



# THE LAST STRAW

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## The Last Straw

### Part 1

#### I

Eddie Coyle stands five foot three in boots two sizes too big because the Army doesn't make boots for men built like him. Nineteen years old, a hundred and twenty-eight pounds after a full meal—which he hasn't had since Queensland. Private First Class, ball turret gunner, the smallest and youngest man on the crew. Right now, Eddie is watching Second Lieutenant Tommy Phelan lose his mind over a nameless, unpainted airplane.

"She's naked," Tommy says, standing on the hardstand at Jackson Field, thick hands planted on his hips, staring at the blank nose of their newly assigned B-17E. "She's naked and she's ugly and I ain't flying a plane that looks like nobody loves her. That's how you get killed. An ugly plane brings bad luck, you all know that. It's like flying in a dead man's boots."

It's a hundred and four degrees in Port Moresby, New Guinea. The air is so wet it feels like being inside a boiler. Eddie can feel his

undershirt pasted to the knobs of his spine, the sweat tracking down behind his ears into his collar, and every miserable humid inch of this airfield that smells like mud and diesel and the sourness of a thousand men who haven't once been completely dry since they shipped out.

And Tommy is still going. He's always still going. "Every plane on this field has a name. *Naughty but Nice*. *Yankee Diddler*. The whole 65th Squadron has pinups on their noses that'd make your mother cry." He gestures at the fuselage—blank olive drab over fresh welds where the tail was reattached after it sheared off four months ago. "And what do we have? Nothing. Bupkis. A plane with no fucking soul."

Eddie leans against a shoulder-high tire and watches. This is what Eddie does. He watches, catalogues, and waits for what comes next. From here, in the shade of the wing, he can see the whole crew arranged around the aircraft like a family portrait—Jimmy running a preflight check in the cockpit. Bobby cross-legged on the hardstand, tapping Morse on his knee. Frank leaning against the fuselage, somehow looking like a magazine ad for pomade in a place where magazines go to rot. Davey standing behind Tommy with his arms folded and his Bowdoin patience running thin. Vern whittling. Al trying to fix a flashlight with parts from two other broken flashlights. Earl sitting on a crate with a cylinder head in his enormous hands, not looking up.

And at the center of the performance, receiving Tommy's tirade with the patience of a man from Savannah, Georgia, who grew up where the summers are almost this miserable, is Captain Walter Calloway, their pilot. Walt leans against the landing gear with his arms loose at his sides and his cap pushed back. Eddie watches him the way Eddie always watches Walt—carefully, from the edges, the way you watch a painting you don't understand yet. Walt never shows when he's pissed. His voice stays even, not too loud and not too slow, so you can't ever tell if he's joking or trying to kill you.

"All right, Tommy," Walt says, his accent sweet as a ripe peach, "so we'll find her a proper name."

"It ain't just about the name, Cap. We need the girl. Without the girl, it's just... machinery. You want to go up against flak with no pinup? You want to bet your ass on a machine that don't know who she's fighting for?"

Eddie scratches the inside of his elbow and tries to look like he belongs. Tommy's right, sort of. B-17s are supposed to have nose art and a name, something that says they're more than just a target waiting for a Zero to find them. Maybe that's why Eddie doesn't like looking straight at this one: she isn't anybody's girl yet. Just a hull, reassembled. Rejected. Maybe she's still mad about being in pieces.

Walt pushes off the landing gear and says, "Well. I can paint her."

This surprises no one. They've all seen the sketchbook Walt keeps in his flight bag, which he thinks he's hiding.

"But I'll need a model," Walt says. "A girl. And since we're a little short on girls at the moment—" He pauses, lets the obvious settle. Ten



men on a jungle airfield. The nearest women are a thousand miles south in Townsville. “—one of you gentlemen is going to volunteer.”

Nobody does. Eddie’s fingers curl against the rubber of the tire. Sweat crawls down his neck. A mosquito whines past his ear.

“Yinz are all cowards,” Jimmy calls down from the cockpit window.

“Democracy!” Tommy announces, because Tommy has a solution for everything. “That’s what we’re fighting for, aint it? We draw for it. Short straw poses. Captain holds, since he’s the artist.”

Bobby says, “That ain’t democracy, lieutenant, that’s a draft.”

Walt considers this. “Yeah, but it’s as fair as we’re gonna get, and the loser gets a stick of salted butter from my personal hoard.” That did it. The rumor of food always did it.

Bobby produces a fistful of dried grass stems he’s been pulling from the edge of the taxiway. He hands them to Walt, who sorts through them with those careful hands, snaps one shorter than the rest, and arranges all ten in his fist with the tops even.

“Rank order,” Tommy says. “Just like chow line.”

There is a strange feeling in Eddie’s gut, watching them all line up for the draw, as if he were crewing a raft in whitewater and the horizon just dropped away.

Jimmy climbs down from the cockpit. He draws first—long straw. He grins, holds it up, steps back.

Davey draws. Glances at his straw, pockets it without comment. Long.

Tommy draws, gets long, and immediately pivots to coaching. “Frankie, you got the gams for it. I’m just saying.”

Frank draws long and blows Tommy a kiss. Earl draws long without looking up from the cylinder head, as though the outcome was never in question. Bobby draws long and keeps tapping Morse on his thigh. Vern draws long, a flicker of relief crossing his freckled face.

Al draws long and exhales hard. “Thank Christ.”

Two straws left in Walt’s fist. Two men remaining. Walt and Eddie. They’re standing close enough now that Eddie can smell him—not just the diesel and the damp, but something like cedarwood and old paper, a scent that belongs in a library in Georgia, not a jungle. It’s a clean smell, a “Captain” smell, and Eddie breathes it in until his head swims.

Walt says, “After you, Eddie,” and the voice is gentle and warm.

Eddie stares at the two grass stems, their tips perfectly even. His pulse is fast and light, up high in the throat, the way it gets before a mission—except this isn’t before a mission. This is a stupid bet about a painting on an airplane, and there’s no reason his heart should be hammering like it’s trying to get out of his chest, no reason for his mouth to be dry, no reason for the back of his neck to be prickling under the sweat. No good reason at all.

Eddie draws.

Six inches of dried grass. Long straw.

Walt opens his hand. The short straw sits alone in his broad palm. “Well,” he says. “I guess I’m my own model. Anybody got a camera that still works?”

Nine men stare at their captain. The mental image arrives simultaneously, and it’s not good.

Eddie speaks first. The words come before the thought is fully formed—before he can stop himself, as he has been taught, in the hard way, to do. “Captain, you can’t be the model. You’re the captain, for chrissake.” He grabs the short straw from Walt’s hand, his fingers brushing the captain’s calloused palm as he does, and the touch burns like a match tip. Then he hears himself say, “If somebody has to be the girl, let it be me.”

Tommy erupts. “The kid’s got guts!” He slaps Eddie between the shoulder blades hard enough to pitch him forward, which doesn’t take much. Jimmy applauds from the wing. Vern looks up from his whittling, nods once, and looks back down. Al is grinning.

Frank circles Eddie, a slow, deliberate prowl. “Yeah. Not bad, Coyle. I always said you had the cheekbones.”

Walt hasn’t moved. He stands, his hand still open and empty, looking at Eddie—not with Tommy’s delight or Frank’s calculation, but with an expression that makes Eddie glance away, that makes the spot



beneath his jaw itch.

“Okay,” Walt says. “Okay, Eddie. Let’s make you a girl.”

Earl snaps the cylinder head back into place, stands, and wipes his hands on a rag. “Waste of paint,” he says, and walks toward the mess tent.

It is the closest thing to a blessing Earl has ever given.

## II

Eddie has volunteered to be a girl and now he needs to become one, and the problem with this plan is that a jungle airfield in New Guinea has exactly none of the things required to make that happen.

Frank figures this out first. He circles Eddie once, twice, like a tailor at a fitting, and starts counting on his fingers. “Makeup. A wig. Clothes that aren’t—” He waves a hand at Eddie’s sweat-dark khaki, his salt-stained boots, the general state of a nineteen-year-old who spent most of the last year sleeping in slit trenches. “This.”

“I could draw from imagination,” Walt says, and Eddie feels a flicker of—what? Not disappointment. Not that. Just an awareness that the offer exists and that Eddie does not want Walt to take it.

“No,” Tommy says, and Eddie is grateful.

Frank laughs. “You really itching to see Eddie in a dress, lieutenant?”

“It isn’t that, but if we’re doing this, we’re doing it right. Our girl is going to be the best-looking broad on this airfield.”

Al clears his throat. “The Australians left a crate. Behind the motor pool. The concert party, from last July—they left their supplies.”

“What good is a crate of concert stuff?” says Tommy.

Frank rolls his eyes, like Tommy might actually be stupid. “The diggers dressed some of their guys up like chorus girls. Supposed to be for morale, I guess. Australian dames must be ugly as sin. But there’s a photo in the ops shed, next to the pinboard. Go look if you don’t believe me.”

Tommy takes off like a shot toward the motor pool. Frank shoves Eddie in that direction too, like a sheepdog on a mission, while the rest trickle after, the mud sucking at their heels, the sky all bruised with coming rain.

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Twenty minutes later, Eddie stands in front of an open crate that smells like a theater trunk composting in tropical humidity for eleven months—which is exactly what it is—and Tommy is pulling things out and narrating at full volume like an auctioneer who has lost all professional restraint.

“Three wigs, all disgusting. We’ll wash them. Two dresses, one with a rip, one that’s mostly sequins.” He holds up a pair of heels, looking from Eddie’s feet to the shoes. “Too big, probably.” He keeps digging. “Stockings. Are these stockings? These are stockings.”

Eddie watches all of this come out of the crate. Each item lands in the dust like artifacts from a country he’s heard about but never visited. His mouth has gone dry again, the same dryness he felt during the straw draw, and he swallows against it and says nothing. Why does it feel like he is being stalked? Like he’s flying out in the open, except instead of flak, it’s the gaze of nine men trying to imagine him as something other than what he is.

Frank takes over when the makeup pouch appears. He unzips it. Eddie watches Frank’s face change, the showmanship dropping away, replaced by the focused calm Frank gets when he’s cutting someone’s hair or working a razor along a jawline. Compacts. Lipstick. Eyeliner pencils, most of them dried out. A cracked mirror. Frank sifts through it all, testing colors on his wrist, discarding what’s dead and keeping what isn’t.

“How the hell you know all this girly crap?” Vern asks, sounding baffled.

That sort of question would’ve made Eddie shrivel, but Frank just shrugs, like it’s obvious, and says, “If you grow up with a mother who



works in a beauty parlor, you pick up a few things. Now when I check out a dame, I can tell you what she'll look like in the morning. The rest of you are flying blind. Sit down, Eddie."

The folding chair wobbles under him. Frank attacks Eddie's face with a wet rag, scouring off the grime, salt, and whatever else has crusted his skin after weeks of missions and too little sleep. The mirror sits propped against the crate lid, but Eddie can't bring himself to look. He fixes his gaze on Frank's hands—and suddenly thinks of his oldest sister, Margaret, seated at the vanity in the room all four Coyle girls shared, doing exactly this. The memory arrives with a clarity that has no business being here, twelve thousand miles from Lowell, standing in red mud beside a crate of Australian drag supplies.

Frank's hands work fast, professional. "Not much of a beard to begin with," he says, dusting baby powder from a half-disintegrated tin across Eddie's jaw. "Blessing and curse." He dabs a spot of foundation—two, three shades off but better than nothing—below Eddie's left eye and sets to blending. "Knock your head back, Coyle. Let me see your eyebrows." Eddie tips his chin up and lets Frank fuss. Through the haze of powder and the tick of the brush, Eddie watches the rest of the crew through the grit in the cracked mirror, sees them



trying not to stare while pretending to fix things, smoke, or whittle.

The captain isn't there, and Eddie notices this the way he does everything about Walt—sideways, by mistake, in the space between sentences, and tries to swallow the disappointment that rises in his chest. It's better, maybe, that Walt isn't here.

Frank says, "Close your eyes."

Eddie closes them. The brush moves across his eyelid, soft and strange, and he keeps very still, the way he does in the turret when the flak is close enough to hear above the engine roar—that stillness that isn't peace but looks like it from the outside. Really, it's a kind of going away, bracing for what comes next.

Frank works eyeliner along the edge of Eddie's lashes. "You ever do theater?" he asks. "It's a racket, but the dames go nuts for stage guys. Most of those fellas are light in the loafers, but that just makes the girls horny as hellcats for some damn reason. Dames are freaks, that's what you'll learn. There. Open."

Eddie blinks and the world snaps into a brighter version of itself. The edge of the bamboo stand behind Frank, the color of the sky—everything a little more vivid, a little too sharp.

Next comes the wig. Frank settles it onto Eddie's head—the least

disgusting of the three, a dark brunette that falls just past the jaw—and smooths it with both hands, adjusting the part, tugging a wave forward over Eddie's forehead. The hair falls past Eddie's ears. It touches the back of his sunburned neck, and the sensation is so gentle against all that damaged skin that Eddie closes his eyes. In the darkness behind his lids, Jackson Field disappears—the mud, the mosquitoes, the distant percussion of artillery up the coast—and what replaces it is not a place but a feeling, formless and luminous, like stepping into a room you've been dreaming about for years and finding that it was real all along, that the door was never locked, that you were simply facing the wrong wall.

“Not bad, kid,” Tommy says, already moving on, holding a dress up against Eddie's chest.

Eddie doesn't answer. He sits very still in the center of his crew and they're all talking and laughing and rummaging and none of them are looking at his face and thank God because his eyes are too bright and his mouth is too tight and if anyone looked closely right now they'd see a boy trying very hard not to feel the exact thing he is feeling.

But nobody looks closely. Why would they? It's a gag. It's a laugh. It's a Tuesday in June in the middle of hell and everyone has bigger things to worry about than a kid who looks like he's either about to cry, puke, or shit his pants. And it is that, the casualness of it, that nearly does him in.

The dress is slippery, the kind of fabric that looks expensive but feels like a shower curtain. Tommy and Frank help him get the thing on, careful as surgeons, though Tommy still manages to jab an elbow into Eddie's crotch and everyone hollers, even as Tommy tries to cover it up.

Al whistles, high and sweet, and says, “Jesus, Coyle, your legs are better than my sister's.”

Frank says, “Legs? Hell, look at this face, would ya? If I seen this face on a movie poster, I'd be first in line.”

“Only because you did the makeup,” Tommy says with a grin. “You're always admiring your own handiwork.”

Eddie looks at himself in the cracked mirror.

He has to stop. He has to look away, and then he has to look back, because he's never once seen his own face like this, not in all the years of mirrors and reflections and family photographs either. What he sees in the mirror is not Eddie Coyle, not the skinny gunner who makes himself small in every room, but someone else entirely: a girl with a face from a poster, someone who might be loved by strangers in the way only a picture can be, a person who'd never had to fight for anything, never once had to convince a father or a teacher or a priest that she was a thing worth keeping.

Frank says, “You look like you could eat a heart out of a man and then ask him for a light. Damn, I'm good.”



### III

Walt chooses the aircraft's nose for its light. Eddie climbs up through the forward hatch, wearing the wig and the dress.

"Sit," says Walt, already set up on the maintenance stand, a battered sketchbook open to a blank page.

Eddie settles on an ammunition crate under the plexiglass. The sun hits him full in the face, and the heat inside the nose is as bad as St Mary's greenhouse in July. Under that, the smell of cordite, oil, and the baked-in sweat of every man crammed into this glass bubble to drop bombs on strangers.

The crew crowds into the navigator's compartment behind the nose, elbowing each other for a view. Tommy's providing commentary—"Cross your legs, kid, you're a lady now." Frank makes adjustments from the doorway, reaching in to fix a curl, to tug the dress off one shoulder.

Eddie laughs on cue and holds still when told and none of this is hard because he's been performing his whole life—doing an impression of himself, trying to be what people expected, or wanted, or needed—since long before he ever laid eyes on a B-17.

Walt works fast, sketching on a pad of paper he pulled from the flight bag. His hand moves in short, confident strokes, and Eddie hears the dry scratch of the charcoal beneath the crew's noise. Walt's gaze flickers up, down, up. His eyes move across Eddie's face as his hand moves across the paper, then down to the page. He doesn't speak, not once, and neither does Eddie, and in that quiet between the scratching and the distant rattle of an engine test, the rest of the crew starts to drift away. Even Tommy, after a while, gives up on the peanut gallery and leaves them alone.

Silence. Only Walt, Eddie, charcoal, and light. Now that they are alone, the air in the nose feels twice as thick. Eddie can smell that cedarwood scent again, stronger now, radiating off Walt in the cramped space. It's an anchor. He finds himself breathing in time with the scratch of Walt's charcoal.

"Turn your chin left," Walt says. "Little more. There."

Eddie turns, the wig hair sliding across his collarbone. Through the plexiglass, he sees the airfield—B-17s baking on the hardstand, palm trees lining the perimeter, the Owen Stanley Range rising gray and hazy to the north. All of it feels very far away, as if the aircraft's nose is a glass bell lowered over the two of them, sealing out the war, the heat, the mud—everything real. Only this remains: the crate beneath Eddie's thighs, the fabric of the dress against his ribs, the charcoal scratching, and Walt's eyes.

Walt's eyes. They keep coming back to Eddie's face. Each time, he feels a warmth behind his sternum, a tightness across the bridge of his nose. It's that specific, held-breath sensation of being studied by a person trying to see what's actually there, rather than what they expect to find. No one has ever looked at him like this. His mother sees only her youngest son. The crew sees their ball turret gunner, the little guy, the kid. The world doesn't even bother to see him—he's a shadow at the edge of things, a half-person, a stowaway.

But Walt is looking at Eddie and drawing what he sees, and Eddie doesn't know what Walt sees, and the not knowing is unbearable and perfect and he wants it to stop and he never wants it to stop.

"Relax your mouth," Walt says softly. "You're holding your jaw."

Eddie unclenches—he hadn't realized—and his face relaxes into an unfamiliar expression, at rest for the first time he can remember, free of the effort of shaping it into the version of Eddie Coyle the world expects.

The charcoal stops. Walt looks from the page to Eddie and back.

"What?" Eddie asks.

Walt shakes his head. "Nothing. Just—hold that. Stay exactly like that."

Eddie stays. The dust between them hangs gold in the late afternoon light. The crate is hard under his thighs, the dress cool against his ribs, the wig warm on his scalp, and Eddie is holding perfectly, absolutely still. Not because his captain told him to, but because for the first time in his life, there's no place he'd rather be than



exactly where he is, looking exactly the way he looks, being seen by exactly this person

The charcoal starts again. Eddie breathes. Outside the glass, the war waits.

#### IV

Three days pass and Eddie can't get clean.

And it's not because he's dirty. Everyone's dirty. They're in the middle of a fucking jungle in June. You could climb into the shower stall every hour and you'd still be coated in a layer of red grit and sweat five minutes later. But the dirt doesn't explain the feeling under his skin, the way it itches and crawls and lights up like a radio dial anytime he thinks of the nose art.

No, this is different. Frank washed the makeup off after the first sitting, and Eddie watched the foundation and lipstick turn the rag a color that looked like a sunset dying, and since then he's washed his face eleven times and can still feel the places where the brush touched. His cheekbones. The line of his eyelid. His lower lip, where the lipstick pressed and dragged. The sensations aren't on his skin anymore but *in*

his skin, settled into the tissue like a bruise that doesn't hurt, and every time he touches his face his fingers find the memory before they find the flesh.

Something's the matter with him, and the more he tries to get rid of it, the deeper it burrows, until he's certain that anyone looking close would see it shining through his skin, this radioactive ache, this shameful, brilliant thing.

On the third day, while checking the ball turret, Eddie catches his reflection in the plexiglass—just his face, distorted in the curve of the dome, looking back at him from underneath. Same narrow jaw, same dark eyes, same scrawny kid from Lowell. But he stares at it the way you stare at a word you've read a thousand times, and suddenly you can't remember what it means. It starts to look foreign. Wrong, even. At night, he lies on his cot, pressing the sea glass Margaret gave him for luck to the hollow of his throat where his pulse beats, staring into the nothing.

Meanwhile, the captain's painting. Eddie can hear it from across the hardstand—the tap of a brush handle against a tin, the scrape of the ladder against the fuselage—but he doesn't go to look. Walt said he'd call when he's ready for the second sitting, and until then, Eddie will do his job, clean his guns, and not think about the way Walt's eyes moved across his face in the gold light.

Eddie is very good at not thinking about things. He's been practicing for nineteen years.

## V

Frank does his face again on the third evening. Better this time—he's had three days to experiment on his own wrist, to figure out which pencils still work and which lipstick shades haven't gone to chalk. Eddie sits on the crate behind the hut and lets him work. When he's finished, Frank holds up the cracked mirror. "There, take a look."

Eddie looks and the face in the mirror looks back and he has to close his eyes because the person in the mirror is a stranger who isn't a stranger. The bones are the same—Coyle bones, Irish as Good Friday—but the eyes are bigger and darker, the lips fuller, the chin a little softer. The transformation isn't even that dramatic; it's just that, for the first time, someone behind his eyes is alive, looking straight back at him, right into him.

He doesn't say any of this to Frank. He says, "You missed a spot," and Frank laughs and fixes it.

Walt finds him twenty minutes later. "Ready?"

Eddie nods. His voice is level. "Sure, Cap. Give me five minutes."

He takes fifteen. He spends them behind the latrine, leaning against the plywood wall, hands on his knees, breathing. The air's cooler now but still heavy and wet. Eddie draws it deep into his nose, pushes it out his mouth, trying to settle his heartbeat into a rhythm that

doesn't feel like he ran a three-minute mile. He's not afraid of the Japanese. Fourteen missions in a glass bubble on a bomber's belly, shot at by Zeros, anti-aircraft guns, even a confused Australian corvette—none of it made him feel like this. This isn't the fear of dying. This is the fear of being found alive.

He puts on the dress, puts on the wig, and climbs into the aircraft's nose. Walt is already there. He's set up a kerosene lamp because the sun is almost down, and the light it throws is amber and unsteady, and it makes the inside of the plexiglass nose glow like a jar of honey. The captain, sleeves rolled up, holds his charcoal. He looks up as Eddie ducks through the bulkhead, and stops.

He just stops. His hand with the charcoal hovers over the pad. His mouth opens and closes. It lasts less than two seconds. Then Walt says, "Sit down," his voice steady, warm, unhurried as always. Eddie sits on the ammunition crate, arranging the dress over his knees. They are alone again in the glass bell at the front of the aircraft.

Walt draws. Eddie holds still. The lamp flickers and their shadows move on the curved walls like the shadows in a cathedral, enormous and wavering and not quite connected to the bodies that cast them.

"Relax," Walt says.

"I'm relaxed," Eddie says, and his voice cracks on the second word, and Walt doesn't acknowledge it, just keeps drawing.

Minutes pass. Or hours. Time has collapsed into the space between charcoal strokes, the scratch of the pencil and the lift, between Walt's eyes shifting from the page to his face. Each time Walt looks up, the gaze lands on his skin—his jaw, mouth, the line of his throat, the place where the dress falls off his shoulder—and each point burns afterward, a small bright heat, like a match touched to paper, pulled away before the flame catches.

And now Eddie is terrified.

Not of Walt. Not of the crew, asleep or playing cards in the huts behind them. It's simpler than that, and worse. He's sitting in a dress in the nose of a broken airplane on a jungle airfield at the edge of the known world. And he doesn't want to leave.

He doesn't want to wash his face. He doesn't want to take off the wig and feel the air hit the back of his neck. He doesn't want to climb out of this glass bell and walk back to his cot and lie in the dark and be Eddie Coyle, Private First Class, ball turret gunner, son, brother, soldier, boy. The terror isn't in what's happening. The terror is in how much he wants it to keep happening, because wanting this—wanting to sit here, looking like this, being looked at like this—means that every other moment of his life has been wrong, and if every other moment has been wrong then Eddie's been wrong, and if he's been wrong then who the hell has he been for nineteen years, and that question is a black hole with gravity so dense that no light escapes, and he feels himself falling toward it, right now, on this ammunition crate, in this amber light, and there's nothing to hold onto except stillness.



So he holds still.

Walt turns the sketchpad around. “Tell me what you think.”

The face on the page is lit from one side, the amber of the kerosene lamp rendered in charcoal and white chalk on gray paper. The eyes are dark and steady. The mouth is soft. The jaw is narrow. The hair falls past the collarbone. It’s Eddie’s face and it isn’t his face. It’s the face of a girl who has his exact bone structure and his exact expression, and she’s beautiful, and she’s calm, and she’s looking out of the page with the quiet, settled certainty of a person who knows exactly who she is.

Eddie stares at the drawing for a long time. His throat works. His eyes sting.

“You made me look—” he starts, and can’t finish, because every possible ending to that sentence is the truth, and the truth is the black hole, and once words like that are spoken they can’t be unspoken, because then it’s real. Walt’s watching, patient and unblinking, waiting for the rest of it, but he can’t give it. Not now. Not ever.

When he doesn’t finish, Walt reaches out. For a second, Eddie thinks he’s going to touch his cheek—to brush away a smudge or a stray hair—and the anticipation is so sharp it hurts. But Walt just folds the sketchpad closed, gently and says, “I’ll start on her tomorrow.”

Eddie nods. He climbs out of the aircraft into the warm dark of the airfield, and the air hits the back of his neck where the wig was, and the absence is cold and electric. He walks to the hut. Bobby is playing solitaire on his footlocker. Tommy is snoring. The cot is the same cot. The blanket is the same blanket. The hut smells the same—canvas and sweat and bug repellent. Everything is exactly the way he left it, and none of it is enough, and Eddie doesn't know how to live in a world where the best thing that will ever happen to him lasted forty-five minutes in the nose of an airplane.

He doesn't wash his face. He lies in the dark with the makeup still on and presses the sea glass to the hollow of his throat and doesn't sleep.

## VI

The whole airfield comes to see.

From the back of a crowd of three dozen men, Eddie watches Walt apply the final strokes to the nose of their B-17. Eddie's arms are crossed, a posture he hopes conveys casualness, but his hands are balled tight under his biceps, nails digging through the thin khaki. He feels like a man standing naked in a searchlight, as if every eye on the airfield can see straight through him—can see the dress, the wig, the something that changed and never changed back. Walt stands on the ladder in shirtsleeves, the tail of his shirt untucked, his cap backward. He's been at it since dawn, and the paint has bled to his wrists and down the buttons of his shirt. The sun is already hard and high, bouncing off the aluminum like a million camera bulbs, making it almost impossible to look straight at the fuselage. But Eddie keeps trying. He can't stop.

The girl has dark hair, a knowing tilt to the mouth, and her legs are perfect. She's leaning back, one hand behind her head—the pose Walt settled on during their second sitting, the one that required Eddie to hold his arm up until the muscles burned, and he didn't care; he'd have held it until the bone came through the skin if Walt had asked. She is, Eddie realizes with a lurch, beautiful. Beautiful like the girls in the magazines, the girls he has stared at his whole life with a hunger he can't place—not in his groin where the other boys seemed to feel it but higher, behind his sternum, a longing that isn't *want* but *want to be*.

And she has his face. His exact face. And nobody knows.

Walt climbs down. The crowd claps and whistles. A sergeant from the 64th Squadron calls out, "Who's the dame?" and Tommy throws his arm around Eddie's shoulders and says, "Here's our girl!" and gets a big laugh, and Eddie laughs too—the right laugh, the easy laugh of a kid who thinks this is funny—and the effort of producing that laugh while looking at his own face on the side of an airplane is the hardest thing he has ever done. Harder than the ball turret. Harder than the straw draw. Harder than sitting still in the amber light while Walt's eyes moved across his mouth.



Davey suggests the name. “The Last Straw,” he says. “Because of how we picked the model.” Everyone agrees it’s perfect. Walt letters it onto the nose in a steady hand, the words curving on the cloud the girl’s standing on, and Eddie reads them—*The Last Straw*—and thinks: *yes*.

Earl appears at the edge of the crowd. He looks at the painting for a long time. Then he looks at Eddie. Then he looks back at the painting.

“She’ll do,” Earl says, and walks away.

Eddie stands on the hardstand and stares at the girl on the nose of the plane and doesn’t let his face do a single thing it wants to do.

## VII

Eddie lies on his cot in the dark and wages war.

He’s a man. He is Edward Francis Coyle of 34 Moody Street, Lowell, Massachusetts. He is his mother’s youngest son. He’s a soldier in the United States Army Air Forces, and any day now he’ll climb into the ball turret of a B-17 bomber and fly north into Japanese-held territory. He needs his mind right, but it’s not right. His mind is full of amber light and charcoal on paper and the weight of a wig on his scalp and the way lipstick felt on his mouth—like a finger pressed to his lips

saying *hush, hush, let go* and Eddie needs this to stop. He needs to reach inside his chest and find the nameless thing that has been growing there since before he can remember—and pull it out by the root and kill it. Now. Tonight. Before it gets any bigger. Before it gets strong enough to kill him first.

He's nine years old and standing in the doorway of his sisters' bedroom watching Margaret brush her hair, one hundred strokes, and the sound of the bristles is the most beautiful sound he ever heard, and the wanting is so big it fills his entire body. He doesn't know what he wants—to be Margaret, to have Margaret's hair, to sit at the vanity and see a girl looking back—he just knows that he's standing on the wrong side of the doorway, that the room on the other side is warm and lit and full of a life that belongs to him but that he can't enter, and when Margaret sees him and says "What do you want, Eddie?" he says "Nothing" and walks away because even at nine, Eddie knows that the truth isn't an option. The truth has never been an option. The truth is a door in a wall, and the wall is his life. If he opens the door, the wall comes down and everything on this side of it—mother, family, church, Lowell, the Army, the crew—collapses into rubble.

So he's kept the door shut. For nineteen years, Eddie has kept it shut. He kept it shut when the other boys talked about girls, and Eddie listened, mimicked, and learned to say the right things with the right grin at the right time. He kept it shut at basic training, at gunnery school, in the barracks, the mess halls, and the transport ships; in every shower, bunk, and moment of forced proximity to men's bodies, where a wrong glance or a wrong silence could get you beaten or worse. He kept it shut in the ball turret, curled in glass and steel at twenty-five thousand feet, where the only person who could see his face was God.

And now Captain Walt Calloway has drawn that face—the real one behind the door—and painted it ten feet tall on the nose of an airplane for the whole United States Army to see, and Eddie is lying on his cot with his fists clenched at his sides and the sea glass cutting into his palm because he's squeezing it hard enough to puncture skin, and he's telling himself: *This stops. This stops now. You don't sit for Walt again and you stop thinking about his hands and the way his voice sounded when he said "hold that, stay exactly like that," and you never again put on a wig or a dress and you forget. You forget all of it. You are Eddie Coyle. You are a man. You are a soldier. You will fly your missions and do your job and go home to Lowell and live the life that's waiting for you on Moody Street and you will not think about this ever again.*

Eddie lies in the dark and makes this promise to himself, and the promise is a fist closed around the sea glass, tight enough to cut, and the cut is real and the blood is real and the pain is a relief because pain is a thing he understands. Pain has a name, a location, a cause, and the thing in Eddie's chest has none of these. But the thing in Eddie's chest is not listening to the promise. The thing in Eddie's chest has heard every promise he has ever made and has outlasted all of them, patient



and ancient and vast, and it will be there in the morning when Eddie wakes, and it will be there on the next mission and the one after that. It will be there when the war ends—if it ends, if Eddie survives—but the thing in his chest is not Eddie. It can't be. He's a man. He's a soldier. No, this thing is a sickness, a weed, a parasite that has latched onto his insides and has been feeding on him since childhood, and Eddie has starved it, ignored it and beaten it back every day of his life, and all it takes is a wig, a tube of lipstick, and a man with charcoal and steady hands and kind, beautiful eyes to undo nineteen years of keeping it caged.

He'll cage it again. He has to. Because if he can't—if the cage is broken now, if the door won't shut, if he has to walk through the rest of his life with this thing alive and growing and pressing against the inside of his skin—then he doesn't want the rest of his life.

The thought arrives with a calm that's worse than any panic. It settles like a cool hand on a fever.

There's a war on. Men die in wars every day. Men die in ball turrets—curled in glass with their knees against their chest, facing the earth, alone. It wouldn't be difficult. It wouldn't even be unusual. It would just be one more kid from Lowell who didn't come home, and his

mother would cry and Margaret would cry and no one would ever know the reason, and the thing in Eddie's chest would finally, finally be quiet.

The sea glass is warm now, blood-temperature, indistinguishable from the hand that holds it. Finally, he loosens his hand. The glass drops to the dirt under the cot. Eddie lies awake until the sky bleaches from black to gray, eyes open and dry, and then he gets up and starts the day just like every other day, as if the night hadn't happened at all.

## VIII

Eddie washes his face.

He uses canteen water and the same rag Frank used after the first sitting, and the water runs clean because there's nothing left to wash off. He puts on his flight suit. He laces the boots that are two sizes too big. He's Eddie Coyle, Private First Class, ball turret gunner, and in forty minutes he'll climb into a glass sphere bolted to the belly of an airplane and fly toward people who want to kill him, and this is fine. This is the simple part.

The mission briefing is in the operations hut. Eddie sits in the back row and listens to the intelligence officer describe the target—a Japanese supply depot on the coast north of Lae, protected by anti-aircraft emplacements and a fighter strip within scramble distance. Expected resistance: moderate to heavy. He writes nothing down. The coordinates don't matter. The route doesn't matter. What matters is that in two hours he'll be crammed in the turret with the twin fifties and the whole earth rotating slowly beneath the glass, and there'll be no room for anything except the job. The turret is thirty-six inches across. There's no room for a wig or a dress or a sketchpad or a kerosene lamp or the sound of charcoal on paper. There's barely room for Eddie. This morning, that's a mercy.

The crew preps the aircraft in the gray dawn light. Jimmy runs the checklist. Earl moves with the efficiency of a man who's done this five hundred times. Al and Frank check their waist guns. Tommy settles into the bombardier's seat. Davey spreads his charts in the navigator's compartment—the same one where he sat on an ammunition crate, twice, in a wig and a dress, in amber light, while Walt drew his face.

Eddie stands under the aircraft and looks up at the ball turret. In a moment the hatch will close, the engines will start, and the war will reassert its claim. But not yet. Not for one more minute.

He walks to the nose.

She's there. Dark hair, knowing mouth, legs crossed, one hand behind her head. *The Last Straw* in tall letters underneath, the paint still fresh enough to smell. The individual brushstrokes are visible where Walt's hand lingered on the curve of her face, which is his face—the one he saw in the cracked mirror when Frank held it up and he had to close his eyes.

Eddie doesn't close his eyes this time. He looks.



He got to see her. That's more than the boy in the doorway of his sisters' bedroom ever dreamed possible. Because even then, even when he'd kneel next to his bed and press his hands together until his knuckles ached, the only prayer he knew was to wake up in the morning and not be himself. To walk into the kitchen and have his mother call him *Edie*, not Eddie, and set him a bowl of cereal and plait his hair for school. Every night for a year he prayed that prayer. Every morning he woke up the same.

And what do you do with that, when you're nine? If God is everything they taught you, He wouldn't have done this to you. If God is making boys with girls' hearts, He doesn't love you as much as the priest said. If God is real, He would've answered a nine-year-old's prayer, just once, just for a morning. And if God isn't real, then there's no one to fix this. There's just Eddie, on his knees, talking to a ceiling.

God never answered. But Walt Calloway did.

For three days in June of 1943, in a plywood hut and in the glass nose of a broken bomber, she existed. She had a face. She had dark eyes and full lips. She sat in lamplight, and a man looked at her and drew what he saw, and what he saw was beautiful. She was real. Not for long. But real.

And that should be enough. He should be able to fold this up the way he folds a letter to tuck the memory away in the place where all the other memories of *not belonging* have gone, and get on with it. That's what men do. That's what soldiers do. He should be able to walk to the turret, climb in, fly the mission, and come home or not come home and either way the girl on the nose is a joke, a gag, a thing that happened once and is over.

He touches the painting. The edge of it, where the dark hair meets the olive drab of the fuselage. The paint's cool under his fingertip.

*What if.*

The thought is so small it barely qualifies as language. Two words. Less than a whisper. The kind of thought a man can pretend he didn't have, can bury under the sound of four engines starting and the checklist calls and the crew on the intercom and the war—the enormous sprawling war that's eating the world and is loud enough to drown out almost anything.

Almost.

“Eddie!” Tommy's voice from the forward hatch. “Move your ass, kid, we're spinning up!”

He pulls his hand back. He walks to the ball turret. He climbs in. The hatch closes over him, leaving him curled in glass and steel, his knees against his chest, in thirty-six inches of space, with the whole earth below him. The engines catch, one by one—number one, two, three, four—and the aircraft shudders and begins to roll.

The hardstand slides beneath him, then the taxiway, then the runway's packed earth. The shadow of the aircraft stretches ahead in the early sun—wings, engines, fuselage, and tail. The engines' pitch rises. Port Moresby blurs and flattens. The huts, the palms, the other bombers all rush backward like a life being left behind.

The wheels leave the ground. The earth drops away.

She's out there. Ten feet forward on the other side of the fuselage, her painted face kissing the sky for the first time. She belongs to the outside—to the wind, to the sun—and Eddie belongs to the inside, crammed inside the glass with his hands on the guns.

That's how it should be. She got three days. Three days of golden light, charcoal drawings, and the eyes of a man who drew her the way she really was, and that's more than Eddie has ever had. Three days is enough. It has to be enough.

Eddie closes his eyes. He lets her go.

The aircraft banks north. Below, the Coral Sea stretches out flat and silver to the horizon, and he opens his eyes and watches it pass and does his job and does not think about the girl on the nose of the plane, and does not think about the girl on the nose of the plane, and does not think about the girl on the nose of the plane.





















1943



**"THE LAST STRAW"**







