

WAR STORIES



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CHAPTER ONE

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The exploding artillery shells blossomed all around him, turning the dark of night into fiery orange day. The rattle of machine-gun fire sliced through the endless booming, carving a spray of concrete chips from the stoop dangerously close to his combat boots.

The soldier crouched in the doorway of what had once been a small bakery. Now it was just a burnt-out shell, along with the rest of the French town, after days of air and artillery bombardment, mortar strikes, and sniper fire.

He was separated from his unit—if there was any unit to be separated from anymore. His entire company had been cut to pieces by a Panzer division as they waited in vain for their own tanks to arrive. It had been how long—ten minutes? fifteen?—since he had last seen an American uniform. Not an upright one, anyway. The dead from both sides lay thick in the streets. The soldier had survived many battles in this war . . . but it was time to face the fact that this one might very well be his last.

The flash came a split second before the explosion. The bakery disintegrated around him, collapsing into dust. At the last instant, he hurled himself out into the street, just as the heavy

wooden door frame came down. He was alive—but now he was exposed. He could feel the dozens of German rifle barrels drawing a bead on him.

And then—hope. Rattling up the ruined street came the first of the American Shermans, late to the battle but maybe not too late for him. The soldier leaped onto the tank, scrambling up over the tread to a precarious perch on the lumbering vehicle's side. There he hung, holding on with his left arm as he fired blindly at the German positions with his right. One by one, adversaries went down—infantrymen, a machine-gun nest, and—

The missile came in with a whistling sound—a shoulder-launched anti-tank shell. He propelled himself free just as the Sherman blew apart in a huge fireball. The explosion launched him forward toward the German line. He hit the ground, somersaulted once, and bounced up, shooting.

“Trevor,” came a voice from behind him.

Blam! Blam! Blam! The rifle kept firing, taking out enemies left, right, and center. A German bullet tore into his shoulder. It didn't slow him down.

Louder this time: “Trevor.”

“I'm *busy!*” Trevor Firestone's thumb worked like a piston on the game controller in his hands. On the screen, the soldier took shot after shot. Three more bullets ripped into him, knocking him down to one knee. He fought on, bellowing in anger, triumph, and pain. Trevor bellowed right along with him, wrestling with the controller as if it would help destroy the enemy.

Pop!

For a moment, the soldier was frozen there, his face contorted with agony and heroic effort. Then the screen went dark.

“What?” Trevor wheeled around to find his father leaning over the game console, the plug in his hand. “What did you do that for? I was in the middle of this amazing battle!”

“I think two and a half hours of battling is enough for one day,” Daniel Firestone told his son.

“No!” Trevor exclaimed in true pain. “Didn’t you see how many Germans I was killing? It had to be a personal best! I can’t believe you pulled the plug before my progress could get saved! How am I supposed to level up now?”

Daniel looked disapprovingly at his twelve-year-old son. “I hope you understand that, in the real world, killing isn’t any kind of progress.”

“My guy’s fighting in World War II,” Trevor argued. “He’s supposed to kill Nazis. That’s his *job*. Ask G.G. He was *there*.”

“You’re right, Trev,” his father replied. “Your great-grandfather fought in World War II. And I’m sure he would tell you there was nothing glamorous about what he did over there.”

“Are you kidding?” Trevor crowed. “He was a hero! He was awarded the Bronze Star—and a medal from the French too. He’s always talking about how cool it was.”

“He makes it *sound* cool sometimes,” Dad amended. “And it was an important part of history. But there’s nothing cool about people killing each other.”

“That’s not what G.G. says,” Trevor insisted stubbornly. “Just ask him.”

His father sighed. “You can ask him yourself. He’s coming for dinner tonight. He’ll be here any minute.”

Trevor jumped up. “Why didn’t you say so?” He ran to the bathroom and began washing his hands.

Dad rolled his eyes. “I’ve been trying to pry you off that game console for more than two hours. But just the mention of Grandpa’s name electrifies you into action.”

Trevor toweled off his wet hands. It was true, of course. There was just no explaining it. G.G. was Dad’s grandfather, but really more like his father, because his grandparents had raised him from the time his father died. So Dad never saw G.G. as this big-time war hero. Plus, Dad was a history teacher. So he knew about war, but the only thing he ever talked about was how awful it was, and how we all had to pray that it would never happen again.

Trevor wasn’t crazy. He didn’t *want* war. But World War II was maybe the biggest, most important thing that had ever happened. No made-up story—book or movie—could even come close to it. The forces of evil came dangerously close to taking over the entire world. And the good guys from every part of the globe banded together to beat them back. Everybody talked about saving the planet, but those people actually *did* it. And to know someone who was a part of it—who was really there, helping to make it happen—was huge!

Trevor rushed past his father in the hall. “I’m going to wait outside.”

The two could already hear the symphony of car horns that meant that G.G. was coming up the block. Trevor ran out the

front door just in time to see his great-grandfather's 1998 Mercury Marauder chugging up the street at fifteen miles per hour, leading a parade of extremely impatient drivers in the cloud of black smoke from its dual exhaust.

Dad appeared on the porch beside Trevor. "He promised me he'd take a taxi. He shouldn't be driving anymore."

"Are you kidding?" Trevor chortled. "He's great. Look how he blocks both lanes. He's sticking it to everybody."

"The point of being a good person," his father explained patiently, "is not to stick it to anybody."

The big car turned into the driveway, clipping the recycling bin and flaking rust onto the pavement. The honking motorists sped by. One of them shook his fist out the window.

Gingerly, G.G. unfolded his lanky frame out of the car. The old man was all legs. It was a point of pride with Trevor that he was built like his great-grandfather. Not like Dad, who was shorter and stocky. At six foot two, G.G. was the tallest person in the family. He always complained that his height had been an extreme disadvantage during the war.

"We'd spend six hours digging a foxhole out of frozen mud, and I was the only one whose head stuck out of it. The snipers used to see me first. You learn how to duck, let me tell you."

Grinning, G.G. stepped onto the porch. He was limping slightly, which told Trevor that the shrapnel in his hip was "acting up" today.

"Hey, kid. What's the good word? Daniel," he added with a nod to Trevor's father.

Trevor beamed. "Hi, G.G.! You just missed the most

amazing game. I was shooting it out with these Nazis, and then this tank came—”

“Trev,” his father interrupted. “Can’t we let Grandpa into the house before the body count starts piling up?”

Inside, while Dad worked on the spaghetti, G.G. settled himself in the beaten-up old leather chair—the one with the brass nail studs that was kept just for him. In this case, *kept* meant kept away from the garbage collectors. When Trevor’s parents had still been together, Mom had tried to put it out with the trash at least three times. Dad had always rescued it. It wasn’t the cause of their divorce, but it definitely hadn’t helped.

“I finished that new model plane, G.G.!” Trevor called out as he set the table. “The C-54 Skymaster.”

“Yeah?” The old man brightened. “Let’s have a look at it.”

“Sorry—it’s at home. Mom’s house, I mean.” Trevor lived with his mother, stepfather, and twin half sisters, age six. Dad time was strictly on weekends—every *other* weekend. That was his only chance to see G.G.

“I remember when the airborne went out on a drop.” G.G.’s weathered face assumed a distant expression, as it always did when he was reliving his army days. “The C-54s flew in such tight formation that they blotted out the sun.”

“Wow,” Trevor breathed. Once G.G. started talking about the war, the stories just rolled out of him, each one cooler than the last. “That must have been an awesome sight.”

“Better than that,” his great-grandfather enthused. “It

meant it was somebody else's turn to go out there and get shot at for a change."

"Yeah, but that took a lot of courage, right? To jump out of an airplane?"

The old man shrugged. "Those airborne types thought they owned the world. We crawled through the mud with bullets flying all around us for every inch of progress. And how did they get where they were going? They took a plane."

To hear G.G. tell it, everybody in World War II had an easy job compared with infantry soldiers, which is what he was. The navy—they were out for a cruise. Pilots—nice view from up there. Tank crews—what did they know about sore feet? Engineers—easier to build a bridge than to march across it when the dynamite goes off. Sometimes, it almost sounded like G.G. hated the war. The old man had an explanation for that too. He and his comrades in Bravo Company had been almost as skilled at complaining as they'd been at soldiering. And their favorite topic for complaining was the fact that the entire Allied Expeditionary Force, clear on up to General Eisenhower, was having a sweet time of it, while leaving all the dirty work to them.

"Come on," Trevor chided his great-grandfather. "The airborne were heroes too. They were taking enemy fire when all they could do was hang there while their parachutes came down."

"I suppose," G.G. conceded. "The Germans shot at everybody, not just us. Come to think of it, the whole war would

have been a lot better without them messing it up—they and their Third Reich.”

The two laughed while, in the kitchen, Trevor’s father shook his head, half-amused, half-disgusted. This was the way their conversations always went—war, war, and more war. Sometimes he felt like he should put a stop to it. Trevor’s interest in World War II was turning into a full-blown obsession. He played video games about it, read books, watched movies, built models. Both his rooms—at his mother’s house and here too—were plastered with posters commemorating military units and major battles. Where were the sports heroes? The TV and movie stars? Was it natural for a twelve-year-old kid to be so totally engrossed in something that glorified death and destruction?

On the other hand, he was thrilled that Trevor had a real relationship with his great-grandfather. After all, what did a twelve-year-old boy have in common with a ninety-three-year-old veteran? It was a *good* thing—in a way. And the reason it worked was that World War II was all Trevor ever wanted to hear about. And Private First Class Jacob Firestone of Bravo Company had plenty to say on the subject.

“Dinner’s ready.” Trevor’s father set the bowl of spaghetti and meatballs on the table. “One request tonight: Can we at least be done with our salads before anyone mentions the word *grenade*?”

Trevor rolled his eyes. “Dad—you’re insulting G.G.”

The old man took his place at the table. “Don’t worry about me, Trevor. I don’t insult so easy. You couldn’t insult me if you—”

“Dropped a grenade in your pants?” Trevor finished.

G.G. shot him an appreciative grin. “Good one!”

Dad sat down with a sigh. “You two. Eighty-one years separating you, and you’re both the same kind of idiot.”

Trevor beamed. Having anything in common with his great-grandfather was okay with him—even idiocy. But he did his best to hold off on the war talk until they’d started on the spaghetti.

Spaghetti was G.G.’s favorite food, because during his deployment in Europe, it was “the only thing those slop-slingers in the kitchen couldn’t turn into latrine runoff.”

Trevor cackled his appreciation. That was another thing he admired about the war. Soldiers were great at cracking jokes.

His father made a face. “Can we please talk about something else?”

The old man pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and began to unfold it. “This letter came in yesterday’s mail. It’s from the village council of Sainte-Régine.”

“Sainte-Régine?” Dad repeated.

G.G. shrugged. “Some one-horse town in France. Our unit passed through there back in forty-four.”

Dad took the letter from his grandfather and scanned it. “According to this, you didn’t just pass through. You fought a battle there and liberated the place!”

“What?” Trevor was up like a shot, reading over his father’s shoulder. It was true. PFC Jacob Firestone of the United States Army (Retired) was the last surviving participant of the Battle of Sainte-Régine. That coming May, in commemoration of the

seventy-fifth anniversary of victory in Europe, the village was holding a celebration of its liberation from German occupation. And they were inviting G.G. to be the guest of honor.

Trevor was bursting with pride. “Wow—it’s like the whole town wouldn’t even be there if it wasn’t for you.”

G.G. was modest. “I’m sure some other unit would have turned up if we’d decided to sleep in that day.”

Dad set the letter down on the table. “It’s a real honor. It’s a shame you have to miss it.”

Trevor was horrified. “Why would he miss it?”

“France isn’t exactly around the corner,” his father explained. “It’s just not practical for a man his age to make a trip like that.”

“But he *has* to go,” Trevor pleaded. “He’s the only guy from the battle still alive! There’s nobody else left for those people to thank.”

Dad tried to be patient. “Think about Grandpa. Does he ever like people to make a big fuss over him? You know he doesn’t. He doesn’t visit the monuments or go to the reunions. He refuses to be honored in the Memorial Day parade. He won’t even look out the window when it passes by his house. Believe me, the last thing he wants to do is take a trip to France.”

“But Dad—”

“If you two knuckleheads are through deciding what I want,” G.G. interrupted, “maybe you’d like to hear my take on all this.”

Grandson and great-grandson turned to face the old man.

“I’m going,” he announced.

Trevor launched into a victory dance.

“Be reasonable,” Dad urged his grandfather. “Don’t you realize what a strain this trip would be on you?”

“I made it once before,” the old man snapped back. “With a fifty-pound pack on my back and people shooting at me.”

“You were eighteen years old!” Dad argued.

“Seventeen. I lied about my age at the recruiting center. People said they’d never take me, but I proved them wrong. Just like you’re wrong now.”

Daniel Firestone stood his ground. “Grandpa, I just can’t let you make a trip like this alone.”

His grandfather scowled at him. “Who said anything about being alone?” He grinned at Trevor. “Ever been to France?”

Trevor’s jaw fell open halfway to his knees.