



# SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY

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Sometimes the past has to be laid to rest before you can look forward. You have to know in your heart, as well as your head, that you can't go home again. And in this case, there just wasn't much left to go back to.

One side of the cafe door was missing. The other half swung on one hinge, creaking softly in the gentle breeze as Jake stepped over the fallen porch roof and into the Monkey Bar.

In the dim light that sneaked through the cracks and broken shutters on the windows, he could see the shards of glass and splintered wood that lay strewn across the floor. A hill of broken furniture had been piled in the center of the room as if someone had made a half-hearted attempt to clean the place up. It looked like a thankless job.

There was a tightening in the pit of his stomach as he slowly took inventory of what was left. Only a few tables and chairs were still standing. The piano was gone and the mahogany monkeys that had once playfully scampered up the wall behind the bar were now faceless splinters of scrap wood.

Leaning heavily against the bar, his fingers idly traced the Japanese characters that had been carved into the counter's surface. The war had left nothing untouched, nothing unscarred.

He stared at himself in the broken mirror that

still hung on the wall behind the bar, his image echoed over and over in its fragments. The lean, bearded man who peered back at him was no longer a stranger. He had become used to the neatly clipped hair that covered his face. He had even learned to like it. It hid the scars that would be a constant reminder of the battles he had fought. It would help him forget, as Boragora had helped him to forget.

Whenever the pain had been unbearable, he had dreamt of this tropical island. Even in his delirium he had returned here, to his home. It had kept him sane, had been his refuge, had been the one thing they couldn't take away from him.

He closed his eyes and once more willed himself back through time. He imagined he could hear the familiar sounds of the Monkey Bar at its busiest: the clinking glasses, the heated conversations, the poker games in the back room. Corky was sitting at the piano, his fingers flying happily across the keys while Sarah sang a slightly off-key torch song. Louie was tending bar and Gushie was wheeling about serving drinks. And if he opened his eyes, he could look out the opened door and see the *Goose* moored at the end of the dock.

"I am sorry, mon ami, but the bar is closed for repairs."

Jake's eyes flew open and he turned to see his old friend silhouetted in the doorway. In five and a half years he hadn't changed much. The shoulders were slightly more stooped, and there were more lines there than Jake remembered, but the white

suit was as impeccably pressed as ever and the ever present scarf still graced that proud neck.

He pushed himself away from the bar and took a hesitant step forward. "Not even for an old friend, Louie?"

Louie cocked his head to one side, the intruder's voice tugging curiously at his heart. The color slowly drained from his craggy face as he moved slowly forward, staring hard at the tall, bearded stranger. The blue eyes that held his were filled with an unbearable sadness, the face gaunt and wasted, the reddish beard flecked with streaks of silver.

He reached out a trembling hand to touch Jake on the shoulder. Surely, this was some sort of apparition. The strain of returning to Boragora and seeing his lovely bar and hotel in such an appalling condition had been too much for him.

"Jake?"

The American nodded, smiling uncertainly. "My God, Louie, it's good to see you again."

A look of bewilderment clouded Louie's face. "Mon dieu," he whispered, "it is you."

There were tears in both men's eyes as Louie hugged Jake to him and kissed him on both cheeks. Still gripping Jake by the shoulders, he stepped back, afraid if he let go this apparition would disappear and he would discover he was only dreaming.

"We thought you were dead, mon ami."

"So did I."

Louie looked at him questioningly, but the habits of old were deeply ingrained and he didn't press it.

"This calls for a celebration!" he said brightly, throwing the broken shutters open to let in some light.

"Don't tell me you managed to save a few bottles of that Napoleon brandy you were always bragging about?"

The Frenchman slipped behind the bar. "No, but I did recently get my hands upon some beer. It is warm, but it is better than nothing, n'est-ce pas?"

Jake turned the offered bottle around in his hand, reading the familiar label. "Remember when Corky and I flew to Tagataya for a load of this stuff?"

Louie smiled and leaned against the counter. "Oui. As I recall we ended up fishing it out of the ocean."

Jake gazed out the door toward the spot on the dock where he had always tied his Grumman's Goose.

"She was the first of our casualties," Louie said quietly, as if reading his thoughts. "I am

afraid she is now at the bottom of the lagoon."

"I know. The water's exceptionally clear today."

Louie rested his hand on his friend's arm. "What happened to you? Eight months after you left here, we got a telegram saying you had been killed in action."

Jake stared at the beer in his hand and shrugged. "I was shot down somewhere in the Pacific, spent a couple of days in the ocean and the rest of the war in a Japanese POW camp."

"But why didn't you contact someone when you got home?"

Jake looked up sharply. "Don't you think I tried, Louie? At first I was mad as hell no one came to visit, then--"

"Visit?"

"Yeah. I just got out of the hospital." He seemed embarrassed and hurried on. "It was a long time before I found out I'd been listed as dead. And then it was as if you had all vanished off the face of the earth. I didn't know where to look, and it wasn't easy searching from a hospital bed."

Louie sighed. "We all valued our privacy so much. Boragora has always been a place for men to forget their troubles. No one asked where you came from or where you were going."

"It left me at a definite disadvantage. I tried to find Corky but there was nowhere to look. His mother had died and the Air Force had no forwarding address. Then I tried to find Sarah..."

He set the bottle down on the counter and thought of his last night with the beautiful redhead. Sarah had clung to him all that night, whimpering in her sleep like a child, calling out his name. In the morning he had tried to slip away quietly, but she had awakened with a cry, forcing a facade of calmness neither of them felt and wanting to put off as long as possible the inevitable good-bye. He had been surprised at her; they had both been so good at hiding their feelings, playing their little games. And even as he had held her trembling body in his arms and the sweet scent of their lovemaking still clung to him, the right words wouldn't come. A soldier going off to war had no right to make those kind of promises. He couldn't.

"I suppose she's married, with a dozen kids by now."

Louie's eyes widened. "I thought that was why you had come. I assumed that you knew."

Jake frowned. "Knew what?"

The other man hesitated for a moment, cursing whatever power had laid this task on him. "Sarah and Corky are--"

"Jake!"

Both men looked up to see a handsome young woman peer around the broken doorway. A warm smile spread across Jake's face and in quick easy strides he was across the room and helping her over the littered floor.

Louie smiled his approval as Jake guided her to the bar. She was tall and willowy, long blonde hair framing an angel's face and eyes that matched Jake's in their blueness.

"One good thing came out of this war," Jake said softly, brushing his lips against her silky hair. "I found Elizabeth again."

"You must be Louie," she said, holding her hand out to him. "Jake has told me so much about you, I feel as if I've known you for years."

"It is a pleasure to meet you, mademoiselle, although I'm afraid I am at somewhat of a disadvantage. Jake has not told me about you." He bowed gallantly, bringing her hand up to his lips.

A proud smile lit up Jake's face and he hugged her to him. "We were married yesterday in Hawaii."

"Married?" But of course. It was so obvious. The aura of sadness that had first surrounded Jake had completely dissolved and the little lines of worry that had wrinkled the corners of his eyes were now pulled into a smile when he looked at her. Louie felt a stab of pain for Sarah. Had Jake ever looked at her that way? Maybe. But whatever hope of happiness they might have found together had been destroyed by the war.

"I knew Elizabeth before I joined the Tigers. We were going to be married before that."

"Until my parents broke us up," she interrupted, taking a sip of Jake's beer. "But I was a lot younger then, and not nearly as stubborn." She slipped her arm through his. "I'm not letting him get away again."

"I am happy for you, mon ami," Louie said, forcing a smile. "It is not often one gets a second chance."

Elizabeth gave her husband a gentle nudge. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but if we don't get going, we're going to miss the *Clipper*."

"You can't stay?"

Jake shook his head and quickly drained the rest of his beer. "I've joined up with Chennault again. I'm going to fly with CAT. But before I go you were going to tell me about Sarah and Corky."

Louie looked away, unable to meet the hopeful look in his friend's eyes. "You were right. Sarah is married with children."

"And Corky?"

"He's doing very well."

Jake seemed relieved. He clasped Louie's hand warmly in his. "I'll keep in touch. If you hear from Corky or Sarah, tell them..." He struggled to keep his voice even. "Tell them I miss them. And if they're ever in China they should look us up."

A painful emptiness filled Louie's heart as he watched Jake and Elizabeth leave the bar. Tomorrow Sarah and Corky would arrive and what would he tell them? There had been an empty spot in each of their lives without Jake, but they had gone on as people had to do. Corky had fallen in love with Sarah; they had become comfortable together. And Jake was happy with his new bride.

Still, he felt as if he had let Jake down. He hadn't actually lied to his friend, yet he hadn't told him the entire truth either. But being honest did not always serve everybody's best interests. Some things were best left unsaid. Still, Jake had a right to know, would probably want to know.

Louie pulled a broom from the corner and made a half-hearted attempt to resume his cleaning. But his thoughts were on the tow-headed, blue-eyed boy who was the apple of his mother's eye and a living reminder of the man Sarah and her husband had both loved.

