PART V

Louie reunited with his family.
Left to right: *Sylvia, Anthony, Louie, Louise, Pete, and Virginia.*
COURTESY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI

CHAPTER 34

The Shimmering Girl

On an October afternoon, Louie stood before his parents' house for the first time in more than three years.

"This little home," he said, "was worth all of it."

As his family filed into the house, Louie paused, overcome by a strange uneasiness. He had to push himself to walk up the steps.

The dining room table was heaped with food. Three years of Christmas and birthday presents sat ready for opening. There was a cake with *Welcome Home Louie* inscribed in icing.

The family ringed around Louie, eager to look at him and touch him. No one asked about prison camp. Louie said a little about it, and to everyone's relief, it seemed to carry little emotion for him. He seemed happy.

Sylvia had a surprise for him. She'd obtained a recording of his POW broadcast, treasured by the family because it had given them proof he was alive. As Louie sat nearby, relaxed and cheerful, Sylvia dropped the record on the turntable. The broadcast began to play.

Louie was suddenly screaming. Shaking violently, he shouted, *"Take it off! Take it off! I can't stand it!"* Sylvia snatched the record, and Louie yelled at her to break it. She smashed it and threw it away.

Virginia (center) and Sylvia with Louie at the family record player. COURTESY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI

Louie fell silent, trembling. His family stared in horror.

Louie walked upstairs and lay on his bed. When he finally drifted off, the Bird followed him into his dreams.

The same man was on many other minds that fall. In debriefings, war crimes investigators listened as POWs told of monstrous abuses and atrocities committed by the Japanese. Over and over, the same name was mentioned: Mutsuhiro Watanabe. Ultimately, prosecutors would gather some 250 affidavits concerning Watanabe's crimes. When Tom Wade gave the name, his interviewer exclaimed, "*Not* the same Watanabe! We've got enough to hang him six times already."

On September 11, General Douglas MacArthur, heading the occupation of Japan, ordered the arrest of forty war crimes suspects. While thousands of men would later be sought, this preliminary list included those accused of the worst crimes, including Hideki Tojo, mastermind of Pearl Harbor and the

enslavement of POWs. Listed with them, reportedly seventh, was Watanabe.

When he got the news, the Bird was sitting in a bar in the village where his mother lived. He packed a trunk, jumped on a train, and fled to the city of Kofu. There, he heard a radio broadcast about wanted men and was shocked to hear himself listed with Tojo. If his case was considered comparable to Tojo's, he thought, arrest would mean execution.

He vowed to never let himself be captured. He would disappear forever. He slipped out of Kofu and vanished.

As Mutsuhiro fled, the hunt for him began. Police appeared at the home of his mother, Shizuka. She said he might be with his sister Michiko, in Tokyo. She gave them an address, and they converged on it. Not only was there no Michiko there, there was no house. B-29s had burned the neighborhood months earlier.

Shizuka's misdirection of the detectives may have been an honest mistake—Michiko had moved down the road, so the only change in the address was the door number—but the police now suspected her of deliberately misleading them to protect her son. They took her in for questioning. If she knew anything, she let nothing slip.

Detectives began tailing and regularly interrogating Shizuka. Her monetary transactions were tracked, her landlord questioned. Mutsuhiro's other relatives and acquaintances were investigated, questioned, and sometimes searched. Police intercepted the family's mail. They even had someone deliver a fake letter, apparently pretending it was from Mutsuhiro, in hopes the family would betray his whereabouts. His photograph was distributed to police in four prefectures, and countless special searches were conducted.

The police found only one clue. A man who'd seen Mutsuhiro at war's end said the sergeant had told him he'd rather kill himself than be captured. Perhaps the Bird was already dead.

As his tormenter disappeared in darkness, Louie was pulled into blinding light. Featured in the media, he was a national sensation. Two thousand people wrote him letters. Press photographers tailed him. He was buried in

speaking invitations, most of which came with an award, so he couldn't decline. In his first weeks home, he gave ninety-five speeches.

The attention was overpowering. Louie was beginning to suffer from suffocating anxiety. Each time he told his story, his gut would wring. Every night, in his dreams, the Bird stood over him, screaming, *"Next! Next! Next!"*

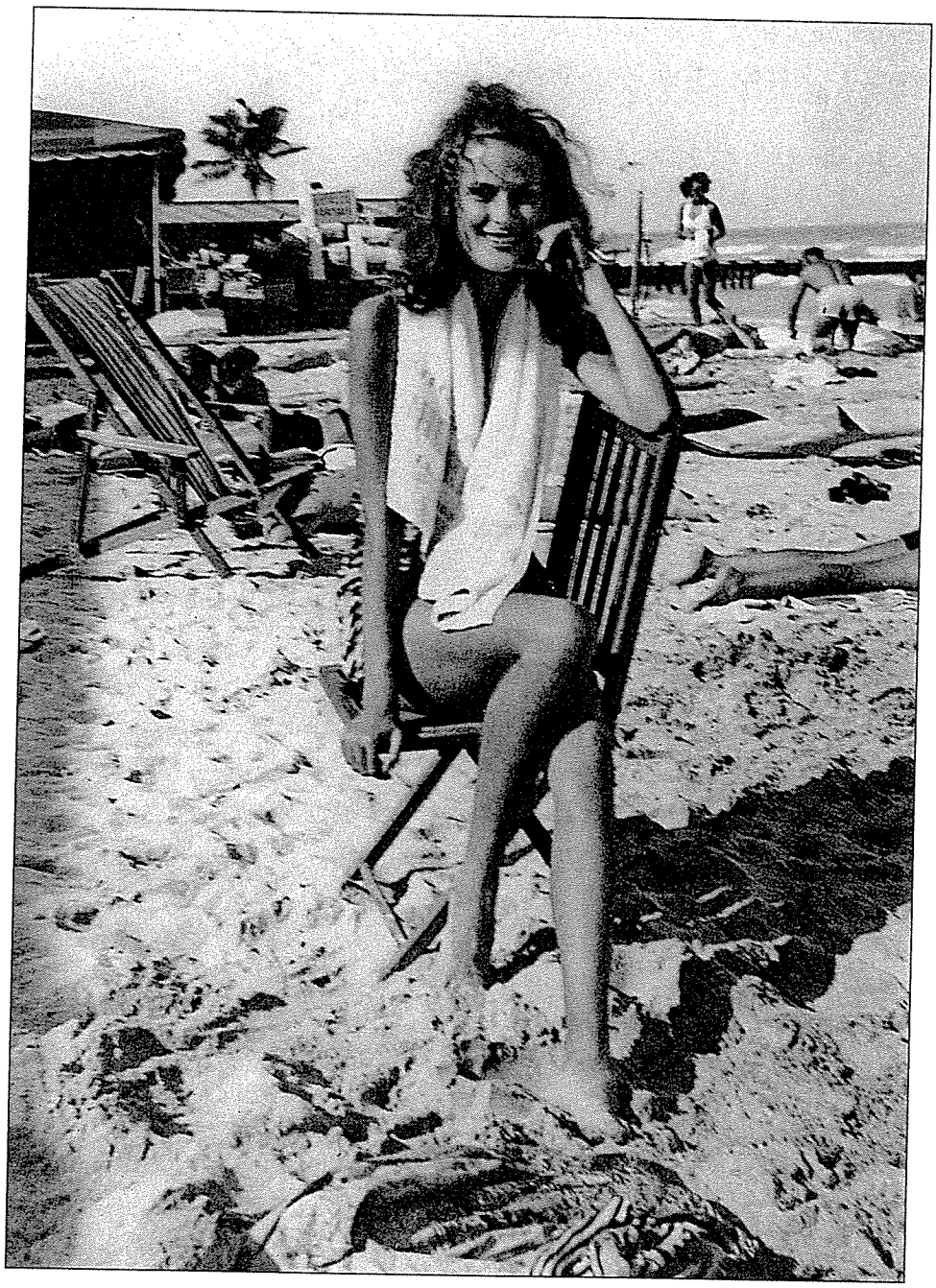
Shortly after returning home, Louie attended a gala where he was slated to speak. He waited to be introduced, anxious. Drinks were set before him, and he sipped them and felt his nerves unwinding. By the time he rose to speak, he was in a haze. The alcohol brought him a pleasant numbness.

Soon after, as he fretted over another speech, he opened a bottle of whiskey and poured some in his coffee. It gave him a warm feeling, so he had another shot, then another. The whiskey floated him through that speech, too. From then on, when the harsh push of memory ran through Louie, he reached for his flask.

It was March 1946. Louie was at a club bar in Miami Beach, taking the two weeks' vacation awarded to servicemen. A door opened. Louie glanced up. Flitting into the club was a shimmering woman, arrestingly beautiful, her hair a tumble of blond. Louie took one long look and had the startling thought that he had to marry this girl.

The next day, Louie returned to the club, vaulted the fence surrounding its private beach, and lay down near two sunbathing women. When one of the women turned, Louie recognized the beauty from the bar. Louie chatted with her and thought her bright, lively, and very beautiful. When they parted, Louie said something about how she probably wouldn't want to see him again. "Maybe," she said playfully, "I want to see you again."

Her name was Cynthia Applewhite, and forests of men had gone down at the sight of her. She was wealthy and pedigreed, living in her parents' mansion and educated in private schools. But for all her polishing, she wasn't a buttoned-up girl. She dressed in bohemian clothes, penned novels, painted, and yearned to roam the world. She was passionate, impulsive, and irresistibly willful. Mostly, she was bored by the vanilla sort of boys who trailed her



Cynthia Applewhite, on the day after Louie met her. COURTESY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI

around, and by Miami Beach. Along came Louie. He was a war hero, understood her fiercely independent personality, and was from nowhere near Miami Beach.

In the coming days, Louie and Cynthia whirled around town, racing through his hotel and streaming toilet paper out the windows, laughing, exhilarated by each other. For Louie, something about this girl seemed the answer to his suffering. Just before he was to leave, he asked her to marry him. She said yes.

After Louie left, Cynthia broke the news to her parents. The Applewhites were alarmed that their daughter, who'd just turned twenty, was leaping into marriage with a twenty-nine-year-old soldier she'd known for less than two weeks. Mrs. Applewhite refused to give Cynthia money to fly to California to get married. Cynthia vowed to get the money somehow.

Louie wrote Cynthia almost every day, and every morning waited for the mailman to bring Cynthia's pink letters. Though their letters were adoring, they revealed how little the two knew each other. Cynthia had no idea how deeply Louie was haunted by his war ordeal, or that he was turning to alcohol to cope. In critical ways, she was engaged to a stranger.

Cynthia vowed to help Louie forget the war, and he grasped her promise as a lifeline. "If you love me enough," he wrote back, "I'll have to forget it. How much can you love?"

Cynthia on her first date with Louie, March 1946. COURTESY OF LOUIS ZAMPERINI

Cynthia arrives in Los Angeles.
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In May, Cynthia's parents agreed to let her visit Louie, on the condition that they not marry until the fall. Cynthia raced to the airport. When her plane landed, Louie bounded up the steps to embrace her, then squired her home to meet his family. The Zamperinis fell for her, just as Louie had.

Driving away, Louie sensed Cynthia drawing backward. Maybe she'd seen something that hinted at all she didn't know, or maybe impulsive decisions were becoming too real. Thinking she was slipping away from him, Louie lost his temper and said they should end the engagement. Cynthia panicked, and they argued. When they calmed down, they made a decision.

A few days later, Louie and Cynthia drove to a church. One of Louie's friends walked Cynthia down the aisle, and the couple said their vows.

That night, Cynthia called home with the news. She hung on the phone all evening, crying, while her mother bawled her out. Unable to get her to hang up, Louie picked up a bottle of champagne, drank it dry, and went to sleep alone.

Phil, Cecy, Cynthia, and Louie at a dinner club in Hollywood, 1946.

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