

Excerpt from *When Valleys Bloom Again*

July 1944

Normandy, France

Dreamlike, Jim hovered between upper and nether space. He lay there, disconnected from time, place and self, and forced his eyes open. Daylight filtered through the canvas sides of a tent, stabbing his eyeballs. He tried to sit up, his head hurt and his lower body ached to beat the band.

Boxes of various sizes, stamped with a bright red cross and heaped in untidy fashion, lined one corner of the room. A tall, white metal cupboard, piled high with bandages, stood in the opposite corner. He fell back on the cot, catching the familiar sound of truck motors revving in the distance, their gearboxes clanking, and muffled voices barking instructions. Where was everyone?

His only memory was of taking shelter in a forester's hut during a battle. Two men from his platoon were hunkered down with him, waiting for the barrage to cease. On the hill overlooking their position, they'd encountered a German battery in a grove of trees. He could still hear the *thud ... thud ... thud*, as shells sought their range, and feel the pressure waves that engorged the tiny space in which he was crouched, compressing his chest, driving out his breath with a double gut punch. The nauseating, blood-taste sensation as myriad sharp, heavy blows beat about his back and shoulders. And the searing pain in his legs, as though they were being sliced into a thousand pieces. He remembered screaming, his motions slowing, then nothing.

Again, he tried to sit up and do an examination of himself, prodding the thick bandage on his left arm. He touched his heavily wrapped head and groped around his upper body. His clumsy investigation served only to increase his anxiety. He dare not look down at his legs, afraid of what he might—or might not—find. What would the pain be like when the anesthetic wore off?

How he longed to see Abby, recalling those tranquil months by her side, the cloudless blue of a summer sky, the fragrances in the conservatory, the damp coolness of the lush spring grass. His heart

melted. Perhaps he was shut off from that world forever.

The flap of the tent rippled open. Through his mental fog, a woman in uniform peered in his direction, as though deciding whether to advance.

“Jimmy?” She moved across the floor. “Jimmy?” the voice repeated, closer this time.

Impossible! He stared at her in disbelief.

She dropped down on her knees beside his bed. “It’s me, Carol.” Then she pressed her face into his neck and wept.

“Sis? Wh-what are you doing here? he said, his voice thin, as if it belonged to someone else.

“What am I doing here?”

“You were rescued, big brother.” She lifted her head, tears ran down her cheeks. “Medicos from one of the rear detachments found you in a bombed-out hut. There were two other guys with you. Unfortunately, they didn’t make it,” she said, sorrow in her eyes. “One was sprawled on top of you. His body must’ve saved you when the roof caved in. You’d been there for days.” She paused, then stroked his shoulder. “They thought you was a goner.” She bit her lower lip. “The ambulance men rushed you to a field station, and then they brought you here unconscious.”

He frowned. “Here?”

“An evacuation hospital. You’re in Normandy. *The* Normandy. Remember?” Carol rapped her knuckles lightly against his temple. “Your tags was found days before you were. Most likely blown off.”

“Were Mom and Abby told?”

“About you being likely dead in action? Mom got a telegram. The army only yesterday found out who you are, if that makes sense.” She shrugged. “Anyway, some bright spark made the connection between us and told me. I, *ahem*, work the wireless at the WAC’s HQ.” Carol breathed on her fingernails, polishing them on her lapel. “Big shot sister—with lousy bitten-off nails,” she said, pulling a face. “I’m still on duty, but they said I could come see you. So, here I am.”

She flopped into the chair by his bed and lit a cigarette. “So, how do you feel?”

It was impossible to describe in words. He clenched his jaw. Was he feeling anything at all?

“Like I’m in a nightmare.” He forced a smile. “How do I look?”

“You’ve been banged up pretty bad,” Carol replied, picking a fleck of cigarette paper off her top lip. “They say you’re lucky to be alive. You’ve got what everyone calls a ‘million-dollar’ wound.”

“A what?” Jim caught his sister’s fleeting glance toward the foot of the bed. His heart began to race. “What are you telling me, Sis?”

“Not to worry, Jimmy. Everything’ll be all right.” She sat back and flashed a smile, hope shining in her eyes. “They’ll take care of you and ship you back to England. Then home. At least the war’s over for you.”

Jim shut his eyes, pressing his head into the pillow. Would the nightmare be over soon?

The entrance of the tent flapped open and two officers appeared, stethoscopes around their necks. Carol glanced over at them and stiffened. One of them pointed at her, raised two fingers to his lips, and shook his head in reprimand.

Carol sprang to her feet, stubbed out the cigarette on the sole of her boot, and rammed the butt into a side pocket. “I think they’d like me to take a powder. But I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She squeezed his hand. “I’ll write to Mom—and your Abby. Chin up, big brother. It’s a miracle you’ve come back to life.” Carol bent down and pecked his cheek. “It’s the swellest holiday I’ve ever had.”

“Holiday?”

“Today’s the Fourth of July.”

While conducting research for my novel, I came across fascinating information that added an element of depth to the story.

In the scene above from *When Valleys Bloom Again*, our soldier, Jim Wright, and other allied soldiers who stormed the Normandy beaches struggled through enemy lines. Thousands died instantly

or were severely injured. Their recovery and rehabilitation was made possible with a new life saving medicine.

I discovered a connection between my hero's hometown in West Chester, PA and the production of penicillin. The history of penicillin ranges from its discovery in 1928 by Alexander Fleming, and its subsequent development in the 1930's by British scientists Howard Florey and Ernst Boris Chain to a laboratory in Pennsylvania's Chester County, "the mushroom capital of the world," where it so happens our hero Jim lived and worked prior to being drafted by the US Army.

Granville Raymond Rettew, a Pennsylvania chemist and mycologist (expert in fungi), followed with interest the research carried out in Britain during the early 1940's. The barrier to date was the difficulty of stabilizing the drug and producing it in sufficiently large quantities. Through his experiments Rettew demonstrated the antibiotic properties of 'spawn' extracted from the mushroom. Later, in collaboration with the American pharmaceutical industry he pioneered a method for the production of penicillin on a massive scale.

By D-Day millions of doses of the drug were made available for the treatment of Allied forces, saving many from infection, crippling injury, and death.