

Chapter 1

Air Raid

In the underground darkness of the air raid shelter I wondered if Momma and I might die, if we'd see our home and Daddy again. An hour later when Daddy met us at the front door, Momma threw her arms around him. "The war has finally come to Kettle," she whispered, and then gave Daddy a kiss. I hugged them with all my strength; buried my face in Daddy's chest and Momma's shoulder. I breathed the sweat of his work, the scent of Momma's perfume.

After I went to bed that night in December, nineteen and forty-two, the events of a few hours earlier jumped around in my thoughts. I wanted to stop thinking about them but couldn't. Next to my family, I loved my little town in the West Virginia hills more than anything. I prayed that German bombs wouldn't destroy Kettle, but after what we'd been through I knew it could happen. A bomb has a job to do and when it lands, whether planned or accidental, it destroys.

When I closed my eyes I felt afraid, wanted to get up and run somewhere, though I didn't know where a twelve year-old boy could go. On the dark sides of my eyelids I saw bombs falling, exploding, on Gruber Feed and Grain and the Kettle Methodist Church, their walls collapsing and smoke rising from fires burning inside the ruins of the buildings. Bombs hitting the tracks of the C&O railroad in the center of town, the heavy steel rails twisted, railroad ties blasted across U.S. Highway 42. Kettle's old nineteen and twenty-eight Ford fire truck would be too puny to step up to the blazes set off by the German bombs. The little brick building that housed the fire truck, headquarters for Kettle's only police officer, Chief Tackett – blown apart. The oversized old silver

telephone bell that hung on the outer wall of the building could ring itself off what remained of the wall, but the Chief would have more urgent business. The Kettle Volunteer Fire Department's powerful siren, once mounted high above the building, would lie smashed across Main Street.

Mayor Raymond T. Baumgartner's famous phrase, often quoted in our weekly paper, the *Kettle News Leader*, "You can go from birth to death and never have to leave Kettle for anything. It's all here," would have to change.

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A few hours earlier in the day, Momma, my best friend William White Wallace, and I stood in front of the cash register on the old wooden counter in the grocery and meat section of Gruber's Department Store. The counter passed down one long side of the room. I loved to breathe the room's rich aromas of newly ground coffee beans, onions, and fresh baked bread. Outside, in the late afternoon darkness, the street lights had come on. From the room's high and white tin ceiling, lamp globes hung like frosted white glass muffins. The meat counter that stretched the length of the other side of the room had fresh-cut pork chops and steaks behind a glass-front cabinet that steamed up year-round, always hard to see through. My favorite place, the candy counter, occupied the area on one side of the front door. On the other side sat a coal-burning pot-belly stove and four oak chairs. Whit Saunders, wearing his high-topped lace-up boots, wide-brimmed hat, and leather jacket, leaned back in one of the chairs. In the wintertime the front of the store always smelled like coal smoke. So did Whit.

Momma snapped her purse shut after she paid for our groceries. She had no sooner buttoned up her long blue coat and smiled at me and William White, than the wail

of the town's fire siren began. The siren sat on top of long metal struts on the roof of the Fire Department building, catty-corner across Kettle's Main Street from where we stood. The siren's powerful sound waves shook the store's large plate glass windows. I held my ears. William White stood motionless but his blue eyes darted around the room like a thief planning his next heist. His stillness reminded me of a wooden cigar store Indian in the Roy Rogers movie we'd seen on Saturday afternoon at the Dixie Palace, though I'd have to overlook William White's skinny frame and wavy blond hair. Everybody in the store, maybe fifteen people, seemed frozen in place – a room full of cigar store Indians.

A few seconds before the first wail of the siren began, Momma had said, "You boys are big strong twelve-year olds. Each of you please take a poke of groceries." But we hadn't yet picked up the big brown paper bags.

In the loud wail of the siren, Momma stood with her eyes closed. William White often said he thought my Momma's height, blue eyes, high cheek bones and curly dark brown hair made her the prettiest woman in Kettle. I told him, "Remember, she was runner-up in the Miss Kettle contest of nineteen and twenty-seven." Daddy often said that I had Momma's long legs and high cheek bones, but I got his brown eyes and curly reddish brown hair. He could've added that I'm skinny and have freckles

A second, then a third wail sounded. A brief pause crammed the air with silence. I'd never thought about hearing silence, but at that moment I could. Also the beating of my heart. The three-wail cycle sounded a second, then after another pause, a third time. Everybody knew what that meant – our groceries would have to sit on the counter for a while.

Kettle Police Chief Arthur R. Tackett, all red-faced, walked in the front door of Gruber's as the third cycle of siren wails ended. He stopped, rested one arm on the glass case of the candy counter and looked around the room. The chief's old red and black checked mackinaw covered the upper half of his khaki uniform and stretched itself tight across his belly. He unbuttoned his mackinaw, and then raised his arms and shouted, "All right everybody, the siren has blowed three times three. You read the paper, it's an air raid drill" Then at a lower volume, a more personal voice, "Y'all got to git yourselves down to Gruber's basement. This won't last long." Then the chief turned to Whit Saunders and said in a confidential way, "I mean it shouldn't last long, assumin' it's just a drill."

"Just a drill – what if it's not?" I wondered.

James Garfield Worthington, owner and editor of our weekly newspaper, stood next to us at the cash register. His silver hair, black topcoat and gray fedora gave him a distinguished look. Last week's special edition of the *Kettle News Leader* had been devoted entirely to Kettle air raid drills. One article described how Kettle town council argued about approval of town-wide air raid drills, what Mayor Raymond T. Baumgartner called the Kettle War Readiness Program. On a split vote, then on a second, unanimous, vote, they approved mandatory air raid drills for the town. The paper announced the signal for an air raid drill: three, three-wail cycles of the fire siren, what we had just heard. Three times three, the *News Leader* called it. Easy to remember. In a photo beside the story, the mayor smiled as he handed Miss Isabel B. Mounts, our high school librarian, not smiling, a World War One helmet. It had been painted white and had the word "Warden" stenciled in black letters across its front.

Town Council also passed an ordinance that required the town to be dark five minutes after the air raid siren ended. Violation of the ordinance would lead to a fine. The paper quoted Mayor Baumgartner, “Don’t anybody run to me with appeals to get rid of fines. This is wartime. The town of Kettle, just like the rest of the country, is at war with Germany and Japan.” The paper carried other air-raid related articles. One of them contained a list to help folks double-check that all their lights had been turned off. Another one had information about where to take shelter during a drill, and suggested food and supplies to stock up on at home, just in case German bombers showed up and we faced an enemy attack from the air.

Everybody looked at Chief Tackett, then at each other. Wink Winkler unbuttoned the jacket of his blue gabardine suit, the one he called his “good luck sales suit”, got a serious look on his ruddy face, and said in a voice full of upset, “Chief, I got me a car, a brand-new Studebaker, to deliver to the Mayor,” followed by a wink. His wink always signaled the end of what he had to say, and not a little joke, though folks usually smiled and sometimes laughed after he winked at them. As William White said, “It’s hard not to smile at Wink after he winks at me.”

The chief raised his voice and put some force into it. “Your delivery will have to wait, Wink. Folks, you heard me. Move along, now! Go to the basement. Time’s a-wastin’. We got less than five minutes before the lights here and all over town is goin’ out.” Then he spelled the word big and loud, “O-U-T!” The chief looked around and added in a serious voice, “Them Germans could be flyin’ over us before you know it.”

I wanted to get to the basement, pronto, but didn’t know where to go.

A few people shuffled towards the back of the store, stopped and milled around. Beverly Shade, a member of our sixth grade class, tall, dark curly hair, stood alone alongside the candy counter. William White motioned for her to join us.

Whit Saunders pushed his wide-brimmed hat back on his head and planted his right foot on top of a small keg of pickles. I always admired how Whit kept his khaki pants legs tucked into the tops of his lace-up boots. He wondered aloud, "Chief, where in tarnation is the door to the basement? We don't exactly live here, you know."

"Uh, understood, Whit. Good question." The chief raised his voice and pointed towards the back of the store, "Everybody, go through the door at the rear of this here grocery section, into shippin' and receivin'. Basement door is on the right. Light switch is outside the door, on the left. Whit, you go first. Make sure the light is on."

Miss Hattie McClintock pulled her black wool coat tight around her small frame. The gray curls of her hair bobbed she spoke at such a fast pace, clipping off the end of each word. William White once said she spoke in a sprightly manner. "Chief Tackett, I have a roast cooking in my oven. It's now six PM, pitch dark, and I'm walking, not driving. My roast will be done in exactly thirty-three minutes. I need to get home."

"Please go to the basement, Miss Hattie. You'll get home in due time. If need be, I'll give you a lift."

Miss Hattie continued, "Is it warm enough down there, Chief? Can't be more than forty degrees outside."

The chief sighed, gazed up at the ceiling, and then looked at Miss Hattie. He spoke in a soft but exasperated voice, "Miss Hattie, and everybody, please move to the

basement. I'm sure it's warm, warm enough, anyway. You won't be down there for very long."

Momma gently tugged on William White and me, Beverly too, and the four of us lined up behind Whit and James Garfield. Everyone else fell into line behind us. We followed the back of Whit's hat and leather jacket through the doorway into the shipping and receiving area, a cavernous room, two stories high, with dark corners. William White once told me he had seen a foot-long rat in there. The shipping platform, its wide doors closed, took up most of the far end of the room. Above it there was a second-story loading platform, its waist-high wooden gates hanging open. Pulleys and ropes dangled from the platform. Crates of produce and hard goods cluttered the room. We wound our way among them to the basement door. Whit stood beside the door and nodded to each of us as we passed through it, like we had come to visit him.

The basement's moldy dampness and cool air hit me as soon as I started down the wooden stairs. One by one, everybody in the store filed down the steep and dark stairway, holding tight to the shaky wooden banister. William White raked his fingers along the crumbling cement between the bricks in the wall above the banister, and our feet crunched the powder that sprinkled on the steps.

After everybody made it to the basement the chief leaned through the doorway at the top of the stairs and said in a calm voice, "I'll be back soon," and then he closed the basement door.

A single, dim light bulb on the end of a frayed cord dangled above us, a weak light at best, but it would have to do. With no success I looked around for another light.

Our little crowd milled around the benches in the center of the store's cellar, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling stacks of packing crates and open waist-high bins of apples, potatoes, and onions. The air carried the aroma of a musty mixture of cider and onions.

Mr. Harlan Roosevelt, known around town as Pappy Roosevelt, walked over to the benches, backless pews in the center of the room. Two brown strings of dried tobacco juice formed lines from each corner of his mouth to his chin. He ran one hand through his unruly gray-brown hair, put his thumbs under the straps of the muddy bib overalls that wrapped around his ample belly, and raised himself to his full six-foot height. His voice sounded like he had charge of us as visitors out at his hog farm, "OK, you ladies take them benches. Y'all set down." William White, who had already sat down, stood up. Pappy's wife, Mrs. Ovieta Blankenship Roosevelt, dressed in a two-piece bright blue suit she wore to church a couple of weeks earlier, Miss Hattie, Momma, Beverly, and two ladies wearing long black wool coats sat down. I stood directly behind Momma.

The door opened and the chief yelled down the steps, "Everybody, sorry but I got to turn out the light. They's basement winders that's lettin' light out on to the street. I thought the sandbags would block the light, but they ain't." Then after a pause he added in a serious tone of voice, "Don't nobody light matches nor a cigarette lighter. In total darkness you can see a match light for miles. We don't wanna give away our whereabouts to them German pilots."

The chief shut the door and the light went out. Pitch-black, total darkness. I felt all discombobulated. I heard Momma's short, quick breaths. That rat William White saw upstairs – he had to have a nest somewhere. The bins down here had food in them.

A man's voice said, "Yep, them German pilots are likely to be searching for Kettle," then he laughed. A couple of other men laughed too.

In the darkness William White made a ghost-like sound, "Whooo-ooo," and a woman let out a little whimper. A deep male voice said, "I don't know which of you boys done that, but don't do it again." Momma elbowed me in the ribs and William White said, loud enough for people to hear, "Freddy, shhhhh." Beverly reached up from the bench and banged my leg with her hand.

Two weeks earlier Momma and I had gone to Huntington to buy Christmas presents. I hadn't wanted to go but Momma said we needed to shop where we'd have more choices in the presents we'd buy. Huntington had a downtown with lots of stores. Along the sidewalks in front of the tall buildings, sand-filled burlap bags had been piled three and four bags high in front of the buildings' window wells. We walked around them. Momma told me the sand bags would protect the people inside if something happened in the war. The sand bags and thoughts of the war made me uneasy. I asked Momma, "Are German planes going to drop bombs on Huntington?"

She didn't answer me right away. "Well, anything's possible, Freddy, but I don't think we need to worry about it, OK?" She spoke in a tone of voice that meant let's not talk any more about this. Then Momma began to walk a little faster. A few days later I watched Buster Whittington's uncle, who worked for Gruber's Department Store, stack sandbags along our Main Street in front of the basement windows of the store.

We sat in silence and total darkness for what seemed like a long time, though it may have been only a few minutes. Across the room I heard a light scratching sound, hoped it didn't turn out to be a...I didn't want to say the word, even to myself.

James Garfield, speaking more to himself as editor of the *Kettle News Leader* than to any of us, said, “Well, maybe there’s a story here. Kettle’s first air raid drill, seen, or not seen, as the case may be, from the basement of Gruber’s Department Store.”

No one spoke for a couple of minutes, then a tenor voice that sounded like Wink Winkler, began to sing the hymn, “Leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms....” Everybody joined in. Next we sang the first verse and chorus of “The Old Rugged Cross.” When we hit the second verse, only Wink knew the words and he sang a solo while folks hummed the melody. The warm voices and familiar words of the hymns comforted and calmed me. Things will be all right, I told myself. Momma put my hand in hers. Then she tightened her grip. I said the Lord’s Prayer in a voice only I could hear.

We sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in harmony. The song seemed to rouse everybody and we rolled right along in high gear. Momma relaxed her grip. Whit Saunders laughed and said, “Lordy, you folks are as good as any Sunday morning gospel quartet on the radio.”

Mrs. Roosevelt yelled, “What about some Christmas carols?” and led us in “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” “Silent Night” seemed to fit the darkness of the basement, though after the first verse, except for Wink, most folks didn’t know the words and dropped back to humming.

At the end of “Silent Night,” William White pulled on my arm and whined like a little kid, “Freddy, when are we gonna get outta here?”

Before I could answer him Miss Hattie jumped in with spirit, “Indeed. We’ve done our civic duty. My roast is surely done. I need to get home!”

That brought on a general chorus of voices in the darkness. “Yes, let’s go home. Enough is enough. War or no war, we got things to do” and words such as that.

I recognized Peyton Gruber’s baritone voice, though I hadn’t seen him in the store when the siren sounded. I imagined his oval face, bald head, and moustache. “I don’t care if Mayor Baumgartner fines me or not, I got to get out of here. My wife will think I’ve run off somewhere.” Daddy had once said that Hanna Mae, Peyton’s wife, kept a tight rein on him.

Miss Hattie replied, “I agree, Peyton. Let’s go home.” Other voices joined in with unsettling comments.

Whit Saunders’s deep voice – loud and authoritative – rose above the din. “Folks, take it easy now. I don’t like it here in the dark neither, but keep in mind there’s a war on. The chief said he’d be back in a few minutes. I’ll make my way up the stairs, stick my nose out the door and ask what’s happenin’. Everybody just stay calm.”

Pappy Roosevelt said in a low voice, “Whit’s right, folks. Let’s take ’er easy.” The din settled down to worried whispers.

Footsteps sounded in the darkness and I counted fourteen creaks of the wooden steps. Then raspy squeaks as the doorknob turned. More squeaks as it turned again. And again. Then the sound of the door being shaken, followed by knocking and then loud pounding on the door.

“Chief, you out there?” Whit yelled.

Silence.

“Hello? Chief? You there?”

More silence.

I whispered to Momma, “Where is he?”

More forceful, loud pounding. “Anybody out there? Anybody?”

Nothing.

With no warning a deep boom pounded the air of our small room, the floor vibrated in a shock wave, and the rafters above us shook. One woman, it may have been Miss Hattie, let out with a shrill scream. Other women screamed. I gasped, along with lots of folks. A man’s voice yelled, “What the hell?” Another said, “Oh no!”

Then a second forceful boom struck. The light bulb hanging from the ceiling flickered on for an instant, just long enough for me to see everybody looking around the room, eyes wide, many with their mouths hanging open, and a cloud of dust in the air. Beverly tottered backwards from the bench and I caught her. She grasped my right hand tightly – her touch felt soft, warm.

The instant the flicker ended and darkness returned, Pappy Roosevelt yelled, “Hit’s an attack. Germans! Thur’s got to be a way outta here, maybe a winder er the coal shute.” Loud bangs came from among the bins and crates. Something made of glass crashed and splintered.

After a few seconds of the banging, Mrs. Roosevelt yelled, “Harlan – get yourself under control!”

The movement stopped. Silence. Darkness. Momma wound her arms tightly around my left arm and William White hung on to my right arm. Beverly still held my right hand. My heart pounded.

James Garfield muttered in a fretful voice, “This story may be about more than a drill.”

I wished Daddy had come with us.

From the far side of the room Pappy Roosevelt said, with a quiver in his words, “I heeard that Huntington were number three on the Germans’ attack list for America. The way I see it, if a navigator were just a little off in his figurin’, Kettle would be smack in a bomber’s path.” There was a loud single clap of hands and Pappy Roosevelt yelled, “Bull’s eye!”

I jumped. Momma, William White and Beverly yanked my arms and hand.

“Damn!” a man yelled.

Nobody spoke. I imagined Kettle as a little pin on a war map, like the one I saw General Omar Bradley and his officers studying in a Movietone newsreel.

The voice of Hartford Wilson, owner of Wilson’s Dry Goods, came through the darkness. He said in a worried tone of voice, “My wife Iretta’s at home by herself. I pray that she’s all right – that God will spare her and, the Lord willing, our store on Main Street.” After a pause he continued, “My sister’s nephew died when the battleship West Virginia was sunk at Pearl Harbor. I thought that was the closest the war would come to me. Guess I was wrong.”

Then a man's voice, at first so soft that I didn’t recognize it, said, "I live alone, and there’s nobody at my house to turn out the lights.” The voice came from near the ceiling, the top of the stairs. Whit Saunders said, “My lights may’ve been enough to bring the German bombers to Kettle. I’ve been worried something like this was going to happen. Ever since Pearl Harbor, almost one year ago to the day, there hasn't been a single day when I didn't wonder how and when the war would come to Kettle. Now I know.”

The room remained silent for a few minutes and then a woman began to cry. The crying stopped and Miss Hattie spoke, her voice cracking, “No doubt about it, German bombers it was. And they came after us, not folks in Huntington. It’s possible they hit Gruber Feed and Grain to hamper our farming.” Her voice got louder, stronger, “Or, God forbid, they may have hit the heart of Kettle, the Methodist Church. I suppose if they really wanted to hurt us, the Methodist Church is what they'd go after.”

Wink Winkler spoke up real fast with an edge to his voice. “Miss Hattie, the water-sprinkling baptisms of the Methodists don't hold a candle to the full immersion of the Baptists, and everybody knows it, even the Germans. No maam, it's the Baptist Church they'd hit, that is if they was goin' after churches.”

A sudden burst of voices began to argue about whether the Methodist or Baptist churches had target value for German bombers, and the spiritual value of each of their baptisms, a sprinkling of water on the head for the Methodists versus the full-immersion method of the Baptists.

About the time William White chimed in, “What about the Presbyterians? Don't anybody want them blowed up?” Whit Saunders began to pound again on the basement door. The room fell silent.

Her voice low, Miss Hattie said, “I’ve listened to the broadcasts of Mr. Edward R. Murrow from London, and his accounts of the blitz and the awful destruction from German bombs dropped on the City, mostly at night. What’s just happened to us, tonight. I’m not sure I want to see our town after what the Germans have done to it. I’m glad it's dark outside, and we won't have to look at the destruction until morning, except for the flames that may still be burning. Tonight should be a night of prayer, and our giving

thanks to God that, unlike so many in London, our lives have been spared.” After a pause she added, “At least so far.”

The basement door opened. A collective sigh passed through the room when the light bulb flickered on again. From the top of the stairs came the crisp voice of Miss Isabel B. Mounts, librarian turned air raid warden. She said, “All right everyone, it’s all over. Come on up.”

No one spoke as we filed up the stairs. I felt relief, but fearful about what waited on us.

Miss Mounts stood outside the basement door, wearing a short khaki coat and her white warden’s helmet. She gave an official-looking nod to each of us as we passed through the doorway into the shipping and receiving department. After the last of our group arrived, she smiled the kind of smile I had seen her give little kids at Sunday School when they did something she told them to. She said, “Thanks for being so patient – and for being *such* good citizens.”

The faces around me looked solemn. Like me, did they dread seeing a bombed Kettle?

The shipping and receiving area had broken pieces of wood and large rolls of linoleum strewn across the floor. Buster Whittington’s uncle pushed a dolly and strained to move one of the big rolls. Another man threw pieces of wood into a pile.

Pappy Roosevelt spoke up. “Looks like they were some damage done here.”

Miss Hattie wiped her eyes with a lace handkerchief. She sounded near tears when she asked, “How bad is it, Isabel?”

Miss Mounts pushed her white helmet back on her head. “How bad is what?”

“The damage. From the bomb.”

Miss Mounts stared at her for a moment, and then replied with surprise in her voice, “Bomb?”

“The Germans.”

Buster Whittington’s uncle lowered his dolly, looked over at us and spoke in a matter of fact way, “Miss Hattie, during the dark of the air raid drill one of the boys thought he’d get a step ahead and move a delivery of linoleum around the upstairs storage area. He didn’t know the upstairs gate was open, and two large crates toppled over and fell from way up there.” He pointed towards the second floor platform at the other end of the room, a full story above us. “Foolish of him to try it, but that’s what he done. Down in the cellar you probably heard the crashes when the big crates hit the floor and smashed. Heavy stuff, rolls of linoleum. Could’a hurt somebody, even killed ‘em.”

Wink Winkler laughed, “Now ain’t that a good’n. There weren’t no bomb, Miss Hattie. What’re you talkin’ about?” Then he winked at her.

Everyone, except for Miss Hattie, Momma, and Beverly burst into laughter. Pappy Roosevelt cut loose with a hoo-haw belly laugh and slapped James Garfield on the back. William White elbowed me in the ribs. I laughed and elbowed him.

Miss Hattie looked around the room and asked, her voice rising, “Where’s Chief Tackett? I need a ride home. Arthur?”