

**Summary:** With Starsky recovering from the assassination attempt, Hutch has to pick up their mothers at the airport. He didn't expect to learn a family secret, too.

**Categories:** Slash

**Genre:** Romance

**Warnings:** Author Chooses Not to Use Archive Warnings

## The Book of Ruth

by Dawnwind

Hutch stood in the doorway of Starsky's hospital room, watching his partner sleep. It seemed almost indulgent to have such a luxury of time. The last ten days had been intense, too horrible to relive, even in memory. But that was past. The outlook, while not rosy, was at least hopeful. Starsky had gotten through the worst.

He walked in and gently stroked Starsky's pale, whiskery cheek.

Two blue eyes blinked, lighting up when Starsky saw who had wakened him. "Hey," he whispered. That was about as loud as he could manage most days.

"Hay is for horses," Hutch replied with mock sternness. The way Starsky immediately responded to his touch put a lump in his throat. He had to swallow once to speak. "I talked to your mom and mine earlier. They'll both be here this afternoon; their planes are less than an hour apart."

Starsky smiled drowsily and brushed his fingers over Hutch's wrist. "You pickin' them up?"

"Of course. Taxis aren't good enough for our moms." Hutch chuckled, pulling the blanket up higher on Starsky's bandaged chest.

"Ren' a car," Starsky said on an outward breath. "Your's's junk..."

"Hey!" Hutch pretended to be offended. He'd had his newish pale blue Ford for three weeks, but it had been on the road quite a few years longer than that. "Insult my car, insult me."

"Nah." Starsky smirked, closing his eyes as if they were too heavy to keep open.

"With my mom and yours here, you'll have two nurses at your beck and call to whip you back into shape." Hutch settled on the edge of the bed, holding his buddy's hand. Starsky's fingers curled limply around his.

Perhaps it was selfish on his part, but he was privately glad he'd had Starsky mostly to himself since the shooting. The first reason was simply practical: the investigation and arrest of Gunther had left no time to ferry their mothers--or any other visitors--from airport to hospital to his or Starsky's apartment. He'd been at Metro or running down leads--with Dobby and Huggy's help--going without sleep and little food day and night. Then the flight to San Francisco to arrest Gunther and the aftermath: marathon meetings with the hastily convened Gunther task force and a bevy of lawyers to make sure the charges against the powerful man would stick.

The second reason was far more personal. Hutch's very soul had been shredded piece by piece every second he was away from Starsky. He only felt whole when he was near enough to touch his partner, best friend, and lover of a single night.

He refused to replay the memories of their first kisses, their first hand-jobs, somehow afraid that dwelling would cause them to be the last ones, as well. Superstitious, probably, but Starsky

would be the first to tell him not to tempt fate. He had to believe that Starsky would recover completely so that their lovemaking could continue.

In the terrible hours after the assassination attempt, while waiting outside the OR for any word of Starsky's condition, Hutch had called all the necessary relatives and friends. Huggy had been in Vegas, and returned on the first flight--still wearing a garish orange jumpsuit.

The call to Ruth Starsky had been the very first he made, but he hadn't been able to get hold of her for several hours. She ended up being the very last relative he'd spoken with--and quickly realized why. She was coughing horribly; he'd had to wait out a prolonged coughing spell after he gave her the terrible news, and had urged her to see her own doctor. By the next day, her diagnosis was pneumonia--which had kept her in bed for nine days. Her doctor really hadn't wanted to let her fly at all, but she'd insisted once the antibiotic course was finished.

His mother, Louise, had a more prosaic reason for not departing immediately. She was the charge nurse on a busy medical-surgical floor at St. Luke's in Duluth, and it took some time to wangle enough days off in a row for the visit.

Hutch inhaled slowly, trying to release some of his pent-up tension. Peace was difficult to attain. Starsky was--with all luck and medical care--getting better. Gunther was behind bars despite a barricade of lawyers advocating for his release. Not going to happen on Hutch's watch.

Then there was his and Starsky's blossoming relationship. Should he tell his mother? She'd always been an open-minded person, sometimes surprisingly so.

Hutch let out the breath noisily. Homosexuality was a tough one, something that when he looked at squarely, scared him. But, when he gazed at Starsky, those black-fringed eyelashes lying sweetly across his cheeks, Hutch felt nothing but love. No fear, no censure.

"Blondie," Starsky said indignantly, all the while tickling the palm of Hutch's hand with one finger. "Stop thinkin'..." He chuckled and winced, waiting out some internal pain.

Hutch waited with him, silent and watchful, his heart so full it ached.

"I can't sleep with all that thinkin'," Starsky finished belatedly. "Nap!"

"Yes, boss," Hutch replied with a grin.

~\*~

Ruth Pulaski finished nursing school on June 12, 1942. Before the ink was dry on the diploma, she had her trunk packed, on her way to serve her country. To say she was excited was a misnomer. In her mind, it seemed wrong to be excited when going into a war zone. Still, she was going to be stationed in England! She'd never been out of New York state before. Never been on a cruise. Never--the list was too long to contemplate.

Exploring London, seeing Buckingham Palace, eating British foods filled her imagination as she climbed aboard the ship that would transport her across the sea. Ruth stumbled on the gangplank and a hand grabbed her elbow to steady her.

"Step lively, can't fall on your face the first day," a female voice said.

Ruth looked to her right and gaped. The girl who had helped her was one of the most beautiful women Ruth had ever seen. Her blonde hair was swept back in a stylish chignon, a smart green uniform indicating that she was in the Army Nurse Corps, like Ruth. She wore bright red lipstick as if her lips were meant to be that sensuous color. The green cap under her arm matched the one pinned securely on Ruth's dark curls. All around them, young women rushed past to get onto the ship. A blast of the ship's horn was loud in Ruth's ears.

"I always have trouble balancing on heels when walking on a ship," the woman went on. "Guess we'll have to stick to more practical footwear from now on, eh?"

Her accent was not one Ruth had ever heard before, but she didn't want to be rude enough to ask. "Thank you," she said belatedly, stepping out of the way of the stream of passengers. "I'm Ruth Pulaski. You're a nurse, too?"

"Louise Larsen." Louise stuck out her hand, shaking Ruth's. "Yep, on my way to London."

"We'll be in the same unit, then!" Ruth exclaimed.

Just like that, they became friends. Turned out Louise knew two other women in the group: Martha and Viola. By quirk of fate, Louise had been quartered with Martha and Viola with Ruth. Since the other two wanted to be stateroom mates for the cruise, it didn't take a moment to switch the assignment roster.

"Where are you from?" Ruth asked once they'd stowed their bags and were trying on life vests.

"Duluth, Minnesota," Louise explained. "You?"

"Bronx, New York," Ruth answered, cinching the belt on her bright orange life vest.

"I love your accent!" Louise exclaimed, leaning over the rail of the ship as it moved away from the shore. "Must be exciting to live in New York. You sound like a character in a movie."

Ruth couldn't imagine a more outrageous statement. Her favorite stars were exotic creatures living in California, not NYC. "I'll admit, I never met anyone from Minnesota, but we studied the Great Lakes in geography class." She gave Lady Liberty a wave as the ship pulled out into the ocean, instinctively turning toward the horizon to face her new beginning.

Ruth and Louise were delighted to share a cramped stateroom over to England. They spent the trip comparing their lives: not just boyfriends and film stars, but their aspirations and dreams. That kept them through the docking in Great Britain and the whirlwind visit to a bombed out London. Ruth looped her old Brownie camera around her neck. If she hadn't gone into nursing school, she'd have been a photographer. It was one of her passions.

The city was a somber reminder of how much England had already endured from the German assault.

"How did anyone survive?" Ruth asked, staring at the rubble of what had once been a brick building near a London bus stop. It had been over a year since she'd read the newspaper articles of the London blitz. Some streets had been reduced to rubble with nothing rebuilt that she could see. "I'd have been so scared."

"Being scared and yet still doing what you have to do is true courage," Louise said softly, brushing her fingers across the back of Ruth's hand.

Ruth inhaled fast. There was something about Louise, something she couldn't put her finger on. She'd never made a friend so quickly. It almost felt like they'd known each other all their lives. Although their interests were not similar, despite both being nurses, they meshed perfectly with each other. She felt like she could talk to Louise about anything. Strange as it sounded--even to her own ears--if Louise was a man, Ruth would have thought she was falling in love.

"Here's the bus!" Louise called out gaily, holding up her fare. "First one to spy Princess Margaret or Princess Elizabeth is a rotten egg."

Ruth clambered onboard the red, double-decker bus, giddy as a school girl. Despite stark evidence of the Nazis' brutality, she was enjoying her first visit to a foreign land. The notion that the Germans could return with more bombs, more destruction, seemed so remote--impossible now that the might of the United States Army had joined forces with the British and Canadians. How could the Germans possibly attack now?

The bus swayed as Ruth followed Louise to the second level. They let the warm mid-June sun warm their shoulders and laughed with delight when Buckingham Palace came into view. Ruth snapped as many pictures as she dared--she wasn't sure if photography was allowed in war-time London. Seeing Louise's face, her look of awe at the changing of the guard in front of the palace, Ruth had to take the photo--with the guard in the background.

The two friends discussed more complicated subjects on the train to Brickbarns. Like politics: Louise approved of Roosevelt's policies, but Ruth was curious to see what another president could do. FDR had been around so long. They even discussed that most taboo topic, religion.

"I've never met anyone who wasn't..." Louise glanced around the train car full of young women and men bound for the Army base. "Christian." She stopped as if uncertain how to say more and her hand crept over to clasp Ruth's. "I guess this is going to sound silly--but, you don't seem--"

"Jewish?" Ruth finished briskly. She was actually surprised how open-minded Louise was. Even in her fairly protected neighborhood back home, which had a large enclave of Jews, she'd encountered anti-Semitism. "I eat pork, I don't wear a wig, no--we're not very religious. We emigrated to New York from Poland when I was five and my parents never looked back." She thought about the horrors she'd read about Hitler, how he'd rounded up Jews and locked them away. Would that have happened to her family if they had stayed? "I think my parents didn't want to seem...different here in America."

"I'm so glad you moved to New York so I could meet you eventually," Louise said sincerely. "I led such a sheltered life--an all-girl boarding school, can you believe it?"

"All girls?" Ruth repeated. She'd attended a crowded public school, walking the city streets back and forth even when she barely spoke enough English to strike up a friendship with another child.

"It was stifling, I realize now. Everyone Lutheran, everyone blond and the same." She spread her arms to include both the people on the train and the lush green countryside they were travelling through. "I knew there had to be more--I wanted life, purpose, meaning."

"As a nurse." Ruth nodded, understanding.

"I've never wanted anything more. Working at St. Luke's last year proved to me that I wasn't cut out to be a wife. I'd waste away, if all I had to do was take care of babies and go to the ladies' guild like my mother," Louise said firmly. "I think I'd rather be a nurse for the rest of my life."

"But what if you meet the right one?" Ruth asked, thinking of the daydreams she'd had. A prince to sweep her off her feet, carry her over the threshold, a white picket fence around their little bungalow. No three story walk-up for her.

"I think I already have," Louise answered, looking straight into Ruth's eyes with her lip tucked under her top teeth. She swallowed, turning away, suddenly withdrawn.

"You have? Who?" Ruth pestered her with questions, but Louise didn't say anything more. It felt very much like she'd pulled away emotionally, but Ruth couldn't fathom why. Eventually, although Ruth wasn't quite sure how, Louise directed the conversation back to other matters.

Both girls agreed that they wanted to work at the front lines, where the action was. To be there immediately after the soldiers were injured. Which meant working in France. The idea sent shivers down Ruth's spine--both scary and exciting.

She was an old-fashioned girl, and had surprised herself when she didn't get married to some boy directly after high school like many of her friends. She had loftier ambitions. Her mother found it scandalous that her only daughter was following older brothers Alvin and Melvin into the second World War.

In Brickbarns, Ruth, Louise and most of the other nurses were billeted in an old estate across the road from the Army hospital in the eastern part of England. The green hills were marvelous in early summer, complete with gamboling white sheep. There was even a picturesque British hamlet close by, exactly as Ruth had pictured. She particularly loved the gorgeous manor house with cross-timbering and mullioned windows. She and Louise ended up sharing a tiny room at the top of a rickety staircase. They were lucky: most of the nurses slept four to a room in the bigger bedchambers.

"I'd never manage all those steps after a long shift!" Viola Cunningham laughed. She waved at Ruth and Louise as they bumped their luggage up the spiral staircase.

"Keeps the legs in shape," Ruth called back.

"However, Ruthie, I can clearly see that the seams in your stockings are crooked," Louise teased.

"Then don't look," Ruth retorted good-naturedly. Perversely, she was quite pleased that Louise did.

"This must have been the maid's quarters," Louise proclaimed, panting when they reached the top. "Up near the roof, like in that novel, *The Little Princess*."

"Never read it," Ruth said, mentally making a note to do so. "But I saw the Shirley Temple movie." She looked around the six sided room with a single window. "This is--I don't know--romantic."

Louise's smile was a beacon in the dimness. "Oh, yes, sugar, it is."

The next day, they were in the hospital wing, caring for soldiers, some of whom had devastating wounds. It was a rude awakening. Louise, with a year's experience in hospital nursing under her belt, seemed capable and strong, handling the caseload with aplomb.

Ruth, however, felt like she was drowning. Nursing school, even when working nights on the surgical floor, had not prepared her for patients--boys--dying of gunshot wounds gone septic, gangrenous limbs hastily amputated on the battlefield, and shellshock that separated mind from body.

Her daydreams of soothing injured soldiers while mortar fire rained around them evaporated. Nursing was incredibly hard, even in a safe, clean ward. How could she possibly manage out on the front lines in the rain, with mud up to her ankles, and not enough medical supplies? She'd heard stories from other nurses who'd been to France. She had enough to deal with here in Brickbarns. Twelve-hour shifts where she never got a break, eating bites of a sandwich between patients, and running to the toilet only when the soldiers were asleep.

Her first death came just a week after they'd arrived. Wounded men were ferried from France in any way possible, both by boat and plane, depending on the severity of their wounds. From the moment she saw Corporal James Frost, Ruth anticipated the worst. She was astonished he'd survived the trip across the channel.

She and Louise followed Dr. Gladstone's every order, pushing IV fluids, epinephrine, the newest sulfa drugs, all in vain. With her heart pounding in her throat, Ruth watched as Gladstone pronounced their patient dead only six hours after he'd been admitted to their hospital.

Tears filming her eyes, Ruth turned away, unable to look at the dead boy any longer. Gladstone flipped a sheet over the boy and moved to the next patient. She wanted to run away and sob, rail against the fates. Why? Why?

What had she expected? How could she hold on to the little bit of goodness she could offer when there were so many bullets, so many Nazis determined to kill?

"Ruthie," Louise said softly, taking her arm. "Time for a breather."

"I have to get Sergeant Millhouse his--"

"Martha! Can you help Sergeant Millhouse for a little while?" Louise called.

"Sure thing, doll, I got it covered," the vivacious redhead relid. She bent over the patient wearing a sling on his right arm.

"Louise." Ruth pursed her lips together feeling like a shirker. Would the head nurse reprimand her for being such a cry-baby?

"The other girls understand. You have to grieve." Louise led her outside. It was night. Due to regulations, the base was blacked out after sunset, only the stars in the heavens providing any sort of light.

"He wasn't as old as me," Ruth whispered against her friend's shoulder. Louise held her tightly, letting her cry. "What if that had been Al or Mel?" The idea that her brothers might be injured had crossed her mind when she was in nursing school, helping give injections and cleaning up after a nauseated patient vomited on her nice white shoes, but that had been abstract. Here, she saw what might happen to them and it terrified her.

"You'd buck up, smile that gorgeous smile, and show them what you know about being a terrific nurse," Louise said softly.

"Have you seen someone die before?" Ruth gazed up at the sky. From the base runway, she could hear the muted whine of a plane landing and knew that more injured G.I.s were on their way.

"Unfortunately." Louise pursed her lips, turning to look up at the stars. "Old men, though, finished with their lives. Not..." She choked once, her breast heaving as if she were going to cry, too. But Louise drew herself up and swiped at her eyes. "Soldiers arriving any moment; we'd better check on the supply of dressings and sutures."

She patted Ruth's belly, her hand flat on Ruth's blood-spattered uniform for a second longer than absolutely necessary. "You all right?"

"You really think I'm a terrific nurse?"

"Yes." Louise smiled, her face lovely in the moonlight.

Ruth would have swooned if it had been anyone else and her heart gave an abrupt thud. This was just her friend Louise, not some romantic prince to sweep her off her feet. "I think you're the best nurse I ever met--"

~\*~

The patient load never got better, but Ruth learned to roll with the highs and lows of the job. She worked with a good group of nurses. The other girls were always ready to lend a hand with complicated procedures or lifting heavy patients. With so many injured arriving daily, the nurses had to work split and overlapping shifts to ensure the wounded soldiers had adequate care.

Ruth made good friends in Viola and Martha. She delighted in the boys who got out of bed to play an impromptu game of baseball using their crutches as bats and dented bed pans as bases.

Occasionally, she took pictures of the young men, arms draped around their squadron mates, ready to be flown back into combat. Those were hard to bear because the boys might never return. Ruth cried with the soldiers when their comrades died, finding that writing notes home to grieving families helped her own pain and loss.

All through it, there was Louise, right beside her. Ruth would look up from changing a bandage to see Louise's bright blue eyes, full of love and joy. When they walked by one another, their hands would brush. Louise sometimes gave Ruth's hand a quick squeeze.

Ruth always felt that tiny--she really didn't know what to call it--tingling in her lower parts. It was a sensation she'd come to associate with Louise. No boy had ever made her feel that excited, that...she almost blushed just thinking the word *aroused*. She'd never imagined that another woman could make her feel that way, but from what Martha and Viola described about experiences with their boyfriends, the feeling was exactly the same.

The best times were always at night, when she and Louise had time to talk in their attic room. They'd taken to jamming into the same bunk, hip to hip, arms around each other. One night in mid-autumn, they curled together, taking turns reading bits of letters from family out loud.

"Louise, " she said, looking down at her roughened, cracked knuckles curled around the note from her mom. The harsh soap they washed with didn't compare with Palmolive back home. "I have to tell you something. We-we talked about going over to France, to take care of the G.I.'s on the front lines, but--" She resolved not to tear up. That seemed to happen so often around Louise. "The bullets and bombs scare me so."

Louise nodded, pulling her close. "I've known you didn't want to for a long time," she whispered. She touched her lips to Ruth's.

Not a real kiss, not much more than momentary pressure, but Ruth was sure Louise's red lipstick had been seared to her mouth. She wanted much more than that, but--it was wrong, on so many levels.

She really didn't know how what to do about it. Girls and boys had been created to go together. She was a nurse; she knew how the penis fit into the vagina, even if she was still a virgin. It was wrong to sneak looks when Louise stripped out of her blood-spattered nurse uniform and stood at the basin wearing only her Army regulation plain white brassiere to wash up quickly before bed.

*Very wrong.*

Ruth still did it every night. Their room was tiny--what else did she have to look at? The thing was, she was fairly sure--make that *positive*--that Louise looked at her, too.

"Is that all right?" Louise asked softly, touching Ruth's curls. "Your eyes are so bright, like lamps."

"I-" Ruth breathed out, scared, her heart racing. She kept flashing back to that night when Louise had held her close after Corporal Frost died. Why would she compare a night of such horror with this lovely, this...kiss? Could she even call it a kiss?

"I'm sorry." Louise climbed quickly out of the cot, her creamy cheeks flaming. "I thought--Ruthie. I've done it before, with really..." Louise hitched a breath and went on as she weren't obviously about to cry. "Really close girlfriends. I was carried away--I'm really sor..."

"Don't be." Ruth scrambled out of bed and pulled Louise around to face her. She was astonished that her friend was crying. Louise never cried. Not even when fresh faced boys who barely needed to shave bled out and died. Never, not even on the nights when Ruthie was overcome with homesickness and the dread of holding the hand of yet another soldier facing life without his legs. "I liked it."

Louise looked up hopefully, blue eyes filled with tears.

"I loved it," Ruth whispered, her heart soaring when she pressed her lips against Louise's.

"I've wanted to do that for a long time," Louise admitted. "You make me happy, Ruth. Like I could burst out singing."

"Do!" Ruth cried, clapping her hands. Louise had a beautiful voice.

"*Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me...*" Louise sang, holding out her hand to Ruth.

Her heart soaring with happiness, Ruth swung their clasped hands in time to the melody. Who needed a radio when she had such a wonderful singer right beside her.

It was innocent, she convinced herself. They were best of friends, closer than sisters. They held hands under cover of the tablecloth in the mess hall when no one was looking. On their rare nights off, Ruth dated the able-bodied soldiers, dancing to Benny Goodman in the USO shack, and even had the occasional pint at the local pub near the base. That was just as innocent, but it was allowed.

Autumn turned unto winter and Ruth could hardly believe that she'd already been in England half a year. The time had flown, with long work hours and an exhausting pace. While Louise admitted that the snow was nothing next to Duluth, it carpeted the entire base in freezing whiteness. Ruth was very cold, far colder than she'd been in a New York snowstorm, mostly because the only heater in their tiny loft room was a potbelly stove. The wind rattled the ancient panes of glass in the turret window at night.

Not that they spent much time in their room. The work was unceasing--lots of soldiers had been transferred from France and other parts of Europe to recuperate before being shipped back to the States. Sometimes Ruth felt so tired she could sleep for a week, but looking across the ward at Louise always revived her on the worst shift.

Louise seemed to radiate beauty, composure, and quiet strength. Her hair was always pinned up in a blond bun, that white cap squarely in place, and her long, narrow fingers busy with writing notes or rolling bandages.

Ruth was in love. She knew it--that Louise loved her was even more clear. The sweet glances when they were too busy to even chat, the expression in her eyes as if she was memorizing Ruth for fear of losing her.

What would become of it? They couldn't continue much longer, that was for sure. Yet Ruth never wanted what they had to end.

"Mother thought nursing was a genteel job for a lady," Ruth said one night, trying to wash the stains out of her uniform in a tiny basin. She didn't even want to think about what had caused that brown blotch on the sleeve.

"Ha!" Louise said explosively, hanging her dripping panties on a line strung across their room. "Little does she know that we handle their privates daily to get them to void."

"I never mention that in my letters home." Ruth giggled. Letting the white fabric soak, she wiped her hands and broke off a piece of Hershey bar, handing over the rest so Louise could take her share. "Mother keeps asking if I've met a nice boy."

"My mother does the same." Louise leaned against the wall, biting her hunk of chocolate. She seemed pensive, her mind half on something else. "Never been interested in dating--boys."

"I wanted to help our G.I.s, but I figured I'd meet a nice soldier and settle down once this was all over," Ruth said, sucking on her Hershey square. "Been here six months already and haven't met a single man I'd willingly marry."

"Didn't figure on any other alternative?" Louise asked with a sad, sweet smile, pushing more coal into the pot bellied stove. The clothes dripping on the line steamed in the heat.

"It never even occurred to me," Ruth admitted, facing the stove. It paid to turn one way or the other every few minutes to keep her entire body warm. She touched Louise's hand gently. "We can't keep--"

"I know." Louise licked the melting chocolate off her finger with a distracted air as if her thoughts had suddenly gone far away. "We've played with fire for too long, bound to get burned."

"Martha told me she saw you speaking with Major Passmore yesterday," Ruth said cautiously. "She's such a nosy-Nancy." Ruth was surprised to see Louise's eyes go wide as if she hadn't

thought anyone knew. "Did you get a promotion?" she asked, wringing her uniform to get out as much water as possible. "You deserve it--you've worked so hard."

Louise handed her the last of the candy bar, looking down at the floor. "Gosh, no. He-uh-asked to take me to the USO shack."

The way she spoke, as if she'd latched on to the most convenient story, proved it wasn't the truth but Ruth wasn't about to pry. She *was* concerned. "Did you accept? Sergeant Vincent, you know, Anzio? Keeps pestering me to go with him to the dance."

"Ruth, you of all people know I don't want to--go walking with a soldier," Louise said sharply. She turned to the tiny window, raising her head as if she could feel sun on her face. Except there wasn't any. Icy rain splattered against the glass, chilled wind pushing through all the drafty places in the old walls.

"Yes." Ruth draped her uniform over the line. Yes, she knew. Even though she was improbably in love with her best friend, and Louise was in love with her, it could never be. They had to conform, to be the good girls society expected them to be.

~\*~

December passed in a haze. The weather was horrible: snow storms kept the planes grounded, which decreased the patients in the ward. Despite the lull, there was more than enough to do, and working briskly kept a body warm.

Stomping the snow off her boots, Ruth shrugged out of her coat in the wide kitchen of the manor house, exhausted after her shift. The room was redolent with the scent of a cake baking in the oven--probably for the New Year's party. Half a dozen nurses, most in the same sleep-deprived state she was, were huddled around the table with cups of strong British tea.

"Want a cuppa?" Viola asked, using the quaint British expression. She tapped the brown tea pot. "Enough for one more."

"No, thanks. I'm sleeping for as long as I can before the transports fly in," Ruth answered. She'd never exchange her love of coffee for tea.

"Don't forget the New Year's party at the enlisted men's club tonight," another nurse called out. "The place'll be jumping."

"That I'll wake up for." Ruth grinned, climbing the stairs to her garret. Viola's original prediction that she'd hate the long climb after working on her feet all day had come true. Still, the small room was a quiet nest where she could spend peaceful hours with Louise. She hadn't seen her friend since earlier in the day when Louise left the hospital to do a few errands.

Louise was sitting on the bunk, reading a letter. It didn't look like the usual mail from home. Ruth recognized the letterhead, even upside down and backwards. Official Army correspondence.

"Ruthie," Louise said, her voice quivering with emotions. "I've got news--"

"Orders?" Ruth asked, staring at her. Louise's long blond hair had tumbled out of the usual tight bun, flaxen strands shining in the light from the single lamp. Apparently she hadn't gotten any sleep: she still wore a white uniform with a blue sweater over the top.

"I've been reassigned, to the Pacific theatre. On an island."

"What?" *Where had this come from?* Ruth gulped, unable to comprehend what she'd heard. "Where?"

"New Caledonia." Louise held up the letter. She looked desolate and elated at the same time.

"Why?" Not really sure what she was asking, Ruth wanted to bury her head on Louise's shoulder, cling to her and never let go.

"I didn't know if my request would be granted," Louise said, gazing at Ruth steadily. "I saw where we were heading and I wanted you so badly it hurt." She touched Ruth's sleeve tentatively, then let her hand drop to her lap. "But...you were right, we can't let this get out of bounds."

"It's far too late for that," Ruth said so softly she wasn't sure she'd spoken out loud. Snatches of conversations and passing comments came back to her. "That time Martha saw you talking to Major Passmore," she guessed. She didn't know quite what he did, but he worked in the General's office. He'd have access to information necessary for transfers and reassignments.

"Yes." Louise bit her bottom lip, crushing the letter in her trembling hand. "I put in the request for a transfer months ago. That day--I was asking if he'd heard anything." She gazed at her with such powerful love that Ruth felt like she would drown in those blue eyes.

Abruptly turning, Louise raised her face to the minuscule window as she often did. Snow was falling, wet flakes sticking to the pane. "I left Duluth to get away from snow. I wanted warm sea waters, a beach, and palm trees."

Ruth laughed wretchedly. "Southeast England wasn't your first choice, then?" Tears clogged her throat but the last thing she wanted to do was cry in front of Louise. "When..." She rubbed her lips. "When are you being shipped out?"

"Tomorrow morning." Dropping her orders to the floor, Louise took Ruth's hand, clasping it between both of hers. Their matching red fingernail varnish shone brightly in the lamp light. "I'm sorry, sweetie."

"You mean--January first? They gave you one day?" Ruth retorted angrily. "I don't want you to leave!"

"I thought there'd be longer to say good-bye. I'd stay with you forever if I could." Louise ducked her head, her hair loose around her cheeks. "I never planned on...falling in love."

Ruth always thought Louise looked exactly like Cinderella or maybe Sleeping Beauty with her cornflower blue eyes, delicate complexion, and that dazzlingly blond hair. She brushed a fair strand back from Louise's face to see her properly and was astonished when Louise kissed her hand.

Just the touch of Louise's lips on her knuckles sent waves of bliss through Ruth. This was no longer innocent. She accepted that.

Ruth leaned in and kissed Louise on the lips, the way she'd wanted to for months. This was wonderful and scary, although it felt wrong. Even so, she knew she would love Louise Larsen until the day she died.

Kisses led to nuzzling. Ruth was breathless and giddy in minutes. "Louise, what if the other girls--?"

"No one ever comes up this far," Louise said, but she paused, listening.

They could both hear the high pitch of women's voices but the house was well built, and actual words were indecipherable. Ruth found herself torn between wanting intimacy and afraid of the consequences. What if they got caught?

"I love you," Louise murmured into her curls. "I have since you tripped walking onto the ship." She reached up and carefully undid the row of buttons on Ruth's stained uniform.

"You saved me." Ruth sighed, leaning against the pillow. Louise gently slid Ruth's uniform off, leaving her in bra and underpants. "I love you, too."

Louise pressed a kiss onto Ruth's neck and another lower on her right breast. Ruth wasn't sure if she should let this continue--*how she wanted it!* Should she reciprocate?

Ruthie." Louise skimmed her fingers over the elastic of Ruth's panties. "Do you want this?"

"Yes." Goosebumps erupted down Ruth's arms and legs and she shivered. The cold air on her exposed belly had nothing to do with her sudden tremors. "Louise, I'm a vir..." she gasped.

"And you still will be, sugar," Louise answered, her face flushed with arousal. "That's the beauty of it."

There was sadness in her voice, tempered with love and obvious desire. Her eyes were wide, the pupils dilated. Louise laid the flat of her hand on Ruth's pelvis, over her panties. Ruth gasped, the tingling in her loins that she'd come to associate with Louise about to drive her mad. If Louise's fingers went any lower, did that turn Ruth into some kind of deviant?

"What are you going to do?" Ruth asked, trying desperately to slow her thundering heartbeat.

"Make love to you." Louise smiled mischievously. "It's sweet and feels incredible, like, bubbles under your skin. Remember when we went out to that pub with the girls and drank Shandy?"

"Ginger ale and beer," Ruth said. The beer here was much darker and more bitter than what she was used to in New York, but the sweet-hot carbonated soda had filled her with effervescence. Exactly how she felt now, only doubly so.

Louise's finger on her skin felt terrific. Why was it wrong? She was a good girl. She'd only put her own fingers down there once or twice. It was nice, in a wet sort of way, but...

"Stop thinking, sugar," Louise whispered. "I love you so much, I want to give you this--"

"A memory?" Ruth arched up to steal a kiss. Louise's lips were soft, warm. The women breathed into each other, slow and steady, giving and accepting love. Ruth could feel Louise's heart thudding in time with her own. It was powerful, strong. "Feels like I swallowed a sparkler on the Fourth."

"Forget what your mother told you; masturbation won't make you go blind," Louise said in a silky tone that sent more shivers down Ruth's spine. She pressed kisses in a trail down Ruth's flat belly, leaving perfect mouth prints in lipstick. "Or I'd be like one of the three mice." Louise hummed the nursery tune, walking her fingers into Ruth's plain white, regulation Army panties.

"But this won't be masturbation," Ruth replied, seeing a loophole in her mother's rules. She hitched a breath, her belly touching Louise's wrist.

"Nope. It'll be--" Louise used both hands to pull Ruth's undies off, "swell."

When she tickled her fingers inside Ruth, it was magical.

"Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!" Ruth didn't wait a moment longer. She spread her legs.

Louise smoothed back the slippery folds of Ruth's inner lips and probed gently at her vagina. That felt wonderful, but nothing prepared her for when Louise bent down to lick her.

Fireworks erupted in her brain. Ruth gasped, flexing both legs and almost kneeling Louise in the mouth. Panting, she grabbed onto Louise, the orgasm ripping through her being like a storm. "I never felt anything like that!"

"You're my everything." Louise smiled joyfully. "This has to be--" She stopped speaking, her face abruptly bleak.

"The only time, ever," Ruth finished, one ear tuned to the occasional noise from the lower stories of the house. "It's too dangerous."

"I don't want your life ruined, sugar," Louise said finally, shoving her long hair back. "That's why I have to leave. We could be court-marshaled if anyone found out. My mother, your mother, would disown us."

"But you've done this before," Ruth stated, the bland fact ugly. She almost wished this could be their special secret, unlike anything else.

"Not with--" Louise ran her thumb down Ruth's cheek to her collarbone. "Not with someone so special that I'd give my soul to spend the rest of my life with."

"So you'll just leave because--?" Ruth couldn't stop the tears this time.

"If I don't leave now, after we've had six months, I'd never be able to leave you ever." Louise squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. Her voice unsteady but no less lovely, she sang, "*Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else--*"

"*But me 'til I come marching home,*" Ruth joined in, tears on her lips.

They fell asleep curled in each other's arms, the war far from their thoughts.

~\*~

It was nine-thirty at night when Ruth came abruptly awake. She'd slept far longer than she expected. Luckily, there hadn't been any air raid sirens in the last few hours. Jammed against the wall in the narrow cot, she gazed at Louise, her heart aching with love. How could she go back to the ward tomorrow, knowing Louise was flying away forever?

"What time is it?" Louise asked without opening her eyes. "I can feel you staring at me."

"Time for the New Year's bash." Ruth jumped out of bed. She couldn't dwell on what was happening in the morning or it would consume her. She allowed herself one last time to watch Louise change clothes; removing her wrinkled uniform and changing into a blue and green challis dress with a cinched waist.

"Now you," Louise said, placing the flat of her hand on Ruth's belly. "The dress with the big red flowers. It looks so lovely on you." She almost choked, her voice fraught with unspoken pain and desire.

Taking Louise's cue, Ruth raised her chin proudly. They would get through this. They would survive, even if it didn't feel like it now. She tried valiantly to think of something completely different to talk about.

"I heard on the BBC radio that Rommel is trapped in Tunisia," she said, stepping into the dress Louise held out. When Louise's fingers touched Ruth's bare skin, her resolve nearly crumbled. "And Japan may abandon Guadalcanal." She faced Louise, trying to match that brave smile and twirled around in the full skirt simply to see the rapt love on Louise's face.

They lingered too long in their room, giving in to one last kiss before putting on lipstick and styling each other's hair. The other nurses would be wondering where they were.

Ruth trotted down the stairs behind Louise, teetering in high heels. "D'you think Rommel's defeat and the Japanese change of course could turn the war?" Ruth asked, determined to keep the

conversation far from romantic clap-trap. "If our side gets Guadalcanal, maybe we'll secure the Solomon Islands and forge the way to Japan?"

Snow was deep on each side of the road and it was icy cold. Ruth shivered as she and Louise crossed onto the base to get to the enlisted men's club. The New Year's eve party was in full swing by the sound of the music audible even yards away.

"Then I wouldn't be needed in the Pacific, you mean?" Louise put her gloved hand to Ruth's cheek, her eyes bleak. "The end to the war with the Japs would be swell, but I don't think it will happen by tomorrow morning, sugar."

"I can dream, Louise, I can dream." Her heart already breaking, Ruth opened the door to the club. Crowds of soldiers were dancing to a recording of the Andrews sisters singing *Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree*.

"Our song," Louise said, blinking. There were tears glistening on her lashes. "I wish we had, just once."

"Sat under the apple tree?" Ruth whispered. "Every time see one, you'll be there with me." In her heart, she said *"I love you, Louise Larsen,"* one more time.

Taking off her coat and hat, she watched as young men lined up to twirl Louise onto the dance floor, her skirt swinging as she struggled to keep up with her partner. Louise never could dance. Nibbling on cake, Ruth sat out the first few numbers, gazing at Louise.

One of her dance partners had a crooked grin and lively blue eyes.

"Ruthie, this is Ben," Louise said, panting. There was a calculating gleam in her eye. "I think the two of you should take the next one while I go get a cup of punch. You wore me out, Ben!"

"Hiya, Ruthie," Ben said. "You like Glenn Miller's *Tuxedo Junction* or *In the Mood* better?"

"Mmm," Ruth started, looking up into his eyes. They were deep blue and full of sunshine. Ruth sighed. She knew what Louise was doing. Girls dated boys. That was expected. Girls didn't pine over their female roommates, not if they wanted a nice normal life in New York City with their Jewish community.

"*In the Mood*," she said, hearing the familiar opening chords of the song start up.

"Exactly what I was in the mood for, myself." He grinned, leading her out between other dancers. "Where you from?"

"Unless I miss my guess," she said, his accent as dear as one of her brothers', "same place you are." He was an excellent dancer. She matched him step for step.

Louise Larson flew out of Ruth Pulaski's life on an icy New Year's day. Ruth stood on the tarmac waving until the plane was out of sight. She felt as frozen inside as the icicles decorating the manor house. Back in the tiny attic room, she pulled out the packet of photos she'd snapped in

London. Ruth touched the first picture she'd ever taken of Louise; in profile, watching the changing of the guard. It seemed apt.

Change, even when she didn't want life to go on.

Ruth exchanged letters with Louise, tales of the ward where they'd both worked, and the antics of the healing patients. She always drew a small red apple tree at the bottom of the note. Louise sent back exciting missives filled with stories of the tropics, the work in the main Army hospital--which sounded exactly like what Ruth did in Brickbarns. Beside her signature was a small green apple.

Their letters got farther apart as the months went by. It was inevitable, the war ground on, there were always more wounded servicemen, and little leisure time. Ruth began seeing Ben regularly. She didn't love him, wasn't sure she could, but he was a good man. He made her laugh. It had to be enough. Louise wrote of a young airman she was dating in one of her last letters. Surprised, Ruth sent back a note wishing Louise happiness, well aware there wouldn't be any more correspondence.

Ruth and Ben Starsky got married six months later by the Army chaplain. It wasn't a proper Jewish ceremony with a huppah, but even so, her mother was ecstatic.

Ruth told herself to never look back. Ben's homecoming in 1944--and the birth of her first son, David, nine months after that--kept her mind busy and her heart full.

~\*~

"Mom!" Hutch waved, catching sight of his mother as she came out of the jetway for United. She never seemed to change. His earliest memories were of a tall, willowy woman, her blond hair pulled into a sensible bun or a French twist for evening wear, and bright red lipstick. Didn't matter that bright red had gone out of fashion, Louise Larsen Hutchinson had a signature look, and she stuck with it. She was classically beautiful but didn't care in the slightest. One of the most down-to-earth women Hutch had ever known. He suspected it was due to working in a hospital for so many years.

"Kenny," Louise cried, pulling Hutch into a hug. "How are you holding up? You look tired. It's never easy to sleep in a hospital waiting room; your back must be twisted like a pretzel."

"Mother." Hutch rolled his eyes. "I'm thirty-four years old."

"Still my little boy, sugar." She winked, patting his cheek. "How's David? Did the antibiotics clear up his infection?" Louise hefted her carry-on bag, starting down the hallway.

"Let me carry that," Hutch said, taking her bag. "Doctors say he's improving steadily," he added with only a small amount of trepidation. He'd admit to a strange superstition about Starsky's recovery. He didn't want to sound pessimistic, but he was cautious about optimism, as well. There were so many hurdles before Starsky would be up and around. The recent infection on the lung the bullet had pierced was just one such setback. Starsky had weathered it well, but what if there were others?

"How long until Mrs. Starsky's plane lands?" Louise looked around LAX airport with interest. "Maybe we can get a sandwich and a cup of coffee? And what's her first name?"

"Ruth. Did I tell you she used to be a nurse like you?" Hutch asked, turning left toward the American Airlines section. "But apparently, that was back in the war. She hasn't done any hospital work since then."

"No, you didn't! What a coincidence, I wonder where she was stationed." Louise chuckled. "It's no surprise she didn't work--most husbands would not have allowed it in the fifties. Such a chauvinistic period! I only went back to nursing after the divorce, because I couldn't stand being cooped up in the house all winter long." She paused beside one of the floor-to-ceiling windows to watch a plane land. "Which way is the beach? Any chance we can take a swim one day?"

"I knew you'd want to go." He laughed. She hadn't changed. She'd always complained bitterly about Minnesota winters. "My friend, Huggy Bear, actually set up a day trip for you and Ruth, if she wants, on Thursday, to go to San Diego." He had to testify in court about the assassination attempt that day, but he wasn't going to tell his mother that.

They found an inexpensive restaurant near the American Airlines departure gates and sat down to eat. As usual of late, Hutch had only had coffee for breakfast and had forgotten to eat lunch. When Louise bought him a turkey on whole wheat with a side salad, Hutch couldn't refuse. She gave him one of those patented 'listen to your mother' expressions and he was reduced to a ten-year-old. Plus, he had to admit the meal was surprisingly tasty. He even stole a few of her French fries.

"Thank you for asking me to come out, Kenny," Louise said sincerely, taking a sip of Coca-Cola. She left a perfect red lip print on the rim of the paper cup. "You've always been such a private person, shouldering all the burdens yourself."

Hutch shrugged self-consciously, well aware that he did that. He couldn't help it. He'd felt like the man of the house when his father moved out, charged with protecting his mother and sister. It was only natural he extend that protection to his best friend and lover.

As he and his mother stood, Hutch decided now was the right time to tell her about him and Starsky. Something about the way she looked up at him, loving and kind, made him think she would understand. He pulled her into a quiet alcove near the waiting area.

"Mom, before Ruth gets here, I have..." Hutch licked his lips, looking anywhere but at Louise. He could see the ground crew stewardess going over to open the jetway door. "I know this will come out of left field, but...Starsky and I..." He gazed at the group of passengers emerging from American flight 62 from LaGuardia. "We've gotten together and--"

"Spit it out, Kenny," she said, rolling her eyes. She peered at the newly arriving passengers. "Whatever it is, I'll support--" Louise froze, sucking in a breath.

Almost interrupting his mother, Hutch blurted out, "Starsky and I are in love."

"Ruthie," Louise whispered.

Hutch caught sight of Starsky's mother in the crowd. Small and neat, she wasn't a great beauty, but there was something compelling in her dark blue eyes. Ruth was waving and abruptly stopped, her gloved hand still raised in the air. She had an oddly stricken expression, amazement and hope mixed into one.

"I never imagined..." Louise took a hesitant step forward.

Hutch glanced at his mother and grabbed for her arm, afraid she was going to faint. Her perfectly made up face was ashen, her eyes wide.

"That's David's mother?" Louise pulled out of his grasp.

"Louise," Ruth proclaimed, beginning to run.

Other passengers went around the two women, streaming past without paying much attention. Hutch stood, rapt, as Louise and Ruth folded into each other's arms, laughing and crying with joy. He watched as they leaned in close, sure that his mother was about to give Ruth Starsky a kiss. At the very last moment, it didn't happen, but Hutch couldn't miss the immediate connection.

"You look exactly the same!" Ruth proclaimed, beaming up at the taller woman. She covered her mouth, coughing, but that didn't hide her brilliant smile.

*Exactly like Starsky's,* Hutch thought, wishing his buddy were here to see this reunion.

"So do you," Louise said reverently.

"I don't." Ruth touched the graying curls under her small blue hat. It matched her blue coat.  
"Older and fatter."

"You know each other," Hutch declared, shepherding them toward the restaurant to be out of the flow of passengers running for their gates.

"We were--" Louise started, looking directly at Ruth.

"In England together, roommates!" Ruth finished her sentence, clearly enamored of her old friend.

*There was more to it than that,* he was sure of it. "You didn't keep in touch?"

Seeing the two of them, side by side, Hutch saw himself and Starsky. One tall and blond, the other shorter and brunette--she was going gray, but not totally. They couldn't take their eyes off one another.

"It's been thirty-six years, Kenny," Louise said, over her shoulder. "So much to catch up on, Ruthie."

She touched Ruth's pink cheek so intimately that Hutch wanted to look away. Was this how people viewed him and Starsky? So wrapped up in each other that everyone else was extraneous?

"Husbands, kids, lives to live," Ruth murmured, leaning into Louise's palm. "I heard you got married, but not much else."

"Two children, Ken and Karen, then divorced in 1957," Louise said with a shrug. "Water under the bridge. Went back to nursing." She linked her arm through Ruth's towing her along to baggage claim. "You? Of course, I know about David."

"I married Ben Starsky, the boy you introduced me to on your last night," Ruth admitted.

Louise laughed with delight. "I was your matchmaker? How ironic."

"Two sons, David and Nicholas. Ben died in 1958," Ruth explained, taking two steps for every one of Louise's, her low heeled black pumps click-clacking on the linoleum.

Bemused, Hutch followed. In all the hubbub, he wasn't sure his mother had heard his declaration about Starsky. He was far more intrigued with a part of Louise's past he knew nothing about--and definitely wanted to learn more.

"I truly can't believe that you're David's mother!" Louise exclaimed when Ruth grabbed her sensible black suitcase off the carousel. "Have you been out to Bay City before?"

"Oh, yes, my brother--You remember Al--lives here. He watched Davey after Ben died. My other brother was killed in the war," Ruth said quickly as if getting through the emotional news fast.

*Just like Starsky would,* Hutch thought.

"I came to see our boys, when was it, Hutch? July of '77?" Ruth continued.

"Yes, because we went to a ballgame," Hutch confirmed, shifting his mother's carry-on to his left hand to relieve Ruth of her case. He couldn't wait to get the women settled and talk to Starsky--with any luck, privately. In a thousand years, who would have guessed this amazing connection? Even all of Starsky's favorite 'what-if' scenarios could not have conjured up this. "My car's in the parking lot, across the street there." He tilted his chin at the door out of the baggage area.

"Kenny and David came out to Duluth about a year ago." Louise glanced at her son, beaming. Her eyes were so bright even he was dazzled. "You have a very handsome son."

"I think yours is terrific!" Ruth laughed, looking up at Hutch.

Caught in the tractor beam of two sets of blue eyes, Hutch forgot to look before he took a step off the curb. A taxi whizzed by, the honk of its horn assaulting his ears.

"Remember to look both ways before you cross the street," Louise reminded him with amused parental superiority.

"Boys." Ruth shook her head, coughing delicately into her fist. "Who would have thought, Louise, our sons would be best friends?" She caught Louise's hand, squeezing tightly.

Hutch was beginning to believe that his life had changed in very elemental ways, and it wasn't just because he was in love with his male partner.

~\*~

Ruth's first thought when she walked into the hospital room was that her son looked so frail. Part of her wanted to assess him as a nurse. She still had the skills; she'd kept her hand in, working as a volunteer school nurse in the last few years. Part of her wanted to hold her son in her arms and never let go. Almost like when he came back from Viet Nam. Only then, he'd simply looked shattered.

Now, although ripped to pieces by automatic weapon fire, Davey looked--Ruth had to think for a moment, even as she pulled her first born to her breast. She kissed his forehead, both eyes, and then his whiskery cheek, pulling back to look at him again.

*He looked whole.*

*Complete.*

In a heartbeat, she knew why. *Hutch*. When she'd visited two years ago--was it really that long ago since she'd seen Davey?--she'd seen their friendship, felt their love, like a palpable bond connecting them.

Funny she hadn't seen Louise's face in Hutch's. They were very much alike. But she had tried to banish Louise from her mind so very long ago. Stopped thinking about her--for the most part.

Still, she'd have been blind not to realize that Davey and Hutch had more than a partner brotherhood. Once upon a time, she might not have used the word romantic to describe two people of the same sex, but she was all too aware that it could happen.

"I missed you," Starsky whispered, gazing at her joyfully. He clasped both her hands.

"I wanted to come sooner--" She tried to stifle the cough rising in her chest. Not wanting to cough in his face, she turned, finding herself looking directly at Louise.

Astonishing to realize how long it had been. Felt like moments since she'd seen Louise tripping over Ben's feet dancing the jitterbug. The old feelings flooded back as if it were December 1942 again. She wanted to slowly peel off Louise's sophisticated sweater set and see if she was wearing a regulation Army brassiere underneath. Her cheeks flushed with heat.

Louise's lips curved into such a sly, knowing smile that Ruth knew she was having the same fantasies. What a couple of old tarts they were!

"Ma?" Starsky asked.

He sounded confused. Little wonder.

Ruth settled on the edge of the bed, gazing at Louise. When she took his hand and put out her left to Louise's, he reached out to Hutch. They made a ring, holding onto family and loved ones, a circle of gratefulness and hope.

"Kenny," Louise said briskly, cocking her head. "You probably thought I didn't hear you in the airport."

Hutch opened his mouth to speak, going red.

"What?" Starsky asked suspiciously, staring at his partner. He pulled a hand free, pushing himself awkwardly up in bed.

Ruth immediately went to his aid, but he waved her away.

"He told me." Louise smiled. She looked straight at Ruth when she said, "These two are in love."

"Hutch!" Starsky cried in horror.

"Mom!" Hutch said at exactly the same moment.

"It's no surprise." Ruth chuckled. "I figured that out two years ago."

"Before we did?" Hutch asked, leaning weakly against the wall beside the bed. He absently rubbed his breastbone with a strangely bemused expression.

"I must have been blind not to see it last year." Louise glanced at Ruth. "There's another reason I should have recognized the signs--"

Everything inside Ruth melted. She remembered how much she'd wanted Louise 36 years ago. During the war, the most difficult time in her life, this woman made her whole. Could they'd actually be together again now?

"We'd understand far better than most," Ruth finished, rubbing her thumb against Louise. They were both wearing matching bright red nail polish. She'd given up the red lipstick that Louise wore so beautifully, but she did love having pretty nails.

"Hold onto your hat, Starsk," Hutch warned. "I think I got a taste of this at the airport."

"What're you talking about?" Starsky inhaled raggedly, carefully putting his hands behind his head. "I'm ready. What's goin' on?"

"I'm going to tell you a story," Ruth said, her memories flying back to that special day in June 1942. "Before the ink was dry on my diploma, I had my trunk packed, on my way to serve my country--"

The End