
Keeping Hope

ALIVE

A World War II Novel

- Brenda Jones -

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
*the memory of my mother and
the women who served on the homefront*



For thou art my hope, O Lord God:
thou art my trust from my youth.

PSALM 71:5

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*family and friends for technical, enthusiastic
and emotional support*

Prologue

Late October 1942

Wheeling, West Virginia

A raspy cough lingered as Margaret Ellen Amos, or Maggie as her friends called her, endured a cold and sore throat. The illness worsened with a high fever on Halloween, the night she planned to attend a dance with her fiancé Ben. Growing up in a small West Virginia town they had been sweethearts since high school. The event was being held at the McLure Hotel where she had worked for a year in the bookkeeping department. Her handsome sailor, Benjamin James Tarelli was home on leave from the U.S. Navy after completing boot camp and Maggie was looking forward to introducing him as her escort. For ten days the young couple visited parks, shopped, danced, and discussed plans for their future. Both realized he could be gone a long time, even though the latest word was that World War II would soon be over.

The day of the dance, Maggie was too ill to get out of bed. Ben insisted on staying with her to fetch aspirin, cough syrup, hot tea or any other remedy she desired. After insisting that she wanted to be left alone, Maggie convinced him to take her new roommate, Anne (Annie) Marie Antonio, to the dance. Reluctantly, Ben agreed, kissed her on the forehead and left the apartment with Annie. She was from the same county though he had not known her, but had heard she liked to party.

That was the last time Maggie saw Ben.



Chapter One

*Great Lakes Naval Training Center
Great Lakes, Illinois
November 1942*

Ben Tarelli's bloodshot eyes burned, pains shooting through his head, as stood in the cold Illinois wind shifting his weight from one leg to the other while waiting in an endless line of sailors. Taking in his surroundings, Ben had no idea how he had arrived at the boot camp, but he knew that two weeks earlier he and his class-mates had graduated from Great Lakes Naval Training Center. As his thoughts became less cloudy he knew that he was returning from a furlough to receive orders that would dictate his future. Today he and his classmates would learn if they were selected to attend specialized schooling or being shipped out and thrust into battles. A cloud of cigarette smoke laced with anxiety hung over the men as nervous chatter along with forced laughter permeated the air.

Ben rubbed his throbbing temples. *I didn't know a hangover could last this long. I don't even remember drinking or getting on the train.* After a forty-five-minute wait, he reached the door of the Quonset hut and in another thirty minutes was at the front of the line where he received a large manila envelope containing his military orders. His future. His fate. With the envelope tucked under his arm he left the building, placed his white hat on his head and stepped into a windy snow squall. After a few deep breaths he stepped off the walkway and moved close to a building for protection from the fierce wind. With cold trembling hands he opened the envelope. “Gunnery School” was all he saw at first. Ben gave out a loud whoop which intensified his throbbing headache. Further reading informed him he had been assigned to the naval training station in Gulfport, Mississippi. He had achieved his goal, but even the thrill of going to gunnery school in a warm climate did nothing to improve his hangover; however even in his condition his near frozen lips formed a smile. Now he needed a cup of hot, strong coffee, a couple of aspirin and peace and quiet, anything to relieve his dry rough tongue and the putrid taste coating the inside of his mouth. He started walking toward the canteen and with each step the previous thumping of the train tracks echoed in his throbbing head.

With his orders securely tucked under his arm, Ben turned the collar of his wool navy pea jacket up around his freezing ears while stumbling along the narrow walkway. Through blurry eyes and swirling snowflakes, he followed

the small posted signs toward the canteen. *I'm not being sent overseas, at least not yet, but when I am I'll have a gun and some control over my destiny.*

Glancing up ahead through the blinding snow flurries, Ben spotted his friend, Rusty, holding his hat on with one hand, a cigarette in the other and a large manila envelope tucked under his arm.

Russell Gale O'Brien had arrived at boot camp with a crop of unruly flame-red hair topping his skinny six-foot frame. Even after his military haircut he remained easy to spot in a crowd, unlike Ben whose stocky athletic build and jet black hair blended in with the other sailors, especially when they were in uniform. During their days in boot camp Ben and Rusty became inseparable; Mutt and Jeff is how their fellow classmates referred to them. Rusty always joking and Ben being more serious proved that opposites do attract; however, their backgrounds were similar. Both were high school graduates with athletic skills which carried over into the naval classes especially judo and swimming. Rusty, a natural boxer enjoyed a good work out in the ring, while Ben preferred team sports, especially football. Their ability to take the training seriously while keeping their humorous antics such as giving classmates comical nick names helped them get through their classes. Rusty and Ben formed a bond that went beyond friendship—it was a wartime friendship only those serving in the military understood.

“Hey, Rusty,” Ben called out. “Hold up!” The sound of his

hoarse words aggravated the pain in his head, but did not slow his pace.

Rusty whirled around toward Ben. “You got your orders, too, I see.” He paused and took a long draw on his cigarette. Tilting his head upward and slowly releasing the smoke into the cold atmosphere, he asked. “So where to?”

“Gunnery school in Mississippi,” Ben answered in a raspy whisper. His parched throat ached as the chilling air racked his body.

Rusty slapped him on the back. “Well, don’t that beat all! We’ll still be together, buddy.” Both sailors were expert marksmen, which Ben attributed to his avid hunting of small game and deer in West Virginia and Rusty’s experience in hunting waterfowl and deer on Maryland’s eastern shore. Their ultimate goal was being assigned to the same ship; hopefully after graduating from gunnery school, that goal would be met.

“Where you heading to now?” Ben asked, knowing Rusty was on his way somewhere to get food. The tall slender sailor ate like a horse and Ben thought if he drank a bottle of cherry pop, he would look like a thermometer.

Rusty took the cigarette out of his mouth, “Just going to get a snack,” he said, waiting for Ben to catch up. “Man alive! You look like death warmed over.” Staring at his friend, he continued. “Wow! That must have been some-kind-of wild leave back in those West Virginia mountains! You hillbillies must know how to party, but then you are known for your moonshine, right?”

“Yeah.” Ben lowered his head. “Something like that, only I can’t remember the last night. I think I got hold of some bad hooch.” His mind wondered back to his Biblical teachings. He could almost hear the pulpit pounding preachers shouting, don’t do this, don’t do that and on it went.

Rusty laughed, interrupting Ben’s reminiscing. “How? You don’t drink or at least that’s what you told me. Oh, well, it’ll come back to you and when it does, I want to hear every detail.” He removed his hat and held it over his heart. “Some guys have all the fun.” When his voice settled, he asked, “Maggie still wearing that engagement ring you gave her the night before you arrived in boot camp?”

“Yeah, at least she was when I left.” Ben continued. “So, how’s everything back East? I can’t imagine your family being glad to see the sights of you.”

“Well, they sure were! Even my old man was pleased to see me. Of course, he needed help harvesting oysters since his arthritis has gotten worse.” Rusty stopped long enough to stomp out his cigarette. “My mama and sister fussed over me something awful.” He shook his head. “Every time I stepped foot in the house they insisted on feeding me.”

Ben forced a smile. “And you loved every minute of it.” As the two sailors stepped inside the warm canteen, a strong gust of wind slammed the door behind them. After removing their hats, they located two empty stools at the opposite end of the counter away from the door.

“My sister Sally may lose her job. Her boss is ill and closing the inn where she works. She doesn’t know what

will happen to it. You remember me telling you about her working and living at an inn for a rich old maid?" he paused as Ben nodded. "Well, if Sally does lose her job, she is thinking of going to Baltimore to work in the shipbuilding yard where some of her friends are working. Working is all she has since her husband was killed at Midway in June. There isn't much to do at the inn now although she is still employed. She takes care of the owner and lives in her own apartment at the inn. With no guests there, it did allow her time to spend with me, but I'm sure she is lonely. She fixed an oyster pie, crab cakes and my favorite, a Smith Island Cake! I'll tell you about it sometime, has eight layers! The best dessert on this earth! She is a good cook, almost as good as Mama," he said as he crushed his cigarette butt into a clean glass ashtray. She promised to send a box of her fabulous fudge as soon as I have my new address. She will also have to have enough ration stamps to purchase sugar.

Ben interrupted his friend's daydream. "So with all that attention and food did you get out on the skipjack much?" Before he could answer, they each ordered a piece of lemon pie and a cup of coffee. Ben was hoping the pie and coffee would rid his dry mouth of the aftertaste of the stale alcohol and cigarettes. The unfamiliar repulsive taste was one he never wanted to experience again.

Looking back to Ben, Rusty answered. "Sure did, but since it takes two deckhands to operate the skipjack, Sally went with me and helped with the tonging. We got a load of oysters every day but Sunday. Mama doesn't take keenly

to working on the Sabbath.” Rusty shook his head and smiled. “The price of oysters is really good now so I left the money for Mama to use. Dad is having trouble breathing, too, and it is getting worse, so he doesn’t go out on the water as often as he did last year. Of course, Mama said she’d save the money for me. You know how mamas are.” He stared at the deserts behind the glass in the dessert case on the counter and added, “She prays for me every day. She needs to believe I’ll come home.”

Ben nodded. “Yeah, they have to have faith we’ll return and I’m sure we’ll not be going anyplace where we’ll need much moola anyway. I put most of my pay in the bank and I will send more home for my parents to deposit for me.” Two hot steaming cups of coffee arrived and Ben removed two aspirins from the tiny pocket in his navy blue wool dress trousers. He plopped them into his mouth before swallowing the hot brew in one quick gulp. The burning sensation affected his mouth, but did nothing to alleviate his aching head or dry tongue.

“Well, how’s Maggie? Is she making plans for the big day?” Rusty grinned. “I bet you spent your whole leave being dragged all over Wheeling looking at dresses and furniture. Probably even talked about how many kids you are going to have.”

Ben sat up straight. His eyes widened. “Oh, no! That can’t be!” He sat his cup down, then rested his elbows on the counter and lowered his head into his hands. “I think I’m starting to remember what happened.” Feeling the blood

flow from his face, he raised his head and stared at the ceiling. “Oh, boy.” He paused. “What have I done? What have I done?”

“I don’t know what you’ve done, but you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Neither spoke as two pieces of lemon pie topped with meringue two inches high were placed in front of them. Ben sat with his head in his hands staring down at the pie, nauseating bile rose into his throat while he fought to keep the hot tears at bay.

Rusty slammed his hand on the counter. “Well, spill it. What have you done?” He looked at his friend, “Oh! You don’t look so good buddy.”

Speaking in a low voice, Ben raised his head and broke the silence. “We planned to go to a Halloween dance at the McLure Hotel where Maggie works. It was my last night before reporting back here, but Maggie became sick—bad sore throat, chills, high fever, felt really bad—so she told me to go to the dance with her roommate, Annie.” He paused and shook his head. “I didn’t see any harm in it. I didn’t plan to stay long.”

Rusty shook his head. “Oh, tell me you didn’t?”

Ben again lowered his head into his trembling hands. “No, like the idiot I am, I did.”

“What? That was stupid. Really stupid! Haven’t you learned that women don’t mean what they say?” Rusty shook his head. “Really stupid. You should have shown some compassion and stayed with her, you know waited

on her. Like you are going to agree to do—in sickness and health.” Rusty continued shaking his head. “So, what happened or do I want to know?”

“I’m not sure. I have a bad feeling about that night and it scares me. It’s all kind of fuzzy. I remember waking up in a room at the hotel but I don’t know how I got there.”

“Oh, brother! Have you talked to Maggie since then?”

“No. I tried to call her from the train station and then stood in the long lines at the pay phones here, but she was never home.” He pushed the half-eaten pie off to the side.

“Or didn’t answer. I tell you, women are funny creatures.”

Ben nodded. “So, I am learning.” Rusty raised his brow and swallowed the last of the pie while Ben continued. “Maggie and I had friends at that dance! They have probably told her what a good time I was having with Annie. Oh, what have I done?”

“That depends. How good of a time did you have?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know!”

“You screwed up, man. But, hey, look at it this way—she may never hear and besides, you are going off to fight for her freedom. To her you are a hero—her hero.” Rusty’s voice trailed off, which was not convincing. He shoved his plate off to the side of his coffee.

“You plan to finish that?” He said pointing to Ben’s unfinished piece of pie.

“No.” He pushed the plate toward Rusty.

Ben lowered his dark thick brow. “Right, now I’ve got my parents to think of, too. If word gets back to my hometown—

and it will—I'll be a disgrace to them. Dad's preaching career will be over. Our congregation thinks our little family is perfect. If it doesn't kill Mom and Dad, they will disown me." The two sailors finished a second cup of coffee, buttoned their wool jackets and moved outside, placing their hats on their shorn heads. They walked to the Quonset hut that would be their home until they boarded a train to Mississippi.

The following days the sailors spent time in lines for haircuts, dental checks, physicals and chances to use the public telephones. Ben had plenty of time to wonder what Maggie knew and how long it would take his mail to reach him in Mississippi. Like all of the other sailors, Ben planned to send post cards with pictures of the Naval Training Center on the front of them to his family and friends, including Maggie, with his new address in hopes of keeping up with hometown news. *But what is the hometown news? Is it gossiping about what I've done? Does Maggie know? Has Annie told her? Oh, if only I could remember that night! I knew Annie was trouble. Why did I go?*



Three weeks later Ben's mail caught up with him and the long-awaited letter from Maggie. It felt as soft as her skin. He read it fast, then slow, then over and over, aware of the fragrance of her gardenia cologne floating into his nostrils.

November 5, 1942

Dearest Ben,

I am feeling much better. I plan to go back to work tomorrow. I miss you. I am so sorry I messed up the last night of your leave. I promise I'll make it up to you when I see you again. I guess by now you know where you will be going.

We have already had snow; it was beautiful but made me miss you more. Remember the fun we had skating at the dam and sled riding down Town Hill? We didn't have a care in the world. That seems so long ago. Now here we are—our country at war and not knowing if we'll ever see each other again. I am sad and scared, but I will never give up faith in you returning. I know that I will wait for you for as long as it takes. I'll never stop loving you. I promise.

By the way, I heard the Jackson twins are stationed in the Philippines. It's hard to get word of where our friends are serving with all of the censoring of the mail. If I hear the whereabouts of other hometown guys, I'll let you know. I'll chose my words wisely. I know "Loose Lips Sink Ships."

I really look forward to hearing from you, so please write when you can. Will your friend from Maryland be with you when you leave boot camp? He sounds real nice. Maybe you could send me a snapshot of the two of you. I've added him to my prayer list.

Must get to bed now. Stay safe and know that I will always love you.

Your Maggie

Ben read and reread Maggie's letter. He was thrilled to hear from her but disappointed that he knew no more about what had happened at the dance. He tried to assure

himself that that was a good thing and transferred his focus on his classes.



The next two weeks passed quickly as Ben attended classes and studied. He had written several letters telling Maggie about school, but had received only the one from her. It seemed like a year since he had held her in his arms. He had her Christmas presents mailed by a department store in Biloxi. One, a box with painted roses on the lid, filled with scented stationary, later the box could be used to store his letters or trinkets. He also sent a manicure set arranged in a gift box lined with light blue silk. Gifts to his parents were sent at the same time.

With no more letters from Maggie, Ben refused to accept the worst, he wrote to her again, though he was still not sure what to say. The only thing he knew was that he had to let her know how much he loved her and for now the only way was sending his love through letters. It was the only way he could keep faith in their relationship. If only keeping his faith in God could be that easy. Since leaving home and coming-in-contact with people of different faiths, or no faith at all, it appeared to him that in the military service, many men felt that sinning during war time was okay.

Gulfport, Mississippi ---10 December 1942

Dearest Maggie,

I tried three times to call you tonight but the lines at the

phones were long, so I spent the whole evening thinking of you and wanting to talk with you—I need to hear your voice. Since I've only received one letter, I fear the worst. Do you have my correct address? Crew 3421 Sec 1, AGS Barr C 6, USNTC, Gulfport, Miss. Please write. I miss you.

The weather is nice here. There are large oak trees, called live oaks, with Spanish moss hanging on them. It reminds me of the angel hair on your Christmas tree last year, except the moss is green not white. Rusty and I are in the same classes and help each other with our studying. Last week we took a tour of Biloxi and the bus drove down a wide double-lane boulevard next to the gulf. You would really like the large houses overlooking the water. Thick green lawns are landscaped with beautiful flowers that seem to go on forever. I thought of us living somewhere like this someday with a bunch of kids and a dog. Sure wish we could be together now. War is awful. It separates you from the ones you love. By the way, I keep the one-half of the heart necklace we got at the county fair around my neck along with my dog tags. It helps me feel like you are with me. I hope you are keeping the other half around your neck, too.

We saw the home of Jefferson Davis, and the tour guide pointed out large new hotels being built because of the war activity here. We saw the Church of the Redeemer in Biloxi, which looks like one of the old churches in Wheeling, only larger. Maybe someday we can come here on a vacation or honeymoon. The tour ended at the USO building in Biloxi which is twelve miles from Gulfport. There are so

many beautiful structures and plants that you would enjoy sketching. I am sending you a set of post cards of the important places (I put an X on the places I've seen) and some pictures I took that I thought you would enjoy. I hope you will sketch or paint them for me and one for Rusty, too. I'm also sending a picture of me and Rusty. He's the tall one. Ha-Ha

We are going out for ice cream now, which we do a lot in this heat, so I'll sign off.

I love you,

Ben

P.S. If you've heard anything about my last night in Wheeling—please don't believe it. I want to talk to you and explain. I sent your Christmas presents. Sure, hope they get there in time and that you like them.



Ben's fist ached from banging it against the telephone booth. Time was running out, he had to get back to the barracks, and was unable to get a call through to Maggie. Today was Christmas Day. The first time they had not been together on Christmas since they were in junior high school. He knew that she must be as lonely as he was because this was her first Christmas since her mother's death. The thought of her being alone in her small apartment haunted him and he wanted to tell her how he felt about her and their future. Gifts and a card arrived from his parents. Nothing from Maggie.