Ronnie Sarth — September 16, 1944

I'm thirsty. So damned thirsty. My tongue. It's rough. Like I gulped a cup of sand. My lips crack. Blood fills my mouth. I need water; cool, fresh water. Not an endless sea.

The storm's passed. Where am I? The raft. I'm in a raft. Overhead is a blanket of stars. They blur and clear. Why? Nothing makes sense.

How many days since waves tossed our destroyer around like a bathtub toy? Two? Five? I smell the brine of the Atlantic. Voices nearby. Joe. My buddies are close. Some crying, some whispering. White hot sun. Blinding me. I keep my eyes shut. No strength to open them. I'm surrounded by water. But I am still so damned thirsty. A shadow comes over my face and something wets my lips. Please! More! I taste blood again and I hear someone moan. Was that me? I don't want to die! The shadow returns, and a few more blessed drops touch my lips. Relief. Such relief. Not enough, though. Not enough.

The sea laps against the sides of the raft. Like the waves on the rocks near Pelham. I'd sit there for hours with Helen, her soft curls blowing in the breeze. I kissed her for the first time on those rocks.

She'll have bought our bottle of champagne by now. We'll toast our forever together soon. "Helen!" My heart screams out from my soul. Can she hear me?

Darkness and silence now. Something wraps around my legs, holds my arms to my trunk. Strong hands lift me by my shoulders, my ankles.

I'm weightless, swung back and out. Wait, no! I'm not dead! Am I? I want to live!

There's a splash—no more thirst or burning. I'm cool; soothed. Drifting under the water, the bright sun filtering through the sea above and below and all around me. But I can't swim. Can't breathe—I don't need to breathe! I can make out other shapes, men wrapped in shrouds. All of us drifting downward, down, down, and I'm not afraid anymore. It's peaceful here. Curious fish welcome me. I see my ship, resting on the bottom, bow up, stern wedged into rocks. A woman in a colorful headscarf stands on the hull. Her voice draws me nearer, though her lips don't move.

"Welcome, my chick. I'm Mother Carey, and this is Fiddler's Green. You're home with your brother-sailors now."

Mother Carey greeted 321 new residents to Fiddler's Green during that handful of days in 1944. Two-hundred and forty-nine of them served aboard the USS Warrington (DD-383).

I was one of them.

CHAPTER ONE

Mid-May 1969, New York City

I gripped the tweezers in my right hand, then loosened my grasp slightly so as not to tear the fragile document. It was difficult to work with the cotton gloves on, even if it was necessary to prevent damage. Squinting at the faded ink on the main page, I carefully matched it to the other faded squiggle in my tweezers. Gently, without breathing, I aligned the fragment with the main document. I tacked it onto the sticky silk backing that would hold it in place invisibly and exhaled. Another two pieces and I would have the entire letter reconstructed. Usually, I'd be restoring the 17th and 18th century manuscripts in the library's collection. Today, I was reconstructing a faded and torn letter from 1944; the lettering scrawled in ink on the thin paper that the US government had used for V-mail throughout the Second World War. And I wasn't happy about it.

SQUEEECHHH—squeechhhh, SQUEEECHHH—squeechhhh. The sound of crepe-soled shoes coming down the linoleum hallway was as irritating as ever. Maybe as irritating as Dr. Masterson's attitude toward women archivists.

"Please don't stop here!" My eyes turned upward as I sent my missive to whatever god was listening.

My boss and mentor, Norm, had insisted on my help restoring the most delicate documents he selected for Letters from the Pacific, the New York Public Library's 25th Anniversary exhibit about Japan's surrender to the Allied forces in 1944. I hadn't wanted anything to do with the war. I still didn't. Refusing to read the letters as I restored them seemed like the only rational approach. I thought of it as I would the NY Times crossword puzzle each Sunday, piecing together words that were not part of phrases or sentences or paragraphs, adding a substrate of silk fabric, to keep

the document stable. No crying, no trembling, intentionally metering my breathing, all contributed to not thinking about Ronnie and losing him nearly twenty-five years earlier.

Norm managed to convince me to help his team by dangling the professional opportunity this offered. This was the favored project of the President of the Library. And Dr. Masterson couldn't overlook the meticulousness of my work, even factoring in his dislike of women. Grudgingly, I said yes, but only as my other work allowed. Clever, Norm. He made sure I had room in my workload for his project.

My door was closed to prevent any air movement from shifting my labor out of place, the portion of the page that I'd completed already affixed to its backing and covered to protect it from light. The sound of the damned shoes kept coming closer and then stopped.

There was a light knock on my office door. I took a moment to cover the rest of my work, stifle my annoyance and responded, "Come."

"Oh! Norm! It's you!" My smile was genuine. The bubble of irritation popped as the thought of a visit from Dr. Masterson retreated. Norm wasn't making his shoes squeak on purpose.

"Good morning, Helen. How's that letter coming along?"

"Pretty well," I replied. "Here. Have a look at this."

I beckoned him behind my desk and he peered over my shoulder, steel-rimmed glasses sliding down his aquiline nose. Tall and slim with an angular jaw, he was just a bit too gangly to be leading-man handsome. His hair had thinned since I first met him at the Upper East Side branch in the late '40s. I'd been a story time volunteer for the children's section. He was the reference librarian. But he saw something in my love of books and reading, encouraged me to attend Hunter College and eventually to get my Master's degree. After working together all these years, the feeling of him being near still had the same effect as that first time. A tremor began in my belly

and then moved lower. My blood fizzed. If I'd ever given away any hint of his effect on me, he'd never let on. As single colleagues, we often went to professional events together. Over time, we'd taken to going to the theater, museum and other cultural activities together. Still, he'd never shown a lick of interest in me. I'd valued him as a mentor and friend too much to change our relationship. It was only recently that I understood why he showed no interest. One evening, his tongue loosened by a bit too much wine, he confided stories in me that opened my eyes to a completely different love. He found men attractive, not women. How had I been so blind! I'd consoled myself by deciding life as a single career woman hadn't been such a terrible choice, even if it had been thrust upon me.

"Careful and precise, Helen. I knew I could count on you. It's not just anyone that can make a twenty-five-year-old letter readable again."

"I haven't read it." I considered my tone. A bit brusquer than I intended, and I deliberately softened my voice. "You know, Norm, I'd never have done this for anyone else."

He put his hand on my shoulder, the casual movement making the hairs on my arms stand on end.

"I know. The war was hard on us all. But it's been twenty-five years. It's more important to teach the youngsters about this history than to keep it boxed up inside ourselves."

I turned to look up at him. What would I do next? Hug him? More? He sounded so sincere and caring.

His words touched me deeply. He'd confided some of his own losses during his own service. Only Margie knew what I'd lost. Ronnie. The love of my life. My soulmate and the life I might have had with him.

The moment passed, and Norm thanked me and moved on to another office. My attention returned to the fragile v-mail. Restoring 25-year-old letters shouldn't have been that difficult. But v-mail had been created to address the high volume of correspondence during the second world war and had to be copied to microfiche. They printed it as a self-mailer on fragile, thinner paper than regular stationery to save space and weight. That way, it could fly from the Pacific theater to the US mainland instead of shipping it over by boat. My challenge was ensuring that the small tears, water stains and other damage to the letters didn't get worse, and that the cramped handwriting was legible. I placed the last two pieces toward the end of the page and started reading the last paragraph of the letter:

"I'm troubled by the rescue we did just before we transited the Canal back to the Pacific. It was after that hurricane, the one I wrote you about in September. I feel so bad we couldn't save more of those sailors. If we'd only been there sooner maybe so many wouldn't have died the way they did, drinking seawater and having the sharks grab them out of the life nets. It was fair amazing we found anyone at all, being in the water for nearly three days as they'd been. My buddy, Ed, told me that the radioman made arrangements to stay in contact with Warrington …"

I stopped. Shivering. Barely aware of the salty water on my own face. I stopped reading.

The Warrington. I'd convinced myself that I'd never see a mention of it. There were too many battles, ships, planes, land units; too many letters. The possibility was too remote. But there it was. The USS Warrington, DD 383. Ronnie's ship. Ronnie's coffin. My breath came rapid and shallow. My head spun. The iron bands holding my heart steady, bound since 1944 with sheer willpower, sprung open with old grief, made new again at the name of his ship. Groping for a tissue, I tucked the letter into my top desk drawer instead of placing it back in an archival box. I headed for the stairs on blind instinct. I had to get some air.

I stepped into the sunlight, blinking and squinting, rummaging in my purse for my sunglasses. Putting them on, and my regular glasses in the case, I stepped onto 40th Street and headed east toward Fifth Avenue. Turning left on Fifth, I walked uptown briskly for a while, trying to shake loose the apparition from my past.

"Go away, Ronnie" His ghost was not listening to me today. I'd had years of practice keeping him out of my thoughts and my heart. Today, though, he was too strong a presence to resist. By the time I was across the street from Central Park, I was perspiring in the spring sunshine and Ronnie was back in my head and my heart. It was spring in New York City. I had met Ronnie in a different park, not so very far from here, but a world away.

A taxi horn startled me out of my reverie.

"Hey lady! Watch wot yer doin'!" A graying round head shouted at me, while the owner of that head gestured to me in anger with his fist punching at the sky.

I stepped back. If I'd stepped off the curb, he might have hit me. Or not. You could never tell about cabbies. Sometimes, it seemed to me, they just sounded their horns to remind people that this was New York City, not some backwater where cars stopped for people in the street. When the light changed, I walked into the park, following the path around the corner, past a large rock outcropping.

There were a handful of people enjoying the morning sun, before the summer heat settled over the city, seated on the rocks and the benches, with their Jacqueline Suzanne, Kurt Vonnegut and Michael Crichton books on their laps, and their daily lives on their minds. Nannies for the well-heeled set pushed carriages with the infant princelings or princesses to be. New Yorkers of

the Upper East Side competed for the best nannies, the best nursery schools, and the best private preparatory schools. These were the children that were born with a silver spoon in their mouths. No luxury was too expensive or frivolous. Margie had derided the expense for her two oldest. But Kelly, the baby of the family, reaped the rewards of the family's later ascension to the middle class. I heard the shriek of a very unhappy youngster at a distance. It tugged at me, my yearning to comfort the little tyke in the way only a woman who'd wanted children, but hadn't had any could desire. A cluster of young people gathered in the clearing behind the rocks, up the hill from where I walked. The girls wore their hair naturally, and long, held out of their faces with colorful headbands. Their Indian-print skirts flowed in the breeze. The boy's faces were unshaven, their hair unkempt. All wore beads, tie-dye, peace sign jewelry. They swayed and circled to Blowing in the Wind, played by a lone guitar player, strumming absently. I caught a whiff of marijuana and wondered about their lives and their futures.

How many of those boys would ship off to jungles and rocks, rice paddies and bamboo forests, sail on far away oceans, or soar over scorched earth that once was a lush, tropical landscape? How many would learn to kill? How many of the women would lose their beloveds? How many would dodge the draft because this time, the enemy and our purpose weren't as clear as in World War II. We hadn't been brazenly attacked. Instead, this war had crept up on us. This was such a strangely different war, and yet so similar, too.

I surrendered to my thoughts and let my curiosity about my war, Ronnie's war, rise to the surface. What had happened to the Warrington? Why hadn't it survived that storm? What if what that sailor had written to his parents were true? I wished I could puzzle it out, but I couldn't. I didn't know anything more than I ever had: Ronnie was dead because his ship had sunk in the

Great Atlantic Hurricane. All I had now was just a young sailor's hunch from the past that something had gone horribly wrong.

The slow burn of old anger started deep in my gut. I had reason to believe that Ronnie's parents knew much more than they'd told me. Mrs. Sarth, his mother, never even called me to say he'd died. My best friend Margie, with her stubborn streak, hauled me out of bed three days after I heard that the Warrington had sunk. Margie insisted I go see Mrs. Sarth at the bakery where she worked. My boss, the Commanding Officer at City Island Station received word that Ronnie's ship had gone down along with several coast guard vessels that had wreaked havoc along the entire Eastern seaboard

"It'll do you both a world of good to have one another to rely on, if something terrible happened." But Margie was wrong. When I showed up, Mrs. Sarth turned me away, tears on her face and loathing in her eyes. I had no place in their family or their grief.

Damn Ronnie's parents and their small-mindedness! Their son had loved me. I hadn't wanted Ronnie to be estranged from them. I wanted them connected to one another. I wanted them to be grandparents to our children. The shock of each of my steps reverberated through my shin bones. If I was going to get back to work this morning, I needed to calm down. I consciously lightened my steps, slowing my breathing My surroundings came back into focus. Why hadn't they ever gotten over that fight?

I circled under a bridge and back up another pathway this time, toward Madison Avenue. Despite the roiling of my emotions of the past half hour, my walk had quieted my soul enough that I could stick my feelings back into their locked box, where they belonged.

As I walked west on 41st Street, I saw the iconic library lion statues, Patience and Fortitude, standing guard over the massive marble steps. I thought of their names as my secret strengths. They'd been my inspiration many times over the years. I'd need them more than ever if I was going to continue work on Letters from the Pacific.

I came in through the front doors, instead of the employee entrance, arriving like a visitor, up the imposing staircase, through the brass revolving doors and into the marble-clad foyer with its matching curved staircases to my right and left. I needed to remind myself of the grandeur, the foreverness of the building. Working here was a huge achievement for me, won through hard work and some lucky connections. It wasn't the home and family I thought I wanted in the 1940's. It was better. Or so I would tell myself whenever I grieved for my losses.

Immediately in front of me was Gottesman Hall, where our exhibit would take place in a little over a year. It could have been intimidating or enticing, depending on who the visitor might be. But I wasn't a visitor. I belonged here, despite Dr. Masterson's bigotry. Instead, I walked, shoulders squared and back straight, towards Gottesman Hall, turned left and slipped through a doorway, nearly hidden by the intricate woodwork that continued from the dark paneling, down the stairs to Research and Archives.

Ruth Lerner was stationed at her desk, on the phone, when I walked into the reception area. She didn't look like she would be particularly difficult to get through. Cornflower blue eyes peered through silver-rimmed bifocals, her cheeks were rosy and her chin-length, steel gray hair a little disordered. She'd rounded a good deal with middle-age. But Ruth's appearance was deceiving. If requests from staff, researchers and academics were the irresistible force, Ruth was the immovable object. Over the years we worked together, I'd rarely seen Ruth reconsider her position on a matter

once she took one. I waited a moment until Ruth was done, trying hard not to eavesdrop. I would never!. She hung up the receiver and looked up at me.

"So sorry to interrupt, Ruth. I'm just feeling a little distracted today. I went for a walk to the park. Got any plans next Tuesday evening?"

"What's on your mind, Zeeskeit?" I'd gotten accustomed to her Yiddishisms over the years.

"Kurt Vonnegut is reading at the 92nd Street Y next Tuesday. Do you want to come with me? We can meet for dinner at Elaine's first and then walk over. I've been needing a night out with a friend along with some good food, instead of my usual takeout."

"Kurt Vonnegut and dinner at Elaine's! Fancy! You think maybe we'll see George Plimpton? I hear he goes there too." Ruth grinned and, for a moment, her years slipped away and I saw the girl she once was.

"You never know, Ruth. You never know" I winked at her and headed back to my office, feeling light for the moment, but with a shadow of trepidation about what I might find next.