

THE TAIL GUNNER

A Novel by S.T. Lile

I. THE RED DIARY

Everyone has secrets. Even if we forget their exact origin, we haul them around from year to year, burying them deeper and deeper until we have no idea where they are or how they came to make us. Are they really our own, or did we borrow them from someone else to make our lives glimmer with mysterious or marvelous depth? When we die and someone else finds them, are they secrets still? And when they pile so high and so heavy that they crush the very memories they were meant to protect, do they even matter anymore? Grandma once told me that secrets were like wet sheets—you had to hang them out on a clothesline so they didn't mold in a dark damp heap. But when I unearthed her secrets one drippy-cold day on our last summer at the farm, hanging them out in the open was the last thing she wanted. If she'd have had her way, the whole lot of them would have been burned.

As for me, the only secrets I thought I had that summer were a graduation adventure to Alaska with my best friend Penelope and the bad poetry in my art journal. But all that went to hell when bomber boy Bish showed up demanding my help. Never in a million years would I have

guessed that I'd be the one to see ghosts. Supernatural stuff was my best friend Penelope Jones's thing. I wanted to be an artist, even though Mom said I'd starve.

That summer began just like the sixteen summers before, with Mom running around like a well-polished freak, trying to hide her excitement about flying off to Europe while getting me "settled" at Grams and Grandpa Chuck's. But now that Grandpa Chuck was gone, everything seemed hollow and fake.

"Sylvie, let's go." Mom grabbed my wheeliebag and headed for the door of our condo. "Motivate, levitate, and stop that scribbling for God's sake."

I slammed my art journal, hiding the drawing I'd just made called "Momclops."

"I've got a plane to catch and Grandma needs you," Mom said, pressing the wheeliebag handle into my hand and latching onto her own perfectly matched luggage set.

"I still don't get why Grams has to move. She's perfectly fine there on the farm."

"Sylvie, she's not right. You know that. Ever since Grandpa Chuck died, she's been forgetting things. Important things. It's not safe for her to live alone anymore."

Mom clicked open the Lexus trunk. "I can stay with her," I said, dumping my backpack into the trunk. "You're gone all the time anyway."

Mom gave me the look, one eye wide under an arched brow, the other so narrow it practically disappeared. "You're going to college, kiddo. Not babysitting your grandmother."

I could feel my eyes bug. Grams would be so pissed if she heard that. "Babysitting." She was happy on the farm with her horses and cat. Besides, Aunt Kate was right next door.

"But really, why the big rush?"

"Because I need you to pack-up and clear out the house. I know you've loved going there every summer, but things change. It's time to grow up and let the farm go."

Car doors slammed. My imagination hid from the eye in the middle of Mom's forehead. It was always better to let her think she was in control of the universe.

"Here's my travel schedule," Mom handed me a list of all the stops she was scheduled to make presenting the latest hot new drug. "I'm starting in Zurich. And I need you to get Grams to her appointment at the retirement home as we planned."

"As *you* planned," I said before I could stop myself.

Mom gave me the eye and then pretty much ignored me once we hit I-5.

My stomach started to ache. I wanted this summer to be like the sixteen summers we'd had before. Just riding, messing with the horses, adventuring with Pen. Instead, I felt like a double agent sent to hijack Grams.

Des Moines, Auburn, the Tacoma Dome blurred by.

"I can't believe I'm going to miss your birthday this year," Mom broke our silence as we crossed the Narrows Bridge. The guilt must have gotten to her.

"You always do." I looked down at the rough water far below.

"Oh, not true!" she wailed. "I always call."

I gave her a lame-ass smile.

"Sylvie, you know I do all this for you." Mom's voice went pissy. "Private school, college, none of it's free."

I attempted to look appreciative even though I'd heard this speech like four hundred times. "It's good we're here for Grams." I said "we" even though it felt like it was really just me.

"Exactly," Mom said, turning the car into Grams' driveway.

When we pulled up, Grams emerged from the canopy of vine maples near the front door of the big house. I jumped out of the car and met her on the walk.

"Sylvie, honey." She spread her arms and wrapped me in a big hug. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I'm here too," said Mom, hurrying to give Grams a stiff hug.

"Are you going somewhere?" Grams looked at Mom, eyes questioning. "You're always running away."

"Don't be silly," said Mom. "I told you I was going to Zurich to help launch a new fertility drug. I'm not running away. I'll be back before you know I left." Mom blew a kiss as she hurried back to the car. "Love you! I'll call you."

Grams and I waved back. "See you in August," I said.

"Be good," said Grams beneath the rumble of the car engine.

"So we can be bad," I said, reaching for Gram's hand. She laughed and swatted my butt. "What's all this about you moving?" I asked.

“Oh dear.” Grams touched my arm. “I don’t know. Nobody ever tells me anything. But your mother and aunt Kate seem to be hell bent on getting rid of all my things. I don’t like it one bit.”

I found out what she meant the next day when Aunt Kate came over demanding I help clean the barn. She sent me up into the hayloft while she shouted orders from below. Once I was up there, though, I could see why Aunt Kate wanted to haul everything to the burn pile before it spontaneously combusted and burned the barn.

“Just shove it!” yelled Aunt Kate as she maneuvered the garden cart beneath the hayloft door like a firefighter positioning an air bag.

“This thing is nasty.” I stood in the hayloft of the horse barn, alfalfa and cobwebs clinging to the sleeve of my ratty sweatshirt. Jeans coated with hay dust, I was glad I chose tall barn boots instead of sneakers. Who knew what lurked amidst the piles of crap Grandpa Chuck had heaped up there over the years?

“Don’t be such a wuss, Sylvie. Just shove the box out the door!” Aunt Kate stared up at me with her hands on her hips and the belly of her overalls bulging with twins. Six-plus months along. Gramps woulda been proud.

I bit my lip and tried to shake off the image from last Fall of Grandpa Chuck in his coffin lying still and cold as old meatloaf. It wasn’t the memory I was after, so I slapped my leather gloves together and leaned out the door. “We’re burning it *all*, right?”

“Right. We’re finally finishing what Dad started years ago.” Kate pushed her wire-rimmed glasses up on her nose. Her long, straight hair had been pulled back in a French braid. “Get a move on, we’ve gotta get back to the burn pile.”

I thought of Mom on tour in Zurich and the fleeting dream I’d had that she’d let me go along to celebrate my seventeenth birthday. Oh well.

Pulling my bandana up over my nose and mouth cowboy style, I heaved against the moldy, hay-strewn box. It barely slid an inch. I growled and shoved at the box again. It burped dust and junk mail. Something rustled. Good thing Mom wasn’t here; she’d be freaking out about dust mites and rabid rodents. Pen, on the other hand, would probably search the box for a new pet.

Me? I just wanted to get it done. So I lifted the front edge of the box over the metal lip that edged the doorway and shoved the ancient box of decaying bank statements and rancid receipts out the hayloft door. “Banzai!” I yelled.

In a weird, slow-motion moment, the box floated toward the cart, landing hard and exploding into a mini-mushroom cloud. Dust billowed. Tiny white moths fluttered blindly from the box’s jumbled depths.

Next, I grabbed a bundle of old-timey costumes Grandpa Chuck had bought during a bout of Auction Fever. Speckled with moth casings and crusted with mouse pee and dried blood from barn-cat birthings, I held my breath as they sailed toward the cart.

“That’s good!” yelled Kate. “Now get down here and help me push.”

I scrambled down the loft ladder and heaved against the metal handle of the wooden cart. “Shove this, push that. Geez, you’re almost as bad as my mom,” I said as we pushed the cart through the gate into the hillside pasture.

“Impossible,” said Kate. “She’d have hired all this out.”

“She did.” I smiled. “Only she went with the Economy Plan—me.”

Kate bumped my shoulder. “Well, I for one am glad she did.”

For that moment, I was glad to be there too. I thought back to my first summers with Grams and Grandpa Chuck—when the big, shingled house had been brand new and the pasture grass was taller than me. Over the years, hungry horses and eroding rains had transformed the hillside pasture into a sparse collection of stubborn nubs. It was still home, though, complete with the crooked shingle line on the barn where Grams had let me nail on new siding when I was five. Later on, we’d built a troll bridge across the creek in the horse pasture that became a cross-country jump as I grew older and braver. Even the bulbs and primroses Grams and I planted under the trees along the driveway still bloomed every year.

Above it all, stood the big house; three storeys high, with a balcony off the living room where you could stand on your tiptoes and see Crescent Harbor filled with fishing boats. Below the balcony was the lower floor with Grams’ big kitchen and Grandpa Chuck’s patio with its black-shrouded gas barbeque. He used to cook salmon and singe hot dogs there nearly every Sunday night. I hated salmon, but loved the ritual.

As Kate and I pushed the wooden cart over the bumpy pasture, a Daddy Long Legs

emerged from the pile of paper rubble. He paused, teetering on web-thin legs like a junkman surveying his yard. As if on his command, the breeze shot scents of mildew and mouse shit up our noses.

“Ugh! I can barely breathe,” Kate said, pulling the neck of her t-shirt over her nose.

“Don’t be such a wuss.” I said from behind my bandana.

She sneered at me, a look she’d no doubt perfected on Mom when they were kids. With a spread of seven years between them, it was no big surprise that they were as different as OshKosh and Oscar de la Renta.

Once we’d rolled the cart up to the fire, Kate and I hurled handfuls of old hay onto the embers. Flames leapt, so the grungy costumes went next, the fire gulping them like a starving serpent. Next we tossed rain-warped junk mail and crumpled checks into the spiraling flames and watched them curl into flakes of black ash.

“Why don’t we just torch the whole thing?” I said, grabbing a huge handful of junk mail and bank statements and piling it onto the fire.

“Can’t do that,” said Kate. Her bushy eyebrows contorted. “You’ll smother the flames.”

“Whatever.” I was already a hundred percent sick of always being told what to do. Even though the flames spluttered as Kate predicted, I tossed more mold-splotched files onto the fire anyway.

“Sylvie, stop!” Kate commanded.

I stepped back from the fire as Scout, our 27-year-old Morgan gelding, plodded up behind me to lip alfalfa bits out of my hair. “Hey buddy.” I scratched his neck and let Kate handle feeding the fire. Scout pushed closer, searching my pockets for treats. He’d grown thin since last summer and his tail was crusted with poop. “Sorry dude, no carrot mush or applesauce in there.” Scout rooted at me with his nose. I laughed and went back to feeding Grandpa Chuck’s crapola to the flames.

Scout’s shoes clicked on loose pasture stones as he wandered over to try Kate. “It’s hell getting old, isn’t it?” she said, scratching the base of his ear.

Not to be left out, Kate’s ancient Thoroughbred, Gulliver, crowded in for attention. Neither of the two arthritic horses could be ridden much anymore, but they’d become part of the family so Grams kept on eking out money for feed. Mom never got the horse thing, but for me

and Kate and Grams, they were part of us. Grams still had the blue ribbons that Scout and I won over the years hanging in the mud hall.

With Kate and the horses tangled in a love fest, I turned back to the boxes. Tossing an empty shoebox into the fire, I realized that the one big box I'd shoved out the hayloft door was actually three boxes of stuff mashed into one. Grandpa Chuck was the master of the “dump box”—the move where he swept everything from the top of his desk into a giant box to make room for a party bar. But this was different.

Curious, I lifted one flap of the inner box to check for critters, finding a sea of curled black and white photographs instead. Unknown faces stared up at me as if drowning in time, and floating on the surface was a small red book. I opened the other flaps to investigate. Smaller than my art journal, the red book's edges were tattered and the spine was cracked. “1945” was stamped in gold on its front. When I picked it up, it smelled of musty boy sweat and gunpowder. Maybe I'd been inhaling too much smoke, but the writing on the page seemed to float.

29 APRILE – April; DOMENICA – Sunday

Stand down on mission—Mussolini was hung and shot today or yesterday in Milano. Good deal. The war is going pretty well. Went down to the shack and did some printing. No mail.

“Hey Kate,” I said, not taking my eyes off the journal.

“Hey what?” She didn't even look up.

“I think I found Grandpa Chuck's World War II diary.”

2 . ENGAGEMENT PHOTOS

Honey-colored light seeped through a crack in the heavy gray clouds overhead. “No way,” Kate said. She stepped toward me and reached for the book.

I turned to keep her from taking it. “Way,” I said, way more intrigued with this than my own plain, black art journal filled with notes and ridiculous Momclops poems.

“He never wanted to talk about the war,” she said, leaning over my shoulder as I let the pages flip open in my hands.

30 LUNEDI – Monday

Went out to the line to get some pictures on preflighting, etc. New crew chief on the ship, Cooper—good man. One letter from Merrilee, one from Mother. News from Smitty—doing fine.

A breeze rolled up the pasture. I wanted to keep the red book forever. It reminded me of the note I stole off Grandpa Chuck’s mirror. The one in fountain pen handwriting that said “I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.”

“Where’d you find this?” Kate asked, taking the book and tucking it under her arm.

I nodded at the water-stained, sagging box filled with curled photographs and mouse-chewed letters.

Kate knelt down to dig through the box of photos, Dust spiraled upward like spirits of the dead.

“Gimme that journal,” I said.

Instead, Kate held up a handful of photos. “Check these out,” she said. The first photograph showed six guys posed in front of a plane. The other was a painting of a woman, wearing nothing but an operator’s headset and a little bitty skirt.

I snorted. “That chick belongs in the Hooters Hall of Fame.”

Kate laughed and blew dust off another photo. “Hey, here’s Dad.” She held up a headshot of a young guy who looked totally unfamiliar except for his smile. It’s the same as

Kate's, wide, with a slight gap between his front teeth. The guy was dressed in a slick-pressed shirt, a uniform hat, and aviator sunglasses.

"That's Grandpa Chuck? He was decently cute," I said. "No wonder Grams fell for him."

As Kate dug deeper into the box and picked up a letter, I slid the diary out from under her arm. I felt better holding the diary, but my stomach spun when I saw the typed letter. Mice had munched one of the folds, leaving a hole in the middle.

My Dear Little Soldier Boy,

I shudder when I think of you being in the Air Corps. Do you remember when you were about seven, you were at the house one day, and I let you run the Hoover sweeper? You were thrilled to death, because it sounded like an airplane. I wonder if that terrible roaring of motors will always thrill you....

It was weird, that feeling of spying on someone's secret life. But I couldn't resist reaching into the time-warped photos like I was fishing for a winning raffle ticket. When I pulled out my prize though, I just about dropped it. "Wait a sec," I said, flashing the snapshot at Kate. "Who's this guy kissing Grams?"

Kate leaned in to study the black and white print. For a second, her eyes were squinty, unplucked brows furled. Then nothing—her face blank. "I don't know," she said. "But it sure isn't Dad."

I wiped about a hundred years of dust from the back of the picture to uncover the words written there. "*Our engagement in Denver. Love you always, Bish.*"

"Bish?" My throat tightened. "And here I thought Grams and Grandpa Chuck had been together since God made dirt."

Deep wrinkles appeared in Kate's forehead. She pulled another photo from the box. It was a young guy in a leather jacket with goggles pushed up on his forehead, poking his head out an airplane window. Written along the bottom edge of the photo was "50th Mission, April 1945."

It was Grams' lover boy, again. Even though he stared into the distance, I would swear

his eyes followed mine. It made me flush, like the fire had shot up about 5,000 degrees even though there was barely a flame. “Do you know that guy?” I asked.

Kate didn’t answer so I slid the mission picture from between her fingers. I studied the handwriting, the guy’s leather jacket, his goggles, the ring on his right hand. Something about it made me shiver and drop the picture. Kate looked up, but before she could quiz me, the sliding glass door at the big house rumbled.

Scout’s ears pricked and he limped over to meet Grams and Dixon, Kate’s three-year-old, at the pasture fence. “Hey girls, how’s it going?” Grams called. “Throwing out more of my treasures?” Her voice was a combination of resentment and gratitude.

“Old crap, Mom,” said Kate. “Not treasures.”

“Except this stuff,” I said, holding up the diary and engagement photo. I reached for the mission picture as a breeze spun it toward the fire. I raced after it, but the flames won. Frustrated and still curious, I turned to Grams. “So who’s Bish?” I yelled across the pasture.

Kate put her hand on my arm. “Don’t,” she whispered. “Not now.”

I shrugged out of Kate’s grip and met Grams at the pasture gate. She squinted at the engagement picture, then took it eagerly into her hands. For a second, her face lit up, then her shoulders drooped and she walked past me, zombie-like, toward the fire. “He was just a boy I knew a long time ago.”

Grams stared deep into the flames. Dixon ran to Kate and she lifted him to the safety of her hip.

“But you were engaged to him. Right?” Something deep inside me needed to know. “Why didn’t you just marry him?”

Grams’ jaw tightened. “He wanted to fly. Bomber boys had to be single.”

“But you were engaged.”

Grams nodded, her eyes distant.

“How’d you meet? How old were you?” I kept pushing, even though I knew I shouldn’t.

“We went to the same high school,” she said, as if reading the past in the flames of the fire. My Dad wasn’t too thrilled about my seeing an older boy—but we had such fun.” Grams pressed the engagement photo to her heart.

“Do you think Grandpa Chuck really meant to burn all this stuff?”

Grams sighed. “Sylvie, honey, Chuck never meant to burn all this. I did.” She let the picture slide from her fingers into the flames. “Just never got around to it.” She watched the photo contort and darken into ash. I ached to grab it from the fire and demand the whole story. But it was too late—the photo had turned to ash and Grams looked mad.

“Oh hell,” she said, dropping the diary into the ash at the edge of the fire. “Just burn it all.” Grams headed back to the house, gathering the fronts of Grandpa Chuck’s old shirt around her. Kate hurried after her, wrapping Grams in a sideways hug. Even Dixon patted Grams’ shoulder as if he, too, felt her pain.

I wanted to run after them—shout that I was sorry—be the one to comfort Grams. I never meant to make her mad, or sad, or whatever she was right then. But I was torn between leaving things be and digging out the truth. Part of me wanted to know—needed to know. Part of me was pissed at them for keeping secrets.

Shifting smoke snapped me into action. I kicked the singed diary out of the fire, and went back to the box of old photos. My fingers pulled a picture out of the pile. My mind hoped for Grandpa Chuck. “I wish you were here,” I whispered, thinking of his big dopey smile. But the picture wasn’t Grandpa Chuck, it was Grams’ guy again. Same leather jacket, khakis, goggles swapped for a funky baseball cap. He was smiling and looking cool. I sneer at the photo. “Who the hell *are* you?” I asked.

Look in the diary. The voice was in my head, but it wasn’t mine.

Hands trembling, I picked up the red diary and opened it to the front page.

“The Private Diary of Keith D. Bishop” was written there. The name “Bish” was scrawled below that. The handwriting looked familiar, although it finally occurred to me that it wasn’t Grandpa Chuck’s. There was a distinct shape to the K, as if it was the beginning of a star. The rest was a mix of caps and small letters. I’d seen it somewhere... somewhere...like on the note I’d swiped from Grandpa Chuck’s bathroom mirror.

Grandpa Chuck had a collection of what he called his “power of positive thinking notes,” and he’d read them everyday. They were still there, taped to the bathroom mirror—except the

torn and yellowed one I'd stolen last summer and pasted into my art journal. *I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.*

I'd always wondered what it meant. Sweat trickled down the side of my face. The handwriting on the note and in the diary were totally the same. "Who are you?" I demanded, staring at the picture.

A gust of wind rolled up the pasture. "What do you mean, 'Who am I?' Who are you?"

My head snapped up. Eyes blinked. There, in the smoke of the fire was the guy from the 50th mission picture. He frowned and stepped out of the flames.

I practically rolled over backwards into the dirt and dead grass of the pasture.

"It's about damn time," he said. "And how."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. Somehow my feet pushed against my legs, and my legs pushed against my torso till I was standing nearly eye-to-eye with him. No way was he much older than me. "Time for what?"

He pulled a little card out of his pocket, glanced at it and put it back. "I'm looking for one Sylvie B. Stevens. You know her?"

"Maybe," I said, shoving my shaking hands into the back pockets of my jeans. "What do you want her for?"

He looked each way as if checking for spies and took a step closer. "Here's the deal. I've got a 21-day furlough to complete a Final Mission and she's my conduit." He glanced at his watch. "I've got exactly 504 hours to get to Ala and deliver a message. I need Sylvie's help. Can't do it without her, in fact. If you know her, I need to get to her, and how."

3. LETTER FROM HOUND DOG

Surely I had been sniffing too much of something. I glanced at the house then back to the fire. Blinking my eyes and shaking my head; the guy had to be a hallucination. But he was still there. “Shit. You’re Bish.” The words sounded like air hissing from a tire.

“Who else would I be?” He dug his hands into his pockets and looked around, taking in the pasture, the big house, and the view to the harbor. “What year is it? Whose house is this?”

“You’re kidding, right?” I toed the red diary that had once again fallen a little too close to the fire. “I thought ghosts knew everything.”

“Oh hell no. My buddies and I’ve been killing time playing Black Jack waiting for the go-ahead,” he said with a snort. “Time’s irrelevant when you’re on stand-down. So no joke, what year is it?”

“Two thousand three,” I said. “And your fiancé, remember Merrilee, the girl you dumped in the war? This is her house.”

“Holy mackerel.” He whistled. “Sixty damn years. And I didn’t dump her, missy.” Bish squatted by the box of photos, tried to pick one up, but his fingers went right through. “I died, dammit. Death has a nasty way of ending an engagement.”

“I guess,” I fumbled for words while trying to shake off the heebie-jeebies. Chills skittered down my spine. I wanted to run, but I felt sort of sorry for him. I pulled an engagement photo from the box and held it up for him to see. He reached out again, his fingers lingering and semi-transparent. “Must have been a big day,” I said, but before the words were out, I was kissing young Grams, feeling the wetness of her lips, the soft wool of her coat beneath my hands, smelling her perfume, and hearing her giggle.

Both Bish and I dropped the picture. “What the hell?” I hissed, jerking away as the picture fluttered back into the box.

“So you *are* Sylvie B. Stevens,” said Bish, smiling. “Only conduits can tap memories.”

“Eeuuw. Says who?” I squirmed and walked a few steps away.

“Headquarters. Mission briefing. Just trust me on this. It could work to our favor.”

“How so?” I was intrigued, but no way did I want him to know. I crossed my arms and

tried to look bored.

Keith D. Bishop frowned at me. Frustration showed in the squint of his super blue eyes. “As in transferring a lot of essential info PDQ.”

I snorted. “Yeah right, but keep that private stuff to yourself,” I said. “I like my grandma, but no way do I want to make out with her.”

Bish stood and shoved his hands back into his pockets. “So you’re her granddaughter.” A smirk flitted across his face. “That’s just swell.”

Rain spat at us. Gray clouds promised more.

“Best get my things out of the rain,” said Bish. “They won’t do a damn bit of good as paper pulp.”

“Your things?” I said. “How so?”

“Stop asking questions and get moving.” Bish glanced toward the big house as the glass door rumbled again. Scout nickered.

“Syee vee, Gamma says come get lunch.” Dixon held up a triangle of bread.

“I’ll be right there, Dix,” I shouted back, hurrying to gather up all of Grams’—Bish’s— whoever’s—stuff into the one grunge-less box so I could carry it to cover. The workshop in the barn was safe enough. Grams hardly ever went in there—too many of Grandpa Chuck’s tools. And even though this Bish dude had me so tweaked I wanted to puke, no way was I letting Grams burn all his stuff.

When I got to the workshop, there was an empty spot on the workbench, so I plopped the box there. Light streamed through the dirty window, and I eased away, afraid of what it might do to the contents of the box. There were hundreds of photos of guys and planes in there. Would they all come crawling out? My body twitched, my brain said “run” so I did, sprinting from the barn to the safety of the house and living, breathing people.

At lunch, I took one bite of egg salad sandwich but could barely swallow it. Dixon tried to get me to eat more, feeding me a potato chip and baby carrot, just like I often fed him. Back then, he was like a little cupid, yellow curly hair, dark eyes, perfect pink lips. When he wasn’t throwing a temper tantrum, he was adorable.

Kate dozed in the cushy chair by the little woodstove, and Grams pattered in the kitchen.

She put the teakettle in the refrigerator and wiped down the long counter. I gave half my sandwich to Dixon and took my plate to the sink.

“Sorry I made you mad out there, Grams,” I said, wrapping my arms around her. “I didn’t mean to.”

“I know,” she said, patting my arm. “I hate the idea of moving. So tired of it. Always stirs up too much dust from the past.”

Dust and pain, I thought to myself. That’s why Mom sent me to deal with it. I can’t be hurt by what I don’t know—or so she thinks. She’s never been one to look back. And cleaning out Grams’ house is all about that. Even with me, Mom shrugged off my love child status like a butterfly shedding a cocoon. “Keep your mind in the moment and your eye on the future,” she often preached.

I rinsed my plate. “Do you know how lucky you are that you found the love of your life?” I said to Grams. “I’m still waiting for Mr. Right.”

“You’re young, dear.” Grams patted my back.

“Same age as you were,” I said, squeezing her arm. “Maybe older.”

Grams put her finger over her lips to shush me. “Did I ever tell you that I took the train to Denver to see Bish? My sister went with me, but oooh, did we get in trouble with Daddy.”

“And people call *me* a teenage deviant,” I said, smiling. “That must have been when you two got engaged.”

Grams squinched up her face like she was trying to remember something then gave up. “I don’t know. It’s been a long time.”

I took her soft hand in mine and fingered the twining gold vines and deep-set diamond of her wedding ring. She still wore it despite Grandpa Chuck’s death. “It’s okay, Grams. I’ll stop bugging you.”

Grams kissed my cheek and crumpled into a chair at the table next to Dixon. He climbed into her lap, and Grams snuggled him in like she used to do with me. Opening the fridge door, I took out a water bottle and the teakettle, quietly placing the kettle back on the stove. Grams didn’t need to be reminded of her mistakes. She was sad and frustrated enough.

“I’m heading back to the burn pile,” I said, more curious than ever about Bish.

“Umm hmmm,” mumbled Kate, eyes still closed. Grams waved and nodded from her

chair. Dixon had buried his face between Grams' neck and shoulder. I remembered the spot. It was good.

Of course, I didn't stay at the burn pile. Who could when a Star Trek tractor beam was pulling you to a stinky old box in the workshop? Besides, I was a sucker for mysteries.

"Yo, Bish," I said when I got back to the box. My voice seemed loud and echoey in the afternoon silence of the barn. "If you're here, stop messing with me."

There was no answer, no magical appearance. Maybe it was me who was losing her mind, not Grams. I scanned the contents of the box. The corner of one letter poked above the pile. It caught my eye because the return address said "Bishop's Sports Shop, 104 Second Ave. SE, Puyallup, Washington." I slid it out of its envelope and unfolded the tan paper. Pencil-scrawled handwriting covered its pages.

May 14, 1943

Stow's Boarding House, Puyallup, Washington

Dear Bish,

I bet you are having a swell time. What I wouldn't give to travel cross-country like you. How did you like Chicago and all the big towns? What do you think of New York? You might have seen a good baseball game in New York, but Chicago isn't so hot. I hope you saw the Brooklyn Dodgers – they are the best.

Mother wrote to say she is proud to have three boys signed up for the service now. It was good you stopped in North Dakota to see her and the kids. How many of my friends did you see and what did they say? Did you see Bauer? He's the tall kid with the ass sticking out.

How about the family and all the little tots?

Everything is fine here. I haven't missed a minute of school since you left. I haven't spent much either, except for shoes and socks \$9.60 (Regal). Also \$15 dollars advance to Mrs. Stow. I hit Pick's Jackpot for \$9 dollars and the next time I played I made \$6 dollars clear. I don't think

THE TAIL GUNNER ~ S. T. LILE ~ SAMPLE

you would like it, but I thought I might as well hit it while it was hot. Don't get the idea that I'm a slot machine fiend because I can quit when I want to. I have saved about fifty dollars since you left. I don't figure that's bad at all.

It's five minutes to 11 now so I'll have to stop. The dinner bell is ringing. Have you been inducted into the Air Corps yet? Write soon, and make that letter thick!

Hound Dog (Warner E. Bishop)

P.S. Did you shoot that game of pool for me?

The last page was a letter from Bish back to Hound Dog.

July 19, 1943 - Miami Beach, Florida

Dear Hound Dog,

Sorry it's taken me so long to get this letter out. Seems I've been in constant motion ever since leaving town. You know how we whooped it up when I got word I'd made the grade for the Air Corps? It's been pretty much like that the whole way. I started Basic three days ago here in Miami Beach. Who would have thought they could take this place over like they have? The old resort hotels are barracks, the restaurants are mess halls, and the theaters are classrooms. The war is going full bore, and who knows for how long. I'm glad I got to see the family before coming here.

The folks are well enough. Ellendale, N.D. is another dusty town filled with churches and bars. Mother is set up there with all the little mites. Verla is her right-hand gal now that Dad and Eddy left for the shipyards in Bremerton. Guess all those years of blacksmithing will come in handy. You may have already heard, but we have a new little brother. Can't believe there are 15 of us Bishop kids now.

Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. were grand.

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Biggest damn cities I ever did see. All trains and taxis and people rushing by. Met another Air Corps fella from Washington headed to Basic on the train to Miami. Big, tall, quiet fella goes by Lefty. We're roommates now, along with another boy from Jersey (Smitty) and a Philly boy named Naussman. The officers say they gotta toughen us all up, see what we're made of, before they send us out to stomp the damn Japs and Nazis.

Speaking of basic, it's time to turn in. They make us jump outta bed in our skivvies at 5am on the nose. Keep up with school, and keep up with the saving. Don't lose it all in those damn slots.

Keep those letters coming,
Bish

P.S. Tell Merrilee she can write to me here at South Beach for the next five weeks. I'll send word to her through you like we planned. Tell her that before she knows it, I'll be flying my own plane.

What a life. He sounded totally pumped. No way would I be that positive if I'd just been drafted. I rifled through the box to find the crew shot Kate had held up briefly when we'd first found the box. Six guys posed in front of a plane with Bish kneeling in front.

"No way can you be real," I said.

The photo morphed as if I was wearing 3-D glasses. Light streamed through the workshop window again. I was back in the heat of the fire.

"Want to place a wager on that?" said Bish, startling me so bad I practically dumped over the box trying to steady myself. Photos, letters, and postcards spilled all over the place. Bish stood in the workshop doorway in full flight gear. Leather helmet and goggles, flight jacket, parachute, jumpsuit, and heavy brown leather boots. A yellow inflatable life preserver thing was draped over his shoulders. "Reality is rarely what it seems—or what we wish for."

I scrambled to scoop up the scattered pictures and letters and toss them into the box. Part of me wanted them to be shut away and forgotten forever. The other part was burning to

know more. The photo of Bish's crew balanced on Grandpa Chuck's big old hand drill and a rusty carriage wrench. I picked it up and held it for Bish to see.

"Mission 17," said Bish. "Damn Mission 17. The one time our training crew flew in combat together. Ruined my life forever." He squinted hard and frowned. "We were supposed to be lucky. Lefty, Naussman, Feinstein, StuBoy, Valentine, and Bishop. We'd trained together in South Carolina and thought we were invincible." Bish clenched his teeth as if he were fighting back a wave of pain. "Boy, were we wrong."

There was a part of me that wanted to give the guy a hug. Clearly something had been messed up. But how do you hug a ghost? Instead, I took that moment to test a bizarre idea. Jabbing the photo into Bish's nebulous shape, I felt a familiar burn. Heat raced up my arm and I was sucked into chaos. The scream might have even been mine.

I'm in a plane, feet straining against a metal brace, hands on gun controls. Explosions everywhere. I stare straight down through a blister window at a stone building, a train, a truck. People strewn in the street. A woman, dead and bloody. A little girl kneels next to her. She lifts her face and stares at me, eyes full of fear. "Don't move," I pray. "Oh God, don't move." My gloved hands are squeezing, shooting, unstoppable. Shells gather around my feet like a haul of fresh sardines. Sweat and gunpowder choke the air. The girl is running. "God dammit, no!" I yell.

In the next second, I was back in the workshop, heart pounding. "Damn fool girl." Bish scowled and turned away. "Don't you ever tap me without my go ahead."

The little girl's eyes, full of fear and hate, flashed in my memory. The three bites of lunch surged in my gut. "Who was that?" I asked. "*What* was that?"

Bish rubbed a hand over his face. "Strafing run," he said, barely above a whisper.

"But that little girl? You shot her. I saw it."

"What the hell do you think this Final Mission is all about?" said Bish. "It ain't no milk run. I never wanted to be a kiddie killer."

Bish slumped onto an overturned crate with his head in his hands. His sadness seared through my body.

“No offense,” I said. “But what am I supposed to do about it? You can’t change the past.”

Bish growled like a cornered animal. “The *signidora* said I could set things right if I delivered the *lamella*.”

I had no friggin’ clue what he was talking about, but it didn’t seem like the time to push. Bish swept his helmet off and tugged at his hair. “But I lost it, and everything went to hell. My guts get blown out and instead of me, all my girl gets is a box of pictures, a sweat-stained jacket, and a diary I had no heart to finish.”

“Which she kept all this time,” I said. My hand shook as I set the picture back in the box. No way did I ever want to touch him or it again.

“What happened to her?” asked Bish. “A swell girl like her must have found somebody else—obviously raised a family.”

I nodded. “She met my Grandpa Chuck. Up till a few months ago, they had 42 years, two kids, and two grandkids. Two more on the way.”

Bish raised his eyebrows, but his whole body seemed deflated. “Holy mackerel. I’m glad for her, but that should have been me. I’d even put money on her wedding ring.”

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