

# **The Footlocker**

## **P. J. Grondin**

### **Prologue**

1945 - Wednesday, April 4  
1:17 p.m.

The deafening explosion produced shock waves that rocked the mighty B-17C bomber. Mickey Navigator Joseph Traver believed the aircraft might shake into a thousand pieces. A second explosion, only a heartbeat after the first, sent a piece of hot metal through the bottom of the plane, passing between his legs, burning the skin on his left inner thigh, mere inches from his groin. He screamed in pain, interrupting his communication with the pilot of the *Mean Streak*, the lead aircraft for the 303<sup>rd</sup> Bomber Group's mission number 351. He looked down between his legs where the metal had torn through his flight suit and grazed his leg. The wound bled, but the hot metal had not cut deep enough to hit major arteries or cause serious physical harm. It would undoubtedly leave a nasty scar. He looked up at the offending piece of shrapnel, embedded in the overhead of the plane's fuselage. Seconds earlier, he had been leaning over the plot map of their primary target. Had he not leaned back to pull his flight jacket tighter around his neck to fight off the chill from the freezing temperatures, the metal fragment would likely have struck him in the head. The thought sent chills through his body worse than the cold air within the craft's interior.

"You alright, Nav?"

Second Lieutenant Harrison Grobe, the pilot of the lead bomber in the mission, calmly called over the interplane headset, hoping everyone in his crew remained unharmed from the anti-aircraft barrage.

Grobe piloted twenty-three previous missions over Germany. He believed that he and his men were safe from harm. The level of defensive anti-aircraft fire at this late stage of the war had dwindled to a fraction of what the pilot had seen only months ago.

"I'm good, Cap. My leg got nipped is all. I'm fine."

Traver gritted his teeth, the pain causing genuine discomfort, but not to the point of affecting his ability to concentrate on the task at hand. This was Traver's first combat mission since completing training stateside. His hopes that the war would be over by the time he shipped overseas to Molesworth Air Base in England were dashed when he stepped off the transport aircraft from the United States and reported for duty. He had looked around at the dreary weather conditions, feeling the penetrating cold bolstered by a wet fog.

Having little time to find a bunk with an open locker, he received orders to report to Grobe. Within hours of touching down in England, he was back in the air, directing the thirty-nine aircraft of the 303<sup>rd</sup> bomber group. The crew of the *Mean Streak* greeted him warmly and informed him that he landed in good hands with their experienced pilot and crew. He quickly learned the meaning of teamwork as the crew worked together as a cohesive unit.

He informed Grobe, "We're twenty minutes to target. Ground visibility is good. Expect to see target within eight to ten minutes. We won't need to divert to our second alternate. We're right on track, no course corrections needed."

"Copy, Nav."

With the roar of the engines from his plane as well as the others in the squadron in his ears, Traver focused on the mission, ignoring the burn of his inner thigh. He closed his eyes, thinking of the payload of bombs that his and thirty-eight other planes prepared to drop on a factory in Unterluss, Germany. The factory, the secondary target of the mission, became the number one target when storm clouds formed over the Fassberg airfield. He rotated his head and neck as tension built from his lower back up his spine. The freezing temperature in the cabin of the aircraft increased his discomfort.

Looking forward past the bombardier, Traver saw the outskirts of the city. He closed his eyes, took a deep, calming breath, and said a prayer for the souls of those who would die in the next ten minutes, wondering if God would forgive him and his crewmates. He knew the air strikes to be a necessary course of action to defeat the German war machine which already claimed countless lives. After completing his prayer and making the sign of the cross, he took another deep breath and brought his attention back to the maps on the navigator's desk. He eyed the buildings on the ground as they approached the target area. The familiar outline of the factory just east of the city came into view.

He spoke into the microphone on his headset, "Nav to Pilot, target in view. Bombs away in approximately three minutes."

Grobe's reply came in loud and clear, "Bombs away in approximately three minutes, copy. Bombardier, do you concur?"

"I concur, Captain."

"Bombardier, you are free to release payload when target is acquired."

"Release payload when target acquired. Copy, Captain."

Traver heard his pilot relay the information to the other pilots, knowing that the individual navigators on the other aircraft would confirm the information. The anti-aircraft gunfire intensified for the next sixty seconds with multiple explosions causing shockwaves that shook the massive bomber. Almost as soon as the intensity picked up, the explosions stopped. They had a clear run to their target.

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The combined total of bombs dropped from all thirty-nine aircraft included over three hundred 500-pound general purpose bombs and one hundred fifty 500-pound M17 incendiary bombs. With the successful mission completed, the squadron headed back to Molesworth Air Base. Except for minor damage, all aircraft reported fit for their next mission. A brief inspection would occur once the squadron landed safely, but the process of refueling and reloading the aircraft with a fresh load of bombs would begin immediately.

With over two hours remaining on the return trip and no hostile aircraft expected, Joseph Traver settled into as comfortable a position as possible. He reached into his flight suit jacket inner pocket and retrieved two letters: one from his wife, Ada May Traver. The second from Ingrid Engel. Both letters weighed on his mind from the moment he read each one for the first time.

Traver married Ada May Lapoint on Friday, April 9, 1943, days before his departure to join the Army Air Corps. He joined the Army and volunteered for Navigator's school, hoping to avoid being drafted into the infantry. His initial test scores easily qualified him for a shot at more advanced positions than toting a rifle all over Europe. Once commissioned as a Second Lieutenant, Traver attended Preflight Navigation School then Advanced Navigation School at Selman Field, Monroe, Louisiana. He finished top in his class and transferred to Bomb and Navigation School at Langley Airfield in Virginia. He hoped to take a short leave and visit his family, but his superiors denied his request. Every available man shipped off to Molesworth to staff the bombers now laying waste to the German war machine.

His wife, Ada May, sent letters roughly every month, which he answered in kind. Their storybook romance had been on track for a lifetime of love and devotion, having been high school sweethearts from their senior year through Joseph's first year in college. Their friends seemed to think they were inseparable.

During Joseph's second year at Fenn College in Cleveland, he met a young lady, a foreign student, from near Bergen, Germany: beautiful, shy, and brilliant Ingrid Engel. She stood out among the other students for many reasons, but her accent caused a stir. Her classmates avoided her. Most simply turned their backs on her when they heard her speak. Others mumbled insults under their breaths and a few became openly hostile.

But Joseph Traver approached her and greeted her with compassion and empathy. He tended to be shy when in a crowd, awkward in social situations. He saw her reluctance to interact with American students and understood why. Word of the war in Europe and around the world reached the United States, which remained reluctant to take sides. The tenor of the conflict became known. Calls for the U.S. to join the fight to defeat Germany grew louder. Many of Traver's friends had already joined the Army or the Navy, and others were contemplating the move, trying to avoid the draft which had been initiated late in 1940. Like many others, Traver had hoped to remain on the sidelines.

As he spent more time at school, word of his relationship with Ingrid, though it remained just a friendship, made its way back to Ada May. She was heartsick thinking that her Joseph spent time with another woman, especially a German girl. Their relationship became strained. The end came quickly as their dates turned into arguments, all about *the Nazi girl*. Joe tried to justify the relationship, but Ada May did not believe him and she broke off their engagement.

The sudden and emotional separation left a void in Joe's heart which Ingrid quickly and willingly filled. Her warmth and support for the man who befriended her warmed his heart. Ada May had been the only woman he ever loved. The new experience of being with Ingrid lifted his spirits. Though Ada May remained on his mind, Ingrid now monopolized his attention.

They talked at length about her home in Bergen, Germany, a lively, lovely city in northern Germany south of Hamburg. She spoke of the beautiful countryside and her parents. She grew up in a loving, supportive family. They hoped that she might find a nice young German boy and marry and give them grandchildren. But when Adolf Hitler's Nazi party rose to power, her father grew anxious for his family's safety. He hoped to finance her education and send her to America. With the timing of her trip to America accelerated because of Hitler's aggressive military actions, she made the trip across the ocean on a merchant ship. She prayed that her parents would follow her, but she lost contact with them both after arriving in New York. Her mother's last letter advised her to remain in America and they would contact her once the war ended.

After a long night studying and talking, Ingrid and Joe shared a bottle of wine and brie cheese. Talk turned to light touches then to passion. For Joe, there was no turning back.

After six weeks, a period where Joe and Ingrid spent all their free time together, Joe heard from Ada May. She said that she needed to talk with him, that she missed him. The pleading tone in her message grabbed his attention.

The next morning at Palizzi's Diner in downtown Sandusky, Ohio, Ada May and Joe sat in a booth across from each other in silence. They ordered coffee and toast.

Finally, Ada May looked up at Joe. With tears welling in her eyes, she said, "I'm pregnant."

Joe's heart sank. His jaw dropped open. He had just joined the Army, scheduled to leave for training the following week. He planned to ask Ingrid to marry him later that day. Ada May's revelation changed everything.

The groans of the engines came back to him. He looked at the letter from his wife, Ada May Lapoint Traver. Then he looked at the letter from Ingrid Engel. He took a deep breath, hung his head, and sighed. He held the picture of Mark and Mary Ann Traver, already fourteen months old. This cursed war kept him from hearing their first words, seeing their first steps and being with them on their first birthday. He longed to see them in the flesh.

Seeing Ada May was a different story.

The war appeared to be winding down. He prayed it would end soon.

He wondered if he would ever see Ingrid again.

## Chapter 1

2009 - Wednesday, May 6  
2:15 p.m.

Mark Traver angled his rented Chevy Silverado into the driveway of the familiar two-story home at 626 Jay Street in Sandusky, Ohio; his childhood home. He disconnected the call to his wife informing her that he arrived in Ohio, safely, after the long flight. Taken aback by the general decay of the house and the neighborhood since he left his hometown in May of 1966, he shuddered as memories flooded his mind. Except for the hideous peeling, flaking, and fading paint over most of the asphalt shingle exterior, not too much had changed. Overgrown shrubs covered the lower half of the front and side windows and the lawn long ago surrendered to a fresh growth of dandelions and other assorted weeds.

The truck came to rest after rolling over the uneven, cracked drive. In all, the property needed a serious overhaul, as did most of the homes in the neighborhood, except two or three whose owners worked diligently to keep ahead of the forces of time and blight that attacked the aging housing stock of the city. He planned to tell the real estate agent to sell the property as-is, to avoid sinking any time and money into a project for which he had no interest. He doubted that his two sisters would object.

When Mark learned of his father, Joseph Traver's, death yesterday morning, he booked the first flight out of Sanford-Orlando International airport to Cleveland Hopkins. Stepping into the crisp, spring air, he shivered, realizing that he did not bring even a light coat to fight off the chill. He forgot how cool the temperatures could get this time of year, especially compared to the heat and humidity of Maitland, Florida, his residence now for over four decades.

After renting the pickup truck, he made the hour-long drive to Sandusky, marveling at the thin, new growth of leaves on the trees along State Route 2. The flight and drive offered plenty of time to think of the finality of death. He could no longer call his father just to talk about the past, the elder Traver's grandchildren, and hopes for the future, none of which he ever did. That opportunity, which he considered many times, was gone forever.

Mark and his father, Joseph Traver, never enjoyed that kind of close, father-son relationship, and Mark never understood why. The atmosphere around the Traver residence seemed dark and cloudy, the mood never happy even on those days when parents should be celebrating their children's milestones and accomplishments. Mark and his sister, Maryanne, being fraternal twins, shared the same birthdate – January 14, 1944. But even on that date during the birthday “celebrations,” a foul mood hovered, their mother and father barely speaking. Mark, Maryanne, and their younger sibling, Caroline, never spoke of the gloom that seemed to drain the joy from their home. When young, they believed it to be normal. But as they grew older and visited the homes of their friends, where conversation and laughter filled the air, they understood that their homelife was not the norm, but an outlier among families in the neighborhood.

Mark could hardly wait to enroll in college and live in a dorm away from home. After his sophomore year, he met Denise Collins on a double date with a close friend. Mark and Denise immediately made a connection and fell in love. They married in a secret ceremony devoid of

family members, only inviting their closest friends to the casual affair. After they both received their bachelor's degrees, they announced that they were man and wife to their families. Denise's parents were shocked, pleading with the young couple to have a formal ceremony to share with their families. Mark's parents appeared indifferent, though his mother's pained expression never left his mind. Over time, Denise's parents accepted the secret marriage, the subject even laughed about as time passed. The rushed, secret marriage seemed to work for them having been happily married after two children, two grandchildren and the passing of forty-three years.

When Mark's sister, Maryanne was a high school junior, she became infatuated with senior Richard Campbell. They both attended Sandusky High School on the outskirts of town. His plans to attend college evaporated when his father died in a freak accident at a local manufacturing plant. He took a job at the New Departure ball-bearing plant and quickly moved up in the company, switching from line work to quality control, then to a management position. Someone in the very infantile computer industry took notice of his rapid rise in the company, along with the skillset he possessed, and offered him a job at an up-and-coming computer firm in Redmond, Washington. The couple moved west, which pleased Maryanne, allowing her an excuse to get away from her parents. From that day forward, she never traveled east of the Mississippi River.

Four years after Mark and Maryanne moved away from home with their respective spouses, Caroline decided that she could no longer tolerate the dark mood that consumed the Traver household. Caroline moved to Bowling Green, Ohio in September of 1970 to attend college. She lived in a dormitory until she met Steve Eastman in a philosophy class. After her second semester, she moved in with him. They never married. She reasoned that, if marriage caused so much heartache, she wanted nothing to do with organized religion or any of its rules.

The last Mark had heard, though it had been many years ago, they remained happily unmarried with three children and seven grandchildren.

The day after Thanksgiving, 1970, two months after their last child moved out of their Jay Street home, Ada May Traver took a .38 revolver and killed herself. According to her husband, Joseph, she did not say a word to him about her intentions. She just walked down to the basement, opened her husband's gun cabinet, picked up the gun and ended her life. She died in the room once used to store coal before the new gas heater had been installed. A very tidy woman who always kept the home in pristine condition, Joseph had commented to the priest that she probably wanted to keep the mess isolated so cleanup would be easy.

And just like that, Joseph Traver became a widower.

Joseph lived in the house for the rest of his life. His grown children never visited to attend their mother's funeral, for any holidays, or to introduce their children to their grandpa. Mark sent pictures of infants after their births and school pictures as they grew, but the elder Traver never laid eyes on even one of his grandchildren in the flesh. Mark's son and daughter lived in central Florida most of their youth. They traveled on family vacations all over the country. They even visited Sandusky and spent the day at the world-famous amusement park. But Mark did not offer to introduce his children to their grandfather, the chasm between father and son so deep. No feelings of hatred or malice existed. They lived like strangers in a shared house, hardly speaking or interacting in any way. It was not just Mark and his father. Every member of the Traver family remained isolated, as much as humanly possible, from the others.

Mark had not spoken with either sister in years. Now, his position as executor would force him to make the calls. He bore no animosity towards either of them. They moved on with their lives, going their separate ways. They built lives of their own with their spouses, children, and grandchildren. Having never been close, the lack of communication seemed natural, even if such

a relationship appeared abnormal to their friends and others who observed the Traver family dynamic. In conversation, when asked how his sisters were, Mark simply answered that he believed they were happy, but he really did not know. That response invariably drew an awkward silence or odd looks from those making the inquiry.

What made the Traver family situation more peculiar was that the Travers, parents and siblings, interacted with anyone outside the family as normally as the next person. They made friends easily, participated in school activities such as sports, cheerleading, band, choir, and pep club. Caroline even ran for, and won, a seat on student council. Up until her death, Ada May attended monthly meetings with a book club and participated in the church choir. Joseph hunted and attended a weekly poker game for as long as Mark could remember. Outwardly normal, but at home, grossly abnormal.

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Mark stepped out of the truck and stared at the house, wondering what made his homelife such a dreary experience. While living at home, with great effort, he trudged through the morning until he could run out the front door. He remembered the feeling of crossing the threshold, running to the corner of Jay and Monroe Streets, meeting his friends to head to Barker Elementary School. In later years he rode to school with a friend's older brother until he grew old enough to find work and buy his own car. He never rode the school bus. His sisters received rides from their friends and never even asked to ride in their brother's car.

Shaking his head to clear the memories, he plodded up the four steps. He found the house keys right where his father's attorney told him they would be: in the mailbox to the right of the front door. The gloom he felt as a boy growing up in the house seemed to emanate from the other side of the locked door. He took a deep breath, turned the key, twisted the knob, pushed the door open, and stepped inside the vestibule.

To his relief, none of the old feelings engulfed him, as if the gloom of the past escaped by his opening the front door. Just a feeling of emptiness remained.

Mark took a deep breath and looked from the vestibule into the living room. He frowned, seeing that everything looked identical to the last time he stood in this spot. The only difference appeared to be that everything had aged. The paint, the carpet, the furniture, the light switches, the light fixtures, the banister along the stairs leading to the second floor; nothing had been upgraded in over forty years.

He stepped into the living room and glanced around, taking in his childhood home, nearly choking on the stale air. The early afternoon sun pierced the threadbare curtains showing the dust particles floating in the air, apparently kicked up from the moment he entered the residence. Dread again filled his entire being as the task at hand gripped him. Most of the furnishings would go straight to the landfill, though he would make those decisions with the auctioneer.

He crossed the room and opened the nearest window, hoping to recycle the dank interior with fresh, crisp, spring air. He opened a second window on the other side of the house to get some air flowing to help the process.

He moved quickly through the house, giving a fleeting glance at the few pictures on the walls. The family photos were old and faded, the color leached from behind the glass frames. The kitchen showed little signs of use, except the full trashcan. Styrofoam containers marred with ketchup, mustard, mayonnaise, and cheese poked up over the edge of the container.

Mark headed up the stairs to the second floor. He took a cursory look in each of the four bedrooms and their associated closets. The rooms that had been his and his sisters' each had a twin bed with no sheets or blankets. They appeared not to have been touched in years. The closets

contained nothing but empty hangers.

The mattress on the queen-sized bed in the master bedroom looked ancient with a severe depression in the center, being decades overdue for replacement. The threadbare sheets and blanket sat heaped in a pile at the foot of the bed. Mark wondered how his father endured this existence for so many years. He shook his head and moved towards the attic door.

The steps creaked with each step. A moldy scent emanated from the cooler air as Mark stepped onto the plain pinewood floor in the attic. Cob webs festooned the area along the rafters where the frame of the house's roof met the attic floor. Mark looked around at the nearly empty space. Several boxes that had obviously not been touched for ages sat along the far end of the open space near a tiny window. The only other object in the attic – a blue footlocker with words stenciled in white – 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Joseph Traver.