

ONE

Just past midnight on June 7, 1941, John Schmidt boarded the *SS Argentina* in the New York harbor. Two years into the second Great War, Germans had overrun much of western Europe, and had advanced deep into the Soviet Union. Given the threat from German U-boats, and because the U.S. was still neutral, two American flags were painted on both sides of the ship's hull. The *SS Argentina* was fully lit, a blazing vessel, carrying 273 passengers, 195 in first class and the rest down below.

The ship's deck shuddered under John's feet. He put down his army-surplus duffel bag, worn thin with use, and leaned against the rail as the vessel glided out of the harbor past Bedloe's Island. His jaw tightened as he stared into the churning black water, trying to shut out the excited voices of people around him. John gripped the rail with both hands. It was really happening. Less than three weeks ago, he was finishing his medical internship in Baltimore, with no definite plans. And now here he was, traveling to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, an intermediate stop on his way to landlocked Paraguay, where he was to serve as a pioneering doctor.

An almost full moon cast a glow across the green patina of the Statue of Liberty. But John stared past the statue, out across the harbor into the unknown. He pulled his lanky frame erect and lifted his face into the wind.

Was he doing the right thing? Would the Mennonites in Paraguay accept him as one of their own or would they see him as an interloper? The language wouldn't be a problem. John grew up speaking *Plautdietsch*, their Low-German dialect. But beyond that, he wasn't sure they'd have much in common despite their common heritage. John's people were German Mennonites who emigrated from Russia to Kansas in the late 1800s. Almost five decades later, in 1931, Mennonites from the same Russian ancestry settled in the Chaco of west Paraguay, the vast virtually uninhabitable desert John was soon to call home.

The past few weeks had been hectic, obtaining his draft release as a conscientious objector doing alternative service and acquiring the papers needed to travel to Paraguay. He'd hardly had time to consider the mission that lay ahead. A shiver ran down his spine. Of course he was doing the right thing. It was God's will.

A commotion near the mid-ship's stairwell interrupted John's thoughts. He turned from the rail and saw a tall woman emerge from the crowd, her stylish figure contrasting almost absurdly with the two portly men who rushed along behind her. Mesmerized, John watched her glide by not far from where he stood. Her green eyes held his for a moment as she and the two men passed by.

John's gaze followed her, and he momentarily forgot his concerns. He'd always noticed pretty girls. In high school, he'd had a few girlfriends and sometimes he'd needed to get hold of himself, especially when he had to pay his own way through university. His motto was "Profession or marriage, but not both." Now, at thirty, and having finished his medical training, John was freed from his self-imposed vow. But for marriage, he'd have eyes only for the right kind of Christian gal.

He continued to stare into the darkness, the crashing waves reflecting an unfamiliar unease building within him. Something he couldn't name.

