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A Thousand Suns

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Extract

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On 29 April 1945 the Allies secretly surrendered unconditionally to Nazi Germany. Four hours later, the surrender was withdrawn.

Herons Cove, Rhode Island

30 April 1945

At a distance it had looked like a tangled ball of fishing net and seaweed. It rolled in the breaking surf and settled a little further up the shingle as each succeeding wave surged up the beach and then drew back with the hiss of thousands of pebbles tumbling in the froth.

The two young boys ambled down through the sand dunes crowned with tufts of coarse grass and descended onto the pebbled surface of the beach. The eldest boy studied the object for a long while before putting raw fingers to his numb lips. He attempted a whistle, which was all but lost between the crash and rumble of the waves and the gusting wind.

A moment later a large German Shepherd appeared on top of a dune, panting noisily, its long pink tongue flapping like a pennant.

'Over there, Prince!' he said pointing towards the dark object on the beach. Prince set off at a sprint, passed the boys, showering them with kicked-up sand and flecks of saliva.

They watched the dog as it quickly crossed the beach, correcting course once it had sighted the object for itself.

'Don't let him roll in it,' the smaller boy called out, 'you know your dad hates him rollin' in beached catch.'

The dog splashed through the surf and reached the object as the boys clattered across the pebbles and onto the soft sand, slowly approaching the dog and the discovery.

Twenty yards away from it, the older boy slowed down. 'That ain't a fishin' net,' he said uneasily.

Prince pawed at the object and buried his nose in it, noisily snuffling and oblivious to the boys as they came to a halt a few feet away.

'Oh boy,' he muttered under his breath, taking an involuntary step back.

A wave rolled the object over. Prince began to lick the exposed pale face of a young man, a blond fringe plastered to the brow with dried blood.

'Is that man dead, Sean?' the smaller boy whispered, looking up at his older friend for confirmation. 'He's dead, ain't he?'

Sean moved reluctantly towards it, aware that Danny was holding back and looking uncertainly to him to take the lead. He was only a year older than Danny – thirteen, to his twelve – but that was enough to confer an unambiguous seniority on him.

He approached the body and leaned over it, studying the face intently, 'Think so. He's not moving a whole lot.'

Danny gasped.

He watched each wave lift and move the dead man's arms up, and the retreating ebb pull them back down again. In a bizarre way it looked like he was trying to fly.

'When a body dies it goes all stiff,' he said matter-of-factly. Danny had the stern face of an undertaker. 'Do you think he's one of the fishermen?'

The dead man looked like he couldn't have been over thirty years old. Sean knew most of the men who worked on the trawlers in Port Lawrence; they were all much older. Most of the young ones in Port Lawrence had long ago left these shores for the war in Europe.

'I don't think so. I don't recognise him. Anyway, those don't look like oilskins.'

He slowly reached out a finger and lightly prodded the corpse's chest. 'Yeah, reckon he's dead all right,' he announced with growing confidence. 'Maybe he fell overboard from one of the cargo ships.'

Danny nodded gravely. 'He must've fallen,' he added soberly.

Sean, encouraged that the corpse wasn't about to spring to life, grew bolder and started to pull away some ribbons of seaweed that had wrapped themselves around the body. Prince resumed licking the dead man's face.

'He ain't going to wake up, Prince, he's gone,' said Sean. He had pulled away enough of the seaweed to reveal the clothes on the corpse's body.

No oilskins, no slicker.

'That ain't a fisherman,' he said suddenly. 'That's a flying jacket. He's an airman, one of our boys.'

The pair of them stared with renewed awe at the dead man rolling with the rhythmic pattern of the waves.

'Gee . . . reckon we should bury him?' said Danny. 'We could make him a nice cross from some driftwood. There's plenty of it lying around.'

Sean considered the idea, but he knew this kind of thing required the

intervention of grown-ups, and someone official to 'square the box and nail the lid', as his mom used to say. 'We should really go tell the deputy, or my dad, or someone. He's one of our fly-boys, Danny – that makes him important. You go and get my dad and tell him, I'll see if he's got a name tag.'

Danny nodded, relieved to have an excuse to step back away from the body. He turned around and ran back across the beach towards the sand dunes and the small village of Port Lawrence beyond, casting one last glance back at Sean as he knelt down beside the body.

Sean watched Danny go before turning back to the body. He wasn't that keen to touch it any more than he had to, but he knew it was the right thing to do. The man had a name, and no doubt a mom and a dad, and a missus who needed to be told where he'd ended up.

Sean knew the body would have something with a name on it . . . a dog tag, or a name-badge on the chest or something. He knew all the fly-boys had some way to identify them.

With one hand only and a barely concealed look of distaste on his face he slowly peeled back the lapel of the leather flying jacket and prepared to slide his fingers under the wet tunic and hunt for some tags. Sean was fully aware that he might just make contact with the dead man's cold flesh, and his bottom lip drew back with disgust at the thought.

But he needed to probe no further.

His eyes widened when he saw the object lying under the lapel of the flying jacket and upon the man's still chest.

'Oh boy,' said Sean.