

CHAPTER ONE

Frozen

Christmas is for kids. It's magic to them. Santa, the tree, lights, decorations, music, toys, treats, parties, vacation from school—it's the stuff that developing imaginations run away with. As a child, I'd been no different. Although the holiday brought less of everything on the list than many of the kids in my neighborhood experienced, it had been my favorite holiday from the start. The whole family went to church together, and the place was packed. Ma would make a special dinner—sometimes turkey—and a couple sides more than the usual potatoes and cabbage. She'd pull out the small box of decorations that she kept in a closet, and she'd make our drab apartment sparkle. Sometimes there'd even be a tree. But, tree or not, it was always a special day. My Christmas-morning, Mama-Bear hug would be followed by a fifty-cent piece placed in my palm by her gentle hand. A fortune! I used to anticipate that gleaming coin as much as the kids up by the park anticipated their shiny new Schwinn. By the time I'd reached my teens, I'd slip the coveted currency back in her change purse next to a couple of lonely dimes and

pennies that held much less luster. It was my gift to her.

“You’re a good boy, Joey,” she’d say later—her way to let me know she was on to me.

Later in life, when Barbara and I had made a family of our own, Christmas would always see a seven-foot tree in the far corner of our living room. The size left just enough room for the tree stand below and the silver star atop, which fit right under the eight-foot ceiling. Gifts for nine children would line the two walls that led to the tree and they’d meet at an ark of more gifts neatly piled around the base of the tree. Slight of hand and well-managed mirror tricks made the lot seem more than it was, and—gratefully—our children never felt slighted. Barbara and I would set out to shop for gifts armed with the few dollars we’d managed to stash away in the Christmas Club at the bank, as well as the uniform allowance that the police department coughed up every December. Half the gifts had always been things the children actually needed, and we had to buy anyway—clothes. Plus, each of them got at least one toy that they’d had their heart set on. And each year, a couple of them would get one extra-special item—a bicycle, a sled, or some other gift that held special meaning and cost us extra money. We’d keep careful track of who got what when, and we’d rotate costly gifts among them through the years. The rest of the presents were rounded out with less expensive yet fun items. All nine children had always been excited and grateful.

We’d run through the Christmas-gift money like a dog through a turkey sandwich, so there was usually only a pittance left to buy gifts for each other. One year, I tore through the wrapping paper of Barbara’s gift to me and found a very serviceable pair of pajama pants.

“Oh, these are beautiful,” I said. “Thank you.”

Then I opened the gift she’d gotten for the children to present to me and found the

matching shirt.

“Aha ha ha! It’s like you guys knew exactly what the other had gotten me!”

Christmas with our kids was always fun and filled with love.

But in November of 1950, I hadn’t yet held those fond memories that were still decades in the future. I did, however, cling to thoughts of the Christmas that was just over a month away. *Could it be true?* I hadn’t had a Christmas at home since I’d joined the Marines, and I prayed that this year would be the one. But the tunnel through which I saw the ever-more dubious light at the end came to me in the form of rising mountains, deepening valleys, and a deteriorating dirt road that led north through enemy territory. Rather than the end of our trek, it now looked more like the beginning of a new and ominous odyssey. Powerful winds that buffeted our faces pushed the temperature down and stung our bodies through the lightweight dungarees and field jackets we’d been issued in the south during warmer days. Cold-weather gear had failed to arrive in time for the early winter incursion that filtered down from Siberia and assaulted us.

First, the motor march took us through Hamhung, and then to an agricultural station where we laid low for some days while the 7th Marines prepared to launch the attack through to the Chosin Reservoir. With the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, I would soon follow in the footsteps of the 5th Marines, who would sustain the attack that the 7th had initiated. As we moved forward, we encountered villages that the 7th had left in shambles. Whispers of *Chinese* filtered their way to the enlisted men in trucks and on foot. Nobody verbalized the question that was apparent in every set of eyes. *What, exactly, does that mean?*

By the time we'd reached Chinhung-ni, the dirt road climbed steeply, and the Deuce-And-A-Halves labored with the weight of the 105 Howitzers through narrow switchbacks on the edge of terrifying drops.

The 11th's convoy was a day behind the 5th's when we reached the gatehouse at Funchilin Pass. The scene here, with its soaring, snow-covered cliffs, and plunging valleys of steep, ragged terrain, was one of majesty and mystery. I had not, in all my time in Korea, felt so far from home, and so completely isolated. The flat bridge at the gatehouse crossed over four enormous pipes that—in perfect symmetry—zigzagged down the mountain in order to carry water from the Chosin Reservoir to a power plant in the valley. It was an impossible feat of engineering. From the back of our truck, I watched the bridge pass beneath the Howitzer, and the realization that this was the only way out rolled through my head with the steady crunch of the tires.

Winter gear, and Thanksgiving, caught up to us at the plateau village of Koto-ri, a few miles north of the gatehouse. Cumbersome, knee-length parkas covered layers of clothes that included two pair of pants over long underwear, a long undershirt, two heavy shirts, sweater and field jacket. With thick, warm gloves, we unhitched the Howitzers while our bulldozers dug gun pits in the frozen, rugged earth. The smell of diesel and exhaust from the heavy equipment was crisp in the frigid air. More dozers scraped the finishing touches of a rough airstrip even as planes landed with supplies and brass. On Thanksgiving, November 23, a melt-in-your-mouth meal, with all the traditional trimmings, made its way to our positions. It *had* to melt in our mouths, because by the time it reached our hands, it had been frozen solid. Braced against the wind and snow, we hunched over behind the prime movers and chipped away at the delicacies.

Bricks of mince pie dumbfounded us.

As we reached Hagaru-ri, at the southern edge of the reservoir, the temperature dipped to zero. By this time, even the grunts had been made aware of the Chinese Communist Forces (CCF) that were massing to the north. We knew the time was about to come when the now relatively-clear way that the 7th Marines had provided us would vanish. Hard fighting was only days away, but—based on past experience—we were all confident in our ability to crush the opposition. Most of us were now seasoned combat veterans, and we could lead the replacements to victory, just as the Second World War veterans had done for us in the Pusan Perimeter.

By the 27th, we'd dug in the guns in the Yudam-ni valley at the western edge of the reservoir. It was here that we would make a stand and cover the 5th Marines for their assault on the CCF troops massed on the reverse slopes of the mountains to our north and west. The guns of 1st Battalion took the west. By midnight, the Siberian winds had made a joke of our parkas, with the temperature dropping to twenty or more degrees below zero. The blare of bugles carried with the wind, green and white phosphorous flares filled the sky, mortars exploded throughout the valley, and machine-gun fire erupted in a continuous stream. Every position was under attack. Tracers ricocheted around us as we loaded and fired with machine-like efficiency. Guns of the entire regiment pocked the mountaintops with fiery explosions as the onslaught of Chinese soldiers mounted their campaign. My repeated prayer as I prepared round after round for the Howitzer had been, *Just stay alive*. I said it for myself, as well as for every other Marine in the valley.

The battle had raged without a break until dawn, when the CCF retreated to regroup.

There'd been a fair amount of regrouping to do for the Marines, as well, since lines had been penetrated and casualties had mounted. That day, additional aid tents had been erected, and a steady stream of choppers evacuated the worst-case injured. Only occasional mortar rounds exploded that day, as warning to the Marines to stay back. We got what sleep we could in the harsh cold that had not let up at all, not even at midday. I suffered from what had become known as *Korean Back*. The freezing cold penetrated my body, and caused the muscles of my back to cramp in unbearable pain. It'd been bad enough when I worked at the gun—moving constantly and generating some body heat. But to lie down in a bag on the frozen ground, it had been impossible to find a position that would calm my back. Sleep, if it arrived at all, came in winks.

At midnight, distant bugles once again sent chills through our already-frozen bodies. The fiery battle eruption repeated itself and followed the same routine as the previous night. Mortar explosions on both sides blended into one continuous heart-thumping drumbeat of devastation, and machine-gun fire syncopated the morose melody. The mountains glowed with explosions, fire, flares, and tracers. Nostrils and lungs burned with the smoke that whipped through the valley floor on the frigid wind. Morning would find air support with bombs and napalm that would drive the Chinese back, but the long hours until then required the men on the ground to go it alone. I could not imagine the toll we'd taken on the enemy forces or how they could sustain the battle, but they did—and at great cost to the Marines. The knowledge that they'd suffered ten, twenty, or even a hundred times more dead than we was of little consolation. The basis of that multiplier had been the number of our dead Marines. Each one of them had been a heavy burden to every single surviving Marine out there.

By dawn, word had reached the battery that, although we'd sent the Chinese scrambling for cover once again, our MSR (Main Supply Route) had been cut. We'd walked into a trap unlike any the Marine Corps had ever encountered before, and we'd been surrounded by elements of six or more Chinese divisions. The feelings of isolation and dread that I'd experienced the previous week at Funchilin Pass had jelled into the painful reality of the present. The new plan was to join the forces of all the regiments and stage a breakout to Hagaru-ri, which was fourteen miles to the south. It was obvious that the Chinese plan was for the utter destruction of the 1st Marine Division. I avoided making any mental wagers on the outcome.

On the 29th of November, the 7th Marines once again took the lead in an attempt to drive the Chinese out of Toktong Pass to our south—the only route out. Heavy fighting and mounting losses forced the 7th to pass the load to the 5th, and retreat into reserve. Late that night, our convoy inched from the valley toward the pass. Trucks were now loaded with the dead and wounded. All unnecessary gear and materials had been destroyed in the valley to create the space needed in order to carry them out.

As we made our way through the pass, the Chinese sniped in a constant barrage from strongholds on the hillsides to either side. Frequent pauses in our advance had been required to systematically drive them off. As we lifted rifles or loaded mortar shells to fire at point-blank range, *Korean Back* played havoc throughout the ranks. Wind whistled through the pass, and into our weakening bodies. Examination of Chinese casualties found many men dressed in dungarees, light jackets, and—in many cases—only sneakers on their already frozen feet. Perhaps the cold would kill the rest of them before we'd have to.

Dawn of November 30th found heavy snowfall whipped up by swirling winds. Visibility had been nearly as low as our chances of survival. I couldn't see anything beyond the second truck in front of me, and the eerie feeling of being enclosed by an unseen enemy crept over me as surely as the Chinese did the convoy. Our Battalion advanced to the front of the line in order to set up a battery to cover those at our rear, as well as for the infantry ahead. With guns dug in and pointed in every direction, we waited for the snow to subside so that targets could be identified. But the only target that materialized had been for the enemy. A forward observer from my Battery, Donald Gerald Miles, rode the rest of the way out in the back of one of the trucks as part of a pile of frozen bodies. My buddy, Bryan Simmons, volunteered to take his place on the front line that encircled us.

"Bryan. Are you sure about this?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Somebody's gotta go, and I've got more experience than the rest of you clowns."

It was a good use of humor to hide the nerves.

"I'm proud of you." I gave him a hug. "You got anything you want me to hold on to?"

He looked to the south—the direction he was about to move with one of the captains—then back to me. "I got 300 bucks on me."

"300 bucks? What are you doing with that kind of money." The majority of my money had been sent home to Ma.

"Ha! No place to spend it, Slick."

"I'll hold it for you, if you want. When you get back, I'll give it to you."

"What if I don't come back?"

“Don’t even say that.”

“Yeah.” He rocked his M-1 on its butt, which rested on the ground. “But what if?”

“I’ll send the money to your parents in Pennsylvania. Every dollar. Promise.”

“Humph. You think I don’t trust you? I don’t want anything going to my parents.”

He pulled off his gloves, and made work of tugging his wallet free. Then he huffed steaming breath across cupped hands and recovered them.

“Send it to *your* parents.”

“You’ll get it back in Hagaru or Koto-ri or Hungnam. I’m proud of you.”

When Bryan left with the captain, I went to Digger’s truck and stuffed the wallet in the bottom of my pack—with no certainty at all that Bryan would ever collect it. Two days later, on December 2, I said a prayer that the bullet that had entered Bryan’s head had killed him before he’d frozen to death. Bryan Simmons’s body joined countless others in the back of one of the countless trucks.

When word of his death reached the battery, I was devastated. He’d had a good friend, Bill Araujo, in Baker Battery. They’d served together in China before reaching Camp Pendleton. I didn’t know Bill very well, but felt he should know. My CO assured me that Bill was already taking the news about Bryan hard. I wished that I could go see him, but there was a war to fight.