

# **CHANCES ARE**

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*Author's note: Chances Are is another chapter in The Saunders House Rules, my own version of the life of Sgt. Chip Saunders, his family and friends. It is also a direct companion to, Letters from the Front, Combat! Journals 2008.*

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Paris, France  
June 1945

For over a half hour, Sergeant Chip Saunders had searched the endless rows of sidewalk cafés along the River Seine, anxiously looking for his brother. But finding anyone in this celebratory mass was difficult. At last, he saw Chris, who waved enthusiastically as he made his way through the tightly packed multitude. With unbridled joy, they embraced, and then Chris was pulling him deeper into the teeming throng, talking non-stop. He said something about “someone” and “want you to meet”, but in the cacophony of noise, Chip simply couldn’t hear everything. After much squeezing, shouldering, and prodding through the crowd, he finally arrived at the little bistro-style table that his brother...*shared*?

“Chip!” his brother said, amidst the clamor of voices, music and clinking glasses, “this is Lieutenant Dana Marshall. Remember? She’s the nurse who wrote that letter for me after I was wounded back in November.”\*

Speechless, Saunders couldn’t help but notice the sense of open honesty about the woman’s smile and how it was reflected in the expression of her eyes. Shoulder-length, ginger hair framed her faintly freckled, heart-shaped face.

“Her unit,” Chris continued with good cheer, “is billeted just outside of the city, not far from mine. Can you believe it?”

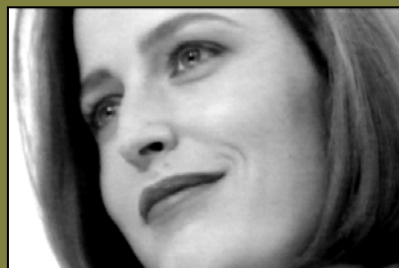


Lieutenant Marshall rose and extended her hand in greeting.

“Hello, sergeant.”

She mentioned something about Chris having graciously offered her a chair while she waited for some friends. But Saunders’ hearing, and his voice, was unexpectedly on the fritz.

The fact that her petite, hourglass figure wasn’t wasted at all on the Army uniform she wore, did not escape his notice or appreciation. The afternoon seemed suddenly warmer. He ran two fingers under the collar of his shirt and was more grateful than he would admit when his brother went to go buy some drinks.



Perhaps, Saunders wondered, it was the fact that he hadn’t been in a woman’s company in a while, perhaps it was the legendary effect that Paris was said to have on people that made the words, *‘where have you been all my life’* beg to roll off his tongue. But he wasn’t about to embarrass either of them by handing her something so stupidly clichéd. *Hanley*, he thought, *was smooth enough to get away with saying something like that, but not me*. Instead, he simply replied, with an unambiguous smile, “Nice to meet you, Lieutenant Marshall,” then took her hand into his own -- and was dumb-struck by the overwhelming knowledge that he was, to borrow a word from his sister, ‘the Brat’, hopelessly “*gone*.”

He could hardly believe his reaction. After all, it wasn’t as if he’d never been in the presence of an attractive woman, and it wasn’t as if he’d never ‘been around the block’ with a few of them either. But there was something about this particular woman that made her...genuine. He was intensely aware of the fact that her hand in his felt not only electrifying, but natural, and her voice, clear and even toned, was soothing and inviting. With every breath he took, the faint scent of her perfume toyed with him. The overall effect was an intoxicating cocktail from which he had no wish to sober up. He tilted his head. Was she asking him something? Shaking himself back to his senses, he blinked. “Huh?” And then realized that he was still holding her hand! With more than a measure of reluctance, he let go.

She ducked her chin just slightly. From the way her cheeks blushed, Saunders knew that she was trying to ignore his moment of awkwardness. “Have you been in Paris long?” she asked as she sat down.

He settled into the chair on her right. “Oh, no, ma’am. I just got in last night. My outfit’s on leave for a week. We’ve been up along the Rhine for a while.”

“Mine was up there too, but we pulled back to Paris late last month. Your brother’s regiment followed us in.”



"Speaking of my brother," Saunders remarked, "I want to thank you for helping him with that letter he wrote to me last fall."

"It was no trouble. He'd been through a lot. It was obvious how important it was that he write to you. I couldn't help but give him a few minutes of my time."

"Well, I appreciate that you did that for him, as well as adding in that note to me."

"You're welcome, Sergeant."

Saunders looked askance. How many times had Chris' letter given him comfort when none seemed possible, or sustained his spirit when all hope threatened to abandon him? He didn't know.

"He thinks the world of you," the lieutenant said.

His expression turned dubious. "Well, don't believe everything my little brother tells you. He can spin quite a yarn when he wants to. Now Joey, on the other hand, he's the *real* storyteller in the family. Nobody can hold a candle to him."

"Joey...that's your brother who's over in the Pacific isn't it?"

"Yes. He's been over there for quite a while."

"Scuttlebutt has it that the fighting there will end soon. Maybe it won't be long until you and your brothers are all home again."

"Maybe. I'd like to be headed *that* way now, instead of waiting to be sent off to the Pacific."

"I know what you mean. My unit's scheduled to head that way too."

"I guess we all will if the rumors prove wrong. Uh...how long you before leave?"

"Any time, now. They say we'll go stateside first for a short time, then it'll be --"

They finished together with, "Hurry up and wait!"

"Well," Chip said with a smile, "that's the Army for ya."

Her expression changed as she looked at him. "You have a very nice smile."

"So do you." At that moment, Saunders realized he could listen to this woman talk all day long and not be bored by anything she said. In fact, he wanted to spend as much time with her as he possibly could.

Reaching into a pocket, he fished out his pack of Lucky Strikes and Zippo lighter. She accepted the offer of a cigarette, and as she leaned in to let him light it for her, she met his gaze. Suddenly, he was aware of all the different shades that made her eyes such a high-contrast grey. Her hand touched his briefly as he held the lighter, and for that solitary, exquisite moment, he did not breathe, he did not move, and he did not want to be anywhere else in the world.

She eased back in her chair a little. "You joined up pretty soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's right." He lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply on it, then blew the smoke toward the ground. "I was just like a lot of other guys, couldn't sit around and not do anything."

"My brother, Nathan, was the same way."

The past tense usage in connection with her brother told him the obvious. "Where was he serving?"

"In the Philippines, at Mindanao."

"I'm sorry. That must be rough on you and your family."

"It is. My mother's health hasn't been good since then, and my father...well, he's very bitter. With Nathan gone, I'm all they have left. Dad's become a bit overprotective of me."

"Well, I guess no one could blame him for that."

"He begged me to resign my commission, but..." She shrugged and shook her head.

"But you'll stay in until this is all over."

She nodded, tapped the ashes of her cigarette into a little ashtray on the table. "You?"

"Let's just say that when the Army tells me I can go home, I'll be happy to oblige."

She cocked her head a little. "Strange..." she pondered, "I can almost imagine you making a career out of the service."

Placing one elbow casually on the wrought-iron table, he rested his cheek against his fist. "No ma'am. Not me. Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against the military --"

"But it's been a long war."

He grinned. "Yes, ma'am. I just want to get back home, get a life started for myself."

"Find the right girl and settle down, is that it?"



He ducked his chin and nodded. "If I'm lucky."

"I hope you are, sergeant...lucky, I mean." She cleared her throat and changed the subject by saying that she knew he'd been in North Africa, Sicily, and then Italy. "Chris said you were wounded there."

"In December of '43. We were in the Liri Valley." He took another drag on his cigarette. "I was shipped back to England, spent a few weeks in the hospital in Bristol before--"

Dana's eyes widened. "Bristol? I was serving in Bristol then." She shook her head in disbelief. "I'm surprised we didn't meet."

His brow arched. "Ma'am, if I'd met *you* before today, I'd definitely have remembered it." Instantly aware of how forward that must have sounded, he backpedaled. "I'm sorry, Lieutenant, that was way out of line --"

"Not at all. I don't want your apology, Sergeant, but I would like it very much if you'd call me by my first name."

He sat back, gave her his most innocent expression, and replied, "Okay. But on one condition. You stop calling me 'Sergeant'."

"And you," came an utterly dead-pan voice from behind them, "can call *me* Chris."



The three of them passed the next hour and a half amiably, talking only vaguely of their experiences in the war, and more about home, family, and the future. In that time, Chip, perceptive as always, determined more about Dana beyond her obvious independent nature. She was smart, but not intimidating, and she had a strong sense of loyalty and integrity. It was obvious she was very direct and didn't mince words. He had no trouble imagining that she was able to give as good as she got no matter if the issue was a joke, or a discussion. Her sense of humor particularly attracted him; she had a quick comeback that was dry, but not hurtful. Her voice and her laughter enthralled him. He hung on her every word, and wanted to know everything about her.

As she was talking about her plans to continue working in nursing, her attention unexpectedly shifted toward the crowd. Curious, Chip looked over his shoulder and noticed three uniformed women waving at Dana.

"I'm sorry," she said. "My friends are here, and..."

Saunders tried to keep his tone light, succeeding only halfheartedly at best. "I guess you need to go."

He and Chris rose with her. She shook his brother's hand, and thanked him for allowing her to share his table and for the drinks he'd bought. When she turned to Chip, he held his breath as she said, "It's been very, very *nice*, meeting you."

He nodded, wanting to say all the right things, all the charming things, but "Yes," was all he could manage. Then he took her hand and that same feeling that he'd felt when he'd been introduced to her coursed through him again. In that instant, he knew that he did not want to let her go and somehow was able to add, "The pleasure was all mine, Dana."

Beside them, Chris cleared his throat a little, effectively drawing their attention. The younger man held a wicked grin at bay. Chip gave him a questioning look, as if to ask, 'What are you looking at?' Then he noticed his brother's attention was centered on his hand -- the one that still held the Lieutenant's.

Grudgingly, Chip released her.

Her friends called to her again, and she waved back. "I'd really better get going."

As she walked past them, she glanced once more at Chip, and he read in her eyes a sense of regret that clearly matched his own. Then, without even thinking about it, he blurted out, "Can I see you again?" She turned and the sudden change in her expression was all the answer he needed.

"Tomorrow," she replied, without a second of hesitation. "At noon."

"Where?"



"Le Petit Pont," she called out, pointing down the Seine as she moved through the crowd.

He didn't understand French, shrugged and shook his head.

"The Little Bridge." Her smile was radiant.

"I'll be there!"

Chris nudged his shoulder playfully. "Isn't she a dish?"

But Saunders didn't hear a word. He was too busy watching Dana Marshall until she was totally out of sight. Then he turned to his brother. "Where's the Little Bridge?"



Tossing his uniform hat on a little lamp table, Saunders stepped to the balcony doors and opened them wide, letting the evening air in. The sounds of the city pulsated around him, and he stood for a moment, looking out at the lights of Paris. Reaching into his pocket for his pack of cigarettes, he took one out, lit it and inhaled deeply. He glanced at his watch; Dana would be along any time now. She'd only needed to return to her barracks, grab a few things for the night, while he had reserved the hotel room.

He'd only met her a few days ago, and during that time, they had spent every available hour with each other. She showed him around Paris, which she had visited before the war, and her ability to speak the language had allowed them a certain accessibility he would otherwise not have enjoyed. During their time together, his feelings for her grew more intense and he was certain that she felt the same way. When he talked, she looked at him, and even leaned a little forward to show her interest in whatever he had to say. When she sat beside him, she casually shifted so that her crossed legs angled toward him. When they sat at a table and his fingers touched hers, she neither pulled away, nor averted her gaze from his. And always there was that alluring smile she would turn on him. Often he would catch her just looking at him; her eyes would travel from his, then move along the bridge of his nose and settle on his mouth before tracing the path back again. Was she thinking of what it would feel like to kiss him? To caress him? Each look, each infinitesimal, fleeting touch left him wanting so much more until, on this, the last day of his furlough, it could no longer remain unacknowledged.

But that awareness, so inviting and so ecstatic, was nonetheless tempered greatly by the fact that the war in the Pacific was not over. Both of them would likely be sent there soon and the remote chance of one, or even both of them surviving was a hard fact they could not ignore. Therefore, the question hung before them whether or not to grasp, if only for a single night, what might be the only opportunity fate would allow. Saunders couldn't help but remember a similar circumstance in England,\* and therefore had to ask Dana if she were really sure this was what she wanted. Her response had needed no words.

Now, as he waited for her, his restlessness increased. Fretfully running one hand through his hair, he leaned against the frame of the balcony door, anticipating the moment when he and Dana could share what they felt, each for the other, in ways no language could express.

The knock on the door startled him, but he smiled widely. It took him only a few strides to cross the room, and as he opened the door --

"Chris?" he exclaimed, not sure whether he ought to be annoyed, angry, or worried. "What the devil are you doing here?"



"Lieutenant Marshall sent me. Orders came through this afternoon," Chris informed reluctantly. "Her unit's been restricted to base. They're leaving for the States in twenty-four hours."

Backing away, Chip immediately reached for his hat. "I've got to see her." But his brother's hands on his shoulders stopped him.

"You can't."

"But you just told me --"

"She's already gone, Chip."

"What?"

"She asked me to bring this to you as fast as I could." Chris reached into his field jacket and pulled out an envelope.





Crestfallen and confused, Saunders took the envelope and then placed his hat into his brother's hands. He walked to the balcony, only vaguely aware of Chris' discomfort in discovering the depth of intimacy he and Dana planned to share.

"I guess it's no surprise that you two would want to...I mean, it's okay." Admonishing himself mentally for feeling so inept, Chris let his gaze drop to the floor. His sadness for his brother revealed itself in the only other words he could manage. "Chip, I'm so sorry."

Saunders slowly opened the envelope. He no longer heard the sounds of the city, and everything around him became a blur, save for the words on the page before him.

*Dear Chip,*

*There's a jeep waiting to take me to a plane, so I have to make this short. Chris will have told you that my unit is on twenty-four hour stand-by to go to the States. You know the drill, no one is allowed to leave the barracks. But there's more. When I got here, I was told to report to my CO immediately. A telegram came from home. I don't know how to tell you, other than to just say it. My mother has passed away.*

He sagged against the doorframe, took a breath, and scrubbed his free hand against his brow as he read on...

*I've enclosed my address, as well as the one in Chicago. I'll be rejoining my unit stateside, but with luck, none of us will be going to the Pacific.*

*Please know that I have no regrets about my feelings for you. I carry them with me, regardless of what the future may hold for us. As I write this, I cannot help but think of the letter I wrote to you for Chris. What were the chances that such a small thing would lead to our meeting? What were the chances that we'd fall in love? I miss you already, Chip. Take good care of yourself, because, chances are, mister, you haven't seen the last of me.*

*All my love, all my hopes,  
Dana*



He dropped his hands to his sides, and squeezed his eyes closed against emotions he would not allow even his brother to witness. Then, lifting the letter once more, he felt compelled to read again the last line. Despite everything, a hope-filled smile tugged at his features. "Chances are," he said, barely above a whisper, "you haven't seen the last of me either."

The End

\* see "Letters from the Front" *Combat! Journal* 2008

\*\* see the television episode, "The Furlough" from season five of *Combat!*