

CHAPTER ONE

New Heights

Our first jump is off this bitty little platform, like a swimming pool diving board, only onto turf instead of into water. I jumped off boulders higher than that thing when I was a kid. This is just to practice our landings, so nobody breaks any legs with carrying all the extra weight of the gear and all. Forward rolling, that's the key, forward with a rightward twist, so you half-corkscrew to the ground onto your hip, then flat forward with both arms stretched ahead like you're bodysurfing.

The trick is all in the knees. Landing stiff, trying to tough it out and remain upright, that's a chump's game. Instructor compared it to a contest of smash-up: one very stupid marine vs. planet Earth. Earth was so far undefeated and would likely remain that way for the foreseeable future.

But, guys being guys, and this being the Marine Corps, there are still a number of broken legs. Our course has a forty percent dropout rate, between one

thing and another. Heh. Love that statistic. Always will love that statistic. Makes me laugh. Heh.

We soon move up from the platforms to the towers — water towers and suchlike. Anything pretty high that doesn't tend to have pedestrians under it, in harm's way of a bunch of leatherneck lunkheads dropping out of the sky and squashing them. We are the new secret weapons, the marine paratroopers, the paramarines, and if I got a nickel every time I heard the word *elite* used to describe the kind of force we were gonna be, I could pile them nickels up into a jump tower so high none of us would survive it.

The Eastern Shore League had folded up its tent at the end of the 1941 season, like most of the quality minor league operations did. Nobody ever came right out and said so, but I guess it just seemed suddenly really dumb to have the fittest guys in America playin' ballgames when the rest of the world was out there killing each other in a war that was without a doubt gonna eventually include the USA. Of course, guys like me were always gonna join up anyway, but maybe others would have been happier playin' ball and hoping for the best as far as all the fighting and fate-of-the-free-world business was concerned.

So the leagues, especially the quality ones like the

class-D-level ESL where I was playing proudly for the Major League–affiliated Centreville Red Sox, went and made the decision easier for everybody. They did that by suspending operations for the duration of the war. And, as much as I enjoyed my time in Maryland, bashing baseballs and embarrassing pitchers on my way to eventually joining the big club up in Boston, I agreed completely that this was the right thing to do.

And so, the *next* right thing to do was obvious.

“You *know* I have flat feet,” my pal Zachary Klecko said to me when I called him up from our hometown of Sandusky, Ohio.

I laughed a lot at that, wasting a good deal of valuable long-distance phone time in the process. He could always make me laugh, that boy, without hardly even trying.

“Sure, I know that,” I said eventually. “You were the only guy I ever saw who could absolutely mash a ball off the wall in deep left center and *still* get thrown out at first base by three steps.”

It was his turn to burn up valuable long-distance phone time, but with his punishing, faintly growling silent treatment.

Then, “That happened *once*, Nardini, all right? *Once.*”

“Exactly,” I said. He was playing right into my

hands like we both knew he would from the moment he picked up the phone. Like he always played into my hands. “Most of the time there was nothing wrong with your feet at all. They’re only maybe a *little* bit flat. In every other way, *you* are just the fighting machine your country needs right now. You. Exactly you. Seen the recruiting posters? Some of them actually have your name on them, I swear. *Uncle Sam wants YOU, Mr. Zachary Klecko!* I promise, I saw one of those in the window of the post office on Meigs Street.”

That made him sigh, real loud. That’s how I knew I had him and the hook was in deep. The surrender sigh of his, it’s a sigh with *oomph*, like a pneumatic drill, that’s how I always knew.

“I have a really good thing going here in Detroit, Nick. Ford takes good care of its people. And they’re building a plant over in Ypsilanti that’s just for the purpose of manufacturing bomber aircraft for the war. B-24 Liberators, Nick. I already have a job lined up there, the day the plant opens, so I know I’m doing my part and there’s no way you can make me feel otherwise.”

The next valuable stretch of silence between us was not an accident and it was well spent.

“Uh-huh,” I said, very sympathetically.

“And I got a gal up here. Her name is Rose, and I’ve

been dying for you to meet her. And Rose got a job, too, up at the Ypsilanti plant, and we're gonna be going together, and building them Liberators, and so, like I said, doing our bit for the war effort . . .”

This time, out of respect because there was a lady involved, I remained silent for just a bit longer, like I was thinking about it, even though it was just for show.

“That’s nice,” I said. “But, no.”

“Um. No?”

“No. Yes, I’m sorry, but it’s no. I am sure Miss Rose is lovely and I am sure she will agree with me.”

“Ha!” my old pal bellowed over the line. “You haven’t even met her yet. But of course you’re sure; you’re always sure. So what, exactly, is it that my Rose is supposed to agree with you about?”

Oh, that was my boy, reliable as the tides.

“With this,” I said. “Rosie and I both know that you, my friend, are not meant to be *building* Liberators. You are meant to *be* one.”

I wasn’t bothered when he followed several speechless seconds of breathing by saying, “I’m hanging up on you now.” I wasn’t even bothered when he made good on that threat.

Because we both knew. And we both knew that we knew.