubled. My ma, on the other hand, had what the Irish call the gift of gab. She enjoyed telling us stories about the old country. Now all the stories had dried up in her worry.

As far as I could tell, nothing was being done about finding my brother—nothing but a whole lot of worrying, and my ma lighting a candle every day at Saint Brendan's

Church. What was needed here was action.

All we knew was his plane was shot down in German-occupied Belgium. The closest I'd come to that place was the Belgian Pavillion at the 1939 New York World's Fair, which happened on Long Island. It seemed obvious someone had to go over to the real place, find Jack, and bring him home. Seeing my ma like this, day after day, fortified me in my plans to be the one to do it.

On the best hand, the Belgian Resistance was hiding Jack from the Nazis. On the worse hand, he was somewhere deep inside Germany, a prisoner of war, and he'd need my help to escape. Never once did I entertain the notion that Jack was dead. Every adventure story I ever read ended happy, like in *Treasure Island*. If Jim Hawkins, just a boy like me, escaped fearsome pirates and got home to his mother, it stood to reason that so could Jack. Escape the Nazis, that is.

"Tommy, help your sister clear up," said my ma, folding her napkin into a perfect triangle and sliding back her chair. There was very crucial tasks to accomplish before bedtime, but I didn't want to upset her, so I said, "Yes, Ma," in my most obedient voice. I was rewarded with a shrug.

Only one of my two sisters was home that night. My older sister Anne (who we called Nancy for a reason I never got) was working nights as a waitress at a Greek diner out on Hempstead Turnpike. Each time I visited her there, she snuck me a big piece of Boston cream pie, and I loved her for it. She was a knockout—a female version of Jack, who could be in the pictures if he wanted. My friends were all carrying a torch for Nancy and always nagging me for information about her. They wanted Nancy's measurements,

offering me a year's worth of Cracker Jack prizes for the three numbers. I found their obsession revolting. Still, it made me proud to be blood related.

Mary was the third child in the family, after Jack and Nancy. She was 14 and the thorn in my side, as I might've already said. When my ma was out of the room she bossed over me in a way made me wish aliens'd snatch her up and take her to Pluto.

"Be careful to let the water get hot before you wash the dishes, Tommy," she said, as she sat on her duff examining her fingernails. Them nails were sharper than a samurai sword. Plus, she was taller than any boy in her class and had five inches on me. So I went to the kitchen sink.

One day, when I shot up tall as Jack, the tables would turn on Mary. For the time being I had to get my revenge on the sly. My da's straightedge razor blades and erasers were my weapons of choice. The last ten pages went missing from a romance novel took her three months to get to the end of. The night before she handed it in to the teacher, several sums were changed on her arithmetic homework. Best of all, on her final paper for history class, I replaced the word Henry—as in King Henry VIII—for Harry.

Now she was getting back at me by throwing dishes in the sink without wiping the food scraps first. "Oops," she said, as the leftover mashed potatoes from my ma's meal floated to the top of the soapy sink water, splashing onto the plates I'd just placed on the drying rack. I loathed her with the same intensity that people hated the Lindbergh baby kidnappers.

"Looks like you'll have to start all over," she said with that smirk she perfected by watching Betty Davis films.

“I’ll finish up without your help, thank you,” is how I solved the problem, just as she’d hoped. She went sauntering out of the kitchen, leaving me in peace to finish with the washing up, alone in my thoughts.

While drying the dishes and stacking them in the cupboard, I mentally went down the list of supplies I still needed to gather before leaving East Hempstead for Nazi-occupied Europe. A duffel bag hidden under my bed already contained a spare pair of blue jeans, a flannel jacket, and a baseball cap. Knowing I’d have to go undercover, I removed the Brooklyn Dodger insignia from the cap—a crying shame. In the likelihood I’d need a disguise, I packed the tie and dress jacket I was forced to wear to Mass on Sunday. For the same reason, I added to the bundle a pair of aviator sunglasses. Jack gave them to me before leaving for Canada. The sunglasses were one of my prized possessions because Jack wore them during flight training. They made me look as dashing as Robert Taylor, the movie star. It was Nancy who made this observation and so it was a fact.

But I still had to find a compass and a map of Europe. The map I’d cut from a *Rand McNally World Atlas* at the public library, using the same razor blade I applied to Mary’s novel. By then the blade was dull, useless as a weapon. Jack left his boxing gloves with me, but I’d need more than my two fists to duke it out with a real Nazi. There was Jack’s bow and arrow set—the one he used for shooting possums that came at night and ate our chickens. I was sharpening my skills by aiming at a target drawn on the barn wall. The bull’s-eye was the nose of Adolf Hitler. If I missed a little, at least got his mustache.

I’d also bring along a pocketknife, a slingshot, seven

darts, a boomerang, and a few boxes of firecrackers and matchsticks. Mary's nail file would go to Belgium too. If the SS had Jack locked up in chains, it would come in handy. The added bonus was knowing Mary's nails was getting ragged. Then there was the real four-leaf clover, glued onto a card, that my grandma in the old country sent me. That was coming along for luck.

When my da lost his job, I lost my allowance. There was only one place to get the dough needed for a journey to Europe, because banks had armed guards. I planned on confessing at a church somewhere far from Saint Brendan's—somewheres like Brussels for example. Three Masses on Sunday worked out to three collection plates coming my way. Normally I was moaning and groaning all the way to Mass, and so people began to notice.

My sister Nancy said, "Tommy, you'll become a saint if you keep this up."

"He's a good lad," said my ma, who was thinking I'd become a churchgoer so's to pray for my brother Jack. She'd attended Mass every morning since Jack went missing. She patted me on the head.

"Patron Saint of Brats and other Wayward Youths," said Mary in her nastiest voice. I flicked my rosary beads at her knee. "See what I mean!" she yelled out. But I'd managed the attack so nimbly, no one knew what she was going on about. I leaned back into the car seat and put on my cherub face. I felt for the wad of dollar bills I'd stuffed in my back pocket and said a Hail Mary just in case.

My departure was scheduled for September 2, 1942, the day that the school term began. All summer I trained, not only

with target practice but also by running laps around the block, doing 100 push-ups every morning, and by climbing trees more than usual.

Mr. Fisch, our neighbor who lived in the green Tudor at the end of the street, was teaching me German. His lawn was filled with miniature dwarf statues standing under a man-made waterfall that flowed into a six-foot long river with a wooden bridge across. Mrs. Fisch said it reminded her of Germany. For more than a month I learned the lingo. Mr. Fisch emigrated from Berlin before the Great War and didn't like Adolf Hitler no more than me. I clued him into my reasons for needing to know German and he swore to keep my plans a secret. But I suspected he didn't take me seriously, even after I asked him to teach me to say in German, "Have you seen a downed Spitfire around here?"

Four years of Latin class, and compared to that, German was a snap. I already knew how to say airplane three different ways: *das Flugzeug*, *die Maschine* or *der Flieger*. I could introduce myself in German and ask for directions. I knew how to count to 100 and how to buy a train ticket. I knew how to ask if the Gestapo was anywhereabouts—important to know, because they were the dreaded Nazi secret police: G-men with a capitol G. I made sure I learned how to say all of my favorite foods—like ketchup and marshmallow, which lucky for me turned out to be *ketchup* and *marschmalloσ*. Whenever I came for a lesson, Mrs. Fisch offered me macaroons from a tin she hid behind the bread box—it helped me keep up the stamina needed for my training.

Mr. Fisch is the one first told me that the Nazis had it out for Jewish people, which included him and Mrs. Fisch.

On one of my visits he handed me a book he said I'd better read, in the English edition because my German "*was* leaving room for improvement." First thing I asked is if the book had pirates.

"*Nein*," he said, in a hushed voice, "But *vay* many monsters." Then he warned me not to pass it on to bullies. That got my attention big-time, so I dived into that book.

Turned out it was written by Adolf Hitler himself. Not since Professor Moriarty was there a villain like him. On the first page he's talking about gobbling up Austria, now a done deal. Take this: "The plow will become the sword, and the wheat will be watered by the tears of war." Meaning my ma's tears, the stinker. Next he's describing himself as a boy: "I had somehow become a little ringleader among my group."

Well, no kidding!

I got to page two of *Mein Kampf* and gave up, but reckoned I'd better bring it along to Europe, being that Mr. Fisch claimed it was "Important reading if you *vunts* to comprehend the despicable Nazi agenda."

I needed somewheres to stay once I got to Europe. The only people I knew over there was in the old country. Irish people like to have big broods. I had grandparents in Ireland, plus hundreds of aunts and uncles. If I went anywhere near them, they'd give me up to the authorities—meaning my ma and da. I'd steer clear of Ireland.

Then it came to me. There was always Daphne, the 18-year-old English girl Jack was engaged to marry. I didn't know much about Daphne, only what I'd learned from a newspaper article, which mentioned a letter she'd written to

Ma. She said, and I quote, "I've put away the trousseau for a while but I'll be taking everything out again soon as I know he'll be back." I had no idea what a trousseau was, but she had to be keen on Jack or why marry him? I'd have to find the letter Daphne wrote to my ma. It was the only way to get her address in London without raising suspicions. For all I knew Ma burnt the letter. She went ape when Jack sent word that he was marrying an English girl. My ma wore black for a week. Still, it was worth looking for the letter. And come to think of it, this Daphne girl might even want to help me find Jack, as it might be between that and her becoming an old maid.

Ma kepted all of Jack's letters tied up with a ribbon in her top dresser drawer. I figured that's where I'd also find Daphne's letter, if it still existed. This drawer was forbidden territory, because Ma said it held her private things. I happened to know she kepted a stash of chocolate mints in there. Once when I peeked into the keyhole, I watched her sneaking one out. I'd a dickens of a time keeping myself out of that drawer once I knew what was in there.

Unless there was hitch-ups, everything was on schedule for my departure in early September. We heard on the radio that the American B-17 Flying Fortresses were now bombing Europe. This was good news to most Americans but worrying for us. Now my brother Jack was in peril. The clock was ticking and there was no more time to waste.

CHAPTER THREE

ON THE MORNING OF SEPTEMBER 2TH, 1942, hours before breakfast, I rolled out of our driveway headed west. The wheels was spinning so fast, my sneakers had trouble gripping the pedals. Any second thoughts, I ordered to get behind number one.

My plan was to go non-stop, but somewheres around New Hyde Park I had to untangle a shoelace that come loose and got jammed in the sprocket. Then, near the boarder of Queens County, the chain began slipping off. I stopped at an Esso gas station and the service boy helped me fix it free of charge. Wiping the motor oil from his hands he said, "Fill'er up, bub?" and we both had a good laugh. I gulped down a bottle of soda and was off again.

It took twenty minutes to pass alongside a cemetery. There was a million tombstones and still not enough space for all the people who had immigrated to the city. What with all the Irish who'd come after the famine, they was now stacking whole families one on top of the other like bricks. That's one of the main reasons my parents moved out to the sticks. Out on Long Island a person planted himself in his backyard if he wanted.

When I got bored, I entertained myself by imagining

the scene back home:

“Mary Rose Mooney!” my ma yells at 6:30 AM. “Wake your brother!”

“Yes—hiss—Mother—hiss—dear,” my sister says, while she removes a pin from a pincushion. Her hair is in curlers and her mind is bent on torture.

Entering my room, the first thing Mary notices is that the bed is made and I ain’t in it. She knows I never make the bed except when I’m bullied: the first clue. She guesses I’m playing some sort of trick, and her back goes up as she braces for a surprise attack, but none will come—that’s the sad part. She examines the bedcover and the way all the corners are tucked under. It’s Ma’s work, once a professional maid. It means one thing: I didn’t sleep in my bed.

Mary runs straight for Ma, hiding the pin behind her back. I almost hear Ma saying, “What are you saying, girl?” Ma puts down the sandwich she’s lovingly fixing for my lunch and begins making her way to my bedroom. All the way she’s calling out for me: “Darling boy! Sweetheart! Apple of my eye!”

I’ve been known to sleep in all kinds of places—sometimes in the attic, once in the crawl space under the stairs, and lots of times in the barn—so she isn’t panicking yet, just a little annoyed. This is the first day of the new school year and she wants me there on time.

Nancy, who worked the late shift at the diner, is woke up by Ma’s voice and steps out of her room, wrapping herself in a satin robe. “I’m trying to sleep, Ma,” she says, before joining in the search, which soon enough will prove to be a waste of time.

“Where ever could he be?” Ma says to my sisters and

to Da. By now he's wide awake and not too happy about it. He'd have a hangover from staying too late at the pub.

"He's run off to avoid school," Mary says. "I'll be sure to let Sister Bridget know."

"You'll do nothing of the kind." I picture my ma saying this as she slaps Mary's backside with a rolling pin. "This is none of your business, you good for nothing snitch. And now get off for school yourself. And try doing better than D's this term."

"I'm trying to be helpful," Mary says. "Harrumph!"

Once Mary leaves the kitchen, my ma says, "I hate to say it but the girl might be right. What else is the explanation? He's normally such a grand child. Maybe we should have switched him to the public school like he wanted. Tommy has a strong aversion to nuns."

They get it, only too late.

"Well, I'm going back to bed," Nancy says, because she likes to sleep in. "There's nothing to be done now. He'll show up this afternoon, once school is out, with a perfectly logical explanation."

But I wasn't returning home. Because later on that day, I was still making my way by bicycle to the Brooklyn Harbor to hop a ship headed across the Atlantic Ocean.

Coasting down a highway, being blasted by the wind made by passing trucks, I stayed as close to the edge of the graveled road as possible, what with all the broken glass along the way.

One puncture and my mission was over.

A passenger in a Chevy tossed a chewed up piece of bubblegum at my head. Drivers laid on their horns as they

swerved around me.

As I neared the city, I stopped to scout out a 1920's model Studebaker that was abandoned on the side of the highway. Sad to say, everything was already stripped, leaving nothing except a worthless, rusty skeleton. Standing on the roof, I was able to get a view of the city, which is always a thrill for anybody who's lived their whole life stuck out in the boonies. A Coast Guard seaplane trailed a plume of white smoke above the Empire State Building—on watch for German warships.

No thoughts of nuns right then, only nagging regrets that I hadn't kissed my ma goodbye. I'd left a note in her top drawer though, in place of the letter from Daphne I took with me. All would become clear the moment Ma went for a chocolate mint. Besides, if I turned back now there'd be trouble, and if I kept with my plan there'd be. . .

What?

Forcing the answers from my mind, I kepted on pedaling down Schermerhorn Street headed toward the East River—weaving between Checker cabs stuck in traffic, and sticking my tongue out whenever the cabbies honked their horns.

CHAPTER FOUR

ABOUT THE SAME TIME THE RECESS BELL rang at Saint Brendan's Catholic School, I made it to the Brooklyn Harbor. Sitting on a stack of newspapers, I checked my feet for blisters. Like I feared, bubbles rose off the surface of my heels and off the sides of my toes. Using the sharp point of my sister's nail file, I popped the blisters, squeezing out blood and water until my feet looked good as new. I shoved them back into the sneakers, thinking I'd earned a rest. I'd picked a good place for it, too, with a view of the East River and downtown Manhattan. The sun was full force on the skyline, rays of light shooting off skyscrapers and off the pure gold roof of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building. Lady Liberty waved at me and I blew her a kiss. Already there was a fresh wave of huddled masses pouring into New York 'cause of Hitler.

Across the water was where bankers like J.P. Morgan racked in gazillions of dollars. To my right stood the Brooklyn Bridge and I was glad I didn't have to pedal over it. My calves burnt and my thighs felt like toasted marshmallows. I'd never cycled so far in my life.

For a fleeting half-hour I worried that I'd made a mistake. Something felt wrong but I wasn't sure what. Then

I knew: I was troubled by being in New York City alone, a scary place with all sorts of lunatics running loose. The sooner I got out of there the better.

My Schwinn Camelback bicycle had to be abandoned, but it couldn't be helped. I loved that bike—its chrome hub-caps and cherry red paint, and the way the spokes buzzed at high speeds. Even though it was a long shot, I left a note in the basket with my address in East Hempstead. Underneath that I put REWARD in big capital letters, without getting into details. My ma would offer a dime to the good citizen who returned it, but by then it would be too late.

My plan was to find a boat leaving for England. I wanted to sail straight for Belgium but that wouldn't be possible. America was at war with Germany and the enemy now occupied France and Belgium. Rotterdam was out too. Most captains didn't want to risk being torpedoed by a U-Boat.

Once in England, I'd figure out a way over the English Channel. Why, the distance across was no farther than what I'd just bicycled. In 1926 a mother swum across the Channel, it was that easy. The only weakness with the plan: I was a cruddy swimmer. Once I came close to drowning in a riptide and Jack had to bring me back to life with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Hopefully the English Channel wasn't turbulent like the Atlantic Ocean. An ocean undertow can suck you down to where the octopuses live. Better to stick to the low end of a swimming pool, I say.

I pushed thoughts of swimming out of my head. What I needed was an ocean worthy ship, headed in the right direction. The harbor was a hubbub of men working to move freight on and off boats. One ship was bigger than Saint

Brendan's Church. Easy to hide out on a jumbo ship, I figured. Beginning my observations, I ducked behind a wood crate that must've contained a bread truck. Two men stood nearby taking a cigarette break. They looked like bodybuilders, with tattoos covering their arms. I got close enough to make out a Hawaiian hula dancer on the buffer man's arm. His friend was wearing a red bandana around his neck. My ears picked up bits of their conversation.

"I'd prefer the navy myself," said Hawaii.

"Nah," said Bandana, "I wanna see some action, not be stuck out on a ship for months at a time, twiddling my thumbs while California gets invaded."

"Aircraft carrier. That's the life for me, nothing boring about that—fighter planes landing left and right and my job to make sure they don't crash into each other."

"Nevah thought a that." Bandana was beginning to second-guess himself. "But heck—I'm kinda sick of ships after this gig." He shifted his attention back to the crates in front of them. "Let's get these boxes loaded and be off to a cold one. I'll have enough fightin' to do with the missus when I get home afterwards."

Inching around the crate to get a better look at the big ship, I observed something a bit worrying. The crate was stenciled with black writing. Whether it was Chinese or Japanese, I wouldn't know. But one thing I did know: what with war raging in the Pacific, I had to be careful not to board a ship headed for Tokyo. Then and there, I eighty-sixed all the cargo ships. And also any boat that looked too small or rickety.

Then my ears rang with the sound of a whistle blowing: a ship getting ready to launch. I followed my ears and

ended up looking up at a boat berthed a few docks down. What a beaut: a sailing yacht with polished brass fittings. The wheel was made of wood oiled to a shine. And it was painted my favorite color: blue. My calculations put it at over 100 feet, big enough to cross an ocean. Something this fancy had to belong to J.P. himself or one of his millionaire cronies. Rockefeller probably used it to cruise himself to Florida. This was the sort of ship suited me fine. For one thing, the food would be something. And as a stowaway, I'd get the leftovers. My mouth salivated as my mind pictured a sirloin steak and cheese fondue, with chocolate pudding and marshmallow topping for dessert. The smell of imaginary cheeseburgers hit my nostrils. I almost passed out with joy, or maybe because I'd skipped breakfast and lunch. *No potatoes on a vessel like this*, I thought.

"Bingo," I said, noticing the British flag waving from on top of the masthead. "Welcome aboard, Tommy!"

But there'd be no welcome aboard for me, not unless I looked like somebody who went golfing and ate caviar on crackers and lobsters that came all the way from Maine by private airplane. I knew the look, too, seeing that I'd once tried out for a job as caddie at the Piping Rock Golf Club. It was my job to retrieve golf balls from a fishpond, but I used my time to closely observe the rich folks, in the hope that their money would rub off on me.

Hurrying back to the Chinese crate, I ducked out of sight and took the Sunday-best jacket and tie from my duffel bag. A white handkerchief got placed in the breast pocket with exactly the perfect fold. The aviator glasses came next, perched on the tip of my nose, playboy style. My baseball cap topped off the disguise. The sneakers were the

only giveaway.

I removed a box of firecrackers from my duffel bag, planning to create a small diversion. But the matches were nowhere to be found. The whistle blew again, this time a long hoot followed by two short toots. My hands were shaking, knowing that all my plans were crumbling like oatmeal cookies. And all for the lack of a match. That's when I heard Hawaii's voice, like a foghorn to a lost sailor. I ran over and begged for a book of matches.

"Ain't you a bit young to smoke," he said.

"Ah, let 'im have 'em," said Bandana. I wanted to hug him.

I bolted for the yacht and thanked myself for forgetting to pack dress shoes, because without them sneakers on I'd'a never made it back to the yacht in time. As it was, the blisters slowed me down enough so that I arrived to find dockworkers loosening the ropes that attached the yacht to the pilings. Lighting a whole pack of firecrackers, I threw it up on the deck of the yacht, in front of the helm. This did the trick and had the whole crew running to the explosion with buckets of water.

I spotted a long rope and attached this to my boomerang, throwing it to the top rail with one elegant toss. My tree climbing practice came to good use, as I shimmied up the rope and leaped onto the deck. I did this so fluidly, no one noticed my presence when I slipped below deck and through the first door I found.

The room was used for storage. There were pillars of steamer trunks all embossed with little V's and L's. Some were locked but I found one that wasn't. It stood on end, and when I opened it, out spilled silky dresses of the sort

that made my sister Mary drool. I pushed my way into the trunk and managed to close it behind me.

The early start that day, and all that cycling from East Hempstead to Brooklyn, had wore me out. I held my hand over my mouth as I yawned, making sure that no noise escaped. It was stuffy inside a trunk with all them evening gowns but otherwise comfortable. Suffocation might prove a problem and I was glad that once my eyes adjusted, I saw light seeping through a crack where the trunk closed, a good indication of airflow. That's when it came to me: I'd left the door open. Out I went, fast as an alley cat, and shut the door. Darkness filled the room and I felt my way back to the trunk. Before long, I was dozing off.

I woke and—by the feel of my bladder—knew I'd been napping for some while. I listened but heard nothing outside of the trunk. The boat was rocking and I guessed we were underway. I had to pee badly and didn't want to spoil the fancy dresses. Besides, my legs was cramping up.

Once out of the trunk, I seen there was nothing to fear. The only stowaway in the storeroom was me. I felt around for my flashlight and had a look around for a place to relieve myself. A bucket stood in the corner and worked better than plumbing. My mind turned to my parched throat and I went hunting for something to drink. I found crates marked gin and vermouth but I wasn't fool enough to start in with that stuff. I needed to find something less potent, and that's when I heard the soft jiggling of glass bottles which—*jackpot*—led me to a case of soda. Things were looking up. I'd packed a jar of peanut butter, another of grape jelly, and a loaf of Wonder Bread. With a couple Cokes and a Milky Way bar, I soon was settled down to a

good supper. I knew it was smart to remain in the store-room until morning. By then we'd be too far out to sea to turn back and I would be on my way to England.

All of a sudden it dawned on me that just because the ship was British, didn't mean we was headed to England. Maybe the owners wanted to escape the war by bolting for Miami or the Caribbean. I might be stuck on a beach for the duration.

There was only one way to know for sure, and so I took out my pocket compass. I'd used some of the money from the collection plates to buy a professional level one, the kind used by lion hunters on African safaris or mountaineers climbing the Matterhorn. The salesgirl at Woolworths said it was the best money could buy.

I opened the case, unlocked the needle, and watched as it jiggled into action. Facing the direction we seemed to be sailing into, I saw the red needle jolt left and hover over the letter "N." My eyes moved around the rim of the compass, toward the path we was headed—toward the letter "E."

"E" for East! "E" for England!

I was glad, because I hadn't packed my swimming trunks and was in no way willing to wait out the war in Bermuda. I had a brother to rescue.