

## **Part I**

### **The Battle for the Bullet**

“I want the mistakes made down in Louisiana, not over in Europe.

If it doesn't work, find out what we need to make it work.”

– General George C. Marshall

Chief of Staff, U.S. Army

Spring 1941

“Monday I go to Louisiana . . . The old-timers say we are going to a God-awful spot  
complete with mud, malaria, mosquitoes, and misery.”

– Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower

August 5, 1941

## Chapter 1

### The Bullet

“How unhappy is he who cannot forgive himself.” – Publilius Syrus

*Wednesday, August 13, 1941*

*DeRidder, Louisiana*

Elizabeth Reed had only met one soldier she liked, and he had wounded her deeply. So when the blond G.I. tossed the bullet, she didn't flinch even as it landed at her feet.

The soldier leaned out of a crowded Army truck. “You're beautiful. Write me.” He pointed at her feet. “*The bullet*—write me.” The empty cartridge had a note folded inside. The bullet-tossing practice was called “yoo-hooing” and was an attempt to get the attention—and addresses—of local girls.

A loud wolf whistle from the truck grated on her like fingernails across the slate board in her classroom. The same soldier called out, “I'd love a kiss from a pretty Southern girl like you.”

Elizabeth coolly nodded at a large matronly woman near her. “Are you talking to me or *her*?” The troop truck exploded in laughter. She fanned away the dust. “Soldiers. They're all the same.” Traffic began moving and the smoking truck rattled across the railroad tracks. Her ten-year-old brother Ben, behind her, had missed the tossed bullet. He spied it just as Elizabeth drew her foot back to kick it. “What's

that?”

“A soldier threw it. It’s a note stuck in an empty cartridge.” As he knelt, she pulled him away. “Leave it alone. It might *blow up*.”

“Lizzie, you’re playing with me.” He bounced on his toes at the three-o’clock train’s whistle. “They’re here.”

Yelling from the convoy’s last truck replaced the whistle. Elizabeth clamped her hands over Ben’s ears. “Sometimes what they say isn’t for fresh ears.”

He twisted loose. “My ears ain’t fresh.”

“Benjamin Franklin Reed, you’re impossible. It’s *aren’t*—not *ain’t*.”

“Well, either way, my ears *ain’t* fresh.”

A soldier yelled from the truck, “Is this Detroit?”

“Nope, this is DeRidder, *Louisianer*.” Ben had always been allergic to silence.

Elizabeth bent down. “We live in *Louisiana*, not *Louisianer*.”

“Ain’t that what I said?” His face was pinched. “Is this how you’ll be treating me in your classroom?”

Grabbing him in a playful headlock, she goosed him until he said, “Uncle.”

Elizabeth looked up at a tall grinning soldier. “I’ll wrassle you next if you’re through with him,” he said in a rich west-Texas drawl.

She felt her face flushing. “I believe I could whip you too.” She grabbed Ben’s hand. “Come on. Our train’s here.”

“Where are y’all going?” Texas said.

She cringed when Ben said, “We’re here to pick up some chicks.”

The soldier laughed. “Well, count me in.”

Elizabeth pulled on Ben’s shirtsleeve. “Let’s go before the train leaves.”

He knelt on the sidewalk. “But what about the bullet?”

“Leave it.” He was slowly rolling the cuff of his overalls. “Come on Ben. A dollar’s waiting on a dime.”

He scampered forward. “Poppa says that there are three things a soldier likes best: dogs, kids, and pretty girls.”

“In that order?”

“Probably not.”

“Well Ben, which one are you?”

“I’m not a dog or a pretty girl, so I guess I fit in as a ‘kid.’” He squeezed her hand. “And if I eyed those soldiers right, you definitely fit the ‘pretty girl’ part.”

“You think so?” She hurried on ahead.

Ben stepped in front of her. “Lizzie, are you mad at *me*?”

She froze. “Why would I be mad at you? I love you like a son.” She licked her fingers, trying to tame the unruly cowlick in his dark hair.

“But I’m your *brother*, not your son.”

“You’re ten years younger than me, so I guess you’re kind of both.”

“You seem mad at *someone*. Is it those soldiers?”

She drew in a long breath. “I’m not mad at them . . . just *tired* of them.”

“Is it ’cause they’re men?”

“Who’s been talking to you?”

“Well, Peg said . . . some soldier hurt you.”

“Is that so?”

“She claimed being your twin lets her see into your heart—says you got *wounded* by a soldier—said you were eligible for a *Purple Heart*.”

Her jaw tightened. “Maybe a broken heart, but not a purple one.” She looked around. “Peg said she’d meet us here before the train arrived.” As they neared the

depot, she rubbed Ben's ear. "Watch for those army trucks." He was digging in his pocket, so she repeated, "*Watch* for those trucks."

"I will."

Her twin sister Peg's words hung like the dust in the air. *Hurt by a soldier. Wounded.* Elizabeth heard her own voice bouncing in her soul. *It's your own fault. You don't have anyone to blame but yourself.*

She bit her lip. It *would not* happen again.

