

Chapter One

“You’re going to have to jump!” the pilot yelled above the noise of the cargo plane’s engines.

Sgt. Mike Dabrowski shook his head in disbelief. “Shit! What happened to the airstrip?”

“They’re under attack. The Japs found them. No way can we put down anywhere on that island. Sorry.” He shrugged and turned his attention back to flying the plane.

Mike cursed, shifted the stub of his cigar to the other side of his mouth. Nothing to be done about it. He hated jumping out of planes. And a night drop, too. Shit.

He spun around and looked down the dimly lit cargo hold. Three small crates of equipment and supplies had to be readied for an unplanned drop.

“Private,” he barked and kicked the boot of the young man slumped in the nearest jump seat. “Help me get this gear ready.” The kid sat up, blinked, and pushed himself to standing.

After thirty minutes, they’d harnessed the crates and shoved them to the closed cargo door, then attached the first parachute to the plane’s ripcords.

“Push them out on my cue!” Mike shouted above the din. The private nodded.

Mike went back to the cockpit. “How much longer ‘til we’re there?”

“Fifteen minutes. One pass for the gear, the second for you guys. I’ll give you the signal.”

“Got it.” Now, he had to deal with the Professor.

Shit. This was not what he'd signed up for, but it was the only thing that stood between him and a military court marshal. His black market cigar business hadn't been looked on as a legit entrepreneurial enterprise by his commanding officer, Major Masker. A week ago, Masker had Mike brought from the brig to his office and had offered him a way out of his most recent incarceration.

Mike slipped on a harness and clipped on the chute. He picked up a second harness and chute. "How do I get out of this chicken-shit outfit?"

The private jerked his thumb at the cargo door. "I think it's that way."

"Everyone's a comedian." Mike snorted and shook his head. The kid grinned.

Mike strode to the back of the plane, where his ticket out of jail slept. He looked down at his charge, Professor James Hardmore, PHD. Big, fucking la-de-da. Long and lanky, the prof was asleep, stretched out on his side, his gold-rimmed glasses skewed on his face. They'd met for the first time that day in Masker's office and from the get-go the professor had gotten under Mike's skin.

"Professor!" Mike shouted. He restrained himself from giving the man's polished shoe a kick. Hadn't they given him any proper boots before he left the states? Shit.

Hardmore moaned softly, licked his lips, and thick blond lashes fluttered open to expose owlish pale blue eyes. "What?"

"Change of plans. We're jumping."

"Jumping? What? Where's the ship? I thought we were going to land and take a boat to the island?" He sat up and rubbed his eyes under his spectacles.

"Didn't I just say change of plans?" Mike swore. "The landing strip is under fire. We have to jump from here."

Hardmore struggled to his feet and caught his balance as the plane pitched and rolled. “How?”

“Parachutes. Jesus, I thought they said you were a fucking genius.” He guffawed and tossed the harness and the canvas chute bag at Hardmore, nearly knocking him down. “Put these on, Einstein.”

Hardmore stared at it. Then he shrugged on the harness and adjusted it around his legs. “How does it work?” The thing hung on him, unbuckled, almost too big for his slim frame.

Mike stared at him. From the scene the man had made in Masker’s office when he’d been told Mike would be on the mission with him, Mike knew he’d be trouble. The professor had taken one look at Mike and refused him, as if he’d had a choice. For Mike’s part, he didn’t like the idea any more than Hardmore. The professor had that air about him, as if everyone else was a low-life, and being a low-life himself, it ate at Mike.

He might be a low-life, but he was the low-life who was going to keep Hardmore alive on that island.

Mike stepped closer and fastened the chute to the harness. He touched the first pull. “Here’s the major chute ripcord. Once you’re out the door, count to five, then pull it. If it fails,” he looked up and caught Hardmore’s light blue eyes staring back at him, “pull this one.” He put his hand on the reserve cord. “It’s the emergency chute.”

Those eyes took him in with such intensity he had to look away, just like Hardmore had stared at him across Masker’s desk. That assessing look unsettled Mike.

“Got it. Count to five and pull.” Hardmore nodded. “When?”

“Coming into position!” the navigator shouted from the cockpit.

“About now.” Mike told Hardmore.

Fear flashed in the professor’s eyes, then his gaze darted to the still-closed door.

“Don’t worry. I’ve done this loads of times. You’ll be fine.” Why he felt he had to assure the professor was beyond him, but what did it hurt? Still, if it had been anyone else, he’d of kicked his ass right out the fucking cargo bay door.

“Right.” Hardmore straightened and gave Mike a sharp nod.

Mike turned and waved at the private to stand ready. The kid pushed the first crate into position and snapped on the cord to pull the chute. Mike threw back the lever and pushed the door open. Wind rushed through the cargo hold, loose papers flew, and the noise made his eardrums ache.

“Ready!” Mike watched the cockpit for the signal.

The navigator leaned back, listening for the mark. Shot his thumb up.

“Crate one away!” Mike shouted.

The kid pushed it out the door and the crate disappeared into the darkness, the tether ran out, then snapped back, opening the chute. He caught it and hooked it to the next one with swift efficiency.

“Crate two away!”

The second crate fell and the private hooked up the last one.

“Crate three away!”

The last crate was gone and Mike turned to the professor. “You’re next.” He grinned around his cigar. He wanted to see what the guy was made of and if anything showed a man’s mettle, it would be jumping out of a plane in the dark over a small, uncharted island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

The professor removed his glasses, folded them and placed them in a pocket of his jacket, then moved into the opening, his hands gripped the metal frame of the door.

“On my mark, professor.”

“Call me James.” Mike could barely hear the words over the roar of the wind and the engines.

Braced against the wall of the plane, Mike glanced at the cockpit. The navigator and the pilot were working on something. As they conversed, he waited with one hand on Hardmore’s shoulder. He could feel the heat of the man’s body through the drab green shirt and flak jacket. Ropelike muscles flexed beneath his hand and he felt the rapid rise and fall of Hardmore’s chest. He wanted to pull away, but kept his hand in place.

The plane tilted as it made a slow curve around for the second pass. The night whipped by outside the cabin. There was a half-moon, enough light to see by but not bright enough to be dangerous. Not like the deadly spotlight of a full moon, thank God.

If they made it to the ground alive, everything should be fine. If there were still no Japs on the island. If they weren’t patrolling the waters. If they hadn’t heard the plane.

Too many goddamn ifs.

The navigator turned back to Mike and put his thumb up.

“Now!” Mike pushed, but the professor didn’t go, his white-knuckled grip on the edge of the door held him back.

“Let go! Jump!” He pushed again but the guy didn’t budge.

“I can’t!” Hardmore’s pale eyes met Mike’s dark gaze and Mike saw the fear and the trust in them.

“We’ll go together.”

The professor nodded. Mike stepped up beside him. “On my mark at three.”

“One. Two. Three.”

Both men stepped out of the plane and into the night.

Mike could see Hardmore, not ten feet from him, arms spread out as if he were ready to flap them and fly away. The seconds counted by in his head and he pulled his cord.

The parachute deployed, and he waited for the teeth-rattling jerk that signaled he’d stopped falling.

Nothing happened.

He looked up. The chute fluttered uselessly above him.

He was fucked.