

FOG AND DARKNESS

CHAPTER 13

Kenny was glad to learn they were going back to Pavuvu. He would be able to get some liberty and see Claudia again. He'd pulled himself together, more or less, and was trying not to wallow in guilt and regret over the losses on Peleliu. He took little satisfaction in knowing his company's casualties, bad as they were, were lighter than those of other units.

He was swimming in unwanted bitterness. Bitterness at the brass for sending great young guys to their death on this shitty piece of rock in the first place. Bitterness at the Japs for being so damned hard to kill and for being such efficient killers themselves. He used to feel bad about shooting one of them. Not anymore. Now he felt no more anguish than if he were stepping on an ant. *What's happening to me? Get over it, get over it, stay human*, he kept telling himself.

Before boarding the ship, he spent a sad hour meandering through the rows and rows—far too many rows—of fresh graves. Some of them were fairly empty because there hadn't been much of the victims left to bury. Kenny shed some tears at Hoagy Carmichael's wooden cross. "Farewell, Hoag," he whispered. "Nobody can shoot at you now. You're a great Marine. Semper fi, buddy."

A chaplain stood one row over, also teary-eyed, holding a Bible. He was murmuring something. Kenny thought he heard him say, "Bless these boys."

As an LVT ferried him across the lagoon to troopships anchored beyond the reef, Kenny looked back at that godforsaken island where he'd somehow survived a cataract of savagery. "So long, Peleliu. Now go to hell."

The trip back to the Solomon Islands would take two days, the ships zigzagging because these were torpedo waters—Japanese submarines were still active. During the voyage, Kenny thought a lot about the fun he used to have with Hoagy Carmichael, the poker games, the arm wrestling, the bragging about Wisconsin bratwurst, the movie stars they'd like to date—although date wasn't exactly the word they used. Hoagy usually named Lana Turner or Jean Harlow, sometimes Hedy Lamarr. For Kenny, Ingrid Bergman almost every time. All that was over now. Kenny reflected on that witch doctor who'd gazed into Hoagy's eyes before the battle.

A white hospital ship with big red crosses painted on its sides didn't have enough beds for all the wounded, so some were placed in wardrooms aboard the troopships. Kenny visited some of the patients after his ship was under way. They were a sorry,

bandaged-up lot, several taking plasma intravenously. “You’re gonna be okay, Richie,” he told a guy who’d been in his platoon at Cape Gloucester. “You did a great job. God bless.”

The klaxon sounded, shrill and insistent, and Kenny felt the ship heel into a sharp turn. “General quarters, general quarters!” the squawk box bellowed. A sailor stuck his head in the hatch. “Enemy sub sighted, sir, better get back to your quarters right fast.” Kenny did, despite almost being trampled by a horde of seamen scrambling to their battle stations. Sitting on his bunk, he thought, “Just great. All I need now is to go swimming with the sharks.”

That didn’t happen. The crew eventually was released from general quarters, and he felt the ship reduce speed and settle back into its zigzag course. A sailor told him American destroyers forced the sub deep and dropped depth charges. Kenny tried to write some notes in his journal for the book project, but just couldn’t. Peleliu was too recent, the experiences too fresh. Not to mention the sub scare.

Instead, he found Billy Ninetrees and pulled him into conversation. “Billy, I saw you consoling that private back on Bloody Nose when he buckled under fire. That was good of you.”

“That was Marvin McAlester.”

“What’s that guy’s background?”

“He worked on a lobster boat in Maine and also was a Golden Gloves boxer, a middleweight. Tough guy. But no matter what they did before, you never really know who can cut it and who can’t until the shooting starts.”

“No, you sure can’t,” Kenny said. “Well, we can’t leave Marvin in your platoon. I’ll transfer him to the supply corps or maybe the cooks. I’ll set it up when we get back.”

“Good idea, sir.”

“Stop calling me sir, damn it.”

Before they reached their destination on the second day, Kenny was called into Colonel Harris’s quarters. He waved off Kenny’s salute and said, “I know you feel bad about your losses on Peleliu—who wouldn’t? But your company did a bang-up job and you led it well, showed some good initiative.” The colonel’s threat of disciplinary action back on Peleliu apparently was a dead issue. “Now then, I’ve cut orders for Wade and Kingman to go stateside. They’ve done their bit. They’ll be instructors now.” Kenny was glad for them but sorry too. Billy Ninetrees would be the only member of the old Guadalcanal gang still with him.

“They’ll be missed, sir,” he said. “I could use them, but I’m glad they’ll be out of harm’s way. Will they get decorations?”

“You tell me. What do you suggest?”

“Bronze Star for Wade, sir, and Meritorious Service Medal for Kingman.”

“Fine, they’ll get them.” Harris jotted something on a notepad, and looked up. “Oh, there’s one more thing.” He held up a small box. “Pin these on your shoulders.”

Kenny opened the box and saw a set of captain's bars. He felt his mouth drop open. "My gosh. I—"

"You've earned them, Nielsen. You command the Second Battalion now. Congratulations."