

# DIVINE ENDORSEMENT

PART ONE OF THE JOHN HARROD TRILOGY

FIRST CHAPTER

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## DIVINE ENDORSEMENT

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## CHAPTER 1

ONE WIN. I only wanted one win that mattered in my lackluster life. If I won today, I could at least feel like my college wrestling career was worth all the pain and heartache I suffered through over the last four years. Then, I could face the world after graduation with confidence and discover what my purpose in life was without the distraction of homework assignments and exhaustive workouts in an overheated gym. Only one more match stood in my way.

My career-long rival, Anderson, loosened up across the mat from me. I eyed him with an intensity and confidence I hadn't felt in weeks. When I turned to the stands to look for my sweetheart, Mary, my eyes locked on those of a strange old man sitting in the bleachers. The old man stared coldly back at me with a focused air of urgency. Among the hundreds in attendance for the NCAA Division I Wrestling Finals, he got in my head faster than Anderson pinned me the last time we wrestled.

I always came up short against the two-time heavyweight champion, but I felt today was my day. Nobody can win all the time, not even him. He cornered the market on wrestling glory and treated me as nothing more than an inconvenience to him. That old man in the bleachers was the perfect distraction I didn't need at this point.

Next to the old man sat my girlfriend Mary, my petite lovely with wavy brown hair that gently cascaded over her shoulders. My parents, who managed to attend this last meet, sat next to her. I felt relieved they were all here. My mom watched with a bouncing knee but managed to shoot a nervous smile my way.

I spied Anderson while I strapped on my headgear. He was an undefeated, egotistical thug with Olympic aspirations and he kicked my ass twelve times over the last four years. Just when I thought I had him, he came up with something that knocked me flat, the tricky bastard. The crowd grew more excited as my match neared, and he sought to close out his college career by pinning me in record time.

I glanced over at Mary and noticed the old man was gone. There was no way he got out of there during the three seconds I looked away. Anderson eyed me angrily, the way he did every time we squared up. I never forgot the awesome failure I felt when he pinned me in the first thirty seconds of the first period the last time we met. If anything, I wanted him to go to Olympic training with the knowledge that he got beat by an average guy like me.

My best friend Dave Sowell, a Texas transplant from cattle country, helped me train for this match with the hope that I'd go out on a high note.

"Don't take his crap, John," Dave said. His chestnut-colored, Longhorn mustache barely stirred as he spoke.

I nodded, hopped up off the metal folding chair, and jogged in place to get my blood flowing. I shook out my arms and hands to shave off some nervous energy, but today I couldn't shake them enough. The

cheers from the bleachers echoed off the painted cinder block walls and funneled into my aching ears.

As the seconds leading up to my match passed, I thought of the old man again. I looked at Anderson, then for the old man. Why was I so concerned about him when I had a big match in a few seconds? The judge blew his whistle, and I dashed onto the mat to square off against my adversary. The split second after the whistle chirped, I tackled Anderson for a quick takedown and scored two points. He squirmed on the mat as I struggled to keep him under control. How a guy his size could be so nimble amazed me. Before I knew it, he was on his feet for an escape and got himself one point.

We grappled again. He spun me down to the mat and knotted my arms. The gym lights above me sent a familiar wave of failure through my mind. While I struggled like a fly in a spider web, my eyes squeezed shut, and like it had many times before, the whistle blew. The referee's brash slap on the mat was the final nail in the coffin that was my wrestling career.

I remained on my back for a moment, absorbed my humiliating defeat, and slapped the mat in utter disgust. I shook Anderson's hand then the referee raised his massive arm once again. Damn it.

I plopped onto a brown metal folding chair beside my teammates, and clutched my head. The magnitude of another failure rested comfortably on my shoulders and it never felt heavier.

"John, I know losing sucks, but don't worry about it. It's over now," Dave said in his thick Texas accent and patted my shoulder.

My wrestling career was over. I'd miss the competitions, the workouts, but not the sour tinge of sweat that rooted in my nostrils for the last eight years. I didn't close out my season on the high note I wanted, and I couldn't get over it.

While I wallowed in a heavy dose of self-pity, I trailed Dave, Mary, and my parents as we left the University of Chicago gym and climbed into my dad's Cadillac Fleetwood to go back to my apartment near Wrigley Field. The car's fan blasted hot air throughout the freeze that gripped the interior but did nothing to warm my spirit. During the ride home, I fielded the usual consolations.

"Don't feel too badly, son," Dad said. "Anderson's a three-time national champ and an Olympic favorite. You have to give him some credit."

"I thought I had him figured out this time," I said. I looked toward the Chicago River at the broken ice sheets caused by a passing barge. "I guess I'm not that good."

I gazed at my 1986 NCAA heavyweight class second place plaque. It'd look great next to my junior league third place bowling trophy.

"John, you're plenty good," Mary said and squeezed my hand. "Give yourself some credit. You'll get your chance one day. Then everyone will see the great guy I see. God has a plan for everyone."

I appreciated Mary's spiritual positivity, but so far, God didn't have much laid out for me other than the rough path of disappointment and unachieved glory I knew all too well thus far in my life.

"Judging from my lack of success, I can already see the kind of plan He has for me. Nobody remembers the also-rans," I said while I stared out the window and my warm breath fogged the car window.

"Everything will turn out fine for you. You'll see," Mary said with her sweet smile that hooked my heart for three years running.

Dad parked the car in front of my apartment building, and we headed inside. I led us inside the apartment Dave and I shared for the last two years, dropped my sports bag on the floor, and shook off my black leather World War Two-style bomber jacket. I hung our coats on a row of coat hooks on the wall beside the door.

I brushed by Mary and caught a waft of lilac from her hair. Warm memories of the first day I met her sophomore year filled my mind. I remembered how my face flushed when she smiled at me that first time. I knew then that she was the girl for me.

“Well, I’m glad we got to see your last wrestling match, son,” Dad said as he gripped his brown leather fur-lined gloves.

“I wish the result were different, but thanks for coming out,” I said. “At least you got to see me win a couple prelim matches yesterday, so the trip wasn’t a total waste.”

“Come on, John enough of the sad sack stuff. I’m proud of you.”

“We both are,” Mom said. She reached up to my head and pulled it down toward her to kiss me.

“Thanks,” I said. “I did everything I could but still got my butt handed to me on a platter.”

“You’ll do great things with your life, John. This is just wrestling, so keep it in perspective. You’ll find your purpose.” Mom caressed my cheek with her soft, warm hand. She had an alleviating touch that always made me feel like a five-year-old boy.

“Sure you will, Son. Listen, your mother and I have a dinner date to get to. Don’t beat yourself up over this. You have the rest of your senior year to think about what you want to do with your life,” Dad said and adjusted his red plaid alpaca scarf.

“You don’t need to be sad,” Mom said with a proud smile. “You’ll be fine.”

“Okay. Thanks for coming out. I appreciate it,” I said.

“You have nowhere to go but up,” she said.

After my parents had left, the thoughts of the old man returned.

“Hey, Mary, at the meet, did you notice the old man sitting next to you?” I asked.

“Old man?” she asked quizzically.

“Yeah. Right before my match started, I spotted an old guy in the bleachers. He just sat there staring at me. He totally broke my concentration.”

“You’re not blaming an old man for losing, are you?”

“Of course not. Do you remember what he looked like?”

“No, I don’t. Sorry, John.”

I threw my hands up and felt my mouth hang open in disbelief.

“How could you miss him? He sat right next to you,” I said. “I know I didn’t imagine him.”

“I guess I was too busy watching you that I didn’t notice him,” Mary said.

“Maybe so.”

I replayed the moment I first saw the old man. She said she didn’t remember him, but I recalled that she slid away from him a little as if he sat too close to her. I didn’t want to make a big deal over some old guy who sat next to my girl, so I let it go.

“Mary, you want to go to Sluggers with us?” Dave asked.

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “You can help celebrate the end of my wrestling life.”

“Sorry, but you’ll have to go without me again,” she said.

“You have to go this time. It’s always where—”

“The action is,” she said like she had many times before. “We have midterms next week, you know,” she said.

She glided her arms around my waist, and a big smile crossed her wondrous face. I kissed her twice and slid my hands over her shoulders.

“You two need some quiet time?” Dave asked with a smug grin.

“I’m leaving,” she said with a smile. “Call me when you get back, okay?”

“Sure thing, baby,” I said.

Mary grabbed her coat and left. A wave of concern washed over me as I again thought of the strange old man.

“What’s wrong, boy?” Dave said.

“I don’t know. I’m still bummed about the meet, I guess,” I said.

“Sluggers will fix that. You can’t stay in moping all night. Clean up, and we’ll head over.”

Dave had a point, so I grabbed my gym bag and headed for the bathroom.

Sluggers on a Saturday night was always fun, even when I felt down. We bought a bucket of beers, went upstairs to the batting cages, and discussed our approaching plans for the summer.

“You’re not going back to Texas after the bike trip?” I asked.

“I thought about it a lot, but I like it here. My Pop wasn’t happy because I won’t be around to help with ranching, but he has plenty of help already. I told him I’d come down for a visit after we get back. Besides, he was thrilled when I told him I got accepted to grad school.”

Upon first meeting Dave, I never pictured him, a ranch hand, as a genius electrical engineer. He breezed through the coursework seemingly without much effort, but I knew he studied his butt off. If I didn’t know he was from Texas, I would’ve sworn he was a biker. Oddly enough, he didn’t like motorcycles or tattoos.

“That’s great,” I said. “I guess we know what you’ll be doing next year.”

“What about you? What are you going to do after we get back from France?” Dave asked. The metallic clink of aluminum bats on baseballs pierced the Phil Collins music that blared through the bar’s speakers.

He had to ask. My grades as a computer programmer were average, but making a career of it didn’t interest me anymore. Once on track to play college football, a lame knee injury right out of high

school branded me damaged goods. Wrestling proved to be a suitable alternative, except for my misfortune of being in the same weight class as Anderson.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I thought about going to graduate school to learn more about business. Programming doesn’t seem sexy anymore.”

“Have you given any more thought to pro wrestling? You’re as big as Lou Ferrigno.”

“The spotlight isn’t for me,” I said then noticed I was subconsciously gripping my bicep.

I loved weightlifting. Over the last few years, I’ve trained like a bodybuilder, a powerlifter, and used every other workout combination in between. Being able to lift heavy weights was the only thing I did with confidence. No referee could stop me with his annoying whistle. Besides, I loved feeling strong.

“You don’t know for sure,” Dave said. “It could be good for you.”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“All right, if fame isn’t for you, how about quantum physics?”

“How the hell am I going to make a living at that?” I bellowed. “I’d need a doctorate first, and I don’t have the smarts or the energy to study another five years.”

Dave removed a worn, red batting glove from his back pocket and shoved his hand into it.

“You got a thing for time travel,” Dave said. “You’re good at math. There has to be some kind of job out there for you. Maybe you can find a way to travel faster than light.”

“Wow, I thought I was a dreamer. Anyway, time travel is fantasy, but it’d be sweet to be able to go to different times as an observer.”

The idea of going to different times and places captivated me. Who didn’t daydream about visiting old relatives, making untold

fortunes, or walking the grounds of the 1934 Century of Progress Exposition like my grandparents once did?

“All the scientists think it’s possible,” Dave said.

“I’ve read the theories, but that’s all they are, theories. People will never be able to go back in time, not with machines anyway.”

“I guess you’re right.”

I thought about the prospect of going back in time in less scientific terms. “Suppose traveling back in time is more intangible than physical. What do you pass through if you go through time? Air and space?” I explained.

“Maybe.”

“To travel through time, you’d have to know what you’re moving through. Nobody knows what the parts are that comprise time. Therefore, how could anyone build a machine to go through it?”

I never bought the idea that a machine could transport a person to a place in a different time. What could a machine do to manipulate something people can’t see but only sense?

“It beats the heck out of me,” he said as he selected a bat.

“That’s why I don’t think a machine could work. Maybe there’s another way nobody thought of.”

“Well, if you do go back in time, don’t mess up my life.”

Most people fantasized about going back in time to make a fortune through stock picks or buying oil land before anyone knew there was oil there, but not me. The nostalgic perspective of the past enamored me the most. I wanted to observe or maybe live the way people did back then, preferably in the 1930s.

“I’ll try not to. Anyway, are you up for drunken batting?” I asked.

“You like to live dangerously,” Dave said and chugged his beer.

“Is there any other way?” I asked and smiled. We clinked our beer bottles together and drank. Dave lifted the gate latch and entered the cage.

With my last year of college coming to a grateful end, thoughts of our trip to bicycle across France came into focus. The trip provided a nice diversion until I'd have to decide what I'd do with my life.

Despite growing up in the Texas backcountry, Dave took a liking to the city. Like others our age, he fell in love with the summertime vibe of Cubs baseball. At Sluggers, folks loved to trash talk the White Sox and defended the poor Cubs at every turn.

On a clear Saturday morning, my mom stopped by to pick me up to go grocery shopping at Jewel. We pulled into the parking lot and cruised up and down a couple aisles searching for a parking space. Whenever I entered a parking lot, I usually drove straight to the back of the lot and parked in the first open spot I saw. My mom always had good luck and today wasn't any different as she found a parking space near the store's entrance. The parking lot still had remnants of small, dirty-snow mountain ranges at the back of the lot where the plows piled the snow high a month before. Fifty-degree temperatures melted the snow hills and captured the pollution from passing cars. Those first warm days of spring never made me feel more alive.

"There's a spot near the front. Must be your lucky day, Mom," I said.

"I usually don't care where I park, but I always take the first open spot I see," she said.

We carefully stepped around puddles as we walked toward the store entrance when a blue sedan turned down our aisle. The passenger leaned out, aimed a gun at us, and opened fire. I didn't remember hearing anything only that I felt my eyes bulge wide open as I swarmed my mom and covered her on the ground.

My eyes followed the car as it continued down the aisle. I blinked a couple times, bewildered by what I saw. Inside the car, an odd flash of light like a giant strobe light went off. The car rolled forward,

bumped off a parked car, and rolled onto a snowbank. I sprinted to the assailant's car. I pounded on the window but saw there was nobody inside. I ran back to my mom, who lay on the ground motionless.

My heart thumped viciously within my chest as I wrapped her in my arms. With short, panicked breaths, I gazed at her. Her eyes were half-open, devoid of their usual sparkle. I lifted her head and saw a thin stream of blood flow down her cheek. Then a wave of anguish flooded my eyes.

The warm spring breeze swayed the budding branches of the stately oak and maple trees of Rosehill Cemetery. I stared at Mom's grave situated beneath a trio of towering maple trees. Puffy cumulus clouds floated overhead while the pastor delivered the eulogy. The crisp, dry air ravaged my body with goosebumps. I squeezed Mary's hand as my heart tightened with the realization that I'd never see my mom again.

I thought of the countless times my mom helped me when I was a kid. Her softness soothed my soul, and her calm voice took the sting out of the many injuries I incurred as a child. When a car ran through a stop sign and clobbered me when I was seven years old, Mom taught me how to deal with pain. When two older boys used me as their personal punching bag during junior high, Mom taught me how to fight back.

Once I reached high school, I woke up to the ways of my world. I joined the wrestling team where I built my physical strength and much-needed confidence. I grew strong fast and tolerated less from the bully community. Eventually, I earned a reputation for protecting weaker kids, which I embraced. In time, I even won over some of the bullies of my youth.

I attributed everything I learned about the streets to my mom. Her common sense approach to life taught me valuable lessons, most of

which I remembered to this day. Tears continued to stream from my eyes all morning. With my mind in a fog, I realized that despite my mom teaching me to look out for others, I failed to look out for her. Then, a tsunami of guilt gripped my heart.

As I wallowed in pitiful nostalgia, the distinct sound of a single-engine plane reached my ears. I looked at the clear skies, but I didn't see any planes making such a sound. The engine abruptly stopped and started again. Nobody around me seemed to notice it. I returned my gaze to my mother's eternal bed as the sound of that plane finally faded away. A bounty of colorful flowers and white lilies adorned her casket. God, I missed her.

After the funeral, we went back to my parents' house in Lincoln Park. I hung Mary's coat on the coatrack stand. My younger twin brothers sullenly climbed up the stairs to their room, while Dave, Mary, and Dad went into the dining room. I moved a small vase of flowers from the center of the mahogany table and put it on the placemat where my mom always sat. I worried about Dad and how he would handle the house with Mom gone. He had a strong personality that served him well as an executive at the phone company, but like the rest of us, he'd have to learn to navigate his way through life without her.

Dad grabbed a six-pack of beer from the refrigerator. He set it on the table, went to the foyer closet, and returned with a small wooden box. We each took a bottle and with labored breaths, we drank to Mom's memory.

"I loved your mother and she loved you boys with all of her heart," he said with a fractured voice. "After she visited Grandpa Devers in Colorado a couple weeks ago, she came back with some things that may interest you, John, considering your upcoming bike trip."

Dave took a swig and silently observed with sadness in his eyes. If I were in his shoes, I probably wouldn't know what to say if his mother had died.

"I don't think I ever met Grandpa Devers. He had a strange first name," I said and reached for the charred lockbox.

"You never knew him. Harrison was his first name."

"What was he like?"

"He was a troubled man. She said he had a lifelong nightmare, whatever that meant."

Inside the box were brittle, delicate papers. A quick volley of mortar explosions unleashed in my mind. I shook my head, and the sounds stopped.

"John?" Mary murmured with a look of concern.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought I heard something. Did you read these, Dad?" I gingerly handled the fragile browned papers.

"I tried but didn't get far."

"This letter looks like it might've been military. It says of Discharge November 12, 1917. Was Grandpa Devers in the army?"

Dad stared as he pondered the question, then he dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief.

"I believe he was in the British Army. Can you make out any words?"

I picked up a section of the paper and it crumbled in my hand.

"I can only make out parts of sentences," I said. "This one has some pieces of sentences. This date looks like 7 September 1917. Engaged in affairs . . . willingness to consort with . . . unexpected disappearance. I can't make sense of this."

"It almost reads like an apology," Dad said.

"It could be a confession too," I said.

"What would he have to confess about?"

"Can we ask him? Is he still alive?"

“He is, but he has advanced Alzheimer’s. I remember when he was first diagnosed around Christmas in 1976. The news hit your mother hard because she was so close to him. The last I heard he doesn’t recognize anyone anymore,” Dad said.

“That’s a shame. I guess we’ll never know the truth.”

Dad excused himself and dragged his heavy heart upstairs to his room. Dave gave me a hug and left to return to our apartment. I spent the rest of the night with Mary, reminiscing about my mom and rereading the strange letters left in her wake. While I pieced together the handwritten sentences, I heard that single-engine plane again.

I stepped onto the deck to look for the plane when it abruptly stopped. My mind suddenly flooded with horrific war-like images as I gazed up at the passing clouds that reflected the dull orange glow of the city lights.

When the sound of an unexpected explosion went off in my mind, I grabbed my head, dropped to the floor, and let out a bloodcurdling scream. As quickly as the sounds plundered my mind, they ceased. While I violently twisted on the deck, I jolted at the touch on my shoulder. My eyes bulged to see who was there.

“John, what’s the matter?” Mary asked in an alarmed tone. Apparently, my display alarmed the crap out of her.

“Mary! Did you hear that?” I said between sharp breaths.

“No, John. Come inside.” She helped me up to my feet as much as her diminutive stature would allow.

She walked me back inside where we sat at a table in the kitchen. I grabbed my beer bottle and aggressively gulped the remaining contents until it was empty.

“I don’t know what’s going on with me. Mary?” I said as she seemed to zone out uncharacteristically. Her half-opened eyes made me think she was having a stroke.

Mary's trance-like expression scared me until I saw her lips move. I caressed her shoulder, and she slowly turned her head toward me. Her eyes blinked rapidly and her breathes shortened. I gently shook her and she looked at me.

"Mary? What is it?" I asked softly. "What's wrong?"

Mary's chin quivered, and then she erupted in tears. I pulled her close to me and struggled to understand what happened to her.

"I'm sorry, John," she said as she trembled. "It was strange, like a ghost spoke to me."

"A ghost?"

"Yes, but it wasn't. I don't know what it was."

"It's a bad time for all of us, Mary. We'll get through this somehow."

I held Mary close as tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn't know what I'd do without her.

A month after Mom's funeral, Dave and I focused on our long awaited bike trip across France. The reality that someone murdered my mom still hadn't sunk in. The police didn't have any leads. What did she do to anyone? How did the gunman disappear in a flash of light like that?

The unexplained sounds of war continued to haunt me, but my alcoholic stupors suppressed them, at least temporarily. Dave didn't interfere at first. Soon, my studies suffered. One Saturday afternoon while I recovered from what I declared to be my last jackhammer hangover, we finalized our trip.

"The more I look at this map, the more I think Paris," Dave said as he pulled the tab on his can of Coke and released a hiss of carbonation. "We should find some action there. What do you think?"

"Paris sounds as good a place as any," I said between skull-bashing throbs. I strained with all my might to focus on the map. I hoped that

once I sobered, Paris might sound exciting. “Where do we go from there? Even though we’ll have about two months to bike anywhere we want, we can still only go maybe seventy miles a day. That doesn’t consider hills, extended stays, weather, injuries, or breakdowns. We’re not conditioned for this so we might crap out early.”

My head spun wildly while I considered what I’d just said. An internal rush to throw up surfaced, but I focused enough to fight it off.

“You look like hell, John. Your flattop grew out, and you haven’t shaved in days. You’re as pale as a baby’s butt in winter.”

“Don’t worry, I’m done boozing,” I said.

“You better be. You better hit the gym again too. You’re looking soft when you need to be strong.”

I knew what he meant, but there was something strange about the way he said *need* that hit me funny. I quickly forgot about it and studied the atlas. We decided to begin in Paris. From there, we’d continue along the River Marne, with stops at Sezanne, Chalons En Champagne, and undetermined points east.

“How far is all that?” I asked. I placed Dave’s sweating Coke against my burning forehead. After a moment of relief from the battle raging inside my skull, I guzzled the contents. The bubbly sweetness stung my throat as I gulped it, and my eyes squeezed shut as I took the burn knowing relief would soon follow.

“About 200 miles. Maybe we should scout some more before going any further. This way leads through some hilly country. I hope we don’t bust our butts on the first day but whatever. Is this a go?” he asked and rested his feet on the coffee table. He then tried to sip from his emptied Coke can then set it down on the table.

My breaths came steadily while I successfully kept my innards from initiating any surprise attacks. My mom taught me that time had special healing powers. I felt I’d be better able to negotiate living without my mom in my life after I returned from the trip. I’d love to

find the sonofabitch who killed her. Then maybe my healing could begin.

“It’s a go. I think this trip is exactly what I need,” I said.

Once graduation passed, Dave and I finally headed to Paris. We spent a couple days in the City of Light checking out the usual tourist attractions. Afterward, we set out on our bike ride along the road to Sezanne. I looked toward the early afternoon sun, partially obstructed by massive cumulus billows. The sunbeams stretched beyond the clouds to the far reaches of the horizon. While Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon* oozed from my Sony Walkman tape player, the roaring sounds of the mysterious single engine plane rudely bashed my serenity. In a frustrated fit of impatience, I yanked off my headset.

“Hey, Dave! Do you hear that?” I shouted.

“Hear what?” he shouted back.

“That plane.”

“Are you hearing that thing again?”

“Yeah!”

The bikes squealed to a stop on the gravelly shoulder. Dave turned to me with an impatient look. The engine sound lingered longer than it usually did, and sounded more real.

“Are they the same as before or different?” he asked with a sharp tone. He seemed to lose his patience with me, and I didn’t want to ruin our trip with this living aggravation that took root in my subconscious.

“Different. I can still hear the damn thing!” I covered my ears to break the sound from my mind but wasn’t successful.

“Here, take a swallow,” he said and handed me his water bottle. “There’s no plane, no nothing. It’s all in your head.”

Instantly the sound of the plane stopped, then I handed the bottle back to him.

“What the hell is wrong with me?” I pleaded.

“It’s probably fallout from your mom dying. It might be like shell shock.”

“Why the hell would I hear sounds of war?”

Dave started to speak but stopped himself. He didn’t have an answer either.

“How much longer will this last?” I asked.

“I don’t know, John. It could be hours, maybe never, but don’t worry. Losing your mom is a huge blow. Time will help you deal with it.”

The mysterious origins of that plane irritated me to no end. Despite Dave’s support, the sounds became more frequent, intense, and I grew more weary. Was some power singling me out for a special insanity? Completing the trip was one goal, but getting through this day posed a greater challenge than I expected. We looked forward to this trip for a long time. However, I wondered how Mary and I would handle the realities of life once they hit us. Either way, she was my girl, and we were ready to face life’s challenges together.

After riding for an hour along the busy road, Dave stopped in front of a sign with two arrows that pointed north to Reims and east to Sezanne.

“Sezanne is that way,” Dave said as he pointed down the road.

The rather flat terrain gave way to gentle hills. The gear we stored in our bike trailers didn’t drag nearly as much as I expected. However, I didn’t expect the easy ride would last for long.

Dave crooned some country western tune, something I’d expect to hear on that Texas ranch of his. Since I grew up in Chicago, I couldn’t imagine riding on horseback in the middle of the country chasing an errant calf. In a feeble effort to distract myself, I tried to sing along. Maybe it would take my mind off that damned plane.

Another sign for Sezanne appeared which showed we had another five kilometers to go. Without traffic, the sounds of bike chains and

road noise filled my ears. The sky above in all its vastness was my only refuge from my torments. I absorbed the vibrant blue and warm summer breeze. I yearned for peaceful times like those people experienced during the years before the atomic bomb. Subconsciously, I kept an open eye, or rather an ear, for that haunting plane, but it hadn't returned.

Like any American who never visited France, I imagined the buildings all fronted cobblestone streets. Excitement mounted as we approached our first stop, the village of Sezanne.

Surprisingly, the village was disappointingly modern, as even McDonald's had set up shop. We pedaled our way through town and stopped in front of a small cafe. The main street merged with another and formed a sharp 'V,' with the cafe wedged in the apex. Dozens of cars passed by and some of them honked at pedestrians who darted across the street, not much different from any street in Chicago.

A large, bright yellow canopy covered an adjoining patio crowded with small tables draped with flapping, white tablecloths. We found a bike rack and locked our bikes among a tangled bunch of others before we ventured inside the cafe. The savory aroma of baking bread sent my stomach on a grumbling crusade. We bought sandwiches, bottles of water, and a six-pack of beer for later consumption by the campfire.

The cafe bustled with activity while I scanned the covered patio for an open table.

"There's one, Dave," I said.

My Chicago accent alerted the clientele to the presence of Americans as heads turned our way with annoyed, yet curious expressions. With a smile, I respectfully recoiled to the table.

A young Frenchman with combed-back black hair, breezy white shirt, and tan slacks, stared at me with disgust until I sat down. I dubbed him, Pierre. I nodded at Pierre, yet he still leered at me in the same way Anderson did.

Pierre eventually left the café, but not before giving me a repulsed look. Oddly enough, I expected to get a look like that from a Frenchman at some point on our trip. Back home we heard that French people were rude but giving dirty looks was universal in nature. Some people were more obvious about it than others.

“What’s with Pierre?” I asked.

Dave watched as the man in question walked across the street, got into a little black Fiat Uno, fired up its little league engine, then drove east.

“I don’t know. What’d he do?” Dave asked.

“He gave me a nasty look.”

Dave chuckled.

“Were you afraid he was going to kick your ass?” Dave asked.

“Yeah, right. I just don’t want any trouble on this trip.”

“Well, he’s gone so don’t worry about him. I’m going to get the map.”

I absorbed the view of the merging streets with its traffic and pedestrians who strolled along the sidewalks. The awning trapped the dry northerly breeze wonderfully while puffy clouds floated across the bright blue sky.

Dave returned with the road map and unfolded it.

“How much longer do we have until we get to the campground?” I asked.

Dave placed his thumb on the map scale to determine a rough distance to our stop for the night. “I’d say another three hours at most.”

“Great. That’ll give us enough daylight to set up camp and knock down some cold ones,” I said.

“You read my mind. I think at the next stop I’ll get me a new gel seat,” Dave said while he rubbed his butt.

“Gel seat? What’s the matter? Are you going wussy on the first day of the trip?”

“That’s Mister Wussy to you.”

We continued riding east to our next stop, Chalons en Champagne. My legs felt the burn of over-exertion as we rode up gentle hills. There wasn’t any way we could do seventy miles a day. I figured we’d improvise going forward. The landscape grew denser with trees as we approached Chalons.

We rounded a sharp turn and spotted a sign. An arrow that pointed west read ‘Foret de Vertus 3 km’. Another arrow pointed east that read, ‘Chalons En Champagne, River Marne 9 km.’

“The campground is about five miles west of here,” Dave said, while he studied the map. “The town of Chalons is east of us.”

We pedaled for another hour and met the little black Fiat Uno on the side of the road with its hood up. Dave and I stopped riding to offer some help. That was our nature. Maybe we were too trusting, but considering our physical sizes, we didn’t feel too threatened. Pierre stepped away from the car then drew a gun on us. Maybe he did want to kick my ass. A burly man sporting a red beret and a thickly stubbled face stepped out of the car and revealed a large revolver.

“Go there,” Pierre said in a thick French accent. He pointed toward the forest with his gun.

We reluctantly headed into a patch of field in front of the woods, with Pierre shoving us occasionally so we’d pick up our pace. Chills ran down my spine, but if the right moment surfaced, I’d let them have it big time.

“What do you want?” I asked with my hands raised.

Pierre only waved his gun toward the forest.

My mouth dried up, and a lump grew in my throat. I never had a gun pointed at me before. I’ve handled many types of guns when I was

younger. Over time, I became proficient with high-powered rifles. I went on many pheasant hunting trips as well as numerous target shooting outings with my Dad and Grandpa Ray. However, being at the other end of the barrel reminded me of what my dad always said, 'you can only think clearly when you're calm.'

"You think they want money?" I asked in a whisper.

"Not sure, but I wish I had my gun," Dave said with steely eyes.

"Once we hit the woods, we'll make a run for it. I ain't playing *Deliverance* with these clowns. I doubt they're good shots anyway, especially with handguns and all these trees around."

"I'm in," Dave said with gritted teeth.

We stepped up our pace, and once we reached the tree line, we bolted in zigzag fashion into the woods. I never ran so fast, and despite the danger behind us, we put a sizeable distance between Pierre and us. Gunshots popped behind us but quickly became more distant.

We stopped to catch our breath behind a dead tree near a stream. I slowly peeked around the trunk at the forest behind us.

"Did we lose them?" Dave asked as he caught his breath.

"I don't see them," I said.

"Shit, I'll bet they took our bikes. The French are bike-happy."

"They didn't look like bike riders to me."

"Why don't we cross the stream and then backtrack to the road? Maybe we can find a cop or a ride back to town," Dave said.

"Works for me," I said.

More gunshots flushed us from our makeshift refuge and we darted across the stream. After running for another twenty minutes, the sound of the shots faded once again.

"I think we lost them this time," I said as I caught my breath. Dave scanned the woods behind us. Ahead of us, daylight grew brighter. That had to be an open field or a cliff.

“It looks like we’re running out of forest. Want to head back?” Dave asked while he tied his shoe.

“No. Let’s keep going. I want to see what’s there.”

“All right.”

Before we resumed our escape, I spotted several unusual grid-like growth patterns on the forest floor. Dave crouched for a closer look then yanked away the overgrowth of weeds. A well-rotted, wooden skeleton about ten feet long and six feet wide emerged. Close by rested several other sections of overgrown frame members.

“John, what is this?” Dave asked.

I studied the relics as well.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I think it’s a wreck.” Dave searched a few feet farther. He found larger pieces and the rusting hulk of an engine.

The odd rectangular shape consisted of warped, rusted metal strips. Tattered remnants of olive green canvas with burned edges hung rotted and drooped earthward.

“I think this was an airplane,” I said.

As I continued to pull off the overgrowth, I uncovered a section of the wreck that was once a fuselage. There, I noticed a faded portion of a bullseye marking. The imprint had a red center, a white inner band, and a blue outer band.

Deep thunder rumbled overhead then rain started to fall. I didn’t think much of it when a flash of lightning nearby nearly gave me a heart attack. Still, the wreck intrigued me.

“This is a British marking. Probably from World War One,” I said.

“How can you tell?”

“It had some kind of fabric covering. The frame is wood, and the engine looks too big to belong to a truck. I can’t believe it’s been here all this time. There’s something written on the side, *aby*. The rest is gone.”

I ran my hand along the remains of the vintage aircraft. The roar of the single-engine plane stormed into my mind like never before. Unable to remove my hand from the wreckage, I felt the fury of distant spirits calling my soul. Then, an agonizing scream raged through my head.

Visions appeared before me of aerial dog fighting, bombs exploding, and soldiers attacking. The appearance of a magnificent tree guarded by angels sent my mind into a panic. The image crashed from my consciousness when gunshots chipped at nearby trees. I almost crapped my pants.

“Shit, our friends are back! Come on!” I yelled. We raced for the open field.

We hurdled over a fallen rotted tree, then I stopped dead in my tracks when a circular ring that looked similar to rippling water rings on a stone-struck pond suddenly appeared in front of us. My heart beat wildly as the gunshots rang louder, closer to us. I slowly tried to touch the oddity that rippled in front of us when Dave shoved me into it. I closed my eyes and a dead silence overcame me.