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Opening extract from

Under a War-Torn Sky

Written by

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For John, who has steadfastly believed in me;
For Megan, whose astute questions helped build the story;
And for Peter, whose unspoiled joie de vivre
I would wish for all boys growing into men.

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Chapter One

March 1944.

"Pull her up, Hank! Pull her up!"

Henry's arms were locked through the steering wheel of his B-24. He was yanking with all he had, but the wheel was stuck solid. "I can't! She won't budge!"

The bomber was in a death dive. Henry's pilot had hurled them into the dive to put out a fire in the plane's engines. The fire had erupted after a Nazi fighter shot up their wing. The force of the winds against the bomber as it hurtled towards the ground was the only thing strong enough to snuff out the flames. Still, Henry knew the pilot's strategy was a real gamble. There was no guarantee that once the plane was

rocketing to earth her two pilots would be able to wrestle her level again. Right now the plane was bucking and rattling enough to shake a guy's teeth loose.

Over the intercom Henry listened to the panic of the crew: "We're going down!"

"Do something, Hank! Please! I don't wanna die!"

In his mind, Henry heard the distant growl of his father: *Do* something, *you idiot*. The surly voice slapped him into action.

Henry had learned to cheat death at the very last second during flight training. Hadn't he repeatedly yanked his plane up just before smashing into something, forcing out a big-man guffaw to hide the fact he'd almost wet his pants, he'd been so afraid? He could do this. Just yank the wheel, Henry, yank it hard, to level the plane off.

BANG-BANG-BANG-BANG.

A German Messerschmitt zoomed past to strafe the bomber's cockpit one last time. Henry couldn't believe the pilot would take the trouble to target a plane already in flames. Ha, you missed me, he thought.

"Do something, Hank! Pull her up."

Henry looked down at the wheel. He stared at the metal half-circle. *Put your hands on it, fool.*

But he couldn't. The Messerschmitt's bullets must have ripped his arms clear off. He stared. He couldn't find them anywhere in the cockpit.

Henry looked up through the shattered window and saw

the green, leafy domes of treetops racing towards him. Closer, closer. There wasn't anything left to do but die. He tried to scream.

With a choking gasp, Henry lurched up. He clenched his hands. They were there. He felt every finger. Henry recognized the stink of burning coal, wet woollen socks hung up to dry, lingering cigarette smoke. He was in his Nissen hut on base in England. It had just been another nightmare. He was awake. He was alive.

Quietly, Henry eased himself back down on his cot. He was grateful not to have woken up the other fliers who slept in the cold hut. They could be tough on a fellow if they smelled his fear. It was hard enough being the youngest copilot there. Henry was just barely nineteen.

He rolled over, still trembling. He wanted to get up and walk off the nightmare, but he couldn't without waking everyone. So he flipped onto his back, whacking his ankles against the cot's iron rails. It creaked loudly. With embarrassed irritation, he wiped leftover dream sweat from his face and stared up at the bottom of the shelf over his head. On it, where no one else would see it, he'd taped a poem called "High Flight". A nineteen-year-old American pilot, flying with the Royal Air Force, had written it just before he'd been killed. Henry knew every word.

He closed his eyes and tried reciting it silently to ease himself back to sleep:

Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth,
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds – and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of – wheeled and soared
and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air.
Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace
Where never lark, or even eagle, flew;
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.

That's how Henry had thought flying would be – dancing the skies, skating the winds, playing tag with angels. But flying bombing missions hadn't been anything like that. The missions had been teeth-gritting beelines to targets, dogged all the way by men shooting at them. He didn't know how many planes he'd seen explode, scattering debris and bodies through the clouds, how many screams of pain he'd tried to ignore during the past few months.

With a groan of frustration, Henry put his hands over his eyes and rubbed his forehead to clear his mind. That's no way to go back to sleep, he told himself. He listened to the

deep, steady snores of his bunkmates. See, they're not afraid.

Suck it up, boy. A whiner won't last long in this world.

Henry pushed his father's voice out of his head. He was sick of that voice and its harsh assessments. It had been a real struggle for Henry not to see himself the way his father seemed to. He'd thought he'd be free of his father here, overseas, in a war, a chaotic world away from their isolated farm. But the voice haunted him still.

Henry made himself think about blueberry pie. To smell his ma's blueberry pie – that would calm him down. It always did. He drifted home to Virginia and dreamed of his mother, Lilly, standing by the kitchen sink. She was awash in Tidewater sunshine:

"Get your fingers out of my pie, you sneak," Lilly chided. "It'll be cool soon enough. Then you can have a proper slice and sit down to the table like civilized folk." Her dimples showed as she said it, though, so Henry knew he could push it. He pulled out another small wedge even though it scalded his fingers. He popped it into his mouth.

Grinning, Lilly picked up a wooden spoon and shook it at him. "You're a hambone," she said and caught him for a hug.

"Lieutenant Forester?" A voice cut through the bleary warmth of Lilly's kitchen. "Get up, Lieutenant. You're flying today."

Henry forced his eyes open. Sergeant Bromsky stood by his bunk, shining a flashlight. The blueberry pie evaporated.

"I'm up, I'm up," Henry said and stretched himself awake. He was used to arising at 4 a.m. on his family's chicken farm. But most of the other fliers weren't. Sleepy groans filled the Nissen hut as the sergeant and his flashlight beam moved from bed to bed to rouse fifteen other pilots, navigators, and bombardiers – the officers of four bomber crews.

"Where we heading, Sarge?" Henry asked. "Any idea?"

Sergeant Bromsky came back to Henry's cot. It was next to the small black stove that heated the thirty-foot-long hut. Built like a tin can cut in half and turned onto the ground, the hut had only one door and two windows at each end. It was dark and damp. Winds from the nearby North Sea found every crack. Even right beside the stove, the airmen shivered.

Sergeant Bromsky faced his backside to the stove. "The word is Germany, pretty far in. But keep it to yourself. You know the rules, Hank."

Henry ground his teeth. That meant about a thousand miles round-trip under attack by enemy fighter planes and anti-aircraft guns on the ground. They'd just hit Berlin and lost almost half the base's crews.

"What number is this, Hank?" the sergeant asked.

The sergeant always asked Henry what number the day's mission was, as if he were rooting for him to get home. His support helped Henry. In return, he gave Sergeant Bromsky his cigarette rations, even though the other guys in the hut made fun of him for not smoking them himself. Henry had been born and raised in tobacco country, and he just hated the stuff.