

Chapter One

No one told the rescuers not to talk, yet instinctively they sifted through the bits of brick and shards of glass as quietly as possible, alert for the slightest sound of human life beneath the rubble of the tailor shop.

Deion Clay paused for a minute and wiped his brow with a soot-blackened handkerchief. He refused to look at the other buildings surrounding him, reduced to heaps. The sight caused a deep ache in his gut. All he knew was underneath this pile a few families had taken refuge in the basement.

Deion had been walking through the streets sometime in the night, offering help to the injured, when he heard the cries for help. And although they had fallen silent for the past few hours, he clung to the faintest hope. It was all he had.

Though hundreds of rescuers had swarmed the area last night, fighting the flames, most citizens from Guernica had since bundled up every meager possession they could scrounge and headed out of town with ox carts carrying the children, and old women. Perhaps twenty still worked alongside Deion, their skin made even blacker by soot than his natural color. They continued to dig, refusing to give up hope for the missing wife, son, or brother.

The attack had been devastating. Bombers had filled the skies in two waves that lasted nearly an hour each. Smoke continued to sting his eyes, and he again wiped away the tears. What the bombs hadn't destroyed, the fire had. Yet Deion understood why the handful of workers stayed, and he vowed to stay with them. How could one walk away from his whole existence without knowing that every last stone was overturned? He knew they'd give their all in hope of one more person being pulled from the rubble alive.

As Deion sifted through the debris, he sifted his motives as well. To find life under the wreckage meant he'd come for a purpose. To save a life would prove Spain hadn't been a mistake after all.

He sucked in a deep breath of recommitment and surveyed the rubble for the line of least resistance. So far they had excavated several feet of a narrow hallway leading to the basement. They were on the right track. They had to be.

“Here, *amigo*.” An older Spanish man handed him a shovel.

Digging in, Deion worked to dislodge the powdered plaster and brick. He scooped a pile and dumped it into a dented pail on the ground behind him. Without a word, the Spanish man passed it back down the line, where another man dumped it into the street.

The men around him scurried around as one, not needing words. The ragged line moved like the black ants Deion had watched as a boy. Working in unison under the intense Mississippi sun, they had quietly moved mounds of dirt thousands of times their own weight. These men seemed to be doing the same. Their wide eyes showed their emotions fluctuating between fear, disbelief, and weariness. Just yesterday, before the German planes swept over the small Spanish town, they’d been bankers, farmers, and schoolteachers. Now that world no longer existed.

Just as America no longer seemed to exist to Deion. The land of freedom, of opportunity. The land where men walked the street without ears pricked for the slightest sound of enemy bombers. Such peace seemed like something from a child’s storybook.

Sure, things had been tough back home, with the recent economic depression and all, but it was nothing like this. And, he hope, it never would be. Deion shook his head, unable to imagine New York City or Chicago under attack with bankers and businessmen sifting rubble caused by enemy bombs. If he did his job well—if all the volunteers for liberty did—America would stay safe.

Deion turned to see some men coming toward him carrying wooden beams, broken and splintered. One man worked the beams into place between the ground and the top of ceiling to support the slow advance of those digging.

The tension in the pit of his stomach tightened with each strike of the shovel’s tip. One wrong move could cause the whole thing to collapse onto the people still trapped underneath, crumbling like a tower of playing cards.

One man’s soft moan grabbed Deion’s attention. He reached under a brick near Deion’s feet and puled out a soggy brown paper package. With trembling fingers he untied the blackened string, revealing a gray suit coat. He said something

in Spanish that Deion didn't understand. Had the coat belonged to a brother, a friend?

A choking sob issued from the man's throat. With a louder sob, he pressed his face into the lapel of the jacket as his trembling, clawlike fingers gripped the fabric.

The gray suit coat reminded Deion of one his friend Jeb had often worn while collecting money for Spain in the subways of New York. Some gave to the Communist cause, nickels and dimes mostly. But they wasted much more playing craps or buying drinks at the corner bar. And what difference would it have made if all those who talked of Spain had actually come? Would fifty, a hundred, five hundred more men have made the difference? Could scenes like this have been prevented?

A moaning wind rocked the branches of a scarred tree next to the shop and swept down into the rubble, caressing Deion's sweat-covered face. He pushed his shovel in deeper, then paused. He held up a hand, stilling the others.

A voice blended with the wind's moaning. It cried again for help. Yes, it was a woman's voice, joined by a baby's cry.

The man next to Deion called to her. Even though Deion couldn't understand all the words, he assumed the man was telling her to save her energy. No doubt they all realized it was possible the limited air supply could be used up before those trapped were reached. The baby's cries continued. A few minutes later they finally stilled, and Deion hoped the mother had comforted the infant in her arms. He refused to consider the alternative.

They pressed on to what Deion assumed was the door to the basement. Though it was still in its frame, it was twisted and crushed. Cautiously he pushed against it, gaining mere fractions of an inch with each groaning effort. When he could finally see past it, four faces peered up at him. Two women, a young girl, and a baby blinked at him, as if trying to focus. Deion didn't know if their wrinkled brows were due to the sunlight or the color of his skin. They'd most likely never expected a colored man to rescue them, especially after hearing the horrible tales of the Moors from Africa who fought with the Nationalists.

The woman studied Deion's face for a moment, then slowly blinked her eyes and handed him the baby. He snuggled the child to his chest, and a warmth surged through his frame. He'd never felt more alive.

But before he had a chance to hand the baby over, a loud rumbling in the distance filled his ears. Enemy ground forces. They could advance into the town by tomorrow. Or maybe sooner.

"Come." Deion reached his hand toward the woman, and though she didn't understand his English words, she reached for his hand and climbed out. The other woman and child followed—out of the darkness and into the light.