

CHAPTER 1

April 17, 1918

WAR DEPARTMENT. John's hand fell limply against the postcard lying on top of the mail he had just pulled from his father's post office box. WAR DEPARTMENT. The stark black wording on the return address shattered all hope of a miraculous deliverance. There was no question; he was being called into military duty. With sinking heart he turned the card over and read the words in bold print.

BE ALERT Keep in touch with your Local Board
Notify Local Board Immediately of change of address

*Kindly be prepared to report for duty
between the 3rd & 6th of Sept.*

Official notice will follow later.

LOCAL BOARD
for the
County of Mahoning
4th Floor Court House
YOUNGSTOWN, O.

Report for Duty

Stumbling down the post office steps, John's thoughts flew to Nola, his sweetheart. *If only I could share this devastating news with her now!* he thought.

Trepidation gripped him, smothering him in a numbness that spread from his heart to the soles of his feet. With fumbling fingers he untied Black from the hitching post, forgetting to give his horse the usual "hello" rub between the eyes. The horse seemed to sense his master's distress for he nuzzled John's arm instead of whinnying a welcome. With uncanny animal instinct, Black knew something was wrong.

Methodically John backed his horse away from the post office hitching post. His mind whirled in agitation as he tried to think of a way to escape being thrust into the midst of the world's unrest.

A whole year and eleven days had elapsed since President Woodrow Wilson, on April 6, 1917, declared the U.S. was entering the war that would become known as World War I. How was it possible that he, John Witmer, a farm boy from the small town of Columbiana, just three days shy of his 21st birthday, was being compelled to go to military training camp? He knew nothing about fighting! Why, he knew nothing about the world except farming, training horses, and attending church where God's Word was taught and lived. He rarely moved outside his community except to take the train sixty miles west to Dalton to visit Nola Horst. A fleeting smile tugged at the corners of his mouth at the pleasant thought of seeing Nola.

"Why, Lord?" his lips cried. "Why is this Your will? For what good is this government order, an order I can't conscientiously take any part in? I love our free country I live in, but, Lord, I love You more." His spirit groaned under the weight of this cross.

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John's mind and heart became a battlefield as he strove to accept the bitter disappointment the postcard brought to his life. *Am I willing to give my life for Christ? Is God asking me to surrender my hopes and dreams for the future? What of my friendship with Nola? How dark and foreboding the future looks when I try to find the answers myself*, he thought, chiding himself for letting his faith waver.

"Lord, I will trust. I will be true to Your bidding. If I am called to give my life that someone else may inherit eternal life, I will do so. And, Father, by Your help I will never disobey Your clear commands to love instead of hate or kill." He gripped Black's reins as he uttered the words aloud. Black's ears picked up at his master's commanding voice and he broke into a gentle trot.

Yet, a chill gripped John that not even April's balmy sunshine could dispel. He felt his human frailty and shrank from the unknown. What lay ahead? Would there be other COs at camp? Or would he need to face hostility alone? Would he even be granted CO status when he was examined? Or would he be sent to prison?

Lord God, his spirit cried out once more, *fill me with Your strength to face the unknown. My flesh shrinks from what is to come and fills me with fear.*

Once more his horse sensed the tension on the reins and responded by increasing his speed. Black's steady trot down Columbiana's cobblestone street soothed John's inner turmoil and he pushed his thoughts aside to concentrate on the day's work waiting at home.

Yesterday's rain brought spring plowing to a temporary standstill, but tomorrow I will be back in the fields, he mused. He loved the smell of freshly-worked soil and relished the prospect of spending the coming days out in the

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field with his horses. His farmer eye scanned the surrounding fields, noting their readiness for spring planting. What would become of his eighty-acre farm? *How long would someone else need to farm it? Should he sell his livestock and horses, or keep them?* Warily he forced the unwanted questions into the background. September was still five months away.

Two weeks of steady fieldwork kept him farmbound before rains allowed him to take a Saturday off to visit Nola.

I hope she received my letter in time, and that a visit suits! he thought as he boarded the Pennsylvania Railroad train. Trains offered the fastest and most efficient way to travel between his and Nola's homes, as both their churches' mode of travel was by horse and buggy.

Riding the train gave him time to reflect on the questions that kept surfacing ever since he had received his draft notice. With the busy spring workdays, he had continually pushed them into the background. But now the questions concerning his farming swirled in profusion through his mind, swamping him with doubts and fears until he realized the enemy of his soul was using the uncertainties to destroy his peace with God.

Unmindful of the passengers around him, he bowed his head in shame. The tempter had caught him so easily! His lips moved in silent prayer to God. *Forgive my faithless questions and doubt, he entreated earnestly. Strengthen my faith, O Lord. You know the future. I believe Your divine words that You will never leave me nor forsake me. Remind me to never lose sight of the promise of Your keeping. Remind me to keep my thoughts centered on Thee. Thank You for answering my plea and for restoring my faith and trust in Thee. I now commit my life and Nola's into Your*

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Almighty hands.

When the train stopped at the Orrville station near Dalton, John exited with renewed strength and inner peace. He hadn't noticed the stares of his fellow passengers or their raised eyebrows. His soul was flooded with such peace that he felt transported to the gates of glory, and his heart was bursting with praise. Comforting words from a hymn the youth had sung in the last singing flowed through him. The words stayed with him as he caught a ride with a farmer to within a mile of Nola's home. The message from the song continued to inspire him as he walked along. Before the Horst farm came into view, the song's melody rang from his lips, his clear voice singing out in heartfelt conviction.

Take my life, and let it be
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee;
Take my moments and my days;
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

After singing the precious words once, he sang the song through again. As he sang it the third time, Nola, who was hanging out wash, spied him turning into the lane and heard the words of the last stanza.

Take myself and I will be,
Ever, only, all for Thee.

Seeing John brought a glow to her face. God in His goodness had given her the love of a man who radiated Christ's love. Her heart beat faster to think of sharing life with him. Just this spring he had bought a farm—another step in God's leading! Leaving the clothes basket she hurried over to meet him.

John and Nola had begun dating seriously after John was baptized and taken in as a member of White Mennonite Church on June 3, 1917, where his father